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Friday Night in the Coliseum

For every wrestler who enters the ring with pure heart and clean hands, a dozen Foreigners and so-called Intellectuals and Sonsofbitches seek to bring him down with treachery and brute force and outright meanness

by William C. Martin

"When I die, I want to be cremated, and I want my ashes scattered in the Coliseum on Friday night. It's in my will." Thus spoke a little old lady who hasn't missed a Friday night wrestling match for -- well, she's not exactly sure, but "it's been a long time, son, a long time." On Friday night, fifty times a year, more than 6500 fans stream into the Coliseum in downtown Houston for promoter Paul Boesch's weekly offering of Crushers, Killers, Bruisers, and Butchers, Commies, Nazis, Japs, and A-rabs, Dukes, Lords, and Barons, Professors and Doctors, Cowboys and Indians, Spoilers and Sissies, Farmers and Lumberjacks, Bulls and Mad Dogs, Masked Men and Midgets, Nice Girls and Bitches, and at least one Clean-cut, Finely Muscled Young Man who never fights dirty until provoked beyond reason and who represents the Last, Best, Black, Brown, Red, or White Hope for Truth, Justice, and the American Way.

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Though scoffed at by much of the public as a kind of gladiatorial theater in which showmanship counts for more than genuine athletic skill, professional wrestling enjoys steadily increasing success not only in Houston but in hundreds of tank towns and major cities all over America. This is not, of course, the first time around. Pro wrestling has been part of the American scene for more than a century and has enjoyed several periods of wide popularity. For most fans over thirty, however, it began sometime around 1949, with the arrival of television. Lou Thesz was world champion in those days, but the man who symbolized professional wrestling to most people was Georgeous George, a consummate exhibitionist whose long golden curls, brocade and satin robes, and outrageously effeminate manner drew huge crowds wherever he went, all hoping to see a local he-man give him the beating he so obviously deserved.

The Georgeous One's success at the box office ushered in a new era of wrestler-showman, each trying to appear more outrageous than the others. For many, villainy has provided the surest route to fame and fortune. The overwhelming majority of professional wrestling matches pit the Good, the Pure, and the True against the Bad, the Mean, and the Ugly, and a man with a flair for provoking anger and hatred has an assured future in the sport. Since shortly after World War II, the most dependable source of high displeasure has been the Foreign Menace, usually an unreconstructed Nazi or a wily Japanese who insults the memory of our boys in uniform with actions so contemptuous one cannot fail to be proud that our side won the war.

Houston's most recent Nazi was Baron von Raschke, a snarling Hun with an Iron Cross on his cape and red swastikas on his shoes, who acknowledged his prefight introductions with a sharply executed goose step. Raschke, however, managed to make one think of George Lincoln Rockwell more often than Hitler or Goebbels, and so never really achieved first-class menacehood. It must be disappointing to be a Nazi and not have people take you seriously.

Now, Japs, especially Big Japs, are a different story. For one thing, they all know karate and can break railroad ties with their bare hands. For another, they are sneaky. So when Toru Tanaka climbs into the ring in that red silk outfit with the dragon on the back, and bows to the crowd and smiles that unspeakably wicked smile, and then caps it off by throwing salt all over everything in a ceremony designed to win the favor of god knows how many of those pagan deities Japanese people worship you just know that nice young man up there in the ring with him is in serious trouble.

Another major Foreign Menace is, of course, the Russian. Russian wrestlers are named Ivan, Boris, or Nikita, and although they have defected from Russia in quest of a few capitalist dollars, they still retain a lot of typically Communist characteristics, like boasting that Russians invented certain well-known wrestling techniques and predicting flatly that the World Champion's belt will one day hang from the Kremlin wall. Furthermore, they value nothing unless it serves their own selfish aims. After a twenty-year partnership with Lord Charles Montague, Boris Malenko states flatly, "I owe his lordship nothing. Remember one thing about us Russians. When we have no more use for anybody or anything, we let them go. Friendship means nothing to a Russian. When we get through with the Arabs and Castro, you will see what I mean. When we want something we don't care who we step on."

Wrestling fans are generally an egalitarian lot, at least among themselves, and they do not appreciate those who put on airs. So they are easily angered by another strain of crowd displeaser one might call Titled Snobs and Pointy-Headed Intellectuals. These villains, who love to call themselves "Professor" or "Doctor" or "Lord" Somebody-or-other, use the standard bag of tricks --pulling a man down by his hair, rubbing his eyes with objects secreted in trunks or shoes, stomping his face while he lies wounded and helpless --but their real specialty is treating the fans like ignorant yahoos. They walk and speak with disdain for common folk, and never miss a chance to belittle the crowd in sesquipedalian put-downs or to declare that their raucous and uncouth behavior calls for nothing less than a letter to the *Times*, to inform proper Englishmen of the deplorable state of manners in the Colonies.

A third prominent villain is the Big Mean Sonofabitch. Dick the Bruiser, Cowboy Bill Watts, Butcher Vachone, Killer Kowalski --these men do not need swastikas and monocles and big words to make you hate them. They have the bile of human meanness by the quart in every vein. If a guileless child hands a Sonofabitch a program to autograph, he will often brush it aside or tear it into pieces and throw it on the floor. It isn't that he has forgotten what it was like to be a child. As a child, he kicked crutches from under crippled newsboys and cheated on tests and smoked in the rest room. Now, at 260 pounds, he goes into the ring not just to win, but to injure and maim. Even before the match begins, he attacks his trusting opponent from behind, pounding his head into the turnbuckle, kicking him in the kidneys, stomping him in the groin, and generally seeking to put him at a disadvantage. These are bad people. None of us is really safe as long as they go unpunished.

Fortunately, these hellish legions do not hold sway unchallenged by the forces of Right. For every villain there is a hero who seeks to hold his own against what seem to be incredible odds. Heroes also fall into identifiable categories. Most of them are trim and handsome young men in their twenties or early thirties, the sort that little boys want to grow up to be, and men want to have as friends, and women want to have, also. Personable Bobby Shane wins hearts when he wrestles in his red, white, and blue muscle suit with the "USA" monogram: and when Tim Woods, dressed all in white, is introduced as a graduate of Michigan State University, older folk nod approvingly. They want their sons and grandsons to go to college, even though they didn't have a chance to go themselves, and it is reassuring to see living proof that not everybody who goes to college is out burning draft cards and blowing up banks.

Though quick to capitalize on the jingoist appeal of matches involving Menacing Foreigners, few promoters will risk a match that might divide the house along racial lines. So black and brown wrestlers usually appear in the role of Hero, behind whom virtually the entire crowd can unite. Browns -- Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Puerto Ricans -- are almost invariably handsome, lithe, and acrobatic. They fight "scientifically" and seldom resort to roughhouse tactics until they have endured so much that the legendary Latin temper can no longer be contained. If a black chooses to play the villain, he will soften the racial element: when Buster Lloyd, the Harlem Hangman, came into town, he belittled the skills of his opponents not because they were white, but because they were Texans and therefore little challenge for a man who learned to fight at the corner of Lenox Avenue and 125th Street. Several white grapplers might have been able to handle Buster, but the hero selected to take his measure and send him packing back to Harlem was Tiger Conway, a black Texan.

The purest of pure Americans, of course, and a people well acquainted with villainy, are Red Indians. Most wrestling circuits feature a Red Indian from time to time; in Houston, ex-Jets linebacker Chief Wahoo McDaniel is the top attraction and has wrestled in the Coliseum more than a hundred times in the last three years. Like Chief White Owl, Chief Suni War Cloud, and Chief Billy Two Rivers, Wahoo enters the ring in moccasin-style boots, warbonnet, and other Indian authentica. He can endure great pain and injustice without flinching or retaliating in kind, but when enraged, or sometimes just to get the old adrenaline going, he will rip into a furious war dance and level his opponent with a series of karate-like Tomahawk Chops to the chest or scalp, then force him into submission with the dreaded Choctaw Death Lock.

Although no Nazi fights clean and few Red Indians fight dirty, not all wrestlers can be characterized so unambiguously. The Masked Man for example, is sinister-looking, and usually evil, with a name indicative of his intentions: The Destroyer, The Assassin, The Hangman and Spoilers One, Two, and Three. But some masked men, like Mr. Wrestling and Mil Mascaras (who stars in Mexican movies as a masked crime-fighting wrestler), are great favorites, and Clawman has tried to dignify mask-wearing by having Mrs. Clawman and the Clawchildren sit at ringside in matching masks.

The majority of Houston's wrestling fans appear to be working-class folk. The white and Mexican-American men still wear crew cuts and well-oiled pompadours, and many black men and boys cut their hair close to the scalp. Family men, often with several children in tow, wear

Perma-Prest slacks and plaid sport shirts with the T-shirt showing at the neck. Others, who stand around before the matches drinking Lone Star Beer and looking for friendly ladies, favor cowboy boots, fancy Levis, and Western shirts with the top two or three pearl buttons already unsnapped. Occasionally, a black dude in a purple jump suit and gold ruffled shirt shows up, but the brothers in nondescript trousers and short-sleeve knits far outnumber him. The women cling stubbornly to bouffant hairstyles, frequently in shades blonder or redder or blacker than hair usually gets, and at least 80 percent wear pants of some sort.

One basic reason these people come to the Coliseum is reflected in the motto displayed in Boesch's office: "Professional Wrestling: the sport that gives you your money's worth." Approximately half the Houston cards feature at least one championship bout or a battle for the right to meet the men's, women's, midgets', tag-team, or Brass Knucks champion of Texas, the United States, or the World. If fans grow jaded with championships, Boesch adds extra wrestlers to produce two-, three-, and four- man team matches, heavyweight-midget teams, man-woman teams, and Battles Royale, in which ten men try to throw each other over the top rope, the grand prize going to the last man left in the ring.

Grudge matches, of course, are the backbone of professional wrestling, and Boesch's skillful exploitation of grudges allows him to draw large crowds and to use wrestlers like Johnny Valentine and Wahoo McDaniel over and over again without having the fans grow weary of them. Men fight grudge matches for many reasons, all of which are elaborately developed in the printed programs and on televised threat-and-insult sessions during intermissions.

They fight to uphold the honor of former associates, as when ex-gridders Ernie Ladd and Wahoo took on Valentine and Killer Karl Kox after the veteran wrestlers called them "big dumb football players" who did not have brains enough to engage in "the sport of the intelligentsia." They fight to avenge wrongs done to members of their family, as when Wild Bull Curry demanded to meet Valentine after the ruffian injured Wild Bull's popular son, Flying Freddy Curry, also known as Bull, Jr. And, in expression of a grudge more generic than personal, they fight to re-establish American supremacy over Foreign Menaces, as when Valentine turned hero-for-a-night by flying in from Asia to repay Toru Tanaka for the punishment the Dirty Jap had been handing out to the local heroes.

But not all grudge matches are fought for such lofty ideals. When Killer Karl Kox and Killer Kowalski wound up in

Houston at the same time, they fought for the exclusive right to wear the nickname. In another long rivalry, marked by low but engaging comedy, Boris Malenko sought to humiliate Wahoo, who had kicked out several of the Russian's teeth a few weeks before, by challenging him to a match in which the loser's head would be shaved in the ring immediately afterward. Malenko lost, suffered the jeers of the fans for several weeks --"Hey, Baldy, why don't you go back to Russia ?"--then challenged Wahoo to a rematch, the loser of which was to leave the state for a full year. The Russian, who had made himself doubly hateful by assuming the title of Professor, promised to punish Wahoo with his new steel dentures, and fans anguished over the possibility that their favorite Indian might bite the dust. Happily, Wahoo won the match, and Boris allegedly caught the first bus to Lake Charles, Louisiana.

To keep fans from tiring of a grudge series before it has yielded its full potential, promoters enhance the appeal of rematches by scheduling them under special rules and conditions that are something of a drawing card in themselves. The circumstances of previous matches often determine the conditions of the next. If one was decided by a questionable use of the ropes, the next might be fought with the ropes removed. If a cowardly villain frustrated a hero's attempt at vengeance by leaving the ring when the going got tough, he might find his way to safety blocked in the next match by a chain-link fence or a posse of eight or ten wrestlers stationed around the ring.

If Wahoo is involved, at least one match in the series will be an Indian Strap Match, in which the opponents are linked to each other by an eight-foot strap of rawhide. The strap can be used to beat, choke, and jerk, and the winner is the first man to drag his opponent around the ring twice. The Russian Chain Match is based on the same principle, but an eight-toot length of heavy chain is considerably more dangerous than a strip of leather.

For guaranteed action, however, none of these can equal a Texas Death Match. In this surefire crowd-pleaser, usually arranged after several battles have failed to establish which of the two rivals is tougher, there are no time limits, no specified number of falls, no grounds for disqualification. A victor is declared when one of the wrestlers can no longer continue, usually because he lies unconscious somewhere in or around the ring. Fans seldom leave a Texas Death Match without feeling they got their money's worth.

For many regulars, Friday night at the Coliseum is the major social event of the week. All over the arena blacks, browns, and whites visit easily across ethnic lines, in

They believe Wahoo can do just that. Wahoo believes it himself and on a dozen occasions has come within seconds of proving it, only to have what seemed certain victory snatched from his hands. Two of their matches ended in a draw. Wahoo lost a third when the referee missed an obvious pin. Funk was disqualified in their next meeting, but titles do not change hands on disqualifications. The champion then won a Texas Death Match by knocking Wahoo out cold with a steel folding chair, a legal but grossly unsportsmanlike tactic.

Two years after they first met, Wahoo and Dory are still at it. In their latest match the third fall apparently ended with Wahoo the winner and new champion, but as he danced around the ring in triumph, the timekeeper informed the referee that Dory's feet had been over the bottom rope, thus nullifying the decision. The referee ordered the match to continue, but Wahoo missed the signal and Funk grabbed him from behind to gain a quick pin. Fans fumed and screamed, then filed out in silent despair. Long after most of them were gone, Freddy the insurance salesman maintained a noisy vigil at ringside, beating on the mat and shouting to nobody in particular, "People paid good money to come see this, and the damn referee is so stupid he has to ask the timekeeper what happened. There's got to be a rematch."

There will be, Freddy, there will be.

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perverse defiance of stereotypes about blue-collar prejudices. A lot of people in the ringside section know each other, by sight if not by name. Mrs. Elizabeth Chappell, better known simply as "Mama," has been coming to the matches for more than twenty-five years. Between bouts, she walks around the ring, visiting with old friends and making new ones. When she beats on a fallen villain with a huge mallet she carries in a shopping bag, folks shout, "Attaway, Mama! Git him!" and agree that "things don't really start to pick up till Mama gets here." When a dapper young insurance salesman flies into a rage at a referee's decision, the fans nudge one another and grin about how "old Freddy really gets worked up, don't he?"

Professional wrestling offers fans an almost unparalleled opportunity to indulge aggressive and violent impulses. A few appreciate the finer points of a takedown or a switch or a Fireman's Carry, but most would walk out on the NCAA wrestling finals or a collegiate match between Lehigh and Oklahoma. They want hitting and kicking and stomping and bleeding. Especially bleeding.

Virtually all bouts incite a high level of crowd noise, but the sight of fresh blood streaming from a wrestler's forehead immediately raises the decibel level well into the danger zone. This is what they came to see. If both men bleed, what follows is nothing less than orgiastic frenzy. Mere main events and world championships and tag-team matches eventually run together to form murky puddles in the back regions of the mind, but no one forgets the night he saw real blood. One woman recalled such a peak experience in tones that seemed almost religious: "One night, about six or seven years ago, Cowboy Ellis was hit against the post and got three gashes in his head. I grabbed him when he rolled out of the ring and got blood on my dress all the way from the neckline to the hem. I thought he would bleed to death in my arms. I never washed that dress. I've still got it at the house. I keep it in a drawer all by itself."

The lust for blood is not simply ghoulish, but a desire to witness the stigmata, the apparently irrefutable proof that what is seen is genuine. Wrestling fans freely acknowledge that much of the action is faked, that many punches are pulled, that the moisture that flies through the air after a blow is not sweat but spit, and that men blunt the full effect of stomping opponents by allowing the heel to hit the canvas before the ball of the foot slaps the conveniently outstretched arm. They not only acknowledge the illusion; they jeer when it is badly performed: "Aw my goodness! He can't even make it look good!" Still, they constantly try to convince themselves and each other that at least part of what they are seeing on a given night is real. When Thunderbolt Patterson throws Bobby Shane

through the ropes onto the concrete, a woman shouts defiantly, "Was that real? Tell me that wasn't real!" And when Johnny Valentine and Ernie Ladd are both disqualified after a three-fall slugfest, a young man tells his buddy, "I think that was real. You know, sometimes they do get mad. One time Killer Kowalski got so mad he tore old Yukon Eric's ear plumb off." But when blood flows, no one seeks or needs confirmation.

The effects on fans of viewing such violence are disputed. Some experiments with children and college students offer evidence that observing violent behavior either produces no change or raises the level of aggressive tendencies in the spectator. Other research, however, indicates that wrestling fans do experience a decrease in aggressive tendencies after viewing wrestling matches. Still, manipulating hatred and aggressive tendencies is not without its risks. Every wrestler has seen or heard about the time when some fan went berserk and clubbed or burned or cut or shot a villain who played his role too convincingly, and Tim Woods, it is said, has had only nine fingers since the night a challenger from the audience grabbed his hand, bit down extra hard, and spat the tenth out onto the mat. Then, too, the possibility always exists that in the highly charged atmosphere of the arena, a wrestler may lose control of himself and cause real damage to his opponent. If he were alive today, old Yukon Eric could tell you something about that.

The Portrayal of Life that unfolds in the ring is no naïve melodrama in which virtue always triumphs and cheaters never win. Whatever else these folk know, they know that life is tough and filled with conflict, hostility, and frustration. For every man who presses toward the prize with pure heart and clean hands, a dozen Foreigners and so-called Intellectuals and Sonsofbitches seek to bring him down with treachery and brute force and outright meanness. And even if he overcomes these, there are other, basically decent men who seek to defeat him in open competition.

Nothing illustrates the frustrations of the climb to the top more clearly than the Saga of Wahoo McDaniel. For three years, Wahoo has been a top challenger for the National Wrestling Alliance world championship owned by Dory Funk, Jr. A quiet and rather colorless man, who still wears his letter jacket from West Texas State rather than the theatrical garb favored by his rivals, Funk is rough but seldom really dirty, and he knows what he is doing in the ring. Folks may not particularly like him, but they have to respect him. He is no fluke champion, and they know that neither Wahoo not anyone else can be Number One until he has defeated Dory Funk, Jr., fair and square.