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DRUGS, VIOLENCE, AND DEATH
A significant challenge inherent in understanding how Canadians view sport is the blurring of perceptions surrounding competition and entertainment. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the attitudes that Canadians express toward professional wrestling. In Canada, professional wrestling has evolved into a multi-million-dollar business. Partly as the result of marketing efforts, popular books, television programs, and movies devoted to wrestling have proliferated, contributing to an ever-expanding body of detailed, “insider” knowledge. At the same time, while there is no mistaking the mystique and enduring popularity of professional wrestling, relatively few Canadians actually do wrestling: instead, we watch, read, and talk about it. Our opinions on wrestling tend toward extremes, ranging from enthusiastic support, on the one hand, to intense dislike, on the other. Indeed, running like an undercurrent beneath virtually any discussion of the place of wrestling in the Canadian cultural landscape is the question of whether to consider it a sport at all or simply dismiss it as a tawdry form of entertainment.

The study of sport and athletics as an area of social research is less than a century old. Most likely, this scholarly neglect was the result of a well-entrenched distinction between “high” and “low” culture: until fairly recently, cultural activities in which ordinary people engage, such as sports, were for the most part deemed unworthy of serious study. Today, the status of sport as a respectable area of study
is no longer challenged, and numerous studies concerned with the development of sport in Canada and the United States have been published. A theme that has consistently emerged from these studies is that sport—the meanings that people attach to particular sports, to athletic competition, and to the very idea of play—reflects the intellectual and cultural climate of a society at a particular period in time.

Despite the often dubious place that professional wrestling holds in our society, the scholarly study of this sport is remarkably rich. Numerous academic articles and papers have been written on professional wrestling, focusing on themes such as fantasy, masculine melodrama, the carnival tradition, and conventional drama. Unfortunately, much of the “insider” writing on the topic of professional-wrestling itself, like most entertainment-industry writing, is anecdotal and filled with the musings of fans. As Michael Bérubé notes, “Much of the reportage about the entertainment industry takes the form of celebration and gossip, so much so that it easily falls under the heading of ‘promotional material.’” This most certainly applies to professional wrestling and brings us back to the greatest challenge inherent in a scholarly discussion about it, namely, whether to classify it as genuine sport or as pure entertainment. Sport has certainly played a significant role in the quest for personal enrichment, to the point that, as Jay Coakley suggests, it might even function as an “opiate of the masses.” Whether sport should be considered this way is debatable, but, as a form of recreation, it clearly occupies a significant place in Canadian society.

**Kayfabe: The Illusion of Reality**

The history of professional wrestling in Canada and the United States dates back to the late nineteenth century. Initially, the predominant style was catch-as-catch-can, or “catch,” wrestling, which originated in England in 1870s and involved opponents who grappled with each other on a mat, using various “hooks” or holds. However, because wrestlers typically performed in circus sideshows and as carnival attractions, professional wrestling acquired a theatrical character, and, over time, this theatrical element became more pronounced. New, more “showy” styles evolved, of the sort that appealed to audiences, with wrestlers assuming the role of characters in a storyline—some good, some evil. Professional wrestling thus occupies an oddly ambiguous position in the world of sport: it demands a peculiar combination of athletic skill and acting talent. To this day, whether to call it a “sport” remains a contentious issue, and it is also not easy to categorize the professional wrestling fan, who is, in many respects, much the same as the fan of other, more socially acceptable, sports.
There are differences, however, and this is clearly evident in the culture surrounding the professional wrestling community.

Prior to the advent of large multimedia corporate productions that monopolized television and pay-per-view marketing avenues, in Canada, as in the United States, professional wrestling was characterized by a system of “territories” controlled by a loose alliance of promoters. For the most part, each territory was dominated by a single promotion company, which arranged and advertised wrestling events. Rivals would sometimes appear on the scene, competing for control of a territory, and, at times, more than one company would operate in a given territory, in a partnership of sorts. But those in the business always understood who controlled which territory. These territories were not all of a piece. Each promoter had a certain style, which was reflected in the style of the wrestlers whom the promoter chose to develop as talent. Significant differences also existed across territories in how wrestlers were paid and otherwise treated by promoters, and the reputation of a specific promoter or territory grew when the terms of employment were attractive to the wrestlers. This system of territories was, in essence, the management structure of the business and formed the backdrop for professional wrestling from the early twentieth century through to the 1980s.

The wrestlers themselves were a rough-and-tumble collection of performers whose athletic abilities gave them some measure of legitimacy and respectability within the sporting community. Canadians, particularly people in western Canada from 1940 to 1980, flocked to ice arenas, community halls, and assorted small-town venues to witness wrestling exhibitions. These exhibitions, with their emphasis on physical prowess, resonated in particular with working-class Canadians, who were accustomed to hard work and the struggle for survival. The wrestling circuit also reached into the rural heartland, at a time when more and more people were migrating to urban areas. Each week, promoters brought a collection of heroes and villains to Canadian communities. You didn’t need to travel to the big city to see the professional wrestlers—they came to you. And the communities responded. They loved the melodrama, the black-and-white storylines, and the escape into a world in which good reliably triumphed over evil, and they were more than willing to suspend disbelief when the performers held their matches.

Indeed, for many years, a mystery hovered over professional wrestling: were these contests real or fake? Even if the scripted storylines and assorted staged antics left a good many spectators convinced that the performances must be contrived, they were drawn in by the aura of intrigue that surrounded professional wrestling. Anyone who claimed to be even remotely familiar with wrestling was quick
to declare that it was all fakery, and yet it certainly looked real. The public never really knew for sure, and the sport’s “insiders” traditionally protected its secrets. The “carney” term *kayfabe* was adopted in the context of protecting the professional wrestling business. *Kayfabe* refers to fakery—to presenting staged events as real and thus maintaining an illusion. As insider jargon, the term formed the basis for an unwritten code of silence among the sport’s practitioners regarding the line between illusion and reality. If skeptics really wanted the inside story, certain performers were (and still are) more than willing to invite a volunteer into the ring for a lesson in the realities of professional wrestling. Should someone be brave enough, or foolish enough, to accept this invitation, he would inevitably be subjected to what was known in the business as “stretching”—inflicting a level of pain sufficient to gain respect (often by employing holds that would be illegal in legitimate wrestling). So the mystery continued.

The debate about whether professional wrestling is real or fake originated in the late nineteenth century. Over the decades, numerous newspaper accounts have “exposed” the chicanery of the business. For example, professional wrestling legends Frank Gotch and George Hackenschmidt were singled out for criticism after a particularly dubious match in the early 1900s, and accusations of duplicity appeared on a regular basis through the 1920s. Even promoters were not immune to the temptation to expose the truth of the business, as in 1934, when Jack Pfefer revealed all to Dan Parker, the sports editor of the *New York Daily Mirror*. Pfefer’s revelations, which included information that outcomes were rigged, effectively put an end to the illusion that professional wrestling was a legitimate sport. All the same, football legend turned professional wrestler Herman Hickman exposed the business again in the 1940s in a *Look* magazine article. While it might seem surprising that such tell-all stories continue to this day, their popularity testifies to the atmosphere of uncertainty and intrigue that still surrounds professional wrestling. It also suggests that, as far as spectators are concerned, the knowledge that wrestling is a performance does not diminish its powers of attraction.

In “The World of Wrestling,” Roland Barthes addresses the question of wrestling’s status as “an ignoble sport.” Professional wrestling, he argues, is properly understood not as a sport but as a form of pageantry, one in which “displayed for the public is the great spectacle of Suffering, Defeat, and Justice.” As Barthes observes:

> There are people who think that wrestling is an ignoble sport. Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle, and it is no more ignoble to attend a wrestled performance of suffering than a performance of the sorrows of Arnolphe
or Andromaque. Of course, there exists a false wrestling, in which the participants unnecessarily go to great lengths to make a show of a fair fight; this is of no interest. True wrestling, wrongly called amateur wrestling, is performed in second-rate halls, where the public spontaneously attunes itself to the spectacular nature of the contest, like the audience at a suburban cinema. Then these same people wax indignant because wrestling is a stage-managed sport (which ought, by the way, to mitigate its ignominy). The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees.  

Barthes’s description of “true wrestling” may not apply to the current version of professional wrestling, but it does resonate with the era defined by the territorial system that existed from approximately the late 1800s to the 1980s. When Barthes refers to the “spectacle of excess” taking place in “the most squalid Parisian halls,” he is, without question, capturing the style of venue and promotion of the territorial era. As he points out, once a match begins, spectators lose interest in the question of whether what they are viewing is real or fake. Their participation is not cognitive but affective. They are there to immerse themselves in visual spectacle.

Barthes is also accurate in his assessment that it is “the function of the wrestler is not to win; it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him.” In wrestling, gestures are typically exaggerated and melodramatic. As Barthes explains: “Each sign in wrestling is therefore endowed with an absolute clarity, since one must always understand everything on the spot. As soon as the adversaries are in the ring, the public is overwhelmed with the obviousness of the roles. As in the theater, each physical type expresses to excess the part which has been assigned to the contestant.” Through their physical appearance and performance, wrestlers are readily coded by audiences as heroes or villains. As Barthes notes, “It is therefore in the body of the wrestler that we find the first key to contest.”

Barthes argues that wrestling appears real because it is “an immediate pantomime, infinitely more efficient than the dramatic pantomime, for the wrestler’s gesture needs no anecdote, no decor, in short no transference in order to appear true.”

In Barthes’s analysis, wrestling matches are fundamentally about the primal struggle between good and evil, as personified by the wrestlers themselves. American professional wrestling, he suggests, “represents a sort of mythological fight between Good and Evil,” which Barthes characterizes as “quasi-political” (para-politique), whereas the “process of creating heroes in French wrestling is
very different, being based on ethics and not on politics.”

Canadian professional wrestling, it may be argued, fits somewhere in between. Canadians, like American audiences, sought what Barthes calls “a highly moral image: that of the perfect bastard.” The more villainous a character was, it seemed, the more appealing he was to the Canadian public. Nevertheless, like French audiences, Canadians also wanted fairness. Rather than the blind patriotism of “my country right or wrong,” the concern was, “Did they play by the rules?” What really mattered was justice. “In the ring,” Barthes wrote, “and even in the depths of their voluntary ignominy, wrestlers remain gods because they are, for a few moments, the key which opens Nature, the pure gesture which separates Good from Evil, and unveils the form of a Justice which is at last intelligible.” Whether professional wrestling was a legitimate sporting contest was less important to the audience than the emotions the storylines generated. It was obvious to spectators what constituted Good and what constituted Evil, and they witnessed first-hand the victory of Justice—and because this contest unfolded with a clarity one rarely experiences in daily life, they clamoured for more.

So what continues to drive the cultural phenomenon that makes professional wrestling so widely available and pervasive? For one thing, to appreciate it requires no extensive experience or training and little reflection. It is rooted in sensationalism rather than reality. At one time, the pantomime of the wrestling storyline attempted to instill traditional values. Today, professional wrestling media, full of rich new content, benefit from decades of experience; with ongoing storylines, those involved in these media know exactly which psychological buttons to push so that the public will continue its support. They believe, as the American philosopher Eric Hoffer is reputed to have said, that “you can never get enough of what you don’t need to make you happy.” Perhaps it is all about economics. When Rosanne Barr’s ex-husband, Tom Arnold, declared, “We are America’s worst nightmare: white trash with money;” he was referring to the economic clout of people whose tastes are held in contempt by the relatively sophisticated and well educated. With this comment, he may have inadvertently hit the nail on the head with respect to both the continuing popularity of professional wrestling and the controversy surrounding it.

AN INSIDER’S TAKE

From the mid-1960s until 1972, my father, Dave Ruhl, was the booker for the wrestling territory that covered Alberta and Saskatchewan. The booker, was considered
the manager, set the matches, determined which wrestlers would be used, and carried much of the responsibility for making sure the show went on without a hitch. As in many professions, management was often reviled, and the booker was the middleman who frequently took the heat for the promoter. The booker had to make hard decisions, and much of the decision making boiled down to whether the performer was liked or not. By the time my father assumed this position, the playbill (the cast of characters) had changed, the “actors” were an unappealing lot, and my father held many of them in disdain. His dislike of what he considered the human refuse making up the territory was common knowledge, and he pulled no punches in that regard. He had enemies, and he ran a tight ship for his employer.

I was never a “fan” of professional wrestling. It was something my father did, but he was essentially a farmer-wrestler. The concept of professional sport as a full-time occupation was essentially unknown: few, if any, could manage to survive on the earnings acquired through any sporting activity. Whether you were a wrestler or a boxer or played hockey or football, you couldn't be without another job. Professional sport was suited to young men living in rural areas because the winter months afforded them an idle period during which they could travel and hope to earn some money playing sports. If you had talent and displayed a certain willingness to cooperate with the owners and managers, you might be given a chance to see the world and escape the monotonous drudgery of farm life, even if only for the winter season. In my father's case, he demonstrated that he was reliable and could hold his own: few who challenged his wrestling skill in a legitimate fight proved to be his equal. Early in his career, he was willing to offer his services as a “jobber,” a wrestler willing to lose matches, thereby allowing his opponent to look good. Any wrestler wanting a shot as a top performer needed to prove his loyalty to the business in this way.

This was old-time wrestling, and the code was strict. Rookies, in particular, had to be taught discipline. Promoters needed to be sure that a wrestler would do as he was instructed and would not attempt to alter the outcome of a match. They also needed to instill the proper respect for the skill and strength that wrestling demanded, even if the outcome was predetermined. A rookie who seemed to think that, because matches were scripted, a wrestler didn’t really need much genuine ability, might be paired with a “shooter,” a wrestler who was apt to depart from the planned sequence of events during a match and instead make a legitimate attack. The shooter was a wrestler with enough skill to handle the unsuspecting novice in a manner that delivered a powerful reminder of the athleticism required for wrestling, thereby teaching the rookie respect for the business. At times, however,
being matched against a shooter failed to produce the desired result, and the new-
comer clearly needed to be taught a more severe lesson. In this case, the rookie
would be matched against a “ripper,” a wrestler known for inflicting pain and even
injury. Shooters and rippers were often wrestlers who primarily engaged in legiti-
mate forms of the sport and were thus relatively unknown to the audiences who
attended pro wrestling events. For the most part, then, audiences were unaware of
what was going on.

The kayfabe lexicon permeated the dressing rooms of the old wrestling territor-
ies. If you couldn’t cut the mustard, you were a “jabroni,” a loser. A “pencil-necked
gEEK,” originally associated with circus sideshow performers, was another epithet
for a “loser” and might also be applied to a particular fan. The cast of characters
included “heroes,” called “baby faces” (or simply “faces”), and bad guys, villains, or
“heels.” There were “stiffs” and “star gazers,” so called for their penchant for getting
pinned, and there were good “workers,” that is, performers who didn’t “oversell”
and made the contest look real. The ability to create the illusion of reality was espe-
cially important in small venues, where little distance separated the performers
from the audience. Performers would use a concealed razor blade to inflict a small
incision on their foreheads, a tactic known as “blading,” so that a well-delivered
blow would open the lacerated area and, to the delight of the audience, start the
flow of blood—very real blood. In fact, veteran wrestlers are often identified by the
series of “track marks” on their foreheads, which testify to the many bloodbaths in
which they have taken part.35

AN ERA ALL BUT FORGOTTEN

The characters I grew up with filled our family home with tales of their antics on
the road. Insider talk was not to be shared, a code that I upheld because it was
part of my father’s business. I was skilled at deflecting questions, and I never had
anyone say to me, “My dad is tougher than your dad.” The wrestlers were a col-
lection of athletes, misfits, family men, miscreants, scholars, circus freaks, boxers,
mdjets, and hucksters. I rarely attended the matches because it was like going
to the office to watch my father work. There were, however, times when I would
accompany my father to be part of a special moment, such as a headline event, or
to see a “lesson” being taught. It was easy to appreciate the precision employed by
someone like George Gordienko—an outstanding wrestler from Winnipeg, who
retains a legendary status as a respected “shooter.” I also enjoyed meeting boxers
like former heavyweight champions Rocky Marciano and Jersey Joe Walcott, and I
will always treasure the image of Rube Wright dressed up as Santa Claus, standing in my parents’ kitchen.  

The proliferation of media coverage devoted to professional wrestling—or all sports, for that matter—is a relatively recent phenomenon. In addition to assorted books (ranging from popular to scholarly) and magazines, those interested in wrestling can now immerse themselves in blogs, websites, and social media. The repetitive storylines in most wrestling autobiographies and numerous pop culture tell-all books tend to mythologize wrestlers. In general, the stories fall into the mould of what old-time wrestlers called “the older we get, the better we were” stories, of the sort based on selective memory. Although Canada has a long history of producing remarkable professional wrestlers, most of the popular literature is devoted to the relatively recent era—from about 1970 onward. As a result, the stories of those who were active in the years when the illusion of reality was still carefully maintained are all but forgotten. Whether professional wrestlers of the early kayfabe era made a conscious effort to hold back their tales is hard to say; however, the aura of mystery that surrounded wrestling at the time was hard to betray. The fact that wrestlers were willing to protect a business that was, for the most part, ruthless and not particularly kind to them testifies to the strength of their loyalty.

During this era, a strong connection existed between wrestling and boxing—one that has, apart from guest appearances at special events, largely disappeared. In earlier days, however, the performers in the two camps were closely intertwined, frequenting the same training facilities and, in many cases, working for the same promoters. Even though wrestlers were part of an industry founded on staged contests, their athletic skill was very real. I remember a story I heard from former promoter and manager Darby Melnick and my father during a discussion of the quality of athleticism among the old-timers. King Kong Clayton was a professional wrestler who was highly regarded as an athlete—someone who, according to my father, was capable of mastering any sport. To illustrate Clayton’s athletic prowess, my father and Melnick recounted a boxing match between Clayton and an outstanding boxer from Medicine Hat, Alberta, named Eppie Lust.

Eppie and his two brothers, Emil and Albert, were all top-notch boxers who had distinguished careers in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1947, a short article appeared in the Lethbridge Herald, about an upcoming wrestling match featuring Clayton. As the article mentioned, “Before the war King Kong defeated Eppie Lust of Medicine Hat, Alberta, for the heavyweight boxing championship of Western Canada.” The authenticity of this title is open to doubt; however, the bout between Lust and Clayton did take place, and Melnick witnessed it. Evidently, Clayton handled Lust
with ease. As Melnick put it, “Every time King Kong hit Eppie, he opened him up.” Years later, my father recounted this story to Eppie’s brother Emil, who then owned a barbershop in Medicine Hat. Emil paused for a moment, reflecting on the fight, and said, “Yes, that’s true. Eppie had no business being in the ring against that man.” Professional wrestlers may have performed in a make-believe world, but many of them were also fine athletes, capable of delivering unanticipated jolts of reality to legitimate fighters.

In another example, in 1932, heavyweight boxer Kingfish Levinsky challenged wrestler Ray Steele to a legitimate boxer-versus-wrestler bout, held at Chicago’s Soldier’s Field. Levinsky was a ranked fighter at the time and held wins over Tommy Loughran and Jack Sharkey. In the parlance of the day, he was more than a “tomato can”—a marginal fighter who rarely lasted more than three rounds with an opponent and bled easily. The bout lasted approximately thirty seconds. After Levinsky threw a right hand, Steele grabbed his arm and administered a top wristlock, or what today’s mixed martial artists call a kimura. Steele then quietly declared to Levinsky, “Kingfish, it’s up to you. Do you want to continue or would you like me to break your arm?”

Of Volga German heritage, Ray Steele was born Peter Sauer in a German colony in Russia on 2 February 1900. After the death of his father, he was raised by his great uncle, and in 1906 he immigrated with his uncle’s family to Lincoln, Nebraska. Sauer was a talented amateur wrestler, winning two Amateur Athletic Union national championships. He was also a formidable shooter. Learning his craft in St. Louis and later in California, he wrestled professionally under the ring name “Ray Steele” from Glendale, California. He also served as the “policeman”—a wrestler who guarded another, making sure that the opponent took no liberties with rules, which could result in injuries—for “Golden Greek” Jim Londos, the unquestioned superstar of the 1930s in promoter Jack Curly’s New York City operation. Rube Wright considered Steele the best legitimate wrestler he ever faced. Steele had some remarkable contests with Ed “Strangler” Lewis, but his main achievement came in 1940, when he took the National Wrestling Association’s title of World Heavy Champion away from Bronislau “Bronko” Nagurski. Steele employed a fast-paced style that would have gone over well in any era, particularly when compared to the plodding, methodical bouts of mat grappling that characterized wrestling until the 1920s.

Ed “Strangler” Lewis is one of the most famous wrestlers from the 1910 to 1940 era, and he was also one of the most formidable. He was considered a great “hooker”—a wrestler with the skill to administer an array of holds or “hooks.” Early
in the 1920s, Lewis and his manager, Billy Sandow, joined forces with promoter Joseph “Toots” Mondt, and the three came to be known as the “Gold Dust Trio.” Mondt is generally credited with having invented the modern form of wrestling (which he called “Slam Bang Western-Style Wrestling”)—a faster-paced, more theatrical style that soon became the industry standard and marked the beginning of the kayfabe era. Lewis, whose fame rivalled that of Babe Ruth, even challenged the then reigning world heavyweight boxing champion Jack Dempsey to a fight, in order to settle a supposed feud over whose skills were superior. When my father met “Strangler” Lewis, he, like any aspiring acolyte, asked him for some words of advice. In a somewhat tired fashion, as if he were about to deliver the same message for the umpteenth time, Lewis replied, “Leave yourself a hole.” “That’s it?” my father thought. “This is the sum total of wisdom from someone considered the greatest and most influential professional wrestler ever?” Later, he told me it was the best advice he was ever given.

There are other characters who deserve mention for their impact on early professional wrestling in western Canada. Regina’s Jack Taylor, considered the Canadian heavyweight champion, held a legendary status through the Great Depression years as one of the all-time greats. Taylor was replaced as champion in 1926 by Earl McCready, but he continued to wrestle into the 1940s. McCready was born in Lansdowne, Ontario, and grew up in Amulet, Saskatchewan. To refer to him as the “real deal” is an understatement. He was the Canadian national champion in 1926 and a member of the 1928 Olympic team; won three NCAA wrestling titles in 1928, 1929, and 1930; played football at Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State); and competed as a wrestler at the British Empire Games where he won a gold medal. Largely forgotten today, he was arguably the greatest amateur wrestler in Canadian history. He was justifiably proud of his induction into the collegiate hall of fame and had an easy, approachable demeanour. Early in his own career, my father was matched with McCready, who later recalled how nervous my father was about meeting him. After his wrestling career, McCready settled into a peaceful life as a massage therapist in Washington State, but, in his later years, he was beset by health problems, passing away in 1983. He was considered a great amateur and professional wrestler in Canada, England, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

THE DEMISE OF THE TERRITORIAL SYSTEM IN WESTERN CANADA

Like the travelling carnival it so resembled, the territorial system that characterized early professional wrestling grew to be an anachronism. Urbanization and
modern communication through radio, television, and closed-circuit events closed the door on this style of promotion. The history of the Alberta promotion well illustrates the transition. Throughout most of the 1940s, professional wrestling in Calgary was promoted by Darby Melnick. In 1948, an American promoter, Larry Tillman, bought out Melnick, and wrestling in Calgary was subsequently promoted out of Great Falls, Montana, by Tillman and Jerry Meeker, with Melnick staying on as manager. That same year, the legendary Stu Hart founded Klondike Wrestling, which he operated out of Edmonton. In 1952, through a series of deals with Tillman and Meeker, Hart acquired control of the Calgary promotion and thus became the promoter for the entire territory, which he now operated under the name Big Time Wrestling (later Wildcat Wrestling and then Stampede Wrestling). This deal brought Alberta into alignment with Saskatchewan. Western Canada was known as a solid territory, but it was also known for the harshness of its weather, excruciatingly long road trips, and, for the most part, little monetary reward or international fame. A wrestler may not have gained financially or increased his notoriety, but he was sure to have received an education about the realities of the sport if he wrestled in western Canada.

The popularity of professional wrestling exploded in the 1950s with the advent of television. Hart used the medium extremely well, eventually bringing in the smooth-talking and manipulative Sam Menacker to serve as an announcer and booker for his operation. Poor business dealings led to the collapse of the relationship between Hart and Menacker, and Hart pushed his enterprise into a new era with the television show, Wildcat Wrestling. Moving back into the television market with announcer Ed Whalen was fortunate timing. In 1967, Wildcat Wrestling was renamed “Stampede Wrestling,” the brand that remains synonymous with the Hart family legacy. Eventually, Stampede Wrestling was sold to Vince McMahon, owner of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), in essence bringing to a close the saga of territorial wrestling in western Canada.

Territorial wrestling lives on in television reruns and numerous pop culture references, and stories continue to emerge that shed light on this fascinating era in the history of Canadian sport. Sadly, but not unexpectedly, the code of the old-time wrestler has vanished. But the human side of a highly commercial and often ruthless business survives in the stories told by insiders. The rough exterior of the performers often belied a soft side that was rarely seen by the public. Perhaps one had to experience these characters first-hand in order to truly appreciate them. Even so, the personalities and stories from third-person accounts of the wrestlers of the past continue to hold a fascination for many people. A mere statistical recounting
of wins and losses is not what engages people’s interest. What matters is the lasting imprint of the sport on Canadians, including me, in terms of childhood memories and reflections of a simpler, less complicated time.

Seen through the eyes of a child, an adult is swiftly judged, earning either respect or dismissal. When I met Rocky Marciano, who was serving as a guest referee for the local wrestling promotion, it was easy to see that the former world heavyweight boxing champion was going through the motions, making an effort to put his best face forward. Sitting between him and my father on the front seat of my father’s automobile, I politely asked Rocky if he would sign some autographs on a pad of “scribbler” paper for me. As he graciously did this, he joked with me, and I could easily sense that he liked children. Granted, I was slightly dismayed when he wrote “to my pal Glenn,” and his signature looked like “Porky” instead of “Rocky,” but I still treasure that autograph, along with a Canadian two-dollar bill signed, also to his “pal,” by Jersey Joe Walcott, another gentleman and former heavyweight champion. Wrestlers such as Billy Robinson, Mike Sharpe, Baron “Ripper” Leone, George Gordienko, Sky Low Low, Sweet Daddy Siki, Earl McCready, Firpo Zbyszko, and Jim and Rube Wright will always occupy an indelible place in my childhood memories, along with boxers such as Lou Nova and Jack Sharkey, as I am sure they still do for other Canadians who remember the early days of professional wrestling in western Canada.

Conclusion

The self-imposed code of silence called kayfabe, to the extent that it ever truly existed, was broken long ago. Early professional wrestling tried to create the illusion of reality, but reality never was, and no doubt never will be, a major concern for anyone in the business. As time passes, fantasy victories become believable, and stories about legendary shooters or legitimate tough guys continue to proliferate. In reality, the surreal party atmosphere festooned by “ring rats” (wrestling groupies) and double standards is often a façade for tragic and unfulfilled lives. Like most professional athletes (as well as other celebrities), these men were not heroes; they were, in the end, a troupe of actors. The performances were staged, and the performers were entertainers. Panum et circenses—give the people bread and circuses. When the professional wrestling sideshow arrived, the circus had come to town.

Criminologists Jack Levin and James Alan Fox call professional wrestling “a culture that’s ripe to sustain evil.” In some ways, this comment could be applied
to modern culture more generally, a culture in which the concept of the “hero” is now suspect, at best. As Levin and Fox note, “We used to put our heroes on pedestals where they could be admired, revered, and emulated, but those days are long gone.”

Why is this? Perhaps the world we inhabit has grown so callous that we can no longer afford to believe in heroes. In the modern zeitgeist, virtue is a form of weakness. We cheer for the bad guy, and although often reluctant to say so explicitly, we expect our heroes to be flawed. Of course, heroes have always had feet of clay, but today they seem to let us down more than ever.

But the erosion of our belief in heroes is by no means the only factor exerting an influence on professional wrestling. In addition, the changing position of women in society is altering the character of competitive activities once regarded as the domain of men, whether in sport, business, or politics. Although the number of women actively participating in other sports has increased dramatically, professional wrestling, like football and mixed martial arts, continues to be dominated by men. The female fan base for combat sports (and for sports overall) is, however, substantial and in fact seems to be growing. This apparent increase in the passive and affective participation of women in such sports is intriguing, given that the active participants are almost exclusively male. Commenting on the rise of football and the declining popularity of the relatively genteel sport of baseball, Frank Deford suggested that football is perhaps “a subversive vestige of the male-centric past.”

The same might be said of wrestling—but the question of women’s attraction to combat sports remains. Until fairly recently, competitive activities, especially those involving displays of physical strength, were regarded as inappropriate to women—insufficiently “feminine.” As women entered the work force, however, attitudes began to shift, and women today have somewhat more freedom to take part in open competition. That, as in the case of professional wrestling, they are also free to do so in ways that many would regard as exploitative is perhaps another indication that the male-centric past is still with us.

The late comedian George Carlin famously described football as a “twentieth-century technological struggle,” one that reminds us that we are “perfectly capable of taking the life of a fellow human being, preferably a stranger.” He was referring, of course, to the technology of combat rather than to communications technology. But the technology that, in theory, connects us also isolates us. In the domain of wrestling, there is no question that the days of kayfabe are over. The mystery that was part and parcel of the old territorial system is unlikely ever to be resurrected because the new media are geared more to exposure than concealment. The public knows the angles. What takes place in one town can be tweeted, YouTubed,
blogged, and posted instantly. There is no anticipation, no build-up of excitement; old-time promotion just isn’t possible.

Although sport is essentially a form of play, it also provides both spectators and participants with an outlet for aggressive energy. Competitive sports thus function in part as a means to release social tensions that might otherwise erupt into genuine conflict.26 However, the line between genuine conflict and the make-believe of athletic contests seems to have grown very faint. Contrary to the promotional hype for the Ultimate Fighting Challenge (UFC) suggests, it is warfare, not the UFC, that is “as real as it gets.” But perhaps we are at once too removed from the atrocities of war and too accustomed to graphic images of violence to value the distinction between the real and the staged. No matter how contrived the professional wrestling storyline was in the early days, in a world too close to the devastation of two world wars, a predictable outcome was what Canadians wanted. In both Canada and the United States, faith in sport and athletics, as Robert Lipsyte points out, was vigorously promoted by industry, the military, government, and the media. The values of the arena and the locker room were to be part of the nation’s life.27

As it still does, professional wrestling resonated with the Canadian working class. The early days of professional wrestling in Canada were not filled with corporate entrepreneurs making their fortunes but rather with grifters, opportunists, and cheap sideshow entertainers. It may, indeed, have been a “tawdry” business, but it was one that featured some superb athletes. Now we use sophisticated technology to bring up old video clips online. We have blogs and websites devoted to old-school or legitimate wrestling and the legends that have built up around it. Despite promotional events such as Hart Legacy Wrestling’s “Resurrection” show in January 2013, I can’t imagine people going to Calgary’s Victoria Pavilion on a Friday evening the way they once did.

NOTES


6 In the early 1930s, as talent manager for New York promoter Jack Curley, Pfefer had been instrumental in the success of the New York promotion and its star, Jim Londos. In 1932, when a rift developed between Curley and Londos, Pfefer sided with Londos, only to be left as an outsider the following year, when the rift was healed and alliances shifted. Seeking revenge, Pfefer went to Parker and divulged the truth about the business. On 19 November 1934, Londos was scheduled to wrestle another star, Everett Marshall, whom he had defeated twenty-five times previously. That morning, an article appeared in New York Daily Mirror with the headline: “Londos and Marshall Meet at Garden Tonight for 26th Time. Score—Londos 26, Marshall 0.” This marked a turning point both for professional wrestling and for Pfefer, who became a reviled figure in the industry. Evidently, Ring Magazine, a highly respected publication devoted to boxing and wrestling, had been correct when it proclaimed, only a month earlier, the end of “honest-to-goodness wrestling matches.”


9 Ibid., 14.
10 Ibid., 15.
11 Ibid., 17.
12 Ibid., 21.
13 Ibid., 17.
15 The use of tactics such as blading became far less common with the advent of televised wrestling, given that the audience for such broadcasts now extended to casual viewers, notably women and children, and that programming had to conform to broadcasting standards. How far viewers would actually be put off by displays of blood is, however, a question. In November 2000, the London-based research firm of Cragg Ross Dawson conducted a qualitative study of the audiences for televised wrestling, the results of which appeared in a March 2001 report titled Wrestling: How Do Audiences Perceive TV and Video Wrestling? (http://www.ofcom.org.uk/static/archive/bsc/pdfs/research/Wrestling.pdf). Section 4.4 of the report (66–70) discusses the reaction of audiences when they were shown video clips of matches that included bloodshed. Despite the fact that viewers were generally convinced that nothing in pro wrestling was real, even dedicated fans were “taken a little aback” by blood, while relatively casual viewers (women, especially) found it “shocking and ugly” (67). However, as the report notes, “the capacity of bloodshed to shock respondents seemed short-lived. Feelings of revulsion or alarm, which initially appeared to be genuine and strong, seemed to dissipate rapidly” (69).
16 Rube Wright was among the most formidable of the early legitimate wrestlers. To my knowledge, no one ever challenged him to a fight if he announced in the locker room that “he felt like winning.” When I asked Rube whether he had ever bested Earl McCready—the great Canadian amateur and professional wrestler, who was perhaps the most worthy contender for the title of greatest legitimate wrestler of the era—he replied they had never faced each other in a legitimate fight. He simply stated, “Earl can’t say he beat me and I can’t say I beat him.” Promoter Stu Hart was quick to point out that if you ever challenged Rube to a fight, “you better have a good pair of running shoes handy.” See Erb, Stu Hart, 113.
17 Emil Lust fought as a welterweight from 1929 to 1942, Eppie (Young Tunney) was active from 1932 to 1945 as a middleweight and light heavyweight, and Albert (Al) was a welterweight from 1941 to 1943, with Eppie as his manager. Not only were all three brothers outstanding boxers and title holders, but they all served with distinction and valour in World War II.
18 Lethbridge Herald, 3 September 1947, 11. Rather sadly, today, even the most determined user of Internet search engines is hard-pressed to find anything but a passing reference to Clayton.
The Volga Germans were a considerable presence in the world of sport. In addition to Steele and my own father, they included such notables as Hockey Hall of Famer Dave “Sweeney” Schriner, who was born in the same German colony as my grandparents.

In 1985, my father visited Rube Wright at his home in Oregon. Sharing recollections and memories, my father asked Rube for a definitive statement on who he felt was the best wrestler he had ever worked out with. Without hesitation, Rube said it was Ray Steele. Knowing Rube’s personality and my father’s fondness for Ray, he may have said this out of kindness; however, when he spoke further about Steele’s technique and skill it was clear to my father why he had such a lofty opinion of him.


Examples abound in the world of sports alone: Hulk Hogan (steroids), Pete Rose (illegal gambling), Mike Tyson (rape), Pee Wee Herman (indecent exposure), O. J. Simpson (murder), Barry Bonds (steroids), Lance Armstrong (performance-enhancing drugs)—the list goes on.


