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The Labors of Professional Wrestling: The Dream, the Drive, and Debility

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The Labors of Professional Wrestling: The Dream, the Drive, and Debility

by

Brooks Oglesby

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

This study centers and examines the laboring body of the professional wrestler as it moves and works through professional wrestling training. I put forth debility as a theoretical framework to naming and understanding the ways that long-term bodily wear and early death becomes an acceptable cost of doing business for the wrestling industry. Dreams of achieving wealth, fame, and stability while escaping precarity and obscurity draw fans toward joining the industry, and these dreams work to maintain a working culture that takes for granted the ways that the wrestler's body is marked for disposability, wearing down, and early death. I connect my experiences and those of my fellow trainees and trainers to industry media texts to trace the individuating, driving discourse of the dream from the highest levels of the industry to the entry levels. I trace my interconnected relationships to professional wrestling as a fan, researcher, and trainee to feel and mine the experience through my own body, experiencing the tensions in training and doing research as a lifelong fan with a dream of my own.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

A 30-second public service announcement plays before viewers can watch World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) on home video. Skips or fast-forwards are suspended so viewers can be captive to witnessing professional wrestlers in writhing pain stretched out of an arena. The PSAs have different versions, but they follow the same script. Images of chest, arm, leg, and skull x-rays flash across the screen as the voices of announcers describe moves gone wrong. The wrestlers seen writhing in pain add first-hand testimony detailing the extent of their injuries. The images fade-to-black followed by a PSA narrator who recites the unforgettable warning blaring in bold letters on the television screen: “Don’t try this at home.”

These public service announcements foreground acute injury, as the first thing a viewer sees. That said, it might appear as an obligatory screening—the opener—before the main event, so that audiences come to understand these injuries as ordinary. In one infamous and gruesome example, former WWE Champion Chris Benoit is shown clutching his shoulder while narrating a clip of his own injury, “I ruptured a disc which fragmented into my spinal column,” (WWE, 2004). Less than three years later, Benoit would be found dead at age 40 in his Atlanta home along with his wife and young son. Soon after, investigators determined that Benoit killed his wife Nancy, herself a former wrestler, and their son Daniel over the course of a weekend before hanging himself in his home gym (Shoemaker, 2013b). An autopsy would reveal that Benoit’s brain, having received dozens of concussions and other traumas over his wrestling career of 20-

plus years, was comparable to “the brain of an 85-year-old Alzheimer’s patient,” (Shoemaker, 2013b). Over a decade later, fans are still struggling to make sense of this unthinkable tragedy, only compounded by widespread fan belief that “the very wrestling skills that made Benoit one of the most respected professional wrestlers contributed to his brutal demise” (Cherney & Lindemann, 2013). In other words, his years as a wrestler produced severe debilitation and early death. And while the Benoit double-murder suicide is particularly horrific, early death is far from unique. Approximately 10% of WWE’s professional wrestlers die by age 40, which exceeds the rate of early death in any professional sport (Morris, 2014).

This project pulls attention back to the body as a primary lens through which we understand debility and precarity in professional wrestling by foregrounding the laboring body that so often shrinks behind the veil of the spectacular. I describe my intersecting experiences as fan, researcher, and professional wrestling performer through the body as I move through professional wrestling training. My aim is to foreground the performing body that is often unacknowledged or overlooked by fans, critics, and industry actors alike. To account for the laboring body of the wrestler as the fuel for the industry, I take up debility as a framework, which disrupts the political category of disability by accounting for injury and bodily exclusion that is endemic to a particular group rather than exceptional, individual, or without cause (Puar, 2017, p. xvii). Debility marks a wearing down and devaluing of the body on a social level, naming those whose bodies are made available for injury “through laboring or warring or both” (Puar, 2017, p. 64). Debility is “a collective or affective condition generated by institutional oppression” (Hsu, 2019, p. 81), marking the ideological practices behind both the production and recognition of incapacitating forms of violence.

Though wrestlers have died young from long-term bodily wear for decades, popular media attention is infrequent and individualized, dismissing as exceptional instances of painkiller abuse as “roid rage.” Recently, HBO’s comedy news program *Last Week Tonight* served as an example of burgeoning considerations of wrestlers’ bodies as a chronically devalued social and physical body, dedicating an entire episode to host John Oliver dissecting WWE’s history of labor exploitation. The official HBO episode streamed on YouTube has garnered over 8 million views since its publication in March 2019 (Konuwa, 2019). A decade earlier, Director Darren Aronofsky released *The Wrestler* (2008), which is a film chronicling the depressing later years of a semi-retired former wrestling star who has ended up alienated from family, short on money, and in failing health. Legendary professional wrestler “Rowdy” Roddy Piper broke down in tears after watching the film, so moved that “that this story was finally told” (Powell, 2008). *Last Week Tonight* would also feature a clip of Piper explaining that he had to return to the wrestling ring later in life in the absence of other financial options. He was unable to access his pension plan until reaching 65 years of age. Grimly asserting, he said, “I’m not gonna make 65—let’s just face facts, guys” (LastWeekTonight, 2019). Following the clip, host John Oliver pointed out that his prediction came to pass, as he died a few years later at age 61. I extend these recent discussions in popular media by centering the performing body through (auto)ethnographic inquiry.

Though these moments breach the façade of spectacular fakery from time to time, both fans, researchers, and professional wrestling producers do not adequately account for debilitation in such performances. The early deaths continue to pile up. As such, this project has three main goals: (1) To pull together my experiences as a fan, a professional wrestling trainee, and a performance studies researcher to deepen my understanding about the serious demands of the

body in professional wrestling; (2) to unpack “early death” as commonsense in the wrestling industry; (3) and, to foreground the laboring body in a critical and reflexive ethnography that can challenge the spectacular facade of professional wrestling.

I center the performing body in this project. I situate my own body as a research site in response to the continued subsuming of the body under the spectacular facade of professional wrestling. D. Soyini Madison (2009) states that, in ethnography, “the body must testify, it must speak—it must provide a report—it must bear witness to the surfaces and the foundations, the symptoms and the causes” (p. 192). In foregrounding the labors of the body, I seek to examine the structural, cultural, and ideological conditions that mark the bodies of professional wrestling performers as disposable and available for injury.

Research Questions

1. How does professional wrestling (re)produce debility?
2. How do wrestlers and trainees describe debility in the professional wrestling industry?
3. How is precarity deployed to discipline and drive “the dream” of professional wrestling?
4. What is my relationship to professional wrestling as a fan, researcher, and fellow trainee?

Together, these research questions explore the forms of labor that wrestlers perform in the professional wrestling academy and broader professional wrestling industry.

Research Contributions

This project will connect fan, academic, and industry perspectives on the labor of professional wrestling through performance (auto)ethnography, supporting a more sustained and

widespread focus on the discourses that make the wearing down of the performing body taken-for-granted. Thus, this project seeks to:

- bridge performance studies with media and cultural studies in communication by foregrounding the laboring body—as researcher, as fan, and as wrestler—to better understand debility and precarity in professional wrestling.
- employ (auto)ethnography as an embodied writing practice and method of inquiry to reflexively challenge my assumptions about the body and the business of professional wrestling. I offer narrative as form of knowledge co-production with other performing bodies.
- extend debility as a theoretical framework by applying it to professional wrestlers as a precarious class. I describe wrestlers as wage workers, athletes, and entertainers who experience a wearing down and devaluing of the body on a social level. I argue debility is endemic of the professional wrestling industry.

Literature Review

To explore the performing body wrestling with debility in the industry and the academy, I bring together literature in communication studies, disability studies, and professional wrestling studies. Together, these areas help me to conceptualize the performing body as a site of meaning making, cultural production, and labor struggle. Within communication studies, performance studies and critical cultural studies are two interdisciplinary areas that account for the “deadly seriousness” (Hall, 2007, p. 33) of a site like professional wrestling as they trace the productive forces imposed upon the performing body that promote early death in the pursuit of profit, excess, and spectacle.

Performance and Critical Cultural Studies in Communication

Much foundational research on professional wrestling in communication studies describes television representations, especially representations of hypermasculinity (Chaudhuri, 2012; Soulliere, 2006; Oppliger, 2004). Through these performed representations, “wrestlers play out assumptions of what real men are and do” (Mazer 116), reinscribing a normative masculinity defined by physical menace and rugged independence. As the conventional performance of masculinity is tied up in the performance of nondisabledness, the prospect of disability threatens the normative performance of masculinity in men that pervade the wrestling industry, contributing to a culture reticent to draw attention to experiences with disability writ large (Ostrander, 2008, p. 596).

Performance studies attends to professional wrestling as a site. Sharon Mazer’s 1990 ethnography of wrestler Johnny Rodz’s professional wrestling training center is an example. In this study, she observed training sessions and conducted interviews with performers to better understand the dramatism enmeshed in such performances. Performance-centered ethnographic research directs attention to broadcast media texts as well as the bodies doing the embodied labor that fuels those productions. This framework contextualizes wrestlers as performers rather than mere athletes and entertainers; in doing so, a performance studies framework emphasizes the centrality of the body as a productive force in wrestling performances and the industry writ large.

Performance studies also interrogates professional wrestling’s unique performative context known as “kayfabe” (Chow, 2014). Professional wrestling performances are typically scripted. In-ring performers follow a set routine of maneuvers, surreptitiously working in collaboration to tell a story to the audience while maintaining a facade of legitimate combat. While operating under their in-ring performers adhere to a code known as “kayfabe,” which is

the “illusion of realness” (Smith, 2006, p. 54) in such performances. In kayfabe, wrestlers are bitter rivals attempting to legitimately incapacitate each other, when, outside of kayfabe, they are (usually) co-workers seeking to gain the audience’s attention and immersion through collective storytelling. This unique performative context provides an interesting entry point through which communication and performance studies might interrogate the site.

Building from previous work, Broderick Chow (2014) provides a blueprint for my project where I undergo professional wrestling training to complement his research in theatre and dance. Understanding professional wrestling as “a practice of caring for the other” (p. 73), he also examines how such performances typically operate within an “economy of the theatre” (p. 45). To Chow, the occurrence of serious in-ring injury functions to challenge this economy, in turn bringing greater attention to the labor of doing such performance work. Further, Chow and Eero Laine (2014) connect the performance of professional wrestling to labor by examining how the performances demonstrate “the underlying exploitation of violence of wage labor in *general*” (p. 52). That is, while professional wrestling is aesthetically excessive and spectacular, the ways in which professional wrestling performers—as workers—experience labor exploitation resembles ordinary forms of wage labor. Violence—in body and labor—is inherent in professional wrestling. And, it is precisely because of the spectacle that exploitation can be ignored.

In addition to producing surplus value for promoters, professional wrestlers also sell their labor to fans who willingly endorse and participate in the illusion of kayfabe produced by the performer (p. 44). Applause from the audience is “an affirmation of the labour of illusion, and not of the illusion itself” (p. 45). It is a way for audiences to confirm their enjoyment of the layers of labor, both on and through the performer’s body. Likewise, when legitimate injury occurs in the ring, the meaning of that audience affirmation changes, “from appreciation of

narrative labor [...] and the ability to simulate violence theatrically, to a celebration of labor as such” (p. 45). The studies of Chow, Laine and others in performance studies and critical cultural studies in communication help to frame professional wrestlers as performers, athletes, and wage workers.

Professional Wrestling Studies

Maintaining its carnivalesque quality, professional wrestling studies has carved out scattered niches in fields of media studies (e.g., Soulliere, 2016), theatre (e.g., Chow, 2014), and celebrity studies (e.g., Phillips, 2015) to understand professional wrestling as texts, performances, and fan culture. The 2019 founding of the Pro Wrestling Studies Association (PWSA) suggests a future of greater scholarly attention toward professional wrestling by bringing together research from performance studies, rhetoric, and critical cultural studies (PWSA, 2019a). The PWSA seeks to legitimate professional wrestling as a site of popular and academic concern, as a “popular culture text, economic system, and location of fan activity” (2019b).

Drawing from contemporary wrestling studies research, I take up Adam Key’s study of wrestler CM Punk and the rhetoric of the American Dream that continues to inform the ways fans and performers alike understand the labor that goes into the production of wrestling performances. Key situates the American Dream as a political myth suggesting that “an individual who works hard will ultimately be rewarded with fame and success” (2020, p. 603), which leads to widespread frustrations among fans and performers when a performer seen as particularly talented or hard-working does not receive equitable advancement in the industry. The American Dream normalizes debilitating labor practices in wrestling, as fans view long-term injury and suffering as a fair trade off for kayfabe advancement.

Brian Jansen (2019) expands on fan complicity in violent wrestling performances by tracing how contemporary mainstream wrestling storylines “rationalize, economize, and trivialize the form’s very real violent labour” (p. 302). Drawing attention to the body as a means of redress, Jansen suggests that “any account of professional wrestling, then, is incomplete without considering the real violent labour involved in performing staged violence, even as trends in the medium and the broader culture [...] seek to elide that labour” (p. 305). I take up Jansen’s assertion that the veiling of the labors of wrestling is both intentional and in dire need of address through further study.

My focus on wrestling training follows R. Tyson Smith’s research on the independent wrestling scene, one rung up the industry ladder. Smith marks the “(at times Sisyphean) struggle” (2014, p. 153) for independent wrestlers to defeat obscurity and achieve a sense of purpose and validation at the cost of precarity and bodily peril. Further, Smith marks that the “learned, rehearsed and disciplined” (p. 150) performance of masculinity is itself an additional labor to maintain amid a fundamentally collaborative, vulnerable, and intimate line of work.

The highly secretive nature of the wrestling business, coupled with the relative nascency of a de facto professional wrestling studies field, also necessitates inclusion of independent professional wrestling journalism. Investigation into the behind-the-scenes workings of professional wrestling has managed to build its own cottage industry for decades, selling gossip and future booking decisions to fans looking for a tantalizing inside scoop, with journalists recently pivoting toward popular press publications. *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling*, for example, serves as a compendium of early death, adapted from journalist David Shoemaker’s acclaimed “Dead Wrestler of the Week” column on *Deadspin*, which chronicled the life and often-tragic death of a seemingly unending pool of subjects.

Literature such as this not only provides rare postmortems for otherwise-forgotten performers of yesteryear, but also works to counter industry whitewashing of labor issues. An entire chapter on union efforts in wrestling, for example, outlines an early unionization effort in the 1980s that ended with Hulk Hogan ratting the scheme to his boss, as well as some of the continuing efforts by retired performers to claim healthcare benefits denied to them after decades of performing (Shoemaker, 2013a, p. 347).

Disability Studies

Michael Oliver's social model of disability situates disability as the "disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities (1990, p. 11). The social model "redirects analysis from the individual to processes of social oppression, discrimination and exclusion" (Mulvany, 2000, p. 584). Other disability theorists continue to update and challenge the social model. Essaya Nabbali (2009), for example, notes that the social model does not substantively examine intersections of disability with other vectors of identity, drawing particular attention to the erasure and subjugation of "mad" people even within disability studies circles. Further, Julie Mulvany (2000) suggests adopting a framework of embodiment when approaching impairment, so as to not tacitly reduce one's experience to an outside observer's list of symptoms and allow those with impairments to author their experiences. This foregrounding of embodiment resists "biologically reductionist" depictions of the body that promote the separation of disability from society (Mulvany, 2000, p. 589). Narrative approaches to disability studies further examine the embodied labor of performance. The practice of "passing as sane," for example, is a laborious performance that propagates isolation and forecloses personal expression, whereas the costs of not passing "can be

quite high, including—in some instances, nonconsensual treatment and involuntary hospitalization" (Cox, 2012, p. 100). Disability studies, like performance studies, centers the body and situates embodiment as a way of knowing.

To anchor my embodied discussion of the wrestling body within a larger social body, I draw from Jasbir Puar's work within cultural studies. Puar's (2017) notion of an "economy of injury" draws greater focus to the performing body throughout wrestling performances, including those where no explicit, spectacular injury occurs. Puar asserts that the economy of injury produces debility, referring to injuries that are "endemic rather than epidemic or exceptional" (p. xvii), the slow, built-up traumas sustained "as a normal consequence of laboring" (p. xvi). A framework of debility helps to account for the gradual wearing down of performers' bodies during and surrounding the production of these performances, "maintain[ing] the precarity of certain bodies [...] precisely through making them available for maiming" (Puar, p. xvii). The production of debility, then, is a biopolitical project that impacts life chances, risk, and who prospers while others face maiming and early death (Puar, p. xviii).

Connecting the practice of explicit killing in Ferguson, Missouri to the practice of shooting to maim in Gaza, Puar (2017) marks populations in different locations as subject to similar logics of the biopolitics of debilitation. Both the sovereign right to kill and the right to maim "are part of the deliberate debilitation of a population [...] and are key elements in the racializing biopolitical logic of security. Both are mobilized to make power visible on the body" (x). In both cases, sovereign power dictates and viscerally enforces the disposability of bodies deemed available for injury and death. Though certainly incongruent with state-sanctioned murder and maiming of racialized populations rendered disposable, I render the chronically death-dealing practices throughout the professional wrestling industry as a similar display of

power in producing and maintaining early death and debilitation for an underclass of aspiring wrestling workers. Debility accounts for those whose bodies are "sustained in a perpetual state of debilitation precisely through foreclosing the social, cultural, and political translation to disability" (2017, p. xiii). Access to the recognition of disability is unequally distributed, and ailing and dying former wrestlers chronically lack both name and recourse for the practices that have worn down their bodies in service of increasing profits. Debility, too, focuses on "devalued populations experiencing forms of active abandonment by the state" (Mitchell & Snyder, 2019, p. 52), compounding bodily suffering and the precarity of being left without recourse or social recognition.

The Wrestling Body as Methodology

This project situates the wrestling body as the primary lens of understanding labor, risk, injury, and debility in professional wrestling, combating popular industry discourses that normalize and veil long-term wearing down of the body. I implicate my own body as a participant as I enter a dedicated professional wrestling training center connected to small independent promotions throughout Florida. I put my experience in conversation with other participants through interviews and popular media excerpts that illuminate levels of the industry inaccessible through my body. In foregrounding the body as a site of theorizing and meaning-making, I model my performance ethnography primarily through the work of Victor & Edith Turner (1982), D. Soyini Madison (2005), Dwight Conquergood (1991), and Joni Jones (2002).

I utilize performance as a method in order to center performing bodies as collaborative sites of knowledge production. Dwight Conquergood (1995) describes performance studies in part by its boundary-crossing quality, which values "the carnivalesque over the canonical" (p. 138), a call for focus on both nonelite, derided sites (such as professional wrestling arenas) and

nonelite, marginalized ways of understanding (such as embodied learning). As a “heterogeneous ensemble of ideas and methods on the move” (p. 140), performance studies invites interdisciplinarity and the possibility of flux into my project. In its resistance to a stringent definition, performance studies complements grounded theory in that it “flourishes within a zone of conflict and struggle” (p. 137). Conflict and struggle, then, are welcome and productive, working as “generative points of departure and coalition for [...] unfolding meanings and affiliations” (p. 137). To invoke coalition invites performance researchers to not only avoid privileging their own embodied learning over others onsite, but also to remain accountable and materially useful to the communities we study.

Drawing from Victor & Edith Turner (1982), D. Soyini Madison (2005), Dwight Conquergood (1991), and Joni Jones (2002), I define performance ethnography as a return to and exploration of possibilities of the body as a means of pointed critical intervention. Through careful preparation (e.g., cultural research, and artifacts and scenes presentations within a constructive setting) and participatory exploration afforded by communal improvisation, performance ethnography is a space brought forth by the ethnographer as a means of engaging participant selves with the experiences of subjects, all experienced and conceptualized by performers, subjects and audiences alike. In doing so, performance ethnography is a method of transgression against conventional ways of doing research by implicating participant bodies in dramatic and artistic spaces that, through a spirit of play, collaboration, and discovery, lay bare the myriad tensions of performance, production, and representation. Using this definition of performance ethnography, I use performance ethnography to further examine and challenge my research questions as a way of co-producing knowledge through performing bodies.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter One introduces professional wrestling as the ethnographic field site. The Chapter outlines the scope of the study by connecting broadcast media texts to burgeoning academic and popular discussions about the chronic wearing of wrestling performers' bodies. I situate my research within professional wrestling studies (Chow, 2014; Shoemaker, 2013a; Levi 2009), performance studies (Conquergood, 1995), and disability studies (Puar, 2017; Mulvany, 2000), and I trace how my embodied research draws from and extends these works. I pair intimate discussions about the individual body with ones about the collective body of wrestling performers as laborers. I take up debility as a theoretical framework to explore how the professional wrestling industry marks performers as a class of workers vulnerable to maiming and early death.

Chapter Two: Early Death & The Economy of Tribute: Debility in Professional Wrestling

Chapter Two explains debility and describes it within the context of the professional wrestling industry. Drawing research from cultural studies and disability studies, debility refers to types of injury imposed upon oppressed populations that evade formal recognition of disability through rendering these populations disposable and their injuries endemic. I use popular media excerpts to address debility and show how the discourse of personal responsibility makes debility commonsense. I show the emergence of wrestling tribute shows become ways of managing the routine outpourings of grief from fans and co-workers when a wrestler dies young. I mark the tribute show as a way of eliding debility in professional wrestling.

Chapter Three: Learning to Work

Chapter Three provides an autoethnographic narrative that draws from fieldnotes taken onsite during training sessions and offsite with connected training experiences at the gym, in the car, and at doctor's offices. I include narrative snapshots to theorize experience from my performing body as "field" site in flux. I foreground the dream of a child, thrill of fan, and pain of researcher performing in professional wrestling. Drawing from embodied experience, I explore how both the dream and thrill are reshaped after working through the demanding labors of wrestling and working with a debilitating illness as a trainee in professional wrestling.

Chapter Four: The Dream and the Drive

Chapter Four is an ethnographic narrative drawn from a series of interviews that I conducted with my head trainer and a fellow trainee who describe labor, debility, and the wrestling body. Reflexively, I address how I am implicated as fan and trainee, and I wrestle with my goals as researcher and my goals as a fan living out and wanting to maintain my professional wrestling dream. I use metaphors of the dream and the drive to theorize the disciplining logics that define the experiences of the aspiring wrestler.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Chapter Five summarizes my research findings. I identify trainee transience at the facility, the ongoing pandemic, and emergent chronic health issues to complete the participant observation as research limitations. I use the wrestling term of the "mark" to consider the ways trainees are positioned in the wrestling industry, consider most performers will unlikely achieve sustained, spectacular success. I review research contributions to Communication and the burgeoning field

of professional wrestling research studies by outlining how the wrestling body is a productive site for performers, scholars, and fans alike to address debility in the industry and beyond.

Conclusion

The “Don’t Try This At Home” PSA reminds fans of the consequences of the work of wrestling by showcasing the writhing, ailing body. Though disappeared elsewhere through individuating discourses and performances of hypermasculinity, the graphic images demonstrate that debility pervades the making and consumption of professional wrestling. Acute injuries to muscle and bone coincide with great personal sacrifice, compounded precarities, and hidden labors of growing and maintaining bodily capital, all contributing to long-term wearing down over shortened lifetimes. Through entering the professional wrestling industry as a trainee, I reexamine how my own understandings of the industry as a fan, a researcher, and a performer intersect and conflict as I experience a fraction of these labors firsthand. I interrogate the discourse of the dream as an animating force among performers and how that reinscribes debilitating practices in the industry. In doing so, I hope to gain a greater understanding of the labor of working as a professional wrestler, and how these labors achieve greater recognition and redress.

In situating my body as a site to understand experience, I recognize professional wrestling is also a site notorious for the spectacle of damaging the body. Here, I turn to D. Soyini Madison again to reconceptualize the notion of danger. Madison asks ethnographers to “consider what it might mean to be an agent of danger, what it might mean to become dangerous ethnographers doing dangerous ethnography” (p. 189). In becoming agents of danger, dangerous ethnographers expand the scope of danger beyond immediate risks to the individual researcher to include considerations of “what is systematically dangerous to all of us: systematic poverty, the

machinery of imperialism, structures of homophobia, and phallogentric power” (p. 189). Far from an individualized understanding of danger that separates and privileges the researcher’s well-being far above those living and working at the researcher’s site, a theory of dangerous ethnography opens up possibilities for solidarity, asking researchers to be dangerous for systemic forces that thrive on veiled exploitation. Professional wrestling is not only an important site to consider dangerous ethnography, but it is a critical one to address the individual and collective labors of the precarious body experiencing debility.



Figure 1. Photo of me standing next to a cardboard standee of WWE’s Chief Operating Officer at a fan event in 2018, taken via my cell phone camera. I removed the photo as my profile picture on social media before starting fieldwork to avoid being seen as a mark.

CHAPTER TWO:
EARLY DEATH & THE ECONOMY OF TRIBUTE: DEBILITY IN PROFESSIONAL
WRESTLING

Nightly jumps in trains, eating in out of the way restaurants, lack of proper rest and the strenuous schedules all contribute toward the sapping of a grappler's strength, and while countless wrestlers earn fortunes their lives at best, despite the programs, often tax the body beyond human endurance. Some matmen die in the ring, others succumb from the shocks sustained while taking those trick falls and out of the ring dives, and others end up mumbling and sparring like punchy fighters who walk on their heels.

-Marcus Griffin, *Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce*

In one of the earliest exposés of the professional wrestling industry, Griffin describes types of injury and wear that extend beyond acute bodily injury shown in modern “Don’t Try This At Home” PSAs. The bumps in the ring compound over time, leading to progressive and sometimes-fatal body and brain injuries; so too do the bumps outside the ring: the unforgiving travel schedule, the sacrifice of personal relationships, and the challenges of maintaining bodily capital in such a demanding line of work (1937, p. 181). This is nothing new. Since its inception in the early 20th Century, the professional wrestling industry has demanded the wearing down of performers’ bodies. Griffin’s 1937 account of these compounding bodily stressors in the industry begins with “disease dogs the footsteps of the modern pachyderms” (p. 181), situating this wearing down within a broader social body of wrestling workers. In this chapter, I extend this

formation of ailing wrestlers as both an individual and collective body by theorizing these chronic harms through a framework of debility. I mark the production of debility through the bodies of precarious performers as a central and largely unspoken driving force of the wrestling industry, capitalizing on an underclass of dream-chasers to garner profit from the wearing down of their bodies. I identify the emergent genre of the professional wrestling tribute show as a practice that consolidates grief over early death and normalizes the continued production of debilitation in the bodies of wrestling workers. By marking the chronic wearing down of the bodies of industry workers through these broadcast media texts, I combat the normalization of debilitation in professional wrestling that otherwise obscures “the violence of what constitutes a ‘normal consequence’” (Puar, 2017, p. xvi) of laboring.

Staging Debility in Professional Wrestling

I connect professional wrestling to debility to account for these kinds of bodily harm that can be otherwise easily glossed over under a logic that privileges discernible impairment. I do so to generate further discussion about the laboring body of the professional wrestler and to account for production of debility in the professional wrestling industry. Debilitation emphasizes “the slow wearing down of populations” (Puar, 2017, xiv). Rather than a discrete moment of an individual becoming disabled, Puar describes debilitation as an intended result enacted on the collective body (Puar, 2017, p. xvii). In other words, a framework of debility asks us to consider bodily harm as an intentional act exacted on marked bodies or populations. Professional wrestlers stand as a class of workers eminently vulnerable to forms of bodily harm which are readily reframed as a normal consequence of this line of work.

Puar’s development of debility echoes cripistemology, which “tries to focus on knowledge produced by disabled people (Bê, 2019, p. 429). Cripistemology is situated within

disability studies to account for “the sometimes-elusive crip subjectivities informed by psychological, emotional, and other invisible or undocumented disabilities” (Johnson & McRuer, 2014, p. 134). For example, in a study of nondisableist assumptions in communication theory, Amin Makkawy and Shane T. Moreman (2019) posit cripistemology to “address and honor the wide differences across disabled positionalities” (p. 405), which can be used to examine debility by centering embodied experience as an epistemological framework in Communication. In the Introduction to *Cripistemologies*, Merri Lisa Johnson and Robert McRuer explicitly mark the production of debility in academic workers: “the hope for a research position, the longing, the high productivity and the long hours and physical pain it requires, the anxiety, despair, resignation (and, yes, occasional Xanax addictions): all these affects fuel and benefit a system that increasingly construes professors as expendable bodies” (2014, p. 139). The Communication discipline specifically produces “indirect death” through racialized forms of harassment, employment discrimination and microaggressions that reinscribe White supremacy through a façade of representational equity (Calvente et al., 2020, p. 204). Debility seeks to account for the myriad stressors and harms that wear down laboring bodies across the labor force from academia to the squared circle.

Puar describes debility as a necessary supplement to disability. It “shadows and often overlaps with disability” (2017, p. xvii). For Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, debility should not subsume disability at the risk of overshadowing concerns of “accommodation and inclusion for people identified either socially or legislatively as disabled,” (2014, p. 1). Debility as a framework nonetheless shows promise in stabilizing the “unstable binary” of disability identity at present. In this way, debilitation forgoes inclusionary or identarian logics to focus on long-term bodily harm that do not fit neatly within a binarized disability framework. And for

populations that may resist such a categorization, as with professional wrestlers, debilitation offers a useful frame for understanding how a professional wrestling career reshapes and wears down the body.

Debility acts as a “needed disruption” to disability as a category, acknowledging that “while some bodies may not be recognized as or identified as disabled, they may well be debilitated, in part by being foreclosed access to legibility and resources as disabled” (p. xv). Debility accounts for those whose incapacities, impairments, and/or debilitations are unrecognized as such by the individual (e.g., hypermasculine veteran wrestler) or by the sovereign forces that impose debilitation upon their bodies. As this normative focus on disability “tend[s] toward impairments that are thought to be discernible, rather than cognitive and intellectual disabilities, chronic pain conditions like fibromyalgia or migraines, and depression” (p. xix). To focus on what is easily discernible intrinsically shifts focus away from conditions that fit less neatly within common understandings of disability, such as those that aging professional wrestlers experience at exceedingly high rates.

Puar primarily conceptualizes debility through connecting racialized state practices of explicit killing in Ferguson, Missouri to the practice of shooting to maim in Gaza. Both the sovereign right to kill, as in Ferguson, and the right to maim, as in Gaza, act as “key elements in the racializing biopolitical logic of security [...] mobilized to make power visible on the body (p. x) through the deliberate and continued debilitation of racialized populations marked as available for injury. And racializing logics have, throughout its history, pervaded the professional wrestling industry. Since its inception in the early 20th century, professional wrestling promoters has tracked in tropes like the White ethnic hero (e.g., the Italian Bruno Sammartino) against the evil foreigner, a one-dimensional caricature existing only to be defeated by the White hero

(Shoemaker, 2013a, p. 132). When Black athletes gained prominence in boxing in the 1960s, professional wrestling stood in contrast, popularly understood as a “White man’s sport” (Shoemaker, 2013a, p. 145). To this day, White performers vastly outpace non-White performers in WWE pay-per-view appearances (Eary, 2021, p. 16), which is the highest level of visibility and success a performer can presently reach in the North American wrestling scene. And racialized caricatures meant to shore up the heroism of the White hero still make up a notable portion of non-White representation at the highest levels of the wrestling industry (Benton, 2015, p. 403).

But while non-White performers face compounded precarity and racialized forms of workplace discrimination, race does not seem to be the primary axis through which certain bodies in the wrestling industry are deemed disposable and suitable for maiming. Puar conceptualizes debility as a process of making and marking bodies as disposable through racialized logics that shore up the security state in Gaza, Ferguson, and elsewhere. I utilize this framework to mark class as an axis through which the wearing down and slow deaths of wrestlers’ bodies goes unquestioned in the pursuit of continued profits. Debility extends to “those whose health and well-being are consciously left to languish in proximity to human-made hazards, including toxicity; maiming by police or militias; exposure to environmental lethality; austerity cuts to social supports; bedroom taxes, gentrification; and the incarcerating practices of ongoing settler colonialisms” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2019, p. 52). Debility provides the language to name the debilitating labor of professional wrestling, including loss of physical function, brain trauma, addiction, suicidality, despair, and early death.

The Precarious Work of Wrestling

Professional wrestlers are precarious performers whose debilitation is acknowledged through in-group terms explaining bodily injury and whose debilitation is expected by a fan community invested in consuming real pain. For example, veteran wrestlers often refer to their “bump card” filling up. The bump card suggests a wrestler’s body has a finite number of bumps that it can withstand in a lifetime. A wrestler must spend those bumps carefully to prolong one’s career, so trainees learn to work efficiently while veterans save their bumps for big events. I learned during training that ailing performers sometimes take painful side bumps on their hips to give their backs a rest, hoping to distribute the wear-and-tear in a way that will extend one’s bump card.

Contemporary wrestling fans, too, increasingly “want to see genuine pain” (Jansen, 2019, p. 320), with hardcore and deathmatch wrestling growing in popularity in recent decades. In larger, international promotions, workrate continues to rapidly grow alongside fan expectations. Yesterday’s finishing moves quickly become transitional moves, and workers continue to push their bodies to make their maneuvers more spectacular and more dangerous. High-risk maneuvers like the suicide dive have quickly morphed from a rare, flashy signature maneuver to a rote transitional maneuver used to set up commercial breaks in broadcast wrestling shows (Williams, 2016). The maneuver, in which a performer runs and dives between the second and third rope, launching their body into an opponent at ringside, is now a staple of pro wrestling shows, diluting its spectacular quality while heightening the risk in an average wrestling match. Recently, AAA *lucha libre* star La Parka II suffered a neck and cervical fracture after his feet caught the ropes during a suicide dive attempt, dying as a result of his injuries nearly two months later (Tiplady-Bishop, 2020).

The growing physical demands in the ring compound stressors and precarities outside the ring. For one, professional wrestlers are classified as independent contractors, working without employer-provided health insurance or related benefits offered to full-time employees. Wrestlers first work for exposure and experience, working toward independent paydays in the range of \$20 per show (Saunders, 2010). Being one of the few to sign a contract with a major company could lead to an increase in pay the upper echelons of the industry, but as gig workers, wrestlers are not permanently employed (Carter, 2021, p. 228). They are imminently replaceable and disposable in the pursuit of maximizing profits.

Fans and former wrestlers alike have suggested unionization of the professional wrestling industry is a way to address exploitive workplace conditions. The connected myths about the hero, individual drive, and wrestling as the dream job have dampened such efforts. Take a *Larry King Live* television appearance of WWE wrestling legend Ted DiBiase for an example. Even in the wake of a 2007 murder-suicide by a fellow WWE wrestler, DiBiase refuted suggestions of inadequate working conditions. “When you get into wrestling, it's almost like you're in the Army,” he said. “You know what you're getting into. You sign on,” (King, 2007). John Cena, who was the face of WWE and the industry writ large, echoed DiBiase. Cena positioned the wrestling as a choice and as a dream profession. “Nobody is forcing them to get into the ring,” Cena said. “It's a job that they all want to do. Hopefully, the job that they all love to do. I certainly do” (King, 2007). He then noted that he didn’t think the question of unionization in the industry would never be answered, “because I don’t think it’ll ever be asked” (King, 2007).

Public calls for unionization almost exclusively come from those who are not actively working in professional wrestling. WWE performer Zelina Vega made headlines in early 2021 when she stated “I support unionization” in a now-deleted tweet posted the same day as her

release from the company (Gagnon, 2021), as this was perhaps the industry's most high-profile statement in support of unionization in decades. Citing failed efforts to unionize in the 1980s, Michael Shiavone (2007) notes that "the enforced competitive structure of wrestling" produces and rewards those who bust unionization efforts, while those found to be organizing can be easily expended, especially if the organizers are lower on the card. The culture of competition among performers and individualism "is rampant in the industry and is arguably a death knell for any attempt at solidarity" (Shiavone, 2007, p. 493). With so few options to make a living in wrestling, the career risks in attempting to unionize are far too great, and as easy as it is to imagine a main event megastar risking their career to organize, but as with all things in wrestling, it would take far more than one person, and the countless wrestlers dreaming of taking those coveted main event slots would limit the potency of any action taken by existing main eventers.

Other forms of collective action have come and gone in the form of lawsuits from former wrestlers and their estates. For example, A group of former wrestlers sued WWE in 2009 over the independent contractor designation, but the case was thrown out "supposedly because the statute of limitations had expired" (Shoemaker, 2013a, p. 347). This highlights how the time-biased nature of debilitation creates barriers to prevention, care, and justice because injuries and disease from decades of accumulated traumas are not as clear-cut or actionable as an acute workplace injury. Additional proposed industry reforms pop up from time to time, like a yearly off-season to allow wrestlers to rest, or a great reduction in travel days, but unionization remains the primary call from fans and former workers alike, as current workers remain largely mum, whether due to disinterest, precarity, or hopelessness.

In addition to long-term physical wear, performers cite mental and social tolls as commensurate with the physical trauma of the injury and rehabilitation process. The New Day, a group of wrestlers who have been mainstays on WWE television for nearly a decade, offered a rare glimpse into the mental toll of injuries on their *Feel The Power* podcast in 2019. On top of the difficulty of being unable to do what he loves, Big E pointed to “realizing that the machine just moves on without you” (WWE, 2019) as well as depression as major issues faced by athletes in wrestling and beyond, and ones that such workers don’t publicly speak about. Further, he suggests that industry pressures and the lack of institutional support compounds these issues:

Not only are you away from it, but there’s the uncertainty of being able to trust your body again to do what it needs to, there’s no pension, there’s no backup plan, that’s why everyone tells you to save your money, because, if for some reason, you have issues with that injury and can never wrestle again, no one else is gonna look out for you. There’s no plan to make sure that your family continues to eat, and when you’re out of the spotlight and you’re off TV, do people care? There’s a lot of uncertainty to that stuff and I think it takes a big mental toll on athletes and people dealing with major injuries” (09:15-09:48)

Throughout the podcast, there is a continuing tension between this understanding of the industry’s production of debilitation and an understanding of injury that places sole blame on the individual. When Big E moves the discussion away from immediate injury toward cumulative injury over a span of years and his anxieties over “paying the price” in the future, fellow New Day member Kofi Kingston adds:

Isn’t it crazy, too, like seeing the veterans come through? Nobody has a perfect stride. Every veteran that comes in when we have like, throwback Raw or whatever it is,

everyone is like hobbling, and it's scary, man. That's a glimpse into our future, so it's a reminder to take care of your body, but at the same time it's like, we're in this industry where it's like there are so many people clawing for this position that it's hard to like, step down and take some time off when you know someone's gonna claw and try to take what is that you have. That's the nature of our business. (23:13-23:53).

By situating the bodies of veteran wrestlers as “a reminder to take care of your body,” Kingston upholds the individualism of the industry, even ascribing a “natural” quality to its negative elements. But at the same time, he points to a pitfall of that very ethos, in that one cannot step away from the industry to properly heal one's body without potentially losing one's livelihood to another worker. The relationship between workers, then, becomes fundamentally antagonistic, at odds with the collaborative, trust-based performances around which the industry is built, and structural critiques of debilitation fade away in favor of narratives that suggest that one's debilitation is ultimately one's own fault.

Another member of the stable, Xavier Woods, out with a torn Achilles tendon at the time of recording, also refers to the industry as a machine, noting that “no one is bigger or more important than the machine. You go down, the machine still works without you. You are not that important to it, and that's one of the things that hurts” (WWE, 2019). The machine, as Woods and Big E say, imposes harms onto workers that go beyond those of the ring itself, mental and social traumas that can compound just as injuries to muscle and bone.

In Memoriam: The Economy of Tribute in Professional Wrestling

Moving from long-term injury to early death, I turn to the emerging genre of professional wrestling tribute shows as a mechanism for managing grief and discourses surrounding long-term injury, as death itself is a profitable enterprise for professional wrestling shareholders. A

2021 analysis of 96 professional wrestlers who died suddenly found that “the sudden death of a superstar gig worker causes shareholder wealth to increase significantly” (Carter, 2021, p. 228), in part due to increased memorabilia revenue as fans grieve, and in part due to the lowered costs associated with hiring a replacement gig worker with severely constrained bargaining power. The death of a wrestler functions as an additional horizon through which stakeholders seek profit through the wrestler’s body, though the death need not be sudden to be profitable.

Early death has become endemic to professional wrestling, as approximately 10% of WWE’s professional wrestlers die by age 40 (Morris, 2014). While organizations like the National Football League have recently faced widespread scrutiny for the ways in which long-term impacts wear down athletes’ bodies (Bell, Applequist, & Dotson-Pierson, 2019; Siegel, 2019), the professional wrestling world faces no such degree of scrutiny. The spectacular artifice of professional wrestling counterintuitively pulls attention away from the body; fans generally understand that they are watching a show and can thus suspend the belief that such performances are taking a lasting toll on these performing bodies. To trace the ways the deaths of these wrestlers are remembered or forgotten, I propose an economy of tribute—situated within professional wrestling but with the hope of broader application in sport and other forms of demanding labor—along which producers determine whose injuries and whose lives are worthy of celebration and tribute and whose lives are deemed unworthy.

WWE boasts the longest-running weekly episodic series in television history with Monday Night Raw, airing each Monday evening since January 1993, with the only interruptions to ongoing kayfabe occurring in the form of memorial shows. The professional wrestling memorial show has itself become a genre, a required and commonplace component in addressing the effects of debilitation in the industry while managing narratives surrounding those

conditions. In legitimate sport and in professional wrestling, deaths of performers spur “exceptional outpourings of shock and grief” that invite fans and mourners to “reflect on the social significance” of the athletic performance as a ritual (Cowdell, 2015, p. 134). As such, the immediate period following a professional wrestler’s death is the primary opportunity for fans, promoters, and other stakeholders to reshape or reify facets of the industry believed to have contributed to that death, and the memorial show emerges as a space for that contest to play out. With such widespread early death, fans have come to expect an acknowledgement of the recently deceased, to soften the blow and cope with the finality of the loss. So in lieu of redressive industry reform, an economy of tribute has developed, in which grieving fans beseech WWE for proper recognition of a recently deceased wrestler, often calling for a memorial video package if not an “In Memory” title card at the start of the next broadcast. Rather than calling for greater protective measures for performers, fans call upon the producers of debilitation to repair the breach it created internally, turning focus away from why these breaches seem to happen so often. Thus, performer, but also to obscure and eschew the consequences of debilitation imposed upon a company’s workers. Under this framework, the producers of this very debilitation wield the power in managing the economy of tribute.

Reviewing the deceased wrestlers deemed worthy of institutional tribute, the wrestler’s proximity to the company at the time of death as well as the nature of the death itself are the primary determinants. Since 1999, three episodes of WWE’s weekly Monday Night Raw episodes have been dedicated to wrestlers who died while under contract as in-ring performers—Owen Hart in 1990, Eddie Guerrero in 2005, and Chris Benoit in 2007. Throughout these memorial shows, fellow wrestlers and loved ones typically share their memories of the deceased, interspersed with retrospective video clips from the deceased’s career and often live matches

carried out by those closest to the deceased. At the start of a professional wrestling memorial show, wrestlers typically gather next to the ring and stand at attention for a “10-bell salute,” reminiscent of 21-gun salutes reserved for military funerals or victims of national tragedies (Brown, 2004). The gravitas of these moments produces a unique genre of show that sets aside kayfabe in service of providing catharsis for a grieving locker room and grieving audience. In these moments, the fallen wrestlers are canonized as those who died tragically and blamelessly in pursuit of a larger American dream.

WWE’s three memorial shows, all for contracted workers, represents the apex of corporate recognition, as the nature of their deaths and their proximity to the company necessitated such an outpouring of grief. Hart, age 34, fell approximately 80 feet down from the rafters during an entrance stunt when a malfunctioning harness released him prematurely (Baker & Kennedy, 1999). Though the pay-per-view audience watching at home did not witness the fall, the thousands in attendance did, watching—some perhaps wondering if it was just another part of the evening’s entertainment—as medical personnel swarmed the ring in a desperate attempt to stabilize him. Hart’s body was eventually removed from the ring and taken to the hospital where he was pronounced dead, and the pay-per-view event carried on with five additional matches. The spectacularly tragic quality of this death elevated its newsworthiness, and the subsequent memorial show was the first step in repairing a massive breach for both fans and executives affected by the tragedy.

Likewise, when 38-year-old Eddie Guerrero was found dead from acute heart failure in a hotel room, a memorial show immediately followed on the next edition of WWE’s weekly television programming. Guerrero was a former world champion who performed at a high level, working a televised match just two days prior to his death. Once released from the company in

2001, Guerrero would eventually return as a babyface, integrating his past experiences with addiction into a redemptive storyline:

Truth is, Brock, I am an addict. About three years ago in Minneapolis, Minnesota, *vato*, your home state! In the shower in the locker room, oh, man, I was high, bro. I was high, high, high! I don't remember much about that night, but what I do remember is them carrying me out of that arena. They carried me straight into rehab. They didn't do that, I did that to myself, *vato*. That was just the beginning of it, *ese*—through three years, not only did I end up losing my job, I lost my wife. I lost my kids and I lost myself. I lost my spirit. I disgraced my race! I disgraced my family! And I disgraced myself! But you know what, Brock, I came to a point in my life, *ese vato*, where it was do or die, homes. I had to make a decision. Do or die. And you know what, *ese*? I did, because I'm here right now. Day by day, by the grace of God, I have earned my way back into this ring, man. Day by day, by the grace of God, I have earned the respect of my kids again. Day by day, I have earned my life back. (WWE SmackDown!, 2004)

The week after this promo, Guerrero would win the WWE Championship for the first time in his career, and less than two years later, he was dead. His death was popularly attributed to his past addictions “catching up to him,” echoing the individuating discourses permeating the industry which directs all blame toward the individual. Even while valorizing Guerrero, even inducting him posthumously into the WWE Hall of Fame the following year, WWE nonetheless situates the blame for his enlarged heart, his addictions, and ultimately his death, at his own feet, made possible through his less spectacular and immediately-clear cause of death.

The response to Chris Benoit's death best represents the industry's shifting economy of tribute. Found dead along with his wife and 7-year-old son at their home after Benoit failed to appear at a pay-per-view event, WWE dedicated the entirety of the following evening's broadcast to him. WWE Chairman Vince McMahon, whose onscreen character was previously killed off in the weeks prior in a storyline involving a limousine explosion, broke kayfabe by appearing in an empty arena at the start of the show to begin the tribute to Benoit. Wrestlers shared tearful memories of the Benoit family alongside footage from the Chris Benoit documentary produced by the company a few years prior. Benoit was headed for a comparable degree of tribute as Guerrero, his close friend and co-worker, posthumously received.

After the show aired, however, details emerged indicating that Chris had, over the course of a weekend, strangled his wife and son to death before hanging himself using equipment in his home gym. As a result, on the following evening's broadcast, McMahon appeared again to open the show with an address:

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Last night on Monday Night Raw, the WWE presented a special tribute show recognizing the career of Chris Benoit. However, now, some 26 hours later, the facts of this horrific tragedy are now apparent. Therefore, other than my comments, there will be no mention of Mr. Benoit's name tonight. On the contrary, tonight's show will be dedicated to everyone who has been affected by this terrible incident. This evening marks the first step in the healing process. Tonight, WWE performers will do what they do better than anyone else in the world – entertain you.

(WWE ECW, 2007)

To date, Benoit has never been mentioned on WWE programming since. His name was scrubbed from WWE's website, and his performances are not searchable on WWE's streaming platform, though they can still be accessed manually.

WWE implicitly elides any potential external responsibility for Guerrero's health, and while McMahon's immediate framing of Chris Benoit is much more explicit, it nonetheless reflects the same undergirding notion that the performer is solely responsible for their health and any debilitation that may develop. He positions the death of the Benoit family as a "tragedy," a framework which ultimately "locates the 'problem' within the individual" (Clapton, 2003, p. 543), disinviting inquiry as to external causes and potential preventative measures that could have been taken. Further, McMahon suggests that the viewers and WWE itself can best heal from this "terrible incident" by moving forward without further acknowledgement. In the spirit of moving forward, WWE has since enacted a more robust concussion protocol and entered a collaboration with the Concussion Legacy Foundation.

The Foundation, which features WWE Chief Operating Officer and semi-retired wrestler Paul "Triple" Levesque on its Board of Directors, "provides an annual lecture on concussions" (WWE, 2021) to WWE's performers as part of its mission to advance "the study, treatment and prevention of the effects of brain trauma in athletes and other at-risk groups" (WWE, 2021). This demonstrates support to shareholders and a response for reporters following subsequent early deaths, but these efforts fall short of challenging WWE's "right to maim." By educating performers on concussions, WWE places the responsibility for future injury solely upon the individual performer. WWE's reforms in the wake of highly publicized early deaths focus on educating performers, eliding responsibility for producing debilitation. To experience a concussion and to suffer the long-term impacts therein becomes an individual's own failure, and

while WWE will, in some cases, provide rehabilitative services for former wrestlers seeking care, WWE's right to concuss, to maim, carries on unimpeded. Even a comprehensive healthcare program offered freely to all performers, which remains a dream for those in the industry at all levels, would not stop the production of debility. In fact, as welcome as such a program would be, a laudable healthcare program would likely function to strengthen WWE's right to maim, as the promise of future treatment could allow for greater wearing down of performers' bodies. Industry reforms, then, must be proactively directed at the production of debility.

Though WWE has only had a handful of memorial shows in recent years, this should not suggest that these are the only early deaths surrounding the company. This is to say nothing of the countless performers from past generations who died before they could collect their pension, or those who turned to crowdfunding efforts to pay for costly medical treatment stemming from the wear-and-tear of the industry. Some receive the customary "In Memory" graphic, and the most famous or most tragic may receive a video package, but many receive no acknowledgement at all.

Andrew "Test" Martin, a mid-card fixture of WWE programming in professional wrestling's late-90s heyday, died at 33 in 2009 following an accidental overdose of the painkiller oxycodone. He had been released from WWE two years prior following a violation of the company's Wellness Policy, which had been instated in 2006 following the sudden death of top performer Eddie Guerrero at age 38. Martin, given his distance from the company and the nature of his death, received no acknowledgement on WWE programming. The economy of tribute affords nothing to those who wash out of the industry and die young in this way.

Unlike some deaths, which can be written off as unrelated or incidental to professional wrestling, Martin's death cannot be uncoupled from the production of debilitation within WWE

and professional wrestling in general. Painkillers were historically a locker room staple in the industry, especially prior to the implementation of WWE's Wellness Policy, and at all levels of the industry, from stars like Guerrero and Benoit (Walker, 2008) to those who left the industry, painkillers have served as a dangerous form of pain management in lieu of alternatives. Martin's death was not only connected to painkillers, as his autopsy suggested that he may have also suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a "progressive worsening of cerebral neurological symptoms, initiated by, and perhaps worsened by, repetitive concussions and subconcussive injuries" (Galgano et al., 2016, p. 2) wherein symptoms like dementia, depression and suicidality typically emerge years later. As CTE garnered increased research attention in the mid-2000s, Martin became the only second wrestler to be connected to the syndrome after Benoit (Garber, 2009). What accounts for the vast difference in tribute garnered by the deaths of Martin and Benoit (despite similarities in their work history and connection to CTE) are both Benoit's far greater proximity to the company as well as the horrific and immediate violence surrounding his death and the death of his family.

Stuart Hall (1978) suggests that "any crime can be lifted into news visibility if violence becomes associated with it, since violence is perhaps the supreme example of the news value 'negative consequences'" (p. 70). Thus, the newsworthiness of the Benoit family's deaths versus the early deaths of wrestlers like Martin demonstrates how we understand violence in wrestling and as an issue of labor in general. The immediate violence of Chris Benoit murdering his wife and son before hanging himself is easily understood as such, as is Owen Hart's horrific fall, instantaneously severing his aorta upon impact on the ring, which caused his lungs to fill with blood. Though the assignment of blame in these events remains a subject of dispute (for Benoit, the potentially mitigating factors of CTE and/or "roid rage" and for Hart, the question of who

was ultimately responsible for the faulty rigging), these acts have clear perpetrators of violence and clearer victims, easily digestible for media producers and consumers. Today, discussions of the careers of Chris Benoit or Owen Hart will invariably center around their deaths, the violence inextricable from their wrestling careers.

Notably, however, Guerrero's career has largely escaped that stain of violence, allowing fans and critics much more room for discussion of his life and career, beyond the circumstances of his early death. Wrestling historian David Shoemaker suggests that Guerrero functions as the "un-Benoit," allowing fans to "appreciate Eddie's overachievement without compunction" (2013a, p. 345). Guerrero remains one of the most beloved wrestlers in wrestling history, with performers routinely paying homage to him via attire and signature moves nearly two decades after his death. The WWE Network features collections of Guerrero's greatest moments, and the company released a "Viva La Raza: The Legacy of Eddie Guerrero" DVD box-set in 2008. Whereas Benoit and Hart remain inextricable from their deaths, Guerrero is celebrated for his life, which is only possible through the removal of any inkling of violence from his death. Eddie's stardom in life necessitated tribute that others (e.g., Martin) did not receive in death, suggesting that one's achievements in kayfabe can not only lead to greater pay and career opportunities, but to the possibility of posthumous recognition and tribute for the performer as well.

Though professional wrestling's excessive and spectacular quality carries with it heightened bodily risks for performers, it also makes clear that which might be obscured elsewhere in sport. Explicitly integrated into the scheduled programming, the production of tribute shows for Owen Hart, Eddie Guerrero, and Chris Benoit (but not others) mark that the tribute show is a political production, one that provides much-needed catharsis while also

carrying the potential to elide industry responsibility in the production of long term injury and early death. Professional wrestling's control of this economy of tribute opens space to question how other industries manage debilitation and early death, inviting fans to consider how similar structures might operate elsewhere and how that power functions in directing their grief in the wake of tragedy.

Conclusion

Debility offers a useful framework for naming and understanding the types of bodily harm faced by wrestlers that may extend beyond the physical maneuvers executed in the ring itself: the wear-and-tear of constant travel, strains sustained in service of maintaining an optimal hypermasculine physique, brain injuries arising decades later from repetitive head trauma, substance abuse as a way of coping with chronic pain, despair and early death. I position professional wrestling workers, most of whom are dream-chasing unknown performers working for little or no pay, as a vulnerable and precarious class of workers, to whom debilitation and early death has become endemic rather than exceptional (Puar, 2017, p. xvii)

I align the bodies of deceased workers like Guerrero, Benoit, and Martin along a logic that assigns tribute based on their value to the company in life and death, positioning them as part of a collective body or population of wrestlers who are broadly susceptible to early death. Individualizing practices manage and maintain this production of debilitation and early death, assigning blame for long-term bodily harm to the performers themselves, even extending that blame to deceased performers. From the disappearing of external harms and precarities imposed upon workers' bodies to the pervasive suggestion that workers necessarily consent to debilitating practices by entering the industry at all.

Early death is so endemic to professional wrestling that an economy of tribute has developed, in which the very producers of debilitation and early death control the mourning process for fans faced with continued tragic loss, deciding which deceased athletes are worthy of memorialization and to what extent. Among other factors, WWE primarily manages this economy of tribute through the deceased's proximity to the company at the time of death as well as the nature of the death; if one's death occurs when one is no longer employed and the mode of death did not feature sufficient immediate violence to be raised to general newsworthiness, little, if any, tribute can be expected. The controlled denial of institutional tribute reflects an institutional right to maim, which denies the production of a "victim-subject" (Puar, 2021, p. 396) in such cases. Memorializing those who died in ways that allow the veiling of debilitation is financially lucrative and useful in managing narratives surrounding the industry's labor practices, whereas those whose deaths are slower or more overtly connected to debilitating working conditions often fade away. For grieving fans and co-workers, in lieu of structural redress, the only remaining recourse is managing tribute for the dead, further normalizing chronic early death as an intrinsic cost of producing professional wrestling.

But those who make it to WWE or another mainstream company are a small fraction of those who enter the industry. The tribute show, grim though it may be, is also aspirational for dreaming future wrestlers, as an institutional symbol of respect among fans and industry peers. A reward for a life's work. Most wrestlers are largely unknown outside of the arenas they work, wrestling small weekend shows in bingo halls, strip malls, and flea markets. For some, the dream is stepping between the ropes at all, and for others, the dream is an illustrious career well remembered, but whatever the specifics, they make the long drives to the shows that will feature them, animated by little more than the rush of working a crowd. To better understand those

workers at the lower rungs of the industry ladder, I now move to my experience in a wrestling training school, where I learned to work alongside others who yearned to know what it felt like to set foot in the ring.



Figure 2. A statue of Tampa wrestling legend and WWE producer Dusty Rhodes. WWE has recently begun paying tribute to certain deceased wrestlers through the display of such statues at fan events. A quote on the plaque reads: “Get a dream, hold on to it, and shoot for the sky.”

CHAPTER THREE:

LEARNING TO WORK

I grew up in the late-90s heyday of professional wrestling. With two nationally televised wrestling shows going head-to-head in prime time each week, boasting mainstream stars like The Rock, Hulk Hogan, and “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, this era was one that wrestling companies have tried and failed to recapture ever since. The “Don’t Try This At Home” PSAs that played prior to the broadcasts did little to persuade anyone I knew. Beds, couches, trampolines, pools—anything to break the fall—quickly became makeshift wrestling rings. My teenaged brothers were the target audience for edgy, raunchy wrestling shows at the time, and I was a willing recipient of the slams, powerbombs, and cutters they’d direct toward the closest couch cushion. I’d eventually get the chance to try out the moves on opponents my own size, too. After getting home from school in 5th grade, my best friend and I would rush out to the trampoline in my backyard, looking to emulate whatever maneuvers we’d recently seen on TV or the wrestling video games we’d play together. The on-screen performances did not match our real backyard ones where we’d end up teary-eyed with bloody noses. We missed the primary goal of professional wrestling: Always protect your ring partner.

Maybe it was the desire to preserve the couches in our house or maybe it had something to do with my habit of teaching my younger cousins how to correctly apply submission holds, but I soon came into possession of a Bashin’ Brawler plush doll, styled after WCW star Diamond Dallas Page. He had a battery in his back and sensors on various areas of his body that would

respond when pressed something along the lines of, “Ow...you’re hurtin’ my...NOSE!” or “C’mon, you’re breakin’ my...LEG!” I spent hours on the trampoline working matches with him, trying to invent my unique finishing move that I would eventually debut for real. Sometimes a car would drive by, and I would make sure to execute my most impressive suplexes on the doll, hoping that the driver might be a pro wrestling scout looking for a 9-year-old to sign.

By the mid-2000s, my middle school friends aged out of pro wrestling just as the superstars faded into retirement, aging out of their prime (See Figure 3). Some died. To revive wrestling and cultivate a new generation of fans, industry promoters began to trade edgy, explicit programming for family-friendly, PG content. I kept watching every week and began following the burgeoning online wrestling news industry to get more insight on its inner workings. The quality of the shows dipped, but I still had the desire to be a part of them, to figure out exactly how the industry worked, and to feel the roar of the crowd when I eventually walked down the ramp toward the ring.

On a drizzly March evening in 2008, I finally got to attend my first live wrestling show, one of about 75,000 in attendance at WrestleMania XXIV. My seat was so far away that I spent more time watching the Jumbotron above the ring, but the angle also allowed me to see things I’d never imagined while watching from home, like defeated wrestlers hobbling back up the ramp and, once out of sight from the cameras, dropping the pretense of injury and waving to the crowd. I filled a floppy disk with digital photos, teared up when Ric Flair wrestled in his retirement match, and briefly bonded with a stranger seated in front of me when we both booed John Cena at the same time. This is where I wanted to be someday, just on the other side of the barricade.

I kept my hope of joining the industry close to the vest as I entered high school, as wrestling wasn't as cool as it was when I was in elementary school. More imminently respectable professions—doctors and lawyers—were common among my peers, with college fast approaching. But none of those careers made sense to me like wrestling did. Wrestlers always proselytize about the importance of a “Plan B,” a fallback for the strong possibility that one won't be able to make a living in the wrestling industry, so I knew I'd be going to college to secure that fallback.

While I was in high school, I also started my first job, writing recaps and news articles for an online pro wrestling news site. These sites are generally looked down upon by those in the industry, derisively referred to as “dirt sheets,” but it nonetheless felt like I had entered the industry in some small way. In my high school's annual talent show, I convinced my friends to perform a skit with me, where I sat in the audience heckling a friend performing an intentionally cringeworthy stand-up comedy set. Annoyed, he challenged me to come up and try it myself, after which I climbed onto the stage and started a confrontation, causing another friend to run onstage in full referee garb. He dragged a mattress out with him, yelling about how he wants a good, clean fight. He rang a bell and I took off my jacket revealing a shirt from a rival high school. It was my first chance to work heel (i.e., wrestling parlance for a villain), and the boos that rained down were just what I wanted. I took the bumps that we'd practiced the night before right onto the mattress and ate the pin, putting over the hometown babyface, the way any good heel does. With high school ending, I applied to the University of South Florida, noting that Tampa was home to WWE's developmental facility. In four years, I could build my body and the skills attractive to a scout to be signed and start my wrestling career. This childhood dream ultimately did not materialize because I had no motivation to regularly exercise; Instead, I

pursued graduate study when WWE's developmental facility relocated across Florida. The dream rested, for now.

Though I continued to passively dream about success in the wrestling ring, the decades of routine horror stories I'd heard about terrible accidents and early death in wrestling troubled those dreams. I remember hearing the news that Eddie Guerrero had died of heart failure at the age of 38, just days after watching him perform on an episode of *WWE SmackDown!* I could never emulate the spectacular aerial flips that many wrestlers executed from the top ropes, so Eddie Guerrero's signature frog splash was always my favorite move to do off diving boards and on trampolines. And then he was gone. Two years later, I remember sitting in my bedroom with my brother when an episode of *WWE Raw* began with "In memory of Chris Benoit: 1967-2007." This was the first I heard of it. I wasn't shocked. I was just exasperated. I whispered, "Come on, not again," as the makeshift tribute show began.

These were the deaths that affected me most as a child. Fans from every generation have similar stories about watching their childhood wrestling superheroes die young. Occasionally, these deaths will get some mainstream press coverage, often pointing to painkiller abuse or "roid rage" while eliding the conditions that produce the need for painkillers. The idea that professional wrestling is silly, immature, and useless extends to the treatment of wrestler deaths. The assumption is wrestlers would die young because they're choosing to do something absurd and pointless. They are choosing a line of work renders their lives expendable.

What is the appeal to perform in a taxing, disreputable industry that produces early death and debilitation?

Most wrestlers never make it to television. Some never make it out alive. Yet, countless aspiring professional wrestlers perform to play out their dream. Far away from the bright lights

of broadcast television, most wrestling takes place among such dreamers, driving straight from their day job to a wrestling school, wearing down their bodies in pursuit of a future big break. To examine this aspect of the industry, I step between the ropes for the first time to revive my own dream, hoping to draw greater attention to the many labors of the professional wrestling industry, many of which are death-dealing. To explore the central role of the body and the pervasive discourse of the dream in wrestling culture, I play out my childhood dream by signing up as a professional wrestling trainee. I structure the format and flow of my autoethnographic narrative similar to the match layout taught to all trainees: the shine, the heat, the comeback, and the finish.

The Shine

Professional wrestling schools are the primary way for aspiring wrestlers to break into the industry. So, I began my dream project by signing up for the 14-month program offered by one of over a dozen wrestling schools operating in Florida. Most of them are run by retired or semi-retired wrestlers. I chose a school both for its 30-minute proximity from my home and the head trainer, who is a semiretired wrestler I watched on television as a child. I sent an email to gauge their interest in letting a college student use their program as a research site. I received a quick response welcoming me, provided I follow the criteria required of all students: Payment of monthly dues totaling about \$3500 for a 14-month class. I agreed, taking out some additional student loans in cash. The trainer then invited me to the facility to observe a session as well as fill out the requisite paperwork on both ends.

I drove about forty minutes from campus to the training center, an unassuming room in a strip mall on the side of a highway. I had arrived before the trainers arrived, and I nervously waited in my car as a group of trainees waited by the door. The thrill and confidence of playing

wrestler as a child was gone, as this was the first foray into a community of people unlikely to be amused by playful antics. I wondered if the trainees had been briefed on the grad student coming to observe. I hoped I'd be able to communicate that I was a fan—a knowledgeable, humble fan—rather than a total mark looking for a fun story to tell. My stomach twisted tighter. As last-minute preparation, I pulled up YouTube on my phone, looking for content featuring the trainers to double-check how to correctly pronounce their names.

After a few minutes, a man from those videos arrived and let the trainees inside. I waited a bit longer before entering the front office, prominently displaying my binder of consent forms in the hopes of marking myself as the prospective student from the prior email rather than a curious stranger. The office was empty save for a desk, a bench press, and a display case featuring replica wrestling championship belts and autographs from current WWE wrestlers, legendary *puroresu* stars, and independent mainstays. I positioned myself strategically in front of the doorway leading to the wrestling ring, not wanting to pass the threshold without permission. I took stock of the memorabilia in the display case: a replica World Heavyweight Championship belt, signed headshots of wrestling legends who had passed through, and group photos of past cohorts who had trained here. After years of dreaming about it, I had finally taken my first step behind the curtain. I'd finally have an opportunity to learn alongside others who spoke in a language I'd only read on dirt sheets and online forums.

After a short wait, Coach Mike met me in the lobby where I introduced myself as “the guy from the email” who wanted to join the school as part of my dissertation. He didn't seem to remember me immediately, but then suddenly he nodded and joked about his bad memory: “Lotta chair shots to the head.” Coach Mike (or Coach, as trainees commonly called him) was a ring veteran with over two decades of experience, still working shows from time to time in

addition to training future wrestlers. He was not the typical larger-than-life wrestler, standing just south of six feet tall. Nonetheless, his broad shoulders and bulging biceps still conveyed toughness and menace. His career was forged primarily on the independent scene, where performers often traveled and worked for little pay or in wrestling parlance: “a hot dog and a handshake.” Wrestlers, like other performing artists, are trained in “‘sacrificial labour,’ predisposing them to accept nonmonetary rewards—the gratification of producing art—as partial compensation for their work, thereby discounting the cash price of their labour” (Jansen, 2019, p. 142). As we laced up our boots before a session, I’d sit and listen as he shared from a seemingly endless wealth of experience. He could tell you which countries had the stiffest rings or loosest ropes, which megastars were assholes and which ones stayed around after shows to help clean up. He would recall how he’d narrowly escaped with his life after working a crowd so effectively that angry fans awaited him after the show brandishing knives.

In this first meeting, he volunteered a partial injury history as part of his introduction: torn ligaments, broken ribs, a broken nose, herniated discs, an ACL surgery, a dislocated shoulder, and at least four concussions. Coach grabbed a liability form and training contract. I signed them and explained that I’d join training after my coursework. I turned to leave when Coach asked if I’d like to observe a training session.

I walked through the unassuming front office into a larger garage with a ring in the center. Loud whirring fans faced the ring to account for the lack of air conditioning. Within minutes of practice starting, trainees congregated around these fans, their drenched shirts clinging to their backs as the smell of nearby highway exhaust gave way to the stench of body odor, salt, and Lysol. I stayed well away from the fans, sliding into the nearest corner of the room and sitting in silence as more trainees filed in, a parade of gym shorts and tank tops. Some

didn't notice me, or pretended not to, and I did the same, nervously scribbling gibberish in my notepad to look busy. I suddenly remembered what I'd read in all those memoirs growing up: the handshake is the fundamental way to show respect to your peers and the ring veterans especially in the locker room. Failure to do so is a quick way to get "heat" on yourself or expelled from the locker room altogether. I slid closer to the entryway and, as each arriving wrestler finished making the rounds to shake hands, I stood, extended my hand and introduced myself, grateful to have learned some etiquette as a fan and to have avoided committing a cardinal sin of the wrestling world on my first day.

The first trainee I met was Adrian, a quiet young man who boasted great physical stature even while seated in the ring. Adrian's father worked nationally in wrestling's heyday before tragically dying young, adding Adrian to a growing list of second- and third-generation performers. Adrian adopted gear and mannerisms in the ring to pay tribute to his father to revive a bygone character for a new generation. I also met Curtis, a more experienced trainee who'd been with the wrestling school for well over a year. Curtis came with his friend Devin, a lifelong fan who too was observing the session and considering following his own dream of becoming a wrestler. Limbering up in the ring were Nicole, a professional cheer instructor, and Corey, a former professional wrestler-turn-manager after suffering a career-ending injury. That day, there were four other trainees in the ring whose names I never learned. They were gone from the school by the time I returned six months later.

As I sat at ringside observing with Devin, the in-ring training session started with stretching and a few conditioning drills. I had expected spectacular gorilla press slams onto crash pads, but I saw nothing of the sort that day, and rarely did training sessions ever focus on the spectacular. On the day I first observed, trainees entered the ring two at a time and practiced a

fundamental tenet of a professional wrestling match—the Irish whip, in which one wrestler grabs an opponent’s arm and pushes them toward the ropes. Many such professional wrestling fundamentals “were brought to the United States by English, Irish, and Northern European immigrants” (Walker, 2018, p. 8), with Irish babyface Danno O’Mahony conquering the 1930s New York professional wrestling by innovating the Irish whip as his signature maneuver. Wrestling maneuvers grow more taxing and spectacular with every generation, so now, in contemporary wrestling, what was once a finishing move is now rote, an easy way to add motion to a match’s early moments and clarify the babyface and heel of a particular matchup.

The trainees grasped the other’s left hand and took turns rhythmically pushing the other back into the ropes, allowing them to spring back, in perfect position to be pushed back into the ropes on another side of the ring. Throughout the drill, they never let go of the other’s hand. They were practicing the fundamentals: ring positioning and footwork. Their feet moved in sync as their arms pushed and pulled into the correct position for the next step. I was watching a dance.

Professional wrestling is fundamentally collaborative, a practice of intimacy and vulnerability all while simulating the infliction of genuine harm upon one another. “They’re always partners,” Coach explained on the first day. “Never opponents.” A typical scoop slam, to a fan, may look like a feat of strength for one wrestler while the other simply goes for a ride. Hulk Hogan’s use of the maneuver on Andre the Giant at *WrestleMania III* is one of the most iconic moments in the industry’s history. Watching the event, the camera stays on Hogan as he hypes himself up for the imminent slam. An announcer shouts, “We’re seeing what this guy is really made of – what he is! The greatest professional athlete in the world!” (*WrestleMania III*, 1987). Andre staggers toward Hogan, who lifts him upside down and slams him to the mat as the

sound of some 93,000 exhilarated fans overwhelms all else. This maneuver catapulted the already-popular Hogan into superstardom. Andre died six years later.

What I had never noticed, and what the industry's illusory performative context known as kayfabe (Smith, 2006) seeks to conceal, was Andre's arm. As he staggers toward Hogan and leans over, he plants his hand firmly into Hogan's quadricep. I was taught to do this when I learned to take a scoop slam, as it helps with the lift and assists in maintaining balance. The assistance provided by Andre's hand demonstrates that there is no such thing as a wrestling movie performed solely by one person. From the most basic Irish whip to "the slam heard around the world" (Hoy-Browne, 2014), wrestling matches grow out of collaboration, trust, and care between performers.

At the same time, professional wrestling is also deeply individualistic. My wrestling school was a revolving door of trainees. Not only was I unsure who would be attending each training session on a given day, I learned to expect the possibility that I could, without notice or explanation, suddenly lose all contact with any fellow trainee, churned out by their inability to continue paying, the completion of their contract, a transfer to another wrestling school, irreconcilable pressures from other areas of their lives, or just quitting. Often, a trainee would show up, we'd lock up a few times, make some small talk at ringside about my project or their history with wrestling, and then they'd be gone, made official by an automated group chat notification that they'd been removed from the group. Nobody questioned it, so I didn't either.

This didn't strike me as callous; it appeared to be a matter-of-fact extension of the individualism of the industry. The performances themselves are intrinsically collaborative, but everything surrounding those performances dissolve those connections. In all, I spent very little time communicating with fellow trainees, and even less time building sequences together in the

ring. Much of the labor that went into my wrestling training was done alone. While exercising during the week, I'd keep my headphones in to motivate myself to get the most out of every rep. Each afternoon of training, I'd spend an hour alone in the car driving to wrestling school. While other trainees used the ring, I spent most of my time silently observing. While trainees are expected to shake hands and show respect to one another, socializing too much or too loudly risks drawing the ire of those in the ring, and given that I was actively seeking to show my commitment to combat the idea that I was an outsider, I rarely risked striking up conversation at ringside. Training would usually run until around midnight, and when we were done, I'd get into my car and drive home, feeling the adrenaline start to give way to the aches. I knew they would grow exponentially by morning. The glowing fast food signs lining the highway were impossible to ignore after workouts like that, and I usually needed to fill my gas tank anyways, so there were days when I spoke to the Wawa cashier more than anyone at wrestling school.

In this way, it's easy to see how the "independent contractor" takes hold among workers. Despite the fundamentally collaborative quality of professional wrestling performances, individualism supersedes community interests in the life of a professional wrestler. *You* shape your body into a wrestler's body, *you* come up with a gimmick, *you* buy the gear, *you* drive to the venue, *you* take the bumps, *you* drive home, and *you* feel the pain. A 2014 study by the University of Louisville Law Review found that Internal Revenue Service's 20-factor test to determine employment status "clearly indicates that wrestlers are employees" (Cowley, p. 143) rather than independent contractors. Wrestling scholars, critics, and fans alike have sounded the alarm about this misnomer for years with no tangible movement to speak of, suggesting that this ethos does not entirely flow from the top. It is not as if a "few bad apples" at the top of the industry are beating back a rigorous and organized unionization movement from the majority of

wrestlers today. As a young fan, I typically thought of wrestlers as solely entertainers, but having looked behind the curtain, I see that wrestlers are fundamentally workers doing the visceral labor of performance.

The proliferation of the individualist ethos in wrestling is, in part, a pedagogical problem. From the first-day trainee to the most grizzled ring veteran, the professional wrestling industry “facilitates integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and brings about conformity” (Freire, 1976, p. 34), producing individualism as a taken-for-granted and intrinsic fact of the industry. The pervasive idea, for example, that one must “pay their dues” through suffering instills and reinforces passivity on the part of workers. A common refrain I heard was: “There’s a difference between hurt and injured. We’re all hurt!” This cloaks pain under the guise of a collective, shared experience, when in fact it precludes the idea that one’s pain is worthy of concern. From the top of the industry down to the newest trainees, wrestlers consistently face “pressure to be ironmen, ready to perform night in and night out, regardless of their physical condition” (Cowley, 2014, p. 144), inviting the quiet proliferation of debilitation. Even through these seemingly benign slogans, wrestlers quickly learn a “functional code of silence, even within the locker room, even among friends and so to painkiller abuse, to alcohol abuse to take the edge off, to illicit drug use to get you going afterward, out of the fog of painkillers and beer” (Shoemaker, 2013a, p. 362). To raise concern about the less spectacular pain, the ““you sit down in your rental car and electric voltage shoots up your ‘spine’ kind of pain,” (Shoemaker, 2013a, p. 361) would be to invite the criticism that maybe you just don’t have what it takes. And that suggestion ignores the real question: Why does it have to “take” so much to be a wrestler?

Six months before my training began, I consulted with a department colleague and later gym partner about the best ways to approximate the body of a wrestler. I assumed functional strength was most important to properly execute moves and avoid botches, but building visible muscle mass would help me achieve what the industry calls “the look.” The stereotype of professional wrestlers as “monstrous, intimidating men who draw upon inherently aggressive instincts” (Smith, 2014, p. 36) carries on from the industry’s carnival beginnings, in which promoters would promise superhuman strength or monstrous physicality to draw more marks. The look, then, has always been connected to standing out physically. As wrestling moved from the carnival to the arena, the look shifted to one of “a ‘real’ rugged man” with “a ‘natural’ strength and cool, dominating indifference” (Smith, 2014, p. 150). The look marks one as larger-than-life and thus marketable, situating the spectacle of the atypical body as central even as promoters shift their focus from monstrosity to an idealized masculinity. Historically, spectacular height has been the thrust of countless gimmicks, and even in contemporary professional wrestling, while some shorter wrestlers have broken through to mainstream success, major companies continue to seek out very tall performers. In 2021, for example, a leaked internal memo from WWE demonstrated their focus on new prospects: “no more midgets, no one starting in their 30s and people who can be box office attractions and main characters” (Nason, 2021). To have the look, one must stand out among—and often stand above—an audience of primarily young men.

Achieving and maintaining the look is important for everyone, but for those lacking a saleable physical presence and standing under six feet tall, like me, building enormous muscles is a common way of compensating. The independent scene, where most wrestlers work, often features performers with “ordinary dispositions, average physical talents, and, at least initially,

standard body sizes” (Smith, 2014, p. 36). Having enrolled in a school run by independent wrestlers that boasted former trainees who had made it to the major companies, I decided on an exercise regimen primarily focused on free weights, a part of the gym that I had never bothered with, to meet a baseline level of visible muscle mass. I would go to the gym five days a week, each day focusing on arms, shoulders, chest, back or legs, prioritizing low-rep high-weight sets to maximize muscle growth. I also began taking a daily creatine supplement every morning and added countless grams of protein to my diet, eating some combination of grilled chicken, beans, and rice most nights. I was aiming for a calorie surplus for the first time in my life, which provided me a new way of looking at the food I ate and the body it was nourishing. Prior to this period, I had only exercised in stops and starts, without a particular end goal other than a vague desire to “weigh less.” The motivation to perform well and demonstrate my commitment to those at the wrestling school kept me on schedule in a way I’d never been able to maintain, and I routinely indulged in the thrill of telling friends and colleagues that I was actually going to wrestling school. Having written about wrestling at every opportunity throughout grad school from a fan’s perspective, I couldn’t wait to access the experience on the other side of the barricade, to feel the mat, the ropes, and the bumps and bruises I anticipated my stronger body receiving. I thought back to all the childhood bumps onto couches and trampolines, hoping that the muscle memory may give me an edge. I wondered who I might be once I entered this new wrestling school as a novice, with my fandom no longer a unique trait and having to build a new set of knowledges, language, and etiquette as I did in graduate school.

With the help of my gym partner, I quickly learned how to do preacher curls, skullcrushers, face pulls, calf raises, and barbell rows, keeping notes on every rep I executed to keep track of my progress. By the third month, I was able to do multiple chin-ups for the first

time in my life, and I friends who I hadn't told about my project remarked on my broader shoulders and bigger arms. In the final two months before training began, I started regularly integrating cardio exercise. Wrestlers often note in memoirs and interviews that there is no cardio that can prepare you for the unique kind of exertion required by professional wrestling, but I nonetheless wanted to build some degree of endurance as much as I could. Two or three times a week, I would swim some laps after a workout or challenge my gym partner to a few games of 1-on-1 basketball. Everything I did was in service of the shine, building the look I'd need to get myself over with the trainers and trainees as I re-entered the training center, this time as a full-fledged trainee.

The Heat

Once I finished coursework and lost access to my school's gym, I took a break from working out to let my body rest and recover prior to beginning my training. I had read enough wrestlers' memoirs to know that the early days of training can be some of the most painful, as your body hasn't acclimated to the unique stresses and strains only experienced between the ropes of a wrestling ring. On one June morning, I took a day trip to Busch Gardens both to have fun and to keep my body moving in a lighter, easier way. The Tampa sun was punishing, and within minutes, my shirt was sticking to my back, drenched in sweat. After a few hours, I entered a bathroom stall to address the sweat that had accumulated under my clothes. I discovered, at some point during my time at the park, I had shit myself.

Though embarrassing, this was a rare enough occurrence that I cleaned myself up and continued my day without thinking too much of it. The rest of the day was inconsequential, but in the following days I started to notice small streaks of shit in my underwear, sometimes after walking around, sometimes after spending the day on my couch, and sometimes after a night of

sleep. I took extra care to make sure I had thoroughly cleaned myself after every bowel movement, but it was no use. Seconds after standing up from the toilet, I would find that some new leakage had already occurred. During the process of fitting my body into the prototypical mold of a wrestler, I had lost control of my bowels, without a clear cause and without any idea of how to treat it. And my 14-month commitment to strenuous, close-contact physical exertion was days away from beginning. Revealing this to anyone would be humiliating, as would backing out of the project. I took the heat. I continued the work of maintaining the look of the pro wrestler: a hard, masculine body that works hurt.

I arrived for my first day of training wearing a pair of daily contact lenses, five-dollar elbow and knee pads I picked up from Wal-Mart, a dark t-shirt, running shoes, basketball shorts, and tight underwear to hopefully conceal any leakage that might occur. I walked into the ringside area and shook hands before quietly following the lead of the other trainees who were stretching. At ringside, a camera crew was interviewing a legendary wrestler from the independent scene. This would become a common occurrence in my time with this school: longtime performers sitting in on classes as guest trainers, the result of a sprawling web of friendships and connections made by Coach on the independents. As practice began, Coach told me the documentary crew wanted some footage of the guest trainer teaching, so I joined her in the ring as cameras captured my first moments stepping through the ropes.

The ring feels unlike any other surface I'd ever walked on with a slight spring to every step as the lumber under the canvas gives slightly. The half-inch of foam above the lumber can't be too thick, or else wrestlers wouldn't be able to run without twisting ankles and the spectacular impact of every fall would be lessened for the audience. The lumber is what your feet feel,

comparable to running across an old, waterlogged deck over a lake. You feel the parts churning and moving below you, and it takes some time to get sure footing.

I should say: you don't want to be a mark. The word itself describes someone who's gullible, someone who can be taken advantage. A rube. The older fans, who "know that it's fake" but enjoy it for other reasons, sometimes style themselves as "smart marks" or "smarks" because, in their view, they're smartened up to the business (Warden, 2019, p. 875). But even in the business itself, you'll hear that there's an influx of marks. Coach once said with a sigh: "all the marks are in the ring now." But even before I heard it from him, I knew not to "mark out" when I met wrestlers who may stop by the school. Looking back, I would have liked to ask for mark photos with many of the wrestlers who came through. I'd even gotten a mark photo with one of the trainers nearly a decade earlier in the parking lot outside a WWE show, but I never dared mention it. Even if we're all marks to some degree, you try not to act like one. That's for the people on the other side of the barricade. When you're trying to break into the business, you maintain the deep respect for the performers that grew from your fandom. I want to suppress the desire to act as a fan.

As a trainee, there is an expectation that I come the ring with rich knowledge of professional wrestling the moment I sign up. Trainees are expected to know the language, the moves, and the legends. For example, insider terms like gigging, receipts, works, and shoots were never defined in training, and I'd learned these online from fan forums over the years. Legends like Ricky "The Dragon" Steamboat and Jerry "The King Lawler" had their wrestling prime years before I was born, but that made no matter. As a trainee, I not only needed to know who they were, but how they were executing their arm drags differently. In the ring, I was expected to know this guest trainer and to be careful to not mark out while working with her.

I did my best to keep my cool when I shook hands with one of the most celebrated women in the independent wrestling world who'd teach me the most basic building blocks of wrestling. First was the front roll, in which you press your knuckles to the mat and somersault onto the mat. This would eventually grow into more high-impact, spectacular movements, but learning and practicing the fundamentals mitigated injury. Even the most advanced students participated in these basic drills. As my shoulders and back met the canvas for the first time, the ring roared underneath me like a rumbling train. Next was the back roll, which involved tucking your chin and doing the reverse. I had done this with friends regularly on the trampoline growing up, so this came easily, and I got my first-ever smattering of applause from the onlookers. Soon after, I excused myself. I went to the restroom and checked to see if I'd shit myself. I was pleased to find that I hadn't. It was the summer heat that coated my body and my clothes in sweat.

The next practice, I learned how to bump. The currency of any professional wrestling performance, a bump is wrestling parlance for anytime a wrestler falls to the mat, usually as a result of another wrestler slamming them or knocking them over. Coach would often refer to his "bump card" being filled, a common adage among wrestling veterans. The thinking is that each performer has a finite number of bumps before their body can't take it anymore, so performers must be prudent about how and when they take bumps. Some manage this by taking some bumps on their side to distribute the wear-and-tear across the body. Some, particularly the larger performers for whom physical menace is their primary selling point, will simply refuse to bump except for extreme circumstances. For Coach, that means limiting his bumps during training sessions, and saving the spectacular bumps for big shows a few times a year. A good way to get

on a ring veteran's bad side is to make them take a bump anywhere but the exact center of the ring.

One at a time, trainees enter the ring from the apron and do their bump drills. First, three flatback bumps. From a standing position, throw your back at the mat. Don't just lazily fall back. Tuck your chin before you hit the mat. As you make contact, spread your arms and smack your palms against the mat. Throw your arms out too early and you risk both breaking the illusion and your arm. Throw your arms too late and your back takes the full brunt of the impact. Don't forget to tuck your chin.

The trainees ahead throw their backs at the mat, feet flying out from under them as if they'd slipped on a banana peel. I wince at the surprisingly loud impact of the ring—the compressing flesh on lumber on steel loud enough so cheap seats can feel it. I try to stop myself from wincing at future bumps. As soon as the bump is complete, the trainee fans their legs and quickly gets to their feet, only to throw themselves back down to the mat for another bump. The more advanced trainees add handstand bumps and flipping bumps to their drill.

I walk to the center of the ring and another guest trainer says, "All right, let's see what you got!" I respond sheepishly that I've never learned how to take a bump before. The trainer rolls under the bottom rope and joins me in the ring to walk me through it. He crosses his arms over his chest "like a mummy" and tells me to squat low "like I'm taking a shit." Fall backwards, throwing your legs into the air and spreading your arms out to distribute the impact of the fall across your body. Tuck your chin. I squatted low, putting as little distance between my back and the canvas as I could, and envisioned slipping on a banana peel, like Coach had explained earlier. I'd done this hundreds of times on my trampoline. Feeling confident, I threw my back at the canvas and completely forgot to tuck my chin. On impact, the back of my head snapped back

onto the mat. My eyes welled but I laughed it off with a comment like, “ah, that’s why you tuck the chin” and gave it a few more tries, this time tucking my chin.

When done successfully, the basic flatback bump hurts less than I expected it would. The ring provides some degree of give, and the rush of adrenaline numbs the pain in the moment. The next morning, however, I couldn’t move my neck sideways at all. My whole back was stiff, and something as simple as putting on a pair of socks or picking up something I dropped became an ordeal. The acute neck stiffness lasted about a week, but these aches represented a new normal for me throughout training. I noticed that I now grunted while slowly reaching down to tie my shoes, and I’d roll out of bed horizontally in the morning instead of sitting up. As Coach explained early on, “there’s a difference between being hurt and being injured; we’re all hurt.”

The next few weeks, I learned more of the basics—the collar-and-elbow tie-up that starts most matches, headlocks, and armbars. While other trainees used the ring, sometimes more advanced students would take me aside and give me extra reps. One night, I practiced my form on applying and taking a basic side headlock continuously for 30 minutes, trading headlocks back and forth, sliding sweaty faces across soaked shirts, exhaling forcefully while in the hold to avoid swallowing my partner’s sweat. Another night, I traced the length of the ring and practiced the precise footwork needed to run the ropes—leading with your right foot, taking three steps to make it across the ring, turning on the last step, and falling back slightly into the ropes, making sure not to lift either foot off the mat, to keep your center of gravity as low as possible in the event the rope snaps. Another night, the guest trainer who taught me to roll returned and guided me and a newer five-foot tall teenage trainee. Through improvisation, the guest trainer instructed us how to lock up at the start of a match and think like a babyface or a heel depending on the situation. Some nights, the ringside area was more relaxed, and trainees might indulge in the

inherent silliness of wrestling, pantomiming needlessly theatrical spinning kicks and mimicking the roar of the crowd as the other would sell as if they were in the heat of a 60-minute classic. On one such evening, Adrian walked by me to deliver a chest chop, which I dutifully sold by falling to my knees and wincing in pain. Rising to my feet, I tried a chop of my own, slapping his chest with the back of my hand. He stopped me, grabbed my wrist, and turned it around. “I don’t know why so many people think it’s with the back of your hand. It’s your palm,” he said, before letting me try the move correctly.

In the back of my mind, I moved with worry. I carried the thought of some catastrophic incident happening because of my mystery illness, which was becoming symptomatic and more frequent. Some sort of incontinent episode was happening daily at this point with more symptoms developing and interfering with all aspects of my life. Dietary changes yielded nothing. I confided in Coach that I was dealing with a non-specific gastrointestinal illness. I needed some time off. He agreed. I underwent a colonoscopy the following month.

The results were largely inconclusive, but doctors did notice a possible fungal infection from the sweaty surfaces I’d been exercising on in the prior months. I was prescribed a weekly oral medication and a daily topical cream to treat it. After a 12-week course of both medications, the incontinence was happening less frequently, and a follow-up confirmed that there was no further evidence of infection. With this shit behind me, I told Coach I was ready for a comeback. I had to come once rather than twice a week to be sure my body could take the bumps and the chops without falling backward medically.

The Comeback

At my first training back, Coach told us that we were losing the facility the following week. Rent was going up and the owner, Coach suspected, intentionally wanted to price out the

wrestlers for a more lucrative or respectable tenant. So, we'd be moving training about an hour away to an event center in a shopping mall that sometimes housed independent wrestling events. The drive became twice as long for me and some of the other trainees, but this facility had air conditioning, which made it sound like the most luxurious training center imaginable.

At the new location, the training sessions were largely the same, and I was starting to progress beyond the very basics. Most training sessions start with basic bumps, rolls, and conditioning drills before the more involved drills begin. For example, I was getting to participate in the "up and over," in which Trainee A runs toward the corner turnbuckle, grabs the top rope, and jumps up and back, passing over Trainee B, who is charging a step behind them. After each successful jump, Trainee A turns and immediately races to the opposite corner and repeats, somewhere around a dozen times. Trainee B must not follow too closely or too far away to avoid injury and must duck at just the right moment. Move too soon and the illusion of legitimate competition is broken; move too late and Trainee B is likely to receive a kick to the jaw.

Coach liked to switch around partners for this drill, making height mismatches to teach trainees how to compensate during a match. Especially at the lower levels of the industry, a wrestler may not know their opponent until minutes before the match begins, so practicing with a variety of body types is imperative in making oneself ready for in-ring opportunities. A 5'10 wrestler should know how to "bump and feed" for a monster heel but should also be ready to work as the monster heel against a shorter opponent.

I was matched up against Adrian. Adrian was at least a full head taller than me. He wore his real gear to training to break it in before for his upcoming bookings. His build and his name were his biggest selling points. So, he played a monster in the ring, which meant he spent much

of our training practicing villainous facial expressions and intimidating shouts than bumping against smaller opponents like me.

Adrian took the role of Trainee A. I made chase. He leapt, using the bottom rope for some additional spring, and glided over my head as I craned my neck down slightly. I had worried about being kicked in the face by such a sizable boot, but as he passed over me, I heard a “whoa!” at ringside, something I’d never received in training, and my inhibitions vanished. He continued to the other corner. I dipped my head as little as possible, hoping he’d graze the top of my head by millimeters. I was chasing that fabled “pop” that makes everything beyond the ropes fade away for a moment. He was well practiced and worked safe despite his monstrous gimmick, making me look great in the process. A consummate co-worker and performer.

After several more up and overs, Coach told us to switch roles. My hands were resting on top of my head, meekly attempting to communicate that I needed some time to recover. But, there is no pausing a wrestling match. I leapt from the bottom rope, lifting my feet as high as possible to clear him, turning as I landed toward the opposite corner to repeat. “Pick those feet up!” Coach said. I knew I was already gassed. Pushing through is part of training. Above all I didn’t want to give any additional reason to not be “one of the boys” by not being able to keep up, so I kept putting one foot in front of the other. I leapt onto the bottom rope on what must have been the ninth or tenth time, threw back my feet, and came crashing down directly on my partner’s head.

I’d broken the cardinal rule. What if he’s really hurt? What if this ruins his big upcoming booking? I helped him up and repeatedly, profusely said how sorry I was. “Don’t worry about it, brother,” he replied. “It happens.” He seemed perfectly unharmed, to my great relief, and unbothered as well. A few weeks later, Adrian stopped showing up to the sessions, and left the

group chat. Graduates generally receive little fanfare, and those who wash out receive silence or derision. I was afraid to ask where he'd gone, but later found out through social media that he had started working independent shows, working his way up the ranks. I hope I get to see him working on the big stage someday, albeit with me on the other side of the barricade.

In addition to learning to work matches, the wrestler-in-training is also responsible for working as ring crew for any independent show in the area. Attendance was mandatory, and often with only a day or two's notice. My first independent show as part of the ring crew was in a small concert venue downtown, with permanently sticky floors from countless spilled beers. Once folding chairs were set up, the venue sat about 100 people, and, given that the show was set to start at 9 that evening, call time for crew was 3 pm. I arrived a bit early and joined a half-dozen fellow trainees and lower-card performers, waiting around the 18-wheeler full of supplies until the venue was opened to us.

A conventional professional wrestling ring is roughly 16 feet long and 16 feet wide, set up piece by piece from the loading truck and loaded back up by end of the night. Two crew members, often newer wrestlers working the undercard or future wrestlers in training, take either end of a steel ringpost and carry it in, eventually aligning all four into a square. From the moment a venue begins its transformation into a wrestling arena, trainees learn the mechanisms that undergird the industry: the hierarchy among workers and promoters, and the expectation of willingly taking on unpaid labor. The work, like so much in wrestling, is collaborative among workers, sharing burdens and lightening loads, but the burdens themselves go unquestioned, as those at the bottom must avoid burning the few bridges available in the industry, and having "the look" extends to performing a capable masculinity in these behind-the-scenes moments just as much as it does while in the ring.

Steel support beams come in next, connecting the corners and providing a firm base for the wooden planks that rest above the beams. I can only handle one, but some of the bigger trainees stack two planks on top of each other as they carry them inside. After the base of the ring is suspended from the corner ringposts, crew members tape a hard half-inch foam layer, comparable to a gym mat, over the lumber. What padding there is can't be too soft, as wrestlers need to run, leap, and bounce, and any soft surface risks serious knee and ankle injuries.

After the foam is down, the crew pulls a thin canvas over it. At the upper echelons of the industry, a ring crew might prepare several layers of canvas that can be quickly pulled back and replaced if too much sweat or blood seeps into it. Most wrestling companies don't have the luxury of multiple canvases. With that, the ring's base is complete, so the next step is to set up the three ropes suspended by each corner of the ring. Wrestlers use these ropes to leap from and bounce off during a match, and more practically, as a way to prevent serious injury that could occur if a wrestler fell out of the ring. When first learning how to run the ropes, Coach highlighted the importance of firmly grabbing the rope with one hand, as this could provide precious leverage should the rope snap and you tumble head-first toward the concrete floor below.

The makeup of these ropes varies from company to company, as longtime wrestlers can tell you all about which companies and which parts of the world have the springiest ropes or the stiffest rings. Having grown up watching wrestlers on television perform backflips with the greatest of ease using these ropes, I expected the ropes to be far springier. The ropes I set up for the show were steel cables surrounded by a thin red padding, comparable to that of a garden hose, and the same I used in training. Wrestlers must simulate the bounce given by the ropes as they slam into them, steel cables digging just below their shoulder blades.

With the ring all set, the crew can disperse to other pre-show duties, setting up chairs, passing out flyers to passersby, or starting to work out the major beats of their upcoming match with their opponent. As soon as the ring is complete, a performer will roll into the ring and hop lightly to get a feel for how much “give” the ring has, then run back and forth to test the ropes. If no further adjustments are needed, performers will usually warm up with some in-ring stretches, rolls, and bumps, or walk through the major spots of their match with their partner.

The first show I worked, I was told I was “on call” for anything the show’s producers might need, like posing as security should the in-ring action spill out into the crowd. As the hours passed and I continued to watch the show leaned in a corner of the arena, I began to think I wouldn’t be needed beyond breaking down the ring after the show. After intermission, the heavily promoted matches began, and I watched as two competitors made their way into the ring, one a towering, swaggering heel, and the other a much smaller underdog, light on his feet in a way that suggested he was a high-flying babyface. The match followed the usual formula, with the babyface opening with a showcase of exciting maneuvers (known as “the shine”). The heel then takes control and slows the pace down (“the heat”), building anticipation toward the babyface’s comeback, which in turn leads to the cathartic closing moment of the match (“the finish”). As the match builds to its climax, the babyface lands spectacular feats of strength and agility on the heel as the crowd comes alive. The heel may fight back with underhanded tactics, with the two countering the other until one successfully pulls off a finishing move to secure the victory.

In this match, the smaller babyface got caught in midair as he flew toward the corner turnbuckle. The crowd’s excitement shifted quickly to awe and expectant dread as the heel effortlessly lifted the babyface over his head and delivered a thunderous powerbomb to the

center of the ring. I gasped as the babyface's skull whipped back onto the mat, producing a secondary *thunk* following the initial crash. Part of the draw is never quite knowing how these moves are executed as safely as possible. You never really know how much of the pain on a performer's face is selling an injury to an audience and how much is involuntary. The fan in me found himself at odds with the trainee in me. I knew enough to know not to look like a mark, especially in this kind of setting. But, I also did not want to be seen celebrating what could have been a legitimate injury.

I glanced over at my trainers to gauge their response. One was bouncing up and down, with a look of cringing awe on his face. I'd been worked, it seemed. The trainers knew the process and these performers far more than I did, and they were enthralled, which gave me license to hoot and holler and applaud as the babyface lay face-down in the ring. The referee announced that the heel had won via KO (i.e., knockout). This was a relatively rare way to finish a wrestling match, but an emphatic one that builds up the menace of a heel for his next match. The heel celebrated briefly before heading backstage, and some of the babyface's allies came out to help him to the back.

A few minutes into the next match, I heard my coach's voice from backstage, "Is Brooks here? Did he drive here?" He called me backstage, and I passed through the curtain to find the babyface from before, ice pack on his neck. He was conscious, but his head was down, looking at nothing. Fellow wrestlers surrounded him, trying to get him to talk with them. "Can you pull your car up?" Coach asked. "I need you to take him to the hospital."

After running a few blocks away and retrieving my car, all the while thinking that this would make great data for my dissertation, I pulled up to the back door and met Coach, who told me that the injured performer would be taken to the hospital by one of his friends, out of concern

that the heavily-concussed performer might “freak out” should he come to in the back seat of a stranger’s car. We were co-workers on the same show but he would have been right to think of me as a stranger. Though collaborative in action, professional wrestling is often less a community than it is strangers working in close proximity.

I don’t recall the name of the concussed performer. I do remember his opponent and the name of the event, so I considered looking up information on what happened with him after this. In the year since his injury, several performers from this company signed with WWE or the upstart rival company All Elite Wrestling (AEW). I wondered if he’d been signed to a lucrative contract, or even if he’d made his national television debut. But then I wondered if it mattered. What would that change?

To hear that he had found success would make it easier to subsume his serious concussion into a digestible success story. The head trauma, the very injury which itself contributed to myriad early, gruesome deaths in the industry, becomes a rite of passage and another addition of the list of dues one pays on their ascent to success, wealth, and prestige. So, *what if he wasn’t signed? What if he’s still working independent shows, pushing himself as hard as he can to reach stardom? What if he takes another bad bump while he’s there? How many impacts to the skull is too many? And what if the bump I saw was his last? What if doctors advised that another bump could lead to permanent injury? What if he doesn’t remember the day of his last match at all? What if wrestling is all he had?* I ended up not looking up what happened to him, but he stayed on my mind as I continued training. As my health started to complicate my own commitment to training, I wondered how his colleagues would react if he hung up his boots. They might be understanding, they might sigh and mourn what might have been, or they might say he doesn’t have the passion he needs to make it. When you’re working

hurt, it's easy to view leaving as a personal failing, one failing themselves rather than a worker finding wellness impossible in a debilitating business.

The Finish

Back at training, I'd get to try something new every week. One week, they'd bring a crash pad into the ring and I'd learn how to take a back body drop. Another week, I learned how to do a sunset flip, in which I'd hit the ropes and flip over my opponent, pulling them down the mat with me for a pin attempt. I finally got to try some character work, as well. Due to my smaller size, I was typecast as a plucky underdog babyface, fighting valiantly against disrespectful, cheating heels and imposing monsters. In one spot, I'd have the heel in a headlock, only for him to grab my hair and shove the back of my head to get under my skin. I'd take a beat, sell my bubbling anger for the imaginary crowd, turn, and run at him in a fit of righteous fury only to be pulled away by the referee. While rehearsing the spot, Coach stopped me as I was midway through my righteous fury run. "I don't mean this to be rude, it's okay either way, but have you ever been in a real fight?" he asked. I'm comfortable performing comedically, but portraying earnest physical menace was always difficult for me. As Coach explained, if you don't believe in what you're doing out there, the audience isn't gonna buy it either. They can smell bullshit a mile away.

Obstacles and all, I had been at it long enough that I had started to feel like part of the group. The group included the musclebound bruiser, the guy with the comedy gimmick, the graceful high-flyer, the cocky heel, and, now, the guy who was doing this for school. Sometimes Coach would use class time to give us lectures or motivational speeches about the business, and during one such speech he started talking about how wrestling needs to be your number one priority if you want to make it. If you just want to have some fun on the weekend, then it can be

one of many equal commitments, but to make it, you have to be fully committed with no exception. He started putting over some of the trainees who'd been working hard, and said, "even Brooks has been busting ass, and this isn't even his dream!" I appreciated the acknowledgement, but it still left me wondering: Is it my dream? My health issues were clearing, and there are a few wrestlers who have advanced degrees. Some even use it as their gimmick. I found myself fantasizing about my would-be gimmick, maybe a pretentious Ivory Tower blowhard who quoted theory while applying submission holds.

After a few months in the new location, I was learning how to take scoop slams. This is the classic wrestling body slam, in which one wrestler reaches between the legs of the other with one arm, lifts them above their shoulders, and slams them back down to the canvas. By this point, I always prioritized tucking my chin, and was aided by some neck exercises recommended to me by a fellow trainee. With my partner, I worked out a series of maneuvers that would climax with a big scoop slam to me. Each step of the way we called the next spot to each other, making sure we stayed on the same page. We locked up. "Headlock!" I took the head. "Tackle!" He pushed me to the ropes, and I sprang back with a shoulder tackle. I dropped for the quick pin, and he kicked out. He crawled to the corner and called me over. I charged and he cut me off with an elbow to the cheek. I took three clubbing blows to the back as he worked me out of the corner. "Cut me off!" I cut him off with an elbow to the gut. "Sunset flip!" I hit the ropes and went to flip over him. He countered before I could fully execute it and we both got to our feet. "Throw one!" I threw a wild punch, telegraphed to make it easier to duck, which he did. "Scoop!" I turned, placed my hand on his thigh and helped him lift me up into the air before I came crashing back down to the mat. He pinned me, and the match was over.

Coach gave us notes, telling us to tighten up this and that, reminding us to face this direction during this move so that future audiences will be able to see our faces emoting. Coach made sure we always worked facing an invisible camera, as this was a valuable skill in the televised sector of the industry. I thanked my partner, and rolled out of the ring, working to catch my breath as I gulped down some water. While two more trainees took the ring, I headed to the bathroom, where I soon discovered that I'd shit myself again. Heat rushed to my face as I started to panic. I thought that was done, but apparently not. I didn't know what was causing this, but in that moment, it seemed undeniable that wrestling was exacerbating it. I walked back to ringside, quickly packed up my things and lied about needing to head home early for some school-related responsibility. I drove for an hour down a lonely misty highway on the West coast of Florida, trying to rationalize what had happened and hoping that I hadn't taken my last bump without realizing it. When I got home, I opened the group chat and saw Coach's latest post: "How about Brooks turning it up a notch?!"

On some level I knew my training was over, but it is worth noting loss of bowel control is not a particularly uncommon experience among professional wrestlers. One of my favorite wrestlers, CM Punk, has a similar story. In a tell-all podcast interview following his exit from WWE, he explains that it happened on a taping of WWE Smackdown, citing exhaustion, broken ribs, a concussion, and an ineffective antibiotic regimen as causes (Mrosko, 2014). After it happened, he tweeted, "hey, everybody, watch SmackDown because I shit my pants," and if you look for it, you can see the referee picking it up off the mat on the broadcast.

Loss of bowel control is "a breach of body boundaries" that can make one seen as "disgusting" or "undesirable" (Lunceford, 2013). Even now, it feels scandalous and risky to type. But with its extreme demands of the performing body, these kinds of things happen in the

production of professional wrestling, and I am resisting my desire to ignore it for the sake of what Joshua Gunn calls “perfumed scholarship” (2006). Wrestlers experience urination, defecation, menstruation, sweat, and other leakages in professional wrestling rings, reminding us that “total control of the body is an unachievable goal, and that we not only have less control, but we are also less independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient than we like to believe” (MacDonald, 2007). Wrestlers face a myriad of risks to produce these performances whether performing dangerous maneuvers, emptying a savings account to pursue their childhood dream, or even the shame of imperfect bodily control.

When I talk to friends, I typically tell the story in a way that suggests that shitting myself happened because of a harsh bump. The last one—the scoop slam—was indeed a hard bump, and more importantly, as CM Punk said when it happened to him, “it’s fucking funny!” (Mrosko, 2014). But it’s also a tidying of the situation to make the story not only more entertaining, but also more legible. Just as acute injury among wrestlers is more legible than long-term debilitation, an acute moment of bowel incontinence is more easily understood than the myriad of factors that led to it. In preparation for this dissertation project, I started a rigorous exercise regimen, all while taking a daily creatine supplement and exponentially increasing my protein intake to enhance my “bodily capital” (Chow, 2014). Weight training for five days a week after a fairly sedentary lifestyle put new stresses on my body, which in turn resulted in the development of chronic gastrointestinal distress which, in conjunction with the shock of the bump itself, caused the moment of bowel incontinence. Even here, the spectacular result itself—the breach—overshadows the various factors that brought about the result in service of a tidier and more immediately legible narrative.

I use this as one example of the essentially porous nature of the body, particularly when doing wrestling. COVID-19 has accentuated this, as the image of multiple bodies in close proximity is no longer commonplace, but the give-and-take between performing bodies extends far beyond it. Despite the individualist ethic permeating the industry, wrestling performances are collaborative performance in which the barriers between bodies become temporarily obscured. This exchange of bodily fluids can add further risks as well, such as the possibility of transmitting blood-borne illnesses through blading or other means of breaking the skin during a match (Fruen, 2019). Wacquant (1995) contends that, even in studies of the body, one rarely “encounters in them actual living bodies of flesh and blood” (p. 65). Any account of the myriad labors of professional wrestling, then, should include both the productive possibilities of collaborative action and the risks that such action engenders, from shame to injury to transmission of disease.

The day after abruptly leaving training, I told Coach that I had another non-specific illness flareup and might need to take a bit more time off. My break began in February 2020, and when COVID-19 reached my county the following month, my break became permanent. The pandemic did not stop the industry; the major companies shifted their usual touring production to a static filming location in Florida, shortly after Florida Governor Ron DeSantis declared professional wrestling to be “essential business” as case numbers exploded in the state (Gross, 2020). Major televised wrestling events carried on without fans in attendance for the first months of the pandemic, with multiple experiments with this new format. “Cinematic” matches, in which wrestlers pre-tape matches in unusual locales (examples from 2020 include a graveyard, a dentist’s office, WWE’s corporate headquarters and even a surreal time-traveling dream sequence), appeared on WrestleMania for the first time. While rival company AEW eventually

allowed limited fans in attendance while shooting episodes at a partially outdoor stadium in Jacksonville, WWE moved to a format called “WWE Thunderdome,” in which hundreds of screens surrounded the ring, each housing a live streaming feed of a different wrestling fan watching and reacting from their home. In a similar spirit, independent wrestling and wrestling schools largely made do and carried on as well.

Given the collaborative, porous, and up-close-and-personal nature of pro wrestling, it is easy to scoff at the idea that this is “essential” amid public health messaging that called for increased physical distancing and a pause on large group gatherings. And certainly, the “essential business” designation had more to do with WWE’s ties to the administration than any earnest sense of respect for wrestling workers, but this nonetheless prevented wrestlers and trainers from losing their livelihood in lieu of any direct government relief. But this designation also makes those industry workers, as with frontline workers in other industries, “available for injury—they are, in other words, objects of disposability, bodies whose debilitation is required” (Puar, 2017, p. 81) to uphold and maintain the present economic equilibrium. Debilitation “as a normal consequence of laboring” (Puar, 2017, p. xvi) is central to the industry, reinforced at all levels, so even the compounding threat of long-term harm from COVID-19 appeared less dangerous than failing to make rent or having to shutter a fledgling independent wrestling organization. As Coach noted during our interview, “Who are you to say what’s essential to someone?”

My final appearance at the training center was in April 2020, as case numbers were rising in Florida (though not as exponentially as future waves would rise). Anticipating that my time in the ring was over, I wanted to make sure I could secure interview participants before conditions worsened, and the people with whom I had gotten to know would begin to exit through the familiar revolving door. This would be my first time in a building other than my home since the

pandemic reached Florida, and I wore two face coverings in the hopes that doing so would doubly decrease my risk of contracting the virus. Back on the inside, I was an outsider again.

Unmasked and unphased, training carried on as normal. There was a heightened emphasis on spraying the ring with Lysol before and after each session. Already feeling my tenuous position in the school starting to fade, I waited silently as training carried on, returning to that stack of first-day consent forms and a pen on my lap. I had solicited the group chat for interview participants in the months prior with limited interest. I chalked it up to my outsidership as well as the imposition of additional unpaid labor. Wrestling training is already physically, mentally, socially, and financially demanding. Trainees and trainers alike often work multiple jobs along with balancing school and family commitments. It is tightrope to balance while being careful to never suggest that those commitments are more important than their wrestling career.

To my fortune, Coach and five fellow trainees agreed to be interviewed over the phone at a future date. I said my goodbyes, shook some hands, and left the facility. In the following weeks, I sent out follow-up messages to each participant to schedule our interview. I posted a general message in the group chat, as well, to assure that my private messages would not be mistakenly caught by a spam filter and missed. I never heard back from them except Coach and the one trainee who had marked out with me at my first session. We scheduled our interviews, marking the end of my time at the training site.

Today, back on the other side of the barricade, the wrestler-in-training look I cultivated has faded, as COVID-era isolation has kept me from the gym. Without a pandemic, it would be difficult for me to return anyways without the draw of becoming of the wrestler of my dreams. As my time at wrestling school fades farther into the past, I find myself wishing I had something physical to share—something to show that I really did it. Early on, Coach warned me photo-

taking was forbidden inside the facility. While some trainees collaborated to sneak a photo of each other from time to time, I never risked it. Sometimes I feel like I don't have anything to show for it. The mark photo I took a decade ago at least stood as proof that I had met a wrestler. I was there. On some level, I imagine that must be how even those who spent decades in the industry feel after hanging up their boots. But my body remembers plenty—how to roll to one side without getting my legs tangled, how to apply a collar-and-elbow, and how to escape a side headlock. My neck remembers the weeks it spent unable to turn to either side. My knees remember the thousands of squats they supported. My spine remembers the shock of a flatback bump.

In professional wrestling, the body tells the story.



Figure 3. Applying John Cena's signature move to my friend, sometime around 2004.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE DREAM AND THE DRIVE

The dream is the drive that pushes trainees to their bodily limits in the ring. The ubiquitous story of the young wrestler’s grueling tour, done for no pay but a “hot dog and a handshake,” is ubiquitous because the unpaid work is done in service of the dream. When the only options to make a living in your dream industry provide dismal benefits and crush any nascent unionization efforts, the dream nonetheless propels the dreamers toward those imperfect options. The dream got me to contact a wrestling school in the first place, and the dream compels me to not paint the industry in too bad a light, so as to not dampen my still-lingering hopes to achieve the dream. Wrestling journalist David Shoemaker (2013a) refers to the perilous, debilitating life of a wrestler as “ritual suicide, self-mutilation in service of a dream” (p. 345).

The dream is an American one. Adam Key describes the American Dream as the idea that “those who work hard will ultimately be rewarded with fame and success” (Key, 2020, p. 603). One of the most famous promos in recent years, in which WWE performer CM Punk seemed to break kayfabe and lambast his employers directly for overlooking him in favor of more marketable but less committed part-time performers. This “pipebomb,” as fans would come to describe it, garnered acclaim precisely because audiences understood it through the prism of the American Dream. Punk earned tremendous sympathy from fans who “could only recognize that he was being wronged if they believe a person should rightfully be promoted for hard work” (Key, 2020, p. 609). Fans’ embrace of CM Punk signaled a growing trend in the industry when support for a wrestler had more to do with the myth than his kayfabe persona or

accomplishments. The collective investment in the American Dream by the fan and the wrestler lubricates the machinery of the industry.

To garner a better understanding of my fellow trainees' investment in the dream, I started seeking interview participants as my in-ring training contract wound down. I made the familiar 90-minute drive to an empty parking lot in an adjacent shopping center to meet up with Corey, a fellow trainee two hours ahead of another grueling late-night practice. A tall, jovial man in his 30s who trained with a persistent limp, he frequently offered stories from his time in the industry. In his 20s, he worked local events as a spectacular high-flyer, but a near-death experience put his dream of worldwide success on hold. Only recently did he start back into training, hoping to re-enter the industry proper in a managerial capacity, now facing limitations to his mobility in the ring. In the parking lot I awaited his arrival, notepad and pen in my lap, watching my high beams stretch into the night. Corey had quickly agreed to an interview when I spoke with him at ringside the week before, but as the minutes turned to hours it became clear that he was a no show.

“Hey man, no worries, it happens! Is there a time or place that works better for you?” I rehearsed in my head as I used my rear-view mirror to insert my contacts. But he no-showed training that night as well, and it would be weeks before anyone heard from him again in the trainee group chat. Sometimes trainees just disappear, and maybe I'd just caught him at the end of his contract. But on a chance Tuesday weeks later, I walked into the training center and there he was, stretching out in the ring. Happy to see he hadn't left for good, I assumed he'd just forgotten about the interview and asked him to participate in an interview next week. I drove back to the same parking lot a few weeks later, and he was gone again. I never got a clear indication of why he was gone. I know that Corey's dream was a redemptive one, of re-entering

the industry and fitting into an environment that typically enforces compulsory able-bodiedness that marks nondisabled bodies as “what is both moral and desirable in the neoliberal social contexts of late capitalism” (Erevelles, 2014, p. 83). But I don’t know why he left. He may have become disenchanted with the demands of training. He may have been unable to continue paying the monthly dues. He might have switched schools or might be training elsewhere. My fleeting encounter with Corey echoes other transient relationships with Adrian and so many others I met while in training. In this chapter, I reconnect with another trainee and my trainer to recall the dream and the drive as dual discourses informing the wrestling industry. Considering my own relationship to these discourses as a former trainee in the industry as well, I explore how these discourses act as disciplinary tools that reinforce debility as an unspoken but central tenet in the production of professional wrestling performances. Entrenched within the larger American Dream, the dreams of veteran and aspiring wrestlers alike demand the sacrifice of wellness over years and decades.

“At the end of the day, I’m still that kid with a dream.”

--Coach

The Dream

Coach

He is a wrestler’s wrestler. His story is an atypical one. Short for a wrestler at just under six feet tall, he’s built his body outward, neck, shoulders, and arms boasting dense, tanned muscles. He shuffles around ringside with some trepidation but comes alive with energy after rolling into the ring, snapping his back onto the mat and bouncing like a cannonball from rope to rope. A veteran of the industry for more than two decades, he’d wrestled around the world with

WWE, TNA, and various promotions in Europe and Asia. His dream as a wrestler was never to acquire “that big money contract” in one location, and that dream has shifted as wrestling became secondary to training. To make a living, he had few choices but to sign with major companies until he could set out on his own. He now finds himself running a small but successful wrestling school in Florida, where a cottage industry of retired and semi-retired wrestlers extend their careers by training the next generations. Far from the bright lights he may once have dreamed of, his wealth of knowledge, his deep resume as a wrestler, and his frequent collaborations with stars from all levels garner respect from his contemporaries and trainees. And the dream of maintaining a full-time career in the industry continues to drive him. When working with these young, aspiring wrestlers, his first lesson involves authenticity.

“There’s absolutely zero fake about our industry,” he told me over the phone, regarding the common derisive refrain that professional wrestling is fake, and by extension frivolous and free of danger. As the head trainer, his investment in authenticity extends from his philosophy on the industry to his practice of teaching trainees how to make maneuvers “appeal real” to the audience. Learning how to “safely” perform maneuvers while simulating genuine harm is central to professional wrestling, and paradoxically, these “safe” moves nonetheless contribute to long-term harm and injuries. To Coach, these injuries, like the long list of broken bones, surgeries, and concussions he’d accrued over the years, reinforce the legitimacy and authenticity of the industry, even as wrestling schools aim to minimize them. His view on the false artifice of the contemporary wrestling industry reflects a common refrain from ring veterans like former WWE performer Lance Storm: “We used to pretend to beat each other up, would barely touch each other, and fans thought it was real, so we called them Marks. Now we really beat the hell out of each other, and fans think it’s fake. Who are the Marks now?” (Storm, 2021).

Coach, too, asserted that marks make up the majority of wrestlers today. Likening wrestlers to musicians, Coach situated a performer's passion as a resource for accessing a sort of authenticity. "The audience can feel if it's real." Further, marks have the drive to pursue their dream even in the face of great personal sacrifice, brutal working conditions, and risks of debilitation. "You've got to be a fan to be in the business today," he said, which I felt from the first moment I entered the training center. From knowing the parlance and history of the business to motivating oneself to keep up with the physical and mental demands of training, marks are essential on both sides of the barricade.

I wanted to hear more about his perspective on those personal sacrifices and other aspects of the industry that might halt those without the dream and drive of a mark, and he began with a familiar saying often relayed during training: "Every bump is like a 35 mile-an-hour car wreck." And he was right. In the moment, a basic flatback bump executed correctly does not hurt as much as I expected it would. Adrenaline is pumping, and you distribute the shock across your back, shoulders, and arms. The lumber underneath the canvas, too, provides a small amount of spring (which fans implicitly understand, as bumps onto the floor outside the ring are typically treated as more devastating). The trauma of these bumps is not spectacular when examined on an individual level, but slow and cumulative, surprising you with a stiff neck the following morning or suddenly finding oneself unable to bend down to tie one's shoes comfortably. This is what veteran performers mean when they talk about their "bump card" filling up: the idea that a wrestler's body carries the capacity for a finite amount of duress. For younger wrestlers, the bump card is typically less of a concern, but for those who've spent years filling up their bump cards, they may find ways of adding more bumps, taking risky side bumps onto their hips or instructing their partners to only slam them in the very center of the ring, which provides the

most “give” and thus a more tolerable bump. I remembered a moment during practice when Coach joked about how he only bumps on weekends, not wanting to waste a bump outside of a Saturday night show.

These were answers Coach had clearly given before. Any wrestling fan, myself included, has a laundry list of canned responses and comebacks for those who turn their nose up at professional wrestling. Coach has a personal repertoire of injuries for the same reasons I memorized injury information for wrestlers who died young: to legitimize professional wrestling in the popular imaginary. Describing physical brutality can become rote over time. From months of pain (and lost pay) after Coach’s torn ACL, each becomes just another in a long list of injuries. Throughout the interview, Coach repeatedly moved the discussion toward the mental, emotional, and social tolls that complicate his pursuit of the dream.

The Coach carved out a path for himself largely on the independent and international scene. For him, the drive toward the wrestler’s dream is taxing and lonely. Recalling one of the first conversations I had with the coach in the facility, he reminded me that nothing can supersede the dream. Birthdays, weddings, and funerals will be missed.

As an academic and wrestler in training, I am familiar with the sacrifice the Coach preached. He echoes what some academics tell me about my academic dream. *Sacrifice my whole self*. Like the academy, I am invited to sacrifice both my physical health and precious time to become successful. And like the academy, there is an acknowledgement of debilitation and precarity in professional wrestling industry, but the sacrifices dreamers make nonetheless largely go unquestioned. Personal sacrifice becomes a “normal consequence of laboring” for the aspiring worker, obscuring “the violence of what constitutes a ‘normal consequence’” (Puar, 2017, p. xvi). The normalization of great sacrifice to wellness maintains the conditions that make it so.

In addition to the physical sacrifice, performers like Coach also face the mental toll of rejection from audiences and promoters alike. Since contemporary locker rooms are full of marks, this is not just a job, but the attempt of fulfilling a dream. Coach noted that the best and most successful in-ring personas are just “us with the knob turned up and broken off,” so getting undesired reaction from audiences can feel like a deeply personal rejection, which only compounds with the greater career precarity a performer will face when they’re not sufficiently “over” with audiences. It took Coach nearly two decades driving from town to town to make wrestling his full-time career, so those negative or quiet reactions can be a demoralizing impediment to realizing the dream.

Today, as the head trainer of his own wrestling school, he balances the responsibilities of a performer as the first industry authority many aspiring wrestlers meet. He stands at the gate, warning and welcoming fellow dreamers that they’ll need to harness the drive within them to make it. “I promise new guys two things,” he repeated to me, “you’re gonna learn more about yourself than you ever have before, and you might learn that this isn’t for you.” He reiterates the constraints for both of us—as trainers and trainees. Today, the veteran trainer said he’s still that kid with a dream. Coach works through the pain and precarity. The realization of the dream still drives him. “The roar of the crowd makes it all worth it,” Coach said.

On Pulling Punches with Coach

I learned quickly in training that pulling your punches is another way of disrespecting your ring partner, as you’re revealing the artifice and forcing them to sell something that makes them look weak. “Don’t make anyone sell that bullshit,” Coach told me from ringside after a particularly weak chop to the chest. On the other hand, working too stiff risks injuring your partner, and brings with it the possibility of painful receipts. Ideally, you work snug, not pulling

your punches but not setting out to be injurious, either. This ethic of care that permeates wrestling culture from handshakes to in-ring action. Devin noted how much a simple handshake with a future ring partner can communicate: “If you give them a gentle hand touch, then that lets them know you’re safe to work with. If you give an aggressive handshake, they’re gonna know that you’re very stiff.” I always had a hard time finding the right balance of power to put into my strikes, and how snugly to apply a headlock.

I wanted to ask difficult questions, ones that I’d craved insider perspectives on for years. Specifically, I wanted to ask Coach about the possibility of unionization in wrestling, as fans call for a wrestler’s union whenever a new story about wrestling and debility makes waves. Despite its popularity among fans, unionization never came up organically in either interview. On the rare occasion the possibility was mentioned in training, the trainers brushed it off with some version of “it’ll never happen.” Whether they personally supported the idea or not barely seemed to enter into it; in any case, the possibility seemed so unattainable that even to discuss it was frivolous, which gave me pause as I prepared for these interviews.

Coach and I worked around it a bit during our interview, feeling each other out like wrestlers just after the bell rings. As he talked about the myriad injuries he’d sustained over his career, he emphasized that entering the industry is “the performer’s choice,” as are the risks they may choose to take inside and outside the ring, so he does not lay blame on the industry which provides both his livelihood and a great deal of personal fulfillment. This perspective echoed the industry legends on *Larry King Live* who remarked that “you know what you’re getting into” and “it’s a job that they all want to do” (2007), so I chose not to push the question.

Coach moves through the industry at as a wrestler, trainer, and gatekeeper. As a wrestler he has worked shows and followed his dream of trying to make a living in the industry. His body

aches with decades of built-up physical injury; unlike many of his contemporaries, he is financially solvent and alive into middle age. As a trainer, he sets the agenda for a new generation of wrestlers. At the facility, for example, he'd ask if trainees are willing to sacrifice their wellness and personal relationships not as a stern warning but as a litmus test. This is just the way it is. The way it has to be. It begins and ends with the individual and their internal drive. And he stands as proof for us trainees that professional wrestling is an achievable dream.

In addition to a wrestler and trainer, Coach is also an industry gatekeeper. On the one hand, he teaches trainees to keep their bump cards in mind, and promotes a conventional, less flashy style of in-ring performance. A "safer" style. But while that safety mitigates acute injury in the moment, it only defers wear to the body into the future. If he views this wear as an individual rather than a structural issue, the inescapable result of dreamers pursuing an intrinsically demanding line of work, then he reconciles his participation through promoting individual safety in the ring. A good wrestler works snugly and limits risk whenever possible, and the onus remains on the individual. On the other hand, he weeds out trainees and attitudes that do not echo the Cenas and DiBiases of the world, who hold that all-consuming sacrifice is both a necessity and a virtue. For those with the resources to comply with that orthodoxy, Coach helps them break into the business. He helps them book their first show and meet with promoters at higher levels of the industry. For those who cannot or will not sacrifice all else, their dream ends in the training center. In feeding new workers into the industry, he is implicated in reproducing these discourses that normalize the wearing down of the laboring wrestler.

Looking back, maybe I worked too soft, and I did a disservice to the business, and to those who continue to grind down their bodies in service of a dream. But I care about maintaining those connections I gained during my fieldwork, and the idea of becoming persona

non grata, even at the entry level of the industry, is worrisome on a professional and personal level. *What if I want to revisit the site for a future project? What if I decide that I want to give wrestling another shot?* Wrestling's fundamentally collaborative quality carries with it a negative side: you are still reliant on those scant connections and acquaintanceships to make it in a precarious industry, and that tension produces compromise. All the dream and drive in the world doesn't amount to much if no one wants to work a match with you. As much as I would like to position myself as a brave, tireless advocate for better working conditions in wrestling, I've made the same concessions to my principles that those at the very top of the industry might make: to protect my spot in service of my dream, however low the spot may be.

Devin

I first met Devin during my first week of training. He planned to join when his finances allowed. Until then, he observed sessions. We had shared in quietly "marking out" upon the arrival of a guest trainer we'd grown up watching wrestling on television. Months later, he joined the other trainees in the ring, and he'd spent those months building his bodily capital. Like Coach, he didn't have the typical height of a successful main event wrestler, so he spent his time before enrolling building muscle mass. Unlike Coach who had the long, dense muscle of a longtime athlete, Devin's arms bulged with newly-built cut muscle. He officially joined after I was hanging up my boots. Devin allowed me to access training after I left. In a way, I returned to being wrestling fan ringside dreaming vicariously through him. A major goal of my "dream" ethnography was exploring my 14-month participation as a trainee. For Devin, however, his dream has been establishing a permanent career in professional wrestling. Before the interview, Devin apologized that he'd only be able to talk in between babysitting. Toddler sounds of his

nephew who kept reaching for the phone or calling for Devin's attention punctuated much of our conversation.

Speaking to him about his history with wrestling, Devin's story resembled mine. He grew up in the late 90s heyday, emulated the moves with friends despite warnings not to "try this at home," and never fully let go of the dream as he grew older. He noted that getting paid to wrestle and travel the world were major appeals for him as a child, but as he grew up, the industry's promise of forward momentum toward his childhood dream became central: "training gives you a sense of purpose." A car accident while driving on the Interstate postponed his pursuit of his dream as he recovered from two torn rotator cuffs over several months. After he recovered, his enrolled friend informed him that the wrestling school was accepting new trainees. Devin used his car accident money to cover his down payment.

Wrestling schools feature all kinds of trainees with all kinds of goals. For some, getting to be part of a 30-man battle royale in front of a dozen fans in a bingo hall is enough to fulfill that dream; for others, nothing short of international stardom is enough. Thus, I asked him about his goals as a wrestler-in-training. "I want to make a name for myself in the industry worldwide—a household name," he exclaimed. "As cocky as it sounds, I would like people to remember me."

Devin's goal embodies the contemporary American Dream, with the locus for personal and professional success having shifted from the mid-20th century "keeping up with the Joneses down the street" (Schor, 2002, p. 185) to the lifestyles of the rich and famous populating mass media today. Just as professional wrestling moved from a traveling live sideshow to a billion-dollar international broadcast industry, the advent of mass broadcast media skewed the American Dream. The American Dream, in the eyes of aspiring professional wrestlers, is one of celebrity

and stardom on a global scale, a success that can endure beyond one's career and life. With limited options to realize that dream, the unexpected financial boon of an insurance payout following his injury allowed him to begin the long drive toward his dream of superstardom. The wrestlers Devin grew up watching became aspirational representatives of his American Dream, successful financially and known globally. At the entry levels of professional wrestling, the promise of realizing that very dream attracts aspiring wrestlers like Devin and the money they can put up. The dream draws you to the door, and then the costs start piling up. Tuition, boots, gym membership, meal plans, protein supplements, gas, and medical bills.

His words also reflect a common refrain in wrestling school. On a small level, trainers tell trainees that their goal is to be what fans remember from a particular show. Before a show, wrestlers and bookers will congregate to go over their biggest spots to make sure every match is unique. Likewise, Coach would often advise us to focus on what gets fans to "look up from their phones." But for Coach, it's not as simple as having the flashiest moves; in an industry constantly pushing the boundaries of the possible for the performing body, even spectacular maneuvers can face diminishing returns and become commonplace. Situating wrestling as more art than craft, Coach believes that fans (as well as potential industry scouts) may not remember the flashiest move on an 8-match card full of flashy moves. Rather, they will remember how something made them feel. While that emotional connection could come from a spectacular move, it's more likely to come from a favorite wrestler's face contorted in pain, emitting a defiant yell before mounting a heroic comeback.

But Devin was getting at memory on a larger scale, the way fans carry their heroes with them years later. Before every show, WWE's title card shows a montage of classic wrestling moments, ending with "Then, Now, Forever" flashing on the screen. Perhaps the most famous

wrestler of all time and Tampa's own Hulk Hogan became known as "The Immortal" at the peak of his in-ring career, later tattooing IMMORTAL across his back. Part of the dream is the possibility of a kind of immortality, that what you do in the ring and how it makes fans feel will live on. Wrestling is not just escapism for fans, but also a means for aspiring wrestlers, who are often fans themselves, to seek escape from the precarity of poverty, dead-end jobs, homelessness, and despair.

One night, Coach told us we wouldn't be training at all, citing a recent rash of late arrivals and absences. Instead, he asked us all for our "why." He wanted to know why we are motivated to become wrestlers. At the start, trainees responded with stock answers that any athlete might deploy at a reporter: "I want to prove people wrong" or "I want to be the best." Coach doubled down. He asked us to honestly consider our goals and motives. Some trainees broke down in tears. One said he "didn't have any sense of purpose" prior to signing up to training. One thanked Coach for helping him get his first bookings, which allowed him to finally afford stable housing. One made a gun with his fingers, pointed toward his mouth, and said that, with what he's been through, he wouldn't be here at all without wrestling.

Devin wasn't there that night but he echoed that sense of purpose in our interview. Where Coach spoke authoritatively with the voice a grizzled veteran, Devin had the nervous excitement of a fan finally stepping into his dreamworld. He had hopes of stardom that competed with fears of failure and debilitation. But even so, he'd been training for several months by the time of our interview, and I noticed that his answers had more overlap with Coach than I'd expected. Like Coach, Devin believed sacrifice—physical, social, and financial—is what drives each trainee to achieve the dream of professional wrestling.

The Drive

Lonely drives across state lines to the next show, driving opponents into the mat, the internal drive to carry on pursuing the dream. Veterans and rookies alike define their work through the drive. For both Devin and Coach, one must demonstrate their drive immediately upon entry into training through demonstrating good physical shape, for the sake of endurance during training, to demonstrate commitment, and to accrue and maintain bodily capital (Chow, 2014; Bourdieu, 1984). The industry at all levels features performers of vastly different builds, as in my time training, I worked with wrestlers well over 6 feet tall and as short as 5 feet, and with those different builds come different pressures. At all levels of professional wrestling, the “hyper-masculinized” body ideal, which emphasizes “large size, lean muscularity, and strength as interconnected features” promotes negative health consequences for performers and viewers alike (Soulliere & Blair, 2006, p. 284). For example, Broderick Chow (2014) connects the “simplistic 1:1 relationship between mass and value” to widespread anabolic steroid abuse in the industry (p. 82). Devin, of average height trying to break into an industry that values tall performers, noted the added pressure to add muscle mass to sufficiently portray menace in the ring and suggest marketability to potential promoters. To not maintain sufficient bodily capital is to suggest to promoters, trainers, and peers that one has insufficient drive to make it as a wrestler.

Coined by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) to describe the value resulting from investments of time and energy into athlete’s bodies, bodily capital is central to the production and maintenance of the professional wrestler. The value of bodily capital is culturally and contextually situated, as in the United States, for example, mass media texts routinely present obesity as a “moral failing warranting public scorn” (Meeuf, 2015). Within the realm of professional wrestling, a

performer's weight can become a selling point, but often through a racialized, xenophobic, and/or monstrous lens, nonetheless operating under a similarly scornful paradigm, whether through foreignness in the case of characters like "the Ugandan Giant" Kamala or hypersexualization in the case of Mark Henry, a legitimate Olympic weightlifter who became known as "Sexual Chocolate" after arriving in WWE. Billed at over 500 pounds, Samoan wrestler Agatupu Rodney Anoa'i portrayed Yokozuna in the early 1990s, borrowing both name and gimmick from Sumo wrestling. At wrestling's late-90s peak, one of the most prominent Black performers was a man billed at 487 pounds known simply as Viscera, his flesh itself treated as a sufficient gimmick.

Like Coach, Devin quickly moved from the realm of the physical to speak about the importance of mental and emotional toughness, fueled by an internal drive. "Determination is the key factor," Devin said when I asked him what it takes to "make it" as a wrestler. Further, he likened the importance of mental stamina to other kinds of labor: "just like they tell you at work, if you're upset with something in your personal life, leave it at the door." Even here, training is separate from and supersedes the trainee's personal life.

I talked to Coach and Devin about the drive to "make it" in individual terms, because the dream, so often, peaks with the image of one person hoisting a championship title above their head as the crowd erupts with joy. But Coach also talks with such pride about former trainees who "made it." Sometimes, he'd share footage with the group and point out little things that came from him—the footwork while running the ropes, the flourish on an arm drag. Devin shared his excitement for fellow trainees who seemed to be next in line for a big break, as well as dream "opponents" that he'd like to work with, just so he could get the chance to learn from them. It's easy to get lost in the atomizing milieu of the industry, to let the lonely drives, the

missed birthdays and funerals, and the bone-deep aches drown out the fundamentally collaborative nature of the work itself, and the sacrifices are personal and deeply felt on an individual level. But these individuating forces butt against the collective moments in and out of the ring, as a wrestler defines “making it” by the external respect garnered from colleagues and fans alike. Extending across the barricade, Devin echoed Coach’s emphasis on the audience as integral to the realization of his dream: “I’ll know I’ve made it once I start getting chants from the crowd, once people start wearing my merch.” Visibility, a sense of purpose, and escape from precarity characterized the dream of both the seasoned veteran and the rookie.

As my interview with Devin wrapped up, I found myself imagining the future in which he realizes his dream of worldwide stardom, and how I’d want to brag about meeting him so early in his illustrious career. Even as I recognize how the dream and drive work together to discipline the bodies, minds, and lives of aspiring wrestlers, they still have hold of me. I’ve hung up the phone and disconnected from that intoxicating forward momentum felt by all who step between the ropes. But my current work isn’t so different. Lonely nights driving from made way for lonely nights typing away at my desk, creatine supplements replaced with caffeine for all-nighters. The same self-doubt and “What am I doing here?” feeling that I felt after botching a move in the ring returned in the form of anxiety over my place in academia and professional contortions made in the hopes of fitting job calls. The disciplinary tactics upon entry into the site—relearning how to read and write effectively just as I relearned the maneuvers I used to perform with my childhood friends—test a newcomer’s drive. Thus, I remain invested in the dream and the drive in the academic industry, but I still feel the pull of Devin and Coach’s dream, too, for a future of making towns and letting the adrenaline numb the pain.

Conclusion: Making the Next Town

After the winner of the last match finishes slapping hands or sneering at the fans, the venue clears out. The cameras shut off, the music fades and the lights come up. Puddles of beer and soda pool around the empty ringside seats. I rip my shoes from the sticky floors and make my way to the ring, where some other trainees and lower-card performers have started the process of breaking it down. Like the wrestlers themselves, the ring is never in the same place for more than an evening or two.

The ropes come down first. I grab a length and lug it to the truck out back, feeling the hard steel cable underneath the garden hose casing. Heading back and forth from the ring to the truck, I pass fellow trainees, event staff, and lower-card performers, lifting all they can carry so they can drive home sooner. I catch Coach waving goodbye as exits the parking lot. He's got a two-hour drive ahead of him and work in the morning. The wrestlers on the marquee mill around, collect some chairs, and file out. Soon, it's past midnight, and it's just us, the ring crew.

After a few trips back and forth, my shoulders are aching, and I don't want to be seen as a slacker, so I take a break by collecting and stacking chairs. Between trips, I sneak a photo of the ring as the disassembly continues. The canvas has been pulled off. "Careful," I remember hearing earlier that night as we spread the canvas across the ring. "We only have the one." After securing a keepsake of my time working ring crew, I loaded my chairs and went to help tear down the ring again. Working with some trainees from a nearby wrestling school, we tightly rolled up the half-inch of foam padding spanning the ring. The foam has to be thin enough to allow performers to run and jump, but nonetheless stands as the only barrier from the lumber and steel underneath.

I line up at the far side of the ring and nod at Devin on the opposite side. He stacks a second plank of wood on top of the first and we lift them onto our shoulders. The plank presses down hard into my right shoulder, but I know that stopping to rest will just make it last longer, so I grit my teeth and try to distribute the weight as much as possible. We awkwardly maneuver around other pairs of trainees making their trips to the truck and back, then we do the same with the steel supports. Soon enough the work is done, and all traces of wrestling have been scrubbed from the venue. I trade some fist bumps with trainees and make the drive home, feeling the callouses on my palm pressing against the wheel. I stagger inside and shower the grime off before bed, all the while hoping that the next night's training isn't too strenuous.

It's been well over a year now since I worked a show. I miss it. Even though I had a discrete end date, training still provides a sense of forward momentum and accomplishment. Every week you learn a new maneuver, a new way to work the crowd or a new responsibility at that weekend's show. Even the danger is invigorating. The fear of botching a move pales in comparison to the thrill of successfully executing it for the first time. The dream is seductive that way. Were I able to continue, I imagine my goals eventually morphing into Devin's, seeing people in the crowd wearing my merch.

I catch myself imagining that this dissertation will catch the eye of someone in the industry who just happens to be looking for a sickly academic to take a bump or work a manager gimmick in an upcoming program. Maybe they'd be interested in the gimmick I was working on while training: a pretentious heel graduate student. I'd come to the ring and smugly condescend to the fans before being interrupted by the top babyface in the territory, who'd quickly and heroically dispatch with me. And as I nursed my wounds outside the ring, I'd feel that fabled rush of the crowd that numbs the pain and drives the dream forward. I thought that stepping

between the ropes at all might be enough, but as with most wrestlers, the thrill is short-lived and the focus immediately shifts to the next town, the next goal, the next step toward the dream.

I know how few wrestling careers end in professional success, let alone good health. I know that the labors of the professional wrestlers are all-consuming, demanding the transformation, maintenance, and wearing down of the physical body while dealing with consistent financial, mental, and social precarity. I know that the adrenaline fades, and the next morning your back is so stiff that it's a struggle to get out of bed. I know that the dream of aspiring wrestlers is enmeshed in the larger mythos of the American Dream, used as a disciplinary tool to excuse and propagate debilitating labor conditions. And I know that it's difficult to pin down exactly why, in the face of these conditions, so many try to make a career of it. Whether for a chance at stardom, an escape from precarity, thrill-seeking, or the fulfillment of a childhood dream, I feel the draw too.



Figure 4. On call during a live event in downtown Tampa. This was the first show following the match involving a serious head injury, so the stretcher in the foreground was a new addition.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSION

This (auto)ethnographic study centers and examines the laboring body as it moves and works through professional wrestling training. I put forth debility as a theoretical framework to naming and understanding the ways that long-term bodily wear and early death becomes an acceptable cost of doing business for the wrestling industry. Dreams of achieving wealth, fame, and stability while escaping precarity and obscurity drives aspiring wrestlers to these training centers. The disciplining of the body begins before ever entering the ring, as these aspiring wrestlers prepare to achieve and maintain bodily capital, here defined by a hypermasculine ideal, muscular, rugged, and reveling in the opportunity for hard physical work. And the effects linger long after, as veteran performers face chronic forms of bodily wear that evade easy classification and social recognition.

I trace my interconnected relationships to professional wrestling as a fan, researcher, and trainee to feel and mine the experience through my own body. I experience the tensions in reconciling my researcher-self with my fan-self as I strain to broach difficult questions with interview participants. The limits to my trainee self's bodily capacity challenges the researcher collecting fieldwork data as well as the fan who wants to continue living out a childhood dream. These competing tensions manifest throughout the industry. The coach, who teaches safe practices in the ring even as he feels bone-deep decades of bumps, reproduces the same practices for the next generation is an example. The trainee who tries and fails to put the images of injured

and dead wrestlers out of his mind in the moments before trying a dangerous maneuver because he cannot set aside the fan within him is another one. And then there is me. I have educational capital as an academic that allows me to stop training when my wellness and my drive to continue training begins to decline. I can opt out of training. I can perform research remotely during a pandemic when Florida deems professional wrestlers essential workers (Zaveri, 2020). Coach and Devin—and even those wrestlers who’d achieve their dreams by working for a major company—did not have the luxury to be safe by maintaining distance and recuperating at home.

Contributions

There are three main contributions of my research study. First, I name debility as the organizing framework informing the wrestling industry that leads to injury, risk, and early death. Both the rigidity of the disabled/nondisabled binary and hypermasculine compulsory able-bodiedness allow for the chronic wearing down of the wrestler’s body to go unnamed and thus unquestioned. I mark professional wrestlers as a precarious class of workers that are made “available for injury” through this very resistance to naming long-term wear to brains, bodies, and minds over years and decades.

Second, I attempt to demystify professional wrestling as a trivial niche in popular culture. The in-ring performances are indeed spectacular. Yet, the same logic of debility can be applied to other industries including the academy where precarious professors-in-training overlook injury to the body to pursue a dream. By exploring the death-dealing practices in professional wrestling, we might understand injury to the individual and collective body as pervasive and taken for granted in and out of the ring, wearing down the laboring body through the mundane as well as the spectacular.

Third and most important is the body. I center the body because the wrestler-as-performer is essential to the (re)production of professional wrestling and critical to exploring debility as a trainee in the professional wrestling industry. By framing professional wrestling within debility, I hope that the ailing, dying, and dead bodies of veteran wrestlers will become a more central concern in the eyes of fans, scholars, and those in wrestling industry. Through the prism of the American Dream, the scarcity of secure work and the precarity of those seeking it produces competition and disrupts the collaborative ethic that underpins in-ring performances, but that spirit of cooperation is unavoidable. The long drives to the next town are lonely, but the destination is one of connection: locking up with your partner, feeling the emotion of the crowd, working snug and letting yourself get worked.

Limitations

Trainee transience at the facility, the ongoing pandemic, and emergent chronic health issues are immediate research limitations while ethnography as a method added its own constraints. By entering and participating within an industry space, I became accountable to other participants and trainers, balancing what information to highlight or exclude with a desire to maintain my relationships with such participants. The transient quality of participants in wrestling training centers posed significant challenges in getting to know other trainees. I wish I had the opportunity to talk with more of them to get a sense of their own dreams and drives. I'd like to know why some were driven away. My time was just as fleeting as the other trainees, and there are certainly stories and perspectives missed as a result. The advent of COVID-19 provided further challenges, as I had to rapidly adapt my study alongside the industry to changing regulations and increased health risks, necessitating that my own body would have to be absent from the site well before I had anticipated. Further, my health issues precluded certain

experiences that some trainees reach near the end of their training, like performing in matches at paid live events or working a weeklong tour up the east coast.

This study is a snapshot of one school of over a dozen in Florida and countless others in the U.S. and around the world. My site was comprised primarily of young men pursuing an eventual full-time professional wrestling career, which is not the goal of everyone who joins a wrestling school. And though I was able to interview participants of my wrestling school, I lacked access to those at more prestigious levels of the industry, so I drew from popular media texts instead to trace their understandings of their bodies as sites of labor and debilitation. My participation attempted to capture the laboring body of the wrestler as a worker by highlighting the grueling bodily toll of wrestling workers at the entry levels of the industry. In doing so, I was unable to attend to broader institutional components to the degree I was able to foreground experience, so greater structural analysis of the industry as a whole is warranted for future research.

The Lasting “Mark”

I think back to Coach’s remark that today’s wrestlers are marks, too. The term “mark” recalls the carnival origins of professional wrestling’s when a worker rigged the game, found a sufficiently gullible customer, and slyly patted the back of the customer with a chalk-covered hand to “mark” the target for other carnival workers to scam later (Goldenberg, 2001). *Marking the body*. From its roots, the mark is primarily an economic designation written upon the body, expressing to onlookers that this person can be duped or deceived monetarily.

When I stepped into the training center for the first time, I felt at the time like I was no longer a mark. I was on the other side of the curtain, after all. But all my years buying wrestler merch, toys, video games, and tickets to live events, I never spent anything close to the

thousands of dollars that I spent on training. In my attempt to build my bodily capital, I developed a chronic illness that will likely cost me thousands more over time. It's uncomfortable to sit. It's uncomfortable to stand. I am still struggling to slowly reintegrate exercise back into my life. And yet I reconcile that discomfort with the fond memories. The times I got to live out my childhood dream. *The chalky handprint is still on my back.*

Becoming a wrestler marks you. As someone who has been willing to sacrifice money, health, and family in service of a dream, the narrative of a wrestler is one debility. Multiple favorite wrestlers of mine have had to retire due to cervical spinal stenosis – a narrowing of the spinal column resulting from bodily wear-and-tear that left them having to choose between immediate retirement or a high risk of neck-down paralysis (Sutherland, 2020). In an industry that enforces compulsory able-bodiedness in its performers, one more addition to the bump card could foreclose any possibility of reconsolidating their body back into the industry they dreamed of joining. And some stayed retired. And some chose to return, chasing one more rush from the roar of the crowd that numbs the pain and, if only momentarily, makes the sacrifices taken to get there feel justified. Whether it is a dream or the drive, professional wrestlers—all laborers—work until their bump cards are filled. The chalky handprint is there for them, too. It must be. To pursue this improbable and dangerous dream in the face of precarity and debilitation requires that the dreamer remain a mark.



Figure 5. Attending WrestleMania 35 in 2019, a month before starting my training.

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