

RINGSIDE:
AN INVESTIGATION INTO
THE EXPERIENCE OF
PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

BY

MICHAEL W. TURKO

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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University of Manitoba
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1. ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship between professional wrestling fan and event. It examines the reasons that fans involve themselves in the event, what that involvement becomes in terms of participation, along with how the fans understand the event as a whole.

The methodology used was qualitative in nature, based on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Data gathering involved a combination of data, investigator, and methodological triangulation. Content analysis and participant observation was utilized in analyzing weekly televised wrestling broadcasts, live arena matches, and the pay-per-view wrestling extravaganzas. Unstructured interviews were utilized before, during, and after live arena matches and pay-per-view events, across the length of the investigation.

This resulted in several insights. The world of professional wrestling, in terms of form and content, was explored in detail. The actions and emotions of wrestling fans were examined, along with their own understanding of the event. Further, insights into certain more general questions of social life were achieved, by exploring commonalities among wrestling fans.

2. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are several people who share in the credit for this thesis, as it was very much a group effort all along the way.

I am very grateful to my fearless research team: Drew Forrest (who risked life, limb, and arrest), Peter Ward, Rob Zaporzan, Rowdy Roddy Kueneman, and especially Roy Kirby and Damon Rondeau, who continuously rose above and beyond the call of duty throughout this project.

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And to my thesis advisor, mentor, and friend, Rod Kueneman, I am forever grateful. He gave me the tools to understand my world, and taught me that questions are more valuable than answers.

Of course, I am in debt to my parents, Walter and Doreen Turko, without whose continual support none of this would have been possible.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to Jacqueline Bedard, who could motivate donkeys to fly.

Michael Turko
August 9, 1991

3. PREFACE

When one thinks of professional wrestling, the image which could occur may be one of a beer-swilling neanderthal, wearing a torn T-shirt, slumped in front of a television set on Saturday morning. This character is likely staring intently, bloated body occasionally jerking along with the combatants on the screen. The image may also be one of a crowded arena on a Friday night, with thousands of rabid, mesmerized fans screaming for blood and devastation, with shredded programs and beer cups held high. Inside the ring, two behemoths are throwing each other into ring-posts, flailing each other with various foreign objects, slamming, eye-gouging, biting and spitting, while an apparently helpless referee tries to retain some control amidst this seeming chaos.

This is professional wrestling, to be sure, but this represents only a small glimpse of the entire phenomenon. This stereotypical image of the fan and the match belies the extreme complexity of design and execution which serves to create the wrestling experience, a strange dialectic of fan and event.

It is the relationship between wrestling fan and wrestling event that is the subject of study of this thesis. Of importance are the reasons that the fans involve themselves in wrestling, what this involvement becomes in terms of participation, along with their own understanding of what is occurring. This will entail an investigation into the mind and actions of the wrestling fan, as well as a thorough analysis of the phenomenon that is professional wrestling.

4. INTRODUCTION

As stated in the preface, this thesis is an attempt to understand the relationship between wrestling fan and event. We were interested in the reasons that fans attend, how they participate, and how they understand that participation. Further, we were interested in how the fans understand the event as a whole. What is it like to be a wrestling fan? How does it feel and what does it require? What meaning does the event have for them? As will be shown later, the available literature on professional wrestling didn't address our questions in a sociologically satisfying manner. The literature either spoke to grand and elaborate theories which the authors imposed from above, or used quantitative analysis of variables in a manner which left us feeling rather empty. Not only was the larger picture missing, but it lacked detail as well. We had no satisfying answers to our questions, and no greater insights into the mindscape of the fan than before we had started. We did not "know" this person, this wrestling fan. We realized we needed a different approach to this problem, and set about developing a methodological attack which would satisfy us.

Our first task was understanding the wrestling world itself: its structure, form and content. We needed to understand the event before we could examine the fans' relationship to it. To accomplish this, content analysis of televised wrestling broadcasts were used over a two-year period. The form and content were analyzed, and this revealed an extremely rich and complex web of plot and detail. The results are discussed in the first major chapter of this thesis. This

gave us a picture of the wrestling world that went a long way in explaining the attraction of the event.

The next component, and second major section of this thesis, was also exposed to content analysis. This is the section on live or arena wrestling. In many ways, arena wrestling could be viewed as the natural fruition of weekly televised broadcasts, and we examined it as such. This event, however, yielded the greatest insights through the second leg of our methodological approach, that of participant observation. At times the research team passively observed what was occurring at arena cards, noting the structural elements of the arena matches and the fans' behavior, in relation to the event and to each other. But the deepest insights, in our opinion, surfaced when we allowed ourselves to be swept along with the event and actually became fans ourselves. Much of the description of arena wrestling in this chapter therefore becomes an account of the personal, psychological and emotional experiences of the research team as actual fans, as the direction of observation turned from outwards to inwards. The advantages of this method of inquiry are self-evident in the chapter. This method, using ourselves as objects of examination, was used in conjunction with more traditional aspects of participant observation, and was not meant to stand alone as a tool for generating understanding of the event. Used in addition to our other methods of inquiry, however, we found it an extremely useful way of gaining personal insights into the world of the wrestling fan.

Throughout the major chapters of the thesis, and especially in those of Arena Wrestling and the Wrestling Extravaganzas, we were constantly being

enriched through interviews with the fans. We spent a great deal of time in conversation with them, and came to recognize elements of their world which were soon becoming elements of ours. We began to speak the same language, as it were. Their responses and discussions guided and enlightened us, and helped us form an increasingly satisfying picture of what it was to be a wrestling fan. Their responses began to fill in the missing or grey areas of the picture, and helped us in addressing our original questions posed at the beginning of the journey. This, together with our other methodological approaches, constantly using triangulation of investigators and analysis, formed the body, which is this thesis.

We feel that our investigation of the wrestling world has yielded several major insights. We have an overall understanding of the structure of professional wrestling; we recognize its form and content, and have presented its complexity in a way that has not been accomplished previously. We also have explored the extremely emotional world of arena wrestling, and have brought out of it an understanding that has a richness and fullness that was lacking - we feel we "know" the wrestling fan now, at least to a much greater degree than we had before. Finally, we have gained greater insights into certain more general questions of social life, by exploring certain commonalities that we share and are addressed when we become wrestling fans, as will be discussed throughout this thesis.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CRITIQUE

As might be expected, the available academic literature concerning wrestling is limited, both in terms of scope and volume. Most could be described as elementary, partly because they are admittedly pioneering, but also because they are concerned with a style of wrestling presentation that is somewhat simplistic by the standards of the 1990's. The literature does contain ground-breaking work, and some pieces provide interesting and important analysis.

Roland Barthes (1957) applied a semiological analysis of wrestling in France during the 1950's. His concern was with the demystification of the transmission of signs and signals, and in wrestling he found a rich pageant of symbolism. He describes wrestling as a spectacle of excess, where suffering, defeat and justice are clearly displayed to the audience, presenting Man's suffering with all the amplification of Tragic Masks. The aspect of fakery is unimportant to the fans, because wrestling acts upon them as classical theatre. The audience is interested in justice; transgressors of morality must clearly receive retribution. This must be excessively obvious and extreme. Barthes sees that a wrestler may irritate or disgust, but never disappoint, for he always accomplishes completely, through a progressive solidification of signs, what the public expects of him.

Through the ultimate reigning of justice, the audience is purged of their sense of societal anomie. They are momentarily allowed to participate in a

world with an intelligible meaning system, where they have a greater sense of control and power. Barthes sees embodied in wrestling:

[...] the euphoria of men raised for awhile above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of Univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes without evasion, without contradiction.¹

and further:

In the ring, wrestlers remain Gods, because they are the key which open Nature, the pure gesture which separates good from evil, and unveils the form of a Justice which is at last, intelligible.²

So for Barthes, wrestling appears to return to the fan a sense of sequential logic, that was otherwise lacking in an ambiguous world. It accomplishes this through its pure and full signification; everything existing in the absolute.

Gregory Stone (1972) approached wrestling with the question of audience belief. He wondered how the fans, who clearly realized it to be fakery, could be caught up in the heat of the performance. Stone concluded that the audience sees it as drama rather than fakery, in the same way that a theatre audience would accept the performances of the actors. For the fan, wrestling represents real life, as does drama. Wrestling presents them with struggles inherent in their everyday lives, such as good. vs. evil, labour vs. management, and the like.

To arrive at this, Stone conducted surveys to find wrestling fans, whom he subsequently interviewed. He found that the majority of those who identified themselves as fans had lower educational levels than the wrestling audience as a whole, and were predominantly working-class. As well, the convergence of sex,

age, and status placed the highest number of fans as older, lower status women. From this information, he draws several conclusions. First, that the low SES of the fans predispose them to a working class authoritarian attitude, which compels them to see the world in terms of black and white, good and evil.³ Secondly, their low SES makes them rely more heavily on appearance for their assessment of people, and this reliance tends to increase with age.⁴ Thirdly, they have less control over staging and are less familiar with it than those with higher SES.⁵ As a result, Stone argues that while the fans do not see the actual result as real, they tend to believe the heroes to be genuinely good, and the villains to be genuinely evil. Further, the lower SES and increased age of the fans lend a credibility to the performance that would not be there for the average audience member.

William Martin (1972) briefly discussed the fans' attraction to wrestling. He begins by outlining the various types of heroes and villains, then describes the fans' insatiable thirst for blood. He sees it as a "desire to witness the Stigmata, the apparently irrefutable proof that what is seen is genuine."⁶ Although fans freely admit that much of what they see in the ring is faked, and in fact jeer it when it is badly performed, they still try and convince themselves that at least part of it is real.

He sees the event not as a naive melodrama where virtue always wins, rather, as a portrayal of life which is tough, and filled with conflict, hostility, and frustration:

[...] for every man who pressed towards the prize
with pure heart and clean hands, a dozen foreigners
and so-called intellectuals and Sonofbitches seek to

bring him down with treachery and brute force and outright meanness.⁷

However, it is the hope that the hero will ultimately prevail that keeps bringing back the fans time after time.

Thomas Henricks (1974) offered a complex look into wrestling. He attempts to show the complementary nature of the structuralist and interactionist perspectives as they apply to wrestling. His claim is that both the directive or formulating aspects of culture and the particularistic creativity of human agents in negotiating such constraints exist in wrestling. The former, a Parsonian or Durkheimian view, involves as the primary structural element the role, or normatively regulated and hierarchically organized framework for participation. The latter, a Simmelian or interactionist perspective, sees the individual as the primary unit, for whom such social or cultural participation is always problematic.

Henricks employs both perspectives by arguing that to analyze the dramatics of wrestling, one must describe how individuals work their way through a set of pre-existent and traditional meanings in order to establish a new relationship amongst themselves. Spectator sports in general feature an interplay between these opposing elements; individual, non-complementary interests within situational demands. This opposition is most dramatically displayed in moments of crisis, utilizing the paradox of irreconcilable differences. The referee serves this moment, but this position may come into tension with another principle of unification, that of moral right alone.

Henricks explains that it is in the opposition of the actors and the contingencies in the course of their struggles which provides not only much of the entertainment, but also gives meaning to ritual or ceremonial forms; in wrestling, the nature of the contest itself is dramatically expressed in these situations:

If the final outcome is problematic until the final moments, these last scenes will be a highly charged microcosm of the contest itself [...] thus, the most important new structure (i.e., who won) is revealed within a received structure of how games should be played.⁸

In wrestling, the antagonisms of the opponents are stilled at this moment by a "joint acceptance of the legitimacy of the struggle itself."⁹ Inherent in this are the aspects of ascent and descent. The ascension, or discovery of meaning arising from interactive interests and situational exigencies is responsible for the creativity and feeling of 'newness' in sport. The descent, or formulative interests of institutionalized cultural meanings, sculpt the broader meanings of the game and frame its energies. Wrestling contains these moments and like all spectator sports constantly creates situations in which this opposition flourishes.

Allen Turowetz (1974) directed his Master's thesis towards a study of wrestling. In it, he provides an ethnographic description of the elements of staging a wrestling contest. His focus is on wrestling as a career for wrestlers, a business for investors, and entertainment for an audience.

He begins by describing logistically what the audience sees, from the preliminary matches through to the main event. He says the typical audience is an even distribution of males and females, composed of all age groups, with a

disproportionate amount of teenagers and middle-aged persons. The rest of the thesis concerns itself with that which occurs beyond the vision of the audience. He discusses the wrestling enterprise in terms of ownership, administration, and performance, dealing with wrestling as a business. Here he describes the hierarchy of power and control, and the bureaucratic aspects of the organization. In the final section he approaches wrestling as a career for the wrestler. He describes what it entails to become a professional wrestler, including training and manufacturing of ideal types. He stresses the role of the promoter in controlling the success of the wrestler, based on perceived audience response. Image is crucial to the event, and it is characterized by athletic prowess and morality. All matches must contain both these elements.

Turowetz acknowledges that his work is descriptive, but he claims not atheoretically so. He suggests that a basic conception of the sociology and social psychology of interaction lies behind it, specifically Goffman's work on staging.

Turowetz' next paper, in collaboration with Michael Rosenberg (1978) attempts to overcome the theoretical weakness of his thesis. In this work, they try to develop a symbolic interactionist account of wrestling as a social relationship. They see wrestling as popular because it is an exaggeration of everyday life experiences: "it reflects this experience in that the ideas, conflicts, and personality types are those recognizable in everyday life [...] however in wrestling, the men are stronger, the drama of the situations is greater, and the people are either heroes or villains."¹⁰ By examining the ways in which

wrestling as a social activity begets meaning for the audience, they hope to uncover the social processes of identification and participation that are central to the fan.

Speaking to identification, they suggest that the fans place identities of group membership upon the wrestlers, which wrestlers announce through the staging of appearances. The drama succeeds when the audience participates as members in this relationship. They list four dimensions through which fans identify with wrestlers: morality, sexuality, ethnicity, and athletic prowess. These serve as exaggerations of everyday life experiences. They suggest that when the hero wins, it is not the victory of some abstract quality over another; rather, it is 'us beating them'. Moreover, the audience is invited to participate in the action, through intense emotional involvement, or 'heat'. Further fan manipulation occurs through the use of television, specifically the crafting of a dramatic image with the use of videotape. Television maintains audience interest between matches at local arenas, and provides them with news, ratings, and scenarios for upcoming events.

The authors conclude by restating that they have not attempted a causal explanation of wrestling's characteristics or popularity in terms of mental set or cultural dispositions. Rather, they have kept with labelling theory, seeking to examine wrestling as a social relationship. Through the use of symbolic interactionism, they have tried to uncover the interaction process that underlies any social relationship.

Turowetz collaborates with Susan Birrell (1979) in a study concerned with work identities as socially constructed and situationally influenced. They believe that by comparing the similarities between collegiate gymnastics and professional wrestling, they can discover relationships between individuals and their work environments which have general significance across a wide range of occupational settings. Their analysis is based on Goffman's themes of presentation of self, with the addition that the presentation of self in the work setting involves a competitive aspect.

They begin with a discussion of character. For the gymnast, performance hinges upon poise - the ability to display composure under stress. The wrestler's performance is also assessed to the degree to which he creates the desired image and impression to the audience. Next they discuss character work-up: the creation and management of work identities. In terms of physical skill, the gymnast and the wrestler both spend long periods of time training, learning to perfect the physical requirements. The wrestler needs enough physical skill to successfully parody legitimate wrestling. For presentational skills, the gymnast discovers his/her own strengths and develops these, shaping what events he/she will specialize in. The wrestler also assesses his strengths, develops them and capitalizes on them. This is done in cooperation with a promoter, who shapes and styles the wrestler's image. Framing behaviour is an integral part of both worlds. Each athlete emerges from the dressing room in full work-identity.

They discuss character display at some length. This is the area where identities and routines are evaluated. They suggest the two worlds are very similar; although the wrestler exhibits dramatic image through appearance and behaviour while the gymnast displays it through the routine, both events generate excitement in the same way. For the gymnast, it is the 'line-up' or arrangement of routines, with the best appearing last. For the wrestler, it is the 'card' or arrangement of matches, leading to a finale or main event. While both events involve teamwork, wrestlers actually provide a parody of teamwork. Because it is scripted, the competition is actually carefully choreographed teamwork. The audience, through willingness to be deceived, may also be considered part of the team. In terms of evaluation, the gymnast performs for a judge, who is the final authority. For the wrestler, the most important judge is audience response, as perceived by the promoter.

Jim Freedman (1983) examines the impact of a travelling wrestling show on Simcoe, a small Ontario town. This backdrop provides an interesting analysis of the event.

He describes Simcoe as a throwback to the early days of wrestling, before television altered its face, where amidst the fervent passion of a small town, it appears in its original form. Although wrestling is now a big city event, it still plays on small town sentiments.

The bulk of Freeman's discussion concerns the ideology inherent in wrestling. He stresses the morality of the event, saying that matches do not pit individuals as much as the idea of good and bad in the ring. What is in fact at

stake is liberal ideology, which is all the audience members have and believe in. Wrestling teaches them a grand and repulsive message: liberal ideology is bankrupt, not because it is inherently untrue and inappropriate. Rather because it is foiled by evil forces, by adulterated human forces ... nice guys finish last. People become angered when the bad guy wins (and liberal ideology loses) because justice has been taken for a ride. Freedman states that the audience, formerly rural villagers, is now predominantly urban labour:

[...] these are low-income workers, those for whom the gates of success are closed in what they have heard is the land of free opportunity. For them the forces of evil, the forces which subvert the ideals of the liberal society, loom uncommonly large [...] cheating and dirty work in the ring, like cheating in the marketplace, is counter to all their ideals, yet it provides paradoxically the only exit from their own poverty.¹¹

As such, wrestling teaches them that there are two choices: they can maintain their honesty and never succeed, or they can get ahead by unscrupulous means. "Through wrestling, the viewers come to understand and thereby express the failure of their expectations."¹² When the hero wins, the audience is told that by the virtues of liberal democracy, we all have the same rights and privileges, and our unadulterated human endowments will carry us to success. If the villain wins, it does not deny that people begin in a state of equal endowment and opportunity, rather, those who use devices, deceit, and technology (an adulteration of natural endowment and skill) will succeed.

Freedman elaborates that what is occurring is a moral and political battle, not between individuals, but between the ideology and practice of capitalism; the

former stressing equality of opportunity, the latter revealing that honest men are at a distinct disadvantage. When justice is subverted, the harsh lesson is that the ideology of contemporary Western society is a failure. The physical ring itself serves to heighten the effect. The ring, which provides a location for perfect competition complete with a referee and rules, adds to the creditability of the encounter between capitalist ideology and practice. Freedman states the ring is pivotal in examining the fan:

For viewers prone to be skeptics, the contradiction between appearances - that is the ring - and the fact of imperfect competition or no competition at all, is too much to swallow [...] for the real fans of wrestling a contradiction between the ideas, the ideology, or the ideal format for how individuals succeed, and the fact of just how many people actually do succeed [...] according to this format, is quite understandable. It is perhaps the most important thing that they know.¹³

These are people most likely to vote for conservative parties, he suggests, in an attempt to rectify such a situation. These are also people who have few illusions about where government stands. They would no more have faith in a government than in a wrestling referee. The referee is the key to an arousing performance, in that he constantly disappoints by failing to uphold the rules. As such, "he makes the blatant and unrestrained excesses of the bad guys all the more repugnant and credible."¹⁴ In this way he is analogous to government, whose ineffectualness leads to the failure of the ideology it espouses. The failure of the referee also creates a gap where authority should be. The audience responds to this as vigilantes, taking justice into their own hands, demanding retribution. Freedman claims that for skeptics, wrestling challenges

fundamental truths about existence - pure competition exists and anything which asserts the contrary is invalid. As a result, it is seen as fake, a deception.

These skeptics say that wrestling does not properly depict real life. However, for the fans:

[...] what is going on is that a good guy is trying to make the world safe for liberal democracy and he is losing. And he is getting no help from the people who say this is how things ought to be and who are supposed to enforce the rules. And if they are of no help then the people must take matters into their own hands.¹⁵

Gerald Morton and George O'Brien (1985) give a detailed description of the progression of wrestling from its earliest roots through to its present form in the television age. They begin with an historical examination of the sport, from ancient Egypt to colonial America. They delineate amateur wrestling from the form we recognize as professional to period of the late 1800's. The major influence in the change in wrestling from its amateur form to professional form was financial; promoters with backgrounds in the theatre maximized profits by limiting the length of matches and by keeping certain wrestlers as champions so as to increase recognition and interest.

Secondly, they discuss the structure and organization of wrestling as it was 'rediscovered' through television, particularly from the point of view of a business. It was a reciprocal relationship, with station owners guaranteed a loyal viewership of consumers, and promoters with a steady advertisement for live matches. They go on to describe recruitment, training, and control of wrestlers by promoters, including the development and perfection of a dramatic image.

The third section explores wrestling's roots in theatrical traditions, specifically, the morality play, the allegory, the Noh Drama, and the classical theatre. Wrestling borrows from the morality play clear-cut concepts of good and evil, and moreover, the actions of the wrestlers conform to what the audience expects that good and evil will do. Ethnicity is employed effectively to this end, as is the redemption of a fallen hero. The lack of philosophical complexity of both forms allows them to work so completely.

In allegory, there must be interest in the characters and action beyond a symbolic function, and wrestling embodies this. Wrestlers, besides having definite character attributes also have individual peculiarities and emotions, allowing them to be more than abstract representations of good and evil.

The Japanese Noh Drama, which combines dance, costume, mime, poetry and music in a highly polished and symbolic form of theatre, appears to share much with wrestling. The authors give examples of wrestlers who use these elements, particularly Japanese villains who concentrate on dance and costume. Because the American audience is not familiar with this form and recognize it only at a surface level, they accept it more readily as reality.

The basic techniques of staging the event are drawn from Greek and Roman theatre. The authors suggest the parallel is explained because of similar problems with a large audience, and great distances between audience and stage. This requires unambiguous movements which are perceptible to all areas of the audience. As a result, all actions, shows of pain, holds and the like must be greatly exaggerated. The audience comes to understand and clearly recognize a

large repertoire of signs. The use of elaborate costuming is another parallel, which furnishes easy identification as to the role of the wrestler.

The authors suggest that the dramatic elements are used so effectively that the audience completely suspends their disbelief, and allows the event to have a cathartic effect on them.

The fourth section explores the wrestling participants, especially the attributes of heroes and villains. Villains are essentially those who break the rules to win matches, violating the audience's sense of justice. The authors see villains as representing real individuals in the fans' lives; the oppressive foreman, the rude clerk, etc., and so the event allows the fans to release their hostilities in a healthy, positive manner. The fan is particularly interested in conversions of wrestlers from hero to villain, and from villain to hero. The fallen hero, taking the sacrificial beating he deserves, purges the fan of his/her own moral backsliding.

Heroes must embody some significant virtue such as loyalty or patriotism, although they are allowed to occasionally break the rules to meet the villain on his own terms. It is the particularity of the villain role which determines the type of hero needed, for example, a Nazi villain will be paired with a super-patriotic hero, who will be allowed to 'bend' the rules and stay within his proper realm of morality. However, nothing is static:

Any villain can become a hero, and any hero a villain. this fact points up the essential meaning of the wrestling drama, that no good is incorruptible and that any evil can be redeemed. This dialectic creates eternal possibilities for drama, possibilities that the wrestling audience experience in their own lives.¹⁶

The final section explores wrestling as an American ritual; ritual in the sense that Margaret Mead used it: "For an act to be ritual, one must be conscious that it is ritual, and yet, at the same time one must not be too conscious."¹⁷ This, they assert, is what makes wrestling ritual; theatre audiences never see the stage as reality, yet wrestling fans are constantly trying to convince themselves of the actuality of what is occurring in the ring. Wrestling being neither completely real nor completely symbolic, violates neither principle. It therefore inhabits the realm of ritual. The fan suspends emotional disbelief by the separation of intellect and emotion. He/she can then accept the drama as real enough to become involved in.

Mead states that there is a definite relationship between a society's periods of crisis and its rituals, and it is this meaning involved in wrestling which qualifies it as the ritual of Americana. Wrestling addresses these concerns at both the archetypal and stereotypical levels. It reflects American social crises and acts as a stress release, utilizing particular villains and their corresponding heroes. Two distinctly American values inherent in wrestling are the support of the underdog, and the acceptance of the conversion of any villain if properly motivated and genuinely enacted in the ring. The ethical framework of wrestling rests on these two principles, and all particularity is basically variations of these. Because of the ritualism, the audience never tires of the formula. The authors conclude by suggesting that:

[...] what wrestling does as ritual that helps us through bad times is that it does prove that villains can be defeated, that heroes who embody good American ideals can win and that, whatever else,

determination and dedication can and do triumph
over deceit and treachery.¹⁸

Speaking solely to its content, the focus of the literature available concerning wrestling is varied. Much is purely descriptive, detailing the structure of the event and all the components that go into creating its appeal. These structural descriptions tend to be quite shallow theoretically, and miss much of the complexity of the modern wrestling phenomenon (Turowetz, 1975; Turowetz and Rosenberg, 1978; Turowetz and Birrell, 1979). Other literature focuses on fan dispositions and attitudes. There exist two groups, those who attempt to apply psychological attributes based on quantitative variables such as age, sex, SES (Stone, 1972), and those who seek to apply grand theories of alienation, ritual, ideological conflict, and indeed, life (Martin, 1972; Barthes, 1957; Freedman, 1983; Morton and O'Brien, 1985). The latter rely on a largely subjective appreciation of the event, imposing a theoretical framework on the fan rather than generating understanding from the bottom up, so to speak. The former attempt to apply neat psychological categories, simplifying complex relationship that are human social interactions.

Speaking to the length that the literature has gone to create a full and rounded understanding of wrestling at a sociological level, a large and fundamental gap appears and so the pattern stands incomplete. This gap centers around the fans, and their relationship to the ring. This has not been explored in a methodologically satisfying fashion, and it is the purpose of this thesis to attempt to fill in this gap and thus enhance understanding of the total pattern. This research is an attempt to understand the social reality of the fans' relation

to the event: why are they there? What meaning does this social situation have for them? Until now, structural description and the categories of grand theoretical understanding have tended to exclude or to treat inadequately these social actors so crucial to the problem: the fans themselves.

Much in the literature does deal with elements quite relevant and necessary to the present inquiry, specifically the structural components required to present a wrestling match. Preliminary analysis reveals that good vs. evil indeed remains the axis around which plots are created. These plots are complex and entertaining enough to have recently filled the Michigan Superdome with over ninety-thousand fans during Wrestlemania III, setting an all-time attendance record for an indoor sporting event. The jump to a national television market by the largest organization, the World Wrestling Federation (W.W.F.) attests to the monumental and intricate planning and orchestration required by an array of media and advertising experts, utilizing classic elements of audience appeal. Inherent in this are certainly elements of the theatre, harkening to the Roman Arena, but with substantial differences due to the electronic medium. All of these elements, however, must be viewed as structural, and serve ultimately as a support or frame for the fans. As such, these components, while necessarily requiring exploration by the researcher, will not stand as the focus; it is the fan that is the axial element.

In conclusion, a new approach is required for three reasons. First, the aggressive multi-media tactics of present-day wrestling gurus has altered its structure significantly. Second, an uncomfortable gap has been seen to exist in

the literature, leaving it incomplete. Third, and perhaps most important, a theoretical understanding, generated from all available data utilizing a grounded approach, will ensure that the theory will fit the data, rather than the data being made to fit the theory.

6. METHODOLOGY

Briefly, the methodology chosen for this thesis was one of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It was deemed the most profitable method of inquiry concerning the subject, in that it utilizes an inductive approach. As opposed to a deductive method, this "grounded" approach builds up theory inductively from successive stages of data collection and analysis. Because theory gradually emerges from data, it controls the process of data collection, acting as a guide towards type and location of data, based on the criteria of theoretical purpose and relevance. Emerging core categories act as theoretical guides to further collection and analysis. As such, grounded theory generates a conceptual understanding of an area, rather than performing a quantitative analysis in hopes of verifying an hypothesis.

Data Gathering

The data gathering involved a combination of data, investigator, and methodological triangulation. The use of diverse data sources and techniques strengthened insight into the topic by allowing its examination from numerous angles, as well as ensuring that understanding generated by the research was rooted in the data. Content analysis, participant observation, and unstructured interviews were utilized.

Participant observation occurred over a two-year period while the research team attended several evenings of matches or "cards" at the Winnipeg Arena, as well as Wrestlemania broadcasts. This allowed the team to experience the event repeatedly, under a number of different circumstances. This setting also allowed

contact with the fans, and gave the team unlimited opportunities to look for discrepancies between how the fans defined and understood the event, and how they actually reacted to it.

Content analysis of weekly televised wrestling broadcasts, Wrestlemania events, interviews, commercial promotions and magazines over a two-year period were used as unobtrusive measurements for the generation of understanding, allowing for the systematic deconstruction and identification of concepts and properties.

Interviews were constantly being conducted with wrestling fans. They were unstructured, so that emerging patterns could direct subsequent inquiry. Rather than being based on preconceived theoretical frameworks, they were guided by sensitizing concepts which constantly adjusted the direction of questioning, while patterns began to emerge. The purpose of these discussions was to gain a general sense of the mindscape of wrestling fans, in terms of how and why they participated, as well as their general understanding of the event.

As the data organized itself coherently, descriptive statements concerning wrestling fans emerged which formed the body of the work. Participant observation and content analysis were used in conjunction with the interviews to strengthen the overall analysis.

Data Analysis

Following the tenets of grounded theory, the analysis of data occurred simultaneously with collection and coding. Analysis began with sensitizing concepts, as outlined by Blumer (1969). These concepts were adjusted and

modified as more data was collected. Categories and properties emerged, which further guided data collection. Sensitivity was displayed towards the pattern model approach as discussed by Kaplan (1964), as it seeks to identify relationships among possible elements of a whole. Above all, the use of data, investigator, and methodological triangulation throughout all stages of investigation maximized the depth of understanding.

7. WEEKLY T.V. WRESTLING

On one level, the wrestling experience may be broken down into several components. These include the weekly televised program, live arena events around North America, magazines devoted exclusively to wrestling, pay-per-view extravaganzas, as well as a large number of products aimed at both adults and children (these include hats, jackets, posters, food products and toys, the list is virtually endless). Because of the strategic interconnectedness of these components, it becomes both difficult and misleading to try and discuss any in complete isolation from the others. Therefore, the discussion must necessarily move at times from one component to another. It is hoped that this does not yield a chapter that appears erratic or ill-focused; on the contrary, this method of presentation should demonstrate its own necessity when complete. For the sake of ready understanding, the attempt will be made to explain each as thoroughly as possible, while keeping in mind that it is the whole which becomes the object that yields the greatest insights.

Televised wrestling events are the staple of wrestling as a product, and are also the component which most people have been exposed to at one time or another. One can call oneself a wrestling fan simply by watching the weekly broadcasts and participating in no other aspects; however, the serious fan appears to be one who uses these broadcasts as an integral part of the larger whole. This is exactly what the W.W.F. tries to cultivate with these broadcasts. To understand what occurs during a "typical" weekly broadcast, it is necessary to return to the overall picture of how organized wrestling operates. It should be

remembered that this entire thesis speaks of wrestling in terms of the World Wrestling Federation (W.W.F.), the largest and most powerful organization on the professional wrestling scene.

The wrestling year is divided into three major time periods, each culminating in an "extravaganza" event; these are marked by "Wrestlemania" in March, "Summer Slam" in August, and "The Survivor Series" in November. Wrestlemania is by far the largest and most important - in 1989 Wrestlemania was held in the Michigan Superdome, and set the record for the largest attendance at an indoor sporting event. In 1991 Wrestlemania set the record for the largest pay-per-view audience in the history of the medium. To some extent, the other two events serve as a build-up to Wrestlemania, however, because of the ongoing and the non-conclusive nature of wrestling, each moment or event can be said to be a build-up to the next. Nevertheless, these three events are responsible for generating the bulk of the W.W.F.'s income. These events are held in large sporting stadiums throughout Canada and the U.S.A., and are broadcast via closed-circuit hook-ups to arenas and other large outlets across North America to a paying audience. They are also broadcast into private homes via cable companies on a pay-per-view basis.

Also occurring throughout the year on a regular basis are the live arena matches or "cards", which take place in most major cities through Canada and the U.S.A. Depending on the strength of the market, they may occur as often as monthly, in the largest markets, or as seldom as twice yearly, in the smallest markets (this seems to be the rate at which Winnipeg holds cards). Attendance

at these live cards involves purchasing a ticket, after which the fan is exposed to a variety of wrestling merchandise sold by W.W.F. representatives throughout the arena.

The W.W.F. publishes its own magazine on a monthly basis, a glossy, beautiful publication which offers coverage of recent cards, updates on present grudges and rivalries, speculation on upcoming events, as well as "in-depth" and "behind-the-scenes" interviews with wrestling personalities. As well, an enormous amount of merchandise is available in a special section of the magazine through mail-order.

The thread which runs through this all is the weekly broadcast. This is the foundation of professional wrestling, and, as mentioned, the segment of wrestling to which most people have been exposed. As foundation, it will be explained in some detail.

To begin with, a structural description will follow. The program is an hour in length, and live segments are taped at different arenas each week, across the United States. Although the bulk of the program is the identical one seen in every market area, special segments are different, as they pertain to the upcoming arena matches in a particular area. The program is extremely slick and professional in all technical areas, and is obviously the result of careful and expensive planning and execution. There are no bad camera angles or fuzzy shots, no lapses in dialogue or miscues; the point is that the W.W.F. weekly broadcasts are as glossy and well-produced as anything seen on television.

Perhaps most instructive at this point would be a description of a typical weekly broadcast, aired May 4, 1991. Following this will be a detailed analysis and exploration of the "finer" points presented in it.

The program begins with a stirring, computer-generated graphic of the W.W.F. logo growing on the screen. Intense music, conjuring images of courageous battles and heroic victories, swells. The effect is very powerful: teutonic glory to be sure. A voice-over welcomes the fan to the "best" in professional wrestling - the World Wrestling Federation. The next shot reveals a huge arena, full of excited fans. Pre-placed flash units add to the excitement, creating an illusion of thousands of cameras going off throughout the arena, trying to freeze in time a piece of the extravaganza, to keep forever. A new camera angle frames three individuals, with the immense crowd behind them. These are Vince McMahon, Roddy Piper, and Randy "Macho Man" Savage; they are the broadcast team. In reality, McMahon owns the W.W.F., but he serves only as the main announcer to the audience. Roddy Piper is an active wrestler, a hero, and his input into the broadcast revolves around promoting "good" wrestlers and chastising "bad" wrestlers. He also acts as foil and antagonist to the villainous member of the broadcast team, Randy Savage. Savage is, for the moment, retired from wrestling, but is very much a crucial component - he holds all heroes in contempt and praises the villains. In the middle of this polemic is McMahon...he appears to be neutral, but definitely, through cues and comments, resides on the side of good. This arrangement yields much excitement during the program, as threats and accusations are thrown across the

broadcast table, insults hurled, and the promise of eventual mayhem always present. The broadcast teams serves a much more important function than may be initially imagined, but this will be explored in a later section.

McMahon welcomes the viewing audience to this particular arena, and briefly announces the highlights of the upcoming hour. The main event, (and not at all usual for the weekly broadcast) is a title-match between two well-established teams: the Rockers (heroes) and the Nasty Boys (villains). The Nasty Boys presently hold the tag-team championship belts. Roddy Piper lends his opinions, stating that the Nasty Boys will surely lose their belts to the Rockers. Savage pipes up, contradicting Piper's views, and insulting him in the bargain. McMahon interrupts, and subtly states he is inclined to share Piper's view. Presently, they go to the ring, where a ring announcer is about to introduce the contestants. He introduces the Rockers, who come bounding from the dressing room area while their theme music thunders from the P.A. system. The crowd erupts exuberantly - these are their heroes, and the possibility that they may see the belt changing hands further fuels emotion. The Rockers are well-muscled, handsome young men, and this is not lost on many female members of the audience. The camera takes many close-ups of young women cheering and swooning as the Rockers climb over the ropes, into the "squared circle". The announcer speaks into his microphone once again, and the mood changes in the arena - for here come the Nasty Boys; despised, brutal, villainous. They are accompanied by their own ominous music, and they too rush to the ring. They appear vile, loutish, and unkempt. They sport punk

haircuts and missing teeth. By now the crowd is booing and giving them the "thumbs-down" sign. The camera focuses on several youngsters, displaying their complete disapproval. The Nasty Boys respond by sticking their tongues out at the crowd, threatening those at ringside, and acting in a generally offensive manner. Before the bell is even rung, the Nasty Boys attack the Rockers, viciously punching and kicking them, giving no indication that they are interested in the "rules" of the match, much less the virtue of good sportsmanship. The Rockers respond by fighting back immediately, and the referee is able to gain some control by maneuvering one Rocker and one Nasty Boy out of the ring, allowing the remaining two opponents to conduct a "proper" match inside of the ring. Throughout this, the three broadcasters have been ever vigilant - Piper calling the Nasty Boys "crazy" and "dirty", Savage praising the "aggressive tactics" of the Nasties, and berating the "gullibility" and "stupidity" of the Rockers for not being fully prepared for this match. McMahon, true to form, subtly agrees with Piper.

The match progresses. The Rockers, the very picture of youthfulness and athletic ability, wrestle in the fashion of well-trained acrobats, combining tumbling with classic wrestling moves. They conjure up images of many hours in the gymnasium. The Nasty Boys, on the other hand, seem to have spent more time in the bar than the gym. Implying that they have much in the way of wrestling technique would be quite misleading. They wrestle in the style of back-alley brawlers. They continually punch, push, choke, gouge, and try to overpower their opponents through sheer force. There is very little doubt in the

minds of the fans as to who deserves to win. But, as all good fans know, justice is more often promised than delivered.

About half-way through the match, Vince McMahon announces that the Legion of Doom (arch-enemies of the Nasty Boys, hence, and necessarily, heroes) have some comments. A squared insert appears on the television screen, blocking about one quarter of the upper-left hand side of the screen. This allows the television audience to view both the match and the insert. Here appear the Legion of Doom. They are a strange combination of road warrior and Marquis de Sade - they sport football shoulder pads with 10 inch spikes coming out of them: splendor in leather and steel. They favour warrior-like face paint and bizarre hair-cuts. It is conceivable that they each tip the scales in excess of 300 pounds. They deliver a foreboding message to the Nasty Boys; they threaten them violently, and promise that they will win the championship belts from them. It is obvious that there is no love lost between these teams. The insert disappears, and the three announcers take their turn: Piper praises the Legion of Doom and believes they can do it, Savage thinks they are all talk, and McMahon comments on the brutal battle that will occur when those two teams meet in the ring.

Back on the screen, the Rockers and the Nasty Boys are involved in a see-saw battle for supremacy; first the Nasties seem to be gaining the upper hand, brutalizing the Rockers with glaring rule-breaking manoevers, apparently beating them into submission. Then, however, the tide begins to turn. The Rockers, through precise execution of proven wrestling moves, begin to dominate

the Nasty Boys. They continue to outthink and out-wrestle their cretinous foes; finally, a Rocker pins a dazed Nasty Boy and the referee begins his 3-count. This is too much for the remaining Nasty Boy. He enters the ring and pulls the Rocker off his fallen companion. Punches and kicks are delivered, a chair finds its way into the ring (courtesy of the Nasty Boys), and the referee is knocked down. By this point, the Nasties no longer seem to care about the official outcome of this match, they simply want to destroy the Rockers. The referee, sensing that all hell has broken loose, waves his arms, and ends the match. The Nasty Boys have been disqualified! But, unfortunately for the Rockers, a championship belt cannot change hands due to a disqualification. While technically the winners, they are forced to leave the ring empty handed, beaten and bruised. The Nasty Boys hoist their tag-team belts high over their heads, taunting the screaming crowd. They jeer and laugh at the crowd, and depart amid a sea of disapproval. Final comments ensue from the announcers, and then it is time for "Update from the Pages of the W.W.F. Magazine." This is a segment with well-known W.W.F. personality/broadcaster Gene Okerlund. It is set in a newsroom, and Gene sits behind a typical news-anchor's desk. This spot is generally used to remind the audience of a dramatic event which has recently occurred, and/or to promote an upcoming extravaganza such as Wrestlemania. It is not used specifically to promote local arena events around the country; that occurs later. These local arena matches do, however, also serve as fodder for the larger pay-per-view events.

During this update, Okerlund discusses a particularly nasty event which occurred some weeks earlier, and which was the birth of a new plot/rivalry, undoubtedly set to culminate in a pay-per-view event. It dealt with the Earthquake (a 400 pound villain) killing the boa constrictor Damien, mascot and beloved pet of the strange loner/hero Jake "The Snake" Roberts. It seems that the Earthquake managed to tie up Roberts in the ropes, and force him to watch his pet, enclosed in a large sack, suffer destruction at the hands of the Earthquake's body slam (several times). During Okerlund's description, we see the replay of this occurrence. Interestingly, at the moment the Earthquake is about to land on the sack, presumably with the snake inside, the scene changes to a close-up of Okerlund's face grimacing. Each time the behemoth is about to make contact with the sack/snake, Okerlund's face is featured. After the tape has been shown, Okerlund voices great moral indignation at the heartless villain. He then assures the audience that Roberts has sworn revenge. He does not, however, divulge the date of a rematch. But we know it is coming.

After the first commercial, we join the ring again. This time it is an event featuring the Texas Tornado, a hero, versus Al Burke, a palooka (this is a wrestler whose only job is to lose to a featured wrestler during a televised match). The Tornado is a hero cut from the same cloth as the Rockers: young, muscled, handsome. He delivers as promised, punishing his opponent with graceful manoevers and classic wrestling moves. The palooka is cast in moral opposition to the wrestler he is facing; if the featured wrestler is a hero, the palooka will be evil, and vice versa. Having said this, the palooka in this match

tries every dirty trick he knows in an attempt to rattle the Tornado. At one point, he seems to be getting the Tornado into some trouble. Yet, in glorious fashion, the Tornado is able to rally all his strength, despite his serious predicament of moments before. He fights back and, using his special move, sends Burke crashing to the canvass. He pins Burke, and the referee counts to three. The crowd erupts, and the Tornado throws his arms up and acknowledges them. They share the victory. Again, the standard discussion among the broadcasters.

At this point we go to "The Event Center", which is the supposed technical headquarters of the W.W.F. It looks like a behind-the-scenes look at a newsroom - technicians seated at tables of equipment, television monitors piled high with various matches being edited and produced. All very legitimate and official. Seated mid-screen is Sean Mooney, the official anchorman of the W.W.F. He looks like a young anchorman on any of the major television networks. This is the segment of the program where the local arena matches are announced and promoted. A broadcast of this would be made for each specific market, and edited into a program sent to that particular market. Needless to say, Sean Mooney's day is likely rather full. This program originates in the Detroit market area, and so Mooney highlights an upcoming night of matches at the Joe Louis Arena in Detroit. Each of the matches he describes involve top-name wrestlers - there are no palookas at live arena events. Further, the matches involve wrestlers who have been in feuds that are ongoing, and have been regularly featured over the past few months. They will be build-ups to

upcoming pay-per-view events such as Summer Slam. The main point is that the arena events will be "hot"; they will involve confrontations between wrestlers that have been built up over time on the weekly televised broadcasts. They will not, however, result in extraordinary or clear-cut upsets, such as championship belts changing hands; these special moments in sport are reserved for the pay-per-view events. Detailed discussion concerning arena events will occur in a later section, suffice to say that when fans purchase tickets to see live matches, they will not be viewing a random pairing of two opponents; there will be a calculated match-up of heroes and villains with established histories of extreme conflict.

The main event at Joe Louis Arena, as explained by a very professional (looking) Sean Mooney, is a "body-bag" match between the hero and former Heavyweight Champion, The Ultimate Warrior, and the villain, The Undertaker. The Undertaker is a ghoulish mortician, hence the body-bag match. Here, the winner is allowed to wrap the loser in a plastic body-bag. What happens after this has been accomplished, we can only imagine. The next match described is an 18-man battle royal, to determine who will fight "Mr. Perfect" for the Intercontinental Championship. It begins with 18 wrestlers in the ring at once; whoever remains after all others have been thrown over the top rope wins. The list of 18 is described by Mooney, and after each name he highlights the prowess (good or bad) of that wrestler. Mooney assures the fans they will not want to miss this one. Next we have an interview with Mr. Perfect himself, along with his veteran manager, Bobby "The Brain" Heenan. Mr. Perfect is, of

course, a villain. Only villains seem to need managers. Mr. Perfect's claim to fame is that he is absolutely perfect: perfect face, perfect body, perfect hair, perfect wrestler. He is not modest. As he speaks he is constantly primping and admiring himself. His arrogance is presented as unbridled, and he suggests that none of the wrestlers involved in the battle royal even deserve to wrestle him. His manager, Bobby Heenan, echoes these sentiments, while attired in a sequined evening jacket. Mooney returns to the screen, and once again outlines the upcoming matches in Detroit.

After the next commercial, we return to the ring. The announcer introduces the palooka, Mr. X, to basic indifference from the crowd. But when the announcer introduces his opponent, Colonel Mustapha, the crowd erupts into a frenzy of hatred. Colonel Mustapha is an officer in the Iraqi Army, a self-proclaimed personal friend of Saddam Hussein, wearing point-toed wrestling boots he claims were a personal gift from Saddam. On several occasions Colonel Mustapha has profaned the American people, the American nation, and has gone so far as to burn a picture of Hulk Hogan, which, for many, is tantamount to burning the American flag! On Television! Not only this, but Colonel Mustapha manages none other than the former American patriot and hero-turned-traitor, Sgt. Slaughter. This is the same Sgt. Slaughter that was once so gung-ho and pro-American that he had a G.I. Joe doll cast in his name and likeness. Through treachery, Slaughter "stole" the Championship from Hulk Hogan, only to have it taken back by Hulk at Wrestlemania '91. Mustapha and Slaughter, however, have vowed to get the title back, for the glory of Saddam

Hussein and all the Iraqi people. All of a sudden, the fans are cheering for Mr. X. Unfortunately, Mustapha takes only three minutes to beat Mr. X, forcing him to submission with the controversial "Camel Clutch". Throughout the match, Roddy Piper has been highly critical of Mustapha's wrestling techniques as well as his politics. Randy Savage, on the other hand, admires both Mustapha's wrestling prowess and his loyalty to his cause.

We now see an interview segment, featuring the Undertaker and followed by an interview with the Ultimate Warrior. The Undertaker, whose character is mysterious and death-like, speaks in clichés based on death and funerals, implying he will kill and then bury the Warrior. He is flanked by his manager Paul Bearer, whose skin is white, eyes are black, and looks as if he has been deceased for two weeks. The Ultimate Warrior, on the other hand, is the picture of exuberant life itself. He speaks to immortal powers which guide him, and who he is in constant contact with. He talks of fate and destiny, and calls on his warriors (fans) to give him the power to destroy the Undertaker. Immediately following these interviews, Sean Mooney again appears at the Event Center, where he briefly recaps the matches at the Joe Louis Arena.

Following the next commercial we return to the ring, for a match between Tom Stone, the palooka, and Virgil, the hero. Virgil's character is quite interesting. He was the former "body-guard" of Ted Debiase, the "Million Dollar Man". Debiase was a villain, and used Virgil to attack his opponents when it looked like Debiase might lose. Virgil, who is black, was very much treated like a paid slave by Debiase, who, on occasion, whipped Virgil in public.

Roddy Piper finally convinced Virgil that he was "a man", and should not kowtow any longer. In a glorious coming-of-age sequence some months before, Virgil told Debiase that he would not be his lackey any longer, and, with Piper's prompting, turned the whip on his master. Since then, Virgil has vowed to "get" Debiase, and has been met with an equal amount of vitriol from Debiase's camp. Because of Piper's association with Virgil, much talk takes place between the three announcers prior to the match. Piper speaks of the inherent equality of the black man, and alludes to Virgil's new-found freedom as the culmination of hundreds of years of the struggle between good and evil. Savage ignores the noble aspects of the argument and points out the trouble Virgil will be in when he and Debiase meet again. He downplays Virgil's ability as a wrestler and suggests his biggest disadvantage is having Piper in his corner. Much "heat" ensues, with McMahon taking control by starting the play-by-play.

The match itself follows the classic pattern: both wrestlers seem to be involved in a give and take battle, with the palooka employing dirty tricks and Virgil sticking with standard manoevers. Soon, however, Stone's foul play gains him the advantage, and we see Virgil in a tight spot, not far from defeat. Then, miraculously, Virgil calls up all of his fortitude, and in a flurry of moves defeats his villainous foe. Piper views this as a victory for all oppressed people, Savage sees it as lucky. More insults are hurled, but McMahon lets us know that we have witnessed a small piece of justice, claiming Virgil deserved to win.

We now see a segment which is advertising a pay-per-view program coming up shortly. It is a program entitled "Wrestlemania's Highlights and Heroes", and promises to recreate the glory and despair contained in the previous six Wrestlemania events. Fans are urged to contact their local cable companies regarding this.

Returning from the commercial, we see the palooka Dan Robbins in the ring, and the announcer signals his opponent, the evil Berserker, along with his insidious manager, Mr. Fuji. The Berserker, as his name implies, appears insane. He doesn't speak, merely grunts. He seems to take all direction from Mr. Fuji, who coaches him at ringside. The Berserker is extremely large, and acting quite crazy; it takes him two and one half minutes to viciously dispatch the hapless Dan Robbins. The Berserker seems like some trained animal, he unquestioningly carries out Fuji's orders, with no wrestling ability whatsoever. He appears utterly contemptuous. Mr. Fuji is cast as equally, if not more, evil, as he is the puppet-master for this gargantuan marionette. During this content there is an inset, again appearing in the upper screen, of the heroic "Tugboat", friend of Hulk Hogan, enemy of the Berserker. He claims that the wild Berserker must be stopped, and he is the man to do it.

We now see an advertising segment featuring the "Game-Boy" by Nintendo. Several wrestlers are promoting the W.W.F. game cartridge, and strongly urge young viewers to try it.

We return to a segment known as the "Funeral Parlour", with Paul Bearer (the ghoulish little man who manages the Undertaker). He has his own "show

within-a-show", as he has a set at one end of the arena from which he conducts interviews. His set is very gothic, with caskets, skulls, dry-ice, and R.I.P. wreaths tastefully arranged. He stands in front holding a microphone, and announces this week's guest - Hulk Hogan! The crowd erupts wildly; Hulk is charisma incarnate, this cannot be overstated. Hulk comes forward and acknowledges the pulsing crowd with a Hollywood smile as big as his persona. He towers over Paul Bearer, and immediately takes a confrontational attitude. Paul begins to berate Hulk, claiming that Sgt. Slaughter is going to get the Championship belt back. Hulk is visibly angered, but remains silent during the tirade. Finally the mighty Hulkster can take no more. He grabs Paul by the lapels of his mourning suit, and snatches the microphone. He begins speaking in ultra-patriotic terms about his mission and his Hulkamaniacs, and promises to destroy Slaughter once and for all. He concludes by lifting Paul Bearer up off the ground, tossing him into a casket, and slamming the lid shut. The fans approve, and rise to their feet in unquestioning support for their Hero.

Having established the dominant patterns that exist in the weekly broadcast, we can now summarize the rest of the program, in lesser detail. The final match features Brett "The Hit-Man" Hart (hero) against a palooka. The palooka uses dirty tactics, threatens to win an upset, and is eventually beaten by Hart who musters all his wrestling skill into a final assault. During the match, an insert of the Barbarian with Bobby Heenan (villains) appears. They describe how they will demolish Hart very shortly. The broadcasters continue to supply the appropriate responses throughout the match, and align themselves

accordingly. This match is followed by a trip back to the Event Center, with Sean Mooney again outlining the upcoming card at the Joe Louis Arena, and urging fans to buy tickets quickly. There are then two interviews, one with the Orient Express (villains), challenging all who would get in their way, and one with Jake "The Snake" Roberts, swearing vengeance on the Earthquake, who killed his snake. Commercial advertisements follow, featuring W.W.F. wrestling dolls, and another ad for the Nintendo "Game-Boy" W.W.F. cartridge.

Concluding the weekly broadcast is Vince McMahon, Roddy Piper, and Randy "Macho Man" Savage sitting at their broadcast table. They recap some of the highlights of the show, as well as commenting on some of the wrestlers appearing on next week's broadcast. We again hear the dramatic, stirring theme, and see the majestic W.W.F. logo consuming the television screen. This is the most that some wrestling fans ever see, but it is not intended to be; and, according to attendance records at pay-per-view events, it seems to be working. But besides the fighting, and squabbling, and threats, and boasting, and evil managers, and rule breaking, what are we dealing with here? It is time to examine these weekly broadcasts in greater detail, for there is more here than meets the eye.

First, there exist three types of wrestlers: the villain, the hero, and the palooka.¹⁹ The villain, quite simply, is any wrestler who breaks the rules, to defeat an opponent. Villains represent evil forces in the world - cheats, liars, and braggarts who will pull all the stops in seeking success. They have no sense of sportsmanship, taking great pleasure in applying excess force in the

ring, especially when their opponents are unable to defend themselves. Villains, when wrestling or during interviews, constantly insult and threaten the audience, and in turn "punish" the crowd by using excess force on their opponents, jeering at the crowd before each act of brutality is applied. Common traits among villains, including their managers, are arrogance, egomania, and condescension. They constantly preen before the camera, flex their bodies, and generally try and portray to the audience a sense of inflated self-worth. In terms of wrestling style, villains rarely employ acrobatic or "scientific", classic wrestling moves. Instead, on the rare occasions they use "holds", they employ ones which are designed to maim and punish rather than "pin" an opponent. They rely on being brutish, primitive, and they attempt to overpower opponents through sheer brute force. They combine this with blatant rule-breaking, and often resort to "foreign objects" hidden in their trunks to strike the final blow. Their treatment of the referee, being the representation of legitimate authority in the ring, is disrespectful, to say the least. Villains' responses to referees cover a large range of the spectrum of disrespect. Some villains will not break an illegal hold until just before the referee ends the four count (wrestlers have up to the count of four to break illegal holds, such as choking, biting, gouging, etc.). Others go so far as to knock the referee unconscious when they view him as hampering their success. According to W.W.F. rules, a referee does not have to be conscious for a match to continue - if he regains consciousness, he continues refereeing. All villains fall somewhere in between these parameters. More discussion concerning the role of the referee will follow.

Extremely popular among villains is the evil foreigner. The W.W.F. is very sensitive to the hatred that can be engendered by choosing a particular cultural persona for its villains. Hence, as seen in the example of the televised program included here, Colonel Mustapha, proud Iraqi officer, fits the bill nicely. This program was aired as the Persian Gulf War was drawing to a close; what better persona for the American and Canadian audiences to focus their hatred on? All of the tension and frustration of international conflict surrounding that event could be released against one individual. Adding to the hate felt against Mustapha is the fact that he is seen to have helped pervert and convert the once proud American wrestler Sgt. Slaughter into an Iraqi nationalist. In place of Slaughter's former marine corp uniform, resplendent with american flag, we now see Slaughter dressed in the official uniform of an Iraqi officer, hoisting the Iraqi flag high, insulting and threatening the American people and glorifying Saddam Hussein.

This arrangement is quite typical. During any major conflict between America and countries abroad, one can be sure to see the arrival of a new villain representing that present nemesis. Hence we have witnessed Middle Eastern villains, Cuban villains, and Arabic villains come and go. It is not necessary to only draw villains from present tensions, however. Several classic types exist, based on past conflicts deeply embedded in the American psyche. We will always have insidious Japanese, jack-booted Nazis, good ole Southern boys, vile Russian Communists, or any other of a number of American sore spots. Ethnicity is not the only prerequisite of a villain. We can see villains

rising along class lines as well. Ted Debiase, also previously mentioned, represents just that. He is billed as the "Million Dollar Man", and flaunts his wealth and social position to its extreme. The plots surrounding Debiase reflect the advantages that someone in his position can have. When Debiase was unable to win the championship belt from Hulk Hogan, he had a "million dollar belt" made from diamonds and rubies, and called it the true championship belt of the W.W.F., challenging all others to try and take it. He demonstrated that if one is rich enough, one can "buy" achievement. His persona has paid other wrestlers to lose to him (to the disgust of the fans). He has paid other wrestlers to do his dirty work, and he constantly berates other wrestlers and fans using terms such as "peon" and "stupid peasants". Moreover, Debiase was seen as a slaveholder, for his practice of "owning" Virgil, his black bodyguard. He has humiliated him publicly on several occasions, even whipping him for a perceived indiscretion. Debiase and his persona show the audience that money buys not only happiness, it buys flesh; their flesh, if he so chooses. His motto is, "Every man has his price", and he has used money, at ringside, to get fans to perform degrading and humiliating acts. Crowds are constantly reminded that those with the money can buy and sell them, and literally make them jump through hoops. Their very souls are available to those with the cash, not just their bodies, which they already realize only too well by participating in a wage-labour economy.

Relying on the inherent repulsion towards sexual ambiguity present in North American society, we also see the "effeminate" villain. A classic example of this type is the late Adrian Adonis, of the W.W.F.

Adonis not only wrestled, he also had a segment on the weekly broadcast called "The Flower Shop", much like the "Funeral Parlour" described earlier, from which he held interviews and advanced plot developments. The set was cluttered with flowers, and painted pastel pink. Adonis, at about 350 pounds, appeared wearing a large brimmed woman's hat, tent-like print dress, thick neck wrapped in red and pink scarves. He wore rouge, lipstick, and excessive eye makeup. His microphone was wrapped in yellow daffodils. Adonis' equally effeminate manager, Jimmy Hart, was constantly fussing around him, rearranging his long, bleached hair. The key was excessiveness. The message was not simply that Adrian Adonis was sexually ambiguous, he was also loathsome and sickening. Here, ladies and gentleman, is a 350 pound transvestite, and he wins matches! He kicks the daylights out of red-blooded American boys! Having Adrian Adonis win in the ring subverted the audience's sense of not only morality, it broke the traditional rules of justice; here is an anomaly, a freak, and he is continuing to win in the ring. It is little surprise that Adonis' persona was so successful for the W.W.F.; fans flocked to arenas and pay-per-view venues to finally see Adrian "deflowered" once and for all.

Another extremely popular villain is the "bully" or "mean" wrestler. This villain operates not along lines of race or class or sexual orientation; rather, he just plain loves to hurt people. Although all villains contain elements of this character, the true bully will wrestle anyone, anywhere, solely for the chance to put them in the hospital. They speak of ending wrestler's careers, and hold everyone in contempt, heroes and villains alike. The audience sees in them the

classic sadist, and they have plenty of experience with this sort in their own lives. Every nasty clerk, rude waiter, heartless boss and playground bully is personified in this villain. The fans' sense of the American spirit and fair play are injured by this man; he seeks neither glory nor success through hard, individual work. He simply wants to inflict pain on whoever is in his way. From our example, the Earthquake fits in this category, as does the Undertaker. They exist only to destroy.

Usually found with the villain is the evil manager. These characters are just as colorful and usually have greater longevity than those they purport to manage. Villains may come and go, but the managers usually just incorporate new faces into their "stables", thus maintaining increased plot development as well as their own legitimacy. The main purpose of any manager is, of course, interference in the match his protégé is involved in. He will distract the referee while his man applies an illegal hold, physically obstructs or trips-up a hero. When his client is in trouble, he will furnish his man with illegal foreign objects, and distract the hero so that his wrestler can mount a surprise attack - from behind. The flamboyant manager is also responsible for generating much "heat" or excitement in plot development. He will brag incessantly during interviews about the prowess of his wrestler, while denigrating other wrestlers. He will run around the outside of the ring during matches, yelling instructions to his wrestler (often involving the order to apply excessive punishment), and bait the crowd at ringside. In short, he will do everything he can to make sure the villain wins the match. In this way, the audience immediately sees the injustice

of the managerial arrangement: it allows the villain an extra advantage that the hero does not have, an ally outside of the ring who is often apparently involved in deciding who actually wins the match, through interference. The wrestlers should decide the outcome based on the best man winning, but the fans see that the deck is stacked through the incorporation of a second party.

And yet, the manager will not confront a hero who is actually in a position to do him some harm. He grabs the hero's leg from outside of the ring, delaying him momentarily. Or he enters the ring after his wrestler has rendered the hero defenceless, and then berates and kicks him, looming over the fallen hero and yelling challenges and insults. In this way, the manager is completely without honour or, more importantly, courage. He will not be so bold when the hero has the upper hand; like a vulture, he waits until his prey is wounded. As a result, the fans see him as carrion, and detest his cowardliness all the more. On occasion, and to the great delight of wrestling fans, a manager misjudges and comes face to face with a powerful hero in the ring. When this occurs, arena audiences leap to their feet. Invariably, the manager's response is to fall to his knees, lift up his arms, and literally beg for mercy; he will not try and defend himself, for this would be out of character. When he receives a thorough lashing, the fans are doubly satisfied. First, because they are seeing a cowardly villain getting his just desserts for a plethora of offences, and second, because they are being shown that the injustice created by his very character is not the norm in society. Rather, it is an anomaly, a brief distraction from the way things should be, and the hero is, in one fell swoop, restores the moral

order inherent in life. He is teaching the fans an important lesson in ethics - that although the unjust and the evil may have their day in the sun, right shall eventually prevail, and justice will assume its rightful place in the affairs of men. Which, naturally, brings us to the hero.

The hero is, in fact, not as easy to describe as the villain. Although a villain always breaks the rules, a hero does not always follow them completely. There are circumstances, moreover, when a hero is urged and applauded by the fans to break rules. This occurs when the villain is so contemptible and ruthless that the hero is allowed momentarily to stoop to his level. This, however, is viewed as a brief, acceptable departure from his true moral character. Within the concept of justice, a second harm may be justified when it is payment for a first, and it is considered punishment. In this way, when the hero breaks the rules and inflicts harm not in keeping with the perceived moral loftiness of his persona, the audience can still subsume this within the concept of justice, by conceiving of it as the second harm which is payment for the first.

It must be stressed, however, that the hero is not allowed to step outside of the rules frequently or randomly. It is reserved for matches which have a long history of bitterness, where a certain villain has continuously bettered a particular hero through deceit and treachery. At some point in the plot development, the villain's antics will appear so heinous that the hero is allowed to forego restraint, and punish the villain accordingly. Such is the stuff that Wrestlemania matches are made of.

Having said that, we can generally state that heroes do ascribe to a particular sense of ethics. They see the rules of combat as having legitimacy, tied to a higher principle of sportsmanship and fair play. They recognize the legitimate authority of the representatives of that order, the referee, as well as the host of "officials" and "bureaucrats" associated with the organization, who lay down rulings and intervene, occasionally, in disputes.

What heroes do have in common, is a particular characteristic or trait that makes them recognizable to wrestling fans as embodying or representing a real virtue. This is of particular importance when pairing a hero against a specific villain. In our example, Sgt. Slaughter, renegade ex-patriot, Iraqi mercenary, becomes involved in a bitter struggle with the super-patriot, American Flag-waving, almost mythical super-hero, Hulk Hogan. Hulk represents an unquestioning love for God, country, and moral absolutism. Hulk is seen as being the ultimate role model for children; he constantly reminds them to train, say their prayers, take their vitamins, and believe in themselves. His persona, carefully developed over the last 10 years, is as close to the embodiment of Good as the world of wrestling has ever seen. This point cannot be understated; it will come into the discussion at a later stage. This pure-type hero, then, is the perfect antithesis to the heinous Slaughter. This fact was not lost on the W.W.F. organization; their most recent match was the main event at the last Wrestlemania, and set the record for the largest watched pay-per-view event in the history of the medium. To reiterate, heroes are less easily catalogued than villains. A large group are comprised of young, handsome, athletic types who

combine acrobatics with classic wrestling holds; the Rockers are classic examples of this breed. They represent the benefits of exhausting hours of training and clean lifestyles. Their love of the sport is witnessed by their great knowledge of holds and counter-holds, and their individual dedication to a higher goal comes through in their sportsmanship. They are frequently pitted against villains who are cumbersome and large, relying on sheer force and brutality. If these heroes win, it confirms the fans' belief in the value of hard work; if they lose, it is invariably due to some evil trick on the part of the villain or his manager. In this case, the fans are reminded that much treachery and injustice exists in the world, and even the most highly developed individual can run afoul of it from time to time.

Any of a countless number of attributes can be embodied in the successful hero. Patriotism and athletic prowess coupled with sportsmanship have been mentioned, but there are many others. Devotion to a simpler, more ideal way of life spawns many wrestling personas, such as the Hillbilly, the Good Ol' Boy, the Farmer, the Peasant, the Simple Man, and so on. The Loner is also a popular hero. Here is embodied the rugged American spirit of individuality, standing alone with a simple set of ethics. These are heroes that need no allies, nor do they need the devotion of the fans (although they receive it). They are outcasts and outlaws, involved in single-minded missions of their own making. They do not usually seek out opponents, rather, they become involved in feuds as a result of some villain "getting in their way", or generally singling the Loner out because of his reputation. Jake "The Snake" Roberts is a

good example of this. His self-described "queer and strange ways of doing things" coupled with his need to "follow my own drummer, who plays a different tune", firmly establish him as the mysterious stranger: aloof, dark, and foreboding.

A large category of heroes are wrestlers who have decided to pick a fight with a particular villain. A new wrestler on the scene, or an established one, for that matter, may pick and develop an antagonism towards a visible villain. This is all the impetus a wrestling fan needs to embrace this character as a hero, because in the wrestling world, two villains never face each other. There exists two separate pools of wrestlers; one pool contains heroes, the other villains. Members fight each other across pools, but not within their own pool. If a villain picks a fight with someone within his own pool, he immediately becomes a hero, and joins the pool of heroes. Therefore, when one opposes a villain, one becomes, *de facto*, a hero. This emerging hero will quite likely be less of a pure-type than the heroes of the previously described categories, but he will be a hero nonetheless. Over time, he may gain other positive attributes which will elevate him to a greater status, or he may move back into the pool of villains, by turning on a hero. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that wrestling fans do not only cheer for heroes; they also cheer against villains. A subtle point, to be sure, but fundamental in understanding the seemingly spontaneous birth of a hero.

In the same way a wrestler becomes a hero by challenging a villain, so too can a villain transform himself into hero by picking a fight with another

villain. Likewise, a hero can easily become a villain. This is extremely common in wrestling, and provides the fuel for many complex plot developments, as wrestlers make and break alliances, double- (and triple-) cross each other, and hunt down former friends and befriend former enemies. It is in these transformations that wrestling fans take a great deal of delight. Seeing a former hero become corrupted and fall from grace only to receive a sound beating from another hero reignites their sense of justice. They also readily accept the villain who repents his evil ways and joins the proper and true flock of righteous men. Ex-villains seem all the more noble, because they have climbed to high moral heights from the pits of dastardliness, rather than starting at some neutral point. Equally, ex-heroes are to be detested all the more, because they know the difference between right and wrong, being formerly virtuous, but have consciously rejected this life, for the sake of money, greed, vengeance, or whatever the case may be.

The third type of wrestler, the palooka, needs only brief mention. He only performs on televised wrestling broadcasts, and occasionally as the first match in an arena event, to warm the crowd up. The sole purpose of the palooka is to lose matches. He is used to showcase the real talent. There are two types of palooka, good and evil. A villain will be paired against a good palooka, while a hero will face an evil palooka. This way, the palooka acts as a substitute hero or villain, yet he doesn't jeopardize the relationship between hero and villain because the audience doesn't invest either a great measure of admiration (good palooka) or a great deal of hatred (bad palooka) in him. To

accomplish this, we are never exposed to a palooka outside of the ring. We will never see one interviewed. Since they never win a match, there is no reason for the audience to believe that they will benefit by remembering them. They are used to tease the audience, by visually hinting at what's in store when the hero and villain actually meet in the arena. By abusing a good palooka, the villain can remind the audience how evil he is, and he can demonstrate the kind of punishment that the hero can expect when hero and villain meet in the ring. The hero uses an evil palooka to remind the audience that he is a tool of holy retribution; anything he dishes out to an evil palooka will be coming ten-fold to a thoroughly corrupt villain. Therefore, the crucial function of the palooka is to build up fervour in a potential arena or pay-per-view audience, and get them to the point where they will buy tickets to see the climax. A hero or villain against a palooka is foreplay; a hero against a villain is consummation.

But there is another soul standing in the ring...a proud, honourable man risking his very life, yet we seldom know his name. He is the referee. His role is no less important, in the overall understanding of the event, than are the combatants. He represents the legitimate authority in the ring; the embodiment of "ought-to-be". He stands for the proposition that all wrestlers do battle on an even footing, by removing the possibilities of cheating, illegal moves, interference from managers and the like. It is he who decides who the winner is, by giving the three count, or through deciding a wrestler has had enough punishment, when in a submission hold. He is empowered to disqualify a wrestler who refuses to follow the rules, and can "count-out" a wrestler who

cannot make it back into the ring after being thrown out. These are the formal characteristics of the referee's function. In actuality, his role is much different.

Generally speaking, the referee acts the fool. Most matches involve him being distracted by an evil manager, allowing the villain to blatantly abuse the hero undisturbed. Although several moves are illegal, the wrestler has to the count of four to break them, therefore one can apply a series of illegal moves throughout the match and not be disqualified. In this sense, the referee's ineffectualness occurs on both the individual and the structural level; he can be tricked, but he also has to act within a set of rules that give the advantage to the evil-doer. The referee is constantly plagued by the tricks of the villain, tricks which the audience clearly sees but he doesn't. The crowd, therefore, becomes enraged, seeing the inadequacy of the referee resulting in their hero losing ground, or possibly, the match. One popular plot involves the referee being accidentally knocked unconscious as the hero slams the villain to the mat, helpless. The hero then pins his enemy, and waits for the three count. When it doesn't arrive, the hero looks around and sees that the referee is incapacitated. At this point, the manager enters the ring with a foreign object, clobbers the hero, who crashes to the canvass. The manager then revives his stunned villain, who climbs on top of the hero, applying a pin. This is when the referee regains consciousness, sees the villain pinning the hero, and gives the three count. The audience, having seen all the treachery occurring, goes berserk! This plot has numerous variations, but the main point is that the audience is privy to information that the referee is not, and as a result, mistaken judgements are laid

down by him. This weakness of the referee to successfully apply good and fair decisions beckons the audience to become involved themselves. Because the referee seemingly can't do the job, they must do it themselves, and so they scream and demand justice.²⁰ They cry out for retribution, and hate the villain even more - he is taking advantage of the fact that the referee can be fooled. The villain is using all the loopholes, and there is nothing that the legitimate authority can do about it. It is up to them, the fans to do it, through further empowerment of their hero. Having no referee in a wrestling match would be senseless, as the hero and villain would be on an even footing. Having more than one referee would be just as detrimental. The opportunities to trick and deceive him would be lessened, and again the hero and villain would be on an even footing. The most beneficial arrangement is to have one, ineffectual, easily diverted, referee.

These are the most visible characters in wrestling, as they move in and out of the ring. There are more personalities, however, each with his own function to perform, each central in its own way. The ring broadcasters are the first objects of our investigation. To recap, this group is comprised of Vince McMahon, chief broadcaster, Roddy Piper, heroic colour commentator, and Randy Savage, villainous colour commentator. They speak during the bulk of the televised program, before, during, and after matches, as well as at the beginning and the end of the program. They serve several functions; the primary one being the credence and legitimacy they afford the entire event by modelling themselves after professional sports broadcasters. One gets the feeling

they could cover any major sporting event as effectively as the other network crews and appear just as professional. This bolsters the sense that what we are witnessing is in fact a sport; if it weren't, then why the traditional trappings of a broadcast team? More specifically, here is an analysis of their key functions: they cue the audience as to who to cheer for, i.e., who are villains and who are heroes, by observing which member of the broadcast team aligns himself with which particular wrestler; remember, Randy Savage will support any wrestler at all, in his commentary, as long as he is a villain. They act as historians, linking up pertinent details in a particular plot and making sure the audience is aware of past actions that have led to the present situation. They act as prophets, giving subtle hints as to who the audience should remember and watch for in the future, and to what future plots they believe will be occurring, in terms of feuds, partnerships, controversies, crises, and resolutions. They bring in much more information than could be gathered simply by watching the matches. During matches they give updates, show inserts, and discuss matters not pertinent to the match at hand. When the audience may not be sure about the reasons behind a certain plot detail, they will offer their opinions, through conversation, to help clarify the situation. They use their considerable ring experience to translate to the audience, who may not be as well-versed as they, what is happening in the ring. They also "pick up the slack" for a particular wrestler if need be; if a move is not well executed, they act towards it as if it were. Several times during a broadcast, moves are not executed as intended, for example, what was meant to be a blow to the head with a fist is in fact only glancing, yet the

wrestler being struck falls to the canvass in writhing pain. The broadcast team describes it as if it was perfectly executed; this should go a long way in influencing the viewer's perspective of it. Based on these functions, what we have is a parallel wrestling program occurring simultaneously with the observable battles. It is a continual broadcast of important information that the viewer requires for a complete understanding of the serialized drama. The broadcasters act as a mirror to the past and a window to the future, linking segmented installments of an ongoing plot. Without their guidance the intended myth or plot might not be followed, lines between hero and villain might blur. At the very least, the complexity of plot and sub-plot could tend to overwhelm the viewer. The one thing that is needed to maintain a ticket-buying public is to be sure that they are aware of the intricacies of the drama, and sustain a personal involvement with it.

The next significant component of a wrestling program involves what may be called the interview, although it is not always necessary for an actual interviewer to be present, as many of the segments produced involve wrestlers in monologues, either between matches or during matches in quarter-screen inserts. The common element is that one or more wrestlers themselves are involved. The wrestler will appear, alone if he is a hero, with his manager if he is a villain. He will discuss what he intends to do to his adversary the next time they meet. Heroes dwell on past wrongs they have received at the hands of their adversary, outlining the reasons that have earned the villain the impending thrashing. Villains tend to brag about their own capabilities and insult the hero

they are to meet. They describe, in general allusions, the severe maiming and possible destruction they plan on meeting out. They minimize the prowess of their adversary, and pick out one or two characteristics of their foe to degrade. When two such segments are aired, featuring hero and villain slated to meet, the villain's segment invariably occurs first - in this way, we see the villain as the initiator of the hostility, and the hero as responding, appropriately, to the foul challenge that has been placed. The purpose of these presentations are to allow the audience to experience first hand the emotional components of the feud, and see the passion involved in the rivalry. Matches never occur which do not dramatize beforehand a deep level of hatred associated with them - we will not see a championship match occur solely for the reason that the challenger wants the "belt". We are invited to think that the contestants would just as soon fight it out in a parking lot as in the ring, invited to sense that if these men ever ran into each other in public, a chaotic battle would ensue. It is no coincidence that fans of any sport enjoy the competition more when there is personal animosity between the teams or individuals, and wrestling plays this aspect to the hilt.

In the television episode used in our example, we were witness to a segment known as the "Funeral Parlour". This type of interview format has been a staple in the W.W.F. Before this was "The Brother Love Show", before that "The Flower Shop", and on and on. These shows are simply variations on a theme. They are approximately five minutes in length, are always hosted by a villain (wrestler or other evil personality), and are a showcase for quite active plot development in the guise of interviews. They are taped on an open set at

one end of the arena, and so are viewed by the arena audience as well as the television audience. Villains and heroes appear on the segment from week to week, and are allowed to address the audience. When villains appear, they are heartily supported by the host, who applauds their treacherous claims wholeheartedly. When heroes appear, much more action occurs. The host generally insults and degrades the hero, and makes suggestions that the hero is about to fall victim to the more talented villain when they meet in the ring. The hero invariably takes this abuse for a few minutes, then turns on the host. He will grab the microphone, and loom over the host, outlining both what he plans on doing to the villain, and making veiled threats to the host. The host (always a coward), will cower from the intense hero, as the audience begins to "egg on" the hero. At the conclusion of the segment, the hero will either storm off, leaving a quaking host, or if he's feeling particularly emotional, will perform some act of a degrading nature on the host. In our example, Hulk Hogan physically locked Paul Bearer into a coffin. Frequently though, exciting plot developments will occur during these segments. Many a hero has been ambushed by his adversary while appearing on these segments. Villains will come racing from behind a curtain with a large object and attack the hero from behind. Once down, savage beatings will follow, often necessitating the hero being removed from the set on a stretcher. This sort of *melée* is very important to the development of the plots. It dramatizes how the intensity of hatred on the villain's part is so great that he will attack the hero anywhere - not simply in the ring. It gives a chance to look "behind-the-scenes" in a way; the

hostilities are shown to be extremely personal, so much so that they can not be contained in the ring. The audience's contempt for the villain increases through events such as this, as they see how low the villain will stoop in his shameless attempt to destroy the hero. In one scenario, a hero, recovering from a broken leg, was attacked from behind and fell to the ground, helpless. The villain kicked him and punched him several times, then sat on his chest, immobilizing him. His sadistic manager then grabbed the hero's crutch, and proceeded to slam it over the bandaged leg of the hero, in an attempt to re-break the leg. This vicious assault only ended when a band of heroes, who "happened to be nearby", rushed the set and intervened. The villain and his manager were able to run off unharmed, and thus add a new chapter into the escalating hostility between the two wrestlers. These segments, summarily, allow several functions to be carried out. They allow plot advancement by allowing wrestlers to speak directly to their adversaries and the audience, threatening and outlining what will occur in the ring. They allow a forum for new plot developments to form and flourish. They give those who would not normally be heard, such as managers and W.W.F. "officials", a chance to speak and so add complexity to the plot.

The "Update" segment, with Gene Okerlund, is also extremely useful. It can and does utilize several methods and types of presentation. It can consist of several minutes of Okerlund discussing pertinent details concerning present plots. Filmed inserts can be added, reminding the audience of particular events they may have missed or forgotten. If the need exists, the Update segment can consist of added interviews with wrestlers, or it can be a showcase for new plots

and developments that were previously filmed and which are now being "revealed" for the first time. As national events, such as Summer Slam, the Survivor Series, and Wrestlemania draw closer, however, Update devotes itself exclusively to promoting these. Because the T.V. matches are limited in that they present only a visual record of what is actually occurring in the ring, it is up to segments such as Update to supply the necessary amount of intrigue, scandal, plot development, and story-line to ensure that the pay-per-view and closed circuit audience will be substantial. As such, the Update segment is central to the success of these truly giant events.

The W.W.F. control center with Sean Mooney is also significant for an overall view of the world of wrestling. As previously mentioned, its purpose is to fill the arenas in the various markets across the U.S. and Canada. A segment is taped for a particular market, highlighting all of the wrestlers on the card. Taped interviews are included, allowing the combatants in the main attractions a chance to stir up more interest. Mooney emphatically urges the television audience to purchase tickets before they are all gone. And because we hope that is where we will finally see Hulk Hogan give Sgt. Slaughter his long-overdue beating, we go.

There are advertisements for official W.W.F. products spread throughout the entire program, both in the actual scheduled advertising break, and in the broadcast itself. We are exposed to polished ads for W.W.F. dolls, hats, clothing, food products, video games, videocassettes of previous events and various topics, vitamins, and on and on. During the show, segments will be

included featuring W.W.F. wrestlers eating the official W.W.F. Ice Cream Bars, or crouched over a tiny ring, re-enacting battles with W.W.F. dolls cast in their own images. Focused shots of the crowd show adults and children wearing Hulk Hogan head-bands and T-shirts, carrying posters of their favourite wrestlers, holding any of a number of licensed W.W.F. products available at arenas or through the mail-order section of the W.W.F. magazine.

Described in this chapter are the features that one will find when tuning into a weekly wrestling broadcast. What seems smooth and natural, and immensely slick, is actually an extremely complex choreography of segments designed to sell tickets. The way it is put together makes it somewhat misleading. The bulk of time is not spent watching actual wrestlers doing battle in the ring, instead, we are exposed to a "program within a program" of sorts. Through special segments between the matches, and careful information-dispersal during the matches through the voice-over discussions, we see another program, dealing with the "personal" side of the wrestlers. We see their "true" personalities, and are privy to the inner motivations that fuel their actions. The world of wrestling organizes a drama of treachery and retribution - evil is done and subsequently vindicated. The non-ring segments allow us a very personal glimpse into that constructed world. The fan is constantly reminded of the fact that these are not simply matches of athletic prowess. These are deeply personal scores that need to be settled. Because the fans have witnessed all of the villain's treachery, moreso even than the referee has seen, they become strongly involved, on an individual level. They saw that son-of-a-bitch manager hand his

villain those brass knuckles, even if that idiot referee didn't, and god-damn-it, they'll be there when he gets his in the end. And the more that villain brags and swaggers during interviews, and feigns innocence, the more they'll relish his pay-back. This point cannot be over-stated: because the fan sees more than the referee and officials do, they have "inside knowledge", and embrace the event as "insiders". It is an old but very effective trick, and it is, in a large part, the motor that drives the continued participation of the fans. Furthermore, by having the program within the program, it allows the W.W.F. to legitimate and help define what the audience witnesses. Not only do we see a match occurring, we hear "experts" discussing the match as it is unfolding. They supply the necessary history, and speculate on the direction in which it may be going in. After the match, "professional sportscasters" in recognizable news-like backdrops add further layers of legitimacy and definition, pointing out those things we may have "missed", and concretizing events we may be only surmising. All the while they are fuelling our fantasies, never losing sight of the axis of professional wrestling: an epic battle of good vs. evil, with retribution and the promise of justice acting as our temptress.

8. ARENA WRESTLING

In the past, arena wrestling was the end and culmination of all of the effort placed into the television broadcast. Audiences at home were wooed and manipulated into buying tickets to an evening of matches at the local arena. They knew they would likely see their hero finally triumph over the forces of evil; an orgiastic climax to weeks of intense courtship. Presently, however, arena wrestling exists more as a means as well as an end. The wildly successful wrestling extravaganzas, Summer Slam, The Survivor Series, and especially Wrestlemania, which rely on pay-per-view and closed-circuit audiences, become the end in the chain of fan participation. Arena wrestling has become more of a point on that journey. It is not that arena wrestling is not important in itself - it generates huge revenues across the continent. It is that the extravaganzas necessarily need the "dream matches", and so the arena events cannot detract from these. Hulk Hogan cannot take the belt away from Sgt. Slaughter night after night in local arenas across the U.S. and Canada, close to the date of Wrestlemania, and then hope to expect the same fans to pay a substantial price to see the same event on Wrestlemania. Instead, we will see Hulk on the taped segments on television, and he will be brutally attacked by Slaughter and his entourage, and left to appear totally decimated. Then, on later segments, we will see Sgt. Slaughter burning posters of Hulk, and insulting him and the American people. Later, we will see Hulk rallying the fans to him with the promise of retribution, and so forth. There will, over the next months, be more surprise attacks, more instances of treachery, more promises of retribution.

It will then be announced that these two will meet in the glorious main event at Wrestlemania, and much attention will be focused on this as the days pass. However, we will not see them meet at our local arenas, as Wrestlemania approaches. Instead, we may see Hulk battling other villains, and he will dispatch them easily. Likewise, we may see Slaughter destroy lesser heroes at our arenas, in his drive towards the destruction of Hulk Hogan. By seeing each of these wrestlers live, we become more personally involved in the final outcome. Throughout this, the audience is intellectually engaged in trying to anticipate which wrestlers will emerge from the sea of plots for the center ring in the major events such as Wrestlemania.

The arena cards do have to be interesting enough to draw large crowds, however. To this end, the W.W.F. runs several key plots simultaneously. While reserving the "dream matches" for its extravaganzas, there is still plenty of fare to present to arena audiences. A typical scenario would involve a feud between two wrestlers. The initial hostilities will be forged and developed on weekly broadcasts, using the special segments to produce "heat". Once the feud becomes sufficiently intense, it would be moved to the arena circuit. Fans would be told that the epic confrontation is to occur at their own hometown arena (in actuality, the identical match would be carried out on consecutive nights at arenas around the country). Fans would fill the arena, and hope to witness a decisive outcome. Instead, they would likely see hero and villain end the match with no clear winner. Usually, the villain would resort to some heinous act, and either win as a result of the referee's misjudgement (in which

case the fans would not accept it as a victory), or lose a result of disqualification, should the referee witness it. A reminder: a championship cannot change hands as a result of disqualification, so one can imagine the great number of variations that can occur to end a match, and not produce a satisfactory or decisive win or loss. Indeed, this ambiguity is used to further the interest in the final outcome. A final outcome, that elusive decision in wrestling, is best served at the extravaganzas, concluding particular plots in some cases, carrying them over to the next extravaganza in others, with interesting variations.

Because of the great number of plots at any one time in the W.W.F., arena audiences are occasionally treated to a clear victory by a hero. Without such occasions, fans may grow tired of constantly being disappointed. Therefore, every so often they are treated to a moment of justice, and are allowed to leave satiated. On these occasions, a wrestling arena can be a very magical place to be indeed. As mentioned, when a particular hero and villain are slated to meet at Wrestlemania, for example, the arena audience will likely see them in individual competition, but not against each other. In these cases, there will be a decisive victory on both their parts, against a lesser hero or villain, accordingly. If they are pitted against each other, as occasionally occurs, there will be no clear, decisive victory. Both may be disqualified, as the battle moves outside of the ring and onto the floor. Or, the villain and his henchmen may be disqualified, as they gang-up on the hopelessly out-numbered hero. In

any case, the promise of clear outcomes will be reserved for Wrestlemania, should they face each other prior to it.

To further illustrate the point, the case of Hulk Hogan and Sgt. Slaughter may be used. If Hulk is scheduled to defend his championship belt against Slaughter at Wrestlemania, Hulk will not lose that belt prior to Wrestlemania. He will be pitted against other villains, and he will have a clear victory. There is also the chance that interference will occur, as Slaughter or one of his entourage enters the ring and "blind-sides" Hulk. The plot may then involve Hulk regaining his composure and successfully retaliating, or it may involve Hulk being beaten ruthlessly and left lying in the ring. Either way, Hulk retains the championship belt, which will still be around his waist at Wrestlemania.

Having glimpsed into the normal plot developments surrounding arena wrestling, one must note that there are many other structural components worth commenting on before subjective analysis is performed.

The ring is located at the center of the arena floor, and is flanked by row upon row of folding chairs. These are the coveted "ring-side" seats, home to the most rabid fans, and, in general, the most demonstrative and vocal ones. These are the seats that sell first. The next most popular locations are the lowest sections in the two ramps immediately opposite the ring; these sell-out second. After these seats are gone, the arena fills according to the speed at which the ticket-buyers buy. Generally, the more enthusiastic the fan, the closer they will be to the ring. Not only does it allow them a closer view of the action, it allows them a degree of interaction with the wrestlers. More

importantly, it allows them to interact more freely with each other. More discussion of this will follow. Presently, here is offered a typical evening at an arena, along with the emotions generated.

On the night of an arena match, you arrive early; there is much beer to be drunk, and much pre-card activity to indulge in. Any wrestling fan worth his salt has ring-side tickets, and so you make your way to the beer vendor closest to the floor. Wrestling fans usually buy two beer at once; the lines can be extremely long. After milling about the beer vendor long enough to finish those, two more are purchased, and your group then makes its way onto the floor. The lights are on bright in the arena, and you look up into the ramps, to scorn those so-called fans who waited so long to purchase tickets that they were relegated to the far-flung corners of the universe. You find your way to your seats, and you and the gang sit down. As you look around you, you see the intensity growing on people's faces and reflected in their conversations.

Ringside is a very social place to be; soon you are starting conversations with those around you. You are six years old again and the circus is about to begin. Hulk Hogan is wrestling tonight as the main event, and you all sense that history, of some sort, is about to be made. Hulk has been suffering untold treachery at the hands of Sgt. Slaughter for several months now, and tonight Hulk is defending his belt against one of Slaughter's buddies, Colonel Mustapha. Can Sgt. Slaughter be very far away? Will he show his face? These questions, and many, many more are now being asked of you by strangers in the row in front, and you quickly respond that Slaughter wouldn't dare show his face, or

Hulk would kick it in. You take a big swallow of beer, and ask your new friend if he saw what Slaughter did to Hulk on T.V. a few weeks ago. He did, and shakes his head, finding it difficult to believe that such treachery can exist in the world. You look slowly to your friends sitting beside you. You smile a sly little smile, and a thought passes silently between you: does that guy really think this is real? The guy in front of you is sharing the same thought with his pals. You finish your beer, and the guy in front turns around again. "I heard that Slaughter is in Iraq right now, going over plans to defeat Hulk with Saddam Hussein", he says. You heard the same rumour on Update with Gene Okerlund the week before. "Probably", you respond, and you notice you are getting angry, "the farther he stays away from Hulk, the better". Then you both smirk to your buddies again, but you know that soon you won't have time to smirk; you'll be screaming too loudly. But now you need more beer, and you have to go to the bathroom. As you walk past the rows, you notice that in general the crowd down here appears to be working-class. You likely won't run into them at the symphony next week. There are a great many women in attendance, most with boyfriends and husbands, some in same sex groups. There are also children present, running around, applying wrestling holds on each other and clutching wrestling dolls and paraphenalia.

Standing in the arena bathroom, you hear much of the same conversation: people discussing the intricacies and outcomes of the evening's card, echoing opinions and recounting events that have been on television over the past months. You find yourself drawn into it, and begin conversations with those

shoulder-to-shoulder with you at the trough. In here it smells like beer and urine, out there it simply smells like beer. You make your last predictions with the others, then leave the room. After loading up on beer, you go back to your seats, only to see your gang involved in lively discussions with those in your section. Some are making bets on the outcome of certain matches. As you take your seat, you notice a fairly large group occupies the seats opposite yours, on the other side of the ring. They are dressed in military garb, holding Iraqi flags and posters in the likeness of Sgt. Slaughter and Colonel Mustapha. Who are these misfits, who would dare to profane the name of Hulk Hogan in such a fashion? These enemies of Right are also involved in heated discussions with those around them; the Slaughter fans are proclaiming the victory of their man over Hulk in the upcoming Wrestlemania, and the Hulkamaniacs are standing firm in their beliefs. Although the interactions are lively, they seem good-natured. These conversations will not likely lead to a fight; they rarely do. The Hogan fans seem to enjoy having a visible "enemy" present on whom they can repeat the assertions that Hulk made on television the week before, and Slaughter fans seems to enjoy being able to actively participate in the generation of "heat".

It is now very close to the pre-ordained time. People's excitement level has continued to build, as has their beer intake. Eyes are bright (if a little glazed), the noise level is rising dramatically. There is a great level of anticipation in the building, and you most surely share in it. Suddenly, the lights go off in the building. Blackness. Just as suddenly, the ring is

illuminated with a pure, white light from overhead. Silence in the room. There is nothing now, except you and the ring; ancient battle-ground for good and evil. Judgement Day. The plains of Abraham. This is what it's all about. A lone figure, clad in black tuxedo, enters the ring. He takes the overhead microphone, and begins to speak. He welcomes you to the arena, on behalf of the W.W.F. He announces the first match; a teaser. It is a "warm-up" match featuring some less known W.W.F. up-and-comer and some palooka. They enter the ring, and begin to battle, with the referee closely supervising. You notice several things: they are not as big as they appear on television, and move much more slowly. From this vantage point, their movements seem to be less effective than from your living-room chair. These matches are, in some sense, designed to bore you; they serve to stand in contrast to the more dynamic matches that will follow, and they do. One thing you appreciate by attending several nights of wrestling at an arena is the careful way your level of excitement is built up, culminating in the main event. It is a very careful choreography of crowd manipulation, and extremely effective.

One advantage of having a few preliminary bouts is that it allows you to go frequently to the beer stands and not miss much. This steady consumption of alcohol appears to be the perfect ingredient in loosening up a wrestling fan's inhibitions. Perhaps the alcohol makes it easier to "play along"; in other words, you stop smirking and start following the action more intently. It also eases social interaction, and there is a certain amount of competitiveness among fans on the floor. You prove your worth by demonstrating that you know all of the

complexities of the current and past plots, through constant conversations with all around you. And so, any substance that allows your considerable expertise to flower is dearly welcomed.

Once the preliminaries are over, the "name" wrestlers start to perform. Seeing a wrestler appear that you have been watching on television is quite exciting. You feel very much aligned with him, if hero, and equally repulsed, if villain. In any event, you feel a personal association, having been present at so many significant moments in his life. To this theme, you are being "played". Heroes look out into the crowd, acknowledge their support, and smile at you. They may walk around ring-side, and shake hands and sign autographs, prior to a match. Villains scowl and threaten the ring-side audience. They yell at you to "shut-up" and create the belief that if you hassle them enough they will leap from the ring, knock over the first four rows getting at you, and hit you with the first foreign object they find. And you find yourself responding. More surprisingly, those with you are responding with equal enthusiasm. There are now very few smirks in the house. Not surprisingly, the referees are no more effectual than they are on television, and this generates no end of wild possibilities.

After two such "name" matches, a small break occurs. This allows you time to get more refreshments, buy some official W.W.F. paraphernalia, and generally cavort with those around you. Your own voice is starting to sound strange to you. You turn to your friends, and with a completely straight face discuss the highlights of the matches you have just seen. It all seems very real,

and you are in a sea of believers for the time being. Now you can't wait to see Hulk, and you stand up and scream across to the Slaughter contingent. You accuse their man of being two notches below Satan, and they yell back at you. Damn, you feel so alive! The lights dim again, and the next few matches all contain top-name heroes and villains. You witness unheard of acts of brutality, which the referee misses. You see mighty heroes, on the brink of extinction, summon immortal powers and rise from the ashes to lay out their vile opponents, as the noise level in the arena is continuously rising. You are on your feet, then standing on your seat, spilling beer and yelling at the top of your lungs, and you are not alone. When the villain wins through a cheap act of deception, you become so enraged that you would like to rush the ring and bludgeon him to death with your official W.W.F. program. When the hero wins, you scream wildly and feel satiated and shake the hands of those around you. This is justice, you scream to yourself, and savour it. It is sweet, and so is your beer, and you're out and you rush to get more.

You arrive back at your seat, and the next match features Hulk Hogan and Colonel Mustapha. The hair is rising on the back of your neck. People seem on the edge of a religious conversion. Your friends' twisted faces reflect your own emotional state. The man in the tuxedo enters the ring. He announces that the next match is tonight's main event. It is a one-fall match, for the Heavyweight Championship of the World. You can feel your heart pounding in your chest. He announces the challenger, Colonel Mustapha, who enters from one side of the arena, accompanied by the Iraqi National Anthem.

As he approaches the ring, you feel blind hatred. Every third word from your mouth starts with an "F". This man, who has never personally done anything to you, not even rang your doorbell and then run away, incites in you a passion for destruction that is truly marvellous. Needles in the eyes would be too good for this individual. The fans in the military garb are also going wild, but their praises are easily drowned out. The announcer speaks again, and your emotions change as if they were controlled by a mercury switch. The P.A. system begins to pump out Hulk's song, your song, as the announcer introduces the Heavyweight Champion of the World, Hulk Hogan! And out from the side, bathed in a single spot-light, comes Hulk! With his theme pounding in your ears, he strides confidently towards the ring, playing the crowd every step of the way. He shakes hands, waves, and is talking as he goes. As he climbs onto the ring apron, every man, woman and child in the arena are on their feet, applauding and shouting their undying loyalty. The noise level is truly deafening. You are mesmerized by this man, and as he walks from corner to corner of the ring, cupping his large hand to his ear to encourage response, you find yourself moved beyond control. You have been taken to a world where everything makes sense and is clear and intelligible. There is no grey-area here; this world operates as it should. Men are either good or bad, and easily recognizable. Action "A" leads to result "B", and confusion and deception have been lifted forever.

As Hulk wrestles, you feel every blow he takes, and relish every blow he delivers. This is no accident. Hulk's matches are designed to elicit maximum

emotion. Hulk takes an early lead in the match, much to the delight of the audience. Soon, however, he begins to lose ground. Mustapha throws him all over the ring, pounding him to the edge of consciousness. Hulk finds himself in the middle of the ring, on his knees, as his opponent towers over him. He receives a blow to the head, and does not respond. He receives a second blow, and miraculously, his eyes open! He looks up at Mustapha. You sense something truly divine is occurring. Hulk takes a third blow, and a fourth, all the while seeming to be revived through the continual punishment.

You respond wildly to this unbelievable come-back, and you begin chanting his name. By the sixth blow, Hulk has gotten to his feet, and is confronting his confused assailant. Everyone in the area is ecstatic. As Mustapha attempts to deliver one more strike, Hulk blocks it with his meaty fore-arm, and shakes his head as if to say "no more". At this point he unleashes a mighty blow, stunning Mustapha, who falls to the mat. Hulk then bounces off the ropes, and drops a devastating elbow-smash across the villain's chest. Hulk gets up, comes off the ropes again, and unleashes his trade-mark leg drop across his hapless tormentor, culminating in a pin. All of you fans, who stood by Hulk even when he seemed destined to defeat, erupt in a frenzied explosion.

Colonel Mustapha lies unconscious in the center of the ring, and a battle-weary Hulk is strutting around the ring, with his Heavyweight Championship Belt high in the air. He holds it out to all four sections of the arena, and when he is holding it out for you, you respond accordingly. You share this victory

with him, because he indicates that he fought it for you. Moreover, he fought it for all that is Right and Good, and if all else in your life seems beyond your control, Hulk is here to show you that Justice will prevail, if you train, take your vitamins, say your prayers, and believe in yourself.

Hulk continues to milk this for a full five minutes, and the crowd cannot get enough. You get the feeling that if Hulk asked all of you to follow him out of the arena and into the sea to drown, you would fight to be first in line. When Hulk has finished his one-man circus, and leaves the ring, there is such an intensity of good feeling that it could only be compared to your favourite hockey team winning the Stanley Cup. This is not even an accurate comparison; you do not spend months seeing your team being brutalized by an opponent's team using foreign objects, while the referee is distracted by the coaching staff. You do not see your favourite players being interviewed, only to have an opponent sneak onto the set and smash your man over the head with a chair. You do not see opponents being interviewed, calling your team lousy and stupid and worthless, bragging how they will chop your favourite player's head off with a hockey stick. You do not see your team being constantly penalized by the official, while the other team goes untouched, even though everyone in the crowd knows they are all using brass knuckles. But when Hulk wins, and successfully defends his championship belt, you have, indeed, seen all that and more. This is a very significant feature of wrestling, and perhaps the main reason that it is so entertaining, and able to create unrivalled emotional responses. It understands the logic of sport, and recognizes the formulas

inherent that generate excitement. These moments it takes from sport, and manipulates and organizes them in such a choreography that what you have is a perfectly timed and structured set of conflicts that you cannot help but be captivated by it. No action in wrestling is accidental or meaningless. There are no unintended dull periods, as may occur in other sports. Every detail, every development is part of a complex unfolding of plot, organized in such a way that it produces constant tension for the onlooker. Every major match is a Superbowl game that ends with a field-goal with one second left on the clock. It is a queer combination of sport and drama, borrowing form from the first, and content from the latter. It appears to be sport, yet there is no element of chance. A surprise outcome doesn't mean the lesser wrestler scores an upset, it means the plot has developed a twist the viewer hadn't anticipated. Because it wears the clothing of sport, it is more readily accepted as such. Accepting it as such, to a necessary degree, at least, certainly makes it much more enjoyable to watch.

The description of attending a wrestling card at a local arena was paramount to understanding the wrestling fan. The emotions and actions described are a natural response to a set of well-organized events. They were not limited to the researcher; they were indicative of the research team, and the fans as a whole. The attempt of the W.W.F. to generate such a response appears immensely successful. One starts out the evening somewhat skeptical, but soon finds oneself carried along with the tension and excitement produced. This is one of the reasons the hard-core fans tend to sit ring-side; they work

each other up into such states, and in the process, go along themselves. The "suspension of disbelief" required quickly becomes effortless here. It would be ridiculous to attend a wrestling match and remain skeptical - to "get the most" of the evening's offerings, one plays along, at first, and soon it is no longer necessary to consciously try. This sentiment was echoed again and again by the fans. To be a wrestling fan means, de facto, to participate in this manner, in this psychological state. One does not question the reality of what one is seeing; to do so would make no sense. More discussion concerning the fans' attitudes and compelling motives will be dealt with in the conclusion of this thesis. Presently, we shall return to observations made during arena matches.

The crowd, on the whole, appears to be made up of working and, to some extent, middle class people. This is certainly true of the fans in the most cherished seats which, as noted, indicates their seriousness. As one moves into the lesser seats, the audience becomes less clearly definable; these are the less enthusiastic, perhaps the mere curious. At ringside, however, generalizations can be made. The fans know what they are there for, and they are very social. A female member of the research team noted that in the females' washroom, women were preening and grooming before the large mirrors. She likened it to the washroom at a bar or nightclub, with women "powdering their noses" to look their best, with male attention very much in mind. Because of the social atmosphere at a wrestling card, this analogy is likely quite applicable. Besides attending with husbands or boyfriends, groups of three or four teenage and older women were seen milling around the floor area and outside near the beer and

refreshment stands. They were outnumbered easily, however, by their male counterparts, especially males past their teens. This was certainly the largest group: men in groups of three or more, in their twenties, thirties, and forties. Guys out for a good time, "boys' night out". Plenty of plaid jackets and black T-shirts. Despite the violence inherent in the sport, and the extreme verbalizations by the fans, actual violence is a rarity at these events. A police officer working the event responded that the crowds at wrestling are far less destructive and prone to fighting than hockey or concert fans at the arena.

The social nature of wrestling is significant. It occurs both at the ring-side seats and out in the refreshment area. When compared with hockey games or concerts, the wrestling fan is much freer in starting up a conversation with a complete stranger, knowing that person will respond. This seems rooted in the "play along" essence of being a wrestling fan. Because the fun is maximized by maintaining this fantasy, interchanges along these lines between strangers legitimates the effort for both, and removes the onus of maintaining that reality from the individual himself. Wrestling fans, therefore, constantly reaffirm each other, in the simple act of discussing the match they have just seen.

The use of alcohol at wrestling matches is also quite significant. More beer is sold at wrestling matches than any other events the arena hosts. Because the largest group of fans seems to be males in their twenties through forties from a working class background, this should come as no surprise. This group tends to lead all others in the consumption of beer. Alcohol facilitates the loosening of inhibitions, and therefore helps fans to interact more freely with

each other, which in turn maintains the fantasy nature of the event. This is not to say that it is prerequisite for the enjoyment of wrestling; many do not drink at all. The point is that a significant number do, before, during, and after the event. Many of the fans make an entire evening of the wrestling matches. They gather as a group in a fan's home beforehand, and discuss the various plots that have led to the meeting of hero and villain on this particular night. They "warm themselves up" in this fashion, getting themselves into the appropriate mood. Some show taped segments of the televised programs from weeks before, which promise to culminate on this night. The talk is reinforcing and legitimating even at this point. Although they may occasionally "break from character" and discuss an aspect of wrestling from the point of view that it is an organized drama with prearranged outcomes, this is quite limited. Yet this ability to step outside of the fantasy is allowed, if done sparingly. It seems to allow the fan to officially state, however briefly, that he knows it is a charade, and is not one of those "stupid" wrestling fans who thinks everything they see is real. Having done that, he is then allowed to move back into the world of make-believe, which makes the entire experience much more enjoyable.

For many fans, the period after the matches is also a time for discussion and reflection. The outcomes of the matches are plot developments in themselves, and so must be analyzed and fit into the ongoing plots. Events must be carefully scrutinized and assigned significance in the overall picture. Predictions must be judged in the aftermath, and bets must be called in. And in a good number of cases, more beer must be consumed. The fans are in an

excited emotional state, and as a result need a good period of time for this "debriefing" - often until the wee hours.

Going back to the actual audience, one notices many families in attendance, with children in tow. When "superstars" such as Hulk Hogan are on the card, the number of children in attendance rises dramatically. The appeal of Hulk to kids, as a result of careful marketing of that target group by the W.W.F., is clearly evident. When Hulk wrestles, the audience make-up is also changed to a degree. More middle and upper-middle class families and individuals attend, due to his high profile. Many, many people know who Hulk Hogan is, fewer know or recognize Jake "The Snake" Roberts. As a result, you have a segment of the audience attending to see Hulk, even though they don't consider themselves wrestling fans to any large degree. Many of this group attend at the urging of their children, who see Hulk on television, in movies, in advertisements, as dolls and games in toy stores, or as star of his own cartoon. If not for Hulk, these people state they would not likely be at the arena. Having experienced the evening, however, some report that they would come back. Most remain skeptical about wrestling, and are not at a point where they are willing to give themselves over to the fantasy of the wrestling world, and are not, as such, the objects of our investigation.

There is an interesting sub-culture of wrestling fans, those who clearly support the villains. They typically arrive in large groups, sporting some accessory which identifies them as fans of one or more particular villain. It may be T-shirts with that villain's picture on them, or it may be a style of

clothing that clearly reflects a villain's persona. The fans of Sgt. Slaughter, for example, wear camouflage and military garb. They bring facsimiles of the Iraqi flag, and posters of Slaughter. Another group supports the Russian wrestlers, and sport "C.C.C.P." shirts and Soviet flags. These groups are extremely vocal, and miss no opportunity to invite those at ring-side into verbal sparring matches (which are plentiful). These fans are usually in their twenties, enjoy large amounts of beer, and are male. They enjoy "partying", and a goodly number are more highly educated, often university students. They see their role as antagonists to the lively crowds. They enjoy creating turmoil and excitement, and their requisite for membership is cheering for the villain, any villain. When a villain approaches the ring, they leap to their feet and scream out their loyalty, causing their neighbors to boo even more loudly. In this way these fans "play" the audience, and take on some of the responsibilities of the villain in generating negative emotion. As such, they seem to create a more personal involvement with the event, as they separate themselves from the crowd, and act as an "object" for the crowd's attention and reaction. This is a "kick" they get from playing a role on the floor, rather than blending into the recognizable patterns of that crowd. Because of the separation and objectification of themselves through adoption of an active role above that of typical fan, these fans maintain a self-described "distancing" from the other fans. They understand the necessary fantasy involved in participating as a wrestling fan, and do not violate it. They do, however, take it to its extreme; they are very active and their animated support of the villains comes very near to a parody of a wrestling fan. They

are exaggerating their actions, but not mocking. They do not step out of character nor break the spell of the believers, but they amplify their responses to heighten and enliven the drama. Specifically, they position themselves as actors in the drama, and play their roles well, if somewhat camp. They recognize the roles they have created, and the responsibilities surrounding that role. To that end, they are very knowledgeable about wrestling, are faithful followers, and share the same fantasy as "straight" fans in their words and actions. They have found a way to increase the fun and excitement for themselves, yet still very much enjoy the pageant of the battles occurring in the ring, but from a different perspective. That perspective will be explored presently.

This research team attended a wrestling card one evening, posing as this sub-culture of wrestling fans. Proper accoutrements were secured and displayed, and a pre-match briefing session was held. The team responded in the (in)appropriate fashion at ring-side. Because of clothing and signs carried, every fan immediately recognized us as villain-lovers. We were quick to downplay their heroes in discussion with those around us, and they were quick to respond. When a Russian wrestler entered the ring, and began singing his national anthem, the crowd started to boo, but we stood up and saluted. Soon much of the crowd's heckling was directed at us. We responded in the only responsible manner, shouting, "Shut up, you capitalist dogs! Nikolai Volkov will demolish your weak hero!!" and the like. We continued this behaviour throughout the matches, rising to our feet to denigrate the heroes, and adore the villains. It created a great deal of excitement among those around us, and was actually

quite fun. Although we continually traded insults with the crowd, none was malicious or threatening in any way, on either parts. The crowd understood our function, and accepted us. This role did require us to distance ourselves from the event, as our authentic counterparts had indicated. The natural current produced sweeps you along with the hero - you naturally identify with him. To continually support the villain requires that you are always conscious of your responses, and that you ignore your initial tendencies and act in the opposite manner, as the role requires. As such, you detach yourself and remain vigilant throughout. This is the price you pay for rising above the status of mere fan and taking on a "higher" role within the world of wrestling. It is a different form of fun, and definitely reserved for those with a theatrical bent.

As mentioned, there are a good number of children that attend the arena matches. They appear to be quite captivated by what they are seeing. The structured presentation and its inherent tension are not lost on them. In fact, because they are less sophisticated, they embrace wrestling at its face value, not being able to clearly draw the line between fantasy and reality. The less sophisticated they are, the more they see wrestling as actual sport. As they become older, they come to understand that there is a "staged" element involved, but usually this is translated merely into the belief, upon serious reflection, that the wrestlers may not be hitting each other as hard as they appear to be. The realization that the entire event is "scripted" does not come along until much later, depending on the child's level of development. Because of the child's simpler mind set, it is very difficult, if not impossible, for the child to actively

and simultaneously hold two opposing beliefs at the same time; that it is sport, and that it is drama. When they are capable of recognizing the scripted element, this realization only occurs after a cooling-down period of difficult reflection, after distancing themselves from the event. While watching tapes of actual wrestling matches, children that this writer spent much time with were unreflective, insisting the act was real and maintaining this stance. An hour or so after watching the matches, the children, depending of course on their particular level of sophistication, were able to think in a more detached manner, and address some of the dramatic aspects of the display. This is hardly surprising, given the difficulty that children experience in thinking in terms of duality. The adult, by comparison, seems much more capable of holding two truths, and "opting" to dwell on the fantasy aspect, as they allow themselves to be swept along for maximum effect and enjoyment. The child, on the other hand, needs to cling to one understanding at a time, and in the case of wrestling, clings to the understanding that unfolds naturally and immediately as a response to a carefully manipulated version of reality. It is very interesting to observe, as this writer has, a group of children at different levels of development watching a wrestling broadcast at the same time. During the broadcast, but moreso afterwards, the older ones will occasionally break out of character and speak towards the staged elements. The younger ones tend to rebuke their seniors, who in turn scoff at them, and just as quickly step back into character. There seems to be a need, especially in such a hierarchical grouping, to prove one's intelligence and insight, even if only momentarily, by demonstrating that

one is not "stupid" enough to believe that all they observe is "real". This is a rare occurrence, but happens often enough to provide a pattern of the developing child's need to demonstrate his acumen and insight into a complex world. The significant, and more common feature surrounding children's relationship to wrestling, remains their inability to coincidentally hold two opposing truths. One observes this skill developing as the child matures, and sees it flower in adulthood. As a result, during an arena match, the children are extremely intent and very vocal. They scream and yell with the rest of the crowd, responding appropriately to heroes and villains, in the correct situational contexts. They also demonstrate a keen knowledge of the plots occurring, and do not hesitate to offer their opinions. In fact, if an adult finds him/herself with a youngster and doesn't know what to talk about, there is a very good chance that the topic of the W.W.F. will quickly break the ice.

This, then, has been our experience of attending several evenings of wrestling at our local arena. These were the sights, sounds, thoughts and emotions of not only us, but the fans around us as well. We shared in a very special world, and were often moved in no small way. To gain insights, we became fans, and it felt good. Even with our understanding of the event; its structure, its logic, its tricks, we were swept along easily, once we adopted the necessary psychological state, and utilized our knowledge of past plot developments. We identified with Hulk, and shared in his victories. The power generated by the event was awesome, almost tangible. In short, we came to understand what is necessary to be a wrestling fan and enjoyed it.

9. THE WRESTLING EXTRAVAGANZAS

As mentioned, the experience of arena wrestling is not just an end in itself, but a means to a greater end - the wrestling extravaganzas of Summer Slam, The Survivor Series, and most importantly, Wrestlemania. Although arena wrestling provides the most deeply personal relationship to the phenomenon, the greatest generator of revenue are the extravaganzas. In 1991, Wrestlemania set the record for the largest pay-per-view audience in the history of the medium. Although the basic structure of events leading to the extravaganzas was discussed previously, we shall examine it in more detail here. These events are important to an overall understanding of W.W.F. wrestling as a whole, because these are what separate this modern brand of wrestling from its predecessor which relied solely on arena matches to generate revenues.

We begin with this description of the "Big Three". Wrestlemania is the mother of all wrestling events, a five hour blockbuster of "dream matches", broadcast live, in March, from sports facilities across the continent. Summer Slam is seen in August, and also features the top stars in the W.W.F., but is used very much as a precursor to Wrestlemania. If Hulk and Slaughter were the planned main event at Wrestlemania, for example, they may meet at Summer Slam. Here, Slaughter would perform an act of treachery, that the referee would not witness. He would win the match, but because it would be hailed as a "controversial" victory, they would meet again at Wrestlemania, with a "special" referee in attendance, for example, in the promise of negating any cheating on Slaughter's part. In the meantime, their feud would be heightened to

unprecedented levels, with Slaughter constantly resorting to sneak attacks, and the like. In other words, feuds are not "settled" at Summer Slam when they involve combatants who are slated for Wrestlemania; rather, they are enlivened. The Survivor Series is unlike either Summer Slam or Wrestlemania, in that it doesn't offer wrestlers in single competition, as such. Instead, in November, teams of six wrestlers each are formed, which then compete in "round-robin" competition, with the last team remaining undefeated declared the winner.

Teams, naturally, are made up of their heroes or villains, and arranged in such a way that wrestlers with individual rivalries will find themselves wrestling against teams that contain their particular rivals. It will always be a hero team competing against a villain team, with much bad blood contained historically on each team towards the other. This gives the fan a chance to see his favourite wrestler in tag-team competition, and when six men are involved on each team, he knows through experience that all hell is likely to break loose. The Survivor Series always makes for lively wrestling, as the ring is often filled with twelve men battling it out, much to the horror of the referee. Innuendo is rich in the build-up to the Survivor Series, as survival is seen not so much as winning the tournament, but rather, as staying alive. If one likes his wrestling chaotic, the Survivor Series is for him.

Wrestlemania, like the other two events, is broadcast live from a major sports center. In 1991 it took place in the Los Angeles Coliseum, in 1990 it was in the Sky Dome in Toronto. Seating in these venues is invariably sold out. Fans wishing to see the action may either buy tickets to arenas around the

U.S. and Canada where they will view it on closed-circuit screens, or, in the U.S., may see it in their homes via a pay-per-view service supplied by their local cable companies for a fixed rate. In an attempt to fill every arena, and be seen in every home, the W.W.F. uses all of its organizational skill and knowledge of human nature to manipulate the audience. They do this through their understanding of what motivates the wrestling fan, and what keeps him/her interested (much of which we have already discussed, much of which is still to follow). They understand the fan's identification with good through the hero, and their repulsion at evil through the villain. They recognize the belief in eventual justice, and the emotion invested and experienced along the way. These, and more, are elements already covered in the discussion of arena wrestling. The difference, however, is that at Wrestlemania, all involved sentiments are extremely elevated. The promise is the best arena match you have ever witnessed magnified by ten. To achieve this, the organizational machinery of the W.W.F. begins to assemble its intricate plots a year in advance. As mentioned, the seeds of ultimate rivalries are sown early, and carefully nourished over the year. Fans are "teased" with glimpses of what is to come, through staged occurrences during the weekly broadcasts. Arena matches are designed to further heighten the tension. As the date of Wrestlemania draws closer, the format of the television broadcasts changes somewhat, to heighten interest. The segments begin to devote more and more time to the upcoming Wrestlemania. The "Update" segment becomes the "Wrestlemania Update". Sean Mooney's "Control Center" focuses less on upcoming arena events in the

various markets and more on special interviews with wrestlers appearing in Wrestlemania. The number and duration of actual matches decreases, to be replaced with more segments featuring "in-depth" and "behind-the-scenes" looks at Wrestlemania developments. In the weeks before the extravaganza, the broadcast is devoted almost entirely to Wrestlemania; live arena matches around the country stop, and the program features late-breaking developments, all aimed at convincing the fan that he would be missing something truly spectacular and never to be seen again, if he did not witness it. It should be restated that Wrestlemania is more than just one main event match; it comprises five full hours of wrestling. Therefore, plots have been necessarily developed for many, many rivalries, not just one. When one takes into account that these are all "dream matches" to varying degrees, requiring complex plot development for each to make them such, one begins to understand the extreme detail involved in coordinating not just Wrestlemania, but the entire world of W.W.F. wrestling which develops exponentially over the year and climaxes in this extravaganza.

This research team has, of course, attended a Wrestlemania broadcast at a closed circuit venue. There are similarities and differences when compared to arena wrestling, each significant enough to address in some detail.

First, the closed-circuit location available to us was a large auditorium in a university sports complex. As a result, the seating was limited to a few thousand, as opposed to fifteen thousand for comparable arena events. The seating arrangement was quite unlike that of the arena. All seats were facing an opposing wall of the auditorium, where there was a large screen hanging upon

which Wrestlemania was being telecast. Bleacher seating held the bulk of the crowd, with four or five hundred seats set up on the floor. This method of seating maximized attendance, but drastically cut down on the amount of interaction that could occur among the crowd. One's first impression mirrored the actuality of the event: a few thousand people sitting in rows watching a huge television or movie screen. Movement was limited to leaving one's seat via the closest aisle, and walking through the crowd to the refreshment areas located on either side of the auditorium. The logistics were, naturally, quite disappointing. Further devastating news was being discovered by the crowd - no beer was being sold. It was later learned by this research team that the liquor license, applied for at the last moment, was refused on grounds of a technicality. This setback was significant. A large number of fans we spoke with considered this to be unforgivable, and continued to voice this fact repeatedly. Many felt that had they known beer would not be available, they would not have come. One can only imagine the W.W.F.'s displeasure at their local representative, who failed to secure a liquor license! This development lent a tangible gloom to a large part of the crowd, who were actually quite angry. The research team itself had been looking forward to a refreshing ale.

Because of the seating arrangement, as noted, interaction was impeded. As opposed to sitting ringside, where one sees the faces of those in the sections to the sides and in front of you, here you only saw the backs of heads. This confinement resulted in a much quieter crowd than the research team had expected. Although people generally shouted at the screen throughout the

presentation, lively interaction between fans was held to a minimum. Because of the lack of this element, fan igniting fan, the level of excitement reached in the arena was never even closely realized. It also feels somewhat awkward to find oneself yelling at a suspended screen hanging across the auditorium. We clearly felt the artificial nature of the event, and as a result, remained quite detached from it, as did the majority of those we spoke with, especially fans who regularly attended live arena matches. As the "dream matches" unfolded before us, we were still captivated by the inherent promises made during the plot developments of the previous year. We were not, however, moved to the degree that we had experienced at any of the arena matches in the past year. This was the sentiment of the crowd, in general. Although they enjoyed seeing plots come to fruition in spectacularly choreographed matches, they felt a degree of emptiness surrounding the form of presentation, and the general restrained and restraining atmosphere in the room. On the whole, the fans felt that this was not the best way to view Wrestlemania, but given that it was the only way for them to see it, they attended, and would likely attend again (many added the proviso that beer must be sold next time). This was the overall feeling in the crowd: a mixture of satiation tempered with disappointment. But enough satiation for them to indicate that they would attend again. This sentiment must be widespread among fans across the continent, for Wrestlemania continues to generate the bulk of the W.W.F.'s yearly income. The message, or promise of justice, makes up for the medium. Not having access to pay-per-view, we can only speculate about how home audiences relate to the event on their televisions

(which represents the largest segment of those viewing Wrestlemania). Certainly, most of the features which make arena wrestling so exciting are absent. However, having it broadcast into the comfort of your rec-room, surrounded by your friends and fellow wrestling fans, and refreshments of your choice, must have its appeal. And, like those here attending the closed circuit broadcast, it becomes the only way to see Wrestlemania short of going to an arena where it is happening live. This, inherently, is the point of this discussion: The W.W.F. seeks to maximize profits by staging a single event with the potential of reaching millions of people simultaneously. To do this, it cannot count on staging a live event only; you have to be close enough to see the ring. It is necessary, therefore, to stage an event that is capable of reaching every fan who wishes to witness it, in similar fashion to the Stanley Cup, Grey Cup, or Superbowl. This they have done. This form of presentation has limitations; it is missing a great deal of what makes arena wrestling so exciting. The effort then has to be placed on the Promise. This Promise must be forged in the heart of what makes a wrestling fan, a wrestling fan. Not just the promise of justice, but the promise of Absolute Justice. To this end they create plots involving Ultimate Heroes and Ultimate Villains. They need their Jesus, and they need their Satan, and so they create a battleground between absolute, ideal types, with the promise of a clear, pure, outcome. And because the fan believes that good will eventually conquer evil, he believes it will finally occur here. Therefore, to miss it would be to miss Judgement Day. He buys his ticket to a closed-circuit venue or subscribes to pay-per-view. Although, by

necessity of the format, it fails to create the extreme emotion he feels at the arena, it is his only way to witness it, and share in the experience of a lifetime. He will soon forget the feeling of emptiness associated with viewing it, because he will by then be captivated by new plots, treacheries, and retributions, fuelled by weekly televised broadcasts and the glory of arena matches. Next year, with a new Promise burning strongly in his heart, fed by the orgasmic enchantedness of his local arena, he will subscribe to pay-per-view or sit in a crowded auditorium once again. And the W.W.F. will count its money.

10. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As outlined in the abstract to this thesis, we were interested in the relationship between the wrestling fan and the wrestling world. First, we examined the form and content of that world. We exposed the complexity of its structure, and presented the method by which it is staged and orchestrated. Second, we immersed ourselves in the world of arena wrestling. Here, we came to know the fans, and gained insights into their emotional and mental states, through discussion and observation. Moreover, we ourselves joined that world, and turned our observations inwards. As a result, we arrived at a certain level of understanding, concerning the wrestling fans.

There is one aspect of being a wrestling fan that has already been addressed, but at this point deserves some final elaboration. This aspect concerns the "play-along" nature of being a wrestling fan, as it applies to the suspension of disbelief that wrestling fans utilize. In our opinion, this is the element which does the farthest in explaining the mental set of the wrestling fan, and is of central importance to this thesis.

As mentioned, the fan must be able to suspend disbelief to participate fully in the wrestling world. Emotions must be allowed to run free to get the most out of the experience. Yet, the fan also knows that wrestling is not real, in the same sense that hockey is real. It is our contention that while disbelief is suspended to a large enough degree to free the emotions, the knowledge that the event is staged is also necessary to maximize enjoyment and participation, and

forms a constant, if muted, backdrop to the entire experience. At this point, an example should prove useful to elaborate this point.

A special moment for most hockey fans occurs when a fight breaks out. The fans erupt and encourage their favourite player to deliver a beating to his opponent; however, their enthusiasm for brutality is restrained. They do not wish to witness an actual murder on the ice, nor do they call for it. This would involve crossing the line over the accepted boundaries of what is appropriate for hockey fights. The fans are hungry for a fist-fight, but one which fits the accepted "rules" of hockey fisticuffs. The fans know that neither man will be seriously injured, as long as the unofficial yet subjectively understood rules of fighting are not violated.

If the combatants had used their sticks instead of their fists, resulting in the gashing of each other's faces, the fans would consider this unacceptable. If one player tried to step on his opponent's neck with his skate, in an attempt to sever his head, this would also be unacceptable.

Wrestling, on the other hand, bases much of the excitement generated on just such activity, with the full weight of the fans' legitimation. The audience vocally encouraged seemingly gross and barbaric actions, again and again. Calls for the death and dismemberment of various villains are extremely commonplace; at one card the arena crowd was at its most enthusiastic when a hero was standing outside of the ring area, ostensibly slamming his opponent's genitals into the steel ring-post.

This difference between the hockey fan and the wrestling fan lies in their understanding of the event. Both fans share certain central characteristics of being human: an unquestionable aggression rooted in our nature, that expresses itself through many of the competitive games we have devised. However, the wrestling fan was an advantage over the hockey fan. He is involved in an event which is perfectly suited to his aggressive nature, yet allows him to deny it to a certain degree. Wrestling presents to him epic battles of extreme violence, where he can let his darker side run free. That part of him which is lusty and cruel can be exposed. Yet, at the same time, the fan knows that the event itself is not real, and therefore his reaction to it is not real, either. What he is seeing and doing is not actually happening. He can, as a group member, pretend that it is; he can act towards himself and to others as if it actually were. He can relax his mind and let his emotions come to the fore and be swept along with the event. He can call for acts of savagery and share in the taste of blood from conquered opponents. When necessary, he can slyly wink at his friends, and remind himself that the event is not actually real, that he is not actually that savage, that he is only playing along with the event. And when it is over, he is satisfied, like the lion gorged on the kill. But, in a reflective moment, which is never far away, he can say to himself that wrestling is not real, and no one really gets hurt. He knows that the wrestlers will all be getting on the plane together, and leaving for the next city, where they will re-enact the battle for another crowd. But, like the lion, the fan is still full.

Therefore, our argument becomes this: while the suspension of disbelief is necessary to fully participate as a wrestling fan, it is not enough. The understanding that the event is drama and hence not real, is also necessary. This understanding must be readily available; never so far out of consciousness that it can't be called up when needed. Yet, it cannot be allowed to dominate the conscious mind, at the expense of the suspension of disbelief. The fan must hold two contradictory truths, one being that wrestling is real, the other being that wrestling is not. It is the manipulated relationship between these two truths which allows the fan to participate to such an extreme extent with the wrestling world. Moreover, without the fan bringing this ability to mentally juggle with him, wrestling, as we have presented it in this thesis, would not exist. Without the ability to suspend disbelief, the event would appear as a ludicrous sham. Without the ability to recognize it as staged, the event would appear too barbaric. With the opposing truths carefully balanced in the fan's mind, the event appears as professional wrestling.

11. NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, Mythologies (London: Paladin Books, 1985), p. 25.
2. ibid., p. 25.
3. Gregory Stone, "Wrestling - The Great American Passion Play", Sport: Readings from a Sociological Perspective, ed. Eric Dunning (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 327.
4. ibid., p. 329.
5. ibid.
6. William Martin, "Friday Night in the Coliseum", The Atlantic Monthly (March, 1972), p. 87.
7. ibid.
8. Thomas Henricks, "Professional Wrestling as Moral Order", Sociological Inquiry, 44(3), 1974, p. 186.
9. ibid.
10. Allan Turowetz and Michael Rosenberg, "Exaggerating Everyday Life: The Case of Professional Wrestling", Shaping Identity in Canadian Society, eds. Jack Haas and William Shaffir (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall of Canada, Ltd., 1978), p. 88.
11. Jim Freedman, "Will the Sheik Use his Blinding Fireball? The Ideology of Professional Wrestling", The Celebration of Society: Perspectives on Contemporary Cultural Performance, ed. Frank Manning (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), p. 71.
12. ibid., p. 73.

13. ibid., p. 77.
14. ibid., p. 78.
15. ibid., p. 79.
16. Gerald Morton and George O'Brien, Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1985), p. 155.
17. ibid., p. 157.
18. ibid., p. 164.
19. The categories of heroes and villains, as well as some of their characteristics, share some commonalities with those described by Morton and O'Brien (1985). My delineation is my own, and was arrived at independently.
20. This point is also discussed by Freedman (1983), however, my analysis was arrived at independently.

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