

## How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Business

By

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Ask anyone about professional wrestling and you'll hear that it's fake, trashy, and gay.<sup>1</sup> All these things are pretty much on the money;<sup>2</sup> wrestling is Shakespeare in bib overalls, employing rudimentary theatrical devices to attract the groundlings because the athletic elements are all rigged. But I wouldn't have it any other way.

I've been a fan of professional wrestling (called "the business" by wrestlers and other insiders) for twenty years now. And much like smokers and alcoholics, I got hooked as a kid. During the 1980s, my older brother was always watching it while imitating the moves on our couch cushions,<sup>3</sup> and little by little, I started watching too.

Wrestling was perfect for little kids then. At the time, everything was almost self-consciously silly and campy, wrestling included. Lumberjacks, hillbillies, rich snobs, barbers, poor Mad Max imitations, "funky" white Africans, corrupt cops, and other insulting stereotypes all faced off in the squared circle at one time or another.<sup>4</sup> Low and mid-level stars squashed opponents who were about as physically impressive as my parents. I sat in my baseball pajamas until well past lunchtime, cheering on guys like Brutus Beefcake, Koko B. Ware, and even villains like the Honky Tonk Man—from the comfort of my living room. And then, this being the late '80s and all, they would all lose to Hulk Hogan. Sometimes my parents let me stay up to watch *Saturday Night's Main Event*, which ran on NBC until 1991, wherein the aforementioned wrestlers—this being the late '80s and all—eventually lost to Hulk Hogan.

The main event was always the same: Hogan stomped out to the ring in his red and yellow gear, often waving an American flag, and ripped open his tank top. Thunderous reaction from the crowd. Once the bell rang, he controlled the match until his opponent cheated and took over. Sometimes the challenger got as much as ten seconds' worth of offensive maneuvers before Hogan miraculously recovered. He'd stand up, shaking his fists and puffing out his cheeks, as the crowd's cheering melded into one jubilant shout that blasted from behind flashbulbs and yellow foam fingers. "The Hulkster is coming alive!" venerable announcer Gorilla Monsoon would yell. "This place is going bananas!" Gorilla might have expected these comeback moments, because the match formula stood unchanged from 1983 to about 1990. But wrestling's enduring charm depends partly on rituals, and Hogan made for an excellent shaman. True, his matches were phonier than augmented breasts, but they drew a lot of money and everyone wanted a taste. You couldn't swing a dead cat without hitting the Hulkster's likeness somewhere. He had his own Saturday morning cartoon show.<sup>5</sup> He cut a rap album.<sup>6</sup> He made movies.<sup>7</sup> Ice cream bars were shaped like him.<sup>8</sup> Basically, he sat at the throne of a multimillion-dollar

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<sup>1</sup> A negative description of any enterprise in which men, for any reason, touch each other.

<sup>2</sup> Except maybe the gay thing.

<sup>3</sup> Or me.

<sup>4</sup> Usually not all at once.

<sup>5</sup> Which was terrible

<sup>6</sup> Also terrible.

<sup>7</sup> Ditto. *Mr. Nanny* still keeps me awake at night.

empire built on careful marketing and his own formidable charisma—and that was about it. Hogan’s connection with audiences had nothing to do with actual wrestling. He punched like a girl and filled his offense with lame back rakes, eye pokes, and stiff, awkward clotheslines. It fell to his opponents—at least the smaller, agile ones—to make his efforts look halfway real. And frankly, guys like Paul Orndorff never quite got their due for pulling it off.

Skilled or not, Hogan pretty much defined wrestling for the first few years I watched. He wasn’t my favorite, but he does represent a simpler, more innocent time in my life. School always let out at three-thirty. My parents would be there for me, together. The bolt on my door would protect me from my older brother. I didn’t need friends as long as I had my books and Saturday morning cartoons. Life wasn’t altogether pleasant, but at least it made sense. Hulk would win in the end.

As the ’80s became the ’90s and public interest in wrestling waned, the gimmickry shifted into overdrive. I tuned in every now and again just to see if, say, a matador was fighting an accountant,<sup>9</sup> but punk rock was my new hobby. And the punk scene regarded wrestling as little more than a lowbrow spectacle. No self-respecting, precocious cynic would ever watch it. Even when I wasn’t listening to Dead Kennedys albums on repeat, I was busy being an obnoxious teenager, which left little time to keep up with wrestling. Like most young people, I was convinced that hating everything was the only true sign of intellect. I augmented this cancerous-yet-appealing untruth by dressing in black, moping over girls, and flaunting my unhappy loneliness—while maintaining that I just wanted to be left alone. Then my dad suddenly admitted he’d had an affair, and he moved out of the house. I was in eighth grade. I’d never suspected any chinks in my parents’ marital armor, and neither had my mother. She, my brother, and I wondered what drove my dad away, and—entertaining the possibility that it was us—wrangled in emotionally and physically unpleasant ways. That we’re so close now gives me joy, but back then we consistently wanted to beat the shit out of one another.

That was when, for reasons that remain unclear, I started watching wrestling again. I flipped past it while channel surfing, remembered that it still existed, and lingered until the show ended, making a note to watch again the next week. As it turns out, I’d caught the brief heyday of World Championship Wrestling, Ted Turner’s now-defunct plaything that bled money from perpetual mismanagement but put on decent shows with guys I grew to like. Their most regular storyline revolved around the chicanery of a rebel faction called the New World Order.<sup>10</sup> In fact, it was pretty much the only storyline. Hence, the quality declined quickly and I switched back to WWE, which was gearing up for the biggest, most successful rivalry in wrestling history: Steve Austin versus the real WWE owner, Vince McMahon.

To say their feud drew money would be like saying the Beatles had a hit record or two. Austin’s rebellious redneck image resonated with fans,<sup>11</sup> who hated Vince’s domineering boss persona. I too watched the whole thing unfold, but for a different reason. Unlike childhood, when I’d watched wrestling because “good guys” beat up “bad guys,” now I watched for a catharsis. I projected rage from high school and depression and adolescence onto these wrestlers, who beat the hell out of each other weekly. For a while, I projected my feelings about Dad’s absence onto poor Vince, whose eventual defeat at the hands of Austin tickled me to no end. My life no longer made sense, but wrestling reminded me that things didn’t make sense anywhere else, either.

My mom worried about my renewed zeal for the “sport.” Looking back, I can understand why. Enough weird, unexpected things had happened on her watch, and she’d always thought wrestling was juvenile, overly violent, and imbecilic.

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<sup>8</sup> Noticing a pattern?

<sup>9</sup> This actually happened.

<sup>10</sup> Only in wrestling could a crew of veterans in their mid/late 30s claim the mantle of young studs rebelling against the old-timers.

<sup>11</sup> Especially fans like me, who would have rebelled against authority if we’d had the faintest idea how.

“You’re such a smart boy,” she would tell me in a very parental voice,<sup>12</sup> “so why do you waste your time watching this crap?” Being the articulate young’un that I was, I’d say “because I *like* it,” and then offer one of those leaden teenage sighs parents hate so much. I would have told her about all that catharsis stuff had I fully realized it myself. But I was a teenager, and that kind of depth was beyond me. I spent those years cataloging things I thought I didn’t have—friends, dates, respect, hope—so explaining why I liked something would require admitting that I liked anything. Which of course, I didn’t.

I was also a fledgling punk rock drummer, and my bandmates were even less understanding about my wrestling fandom than my parents.

“I can’t believe you watch that shit,” they’d say. “You hate corporate everything, and that’s the most redneck, corporate shit on earth. It’s retarded.”

I seldom defended wrestling; because my bandmates were actually capable of making friends and attracting girls, I didn’t have much leverage to counter argue.<sup>13</sup> But on Monday nights, I’d take the phone off the hook so nothing could interrupt *Raw Is War*. And unless another person brought it up, I didn’t mention wrestling around the band, or anyone else.

Deep down, I suspected everyone was right. Even worse, I started to fear that liking wrestling somehow made me stupid. Without my intellect, I had nothing; I wasn’t a boy overflowing with useful skills, and the only reason anyone cared about me (I thought) was because of my “smart kid” status. I didn’t think I deserved the label, but I still didn’t want to lose it.<sup>14</sup>

The uneasiness lingered until, midway through my freshman year of college, when I discovered that my professors watched regular, even bad, movies and TV. I’d always pictured academia as a top-hat-and-monocle smart people’s club, in which dignified, mustachioed men discussed Russian formalism over cognac. And to some extent, that’s true. Academics would love you to believe that they are superheroes in tweed, taking on the world’s problems one impenetrable theory at a time. But beneath that super-serious veneer, they consume pop culture like everyone else. A couple of my professors at Gettysburg College even watched *American Idol*. The woman who taught my Critical Methods course—a blonde, sarcastic ex-bond trader who terrified her students by regularly assigning them Lacan and Henry James—bragged about reading bad detective fiction.

At first, I was stunned that educated people would so freely admit such pastimes. But once I started seriously pursuing an English degree, it all made sense; academics welcome trash in their free time because academia is boring. I mean, critics are generally nice people who mean well, but they tend to produce sentences like this:

Poe’s fame has been subject to curious undulations, and it is now a fashion amongst the ‘advanced intelligentsia’ to minimize his importance both as an artist and as an influence; but it would be hard for any mature and reflective critic to deny the tremendous value of his work and the persuasive potency of his mind as an opener of artistic vistas.<sup>15</sup>

So, academics need an escape from the overeducated circle jerk that is their livelihood. They find it in simpler entertainment, where they can witness clear victories and defeats and no one has to think too hard. They’re also, you know, real people who breathe and eat and stuff, but that’s less obvious.

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<sup>12</sup>A mix of concern and condescension.

<sup>13</sup>These days, my guitarist watches Ultimate Fighting, which appeals to most of pro wrestling’s target demographic anyway.

<sup>14</sup> Which is why I defended it so vigorously by being an alternately distant and needy asshole teenager for six years.

<sup>15</sup>That sentence was taken from H.P. Lovecraft’s “The Master of the Modern Horror Story,” and it should be noted that Lovecraft was a racist prick who wasn’t nice, nor meant well.

I even met medieval scholars who liked professional wrestling. One was a fellow named Scott Pincikowski who sold programs at WWE events when he was in high school. The other was my senior seminar professor, who had also attended live wrestling events.

“It was wild, man,” he told me as we sat in his office one afternoon. “They were choking each other with cables and stuff.”

I smirked, tempted to mention Japanese garbage wrestling and its fire/barbed wire/beds of nails/exploding ring/cactus and rubbing alcohol death matches. I resisted, out of respect for his bubble and the inevitable bursting such information would cause, but his remark was still a revelation. The man liked wrestling. Amazing. He and his peers studied the foundations of modern writing, for chrissakes. What on earth attracted them to pro wrestling?

My upcoming senior seminar paper was my best chance of finding out. The actual topic was pro wrestling as a critical lens for Beowulf, but more relevant (and certainly more interesting) was how well the medievals took the concept of sport as entertainment. Their tournaments, for example, weren’t just demonstrations of athletic skill, but much-anticipated spectacles whose participants knew the value of showmanship. They could advance their reputations two ways: excel in the tournaments through physical ability, or get people to talk about them for other reasons. Although it was improper for knights to toot their own horns,<sup>16</sup> some excessively praised themselves anyway. One such knight reportedly said, “when I have put on my great double hauberk...the earth trembles.” Not bad for 700 years ago.

Nowadays, wrestlers talk up their accomplishments and slander their opponents during the all-important pre-match interviews. Since pro wrestling was first televised, these interviews have given competitors a chance to preen for their audience and speak their minds. They’ve become integral to each wrestler’s individual success with spectators.

And medieval sports entertainment wasn’t limited to lavish affairs put on by the moneyed classes. Peasants learned to wrestle by emulating the nobility, helping spread the sport’s popularity. The same carnival atmosphere that fosters today’s pro wrestling could be found among the peasantry at small, local festivals. Wrestlers would stand in the ring and challenge onlookers to step in. Betting was rampant and, after the matches, passions often erupted into wild brawls.

I voraciously read book after book on the subject, stopping just short of tearing out the pages and eating them. Finally, a viable excuse for enjoying wrestling. I could even point to scholarly critiques. *English Language Notes* has published articles debating the Beowulf/Grendel fight in Greco-Roman wrestling terms easily adaptable to a pro wrestling viewpoint.<sup>17</sup> Even Roland Barthes, the literary and social critic, devoted a chapter of *Mythologies* to “The World of Wrestling,” an in-depth analysis of the sport’s theatrical elements:

Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle...the function of the wrestler is not to win; it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him...Wrestling...offers excessive gestures, exploited to the limit of their meaning...[A] man who is down is exaggeratedly so, and completely fills the eyes of the spectators with the intolerable spectacle of his powerlessness.

Heady stuff for a fake sport that would, years after Barthes’ death, feature one man trying to suffocate another with a plastic bag on national television. Wrestling may be fake, but the moves have to look real. Hence the need for “selling,” which basically means “acting hurt.”<sup>18</sup> Because they’re acting,

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<sup>16</sup>Which is just as well; the armor would have made that rather difficult.

<sup>17</sup>The best of which was written by Gettysburg College alumnus Josh Eyer.

<sup>18</sup>A lot of wrestling moves (pile drivers, DDTs, powerbombs, etc.) actually do hurt and are quite risky.

wrestlers go to ridiculous lengths to craft the illusion of legitimacy. When someone kicked Hulk Hogan in the stomach, he didn't just wince. He dropped to the mat, clutching his abdomen, his face wrenched in an agonized grimace. If Hogan escaped a leg submission (which he often did), he'd limp around for a minute before collapsing.

Another point Barthes makes is that villains need to be really awful to draw the most attention and money to their eventual defeat. "The baser the action of the 'bastard,' the more delighted the public is by the blow which he justly receives in return," says Barthes. "If the villain—who is of course a coward—takes refuge behind the ropes, claiming unfairly to have a right to do so by a brazen mimicry, he is inexorably pursued there and caught, and the crowd is jubilant at seeing the rules broken for the sake of a deserved punishment."

He's right, and inadvertently predicts most of Hulk Hogan's career. The Hulkster cheated outrageously—to the crowd's delight—because he fought heels. Those heels did, of course, need to pose an (apparent) threat or else there'd be no drama,<sup>19</sup> and no interest. Thus, Hogan typically was pitted against bigger guys, or a "friend" of his would turn on him, beat him up, and then feud with him all over the country, drawing insane amounts of money along the way.<sup>20</sup>

I read Barthes' essay about a billion times, until it dawned on me that, while I had an abundance of excuses for enjoying wrestling, Barthes proved (without necessarily meaning to) that educated people didn't need excuses. His choice to pen an elaborate justification of his own fandom had punched a hole in the high art/low art snobbery that kept me ashamed of a favorite pastime for six years.

These days, I'm pretty open about how much I love watching grown men in their underwear pretend to fight. Wrestling doesn't bolster childhood innocence or soothe causeless, adolescent rage anymore, but it is fun, and fun should never be discouraged. Besides, with my proof that "lowbrow" entertainment can be appreciated in a "highbrow" way, there's no shame in it anymore.<sup>21</sup> My friends still mock me, but more gently now, and they don't disapprove; instead, they're amused. Instead of denouncing me as a redneck-in-hipster's clothing, they brag about their favorite sports (most of which aren't rigged) or jokingly hypothesize ulterior motives for why I keep watching ("Dude, you're so gay"). I'm okay with that. Still, it would behoove them to cool it, just in case I ever find out what a double hauberk is.

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Dave Kiefaber has no idea how to approach biographical information without it turning into a bizarre personals ad. But since people are curious, he currently lives in Baltimore as the troll in the basement of a young, married couple. He grew up in North Carolina and got his B.A. in English/creative writing at Gettysburg College, so now Front Porch readers know who to blame for his decision to publish. His short fiction and essays have (dis)graced the pages of the Gettysburg Mercury and The Bullet, a publication that he managed to not ruin as its editor-in-chief in the spring of 2006.

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<sup>19</sup>Which was enough of a problem anyway.

<sup>20</sup>Paul Orndorff, one of Hulk's earliest WWE enemies, recalls making upwards of \$20,000 *a night* during their feud.

<sup>21</sup>There shouldn't have been in the first place, but you try explaining that to your social environment when you do something it doesn't like.