

STEPPING AWAY FROM THE RING:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF HERO WORSHIP
CREATED THROUGH MEDIA CONSUMPTION

By

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to all of my loved ones who helped me not only live my dream for nearly ten years, but supported me when it was time to find a new direction for my life. Misty, Mom, Dad, Heather, Matt, you have all played important roles in my life and no amount of words can ever express how much I value you. Thank you. I dedicate this work to you.

To everyone who has ever had a dream, and somewhere lost it along the way, I express both my understanding and my hopes that my life story can help you understand your own.

To Eddy Guerrero, and Nancy and Daniel Benoit: your lives and deaths affected others in more ways than you would ever know. Rest in peace.

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ABSTRACT

Letting go of a dream:

An autoethnographic study of hero worship present in media consumption

James Ross Gatfield

This autoethnographic study examines the relationship between media consumption and hero worship in the lived experience of an individual over the course of a lifetime spent dedicated to achieving a career in professional wrestling. The focus of this study is on identity creation through repeated exposure to media sources relating to that lifelong dream. Previous communication research regarding media exposure provides significant knowledge on the potential effects of the media consumption on the lived experience of the audience, but virtually no prior research has examined explicit effects on a deeply individual level. Narratives encompassing the years devoted to a professional wrestling dream are analyzed and examined. Two prevalent themes were present throughout the lived experience narrative: self-identification and desired validation. Extensive analysis of the two themes, combined with application of modified elements from uses and gratifications theory and cultivation theory, provides understanding regarding the presence of hero worship in the life of a devoted media consumer. As the lived experience evolved, the purpose and subsequent impact of media consumption changed in accordance with the themes of self-identification and desired

validation. The unique approach of this study provides a valuable future reference for additional media studies, allowing insight into the personal impact of media exposure on the lives of audience members.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In June of 2007, professional wrestler Chris Benoit committed a crime that would not only change the wrestling business forever, but permanently alter the rest of my life as well. When I learned that Benoit murdered his wife and son before killing himself, everything I knew about my world came crashing down around me. After spending the better part of a decade living with the dream of becoming a professional wrestler, making life decisions based on that goal and essentially defining myself with that career in mind, the actions of a man I had never met destroyed it all. The question that intrigues me is: what caused Chris Benoit's horrendous actions to have so much of an effect on my own life? My experiences with Benoit were limited to seeing him on television and twice at live World Wrestling Entertainment events in Boise. Yet when a number of factors in his life culminated in a truly terrible crime, I took it all very personally. Something caused this personal reaction to occur and my experience as a mass communication scholar led me to believe that my media exposure was involved.

Mass communication as a sub-category of the communication discipline studies the practice of communicating to large groups of people using specially designed channels. All mass media scholars are familiar with the resulting academic thought regarding the manner in which widespread messages affect audiences exposed to them. Studies and subsequent theories have been developed in attempt to explain the ways that mass media influence the viewpoints and opinions of society. This aspect of mass communication study caused me to reconsider the way that television shows, movies,

newspapers, and many other such sources of media change the way that we relate to the world around us. When I found evidence of my own life being directed by the mass media and my extensive connection to it, I began to understand the power that media exposure can have over the lives of the audience.

As a child, I became interested in the business of professional wrestling. Eventually I made the decision to follow my dreams and become a pro-wrestler, a choice that led to spending the better part of the next decade pursuing that goal. That dream led me to Boise State University, pursuing a mass-communication degree to allow me the opportunity to work as a wrestling commentator if I wasn't capable of the physical ring work. I got involved in local theater to hone my skills as a showman, and altered my diet and exercise routine in order to be fit for the physical demands of the career choice I was making. Essentially, I changed major aspects of my life and guided my future decisions based on a group of individuals that I found to be heroic.

In the summer of 2007, everything in my life changed when WWE wrestler Chris Benoit killed his wife, child, and finally himself. I was a fan of Benoit, and followed his career for over a decade. When his poor choices in life regarding drug use and physical abuse to his body caused enough brain damage to make him capable of committing those terrible murders, my life changed forever.

My wrestling life had already suffered through the death of my favorite wrestler Eddie Guerrero in 2005. When the Benoit tragedy occurred, I could no longer follow the dream I had pursued for so long. Watching the business I loved and the performers I respected fall apart drove me away from everything I wanted. I felt a sense of guilt for

idolizing someone capable of murdering his family, and ultimately gave up on my dream, a decision that led me into graduate school to continue my studies.

As time passed, I reconsidered the events that led me to where I am now, and my background in mass communication made everything clear. I came to realize that my exposure to professional wrestling on a nearly daily basis for over ten years thrust me into a position in which I viewed the wrestlers I respected as heroes. This hero worship created an unhealthy connection in my mind that led me into an intense feeling of depression, disappointment, and guilt when Chris Benoit killed his family and himself. That realization became the driving force behind the subject explored in this study: the relationship between my media consumption and the presence of hero worship in my lived experience.

Identity, media exposure, and hero worship have all found their way into communication studies from a variety of perspectives. Many theories emerged in order to address a number of questions regarding the way that people negotiate who they are and use that to cope with the world around them. In order to develop the argument for my study on the influence of the media on my personal experience with hero worship, consideration must be given to the existing research in the communication field on related topics.

Identity Development

Our identity shapes everything about us. From the actions we take to the ideas we have about ourselves, there is some form of identity influencing those decisions. Research on identity creation has provided a number of existing theories that provide a multitude of answers from a variety of theoretical perspectives.

Attribution theory, as innovated by Fritz Heider, determines that human beings need to understand the behaviors of themselves and others, and thus have various ways of making causal attributions to the behaviors of ourselves and others (1958). These methods of attribution may include personal effects, desire, obligation, situational causes, among others. Through attribution theory, we are able to create and negotiate reasons for our actions, as well as the actions of others. Heider's theory proposes that people use attributions to infer the causes of actions, balance obligations and values, and make lasting determinations about the identities of others and well as ourselves (1958). A decidedly sociopsychological theory, it relies on being able to understand and predict behavior through observation.

In contrast, the work of sociocultural theorist Rom Harré introduces a differing theory of how identity is created and developed over time. For Harré, humans are both social and individual creatures, and create identity through a personal theory (1979). In this social construction theory, there are two aspects to the individual: the "person" and the "self." Harré distinguishes the "person" as being the socially constructed portion of the individual that exists in the values and ideas that are socially constructed in the society in which the individual exists as a member. Alternatively, the "self" is the private way that we view ourselves, outside of the public notion of ourselves as a "person." The "self" is based on our own personal theory of what it means to be a member of the culture to which we belong. This theory is learned through a lifetime of communications with others in our culture. The values, ideals, and practices of the culture will create the circumstances under which the theory is created, thus making "self theories" vary from culture to culture (1979). As this is a sociocultural theory, it assumes differently from the

sociopsychological tradition in the belief that human interaction creates the individual, the individual does not exist prior to cultural involvement.

Media Exposure

Moving beyond identity creation and lifelong negotiation, the next area of academic focus for this study is the subject of media exposure and the influence it can have on the lives of those exposed to it. A field of immense interest to mass media scholars, there are numerous approaches to how we are affected by our exposure to television, radio, video games, and various others forms of mass media.

When studying the relationship between media exposure and hero worship, and the subsequent impact on identity, ideas of the individual and effects of the social environment came into play. Therefore, the theories adopted for this study needed to allow for analysis of the underlying reasons for my actions. As a result, I chose two theories from the sociopsychological tradition to examine my experience as a media consumer.

The sociopsychological communication perspective acts as the realm of questions such as “how can individual behavior be predicted,” “how is information integrated to form beliefs and attitudes,” and “how are messages assimilated into the belief/attitude system?” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005). Focusing on the individual as a social creature is central to this tradition of thought, and theories explain communication as being “infused with causal forces of social influence” (Craig & Muller, 2007, p. 313).

Furthermore, a primary goal for this project was to create a case study that can be employed to explain other instances of hero worship in the media. Therefore, this thesis requires a theoretical perspective that acknowledges a real world understood and

explained through generalizable claims. The sociopsychological tradition holds this as one of the cornerstones of the perspective, in effect making it a viable choice to consider for this study.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications theory takes an approach in relation to media consumption that empowers the audience over the provider, placing emphasis on the receiver of the communication over the message and the mass media source. Rather than assuming that mass media creators possess the power to force messages into a vulnerable audience, uses and gratifications theory proposes that people use the media in a way that will meet their individual needs. Essentially, we *use* the media to *gratify* us. The needs vary from person to person, and are as unique as the different types of media that fulfill them. We may surf the internet to fulfill the need of connection to society, or we may play a video game to fulfill a need for entertainment.

Certain fundamental assumptions exist in this theory that make it unique and give it focus. These assumptions determine how media consumption is viewed in the theory, and limit the ways that it can be analyzed while still following the foundations that give it weight. These assumptions are (Blumler & Katz, 1974):

- 1) Audiences of mass media are active and contain some form of agency in their interaction with the media. This activity allows them to form goals based around their media consumption.

- 2) The individual is aware of one's own interactions with the media. This means that one can determine reasons for choosing particular media based on particular

interests. Furthermore, those interactions are more important on an individual basis, rather than purely focusing on a larger cultural appeal.

3) Gratifications are met through a relationship with both the media and the audience member. Therefore, it is not simply a process of the media acting autonomously to fulfill the needs of the audience. Additionally, there are other sources for possible needs gratification, so the media need to be created as a viable option to fulfill those needs.

Uses and gratifications theory fits into the sociopsychological perspective of communication study through its foundational focus on the individual. All studies created analyzing needs gratification operate under the assumption that media consumption can be explored effectively through the examination of individual motives. The media are therefore affected by our own cognition, because if we do not have our needs fulfilled by a particular piece of mass media, we will not consume it.

Recent research in uses and gratifications theory illustrates the importance of considering agency in audience media choice. White (2007) explores the uses and gratifications of text messaging among college students. The study reveals no pronounced difference in text messaging between males and females, that text messaging fulfills a need for personal messaging primarily, and illustrates differences between the uses and gratifications of high and low users of text messaging technology.

Gibson (2008) employs participant observation methodology to understand the uses and gratifications of *World of Warcraft* players. Interactivity, asynchronicity, demassification, and community emerge as specific uses being gratified by players of the

game. The study attempts to explain the motivation for the millions of subscribers playing the game, while opening the doors for future studies of the online gaming space.

Rives (2009) applies uses and gratifications theory to understand the role of Web 2.0 technology in comparison to the uses for standard internet technology. The study finds that there are similar motives between the two, with additional uses relating to the increased social-based possibilities offered through Web 2.0 technology.

Hagerty (2008) utilizes uses and gratifications theory to explore the motivations for using YouTube as an emerging form of internet media. Compared to reasons for using television as a medium, results show that YouTube is not utilized for the same overall reasons as television for a medium. He suggests that future research is required to understand the role of uses and gratifications in YouTube research.

Qin (2009) finds that young adults make specific choices in their media choices regarding exposure to standard network news programming and late-night comedy news programming such as *The Daily Show*. Qin's results reveal that subjects are capable of understanding specific motivations in their media consumption, with many indicating that comedy programming is chosen in order to be informed as well as entertained. In addition, the study also suggests that exposure to comedy news programming such as *The Daily Show* does not adversely affect knowledge responses in subjects.

Meyer (2009) suggests through analysis of audience preferences regarding NFL news coverage that television and internet are converging as media, with television remaining the primary choice. She suggests that this audience predilection towards television based NFL news media will lead to an eventual convergence incorporating the interactivity of the internet with the presentation style of television.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory operates under the idea that exposure to television will create beliefs in viewers that may not necessarily be accurate, but are considered true by those who hold them. Focused entirely on the medium of television, the theory looks at the potential effects that these beliefs can have on the worldviews of audience members.

Through the activity of cultivation, the process by which certain beliefs about the world are created by television and assimilated by the viewer, audiences may develop certain ideas about social reality that may prove not only inaccurate but harmful. The likelihood of these beliefs being developed increases in what Gerbner (1998) referred to as “heavy viewers,” those who consume more than 4 hours of television per day.

Just as uses and gratifications theory contains fundamental assumptions that give the theory uniqueness and guide research performed using it, cultivation theory operates with key values and assumptions:

- 1) Individuals are affected by the social forces they live among, forces that create the beliefs used to address the world. However, the impact of these forces is based upon the actions of the individual through the amount of time spent watching television.
- 2) People are capable of creating beliefs and sharing those with others, leading to the phenomenon of “mainstreaming.”
- 3) Repeated exposure to ideals through television viewing leads to the creation of identification with those ideals, leading to worldviews based around them. The human mind will create systems based around the stimuli present, regardless of the accuracy involved.

Cultivation theory's understanding of the social forces behind television programming and the way that those beliefs affect the audience leads to a bit of cross-over with the more socially created concepts of the sociocultural tradition. However, the focus on the individual's ability to affect the amount of impact that television has over their beliefs, as well as the focus on the cognitive processes involved in cultivation, firmly roots this theory into the sociopsychological tradition.

Cultivation theory has evolved beyond the original applications of George Gerbner to incorporate the evolving nature of television media, moving beyond "mainstream" television programming. Burdette (2006) uses cultivation theory to understand the creation of stereotypes regarding Texans as portrayed in American entertainment media. An online survey of respondents reveals that media consumers outside of the state of Texas hold strong perceptions of Texans that align with portrayals found in the media. Following with cultivation theory, perceptions were found to increase among viewers with higher amounts of consumption.

Khan (2007) examines the relationship between media exposure and the perception of threat from Muslims to American viewers, and resultant ethnocentrism. The study reveals that there is not a significant connection between media exposure and the perception of threat, suggesting that perceived threats regarding Muslims occur regardless of exposure to media.

Herring (2007) employs cultivation theory to understand the role of television viewership in the creation of work ethic in members of the baby boom generation. The study reveals cultivation effects regarding the definition of work ethic held by

respondents. Furthermore, Herring's study suggests that cultivation played a role in childhood occupational dreams and goals held by respondents.

Reyes (2008) examines the role of cultivation in the creation of stereotypes involving Latino culture in the television series *Desperate Housewives*. The study analyzes the portrayal of Latin men, women, and general cultural aspects in order to understand how they influence the beliefs of viewers consuming the television show, specifically in the first three seasons of the program.

Meade (2009) collected surveys from 273 students at a major university to use cultivation theory in order to understand the relationship between exposure to television dating shows and the perception of alternatives to current romantic relationships. The study reveals that higher exposure to such television programming as *The Bachelorette* increases the likelihood for viewers to believe in the possibility of alternatives to their current romantic partner.

Hero Worship

Transitioning away from the broader concepts of identity and the influence of mass media exposure, the focus can narrow more to the topic of interest for this study, hero worship. Looking at previous research on the subject of hero worship allows not only examples of what information has been ascertained on the subject, but what methods have been used in the development of that research.

Strate (1991) provides a historic look at the hero, through three periods of time: 8th century Greece, 17th century England, and 20th century America. Each period of time is connected to a particular form of media transmission: oral, written, and electronic. Taking these time-periods and methods of passing information, Strate performs a

deductive study to determine what characteristics of heroes are present in each era, and how the media method of the day contributed to the creation of those heroes. He theorizes that the evolution of heroes can be directly attributed to the growth of media technology.

Hakanen (1989) examines heroes in terms of adolescents and their identification with traditional heroes, when the shift to nontraditional heroes occurs, and how this leads to a tolerance of public figures as heroes after their faults have been pointed out in public. Hakanen connects media use and informational television watching to this study in order to understand how media exposure contributes to this shift. Employing a quantitative survey of high school students, he determined that maturation did not play a factor in hero identification and tolerance of public figure corruption.

Exploring hero worship from the realm of sports science, Harris (1994) approaches the subject as she discusses the debate over whether sports athletes are diminishing as adolescent heroes in comparison to previous eras. Williams (1994) explores the sports figure as hero in his analysis of baseball as it exists after being revised and transferred into mythical archetypes that are inherent to human history. More recently, further sports research has been performed regarding differentiating between sports heroes and sports celebrities (Shuart, 2002). Summers and Johnson Morgan (2008), analyze the use of public relations in the creation of fan expectations in sports celebrities. They suggest that sports fans develop complex expectations for both the public and private lives of individuals, and public relations should be used carefully in order to consider those expectations. The study sees a connection between both the media and public relations in the creation of sports heroes.

Hust (2005) analyzes the way that mediated images of heroic male personalities perpetuate certain ideals to boys exposed to the images. Utilizing programs such as *Sports Center*, *Sex in the City*, *Rocky*, and *Jackass*, she finds that certain cultural values based around such ideas as physical and sexual expertise are reinforced to male viewers. This creates very specific gender roles that boys feel a need to fill, ultimately risking the creation of a unique idea of self. The study was performed using qualitative methods, such as interviewing and participant observation, and found that the boys being studied often used references to popular media figures when describing what masculinity means (Hust, 2005). Hust's study provides insight into the potential values and beliefs about identity that are instilled into viewers through the mass media.

Sources such as these related to the subjects of identity, media exposure, and hero worship provide a solid foundation of research to consider and build from. Clearly, a wide variety of theoretical perspectives from the communication discipline have addressed and attempted to answer questions related to those subjects. However, the research performed in the field of communication, specifically as it relates to the more focused study of media effects and hero worship, has consisted of analyzing groups of individuals over relatively brief amounts of time. Frequently, such studies involve quantitative methods. The results of this type of research are without a doubt valid, but cannot offer a more specific type of insight into the lived experience of an individual. A more focused micro-examination of the role that media exposure plays in hero worship would allow not only unique insight into thought process of persons living through the phenomenon, but into media effects in general.

This offers my study the unique opportunity to present another angle to consider both hero worship and media exposure. My story offers something unique to the communication field, a personal, life-long narrative filled with media influenced hero worship. Beginning in mid-1996, professional wrestling occupied every aspect of my life. Soon, that passionate interest developed into a deeply embedded dream to become a professional wrestler myself, leading to an over seven-year journey to reach that goal. Over that time, professional wrestling monopolized my media experience, often consuming more than thirty hours of wrestling content a week. Television programs, videos, video games, magazines, and other forms of media all provided me with extensive amounts of wrestling exposure. Eventually, my extensive amount of wrestling consumption led to certain behaviors and beliefs that personalized my experience far beyond simple interest. A type of hero worship developed, inserting me into a position that led to my life-changing reaction to the events of June 2007. As unique as the specific circumstances of my story may be, the narrative of my lived experience presents an opportunity to explore both the subjects of hero worship and media exposure in such a way to acquire further understanding unattainable by more orthodox communication studies.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

A life spent following a dream, organizing a life and making important decisions toward the realization of a goal only to see events beyond personal control destroy the perceived world evokes a deep level of emotional impact. The subsequent retelling, and ultimately analysis, of such a narrative requires a methodology capable of addressing the unique personal context. The realm of qualitative methodology, and more specifically autoethnography, provides such an approach to my lived experience via the narrative provided for this study. Autoethnography, a relatively fluid approach to the analysis of lived experience, provides the necessary allowance for the human aspect in research, key to the type of study I am performing.

Carolyn Ellis (1998), one of the key proponents of the methodology, describes the autoethnographic mantra as using the method to "show instead of tell" and ultimately "understand self to understand others" (p. 2). Along with her partner Arthur Bochner, the two have contributed a great deal to the growth and legitimacy of the method. Bochner and Ellis champion a form of ethnography that operates under the assumption that "ethnographers cannot stand above and outside what they study" (1996, p. 19). Whatever that subject is, they believe the most effective way for ethnographic research to take place is to move it beyond strictly academic research to open it up for a larger audience to learn about themselves through the lives of others (1996).

Bochner and Ellis have continued to support the methodology by coordinating conferences to celebrate what they term "ethnographic alternatives" these include

autoethnography, poetry, and other works that "link social science to literature (2002, p. 2)." They advocate a form of social research that allows a more universal human understanding amid the social sciences and those in the field of literature (2002). Sandra Ragan (2000) provides additional support to autoethnography, stating that autoethnographic authors have provided some of the "richest, most provocative reading in our discipline [communication] in years" (p.230). Ragan further espouses the value of the method in that it prevents writers from being "limited by arbitrary methodological boundaries" (p. 231).

Taking a slightly different approach to the method, Leon Anderson (2006) proposes *analytic autoethnography* as allowing the proper amount of academic credibility among standard ethnography by practicing a methodology that places an emphasis on five key aspects: "(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis" (p. 378). This creates a more scientific style of autoethnography that follows the conventions of more traditional research, as opposed to the more literary preferences of Bochner and Ellis, but still places a value on the lived experience of the author.

Autoethnography has created the forum for a number of important issues to receive personal insight from those who experienced them firsthand. In terms of relating to the subject of media effects, the methodology has allowed for exploration of the portrayal of Black women on reality television programming (Boylorn, 2008), and the analysis of news coverage and its effects on the perception of inner-city crime during the 2001 Ohio race riots (Waymer, 2009).

Allowing lived experience to create understanding has created autoethnography that allows life as a scholar to be considered, through being a feminist scholar coping with studying emotional labor of others while coping with one's own burden (Shuler 2007); the existence of sexist and racist ideologies in university environments (Patton, 2004); as a way to explore the very methodology of autoethnography through its own lens (Wall, 2006); and even as a method for global colleagues to reach a greater understanding of each other as academics and socially conscious individuals (Weems, et al. 2009).

Autoethnography is most powerful when it is employed to discuss something traumatic or otherwise paramount to the author's lived experience. Lives intertwined with eating disorders (Tillman-Healy, 1996); families coping with the death of a patriarch (O'Rourke, 2007); the relationship of gay men and body image relationships to HIV-related fears (Fox, 2007); growing up as an adopted African American (Terrentine, 2007); living and coping with depression (Henson, 2007) all expose the great power of autoethnography to introduce audiences to worlds otherwise unknown to many. Due to the personal and subjective nature of the methodology, audiences receive the opportunity to experience these subjects at a much more personal level, allowing emotion and human experience to bleed directly into the writing.

By using this personal method of study to analyze my own experience of hero worship, I can analyze the way that my experience with the mass media through professional wrestling led to my creation of a number of heroes. From there, I can look further into my experience to ascertain how that hero worship led to my life altering choices and eventually to feeling of guilt and shame when my heroes made choices that

did not coincide with my values and beliefs. By applying research directly to my own experience, rather than applying them to outside sources, I will provide more insight into the phenomenon of hero worship.

A key advantage afforded by the autoethnographic method is related to the amount of time spent in my life regarding a single goal provides a significant amount of data to draw my analysis from. A far larger amount of varied and comprehensive information compared to a study involving participants over a set amount of time, as found in a more traditional ethnography. I am not limited to only information gathered over the span of six months to a year, and from a population of participants that were living with the knowledge that they were being studied. Interviews can allow a certain amount of past information regarding experiences of hero worship as it relates to media, but the results are limited by my interpretation of the subjects' memories. Instead, utilizing my own experience reduces the chances of my emotions and beliefs being misinterpreted by the scientist performing the study.

My autoethnographic study encompasses recounted lived experience from my entire life as a wrestling fan and eventual aspiring wrestler. The scenes and stories included in this study come from pieces created in numerous creative nonfiction courses completed during my time as an undergraduate. As a mass communication major, I spent a great number of my elective credits exploring courses in creative writing, recounting and developing my life story along the way. Furthermore, these classes took place during two critical stages in my narrative: before and after the Benoit murder/suicide. This timing allows for writing in different stages of my life, exposing my mindset as it evolved from that of a passionate dreamer to a disillusioned outsider from my previous world.

These creative nonfiction writings, in addition to numerous journals and unfinished essays, provide the necessary evidence from my life as an aspirant professional wrestler, offering the ability to study my state of mind as it changed over the course of my decade of hero worship and preparation. In order to present the ongoing state of the narrative, recent personal journals and creative nonfiction drafts were included to present the next stage of the story, as my lived experience has evolved following the end of my wrestling dream.

I must stress that the events recounted in this autoethnography never existed as a strict journal or diary, instead primarily composed as creative nonfiction. The few written as personal journals were done so without strict dates and times, often as informal personal journaling with the future intent of creating an autobiography of my wrestling journey. Therefore, the most effective way to approach the creation of the narrative scenes in this autoethnography is as evidence of my personal actions and thought processes, illustrating the role of professional wrestling in my lived experience and the consequential behaviors influenced by my hero worship.

After collecting these nonfiction writings, steps were enacted to extract the narrative and create a unified structure. Many scenes existed prior as creative nonfiction, therefore it was necessary to edit them and create a uniform style. At times, this involved rewriting scenes while still working to capture the emotions felt in each individual instance. Scenes were then constructed and organized into a roughly chronological order. I chose to do this in order to provide an organization to my lived experience that would enable the outside observer a better grasp of my life story as a devoted would-be professional wrestler.

Once the narrative scenes were gathered and composed in a uniform style of presentation, I separated the chronological order into three distinct eras of my lived experience: 1) my time spent as a passionate aspiring wrestler; 2) the events surrounding the Benoit tragedy; and 3) my life in graduate school. The division of these three sections signified three logical breaks in the narrative, making natural transitions from my life preparing to wrestle, the events that caused me to rethink my dreams, and finally a glimpse into my life after undergraduate study. By creating these partitions, the evolution of my lived experience could be dissected further to allow ample access for analysis of the forces at play between the mass media message (professional wrestling) and myself.

Following the allocation of the narrative scenes into three separate chapters of my lived experience, I performed numerous readings in order to extract themes present throughout the individual accounts. Each reading looked for themes, emotions present in the writing, and specific occurrences that may have repeated throughout the thick description. Through examination, two specific themes presented themselves as recurring throughout the narrative experience.

The first of these themes, and the more pronounced of the pair, was a strong sense of self-identification I felt with the wrestlers most admired during my years as an aspirant wrestler. The second theme, present to a lesser extent than the first but still prevalent enough to regard as a major aspect of my experience, was my desire for validation from those around me. Both themes existed extensively through the accounted lived experience, and I chose to examine them as the chief aspects of my professional wrestling hero worship. Other subthemes and emotions presented themselves, though not enough

to be considered key characteristics to my behavior over the fourteen years addressed in this autoethnography. Themes of addiction, individuality, and an unwillingness to enjoy wrestling as purely a fan are all present in lesser amounts through the narrative experience, although not to a significant enough degree to be classified as primary. These subthemes were not considered crucial to the explanation of my experience as an aspiring wrestler, and therefore do not receive the same depth of analysis in this autoethnography. Following the extraction of two primary themes, I separated each individual chapter as two subchapters exploring the two themes of desired validation and self-identification. The ordering of each chapter's sub-section in the narrative portion of this study was organized to present the most coherent story flow, not to indicate any level of importance between the two themes.

Once I had separated the lived experience narrative into three logical chapters and organized them according to the most two important themes throughout the story as a whole, I transitioned into the full analysis of the scenes presented in each chapter. I explored each chapter in terms of the two themes of self-identification and desired validation. Communication theory was then applied to the narrative, describing how the themes present in my lived experiences provide important insight into the realm of media effects on audience members. I explained why the scenes presented in this autoethnography are important to the theories used and the mass communication field as a whole. Finally, I concluded with the implications of my research, as well as the value of my autoethnography for future studies. In terms of structure, this autoethnography was organized utilizing Ginnifer Cie Gee's autoethnography studying her lived experience as a child growing up with a mentally ill parent (2009).

The intention of this autoethnography, and therefore the value of it to other scholars and any individuals interested in the subject matter, is that it will provide a deep case study that applicable to other academic works studying hero worship. By analyzing my lived experience in an autoethnographic format, I can provide extensive amounts of field notes and narrative that will explain the way that hero worship affected my life in as many different and varied ways as possible through the recounted events of the past fourteen years. This will provide research for future scholars to use in order to further develop the subject, as well as furthering the value of autoethnography in the future of academic study.

Between my focus on the phenomenon of hero worship itself, and my autoethnographic method of study, this thesis provides a unique look at the subject of media influence, applying it to a common human theme. My study differs from many existing studies on my subject of interest, allowing it to approach the topic from a different angle. My situation is both distinctive enough to provide an interesting subject of study and universal enough to apply to other cases to justify this study.

CHAPTER THREE: NARRATIVE CONTEXT

After spending more than seven years passionately following my dream of becoming a professional wrestler, I let the actions of a man I had never met destroy it all. In retrospect, I can now realize that this very statement reveals a great deal about the issues present in this narrative. The following story will provide further detail into those problems, but an initial amount of introductory setup is required for the reader to understand the entirety of my story. Certain recurring characters, relationships, and events need explanation before delving into the account of my experience.

As mentioned previously, I spent seven years of my life working toward the goal of becoming a professional wrestler, before events in June of 2007 changed the direction of my life forever. The narrative presented in this study runs from early 1996 (when I was eleven years old) until the end of 2009. As with most narratives, the story of this autoethnography can be considered ongoing, but in the case of this study, the events fit within that time frame.

Heart Condition

I was born with a congenital heart defect. The aortic valve in my heart had not developed correctly, resulting in a tiny hole existing where three flaps should be. This defect required open-heart surgery when I was eight weeks old. Throughout my life, consideration was always given to the fact that I had received this treatment. In grade school, I was not allowed to take part in organized sports beyond physical education class. As a child, I was discouraged from considering careers with extensive levels of

physical labor, for fear that I would be unable to withstand the level of exertion.

Although I never experienced any type of further complications, this belief persisted.

The only direct heart-related change to my life came through my yearly heart checkups with Dr. Michael Nichols. Every fall, throughout my childhood and into my late teenage years, I returned in order to be examined and questioned to determine the ongoing state of my heart. Slowly, these checkups allowed me to understand more about my condition as I became more mature. As I neared my teenage years, my awareness came to include the fact that this condition often resulted in the requirement of a repeat surgery when the patient nears the age of sixteen. This fact (and my heart's condition in general) loomed heavily on my mind, and played an important role in the progression of my story as an aspiring professional wrestler.

Family

I grew up in a small rural community of Montour, twenty miles outside of Emmett, Idaho. My father worked on the family dairy, performing a number of duties that ranged from repairing equipment to harvesting crops and milking cows. Lauded throughout the community for his expertise with machinery, my dad was frequently repairing equipment for others. A self-taught man, I learned early on from my father that hard work and self-motivation were often just as important as formal training.

My mother spent a number of years juggling time between working on the dairy and acting as a stay-at-home mom, before getting a job in retail during my junior year of high school. Her constant belief in me as I grew up led me to understand that it was important for me to find success in myself. Every time I had some kind of idea about what I wanted to do with my life, she was always the first to hear about it.

Throughout my entire childhood, my parents exhibited a hard-working outlook on life, always providing everything for my sister and me, even through more difficult financial times. This work ethic and generally driven approach to life led me to believe early on that it wasn't always important to be overly wealthy, as long as you were happy and could take care of those you love.

All through my childhood, my parents always encouraged me to do what made me happy. There was always a sense of pride from them in whatever I did. I was never expected to grow up to work on the dairy, only to find a career and a life that made me happy. I wasn't required to be a straight-A student. It didn't matter what kind of grades I received, as long as I gave my best effort and passed my classes. This led to an inadvertent effect in that I began to push myself harder, determined to receive the best grades possible, as long as I felt like I had given my best. Despite this drive to receive the best grades possible, my parents never pressured me to feel like I was supposed to be perfect. They only wanted me to be happy and give my best.

My grandfather, the patriarch of the Gatfield family, was well-known in the community. Both his extremely personable demeanor, and his willingness to share his democratic political viewpoint made him a very unique individual in Gem County, Idaho. Due to my grandfather's influence, the name "Gatfield" held a value in the community that always led me to have a desire to do the name proud. When my grandfather died after a long battle with cancer, the funeral procession stretched backed nearly two miles and included friends from all over the United States. "Papa" was one of my best friends, and never had the chance to see me pursue a career in wrestling, but his influence on my childhood was nonetheless instrumental.

School

I attended Sweet-Montour Elementary School for the duration of my grade school experience. Early on, my desire to excel in school revealed a high aptitude for schoolwork. Quickly, I became a straight-A student and one of the teachers' prized pupils. I was frequently pushed to complete more difficult assignments than my classmates, help them on their own assignments, and essentially became singled out as being smarter than those around me. Justifiably, it wasn't long before my fellow students grew to resent me. This led to poor treatment from those in my class, numerous instances of name-calling and bullying, and eventually complete exile from the social climate of Sweet Montour Elementary School. Beyond my lone friend, Matt, there were few students around my age who wished to talk to me by the time I finished my seventh grade year. Despite my attempts to dispel the preferential treatment the teachers had given me throughout grade school, nothing I did would reverse the feelings of my peers toward me.

Years of ill treatment had a number of effects on my disposition by the time I went to high school. I grew to have a relatively low level of self-esteem, constantly wishing that I could be anyone else. I developed a staunch dislike for those who were considered "above average," or "intellectuals," and actively resisted any attempts encouraging me to embrace my own intelligence. Soon, the only thing I looked forward to during school was going home to watch professional wrestling. Wrestling was a side of me unknown to those at Sweet Montour Elementary, a side I never wished to reveal. Pro-wrestling actively represented the exact opposite of everything the teachers praised me for, and the students hated me for. Therefore, I kept wrestling as my own treasured secret, unwilling to let the unpleasant climate at school affect it in any way.

Once I began attending Emmet High School, my experience began to change. Being largely an outsider, I was a relative unknown to nearly all of the students attending Emmett High School. The ability to “start over” and avoid the negative treatment I suffered during my time in grade school filled me with an eager desire to enjoy my time as a high school student. I elected to hide as much of my academic ability as possible, avoiding advanced placement courses and programs, instead operating under a desire to excel in my studies while still “flying under the radar.” I developed good relationships with nearly all of my teachers, and established a reputation for being hard working, laid-back, and good-natured. However, I was still very careful to avoid being singled out as different, and most teachers seemed to understand that desire.

Coming in as what essentially amounted to being a “new student,” I began socializing with many different groups of fellow students. This behavior led to my affiliation with different groups, which contributed to an eclectic experience. I spent two years in the automotive program, completed two semesters of weight lifting, enrolled as a member of the National Honor Society, and nearly became the first reporter for an ultimately ill-fated EHS news program.

Despite that wide variety, the majority of my social experiences during my high school involved my time in the Emmett FFA. My dad had been a successful member of the FFA during his high school years, so I felt it was only right that I tried my hand at the organization. Serving as a member for all four years of my EHS tenure, I held three offices and was elected president during my senior year. The FFA allowed me the opportunity to travel, both around the state of Idaho and abroad and ultimately defined my high school experience. I met many of my friends in the FFA, gained valuable public

speaking experience, and learned a great deal about the role of responsibility in an organization. The FFA held an important place in my life as a high school student, and many of the skills I acquired in the organization are still with me today.

Matt

I first met my friend Matt the summer before we both went to kindergarten. The two of us were enrolled in the same “Bible School” group at my local Methodist Church, and quickly forged a friendship that transferred over to our time in school. Throughout the years, Matt and I continued to be best friends, essentially growing up together. We lived fairly far apart, given the layout of our rural community, but it didn’t keep us from spending as much time as possible together. As each found things in our lives that interested us, the other joined in. Once I became interested in professional wrestling, it wasn’t long before I had introduced Matt to the world and brought him along with me. Soon he and I were eagerly involved in wrestling video games, watching wrestling pay-per-view events, and attending live events.

Once I realized that I wanted nothing more than to be a professional wrestler, Matt was the first person to support me. From the outset, he never questioned my desire, even when others wrote off my desire as a fleeting childhood dream. For some reason, he just always treated me like there was no other career possible for me. As our high school years drew to a close, Matt and I began to prepare for our adult lives. When I enrolled in college and continued working on a career in professional wrestling, he enlisted in the Marines and completed a tour in Iraq before returning home to marry. Both of us continued to talk about our love of professional wrestling, even suggesting the possibility of starting our own independent wrestling promotion later in life.

Matt's continued support of my professional wrestling dream began to fade into the background with my own desire following the events of June 2007. We began to discuss wrestling with less frequency, quit holding "Pay-Per-View Parties," and rarely picked up a wrestling game when we got together to do some gaming. There was never an explicit conversation about how wrestling faded from our lives, only an understood acceptance that it had.

Misty

I began dating Misty my senior year of high school, after meeting her in the FFA and spending a great deal of time with her on various group trips. From the start, she was aware of my professional wrestling dreams, and never discounted them. Not a wrestling fan herself, she was still willing to accept my passion for the business. Eventually, that led to her not only becoming familiar with the wrestling business, but also becoming an integral part of my journey as an aspiring wrestler. Where before I was largely alone as I worked to achieve my dreams, Misty now stood by my side and gave me encouragement. When I saw my first televised live WWE event, Misty was there with me. When I first learned how to perform a "moonsault" (back flip splash) on a trampoline, Misty was hiding her eyes in fear for my safety.¹ When wrestling was good, Misty had to sit and listen to me gush about it. When wrestling fell apart, Misty was there to find me among the pieces.

Any telling of my story as an aspiring wrestler would be erroneously incomplete without Misty. Before Misty and I began dating, nothing was more important to me than wrestling, and nothing put the rest of life into perspective. Misty gave me that

¹In professional wrestling, a "splash" is a maneuver that involves a wrestler landing stomach first on an opponent, similar to a "belly-flop" in water.

perspective, while at the same time providing me with a base. Often, my dreaming would detach me from the rest of my reality, and she not only put up with that side of me, but she always gave me support in a way that no one else did. Misty knew everything about the dreaming wrestler inside of me, more than even Matt did, and that allowed her an incredible amount of insight from which to give me support.

Following the Benoit tragedy in 2007, Misty was the only person that I ever discussed the murder/suicide with in any length. Even then, I rarely talked to her about it. Still, she was there to keep me going and support me in whatever choice I made. I never felt like I disappointed her when I decided to give up wrestling and go to graduate school. Events in her life caused her to be less capable of supporting me during my first semester of graduate school, only elevating my stress without a strong sense of balance from her. Eventually, changes occurred in our lives that allowed her and I to see each other more, and she once again helped me to understand myself as best as possible. Misty is best described as my foundation, grounding me when necessary, yet always supporting me in everything I do.

Eddy Guerrero and Chris Benoit

The first wrestler I remember catching my eye was Eddy Guerrero. Before I became a regular wrestling fan, I was only aware of a few key performers like Hulk Hogan. Once I began watching *World Championship Wrestling Monday Nitro*, however, that awareness quickly changed. My understanding of professional wrestlers being nothing more than loud, monstrous bodybuilders replaced itself with the revelation that wrestling was full of amazing athletes capable of fantastic matches. Eddy Guerrero was one the performers that contributed to that revelation. Early on, I realized that there was

something different about an Eddy Guerrero match, yet it would be years before I began to attribute that to his ability to "work." Guerrero quickly became one of my favorite wrestlers, as I eagerly followed his run through WCW until personal problems in his life, and management issues, led to his departure from the company. Eddy resurfaced in the WWF, changing the spelling of his name to Eddie Guerrero (although I kept using "Eddy" for nostalgic reasons), but my mother deemed the more mature WWF product to be inappropriate, so I quit following him. After the merger of WCW with WWF, I began watching the product, and Eddy Guerrero once again became not only one of my favorite wrestlers, he became my *favorite* wrestler. I collected every piece of Eddy Guerrero footage available, studied his wrestling style, and did everything possible to internalize everything I could about him.

In November 2005, Eddy Guerrero died from heart complications after years of drug abuse caught up with him. Guerrero's drug habits, rehab, and subsequent clean life were well documented, but the damage had already been done to his body. An undeniably tragic moment in the wrestling world, numerous tributes honored his life as wrestlers and fans mourned one of the most beloved performers in decades. The death of Eddy Guerrero marked the first time in my life that a premature death in the wrestling business claimed one of my favorite performers. Everything about my view of the wrestling world changed with his death, and I found myself questioning what could have led to such a wonderful wrestler to dying young. Eventually, my passion to wrestle only increased, as I dedicated my career to the man who meant so much to me as a fan. Eddy Guerrero cemented himself as my favorite wrestler, and his death only made me want to carry on his memory when I stepped into the ring.

As Eddy Guerrero and Chris Benoit were close friends, it was inevitable that I would begin following Benoit's career closely. Over the years, the two of them teamed together, wrestled each other, and supported each other enough that Benoit became one of my favorites almost by association. When circumstances led to Guerrero's departure from WCW, Benoit went along with him to the competition. Eventually, when my wrestling passion led me to following the WWF, Chris Benoit quickly became a favorite once again. His technical skill and intensity were unparalleled, and his matches never ceased to amaze. Outside of wrestling, he always carried himself with respect and pride. Regardless of what kind of “character” he played at any given time, Benoit came across as the ultimate professional. The lives of Guerrero and Benoit peaked during the final moments of Wrestlemania 20, when the two men met and embraced in the ring as the audience showered them with praise. In a business dominated by larger men, Guerrero and Benoit broke the stereotypes to become champions and share the stage at one of the most important wrestling events in the history of the business. The moment was captured in an image that became my favorite wrestling photograph.

Following the death of Eddy Guerrero, I came to love Benoit even more. In Chris Benoit, I still had a link to the performer that inspired so much about my passion for wrestling. Over time, he became the performer I most wanted to meet when I became a new wrestler. I fancied myself meeting him and learning tricks of the trade. I secretly hoped that I could become something of a protégé to Benoit, learning his moves and doing him proud as I paid tribute to his friend and my hero. Chris Benoit became my last link to Eddy Guerrero, and in turn only became more important to my dreams.

In June of 2007, everything the wrestling world knew about Chris Benoit changed. Years of physical abuse to his brain, compounded with drug abuse, created a condition that led him to kill his wife and son before committing suicide. The tragic events of that weekend reverberated throughout the wrestling business, prompting media attention and potential government investigation into the drug abuse present in professional wrestling. Chris Benoit disappeared from the wrestling history books, and fans around the world found themselves confused and sickened by his actions. Less than two years after the death of Eddy Guerrero, the wrestling business plunged into a terrible state, and I found myself in the middle of it. My life changed dramatically, and for the first time in my decade as a passionate fan, I truly regretted loving the wrestling business.

CHAPTER FOUR: "CREATING A DREAM"

Desired Validation

Becoming a Wrestling Fan

During the last couple of months, I have found myself watching wrestling every time my dad turns it on. Ever since that first episode of *WCW Monday Nitro* that my dad introduced me to, I haven't been able to stop thinking about professional wrestling. There is just something about the spectacle, the athleticism, the stories told inside and outside of the ring that has hooked me in a way that few things ever have. I'm starting to anticipate Mondays, something that I never used to do. Now, as each Sunday night ends, I think about the fact that I only have to survive school and chores before I can sit and watch wrestling with my dad.

I can't even express how much enjoyment I've been getting from watching wrestling each week. For some reason, even though I know that wrestling is "fake" I still can't get enough of it. Something about the performance, the showmanship and the spectacle has me hooked far more than whether or not the action in the ring is considered "real." Come to think of it, I'm not sure I ever thought that wrestling was anything other than performance, and I've never given it a second thought.

I've seen the masked high-flying marvel Rey Mysterio win the WCW Cruiserweight title and quickly become one of the most amazing athletes I have ever witnessed, even if the outcome of his matches is completely pre-determined. The super heroic attitude of Sting is electrifying and infectious, making him a genuine thrill to

watch. The in-ring skill and smooth attitude of Eddy Guerrero has wowed me enough that I think I have discovered one of my first favorite wrestlers. I never get tired of watching his matches, and his "Frog Splash" dive from the top rope is always an exclamatory finish to his matches. The impending invasion that I witnessed back in May has led to the formation of the New World Order faction, a group that every week debuted new wrestlers from "the other company" in a war that has engulfed the entire WCW roster. Everything about professional wrestling has been getting more incredible every week, and I can't believe I never paid attention to it for so long. Honestly, I can't wait for tonight's show.

However, tonight my dad is working as bit later, and 7:00 pm is getting closer and closer. As I watch the clock hands inching their way closer to the starting time of *Nitro*, I begin to get antsy as my dad is still at the shop working. Noticing that nobody else has turned on the television yet, I decide to take initiative and watch wrestling on my own. We only have one television in the house, and in the evenings it is usually occupied, so I always ask when I want to watch something. I walk up to my mom in the kitchen, convinced that she will be unhappy with me watching wrestling.

She still doesn't seem to be too pleased when my dad and I watch it. Not that she gets mad, but she doesn't necessarily approve of the dramatic battles that take place in the "squared-circle." The thrill I get from watching these athletes battle in the ring over the control of WCW seems to be lost on my mom. This has made me more than a little bit cautious about asking her if it would be okay if I watch wrestling tonight. I understand the importance of this question, because if she okays it now, I will be able to tune in on my own whenever my dad is working late. In the past, I would have just missed

wrestling for the week, but I have gotten far too interested in it to give up this chance to see what happens next in the war between WCW and the NWO. Hoping for the best, I walk into the kitchen where mom is preparing dinner and ask the question.

"Mom?"

"Yes Jimbo?"

"I was just wondering, since um, dad isn't home yet, if I maybe could watch wrestling tonight?"

Inside, I feel every bit of hope I have welling up as I await her response. At first, she seems a little bit surprised. I know she has been slightly taken aback due to my increasing interest in professional wrestling, after years of being into much more "intellectual" subjects such as archaeology and chemistry, fields that professional wrestling does not exactly fit in with. However, my love has been growing, and I think she can see that as she considers the answer to my question.

"Sure, go ahead, your dad would probably turn it on when he got home anyway."

"Thanks mom!" I state enthusiastically and bounce into the living room, jumping onto the couch and turning on *WCW Monday Nitro*. When my dad gets home, my mom jovially accuses him of "ruining" me by getting me hooked on wrestling. I chuckle as I hear this, and get sucked right back into wrestling. I'm home.

Telling My Mother That I Want to Become a Wrestler

Sitting in the car as my mom drives me to guitar lessons, I'm starting to feel like it is best to tell her now what I want to do with my life. A couple of years spent watching wrestling every Monday and spending hours with Matt playing as our created wrestlers has led me to thinking about going all the way and becoming a professional wrestler after

I graduate from high school. I have never felt this way about something before, and I can't imagine spending my life without knowing that I at least tried to become one of the performers I admire so much on television. College has been a subject for a while, and although I still want to keep it as an option in order to give myself a "fallback" in case I need one, I cannot let myself pass up the chance to be a part of the world I love.

I look over at mom as we cruise along the highway, somehow feeling like I did years ago when I asked to watch wrestling on my own for the first time. She no longer opposes my weekly love for WCW like she did before, even having her own favorite wrestler in Bill Goldberg, but I still feel a great deal of trepidation as I prepare to discuss my future with her.

"Mom, now that I'm going to be a sophomore, I'm starting to kind of think about what I want to do after I get out of high school."

"Yeah, I know you have been talking about going to college, especially since your grades have been so good."

"Um yeah, I still am thinking about going to college, but I'm also starting to think about something a little bit different in terms of what I want to do with my life. After I graduate from college, I think there is something else I want to do."

"Okay, honey, what are you thinking about? You know that your dad and I will support you in whatever you do."

I look over at her, still feeling my nervousness gnaw in the pit of my stomach as I think to myself *yeah, but we'll see if you support me jumping headfirst into the professional wrestling business*. Taking a deep breath, the words seem to take forever to

leave my lips, whereas in all reality they probably exit rapidly as I tell my mom "I want to be a professional wrestler."

The road blurs past as our car gets closer to delivering me to guitar lessons, and my future blurs through my head as my mother considers the career goal I have presented to her. If the words leaving my mouth seemed to take an eternity, her response easily takes twice that long. Agonizing about what she was going to say, I finally come back to reality and feel a little bit silly for even bringing up wrestling.

After what was only a slight pause, mom looks over and replies, "okay Jimbo, if that is what you want to do after you get out of school, let's take some time to think about it, and make sure that you are physically able to do that when we go to your heart checkup this fall."

She asks me to consider college as an option for a career backup, and I inform her that I already intended to all along, and I let go a relieved sigh, knowing that I have made a big step toward achieving my dream. I have the blessing of my mom, and I know that if she is supportive of my goals, it will be much easier to convince my dad. All I have to do is get through my heart checkup with Dr. Nichols. I know that I can be a professional wrestler, and my heart defect isn't going to prevent me from doing that.

Heart Checkup with Dr. Nichols

I've been both dreading and hoping for this day now for months. All of my dreams center on this day. If Dr. Nichols gives the go ahead, I'm free to continue my journey to become a professional wrestler. However, my body can prohibit me from ever walking down that road before I've even started moving. Will my heart be able to stand up to the physical demands of being a wrestler? Sure, all the action is predetermined, but

the performers have to be athletic in order to put together the matches I love so much. A weak or defective heart would be risking premature death due to the physical exertion alone. Today, I find out if my heart even has a chance of letting me step between the ropes.

I don't know that I've ever been more nervous about anything in my life. Compared to this, every test I've taken in school, every report card I've received, it all has been easier to anticipate than this. Heck, even telling my parents that I wanted to become a wrestler was easier than this. I'm almost 16 years old now, and this is usually when people who have had the same procedure know if they have to repeat the treatment. Am I going to have to receive heart surgery again? I haven't even thought about that, only worried about whether I could be a wrestler or not.

I can't let the thought of surgery stay in my mind, because all that will do is stress me out more. I have to focus on being a wrestler. If Dr. Nichols says that I can't, my dream ends today. A dream I have only just gotten used to calling my own. No, I have to keep positive, like I have since mom told me to wait for this checkup. I am going to be just fine. Not only is my heart check-up going to be a positive one, but Dr. Nichols is going to confirm that my dream to be a pro-wrestler can still be a reality. This is what I'm going to do, and not even my own body will stop me.

Walking into the doctor's office with my mom, I feel like there are literally butterflies in my stomach. The butterflies are definitely not happy, and are more than willing to let me know about it. I sit down in one of the soft chairs that line the wall, and half-heartedly pretend that I'm looking at one of the magazines on the coffee table as

mom signs me in at the front desk. Coming back over and sitting next to me, she easily can tell that I'm a bit nervous about the appointment.

"Everything okay Jimbo?"

"Um, yeah. Bit nervous is all."

"I'm sure everything will come out just fine. You've been feeling normal haven't you?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Well then don't worry about it. I'm sure that Dr. Nichols is going to say that you are just fine."

"Yeah, I know. It's just that..."

She smiles at me. "I know you're nervous about what he'll say about wrestling. I really don't know, but we'll know what your heart looks like soon enough."

I let go a sigh of apprehension, and before I can get any more worried the nurse shows up to take me to get the echocardiogram done on my heart. An ultrasound performed on my chest, the echocardiogram will give Dr. Nichols a look at how my heart is holding up, as well as how it is performing. I generally have them done every other checkup, and this one will be especially important, due to my age and the potential for needing the procedure repeated.

The three of us enter the room where the echocardiogram will take place, and I climb up onto the table and remove my shirt before lying backwards. Handing my t-shirt over to my mom, I look down at my chest. The seven-inch scar runs down the middle of my chest, as a constant reminder of how I'm different. The only thing standing between a professional wrestling career and me, the scar seems more pronounced than ever before. The nurse puts the gel on the instrument that she will use to perform the echo, and once

again, I remember just how cold that stuff can be. I am probably one of the only sixteen-year-old boys that can sympathize with how cold it is to have an ultrasound. Quickly, the grainy image of my heart appears on the screen, and I can hear the weird, muffled sound of my heartbeat over the speaker. Everything looks fine to me, but I know that feeling is just the hopeful wrestler living inside of me. Kid Xtreme just waiting for his chance to come out and amaze the world, and the echocardiogram seems to be speaking directly to him.

The nurse finishes up the echo, and I put my shirt back on as she informs us that she'll take us down the hall into the examination room until Dr. Nichols can meet with us after he reviews the results. I don't really hear very much of what she is saying, mostly due to my own anxiety building up to a fever pitch. I realize the irony of coming to a heart checkup and being so nervous about the results that my heart beats like crazy. The personal nature of that joke lets me smile a little bit, and I get up off of the table and follow my mom and the nurse down the hallway and into the examination room that Dr. Nichols will meet us in. Sitting there on the table waiting for him to arrive, I barely speak at all, and mom doesn't seem to feel a need to make me. I think she knows how close I am to finding out whether my dreams will ever have a chance of being a reality.

After what seems like an eternity, Dr. Nichols walks into the room, as only he can. His friendly face is set off with a head of graying, unkempt hair and a set of tired eyes that suggest he hasn't gotten any good sleep in quite some time. As one of the best pediatric heart physicians in the area, it is very likely that he hasn't had time for that much-needed sleep. In spite of how tired he may be, it doesn't keep him from being cheerful and friendly, greeting us with a voice that is always soothing and genuine. Dr.

Nichols could deliver terrible news in such a way with his voice that you would instantly feel that every measure would be taken to ensure the greatest chance of success. In his line of work, I'm sure he has had to. He makes a joke about how tall I'm getting, and I chuckle nervously a bit as he checks my blood pressure and listens to my heart.

Completing all of the formalities, Dr. Nichols sits down to discuss my heart. He expresses happily that other than the slight heart murmur that I will always have, everything looks fantastic. In fact, he states that my heart has developed so well that it looks as if it never had a problem in the first place, and that I may never need the repeat surgery performed. Feeling a bit of the load taken off of me, I can feel my eyes lighting up and my stomach nervously tightening in a strange paradox as I ask that important question that has been on my mind for nearly a year: can I be a professional wrestler?

Dr. Nichols looks at me with pleasant surprise and humor in his eyes and replies, "well, your mom might not like the answer I have for this, but I think that you can do just about anything you want to do other than be drafted by the military. Just watch out for folding chairs." He adds in the last part with a smile on his face. He warns me about avoiding smoking and excessive drinking, and tells me that I can do whatever I want to with my life. Never before having that kind of freedom with my life, I breathe what feels like the first breath of the rest of my life. I have always had to avoid sports in school in order to make sure my heart develops safely as a child, and it always made me feel like an outsider. Now, not only can I dream about being a professional wrestler, but now I have my doctor's approval! My mom and Dr. Nichols visit for a few minutes, but all of it shuts out of my head as I begin picturing my entire wrestling career beginning that very moment in the doctor's office. Dr. Nichols tells me that he'll see me again in two years

for my last childhood checkup, just to make sure everything is going well, and I nod happily, ready to go out into the world and become a pro-wrestler.

Mixed Feedback to Wrestling Dreams

Matt and I have decided to take advantage of the rather laidback environment for Emmett High School homecoming week, wandering around during the extended morning break and visiting with various teachers and friends. Now sophomores at EHS, we are beginning to feel like we have a little more of a presence in the school, no longer feeling like the insignificant underclassmen. We aren't yet as cool as the seniors, (heck, we aren't even juniors) but our second year of high school is starting nicely as homecoming week has been a blast.

Each day this week, there have been themed dress-up days to allow EHS students the chance to have some fun with our friends as we build to the big game and dance at the end of the week. Cowboy day, toga day, clown day have all made their mark, and today is celebrity day. Celebrity day was going to be my day, as I finally had an excuse to dress up as a wrestler. I made the decision early that I was going to dress up as one of my favorite wrestlers, whether anyone knew who I was or not.

I considered the options I had for wrestlers to portray, and based on my physical appearance and supplies at hand, I decided to dress up as Matt Hardy. I'm a big fan of the "Hardy Boyz" tag-team, and the rest of my favorite wrestlers have looks that either I can't convincingly emulate, or won't be allowed at school. Wrestling trunks and bare chests don't fit in with the dress code.

The elder of the young brothers, Matt has dark hair and wears dark baggy jeans and a "Hardy Boyz" t-shirt. All of which were easy for me to take care of. My hair is

dark, and I have both the jeans and the "Hardy Boyz" t-shirt, so it seemed to be an obvious choice for my Celebrity Day costume. To complete the costume, last night I picked up some heavy black tights at the nearby dollar store and cut them up to make the forearm-length arm sleeves that Matt Hardy wears as part of his wrestling gear. Finishing the costume up this morning, I smiled excitedly as I got ready to attend high school as one of the "Hardy Boyz."

Now proudly sporting my costume as Matt and I saunter through the sea of high school students and teachers, I'm greeted with an amusing mixture of complete unawareness and exuberant praise. Most of the people I see are completely unaware of who anyone in the WWE is, let alone one of the Hardys. I get a few questions and an assortment of snide remarks about my ridiculous armbands, but I don't let them bother me. I'm a Hardy Boy today, and I really don't care if anyone who doesn't know that wants to make fun of me. For those who do know, their reactions completely justify my choice.

Passing a group of my friends from the auto shop, one of them immediately gets my attention by enthusiastically yelling "Twist of Fate," the name of Matt Hardy's finishing move. All of them come over to us and admire the costume I have created, each trying on my armbands and mimicking various Hardy Boy taunts. Clearly approving of my celebrity day costume, I give them all high-fives and move on to admire other people's costumes. Movie stars, sports athletes, a few fictional characters, and an occasional political figure litter the landscape of costumes collected for celebrity day. Sure, most people are dressed up as more noticeable personalities than I am, but few of them are getting a chance to let their dream shine through during the homecoming

festivities. Matt heads off to talk to his track coach, and I keep milling around the crowd by myself and take in the sights.

As Matt and I walk past one of my English teachers, we get stopped as she looks over my costume in order to ask me who I am. "Matt Hardy, of the WWE tag-team." I proudly reply, before her expression cools down my mood. "Oh, a professional wrestler huh?" She replies disapprovingly. Still trying to remain steadfast in my costume choice, I confidently continue. "Yeah, he is a pretty entertaining young wrestler, and I'm going to be a professional wrestler myself once I get out of school. I've been dreaming about it for a long time." Clearly still unimpressed, she responded with something that truly caught me off guard. "No you're not," she coldly stated "you'll do something else, you aren't going to be a wrestler."

Trying to compute the rather abrupt and negative feedback, I do my best not to let myself reflect the staggering disappointment of her words. Teachers are supposed to be supportive, aren't they? They are supposed to nourish dreaming students, not quell their passion. I choke out a pleasant reply, "Yep, I'm really going to do it. I'll send you a tape when I get to the big time." Still intent on disagreeing with my goals, she blows me off with a quick "no, no you're not," before walking away. Feeling a painful concoction of anger, disappointment, and betrayal, I quietly walk away from the crowd and to my locker. Somehow, no amount of verification from my friends can overshadow my teacher's vicious judgment of my wrestling dreams. I've always been proud of the positive relationships I've had with teachers, and my English teacher just crushed a great deal of the trust present in perception of teachers. Despite a desire to keep low-key in my

academic abilities, I have never stopped approaching my relationship with teachers with anything but respect. Until today, I have always felt like that respect was mutual.

Looking at the wrestling pictures plastered around my locker's interior, I make a vow to myself that no matter how much negative feedback I receive from a world that doesn't understand me; I will always have passion for the wrestling business. I will always have my dreams.

Footage Library

Sitting in front of a pair of large plastic tubs and a couple of cardboard boxes full of video tapes and DVDs, I proudly rummage through my hours of wrestling footage, reflecting over the ever-growing library. Classic WWF, current WWE, WCW, NWA, ECW, TNA, Japanese "puroresu," lucha libre from Mexico, all represented in my library footage.¹ Over a three years' worth of WWE television all recorded for future reference, I began in late 2003 when I decided that I needed to build an effective library of footage for future reference. Many wrestlers collect huge libraries of footage in order to learn new techniques and other ideas from past wrestlers. Sadly, I have hardly any WCW footage, and now that they are no longer in business, I need to collect as much footage as I can from everywhere else.

I begin to make a quick tally in my head, quickly realizing that I have more than 700 hours of footage between the tapes I have recorded and the DVDs I have purchased, much more. Every Wrestlemania, years of WWE and TNA television, dozens of Pay-Per-View events, hundreds of DVDs, compilations of most of my favorite wrestlers, the

¹The World Wrestling Federation (WWF) was renamed World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) in 2002 following a dispute with the World Wildlife Fund over the use of the WWF letters.

entire Wrestling Society X television run, every Pro Wrestling Noah Global Honored Championship match for five years, among countless other pieces of footage.

Chuckling to myself, I realize that I have watched nearly all of it, and this footage library is probably only half of the entire amount of wrestling I have witnessed in my lifetime. I have probably watched more than 2000 hours of wrestling so far in my life. 2000 hours. Over eighty three days' worth, almost three months. I laugh, and immediately tell my sister how much wrestling footage I own. "Wow, that is kind of scary," she tells me with a wide-eyed look. "Yeah, but isn't it awesome?" I exclaim, and I can tell that she doesn't exactly agree with me.

Unaffected by my sister's reaction to my wrestling library, I head back to my bedroom and begin sorting through it in order to find something new to watch. Sitting on my bed and still beaming over the plethora of wrestling footage I own and have watched, I start thinking of new places to get more footage. This may be a respectable library, but if I am going to be a true wrestling scholar, I need to continue building it. I head over to my computer and sit down, ready to find some more wrestling footage. Maybe I should start collecting some Ring of Honor, or maybe some Chikara wrestling. I realize briefly that my library of wrestling footage might be considered extreme by most, but I quickly disregard the thought. Nothing makes me happier than professional wrestling, and there is always more to learn if I am going to be the best.

Final Day of High School

Walking back into Emmett High School to pick up my last EHS yearbook, a strange feeling comes over me. A bittersweet feeling of anticipation and melancholy rising up in me as I realize that I am now no longer a student in the big white domes leads

me into the crowd of students mingling and signing yearbooks. Every year, the yearbooks are not completed until the about a month after the end of the school year, so I return now after enjoying a month of post-graduation summer.

I make my way over to the table of yearbooks and pick up the hardcover book with "EHS 2003" boldly embossed on the front. Quickly flipping through the pages, I immediately get a warm feeling of fond nostalgia as I recall moments over my last year of high school. I cringe as I find my own picture in the yearbook. I have never been fond of my own image, especially in such a formal manner as a yearbook, wearing a suit. Reaching the football season section of the yearbook, I happily chuckle with surprise as I find a photograph of myself sporting my wrestling-inspired face paint eagerly posing for the camera at the homecoming game. For some reason, I look so much more appropriate in a photograph with face paint than I do in a suit.

Closing the yearbook, I locate a number of my friends congregating in the high school atrium, signing yearbooks and generally hanging out. Friends I have gathered over my entire life that I may never see again as we all move on into our own lives, be it college or pursuing our careers. I smile as I approach the group, doing my best to keep from letting on that I am already beginning to miss everyone. Pushing those emotions into the back of my mind, I revert right into my high school self as I reach the group. If this is the last time I see some of these friends, I need to make the most of it.

Immediately entering myself into the fray, I begin joking with everyone about anything and everything we can think of. Using our yearbook pictures as fodder, we all enjoy a good laugh at the awkwardly stiff poses and goofy teenage smiles. Good-natured jabs and self-deprecating humor exchange between friends that are taking advantage of

this last complete congregation of the affectionately christened "Lunch Crew," due to our well-known meetings during the lunch hour. Rare was the day that we didn't manage to fill one of the tables in the lunchroom with an increasingly larger group of individuals from all backgrounds and social groups. A time I will never forget, breaking the clique-based high school climate in the name of friendship and social interaction.

No one will admit it, but it becomes increasingly obvious that there isn't a person in our group that isn't beginning to feel the end of our high school friendships as we all prepare to go our own way. Bringing our joking to a close, we open our yearbooks and begin the process of signing them and giving our final statements as Emmett High School students. As I sign each yearbook, I feel a little bit of my childhood disappearing. I couldn't ask for a better group of friends, and now it is time for me to move on and make them proud as I go forth and become an adult. Time for me to show them that every time they had to listen to me dream about wrestling was just building to something bigger and better.

Signing the last yearbook, I close mine and look at the rest of the group. It is time for us to say goodbye and head out on our own. Maybe we will see each other again, maybe we never will, but regardless we will not be the same people that we are now. We will be college students, career-focused individuals, maybe even spouses and parents. The entire world is before us, and the time has come for us to step out there into it. As we finish up our melancholy yet optimistic goodbyes, everyone has positive words for my future wrestling career.

"Give WWE hell!"

"Think wrestling, think Jim!"

"I can't wait until I can watch Raw and tell people that I know you!"

"Show em' that Kid Xtreme is the future of wrestling!"

Each word of encouragement makes me a little bit more excited about my future, feeling that with the support of my "Lunch Crew" anything is possible. These friends helped me become the adult I am now, and I will never forget them, no matter how far I make it into the wrestling business. Swelling with pride, I finish my goodbyes, and walk out of the high school atrium, and into adulthood.

Creative Writing

Gathering up my papers and placing them in my notebook, I feel a strange feeling for the first time in my life as an aspiring wrestler. Plenty of instances prior the subject of my wrestling dream has come up as a subject, only to be shot down with extreme negativity. However, as I pack up my backpack after my creative writing class, I realize the exact opposite occurred. Today I had the opportunity to present my current creative writing to be "workshopped" in a group setting, and I chose to present a piece about my story as an aspiring wrestler.

Written in a "collage" format, a number of scenes about my own wrestling-based life were collected and alternated with selections written regarding other aspects of the wrestling business such as history, individual wrestlers, and other similar subjects. The result was a piece of writing affectionately described as resembling an informal interview conducted with me about the subject of professional wrestling and my love of it. The writing was very positively received by my workshop group, and for the first time ever placed my wrestling aspirations in the spotlight for others to critique and consider.

I had been intensely hesitant about writing and presenting this piece, due to my own experiences with people regarding the wrestling business and my love of it. My first semester of college, in English 101, I composed a simple piece of writing about my dream, and received lukewarm feedback from the professor about the subject. She praised the writing, but I could tell that she wasn't nearly as enthusiastic about the subject. English 101 didn't feature any significant level of group workshopping, so I still hadn't been forced to expose my aspirations to a large number of my peers.

That all changed during today's class. Sitting down in the middle of five other individuals I'm still not terribly well acquainted with, I immediately felt a sliver of regret for choosing to commit to writing about my passion for professional wrestling. Completely understanding that it was too late to go back, I still recognized that this could all go terribly wrong for me if the group had strong aversions to the world of professional wrestling. As we each moved around the group and discussed the other pieces presented, I began wishing intensely that I had chosen any other selection of my writing to present. Anything would have felt safer than exposing my dreams to a group of people who were essentially strangers. I just knew that everyone was going to ridicule my dreams and my writing, and I really didn't know if I could handle that again.

To my amazement, nothing of the sort occurred. Everyone in the workshop group had positive words about my writing, and all were extremely receptive about my wrestling goals. A number of them revealed their own experiences as wrestling fans, pleasantly surprising me as we shared stories about favorite wrestlers and storylines. For the first time, I felt like I didn't have to be afraid to admit my passion for wrestling to others, especially in school. More than that, I finally began to feel like my dreams made

me unique and different, but in a good way. Wrestling was something that made me interesting, not something that made me a disappointment and an outsider to the others. I chose to expose that to my peers in a creative writing class, and it resulted in a resounding success. I took a huge risk, based on my past experiences, and it completely paid off.

Now, as I leave the Liberal Arts building and make my way across campus, I can't help but feel somehow justified. People have told me that wrestling was fake, teachers have coldly informed me that I would never achieve my goals, even my own physical condition has threatened my dreams. Now, as the cool evening air descends around me marking the onset of nightfall, I let a huge smile appear across my face. General negativity to the world of professional wrestling has made me feel guilty of even dreaming about it, but that no longer matters. Today, five other college students justified everything about my life that I have ever been afraid to share. Today, I was allowed to stand up and proclaim my love for the wrestling business and everything it meant to me, and no one told me that I was wrong.

For some reason, I had never before tonight realized how important it would be to receive positive feedback on my wrestling dream. No matter how minimal it was when compared to the years of life I had already spent dreaming about the wrestling business, the positive feedback from my workshop group made all of the difference. After years of feeling like my goals were best left hidden from all but the most personal of my relationships, today's class showed me that there was a value to the life I was creating. Literally feeling a huge weight remove itself from my shoulders, I fully realize the

significance of that cliché for the first time. There is nothing in this world I want more than to be a professional wrestler, and nothing about that should make me ashamed.

Self Identification

Wrestling Video Games/ The Birth of Kid Xtreme

Years of watching wrestling have made me really want to play a wrestling video game, but until recently, I never owned a game console. Last year, my sister and I got a Playstation, opening my world to so many different wrestling game options, and I have been playing them all. *WCW Nitro*, *WCW Thunder*, *WCW Mayhem*, *Pro Wrestling*, *WWE Smackdown* and now I'm going to be able to play my brand new copy of *WWF Smackdown 2*.

I'm still not terribly familiar with the WWF, firmly aligned as a WCW fan, but that game looks like it is so much more interesting than the other games I've been playing. It advertises a much more in-depth wrestler creation feature, meaning that my friends and I are going to be able to create ourselves! Other games have featured wrestler creation, but I've never felt like it was detailed enough to truly feel like it was my own creation. *Smackdown 2* seems to have that level of depth, and I'm totally excited to get started.

Sitting with Matt in my room, the splendor of *WWE Smackdown's* gameplay and wrestler creation are completely submerging us in video game wrestling heaven. It's time for us to create our characters, and we are trying to decide what kind of wrestlers we are going to be. Matt seems to have an idea about a character that is a tough roughhousing type of guy with a mean clothesline.

"Whatcha think Matt?"

"I'm gonna create this guy who is pretty rough, and has this crazy orange and black mask.

I like that clothesline as a finisher. It looks totally brutal."

"What are you going to call him?"

"I'm thinking that Bane would be cool, you know, like the Batman villain."

"I like that, it's pretty good. I'm still trying to come up with mine, but I think I may have an idea."

In my previous games, the limited wrestler creation feature had led me to calling my character The Kid, due to the names that were available for use. I hadn't really settled too much on a finishing move, but I liked having my wrestler use a faster, high-flying style, inspired by my favorites like Eddie Guerrero, Sting, and Rey Mysterio.

However, this game gives me the option to do more. I can create any type of wrestler I want, and name him whatever I wish. I have a silly idea, an idea that could give me some way to develop on my previous created wrestlers while making him sound more unique than simply "The Kid." I look over at Matt and crack a smile as I sort of half-heartedly joke "I think I'll call him Kid Xtreme." Expecting him to think it was kind of silly and maybe not cool enough, he quickly responds "I like it! Kid X it is!" I quickly give him face paint like Sting, a pair of blue camouflage pants I totally love, and couple of moves that seem perfect, a "Frog Splash" like Eddy Guerrero's, and a standing side kick called the Superkick that I totally love. Bane and Kid Xtreme have made their debuts on *WWF Smackdown 2*, and for the first time, I feel like I'm creating myself as a wrestler. If I were to be a wrestler, I would want to be like Kid Xtreme. I can't even imagine being a wrestler. That would be so incredible. Painting up my face, sporting my blue camouflage pants, and wowing the audience with a precision superkick before

crashing down from the top rope with an amazing "Frog Splash," would be so exhilarating. I get shivers thinking about it. I could never be a wrestler, but if it was possible, that would be amazing.

The Death of World Championship Wrestling-March 26th, 2001

Starting my video tape recording and gathering up my snacks for the evening, I'm all ready for another episode of WCW Monday Nitro. I don't usually tape Nitro, but tonight is the annual Spring Break episode, and that usually means something exciting will occur. In addition, every champion will defend his title tonight, so I really want to record this for future viewing. WCW has been going through a bit of a slump lately, but I know that things are about to get better and tonight is a good place to start.

As Nitro begins, instead of the opening video, something I never thought I would see on WCW Monday Nitro appears before my eyes. Standing in front of the camera is WWF chairman Vince McMahon. A mixture of shock and confusion floods over me as I say out loud "what the hell is going on?" My mom hears me and responds to my mixture of shock and cursing from the kitchen, "Jimbo, what are you upset about?" Ashamed at my sudden outburst, I turn around and look at her "Vince McMahon from the WWF is at WCW. I don't know *what* is going on."

My question immediately answered when Vince, finished basking in the inevitable shock of every WCW fan watching around the world, addresses the situation. Explaining proudly that he now owns World Championship Wrestling and will address the future of the company in a special Nitro/Raw simulcast at the end of the program, Vince McMahon turns the broadcast back over to the WCW team. Still unable to process the disbelief coursing through my body, I slowly begin to realize something that should

have been obvious months ago. The whole time I thought WCW was simply going through a slump, it was actually falling steadily behind the WWF through poor quality television programming. Now it will cease to exist as a separate company. The "Monday Night War" is now over, and I am on the losing side.

Overcome with emotion, I sit quietly as I watch my last night of WCW wrestling. Throughout the night, wrestlers interviewed only express uncertainty as to the state of WCW and the future of their careers. One after another, many of the titles change hands, as babyface wrestlers capture the belts from the heels that hold them. I understand the importance of giving fans a positive show for the last broadcast, crowning a number of fan favorites as champions. At the same time, every time I watch a wrestler lose a belt, I wonder if that wrestler is not going to be retained by the WWF as they take over WCW. In my mind, every time someone loses a match I say an informal goodbye. I check the satellite guide for programming next Monday. WCW Nitro is not scheduled.

There is one positive to the historic night. Ric Flair, longtime WCW wrestler and multiple-time champion that many people consider one of the faces of the company, issues a challenge to perennial rival Sting. Sting and Flair have fought each other for years in possibly hundreds of matches, and my heart jumps a bit when the idea of getting to see them fight one last time presents itself. Sting has been absent from WCW for a good while, and now it looks as if he will be returning for the final Nitro! Despite the sad circumstances of the night, I still can't help but smile when Sting returns to accept the challenge for the match at the end of the show. The rivalry that defined WCW for years is going to be the same rivalry that bids the company farewell as everyone knows it. One

of the few times that something rather poetic occurs in professional wrestling and it couldn't have happened on a more historic night.

Sting and Ric Flair step into the ring one last time as the emotional announcers react to the significance of the bout. Differing from their previous matches, this time the two men are clearly wrestling without trying to hide their respect for each other. The match becomes a true exhibition, as Sting and Flair smile and talk to each other throughout the duration. The result is something that breaks the illusion of wrestling being "real," but nobody cares. This is that last match in WCW history, one final ceremonial shot in the long-running "Monday Night War." I watch as two men I have grown up idolizing say farewell to the company that made me a wrestling fan and an aspiring wrestler. My eyes tear up slightly and a lump grows in my throat as Sting locks in his finishing hold, the "Scorpion Deathlock," and Ric Flair submits to end the last match in WCW history. *Goodbye WCW, wrestling will never be the same.*

Following the bittersweet ending of the final WCW match, the broadcast switches over to the simulcast between WCW Nitro and WWF Raw. Vince McMahon walks out into his WWF ring, and begins to address his purchase of WCW. In front of an explosive crowd, McMahon begins to question which WCW wrestlers fans want to see retained in the WWF. As he runs through the names, a number of them elicit large reactions from the attendance, and I hold hope that maybe some of my favorite wrestlers will make the transition. Vince McMahon then gives a heelish response to the crowd and says that instead of keeping WCW going as a separate company, he was going to shut it all down and put it all away for good. I understand the dramatic nature of the situation, and that

Vince McMahon is currently playing a role, but I can't help but fear that he may be serious in some way.

Still glued to the television in the most significant night of my time as a wrestling fan, questions about the future of WCW are answered in part when Vince McMahon's son Shane, whom he is feuding with on television, appears on the WCW side of the simulcast. As an enormous buzz grows over both crowds and I feel myself getting more intrigued, Shane announces that he has bought World Championship Wrestling out from under his dad. Still understanding the storyline nature of the situation, I can't help but feel a rush of adrenaline as I realize that WCW is still going to be alive in some way. The WWF isn't going to get rid of the company I grew up loving. Someday, WCW will be back on television, even if it is a WWF owned and operated company outside of storylines. Maybe I'll still be able to wrestle for WCW after all!

Daydreaming About Gimmicks

The late afternoon heat rising to the third floor of Emmett High School's domed structure, mixing with the softly boring voice of my geometry teacher, is making it incredibly difficult to focus on the discussion about quadrilaterals taking place on the whiteboard. Quickly, wrestling is once again the primary focus of my mind, and I find myself thinking about what kind of wrestler I will become.

I've always pictured myself being a high-energy babyface, much like Sting in WCW. After all, that's the way that Kid Xtreme has been since his creation.¹ Winning over the crowd with my enthusiasm and amazing high-impact moves seems like it would be amazingly fun. However, the afternoon lull has gotten me deep into my daydreaming,

¹ In professional wrestling, a "babyface" or "face" wrestler is a fan-favorite hero, whereas a "heel" is a villain.

so I begin thinking about different approaches to my wrestling character, and a scene plays out in my mind.

Kid Xtreme and Bane, fresh off another tag-team win, are basking in the adoration of the crowd. As they continue celebrating their victory, one of the wrestling commentators steps into the ring to interview them about their next move. "You two seem to be on quite a roll lately, is a run at the tag-team championships in the future?" he asks as the crowd explodes in approval of the idea

Taking the microphone, Bane replies "since it sounds like the crowd is in favor of the idea, I'm thinking that it's about time to put some gold around our waists. After all, there isn't another more dominating team in the wrestling world today! Between my power and Kid X's speed, the tag team titles are a mere formality!" With that, he grabs Kid Xtreme's hand and raises it into the air in a victorious celebration of the upcoming championship clash.

Kid Xtreme, hand held high as the crowd rises into a frenzy, steps away from Bane to appeal to the crowd even more. As Bane turns around to face him, Kid Xtreme blasts him in the jaw with his signature "5-Toe KO" standing sidekick before ascending to the top rope and crashing down on him with the Frog Splash. Pulling the microphone away from the shocked commentator, Kid Xtreme gets a sadistic grin across his face as the cheers turn to a sea of boos across the packed arena. He lifts the microphone slowly to his lips, savoring the moment.

"Bane, Bane, Bane. So you really think that it is time for the two of us to make a run at the tag-team championships? I don't know how you think that would be a good idea, since I'm the only member of this team that is championship-caliber. I'm the only

reason that we have managed to win all of our matches. You know it, I know it, and everyone in this arena knows it. You are right about one thing though: someone here is going to be wearing championship gold; it just isn't going to be you. I'm going to end this tag-team feel good story once and for all, and then I'm going to win the World Championship. If anyone has a problem with that, step into the ring, and see how long you last with The Xtreme One!"

I quietly laugh to myself, picturing the entire heel turn as I execute it to perfection. I'll have to tell Matt about that one, he'll get a kick out of the beginning of our imaginary wrestling feud. Gazing back up to the whiteboard, I see that the quadrilaterals are still executing their reign of terror over the sleepy classroom. Maybe I could be a heel, it sure seems like it could be fun. Eddy Guerrero, Chris Jericho, and Shawn Michaels are such a great heels, I could use them as inspirations. Inciting the ire of the crowd as I belittle them and their heroes, all in the name of entertainment, would allow me to be something different than I am in reality. Kid Xtreme as a heel? Maybe, all it takes is the right storyline, and anything goes.

The class bell rings, signifying one last period before the end of another day in high school. I gather up my textbook and notebook, covering up a piece of notebook paper with names and finishing moves scribbled down on it, a running list of the characters I can be when I become a wrestler. Babyface or heel, high-flyer or brawler, Kid Xtreme or maybe just Jim Gatfield, it doesn't matter. All that matters is walking out of high school and into a long career as a professional wrestler. After that, I can do all of the heel turns I want.

Frog Splash

I stand in front of the pile of hay bales dumped near the calf feeders yesterday by Uncle Bob. Deciding they need stacked, I begin the job by putting together a bottom layer of bales that measures about 8'x8'. As I walk over to the other pile of bales, my mind starts working. I quickly begin stacking some bales on top of each other, to give me a platform about four-feet tall to stand on. I have to begin small, or I will never convince myself to do this. It's time I executed the Frog Splash. I've watched Eddy Guerrero and others perform it for years, and it's time for me to try it in more than just a video game. Alfalfa hay bales are firm, yet have enough give that I won't hit too hard. I keep telling myself this as I step up onto the hay bale platform crafted for my dive.

Looking down at the hay below me, I realize that I'm only a couple of feet above my alfalfa landing-pad, but I will have to cover about six feet of forward distance in order to hit the bales cleanly. Not too bad, I'm sure I can do this. Breathing the cool fall air into my lungs, I look over to see the late afternoon sun getting ready to start setting behind the skyline. A nice beautiful display contrasting with the potential self-violence I'm about to inflict. "If you are ever going to be able to be a wrestler you are going to have to be able to take some damage," I tell myself as I measure up the leap I'm about to make. No more time to waste, I clear my head, coil my body back, and snap forward into a leap. I tuck my knees and elbows together in a brief cannonball-like motion before straightening out to land belly first on the hay in a "splash."

Landing on the hay, the first thing noticed is the searing pain shooting through my knees. Near the end of my jump, I panicked a bit about landing belly first on the hay, and decided to land knees-first. Quickly learning why that is a bad idea; I stand up and realize that I'm not injured, only jarring my knees hard on the landing. It is only during

walking around to bring the feeling back into my legs that I see all of the small cuts and scrapes on my bare forearms. Alfalfa hay is anything but soft and smooth, and I was so overtaken by the idea of doing a Frog Splash that putting on my jacket completely never even entered my mind.

Thinking about what I did wrong, I walk over to my three-wheeler and grab my hooded sweatshirt. I pull the hay slivers out of my arms and put on the sweatshirt, wincing only slightly as the cloth irritates my fresh scratches. Climbing back up onto my hay launch pad, I take another deep breath and leap again. I am going to get good at this.

My second Frog Splash lands perfectly, or at least when compared to the first, distributing the impact between my knees, elbows, and chest. Snapping up, I feel the adrenaline surge through my body. I did it! I hit a Frog Splash onto a pile of alfalfa hay bales and it didn't hurt! Looking around to see if anyone happened to see it, I realize that I am alone. That realization is both a little disappointing and maybe a bit relieving because it means nobody saw my first attempt.

Spending the next half an hour perfecting my Frog Splash, I slowly begin to learn what is most effective in terms of style and landing. I slowly adapt my leap from one that resembles Eddy Guerrero's and into one with my own twist on it. After a number of successful leaps, I look over at my hay bale platform and realize that it is time to think larger. Or in my case, think higher. A tractor parked near the hay catches my eye. Just as it did a mere thirty minutes earlier, my brain begins to work faster than my common sense.

Soon, there is a hay bale landing pad next to the tractor with plenty of room. Climbing to the top of the large black rear tire on the tractor, I realize that my next action

may be a bit foolish. Laughing out loud to myself and anything else within earshot, Kid Xtreme takes over and I establish my footing on the tire. Looking down, I realize that this time I'm about four feet above the bales below, just about doubling the height of my previous jumps. I'm also slightly farther away, in order to account for the longer jump. I fancy that this is a close representation of the distance in a wrestling ring, at least much closer than before. Intent on making this a good jump, I push any thoughts of injury out of my mind and jump higher than I had before, using every bit of athleticism I have to get a good cannonball at the apex of my jump before landing on the hay solidly and painlessly. A huge smile spreads across my face as I realize that my leap couldn't have landed better if I had tried a hundred more times. Satisfied with my performance, I finish stacking the pile of hay, get on the three-wheeler, and drive home. I have a finishing move. I have a Frog Splash that maybe even Eddy Guerrero would be proud of.

My First Wrestlemania

Opening the door to meet Matt, I can immediately see that he has the same look of anticipation on his face that I've been displaying all afternoon. Now just over a year after the end of WCW, and the completely failed attempt to rebuild it as a WWF-owned sister company, the two of us have fully transitioned into fans of the McMahon side of the pro-wrestling world. Getting used to seeing a dead WCW finally buried and forgotten, the stars of the WWF present a completely different way to view the wrestling world, and tonight the two of us are about to experience the crown jewel of that universe for the first time. Tonight, Matt and I are going to watch Wrestlemania 18.

Since 1985, Wrestlemania has always been the focal point of the WWF's wrestling world, essentially the end of one year and the beginning of another. Each

spring feuds culminate, new champions begin their legacies, and moments take place that wrestling fans will fondly remember for years to come. Or at least that is what the event has been promoted as. In my time spent as a wrestling fan, I have been aware of the importance of Wrestlemania to the professional wrestling landscape, but never before have I been following the WWF product enough to make purchasing it a realistic idea. That all changes tonight, as not only am I familiar with the product, but am completely ecstatic to see the night's festivities.

Tonight, not only do Matt and I get to watch every important rivalry come to a head, not only do we get to see champions defend their titles against deserving challengers, but tonight the two of us get to witness one of the most intriguing matchups that we have ever seen. For the first time, and quite possibly the only time, Hulk Hogan is returning to professional wrestling to face off with The Rock. Two of the most charismatic and popular performers in the wrestling business, essentially the same archetype in two separate generations, will face each other on the "Grandest Stage of Them All," Wrestlemania.

Gathering our snacks: an amalgamation of soda pop, chips, salsa, and my mom's homemade pizza, we excitedly make our way into the living room and plant ourselves firmly on the sofa. With an entirely unnecessary supply of salt and sugar at hand, the two of us are completely prepared for the next four hours of wrestling excitement. After years of hearing how important the event was for the professional wrestling industry, I am finally going to have a chance to experience it firsthand.

Immediately, I can tell that Wrestlemania is something different from every other wrestling pay-per-view I have ever watched. Something special. Everything from the

stage in the arena, to the video packages proceeding each match is bigger and more amazing than I have ever seen before in a wrestling event. Performers have new ring gear, everyone seems to be working harder than they ever have before, and at home Matt and I sit with our eyes glued to the spectacle. Words rarely leave our mouths; instead every match consumes us and takes us on a journey out of the living room and into the arena with the sold-out crowd.

Throughout our stay with the 68,000 people that have filled the Toronto Skydome, setting a new record, we witness exactly what makes Wrestlemania special. Championship belts change hands, blood feuds between superstars end, new rivalries are born, and throughout it all is a feeling that we are witnessing history being written in the process. As each match ends, Matt and I grow in our anticipation of the moment we have been waiting for all night, the showdown of legends. Wrestlemania 18 has been an amazing night so far, but nothing has stopped us from eagerly awaiting the match that in our opinion is the true main event, regardless of the WWF Championship match that is taking place at the end of the show. No, to Matt and me, Wrestlemania 18 means one thing, Hulk Hogan versus The Rock. Just as our anticipation reaches a fever pitch, a video package begins hyping the match, and the time has come.

As Matt and I surge with excitement, Hulk Hogan makes his way down to the ring, something I hadn't thought I would ever see again. Hogan had been a big part of my years as a WCW fan, albeit as the heel Hollywood Hogan, but due to problems with management he left the company over a year before the WWF ended the Monday night wrestling war. Now, back in the wrestling company that made him famous in the 1980's,

Hogan was once again in a featured bout at Wrestlemania, and for the first time ever, I was about to see him face The Rock in a singles match.

After both men's entrances complete, an epic stare down occurs as they stand face to face in the ring, a steadily growing buzz from the crowd, and a similar one occurring in the living room between Matt and me. They finally lock up, and as each blow lands and every slam echoes through Toronto, it becomes obvious that the wrestling world is once again seeing history being made at Wrestlemania. Hogan, coming into the match as the heel, is drawing large amounts of cheering from the audience, rewriting the very characters in the middle of the match to the shock of both men. Finishing moves are traded and kicked out of, and finally after three more of The Rock's signature finishing maneuvers, he manages to pin the legendary Hogan as an emotionally exhausted crowd explodes one last time. At home, Matt and I echo the crowd's sentiment, both feeling the toll of such an amazing and historic encounter. Hulk Hogan is back, and this time he is once again a beloved hero. Two of the greatest performers in the wrestling business have just shown fans the world over why they are the best at what they do, and have given the wrestling historians something to talk about for years to come. Hulk Hogan vs. The Rock at Wrestlemania 18. My first Wrestlemania, and I got to see the match live as it happened.

Honestly, the rest of the show doesn't resonate nearly as much after the blockbuster match that has just occurred. The WWF Women's Championship title defense takes place next, and I feel sorry for the competitors, as none of them manage to keep the crowd's attention after Hogan/Rock. Triple H and Chris Jericho face off for the WWF Championship, and even though I'm a big Chris Jericho fan, I find myself with the

rest of the crowd as we half-heartedly cheer the title match and exhaustively applaud as Triple H captures the championship. Nothing against any of the performers, but nobody was going to keep the crowd going after the two of the most legendary entertainers in professional wrestling stepped into the ring and put on a show.

Wrestlemania 18 concludes, and Matt and I exist in a sort of quiet excitement. The show was everything that we could have hoped for, and to such an extreme that we found ourselves exhausted in the aftermath. Cheering on the clash between Hogan and The Rock was such an emotionally charged event we each have nothing left in us. We pack away the snacks, throw away our trash, and I tell Matt goodbye before he heads home. Another day of school tomorrow, and we can talk all about Wrestlemania then. Now, all I need is a good night's rest. I stumble into my bedroom, change into a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants, and flop onto my bed, with visions of myself in the main event of Wrestlemania roaring through my head like the chants of "Hogan! Hogan! Hogan!" thundered through the Toronto SkyDome tonight.

My First Live WWE event

As I enter the Bank of America Center, the buzz of the live crowd contributes to the sense of excitement I have been harboring all day. The last couple of months have gone by painfully slow in anticipation of tonight. For the first time in years, and certainly the first time during my time as a wrestling fan, the WWE has returned to Idaho on their tour circuit. The Raw crew is in Boise for a non-televised "house show," and Matt, my dad, and I have tickets!

Never before have I had a chance to attend live professional wrestling, and seeing it tonight has occupied my mind to a nearly dangerous level since the day I acquired our

tickets. Nothing at school today managed to engage me enough to pull me out of my wrestling high, meaning that I only physically attended each and every class. In fact, only hours after the end of the school day, I can't really remember nearly anything that happened. That doesn't matter now, as I'm only moments away from seeing my first wrestling ring in person.

Pushing my way through the crowd composed of people from all walks of life and representing all age groups, I finally get deep enough into the arena to see the WWE ring. The first thing that immediately jumps to my mind is the size of the apparatus that will enclose the evening's action. For some reason, in my mind, the squared-circle was always much larger. Not necessarily tiny, the dimensions still cause me a deal of surprise as I walk to my seat. That emotion doesn't last long though, as I quickly realize that I am only minutes away from seeing professional wrestling completely live and in person. For the first time, I am going to be able to see pro-wrestling the way it was always intended, in front of a live audience. No camera cuts to change the way I see it, no commercial breaks to slow down the action, wrestling in its most raw form.

As the three of us settle into our seats, the first thing that stands out is the crowd interaction that will be taking place through the night. Already, those in attendance have begun entertaining themselves with various chants and cheers, warming up for the wrestling later. Matt and I quickly join in on a Ric Flair-inspired "Whooooooo!" chant as it echoes throughout the arena. This pastime only proves necessary for a short time, as much to the excitement of everyone in attendance, the lights dim and music blares over the speakers. As the explosion of cheers dies down, the ring announcer makes the necessary statements to the crowd involving the ban on recording the show, throwing

things into the ring, etc. Honestly, little internalizes into my mind as I can barely contain the adrenaline-fueled anticipation building inside of me. The opener is mere moments away, and I can't wait!

After the ring announcer finally concludes his opening dialogue, the show begins with a bang. Spike Dudley faces off against the hated Rico, losing in a spirited effort that only serves to fire up the audience and get them ready for the next match. Matt and I then gasp in incredulity as "The Big Show" makes his way to the ring. Standing over 7 feet tall and billed at 500 pounds, he towers over everyone in the arena as he lumbers in the direction of the ring for his match. Without a doubt the most impressive human being I have ever seen, "The Big Show" has always appeared to be massive on television, but unlike the ring, he is actually more impressive in person. He faces the eccentric wrestler "Goldust" in a match filled with comedy before he decisively hoists his opponent into the air and delivers his signature "Choke Slam" finishing move. A textbook example of how the world of professional wrestling delivers an experience unlike any other.

As the evening drives on, everything about the live wrestling experience completely enthralls me. The crowd interaction, the in-ring performance, the energy present in the atmosphere, each aspect feels both amazing and entirely comfortable to me. For the first time in my life, I feel exactly at home. Nowhere before have I felt more in my element than I do now. Professional wrestling has been as passion in my life for more than five years now, and everything I love about it is only amplified to a level I never thought possible. No matter the participants, every match is entertaining and fills me with amazement for the skill and athleticism displayed by the performers. Each slam,

each kick, each top-rope maneuver sinks in as I eagerly study the way that the performers work with each other in pursuit of entertaining their fans with an amazing match.

As the time for the main event arrives, the only thing I regret about the experience is that it is about time for me to go home. Secretly, I wish that somehow I could just leave with the crew, traveling on the road and living in a world that truly feels like home. Rob Van Dam and Triple H deliver in a hard-hitting main event that places a firm exclamation point on a night filled with amazement and an overall sense that everything I'm aspiring to do with my life is completely justified. Traveling to cities every night and wrestling in front of live crowds, absorbing the energy in the air and turning it into an amazing performance that leaves everyone in attendance happy, nothing could be more perfect.

As the final count of the evening takes place and the heel Triple H manages to retain his World Heavyweight Championship after cheating behind the referee's back, my first night into the world of my future ends. The three of us stand up, and it's more than clear to Matt and my dad that the evening has changed me. I'm no longer simply an aspiring wrestler dreaming about a life spent in the world of professional wrestling. Now, I've seen that world first hand, tasted it, and came away only more hooked on the idea of being a part of it. Tonight was akin to letting a drug addict have free run of a pharmacy. My addiction, only enabled, now rises to a level never before realized. Wrestling isn't just a dream to me anymore; it's now a full-fledged reality. I've seen my future, and I can't wait to get there.

Face Paint

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, I study the lines of my face and try to figure out the best place to start. I'm selling popcorn tonight at the Emmett High School football game to raise money for my FFA chapter, and I want to have some fun and paint my face up. Last time, one of my friends painted me up before the game, but tonight is my junior year Homecoming, and this time I have something special planned. I don't want just some kind of random face paint smeared over my face, this time I have a design in mind.

I open up the package of clown face paint, thankful that football season is so close to Halloween, and take out the paint. Blue, white, and a little bit of red, Emmett High School's official colors. At least they are simple enough to make them easy to find. I collect some small sponges, Q-tips, and a bit of tissue and I begin to create my face paint masterpiece. Finally, after years of watching Sting wear ever-changing face paint in his wrestling career, I'm going to don the paint myself.

I slowly create an outline that covers my forehead before running down each cheek to a point before running back up to the bridge of my nose, leaving my nose and mouth uncovered. I stop for a moment and smile, as my face paint begins to resemble the style of face paint Sting used in his career before the NWO storyline began. Filling the outline with blue and white diagonal slashes separated with thin red lines, I top it all off by redoing the outline in red to make it pop out. Touching it all up, I step back and look at the job I have done in attempting to recreate Sting's face paint from the early 90's. Very reminiscent of the paint that Sting sported in his 1990 World Championship match against Ric Flair, the match in which a young Sting finally won the title. I swell with

pride as the face paint of one of my heroes looks back at me, and can't wait to get to the football game. I don't care if nobody knows what the paint is supposed to look like; all I know is that I did a pretty good job of making myself look like the "Stinger," and tonight is going to be awesome.

Driving to the football game in my little yellow 1979 Plymouth Horizon, waves and smiles of various onlookers fill me with enthusiasm as I make my way through a residential area of Emmett. Everyone knows that tonight is Homecoming Night for the Emmett Huskies, and seeing my face paint only gets them more excited about the upcoming game. Pulling into the parking lot, I can already tell that my paint is going to be a success, as students who rarely give me the time of day are stopping to admire the paint.

Arriving to the Ag Shop to get the popcorn machine ready before we head out, my FFA advisor Mr. Dean can't help but smile when he sees what I have been up to in preparation for tonight. "You like it?" I ask with an eager enthusiasm, typical whenever I do something off-the-wall that makes me proud. "Oh Mr. Gatfield," he replies, "I'm glad to see you found your school spirit for our popcorn sales tonight." I can tell by his tone that another one of my harmless but harebrained ideas has amused him.

As each one of my friends arrives to sell popcorn beside me, I get more and more excited about my face paint and the football game. As expected, not many of them have any idea what design I was inspired by, but that doesn't stop them from loving it. Matt, however, knows exactly what I was trying to do. He immediately smiles and says "Sting" when he gets to our popcorn booth. For him, it is even more amusing, because Kid Xtreme has been sporting a similar style of face paint since I created him. For the

first time, Kid Xtreme and Jim Gatfield are starting to become the same person, even if it is for a brief moment and simply through face paint.

The game starts, and the positive reaction to my face paint allows me to mix school spirit and wrestling in a way that injects me with unbounded enthusiasm. I manage to sell more popcorn than before, getting out into the crowd and catching the attention of everyone enough to raise some rather impressive money during the night. I take part in cheers instigated by the pep club and the cheerleaders, hang out with the football players and band during half time, and even get my picture taken for the yearbook. For the first time in my high school experience, I'm actually more than just another nameless face. Everyone from teachers to fellow students ask me about what my face paint will be like next game, and although I'm not sure about what the design will look like, I tell them to expect something even better.

The end of the game arrives, and Emmett High School is not victorious, but I barely notice. My night has been full of inspiring school spirit, selling popcorn, and completely living up my face paint. To those around me, it was a merely a pleasant addition to their homecoming football game, another fun exhibition of EHS school spirit. To me, it was an incredible evening of getting to sport the face paint like Sting, let a little bit of Kid Xtreme out in public, and put on a bit of a show. The next home game is in a couple of weeks, and I cannot wait to get out there and sell some popcorn!

College Plans

As my time in high school nears its end, the subject of college has become one of increasing importance. My dream of becoming a professional wrestler is still as strong as it has ever been, but I'm completely aware of the importance of an education for my

future. In the event that something prevents me from becoming a wrestler, or if it turns out I'm completely incapable of the in-ring athletics, I need a "fallback." Besides, a number of wrestlers have emphasized the importance of getting a good education before moving on to a career in pro-wrestling. Therefore, I'm going to need to make a choice regarding college.

As my senior year is about to begin, the time is rapidly approaching for me to not only choose a college, but also come up with some sort of an idea about what to major in. I know that many students start without any major in mind, but I want to have more of direction than just "undeclared." After all, there might be a chance that I can make this time in college work for my career in professional wrestling.

Looking through the plethora of college brochures I have received in the mail, nothing really seems to stand out to me. Sifting through colleges in every region of the United States, I begin wondering why I'm even bothering looking into a number of colleges located across the country. As a wrestler, I'll have plenty of time to see the country as I travel from show to show. In fact, due to the near complete absence of professional wrestling in the Idaho area, I'm guaranteed to be required to move when I get started training.

Picking up the brochure to Boise State University, I begin flipping through the available majors, trying to figure out which one is best for me. In the past, I have considered everything from automotive repair to chemistry, with nothing ever feeling like the right choice for my "fallback." No, I need something that will still give me an opportunity to be involved with wrestling, something that will apply outside of the ring.

As I read down the list of majors, my eyes stop on one that answers my questions, the major that will help me work in the wrestling business even if I can't be a wrestler, mass communication. Majoring in mass communication with an emphasis in journalism will give me the appropriate background needed to work in a number of different wrestling-related jobs, most importantly that of wrestling commentator. My love for wrestling has led me to develop a knowledge of the product that is unrivaled by many. Being able to apply that intelligence as a play-by-play commentator would allow me to have the opportunity to be involved with the world that I love, even if I'm not cut out for the in-ring performing. I'm completely confident that I am ready for the athletic side of wrestling, but it feels good to have a viable option that will allow me to stay involved with the business. Mass Communication will allow me to become a commentator, or a wrestling reporter, both jobs that would still embrace my dream of being connected to the wrestling business.

I collect all of the other college brochures, and drop them in a cardboard box to be thrown away. I won't need them anymore. Boise State University is about to get another application, one they won't be able to turn down. My academic record is nearly impeccable, and now it's time to apply that success to my college career. I begin filling out the application to Boise State, being sure to specify that I am majoring in Communication. I really don't know much about Mass Communication, but what I do know is that wrestling is going to be my future, no matter how I get there. Maybe college isn't such a bad idea after all.

Acting

Standing offstage, using the side curtain to mask my presence from the audience, I can feel my heart beating at a furious rate in anticipation of my entrance into the scene. We are already in the middle of our third night of productions, but my stage fright is no less pronounced now than it had been on opening night. For that matter, I don't think that my stage fright has subsided since I first stepped in front of the crowd and auditioned for the character of "Evil Eye Fleagle." The character I'm currently waiting to debut for this Saturday night audience enjoying the Emmett Community Playhouse rendition of the musical *Lil' Abner*. Here I am in my first role with the Playhouse, my first community acting production, and my first acting experience since grade school. As I begin to consider these aspects of my current situation, I realize that I'm only aiding my intense stage fright and try to remain focused on my impending scene.

As I watch my fellow actor Eric portraying the bombastic character of Bullmoose, Evil Eye Fleagle's employer, I get goosebumps from the way he plays to the crowd and keeps them engaged. Someone who isn't nearly as loud and boisterous offstage, Eric becomes a completely different personality once he steps in front of the crowd. He becomes Bullmoose, and the audience absolutely eats it up. Live performance, and acting in particular, prompts a fascinating transformation in people that I can only describe as a type of "magic." The quiet become boisterous, the straight-laced become wild, and each and every performer finds a place inside of them that allows their imagination to manifest itself in the name of performance. As I stand marveling at Eric's incredible performance, my stage fright reaches a crescendo before immediately

dissipating into a calm focus as I hear the lines approach that signal my movement out of the real world, and into the realm of performance.

Quickly looking down at my green suit to make sure everything was in order, reaching up to straighten my large brimmed green hat with pink hatband, and swiftly inserting a business card into my left sleeve, I take a deep breath and step out onto the stage. Slinking across the stage, partially to hide my own height and partially to create a sense of shadiness to the ridiculous character, I slide up next to Bullmoose. Deftly producing my business card from my left sleeve, utilizing skill acquired from numerous practice runs and my own childhood interest in magic tricks, I can already hear the crowd warming up to the character as the laughter begins to funnel in from numerous places in the attendance.

Finishing up the scene, which in reality only takes five to seven minutes and consists of using my exaggerated Brooklyn accent to sell my services to Bullmoose before flirting with his secretary, I turn back around and slink my way back off stage. Still feeding off of the intense high I received while on stage, I stand catching my breath when something unexpected occurs that catches my attention. I stand still as I hear applause. Loud applause.

At first, it doesn't even occur to me what is really happening. I assume that the curtain has closed, and the crowd is positively reacting to the previous scene. That thought alone makes me happy, before others backstage come running up to me enthusiastically. As they congratulate me, I begin to realize something. The applause is for *me*. It is at that very moment that I look back out at the stage and realize that the scene hasn't even continued past my departure yet. Eric and the rest of the performers on

stage have stopped to allow the audience to give me a rousing ovation for my appearance as Evil Eye Fleagle. The applause is for *me*.

Feeling an overwhelming mixture of excitement and shock at the reaction of the crowd, time stands still around me as I take in everything that has happened over the past ten minutes. I realize that in my performance high, I don't even really recall giving my performance on stage, at least in detail, simply that I gave it. Everything from the moment I slipped the business card in my sleeve to catching my breath after returning backstage is nothing more than an intense blur.

Now, as the applause continues to flow from the attendance into the backstage area, I finally understand why people love to perform. There is nothing else like having that connection to the live crowd, nothing like being able to cause that much joy in others. I have never felt this way before, and I can't imagine a single substance on the earth that could replicate this high.

As the applause finally dies down after what has realistically only been about 30 seconds, I'm still unable to remove myself from the euphoria I'm experiencing. Realizing that this feeling is something that I could have access to on a regular basis as a professional wrestler, my resolve only intensifies to make my dream a reality. If I can cause the interruption of a scene after only 5 minutes of performance, it's amazing to imagine what I could do with an entire wrestling match. Hearing the end of the scene arrive and the applause rise once again for the rest of my performers, I excitedly bounce deeper backstage, imagination wild with the possibilities.

CHAPTER FIVE: "WATCHING A DREAM DIE"

Self-Identification

The Death of Eddy Guerrero

November 15th, 2005: I groggily rub the sleep from my eyes as the noise of a knock on my door wakes me up. Looking out, I realize that it is my dad. Wondering what is on his mind so early in the morning; I sleepily walk over and open up the door. "What's up?" I ask him, figuring something on the farm broke down and he needs my help. Instead, he looks at me solemnly and then asks, "Did you hear, Eddy Guerrero died."

Immediately, everything around me stops. Still wondering if maybe I'm in the middle of a dream, I stare at him for a second before I ask, "what, what happened?" Dad immediately fills me in on what he knows "yeah, I heard it on the radio this morning. Chavo Guerrero found him dead in his hotel room Saturday night before a show. They think he had a heart attack." Unable to accurately process the news I have just received, the only reply I can get out of my mouth is a quiet "oh my god," followed with an "I wonder what happened; he had been clean so long." My dad looks at me with an expression that shows he understands the shock I'm going through. "I'm sorry Jimbo, I just thought you should know." I thank him for giving me the update, news I was completely unaware of due to my current lack of home internet access, and I walk back to my bed. Still completely filled with confusion and sadness, I lie back down. Maybe when I wake up it will all turn out to be just a dream?

A couple of hours later, I awake once more after sleep filled with terrible nightmares. The only thing on my mind now is the news received earlier this morning. The news delivered by my father mere hours ago. With every piece of my soul, I hope that maybe I just dreamt a terrible dream. I hope that Eddy Guerrero is still alive, and healthy. My favorite wrestler in the entirety of the wrestling business, I can't imagine a world without him, yet a feeling deep down in my gut tells me that I'm going to have to find a way. Turning on the radio, nothing in the news mentions the death and my wishes seems to be coming true. Without internet, there is only one way to confirm for sure, so I pick up the phone and I call my girlfriend.

As Misty picks up the phone, she immediately notices the sadness and concern in my tone. "Baby, what's wrong?" Gathering up my courage, I ask the question that I desperately don't want answered, "Misty, can you check the internet for me? I think Eddy Guerrero died." For a moment, there is no answer as Misty contemplates the words I have just spoken through the receiver. After a couple of seconds, she replies quietly and flatly "yeah baby, just give me a second."

As the last few moments of my life slip away without knowing the fate of Eddy Guerrero, I hear Misty's fingers typing as she accesses the internet. Almost immediately, and certainly before I'm ready for it, she replies with three words: "I'm sorry baby." Feeling my world crash down around me, tears well up in my eyes and I say nothing. I can hear Misty trying to comfort me on the other end of the line, giving me the only known details and trying to help me cope with the news that I never wanted to hear. Nothing she says takes me out of the impossible place I have found myself occupying. Finally, I manage to speak.

"He wasn't even forty years old, he wasn't supposed to die yet. Four years he has been clean from drugs. He was supposed to win the title again. He was supposed to be there when I got to the WWE. He wasn't supposed to die." Each word causes a small amount of physical pain in my body, each syllable grinding the sad news into my heart. Concerned for me, Misty asks, "Are you going to be okay?" I breathe deeply, "I don't know. I'm sure I will eventually, but all I can say is I'm not now." Reassuring her not to worry about me, I tell her that I will see her later, after rehearsals are over. We share our goodbyes, and I hang up the phone.

Throughout the next couple of hours, nothing about the day seems to resonate with me in any way. No matter how hard I try to shake myself out of this miserable state, I'm unable to have any success. Eddy Guerrero has died, and nothing can make me feel better about it. I try to consider the fact that he had a long and prosperous career; try to tell myself that he managed to clean his life up and turn his career around. Not even one of these things makes me feel any better about it. Wrestling will never be the same without him, and I don't know if I will either.

After a long day spent wishing that I had never woken up in the first place, I walk into the Emmett Frontier Cinema for theater rehearsal. I'm the lead in the fall Emmett Community Playhouse production of *My Three Angels*, and this is the last regular rehearsal before our technical rehearsal. Still reeling from the news that my favorite wrestler has died before reaching the age of forty, I begin to question my ability to perform on stage tonight in the rehearsal. Immediately upon questioning my own ability to perform, I chastise myself firmly. I tell myself that I'm a performer, and everyone in the cast is depending on me. The director chose me for this role, and to let my own life

jeopardize the success of our rehearsal would be extremely unprofessional. Eddy Guerrero was the consummate performer, and if I were to let his death ruin my own job on stage, I would be betraying everything he stood for. Realizing the importance of this performance, to not only the ECP but also myself as an actor, I gather my emotions and pick up my costume, determined to make Eddy Guerrero and myself proud of my ability as a performer.

Arriving at Misty's house after the rehearsal, she meets me with a hug and asks me how I'm doing, concern showing clearly on her face. Following a very successful rehearsal, I smile a bit and tell her that I am doing as well as can be expected, and am ready to watch the tribute show. WWE Raw tonight aired as a tribute show to the life of Eddy Guerrero, and Misty made sure to record it while I was in rehearsal. Sitting down on the couch, I hesitate for a moment before calmly pressing "play" on the VCR remote. Nothing in me is looking forward to watching this tribute show, but everything in me absolutely wants to.

There has never been an episode of wrestling more difficult for me to watch. Every wrestler in the WWE is on hand, opening up the show standing on the stage in tears, as the ring bell gravely rings ten times in the professional wrestling tradition to signify respect for the death of a performer. Throughout the night, tribute matches take place between performers who were close to Eddy in some way, along with heartfelt speeches given in remembrance of a man who many consider one of the best wrestlers in the world. Videos air commemorating his career, and throughout the entire two hours, a melancholy celebration is held for the life of a man who touched so many fans and fellow performers with his talent and positive attitude.

Eddy Guerrero was one of the wrestlers who helped turn me into a fan, and his matches taught me a great deal about what it meant to be a truly amazing professional wrestler. I watched Guerrero matches to learn ring psychology and fan interaction; I listened to Guerrero promos to learn how to make the most of a wrestling character. In everything Eddy did, he gave the entirety of himself. No one in the wrestling business can deny that Eddy Guerrero was a truly unique and special individual, unlike anyone else before him. Sadly, it is likely that those same people will admit that there will never be anyone else like him again.

As the tribute show ends, every wrestler's emotional goodbye to Eddy, combined with my own grief over the loss of my personal hero in the wrestling business, finally becomes too much. One last tribute video begins to play, a music video with Johnny Cash's "Hurt," and I begin to cry. As each tear exits my eyes and runs down my cheeks, as the images and video of Eddy's life mix with the aged and grief-worn voice of Johnny Cash, my own mind races with questions. Why did Eddy die so young? How did his cleaned up life still result in something so terrible? Why does the wrestling business have so many performers die so early? How will wrestling ever be the same again without Eddy? How will I ever be the same again?

Buddy Wayne's Wrestling School

May 20th, 2007. With the end of my college experience rapidly approaching, the subject of wrestling school is constantly pushing its way into my mind. Realizing that this choice is more important than nearly any other wrestling-based choice I have made, outside of actually setting the goal in the first place, I have been thinking about my choice of school for a long time.

Originally, I planned on attending Ohio Valley Wrestling's training program, WWE's development territory. I even made contact with the school and received further contact information from the trainers. That all changed when the relationship between Ohio Valley and WWE ended, leaving me needing to find another way to make my way to the World Wrestling Entertainment empire.

In the months following the OVW/WWE split, I have considered a number of options that would place me all over the country, but with none feeling like the appropriate choice. Every time I look into a school, I am either disappointed in the quality of the program, or leery of my potential in being noticed by the WWE after completing my training. However, now I feel confident in my choice of a wrestling school.

For the past year, I have been following the wrestling news website Figure Four Wrestling. Created and maintained by Bryan Alvarez, the Seattle-based news source has been my sole source of wrestling headlines and behind-the-scenes information since discovering the radio shows on iTunes. Figure Four Wrestling features a number of these radio shows on the subject of professional wrestling and mixed martial arts with a number of different hosts and guests. One of these guests is Bryan Alvarez's good friend and former wrestler, Buddy Wayne. Wayne is an independent wrestler, whose career took him all over North America working for a number of different wrestling promotions, including working as an enhancement talent for the WWF/WWE.

A regular guest on Bryan Alvarez's Figure Four Daily show, Wayne has also been instrumental in training Alvarez for his part-time independent wrestling career. Now essentially retired from the world of active wrestling, he runs a wrestling school out of his

home in Everett Washington. As I listen to the radio show on my mp3 player, Bryan and Buddy discuss the state of some of the school's trainees when something occurs to me that I never realized before. I can attend Buddy Wayne's wrestling school!

Everett, Washington, is much closer than many of the other schools I have considered, and I have loved Washington every time I have visited the state. Buddy Wayne has worked with the WWE in the past, and has forged relationships with instructors connected with World Wrestling Entertainment's developmental territories. With Buddy's years of experience working all over the country, he will be the perfect trainer. His experience with numerous styles of pro-wrestling makes him an excellent choice for preparing me for a long career in professional wrestling.

Feeling a rush of excitement over my realization, I dash over to my computer and locate the website for Buddy Wayne's wrestling school. Every piece of information needed for the school is present on the site: location, cost, contact information. Everything I need to get myself ready to head off to wrestling school. Having made my choice, I feel a great weight lift off of my chest. All I need to do is finish my final semester as an undergraduate student, and then it's off to Everett, Washington to train under Buddy Wayne. One step closer to making my dream a reality. Deciding to make sure I'm confident in my choice, I determine that I will wait through the summer before contacting Buddy Wayne to set up my enrollment in the school. With a huge smile on my face, I log off of my computer and head to work, with my future just a little bit clearer.

Benoit Tragedy

June 25th, 2007: At 5:30 pm, I arrive at my Misty's house, ready to meet with some friends and watch a special 3-hour edition of WWE RAW. WWE Chairman Vince McMahon had been blown up in his limousine on air a couple of months ago, and the culprit was supposed to be revealed tonight. Some good old fashioned wrestling shenanigans. I get there before everyone else, so I log onto the internet quickly to check for news in the wrestling world. As the homepage for Figure Four Wrestling loads up, the headline appears- "WWE Reporting Benoit Family Dead."

Everything stops. I feel my head begin to swim, as the room around me grows strangely quiet. I can't remember anything that happened prior in my day. As my heart sinks into my soul, my index finger clicks on the link to find out that the only details as of yet are that Atlanta authorities have found the bodies of Chris, his wife Nancy, and his son Daniel-dead in their home. Only about 18 months earlier, I had to deal with my favorite wrestler, Eddy Guerrero, dying from complications stemming from past drug use. He was 38 years old. Benoit was only about 40.

I call my friends, and they come rushing over, walking in to see me sitting in front of the television, watching Vince McMahon address an empty arena out of character to explain that RAW will be a tribute show to the career of Chris Benoit. For some reason, it doesn't really sink in as real until Vince stands solitary in the middle of the arena, and then it all comes crashing in on me. A lump grows in my throat, tears in my eyes, and I knew that another great wrestler had died. It doesn't seem fair to me. It doesn't seem possible.

Was it a gas leak in the house? Did they get sick? Could an intruder have killed them? These questions burned into my mind as RAW airs filled with old Benoit matches and tear-filled speeches from his coworkers, each describing a consummate professional who always took incredible pride in both his work and his family. I remember a wrestler who always provided fans with incredible matches, who always seemed to be able to work with anyone. I remember a wrestler who I always secretly hoped would teach me something when my career began in the WWE, passing some nugget of wisdom in my direction. Chris Benoit was widely considered one of the best in-ring performers in the history of professional wrestling. Why was he gone?

RAW ends, and I sit back down at the computer, eager to find out something that will help set my mind somewhat at ease. What I find changes the course of my life forever. Chris Benoit killed his family before committing suicide.

June 26th, 2007: I wake up in a foreign environment, wishing I remembered my way back, but realizing that the map had been taken out of my hands the night before. I went home after finding out the news and turned on WWE Smackdown. Still hoping that the authorities were wrong about what transpired at the Benoit home, I sat down and halfheartedly played one last match as Chris Benoit. A numb tribute to a long-time favorite, my last Benoit match was finished with his signature hold, the “Crippler Crossface.” Sitting on my bed the next morning, I can barely remember playing the match. Chris Benoit won’t be in another Smackdown game.

A shred of hope that the Atlanta authorities are only saying that it could be homicide in order to consider all possibilities still exists in my heart. Deep in the pit of my stomach, a burning fear tells me that I am wrong.

Later in the day, my fears are confirmed. Turning on my laptop to get an update on the situation, my heart sinks as a black and white picture of Chris Benoit shines back from my PC background. Mere minutes later, I find that there is little doubt concerning what happened to the Benoit family. Chris killed his wife on Friday, his son on Saturday, and himself Monday. As I read the news, everything that I know falls apart. I had followed the career of Chris Benoit for over ten years, I had watched him grow, switch companies, recover from a broken neck, and main-event Wrestlemania 20. He was one of the few wrestlers that defined my wrestling fandom. Everything is different now. I delete the picture.

WWE Signature Pharmacy Scandal

August 30th, 2007: My stomach turns and a violent feeling of nausea overcomes me as I read the New York Daily News headline: "Top WWE Names Emerge in Doping Scandal." A mere two months after the Benoit tragedy, a number of wrestlers have been exposed as customers of Signature Pharmacy. An internet pharmacy, Signature was selling a number of different performance enhancing substances to WWE performers, including anabolic steroids. More frustrating than the onset of another wrestling scandal is the list of names exposed as customers.

Following the tragic Benoit double murder/suicide in June, the hot topic in the media was clearly "roid rage." This prompted a number of debates between current and former WWE employees over the current drug policies in the organization. Those currently employed went onto television and proclaimed that the current roster of WWE performers are being tested constantly, resulting in completely clean athletes. One such man was Ken Anderson, known as Ken Kennedy in the WWE. Anderson, a performer I

have admired greatly since his debut, was outspoken in a number of media appearances about the clean nature of WWE employees. At the time, something about his aggressive message seemed to be a bit unsettling to me, but so much about the wrestling business was negative at the time that I let it go.

Now, I can't even express the level of disappointment and anger I feel as I scroll down the list and see the name *Ken Anderson*. Anderson spent weeks proclaiming that anyone accusing WWE performers of abusing drugs was ignorant and falsely informed. Now, Ken Anderson comes out as someone who was a regular purchaser of performance enhancing drugs.

As I read his name, I immediately curse and realize that the entire time he was lying as he spouted information about the effectiveness of the WWE drug policy and his substance-free athletic life. I will never again consider myself a fan of "Ken Kennedy." I know that a number of wrestlers I have followed and admired are guilty of drug abuse, but Ken Anderson's almost indignant proclamation of the drug-free environment in wrestling makes it inexcusable when the truth comes out otherwise. As far as I'm concerned, I don't care if I never see him wrestle again.

Once I get over the intense anger that Ken Anderson's involvement sparks in me, I move further down the list and find something that is nearly too much to handle. Chavo Guerrero, Eddy's nephew and the one who found his body, was still purchasing drugs from Signature Pharmacy long after the death of his uncle. Eddy Guerrero died due to damage sustained to his body after years of drug abuse, and Chavo continued to abuse drugs. He still injected himself with steroids, knowing what they did to his uncle Eddy, knowing what that death did to the Guerrero family. Nothing about that realization does

anything but fill me with sorrow. Eddy's death affected everyone in the wrestling business, but didn't affect Chavo enough to end his drug abuse.

If the discovery of Chavo Guerrero's drug purchases isn't enough to ruin that last shreds of hope I had for the wrestling business, another name on the customer list does the damage. November 2nd, 2005, only 11 days before his death, Eddy Guerrero received a shipment from Signature Pharmacy. Eddy was supposed to be clean. He had made it public that his drug abuse had been past him for more than four years in 2005. Years of substance abuse had finally been defeated after a successful stint in rehab. Guerrero cleaned up his life, got his job back with the WWE, got his family back, and put his life together. The story of Eddy's rise back into life was the only positive aspect following his death. As hard as it was to cope with the death of my favorite wrestler, at least I could feel good about the way he turned everything around and cleaned up his life. Discovering that he received steroids less than two weeks before his death ruins everything I have assumed about him for nearly two years. How can I ever trust another wrestler again, when even Eddy Guerrero's inspiring story was only half-true at best? Maybe he managed clean up some of his drug abuse, but he still abused the very drug that likely caused his death.

First the Benoit tragedy, and now this internet pharmacy bust. Wrestling has never suffered such so many blows in such a short amount of time. As a wrestling fan, I've never felt so betrayed by the business I love. For years, I have wanted nothing more than to be a wrestler, and now I'm struggling to remember why. Nothing about wrestling seems fun anymore. Where there used to be over-the-top personalities and amazing athletic displays, now there are only murderers and liars. How can I ever be proud of

myself for supporting such a world? I close the internet browser, get up from my desk, and walk away, desperate for something to show me that dreams are still worth following.

"Benoit Brain Massively Damaged"

September 17th, 2007: The final pages of my next Figure Four Weekly newsletter slide out of the printer and into the tray, the newsletter headlined with the intriguing and thought provoking headline "Benoit Brain Massively Damaged." When I read the headline in my browser, I immediately felt compelled to print the letter out rather than read it off the computer screen.

Holding it in my hand now, the thick stack of paper seems rife with information that may be crucial to the way that I consider many things about the wrestling business. "Benoit Brain Massively Damaged:" four simple words that have potential to change a number of things that have been the focus of my life for over two months. What if there was something else involved in those tragic events that changed the wrestling world in June? "Roid Rage" has been the subject of wrestling-based discussion since that fateful weekend, and this newsletter now suggests that maybe there is something else to the tragedy that permanently altered the wrestling business.

Eagerly, yet cautiously, my eyes consume the words on the page. Looking for any answer to the question that has haunted my mind since June, the facts begin to alter everything that I have assumed about the Benoit tragedy, and wrestling in general. At the time of his death, Chris Benoit was suffering from chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in all regions of his brain. CTE is a condition that results from massive head injuries, found to be present in the brains of a number of other sports athletes who

experienced significant bouts with depression, often resulting in suicide. However, Chris Benoit's case of CTE was more significant than any other recorded instance, dramatically present throughout his brain. Upon testing his brain matter during the autopsy, it was found that Chris Benoit's brain was equivalent to that of an 85-year-old Alzheimer's patient. Chris Benoit was likely suffering from extreme dementia, bouts of depression and various other cognitive problems.

Reading this news, a strange feeling of relief rose in my stomach. Although nothing can ever change the horrific events that occurred in June, something about the contents of this newsletter gives me a slight feeling of solace. For over two months now, I have felt an extreme level of guilt over the actions of a man that I have never met, guilt over a man that I felt was a "monster." Somehow, I felt like there was a side of him that I never knew about, a side that was capable of murder. Now, with the news coming out that there was something else wrong with him, things feel a bit different.

Somehow, I feel justified that it turns out that more than just "roid rage" was responsible for the tragic and inexcusable actions that Benoit committed. "Roid rage" always made it seem like Chris Benoit was a man who was merely moments away from becoming a murderer, a man who only needed steroids to aid the transformation. Now, the tragic events were the actions of a man whose brain suffered so much damage that he was no longer the Chris Benoit loved by his family and friends. No longer strictly a "monster," Benoit was the product of a high-impact athletic lifestyle that resulted in the creation of a man capable of the act of murder.

For the extent of his twenty-year plus career, Chris Benoit wrestled a style that contributed to the devastated state of his 40-year old brain. Throughout Canada, Mexico,

and into the United States wrestling scene, he wrestled in matches filled with hard suplexes that dropped him on his skull, top rope headbutt dives, unprotected chairshots to the head, and stiff strikes, all moves that involved heavy impacts to his cranium. Even though the wrestling business consists of worked matches with predetermined winners and planned spots, there is always a certain amount of damage sustained by the performers. Certain moves are more likely to result in this damage, and Benoit matches were full of them. In fact, the diving headbutt was one of his signature moves, appearing in nearly every one of the thousands of matches in the span of his career. Everything about Chris Benoit's wrestling style was contributing to his brain damage, and it was too late before anyone discovered the effects.

Thinking about the findings and considering my own sense of relief at the discovery that he wasn't acting normally at the time only results in an intense feeling of guilt. Every time I cheered an amazing Chris Benoit match, every time I marveled at his hard-hitting style, and every time I jumped for one of his diving headbutts, he was only destroying his brain. Chris Benoit was settling the stage for the horrendous murder of his family, and all I could do was excitedly cheer him on. I never considered the consequences, and knowing them now, I feel a slight level of relief discovering that he wasn't simply a steroid-addled murderer. Putting down the newsletter, I sit and consider what these findings mean for the wrestling business, and for me.

For all of the performance in the wrestling business, somehow these men and women are receiving concussions on a regular basis, concussions that result in permanent and dangerous brain damage. Chris Benoit received such brain damage, and killed his family and himself in the process. Now, this reality is public, and the constant dangers of

drugs are now seemingly secondary to the real physical dangers of the business. Drugs can create a dangerous altered state, but years of wear and tear on the brains of wrestlers appear to be far more treacherous. Chris Benoit was an extreme case, but not an impossible case. The wrestling business could have those same circumstances occur once again, and all I have been doing is cheering on the risky maneuvers that lead to such brain damage. Chris Benoit kills his family, and I'm somewhat reassured when I find out that his actions were the result of a lifetime of brain trauma. I'm relieved that he wasn't himself anymore, *relieved*.

A feeling of sickness spreads throughout me as I realize how selfish and disturbing my behavior is following these findings. A man killed his wife and his son before hanging himself, and all I can do is be glad that he was no longer acting under his normal judgment. Granted, I know that his actions are never excusable, never anything but appalling, but my mind is still somehow eased at the discovery that I didn't support and idolize a monster for more than a decade. Disgusted at my own feelings, I tear up the newsletter and throw it in the trash. My love for the wrestling business has made me so blind that all I can do is be glad that one of my heroes wasn't acting under his normal cognition when he brutally murdered his family. Chris Benoit murdered his family.

Deciding To End the Dream

I sit taking in the recent events of the wrestling landscape: the tragedy, the drugs, the physical damage. For years, the wrestling business has been the sole focus of my life, and where has it gotten me? Lost, broken, betrayed. Still, I have to follow it. I feel as if the men and women who risk their lives to entertain still deserve my attention. Especially since some of them managed to survive the suspensions, providing fans like

myself with a hope that maybe a few of the people behind the personas are genuine. As I continue to deliberate over where to go, I manage to answer my own questions. Sitting by myself and trying to figure out my place in wrestling, I begin to watch the vision in my right eye dwindle as bursts of light flood my field of vision, rendering me nearly blind for a short period of time before the intrusive ache began. A migraine. I have them once or twice a month. I'm used to them. I just deal with it. However, as this one carries out its attack, I finally understand everything.

Wrestling had finally been blown open, even if were for a rather brief period of time, as the coverage gradually faded away when steroids were difficult to blame everything on. Although the dark side of the business didn't really shock or alarm me, in the months following the Benoit incident it all became painfully real. I saw firsthand the worst-case results of wrestling's less favorable side. Between the tremendous amounts of injury to Benoit's brain and yes, some drug abuse, a man thought by many to be a family man and the ultimate in-ring performer transformed into an individual who choked his wife and son to death before hanging himself.

I ask myself where I want to be in a business that had the potential to cause that, and the migraine helps to answer my question. Even though I would never have considered using the drugs commonly abused by wrestlers, I suffer from headaches on a semi-regular basis. I won't be able to avoid certain amounts of head-trauma, and I realize that I don't want to spend the rest of my life with chronic headaches and memory loss. Not for a business that can't even be represented accurately in the news media.

I make my decision: it is time for me to step back, and take a different direction with my life. I will always have wrestling, but can't bring myself to build a career in it.

The injuries, the drugs, the controversy and general dislike by the mainstream population have finally caught up to me. I won't stop watching, and will likely regain my passion as a spectator, but my seven-year journey is ending.

A profound sadness washes over me as I make that decision. Everything I knew about myself is going away, and I'm now left picking up the pieces and starting over. As hard as this is for me to realize, I can't make any other decision. It's time to move on, time to find myself somewhere else. Wrestling betrayed me and left me behind, and Chris Benoit finally made me realize that. I stand up, and walk outside, leaving my past behind me. The fresh early fall air fills my lungs with a strange melancholy. I look off into the distance as the years of my life spent dreaming of a career in professional wrestling slip away into nothing more than memory. I will have to find myself again. The WWE will have to find a new champion.

Desired Validation

Media Coverage of Wrestling Post-Benoit

Disgustingly closing my internet browser and pushing away from my desk, I let out an exasperated groan laced with a tone of desperation. I had been looking for some updates on the progression of the investigation surrounding the Benoit tragedy, and much to my disappointment nothing has changed.

I sit in my desk chair, seething about the world I live in now, wishing that anything would change for the better. "Roid rage" is still the hot news phrase, and nothing else seems to be attracting the news media. Nobody seems willing to look into anything about what may have caused Chris Benoit to kill his family and himself, with every story completely content to accept that Benoit was a steroid-addled monster.

During the past couple of weeks, nothing about the Benoit murder-suicide has been anything but completely frustrating for wrestling fans. Immediately, the media picked up the story and made it the latest controversial freak news story of interest. Instead of taking the time to explore the circumstances in Chris Benoit's life that led to this terrible situation, each and every piece of news coverage only paints the man as a monster.

While I firmly agree that everything about his actions in June were nothing short of horrifying, I also have no doubt that there are other factors at play that drove him into a state that made him capable of those actions. I never knew Chris Benoit personally, but nothing about interviews with his close friends and coworkers suggests that this type of situation was possible earlier in his life. Something else is at play, and I don't believe that it was only "roid rage." Professional wrestlers have been practitioners of steroid use for decades, and never before has there been any sort of situation remotely close to this. Chris Benoit strangled his wife, smothered his son, and hung himself. Everything about that situation that suggests some sort of extreme circumstances, and reducing the case to nothing more than one of "roid rage" does nothing flattering for the image of media outlets covering it.

In addition to the painfully reductive coverage, a number of wrestlers both currently and formerly employed by the WWE have come forward to be interviewed. Nancy Grace has featured a number of these performers as guests, quickly leading to a situation that has simply resulted in current employees defending the drug policy of the WWE and former employees condemning it. This "us vs. them" debate has degenerated into arguing and bickering between two groups that clearly have ulterior motives. The

longer this goes, the more it seems like everyone is less focused on trying to understand what led to the unfortunate and truly saddening murder of two innocent people, and more on trying to promote their own agenda in the public spotlight.

As an outsider, both sides seem to have valid points, but neither seems to be presenting those in the most logical manner. Like anything, this situation is not one that can be addressed in an either/or, black-and-white manner. Unfortunately, no one seems willing to work together to understand the situation in a way that could improve both professional wrestling and the athletic world in general. Media coverage is only fueling that fire, simplifying the situation to one key aspect that draws ratings and allows for easy condemnation of the wrestling business.

As an aspiring wrestler and someone who was a lifelong Chris Benoit fan, everything about this situation is completely painful and ultimately angering. I just can't believe that Chris Benoit was nothing more than a monster capable of murdering his family simply through the abuse of anabolic steroids. I can't let myself believe that the man who I followed for over a decade was the same man who committed such a horrible crime. Still, nothing in the investigation of the situation gives me anything else to consider. I want to know why a man loved by his friends, respected by his coworkers, and universally lauded by wrestling fans could destroy both his family and the wrestling business when he seemed to love both so much. When steroids appear to be the only thing anyone is willing to blame, it makes me question everything I know about the wrestling business.

If the drugs that Benoit took made him this monster, and he was this monster his entire life, that means I supported and idolized this monster for my entire life as a

wrestling fan. He was the man that I wanted to learn from as a young wrestler. I wanted him to teach me some new holds, show me how to put together an amazing match, and ultimately help me reach the next level in my career. Once I got to the WWE, I was supposed to learn from Eddy Guerrero and Chris Benoit. In the course of less than two years, Guerrero died before his time, and Benoit became a murderer. Everything I love about the wrestling business is changing, and not for the better.

Standing up, I walk away from my computer desk and to the kitchen for a glass of water. Slowly drinking the cold liquid, the knot that developed in my stomach weeks ago after that fateful Monday angrily stirs deep inside of me. I should have known that things hadn't changed. Nothing about this situation is going to get better anytime soon.

Professional wrestling is going to change, and that transformation is likely to be painful and dramatic. Putting the glass in the sink, I stare out the window and into the distance, focused on nothing. Wrestling was once the most familiar and comfortable part of my life, the place I always went to when things were difficult in my own life. Now that everything bad in my life centers around the wrestling world, I have nowhere to turn, and there is no feeling more empty and saddening than that.

Anniversary Present from Misty

July 27th, 2007. Misty and I are celebrating our anniversary, each presenting gifts to the other. Before handing me a thin, flat present, Misty gets an uncomfortable look on her face. "What's wrong?" I ask her, wondering what could be causing her such discomfort about giving me an anniversary present. "I've had this present for a while, and I really wish I had given it to you a long time ago." Confused by her concern, I reassure her that no matter what the item is I will still love it, but she doesn't seem convinced.

Undoing the tape, I slowly remove the paper off of the package. I notice that it is some sort of photograph and as I reveal it, the concern on Misty's face becomes clear. In my hands lies an autographed photograph that would have been one of my most treasured possessions less than six weeks earlier, Eddy Guerrero and Chris Benoit standing together in the ring at the end of Wrestlemania 20. Both men were champions at the end of that show, and the image of them standing in the center of the ring with confetti soaring down around them had been my favorite moment as a fan since that day. Now, the photograph was a surreal and painful reminder of how things change.

I could sense Misty's unhappiness at the timing of the gift, but nothing about me wished to blame her for the uncomfortable nature of the circumstances surrounding it. I gently pull her to me and embrace her in a hug, thanking her for the gift and reassuring her that I cherished it and the intent she had went getting it for me.

"Are you sure you aren't upset about it?" she asks quietly, on the verge of tears.

"Misty, nothing about this is going to make me upset with you. Yes, this picture makes me sad, but that is not your fault. In another time, this would have been one of the greatest gifts you could have given me." I paused, making sure she was going to be okay.

"Don't feel bad about it just because things outside of your control changed the situation. I still love you and I am extremely thankful for the thought you put into this gift." I kiss her, put the picture aside, and finish exchanging gifts with her. I'm not sure when I'll be able to hang the picture on my wall.

CHAPTER SIX: "LIVING WITHOUT A DREAM"

Desired Validation

Driving Home After a Day of Graduate Classes-Fall 2008

Opening the door on my tired 1993 Chrysler LeBaron, I dejectedly throw my bag into the passenger seat and let go a half-hearted sigh as I get into the car. I've now been a graduate student for over two months, and I can't think of a time in my life in which I have been more miserable. After my world fell apart following the Benoit murder-suicide, graduate school seemed like the logical choice, but nothing about that choice now is even remotely positive.

Trying to make the transition into the world of graduate studies has been a nightmare. Competition between first and second year grad students has led to some nearly vicious treatments and more than a few confrontations that have been rather uncomfortable for me to handle, even if I was not directly involved in them. These tensions have also detracted from the information being presented in my classes, making my understanding of the subject matter suffer. Add in the fact that one of my grades rests on a semester-long group that doesn't get along in the slightest, and graduate school has felt like a complete disaster to me thus far. Nothing about this life feels like I made the right choice when my wrestling dream fell apart.

Driving along State Street in downtown Boise, I can't help but feel like somehow I'm being punished for making the wrong choices in my life. There isn't a single day that I look forward to going to school, dreading each consecutive class even more than the

previous one. My friends and family are all busy with their own problems, and my girlfriend is having issues with her roommates, leaving me without much of a support base for the last couple of months. Every time I come home from another day in graduate school hell, I'm met with nothing but other people's concerns and problems, forcing me to deal with my issues in my own time.

I roll down window and let the cool fall air flow through the red interior of the LeBaron, hoping to let me head clear a bit of the past few months away. Beginning to feel a little bit better as I put some distance between school and myself, a pitiful protest comes growling up from my stomach. Realizing that I haven't eaten anything for hours, I pull into WinCo to see if the grocery store has anything that will quiet my stomach.

Walking around the large supermarket, I see a number of people going about their lives, buying groceries on their way home from work. I wonder how many of them have achieved their dreams. Are they happy with the lives they have created? Did everything go as they planned? Thinking about my own place in life, I can't help but feel a bit sick when I look at where I am now as opposed to where I was supposed to be. I find myself suffering through graduate school, each day making me wish I had never enrolled in the first place. I was supposed to be completing my wrestling training, not dreading my next day of class. I was supposed to be figuring out how to get noticed by the WWE, not feeling like my scholarly work isn't good enough for anyone else. I was supposed to be learning the Frog Splash, not feeling like I don't belong in the company of the established graduate students. I was *supposed* to be Kid Xtreme, not a shell of my former self.

Still walking by myself through the busy store, I begin wondering how I could ever feel like I was truly myself again. What does it mean to be "me?" Whatever the

answer is, I'm sure it isn't who I am now. Nowhere in my life is there room for me to be broken down like this, miserable in the world in which I have placed myself. I have never met a person who dreamed more passionately than I did. Everything about who I was centered around achieving my goal, and now everything I am centers around just mentally surviving until the next day. Somehow, I have to find my way out of this, and into a world where I can be true to myself again.

A question presents itself in my mind, feeling forbidden and impossible at first, yet more plausible as I think about it. *Why can't I be a wrestler?* As I consider the question, it holds a certain bit of validity that maybe never left in the first place. Why can't I be a wrestler? I sure don't feel like I belong in the world of academia, as those establishing themselves are becoming the kind of people I could never become. I find myself in an ironic situation. Once again, I'm in a world filled with people making choices I do not agree with, and worried that I may become like them. Much as I didn't want to make the same choice as those wrestlers claimed by the wrestling business, I found myself now wishing desperately that I didn't become like those students mistreating the new graduates. A sad chuckle escapes my lips as I consider the similarity between those situations. Maybe wrestling isn't as uniquely dangerous as I thought, just dangerous in different ways. Academics may not tend to be as violent as wrestlers, but that doesn't stop those of a certain character from mistreating and emotionally abusing those around them. Maybe, the profession doesn't matter. Maybe, the individual does.

With this fresh set of discoveries flowing through my mind, I try to reconsider the world of professional wrestling. I picture a world in which I once again am an aspiring wrestler. I picture myself going to Buddy Wayne's wrestling school, graduating and

making my way to the WWE. I picture making my debut on WWE Raw, and getting to meet Shawn Michaels and Chris Jericho. I picture myself having an incredible rookie year as a wrestler, becoming massively popular with the crowd. I picture headlining Wrestlemania, winning the world title. I picture a glorious and long-lasting career that finds me inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame. As I picture each of these scenes in my mind, I realize that something very important is missing that used to always be there, my passion. Everything now is a daydream, where in the past it had been a goal. It is fine for me to daydream all I want about wrestling, but I will never do it. I can't. Professional wrestling requires passion, and I lost mine in the summer of 2007. I buy a drink and walk back out to my car. I'm not hungry anymore.

Self-Identification

The Wrestler

After months of eagerly awaiting the Idaho debut of the critically acclaimed film, *The Wrestler*, I'm in downtown Boise with Misty waiting in line at The Flicks, the local art house movie theater. From the first time that I heard about this movie, it immediately became my most anticipated film. I have seen a great deal of Darren Aronofsky's work, and I have faith in his skill to portray the world of independent wrestling accurately. Add the talent of Mickey Rourke to the equation, and I'm more than a little bit enthusiastic about seeing the world of professional wrestling get a serious treatment by the film industry.

Finally reaching the ticket window, I purchase a pair of tickets, and we walk into The Flicks. Waiting in line at the concessions counter, we each order an Italian soda and sit down at a table to wait for the previous movie to get out. "From what I hear, this is a

pretty intense movie," I tell Misty as a warning while we each sip raspberry Italian soda. "That's okay, I know how much you want to see this, and I want to be with you," she replies with a smile, still supporting my dwindling wrestling side long after the Benoit fallout decimated it. "Thanks," I quietly reply before the crowd begins to shuffle out from the previous showing. Judging by the positive reactions, the film seems to impress the Boise audience as much as it has the critics.

Finding seats in the theater, we settle in and I let everything bad about the wrestling business leave my mind. Nothing about my past life has been pleasant to remember in my current world, but it's time for that to be forgotten for the duration of this film. As the trailers play for a number of other independent films, I reconsider the last couple of years. Going from an aspiring wrestler to hating everything about the wrestling business, to becoming a graduate student and questioning my very reasons for feeling abandoned by the business I loved so much, I find myself now inhabiting a strange place. No longer a naïve wrestling enthusiast, no longer full of feelings of hate and betrayal, I now exist somewhere in between. Somehow I understand the business better now than I thought I did in either of those extremes. I consider that realization as the beginning moments of the movie begin, and I'm lost in the world of *The Wrestler*.

Immediately the film speaks to me. I meet a man past his prime, Randy "The Ram" Robinson, in whom wrestling is so ingrained that his life is not complete without it. Robinson continues to wrestle in the independent circuit, in front of very small crowds and for little pay. Everything he does is for the satisfaction of still being able to wrestle. The intrigue of the movie becomes personal when a particularly brutal "hardcore" match, against real-life wrestler "The Necro Butcher," triggers a heart attack (a match that

shocks Misty due to its graphic, yet authentic, nature and makes her glad I'm not wrestling). When "The Ram" wakes up in the hospital and learns of his condition, resulting in a long scar running down the middle of his chest, I run my fingers along my own scar and take in the eerie similarities between the two. Randy Robinson is a man who cannot let wrestling go, and it has even threatened to take his life. I'm a man who let wrestling go, and it felt like it took my life when I did.

As the film concludes and Randy "The Ram" Robinson realizes that his life will never be complete without wrestling, he takes the chance and wrestles one more match against his doctor's orders. As he flies over the camera in the last moment of the film to deliver his signature "Ram Jam," a flying dive similar to a Frog Splash, I feel the last two years of my life come crashing in on me. Everything in that movie made the wrestling business out to be entirely unglamorous, even dangerous and sad, but I still understood why "The Ram" stuck with it. In a world that made him feel like an outsider, wrestling always welcomed him home. Granted, there were always dangers, and he made some less than intelligent choices with his health, but Randy Robinson found his home, a home that would always feel welcome. The rest of the world could give up on him, even drive him away, and wrestling would always be there waiting.

Understanding what that meant, and fully aware of how sad it made me, I stand up quietly with a solemn but clearly affected expression on my face. Misty asked me what I thought, and I replied confidently, "I loved everything about it. I understood everything about it. Somehow, that will always be my world." I could tell that parts of the film bothered Misty, but she also seemed to understand why they didn't bother me.

As we walk to the car, I begin talking about a number of things in the movie with a strange enthusiasm I haven't felt about something related to wrestling in a long time.

Back at home and lying in bed, I begin questioning what everything meant. My reactions to the movie, my realization of my new place in understanding the wrestling business, my inability to let it all go permanently. As I slowly feel sleep approach, my questions don't seem to have answers. Am I going to be able to let wrestling go? Will it ever be a large part of my life again? Do I even want it to?

Trying to Watch Benoit Match-August 2008

Flipping through my DVD binder full of pro-wrestling, I'm saddened as I stop on the Chris Benoit compilation set. Titled *Hard Knocks: The Chris Benoit Story*, it was one of my favorite DVD sets when the WWE first put it out a couple of years ago. Filled with classic bouts against Eddy Guerrero, Kurt Angle, and various other international wrestling legends, the set also featured an in-depth biographical documentary of one of the best wrestlers in the history of the business. When I first purchased it, I immediately rushed through it all eagerly, devouring the footage with an enthusiasm I only reserved for matches with my very favorite wrestlers. Only Eddy Guerrero, Shawn Michaels, Keiji Muto, Kurt Angle, and Sting have been reserved for that kind of enthusiasm.

Now looking at the DVD set and reading over the match listing once again, I feel a knot grow in my stomach. These matches were among my favorites, and now I can't even imagine ever enjoying them in the past, let alone watching them again. *Chris Benoit vs. Eddy Guerrero on WCW Monday Nitro, Benoit vs. Jushin Liger in New Japan Pro Wrestling*, match after match stands out to me as I make my way down the list. My eyes freeze on one particular match, and a wave of depression hits me. *Chris Benoit vs.*

Kurt Angle for the WWE Championship at the 2003 Royal Rumble. A match that I always proudly included in my top five favorite matches of all time, a match that stood out amid the thousands of hours of footage I've watched.

At the time, I had never seen any match with the same level of athleticism and drama throughout its entirety. Angle and Benoit put together such an amazing amount of physicality that when the finish arrived and Kurt Angle sank in his signature Ankle Lock submission hold, Benoit's hand pounding on the mat to signify succumbing to the pain not only seemed inevitable but it seemed appropriate. Even for fans such as my two close friends, Matt and James, watching at the time there was no possible way that Benoit could continue. We knew that it was the end of the match, and not one of us blamed Benoit for giving up. The audience in attendance agreed, as he received a standing ovation upon returning to his feet and walking to the backstage area. A classic match, one of the best I have ever seen, and quite possibly the best match I had witnessed at that time. I have never been one to give matches ratings, but if I did, this match would have easily been perfect.

In a world after the Benoit tragedy, the match only serves as a painful memory of a past filled with thrills now long since expired. I sit for a minute contemplating the match, wondering if I can still consider it one of my favorites. I haven't watched any Chris Benoit watches since the WWE Raw tribute show airing the day after the tragedy. Every time I think about Chris Benoit, I have trouble focusing on anything other than the crimes he committed. For years, he was one of my favorite wrestlers, especially in the wake of Eddy Guerrero's death. After Eddy was gone, Benoit gave me a link to his career through one of his closest friends and greatest opponents. Now, instead of feeling

a connection to the career of my favorite wrestler, thinking of Chris Benoit only makes me feel betrayed and morose. How can I ever fondly remember the man who completely ruined my life as a wrestling fan when he chose to end his family's?

Wishing to free myself from the mental prison I've placed myself in, I slowly turn the Benoit compilation DVD around in my hand. Staring intently at the art on the disc, an intense photograph of Benoit similar to those typically used in wrestling magazines and on posters stares right back at me. His missing tooth and concentrated gaze bore into my memory as I remember a time when a picture of Chris Benoit would have been a signifier for my love of wrestling, now representing the exact opposite. Would I be feeling the same way about the wrestling business, and my future in general, if some other wrestler had committed the crimes, someone who *wasn't* one of my favorite and most respected wrestlers?

Still considering the answer to that question, I stand up and walk over to my entertainment center. Still holding the DVD in my hand, I turn on the television and silently watch the screen light up. I haven't watched the Benoit/Angle Royal Rumble match in over a year, and I desperately wish that the circumstances surrounding it now were different. After realizing that my television was on and waiting for input, I turn on my Xbox 360 to play the DVD. Opening up the disc tray, I gently place it in the gray plastic compartment. Pressing the button to close the tray, I shudder as I watch the powerful stare of the man who changed wrestling forever disappear into the gaming console.

Listening to the disc load inside the machine, I feel myself growing nervous about the idea of watching a Benoit match again. Even if it is my favorite Chris Benoit match,

the idea of seeing him from a moment in my past when things were different and I still passionately loved watching him perform felt sickening to my stomach. A lump grows in my throat and my hand trembles as I see the Xbox menu change to read "Play DVD." I can't do it. I'm not ready yet. I reach over and press the eject button. The tray opens and I remove the disc. Placing it back in the binder, a feeling of relief and safety returns to me, everything returns to normal. I put the DVD binder back on my shelf. No wrestling today.

Buddy Wayne's Health

August 2009: Fingers stepping carefully and caringly across my keyboard, I begin writing an email full of well wishes to the man previously intended to be my wrestling trainer, Buddy Wayne. A frequent collaborator to Figure Four Wrestling, Wayne spent years wrestling for a number of wrestling promotions throughout the country before opening his wrestling school. His connections in the wrestling business granted him communication with individuals working in WWE training schools, so I felt he would be my best choice back when I was still an aspiring grappler. Before I had a chance to contact him about training, everything in my life changed.

Earlier this month, in a training accident with one of his students, Wayne received a concussion that sent him to the hospital. The discovery was made during treatment that he had been suffering from a blood infection that had been present for a number of years without anyone knowing about it. This discovery led to a series of treatments in order to eliminate the infection before it caused any more damage. Unfortunately, enough was inflicted that Buddy Wayne required open-heart surgery to replace a damaged valve in his heart. Figure Four's Bryan Alvarez reported the condition to the site's members, and

the support for Buddy poured in. Everyone who read the newsletter and listened to the radio shows was familiar with Buddy Wayne's signature rough sense of humor and sad to see him in poor health. Aware of his fear of the upcoming surgery, and as someone familiar with having a heart condition, I feel compelled to send some caring words to the man who would have trained me.

Composing my email, I inform Buddy Wayne about my own heart condition and the positive outcome that resulted in regards to my longtime health. Closing with words informing him of his value to the Figure Four audience and that I would be thinking of him, I click on "send" and let my message travel over the internet to the trainer I never had. Despite never having a chance to receive training and never meeting him, I feel a connection to Buddy in a way that makes me wonder what it would have been like in my alternate life as a wrestler.

The next morning, I receive a surprisingly positive reply. Buddy thanks me for my email, and asks me a number of questions regarding my life as someone with a heart condition. He questions the type of medications I have to take (if any) and the follow-up I've required. After answering his questions, I reassure him that he is in little danger and that everything will go fine in his surgery. I feel a strange happiness as I send off the message, comfortable with being able to somehow help the man who would've been my trainer. Even if I will never get a chance to meet Buddy Wayne in person, never be trained by him, I got to help him get through something that is important to his life.

Later that day, I'm listening to the last radio show featuring Buddy Wayne before he goes under the knife, and I'm shocked to hear him thank "the listener who also went through heart surgery" for the positive words as he expresses gratitude to the Figure Four

Wrestling listeners. I never wished to get a response to my email, let alone any kind of recognition from him anywhere, and he mentioned my message during his last radio show before the surgery. I laugh a little bit, realizing that somehow I'm always going to connect myself to the wrestling business, even if it means encouraging the trainer I never knew. Buddy concludes the show, and I eagerly await hearing the outcome of his surgery the next day.

Immediately checking the internet upon waking up the morning of Buddy Wayne's surgery, I quickly click on the Figure Four link "Buddy Wayne Update." A feeling of relief and happiness explodes in me as I read Bryan Alvarez's words announcing that everything went according to plan, and Buddy Wayne is currently recovering in good health according to schedule. For once, a wrestler didn't get claimed in the middle of his life. Ironically, I realize that the concussion Buddy received from his student's botched move may have saved his life. After all, he wouldn't have gone to the hospital without it, and the blood infection could have carried out its damage to Wayne's system. Thankfully, everything lined up in a pleasant coincidence this time, and something that appeared to be an unfortunate injury ultimately led to saving a man's life. Maybe not everything in wrestling leads to tragedy.

The Death of Eddie "Umaga" Fatu

December 4th, 2009. Getting ready to leave for work, I sit down at my computer desk to check my email before the hour-long drive to Boise State. As the Internet Explorer loads up, I notice a headline that saddens me on Figure Four Wrestling. Eddie Fatu, known as "Umaga" in the WWE, is in critical condition after being found unresponsive at home by his wife. Currently, authorities assume that he had some sort of

heart attack or stroke, and is receiving care at the local hospital, with little hope for survival. Another wrestler claimed by the curse of the wrestling business. Not a good way to start my day. I step away from my computer, and head out to my car.

Driving to my office, I remember what it was like to watch Umaga wrestle. One of the most agile "big men" in the wrestling business, Umaga was capable of moving with a speed that belied his near 400-pound frame. His bouts with John Cena and Jeff Hardy were some of the best matches in the WWE in a long time. He was part of one of the biggest Wrestlemania matches in history, representing Vince McMahon in the "Hair vs. Hair" match against a Donald Trump-endorsed Bobby Lashley at Wrestlemania 23. I always enjoyed watching Umaga wrestle, and sadly knew this day would come when the company released him earlier this year for drug-test failures. Umaga had a problem with controlled substances, and sadly it looks like that problem finally caught up with him.

Arriving in my office, I see there has been no fresh news on the situation since I left my house, so I leave the matter in the back of my mind. After teaching my Friday afternoon class, I pack up my stuff and drive home, with the condition of Umaga weighing heavily in the back of my mind. I decide that it is best to wait a while before checking again on his condition. Somehow, I'm afraid that I know the outcome, but don't want anything confirmed yet. Fatu's wife found him bleeding from the nose and not breathing. At the very least, it is going to be a long time before he recovers, but I am truly worried that it is much worse. All I can think is "not another wrestler, he is only 36 years-old."

Walking into my bedroom, I slowly sit down at my computer and read the headlines as Figure Four Wrestling loads up. "Eddie 'Umaga' Fatu passes away." Once

again, I feel my heart sink as another wrestler succumbs to the allure of substance abuse in the business. Another wrestler under 40 is gone. Even more saddening, I feel myself getting used to the occurrence, and it scares me a little bit. I truly enjoyed watching him wrestle, and he was far too talented to be called away early. Umaga came from a long line of wrestlers in his family, with only one family member overshadowing him athletically, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson.

Watching me turn away from my computer, Misty can tell by the look on my face that something is wrong. "What's wrong, honey?" she asks. "Umaga died." I reply, and briefly recap the day's events to her. She understands what it means to me, seeing another young and talented wrestler fall to the business, and she shares my solemn attitude as I send my friend Brent a text. "Umaga died. He was 36."

The New "Monday Night War" Begins

January 4th, 2010. For the first time in over eight years, there is head-to-head primetime wrestling on a Monday night. Not since the days of the famous wrestling war between WWF/WWE and WCW has there been direct competition on the most important night of the week for pro-wrestling. Total Nonstop Action Wrestling, TNA, is starting over tonight with intent to compete directly with Vince McMahon's wrestling empire. Normally airing on Thursdays, this week TNA Impact is on a Monday night.

Hulk Hogan is debuting with TNA, and with him comes a number of wrestling personalities famous from the previous "Monday Night War." Honestly, in a life burned by wrestling to the point that I often have trouble keeping interest, I'm honestly more excited about wrestling than I have been in a long time. As someone who started

watching wrestling right at the beginning of the first battle, I'm anxious to see the competition heat up once again.

I enter my parents' living room, ready to watch wrestling with my dad as I used to in the past, fully aware that he is intrigued by the idea of seeing some familiar faces from the past once again. Tonight looks to have an impressive lineup, from the rebirth of TNA on one side, to the WWE return of Bret Hart on the other. Hart left the company twelve years prior, and plenty of bad blood has been involved in the departure. Now, in a classic example of how you can "never say never" in the wrestling business, Bret "The Hitman" Hart is going to return to Vince McMahon's company. Regardless of which company has the more successful program, tonight is the most historically relevant night in professional wrestling in a long time.

Grabbing a ginger ale and sitting on the couch, I feel the warmth of nostalgia hit me as I watch TNA Impact open with the promise of the arrival of Hulk Hogan and company. I think back to my days as a devout fan of WCW, remembering every Nitro filled with potential for amazing surprises and shocking twists. I then remind myself that not everything about WCW was as perfect as I would like it to be; in fact, it eventually became terrible. However, during the peak of the Monday Night War, WCW was tremendous, and now many of the people involved get to help create a new company. TNA has the chance to be reborn as true competition to the WWE, and I can't wait to see it happen. Tonight, I'm going to step back across the Monday Night War lines and support the WWE's opposition. Tonight, TNA is my WCW.

The arrival of Hulk Hogan is announced, and my dad hurries into the room and sits down on the couch next to me. For a moment, I return to 1996, watching WCW

Monday Nitro with my dad, eagerly soaking all of it in. Hulk makes his way out to the ring, and soon I see a number of faces that were fixtures of my youth. Hogan, Scott Hall, Kevin Nash, Ric Flair, Eric Bischoff, and even Sting all appear in quick succession on TNA television.

Thankfully, these aging wrestlers do not look to be the focus of the wrestling in TNA, as focus is quickly placed on the young upcoming talent on the roster. I'm glad to see the old faces again, but breathe a sigh of relief when I realize that they are not going to be wrestling each other as much as they are going to play other roles. The time has come for new talent to shine, and the legends can help make that happen.

During the first commercial break, I quickly flip over to WWE Raw and watch a surreal moment as two men with a less than favorable real-life history together, Shawn Michaels and Bret Hart, hug in the middle of the ring and end their animosity that has lived for the past twelve years. As a huge Shawn Michaels fans, I find myself getting goose bumps watching something I never thought I would see happen, but the nostalgic part of me flips back to TNA Impact as soon as Raw goes to commercial. This routine repeats itself throughout the rest of the night, flipping back and forth during commercials, but always placing emphasis in Impact, watching nearly the entire show. Something about getting to see faces from WCW mixed in with a new fresh set of faces that aren't the same old WWE talent has got me hooked on tonight's Impact. Years ago, the subpar writing and pacing of TNA television pushed me away and I quit watching it. With new people behind the helm and a plethora of memories relived, I find myself seeing the company with as fresh set of eyes and thoroughly enjoying it. The new "Monday Night War" is beginning, and wrestling can only benefit from the competition.

As Impact and Raw end, I feel the wave of nostalgia slowly pull away, leaving me still feeling giddy about getting to relive a moment from my past. I'm eagerly looking forward to seeing how this turns out, hoping for resurgence in a stagnating wrestling scene. Tonight was a big step to making that possible. The matches were good, the energy was high, and it felt like maybe wrestling stands a chance of being truly good again. My own experience with the horrors of the wrestling business clearly led me in a particular direction in terms of my own interest in the product, but a lack of viable competition with the WWE has created an environment without innovation, with the fans being the ones on the losing end.

January 5th 2010: Sitting down at my computer the next day, I hurriedly peruse the wrestling websites eager for news regarding the ratings for the two shows. If TNA managed to get good enough ratings, the experiment of moving Impact to Monday night could become permanent. What I find shocks me. Not only did TNA Impact receive the largest rating in company history last night, but it managed to pull enough viewers from WWE Raw that the return of Bret Hart after 12 years didn't spike the WWE ratings at all. I never thought that would be possible. TNA is still relatively unknown in the mainstream, but the ratings were extremely positive. The "Monday Night War" can happen again. The ghost of WCW is alive and well in Total Nonstop Action Wrestling. Professional wrestling might just be getting ready to turn around again. I think back to when I was an aspiring wrestler, and how I was so devastated when WCW closed down. I remembered asking myself, "How am I going to work for WCW now?" I think about how terrible that all was, and I smile to myself. I never thought it would happen, but nearly nine years later, WCW is back. The war is on.

CHAPTER SEVEN: ANALYSIS

Desired Validation

In terms of my desire for validation, it quickly became apparent to me that as I developed my dream to become a professional wrestler I simultaneously sought some form of confirmation from those around me. Essentially looking to justify my choice to direct my life toward a career in professional wrestling, I sought support from a number of different facets of my life: family, friends, teachers, and even society. That validation played an important role in the development of my dream and subsequent disillusionment with that goal.

"Creating a Dream"

The craving for support in my dreams and wishes presented itself early on in my life as a wrestling fan. One of my earliest memories as a wrestling fan is less the actual content of the programming, and more getting my mother's permission to watch professional wrestling when my father wasn't around. Getting to watch wrestling on my own was a very significant threshold to cross, as my mom had not always been approving of professional wrestling when my dad chose to leave it on. My perception of her approach to professional wrestling made it difficult to breach the subject with her, often missing wrestling on weeks when my father worked late. Eventually, my interest grew to the point that I finally gained the courage to ask for permission to watch wrestling. That early scene in my experience as a wrestling fan exposed the role that desired validation

would play in my entire life, as well as signifying my first memorable experience with commonly held negative sentiment regarding the wrestling business.

Once a love for the wrestling business developed that drove me to the realizing that I wished to pursue it as a career, my experience with seeking validation from others only increased. My mom once again became the subject of this validation early on, perhaps stemming from my previous experience with her unwillingness to accept the wrestling business. Receiving her approval (or at least acceptance) of my desire to be a professional wrestler signified my first major step on the road to a life in that world. Following the consent of my mother, gaining the approval of Dr. Nichols only finalized my resolve to aim for a career as a wrestler. During this formative time in my lived experience as an aspiring wrestler, the consent of those adults important to me justified my choices and gave me the validation necessary to move forward with my goals.

My first experience with direct contention to my life goals, therefore, was very significant due to the source being a trusted adult. Having my high school English teacher directly tell me that I was not going to be a professional wrestler not only shocked me, but it left me feeling vulnerable. She gave me no explanation, and I could never understand why she would seek to deny me that dream through her words. For my entire life, my relationship with teachers had always been one of admiration and trust. It wasn't until later in life that I realized how preferential treatment I received in grade school because of my academic performance likely led to my poor treatment from my fellow students. Hence, early in high school I was still very trusting of my teachers and assumed they held a role of support in their students' lives.

As illustrated in the narrative, I saw nothing unacceptable about my wish to become a professional wrestler, so when I received a blunt refusal to my declaration of such dreams, it stunned me. Again, the commonly held negative view of professional wrestling presented itself to me. However, for the first time, that disapproving sentiment was pronounced and from a trusted adult in my life. That reaction from my English teacher haunted me for years, as it had directly opposed my subconscious desire to receive validation from those around me. That scene acted as a pivotal moment in my desire for validation, influencing my future willingness to reveal my dream to others.

As my life in high school concluded, my desire for validation transitioned away from only the adults around me and to those I called peers. Moving into adulthood, I found myself focusing on those around me for approval, clearly exhibiting the theme of desire for validation. I looked to my high school friends, eagerly wanting to make them proud when I returned years later as an accomplished professional wrestler. My final day at Emmet High School, receiving my yearbook and telling my friends goodbye reflected that wish. Each time one of them mentioned my dream of becoming a professional wrestler, I felt a sense of pride swell up inside of me. Professional wrestling was going to be my life, and knowing that my closest friends supported me only strengthened that desire.

Following the lived experience narrative into college, my peers remained the most significant source of the validation I pursued, as my focus shifted away from respected adults in my life and toward those closer to me. Pride in my own personal collection of wrestling footage led to a brief moment of desired validation from my sister, resulting in her alarm at my extensive collection of wrestling tapes and DVDs. As opposed to the

disappointed reaction I felt from my interaction with my English teacher, I experienced no direct emotional response to my sister's less than enthusiastic reply to my announcement. Partially, this likely had to do with her much less severe refusal of my passion as compared to my teacher.

However, that particular instance signified an evolution of my approach to the negative opinions concerning professional wrestling present in my life. Earlier scenes of unfavorable attitudes regarding the wrestling business, ranging from the mild disapproval of my mother to the starkly pessimistic reaction of my English teacher, clearly affected me at a more significant level. Once I began approaching my contemporaries for support in my dreams, the positive feedback I received was much more important than any negativity. The importance of positive criticism and confirmation from my peers was most evident during the scene recounting my experiences in undergraduate creative writing courses.

The discovery that other writers in my class were not immediately opposed to my story as an aspiring wrestler presented a turning point in my narrative journey into professional wrestling. For me as a young college student still trying to find my role in the university setting as I made progress toward my goal of wrestling, receiving rousing acclaim for my choice to present my dreams in creative writing provided every bit of validation needed. When those around me, specifically my colleagues in the college setting, demonstrated a willingness to take my dreams seriously, any previous negativity was nullified. The last memorable moment regarding the impact of those around me on my resolve to become a wrestler, the theme of desired validation changed later in the narrative.

"Watching a Dream Die"

As my experience as a wrestling fan and aspiring future wrestler changed in the events following the death of Eddy Guerrero, so did my desire for validation from those around me. Instead of trying to find ways to gain support from my family, friends, and assorted peers, my view on the wrestling world changed significantly enough that personal validation was no longer necessary. Eddy Guerrero's death opened my eyes to the frequently tragic side of a wrestling business filled with drug abuse.

Guerrero had managed to clean up his life, but nothing could save him from the damage he had already caused. His tragic death sparked conversations about drug testing in the wrestling business, as well as the inordinate amount of wrestlers dying before the age of 40. Due to these changing developments in the business I grew up passionately loving, in addition to seeing the dark side of the wrestling business become public, my desire for validation could no longer be fulfilled by those around me. Wrestling's less than favorable behind-the-scenes atmosphere finally forced its way into my personal connection to the business, claiming the life of my favorite wrestler. I could no longer look for validation from my friends and family when wrestling had betrayed me so severely.

Those feelings of betrayal, paired with my altered approach to achieving validation came into play significantly following the Benoit murder/suicide. Whereas the death of Eddy Guerrero marked the first moment that my eyes were truly opened to the tragic side of wrestling, Chris Benoit killing his family and himself damaged my perspective irreparably. Guerrero's death prompted the general public to consider wrestling deaths for a short time, whereas Benoit's actions firmly placed professional

wrestling in the media spotlight for months. Every instance of negative sentiment toward the wrestling business present previously in my narrative dramatically amplified. However, rather than just existing among scattered acquaintances, disapproval permeated throughout society.

News stories condemned pro-wrestling, wrestlers argued with each other on talk shows, and a generally terrible situation developed concerning perception of the wrestling business. This meant that validation from those around me would no longer suffice. I needed to see something in society that would give me reason to continue in my dreams. The media coverage following the Benoit tragedy only caused that need to suffer. Current WWE employees arguing with former wrestlers, each clearly operating with ulterior motives, only harmed the public image of wrestling. The more I looked for validation in my wrestling goals, the less I found. It soon became clear to me that the media was content riding a horrifying story of "roid-rage," with no further explanations explored in coverage of the Benoit murder. Every piece of media coverage contributed to the creation of an image of Chris Benoit as a steroid-addled monster, depicted as a murderer created through drug abuse that could likely be recreated again in a terrible wrestling business. At this point in the narrative, my desire for validation only suffered; leading to a feeling that the wrestling business was something I may not want in my future. My voice during these scenes expressed a desperate need to feel justified in my choice to pursue a career in wrestling, and no place to find that in a post-Benoit world.

The role of validation in my personal life took an interesting turn in the events following the Chris Benoit murder/suicide. Once looking for support from those around me, in one particular instance I became the source of validation. My anniversary with

Misty provided the unique moment in which I had to confirm her choice of anniversary present. As indicated in the scene, a photograph of Eddy Guerrero and Chris Benoit would have been an amazing gift months earlier, and her guilt in giving me the gift provided the opportunity to provide wrestling-related validation to someone else in my life. Interestingly, I no longer sought personal confirmation from those around me in a world that condemned wrestling, but *my* validation in relation to those around me found a place of importance.

"Living Without a Dream"

During the final chapter of my lived experience, my desire for support evolved to include those around me once again. However, during this time I sought a sense of self-validation most of all. Trying to cope with my decision to become a graduate student, and the less than favorable circumstances surrounding that experience, I found myself looking to justify my personal choices more than ever before. Years of my life had been spent in eager devotion to professional wrestling, and once I found myself no longer living in that world, I had to find a way to convince myself that I had made the right decision. A stressful first semester of graduate school only solidified my need for some kind of proof that I had made the right choice in ending my wrestling dreams, and nothing seemed to give me that sense of confirmation.

Throughout my narrative as an aspiring wrestler, a desire for validation played an important role. Early on, I looked to those around me for verification of my actions. I found a mixture of disapproval and enthusiastic support from those in my life, and used that feedback to influence my drive to become a wrestler. Eventually, tragic events in the wrestling world led to a swell of negative sentiment in the media for pro-wrestling. That

overwhelming pessimism permanently weakened my resolve, and contributing to the decision to give up my dream. Finally, as I found myself living in a world without wrestling, self-validation meant much more than any support from those around me. My need for validation evolved throughout my lived experience, reflecting personal changes in my relationship with professional wrestling.

Self-Identification

Self-identification in my life as an aspiring wrestler involved an evolution from mere wrestling fan to a passionate devotee who found aspects of that world that I could apply to my own life, and vice-versa. As my enthusiasm increased, so did that identification with the wrestling business and specifically the performers I admired in that industry. Once events occurred in the wrestling business that contradicted those connections, self-identification played an equally important role in the way I coped with that change, and the eventual choices made in my life.

"Creating a Dream"

A key feature of my passion for the wrestling business, amplifying significantly once I made the choice to pursue a career in pro-wrestling, was a strong sense of self-identification with the world of the "squared-circle." The first instance of this was evident during the time spent with Matt playing wrestling video games. That revelation that I could make myself as a wrestler on the television screen planted the early seeds for later prominent self-identification. Wrestling video games resulted in the creation of "Kid Xtreme" who, while an admittedly juvenile character manifested simply for those games, eventually served as an internal label for my wrestling passion. The creation of that personal character gave the pro-wrestling portion of my personality a voice, only

serving to increase my association with the wrestling business. With "Kid Xtreme," I could see *myself* wrestling on my television screen. That action enabled my ability to identify with the wrestling world to increase to a much more personal level, opening my eyes for the first time to the idea that I could become a professional wrestler. I could be "Kid Xtreme," and that belief echoed through numerous scenes of self-identification in my narrative.

Once that internal voice was born, and professional wrestling felt like a tangible reality, I found ways to identify with the wrestling world everywhere in my own world. Soon, every time I watched professional wrestling, I found a way for it to tie into my future as a wrestler. The day the then-WWF purchase of WCW was announced, I found myself worrying about where I was going to wrestle in my career. I had always pictured myself being a WCW performer, and finding myself staring at a wrestling world without World Championship Wrestling left me feeling momentarily lost. My self-identification with wrestling was so strong already that a loyalty to WCW developed with full intentions of gaining employment in that company. Nothing about the death of World Championship Wrestling should have left me with anything more than sadness over losing the chance to watch my favorite wrestlers anymore. Instead, a frustrating disappointment over not having the chance to wrestle under the WCW banner vastly overshadowed any loss of my favorite performers. Clearly, self-identification had begun taking an important place in my life as an aspiring wrestler. Already, my wrestling exposure tied directly into planning for my future.

Once I transitioned from following World Championship Wrestling to passionately devoting myself to the newly christened World Wrestling Entertainment, the

level of self-identification in my narrative increased in terms of my habits as a viewer. My first exposure to Wrestlemania represented a step forward as I found myself for the first time witnessing the absolute pinnacle of wrestling spectacle and bravado. Soon, I developed an unparalleled respect for Wrestlemania, eventually collecting every prior event and creating a yearly tradition of my "Wrestlemania Party."

As illustrated in the narrative scene recounting my first live WWE event, nothing witnessed during televised wrestling or on pay-per-view compared in terms of the level of connection I felt concerning wrestling performers. Every bit of passion I enacted with regard to my ultimate goal of becoming a wrestler instantly legitimized itself beyond question as I spent an evening in the Bank of America Center soaking in the live wrestling experience. Finally seeing the WWE superstars in person solidified my concept of professional wrestling. Statements such as "secretly, I wish that somehow I could just leave with the crew, traveling on the road and living in a world that truly feels like home" echo the immediate increase in self-identification experienced that night. As I watched the athletes clash in the ring, I saw myself. I saw "Kid Xtreme" walking down the aisle, stepping between the ropes, and giving the audience an amazing performance they would never forget. Nothing before had thrilled me so much about becoming a professional wrestler, and walking out of the arena that night I could see no other career for myself.

Self-identification with wrestling became so instilled in my life that it began bleeding over into my actions away from the television screen. A common occurrence during my time spent in high school classrooms, daydreaming about the wrestling business only served to hone my identification with the wrestlers I wished to emulate. I

created numerous personas, fantasized about wrestling storylines, and invented new wrestling maneuvers. I essentially spent hours of my life musing about my future as a professional wrestler. These daydreams were substantial to moving my self-identification with the wrestling business beyond my immediate interaction with professional wrestling. I had begun letting wrestling dictate other parts of my life, no longer limiting it to the basic action of *watching* wrestling.

I then began to let myself make choices that were entirely wrestling related. Whether that meant emulating the face paint of a favorite wrestler for my high school homecoming game, or going to the extent of actually performing the Frog Splash dive made famous by my favorite wrestler, I lived my life in emulation of those I idolized. I actually set up an apparatus that allowed me to dive from the back of a full-sized tractor and land a Frog Splash. Self-identification led me to endangering my own health in order to learn the moves of the wrestlers I loved. I never got into any sort of "backyard wrestling" with my friends, but didn't hesitate in risking personal injury to master a wrestling move. That very action clearly exhibits identification with the wrestlers I admired.

After high school, my connection to the wrestling business moved beyond simple (yet dangerous) actions and actually informed important decisions in my life. I chose to become a communication major at Boise State University only because of the potential it would give me for a commentary career in wrestling. I knew very little about the communication field, yet my identification was so strong that I proudly chose my major in the department, leading to my eventual undergraduate degree and enrollment in the master's program. I became immersed in the community theater scene in my hometown,

not for an interest in acting but because I wanted stage experience to prepare me for working in front of a live crowd. I quickly assimilated into acting, and found something else that I was passionate about, but still made the choice only to aid my future as a wrestler.

Self-identification with the wrestling business influenced not only my simple day-to-day behaviors during the early portion of my wrestling narrative, but the important choices in my life such as my education choices and involvement with a hobby that led to a seven-year connection to the Emmett Community Playhouse. I became a communication major and an amateur actor simply because I wanted to become a professional wrestler. In my mind, I needed to have a degree that would give me options elsewhere in the wrestling business. I believed those options could only be obtained through mass communication study, so I whole-heartedly pursued that degree. I needed experience working in front of a live crowd, so I devoted myself to becoming the best actor possible.

Acting and college became important facets of my life, but only existed in the way that they do because I believed them to be necessary steps on my journey. I believed that I needed to make those choices because they were natural for my development, so I made them without considering my own interest in them. I wanted to be a wrestler, and my self-identification meant that certain choices were necessary.

"Watching a Dream Die"

I continued identifying extensively with the wrestling business, leading to an extremely personal connection by the time that Eddy Guerrero's death affected my world. Guerrero had been one of my most-admired wrestlers during my entire time as a fan, and

was definitely my *favorite* wrestler for years at the time of his death. I collected hours of Eddy Guerrero footage from his entire career; eagerly picked apart each of his performances to learn about the wrestling business, and even endangered myself learning his finishing move. When he tragically died before the age of 40, my world crashed to a halt, as exposed in change in voice present in the narrative.

I self-identified so much with Eddy Guerrero that when I found myself confronted with a wrestling world without Eddy, my reaction was extremely personal. I felt as though a mentor died, a friend. Eddy Guerrero defined so much about my wrestling experience that when his past drug experience claimed his life, everything I knew about the wrestling business changed. I spent weeks mourning his death, trying to understand my role as an aspiring wrestler. For the first time as an aspiring wrestler, I questioned the wrestling business.

Eventually, Eddy's death only gave me more determination to become a professional wrestler, eager to pay tribute to his memory. My perceived identification with the wrestling business drove me forward to the point that I made a choice on a wrestling school, based on a desire to enter the WWE specifically. I chose Buddy Wayne's school because I believed that he could get me to the company where Guerrero finished his career. Self-identification with my fallen hero had motivated me even more to enter the wrestling business after college. Everything about my life was ready to become a wrestler when the events of June 2007 derailed it all.

My reaction to the actions of Chris Benoit was primarily influenced by my self-identification with wrestling and specific wrestlers. In the wake of Eddy Guerrero's death, Chris Benoit served as a final link to my hero. Guerrero and Benoit were close

friends for years, and by association, I became closely linked to Benoit myself. My self-identification with Benoit was clearest when considering how the news of the murder of his family and subsequent suicide deeply affected me. This section of my narrative exposed a great deal of that outcome. Feelings of guilt and shame accompanied my sadness over the tragedy. I had spent so many years emulating the wrestling performers I admired, intent on becoming like them, that when something truly terrible occurred involving one of them, self-identification led me to feel somehow connected and responsible. My language during the narrative reflected that. I proclaimed that I felt guilt for feeling like I "supported a monster." The name "Chris Benoit" became an object of physical and psychological pain.

This reaction revealed a great deal about how much I felt connected to those wrestlers whose footsteps I wished to follow. As illustrated throughout the narrative, I felt as though I was being forced to cope with the actions of someone I felt connected to and wished to be like. I had never met Chris Benoit. Much of his personal life was hidden from me. Yet when he did something that was incongruous with my image of him, I found myself emotionally shattered. That emotional state only continued in the events following the Benoit tragedy, when evidence of extensive drug abuse permeated the already scathing coverage present in the media.

The Signature Pharmacy internet sting drove me further into a depression fueled by my identification with the wrestling business. Numerous wrestlers were exposed as being customers of this pharmacy, purchasing performance-enhancing substances that knowingly led to many premature deaths. Wrestlers who adamantly espoused the

WWE's supposed drug-free environment, like Ken Anderson, were revealed as having acquired steroids and other similar substances from Signature Pharmacy.

In a world where "roid rage" was the popular phrase for condemning wrestling, the list of names released during the investigation of the internet pharmacy directly affected my self-identification with the performers I idolized. Whereas before I saw men and women who I wished nothing more than to emulate, I found a man who murdered his family and a list of liars who tried to support an industry filled with drug abuse; and for the first time I felt completely disgusted with the wrestling business. The revelation that Eddy Guerrero received steroids mere days before his death was nearly too much to comprehend. Guerrero was supposed to be clean, but it turned out that "clean" only meant that he was no longer abusing more illicit substances. In my mind, one of my heroes was a liar, and the other was a murderer. Nothing about my self-identification with wrestling had resulted in anything but grief and guilt in the fall of 2007.

Once the realization made news that Chris Benoit's brain had been traumatized through years of physical abuse, my connection with wrestling became too personal. Long before, I had resolved to be completely drug free as a wrestler, especially following the death of Eddy Guerrero. The issue of brain damage and head injuries was something I could not avoid through personal choices. Regardless of how careful I could be as a wrestler, accidents would happen and head injuries would occur. No amount of care in the ring could completely prevent me from getting concussions, the very injuries that likely caused Chris Benoit's actions. The realization associated with my lifelong migraine history revealed my belief that I may be more susceptible to concussions. Nothing guaranteed that I would be, and certainly nothing about my own life suggested

that I would ever become a murderer. Still, throughout those final scenes in my life as an aspiring wrestler, I identified so much with wrestling that Chris Benoit's actions led me to fear the same thing happening to me. Benoit was one of my favorite wrestlers, and my final connection to Eddy Guerrero, so his actions became extremely personal to me. My ultimate decision about the business I longed to part of for so long tied directly into my self-identification with the wrestling business.

Trying to cope with the state of professional wrestling in late 2007 was extremely difficult for loyal fans who had been following these performers for years, including myself. Even though injuries and drug abuse were not shocking revelations to any informed wrestling fan, during earlier points in my life I believed that those troubles would not affect me. Eddy Guerrero had defeated those issues, and the lessons learned from him only made me more resolute in my drug-free lifestyle. When the demons of his past caught up to him and caused his premature death, the first definite blow struck my wrestling world. Still, my self-identification caused me to believe that I could go forth with his memory in my mind, making his example even more powerful.

However, my lifelong dreams of becoming a wrestler could not stand up to the terrible actions of a broken Chris Benoit. I could no longer ignore the effects of drug abuse and physical injury. I fully identified with the wrestling business, and therefore I began to wonder if I would be susceptible to committing the same kinds of crimes. Of course, there is no evidence that I (or anybody else) would have the same set of circumstances and outcomes as Chris Benoit, but my self-identification with wrestling was so great that I was unable to see that at the time. Seeing two of my favorite wrestlers die from years of abuse, compounded with the second murdering his family in the

process, as well as the mass of drug related suspensions of wrestlers who were close to Eddy ended any previous visions I had of the wrestling business. As a narrator, I transitioned from an enthusiastic wrestling hopeful to an individual more disgusted with the wrestling business than those around me. I could no longer identify myself with a business so full of dangerous behavior that it led my heroes to their own deaths and the horrific deaths of innocent people. I had spent years wanting to "be like them," and when I could no longer ignore the tragic dark side to the industry, I wanted to be anything but "them."

"Living Without a Dream"

The narrative involving the years of my life without a wrestling dream revealed my waning self-identification with the wrestling business, but at the same time an unwillingness to let that go permanently. Watching *The Wrestler* opened my eyes to the permanent connection I had (and still have) to a life created over many years, even if that no longer involves becoming a wrestler. Identifying in some way with the character of Randy "The Ram" Robinson revealed the bittersweet revelation that I will never be able to let the wrestling business go. Far too much life was devoted to a lifelong dream of wrestling, and even though I had accepted the end of that part of my life, I could never let it completely go. Later events reflected this permanent fixture of wrestling in my life, both positively and negatively.

Attempting to watch Chris Benoit matches proved fruitless, as my self-identification was still pronounced enough that the very idea of reliving his past battles sickened me. Many of my favorite matches could no longer be considered part of my life as a wrestling fan because Benoit meant nothing more than sadness and guilt. The

narrative revealed that the events of 2007 affected me on such a personal level that I could not consider Chris Benoit's career objectively, no matter how much I admired him in the past.

Providing consolation to Buddy Wayne prior to his heart surgery revealed a brief moment in which my identification with the wrestling business paid off positively.

Wayne never met me, let alone trained me, but he represented a time in my life that was so important to my development that I felt obligated to help him in any way possible once I found out that he needed heart surgery. Finally, my heart condition allowed me to help someone else, and the brief bond I had with Buddy before his surgery provided me with a small portion of hope that not everything in my life of wrestling had ended in a negative manner. Throughout my lived experience, I identified with wrestling so extensively that I felt like I knew many of the individuals in the business, without meeting them. In the case of Guerrero, Benoit, and many other wrestlers, that perceived connection resulted in disappointment, anger, and guilt. Finally, with Buddy Wayne, my self-perception of the people in the wrestling business proved helpful. That crucial scene illustrated how not only my life experience helped Buddy Wayne get through his feared surgery, but also how I began to approach the wrestling business in a more mature and realistic manner.

The death of Eddie "Umaga" Fatu proved to reinforce the unfortunate side of the wrestling business, revealing a disturbingly numb acceptance of that side within myself. The death of Eddy Guerrero, and every performer who died following, saddened me deeply. However, with the traumatic events surrounding Chris Benoit's action, I lost a great deal of my self-identification with the performers I loved. Each subsequent wrestling death then filled me with frustration and anger, eventually subsiding into a

sense of deadened reservation of the inevitability of premature wrestling deaths. I had admired Umaga's career, but the wrestling business had left me realizing that nothing about that world was going to change anytime soon. Wrestling fostered drug abuse, and drug abuse caused deaths. Late in the narrative I only grew to sadly understand that, and my self-identification no longer directly linked me to the wrestlers.

The final scene of my narrative, witnessing the return of the "Monday Night Wrestling War," served to indicate the evolution of my self-identification in a life without a dream. I became a fan in a time filled with direct competition in the wrestling world. I witnessed the death of my childhood wrestling company, the birth of Total Nonstop Action Wrestling in its ashes, and its eventual rise to prominence that resulted in the beginning moments of a new "war." Returning to a moment in my past, once again watching wrestling with my dad, allowed me a sense of closure with the previous wrestling period in my life. Following the death of WCW, my devotion to a wrestling career resulted in self-identification that ultimately caused emotional suffering when my heroes were revealed in a less favorable light. Seeing everything come full circle, with a new competing company confronting the WWE, allowed me the ability to look back over my past as an aspiring wrestler. Wrestling became a nostalgic interest to me, no longer signifying my future but representing my past.

Whereas desired validation played an important part in developing my passion for a wrestling career, my self-identification with the wrestlers I admired resulted in the powerful emotional reaction I experienced following the Benoit tragedy. I felt so strong that I knew my heroes that when their actions did not align with my perceptions of them, they led to the end of my life as a wrestler. Self-identification played a prominent role in

my hero worship, as my choices were dictated by a belief that I understood everything about the wrestlers I revered. Just as my desire for validation evolved throughout my lived experience, my sense of self-identification changed. Initially existing as a means for guiding my choices, self-identification eventually served to end my desire for a career in wrestling. Once a source of direction, it eventually became the basis for my suffering.

Communication Theory

In order to understand the way that hero worship played a role in my personal life, and how that was reflected in the lived experience presented in my autoethnographic narrative, I chose to adopt elements from two mass communication theories in the sociopsychological tradition: uses and gratifications theory and cultivation theory. Primarily, in order to explain the reasons that I chose to continue to use the media to perpetuate my hero worship and explore what role that played in the themes prominent in my narrative, I elected to adapt elements from uses and gratifications theory. To a lesser degree, I modified two elements present in cultivation theory to explain the role that my media consumption played in shaping my life and the beliefs I held about the world. By employing these two theories, I allowed myself the opportunity to explore different stages of my personal hero worship, stages continuously repeated and renegotiated as themes in my experience.

Granted, despite the sociopsychological nature of the two theories, fundamental differences exist between them in terms of the role power plays in media exposure. Uses and gratifications theory places power in the audience member, allowing the media consumer to enact agency over their media choices. Cultivation theory instead assumes that power in the media message exchange lies with the media itself, as ideas are

cultivated into viewers without their consent. As illustrated, the role of power exists in a dramatically different manner between the two theories. In terms of this study, that difference is embraced and intentional. By choosing two theories that approach the role of power in a contradicting manner, I am able to approach my media consumption in a more balanced manner. Rather than assuming an either/or stance on the role of power in media consumption, my study proceeds with the assumption that both the media and the viewer are empowered.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications theory places importance not on the power of the media to control the individual, but instead on the relationship between the viewer and the media. In the case of my development from a wrestling fan into a full-fledged aspiring wrestler, my relationship with wrestling media directly influenced my continued devotion to the business. This essentially created a never-ending cycle in my media exposure, as the more I used wrestling to fulfill my wrestling needs, the more I consumed myself with wrestling media.

Many of the important scenes during my lived experience as a wrestling fan involved exposure to various forms of wrestling media, all chosen to gratify a specific need. I chose to expose myself to the wrestling in my life. Early on, wrestling consumption only involved watching WCW programming every week, before immersing myself in video games related to the wrestling business. Once I began pursuing a career in the wrestling business, interactive media such as video games became more important to my media consumption choices, as they fulfilled a need to have a personal connection between wrestling and myself. I wanted to feel a tangible bond between professional

wrestling and my life, and creating a unique wrestling character based on myself gratified that need.

Eventually, my need to fulfill a desire for wrestling led to increasing my exposure to include live events and yearly pay-per-views like Wrestlemania. I watched wrestling to fulfill needs related to my goal of becoming a wrestler, and I was entirely aware of that need. As I became more engaged in reaching my target, that need for professional wrestling exposure influenced my wrestling consumption to include footage from promotions around the world. My increased need for wrestling gratification resulted in an extensive library filled with tapes and DVDs.

Uses and gratifications theory reveals more insight into my lived experience with hero worship, further exploring the individual consequences of the phenomenon as it existed early in my narrative. The theory looks into the individual's motivations for media consumption, not for cultural interest in media consumption habits. As it applies to my experience, I was completely aware of my media consumption. I chose to increase my media habits to include more wrestling footage, video games, and every type of media possible to satiate my hunger for the wrestling business. I self-identified with the wrestling world, and especially with the performers I admired within it, thus leading to ravenous media consumption habits in order to further familiarize myself with them. I enacted complete agency over those habits, exposing myself to media not commonly present elsewhere in my own life, even going to the extent of collecting international wrestling footage. I wanted nothing more than to be like the wrestlers I loved, and amassing a large library of wrestling footage gratified that need.

My media consumption changed in reaction to the actions of Chris Benoit. Whereas previously I used wrestling media to gratify my desire for exposure to the wrestling business, in the months following the murder/suicide I changed my habits significantly. Finding myself feeling betrayed by the wrestlers I admired, my wrestling consumption lessened dramatically. When I tuned into wrestling, it was primarily out of habit. I began consuming more sources of news media, attempting to gain insight into the Benoit investigation, and only found disappointment. Soon, I took advantage of the agency uses and gratifications theory places over the viewer and stopped pursuing coverage at all.

Eventually, after I chose to stop pursuing a career as a wrestler, many weeks passed without any exposure to wrestling. Occasionally, I would watch an old DVD or catch an episode of WWE Raw. No longer devoting myself to being a student of professional wrestling, I didn't have a use to gratify with pro-wrestling footage. Professional wrestling footage served as a source of research when I was going to be a wrestler, and after that was no longer an option I changed my media consumption habits accordingly.

After I settled into my life as a graduate student, I began watching wrestling with more frequency, but for very different reasons. I no longer consumed every piece of wrestling footage available, instead only watching wrestling that interested me contextually. I would skip episodes of WWE programming if they didn't sound interesting, only watched pay-per-views that had compelling line-ups, and only bought occasional DVDs. I modified my media habits from that of a wrestling student to a normal fan. Wrestling became a source of entertainment, not a source of education.

Throughout my lived experience as an aspiring wrestler, my media choices did not reflect an entire generation influenced by popular cultural appeal. In fact, many around me openly expressed disdain for professional wrestling. Rather, my wrestling media consumption was the result of a passionate devotion to the professional wrestling world. I worshipped my wrestling heroes, to the extent that I made life choices with them in mind. Crucial to that hero worship was my continued consumption of professional wrestling, revealing the effect that the phenomenon can have on media choices and exposure. Once I found myself severing ties with my heroes, my media consumption changed considerably. I became a fan, exercising power over my media habits, gratifying my changing needs. I quit consuming media I had no use for, demonstrating a control present in my relationship with my media habits. Uses and gratifications theory explains my evolving media practices, as I had full awareness of my purpose for media consumption, and made changes in that consumption as my needs changed.

Cultivation Theory

As George Gerbner (1998) originally envisioned it, cultivation theory focuses on the exposure of audiences to concepts found in popular television programming. This exposure, directly related to the level of exposure to televised media, creates "mainstreamed" ideas that in turn influence their world concept. This classic concept of cultivation theory does not relate to a study such as my own, as I focus on my individual experience consuming media that would not have fit into the idea of mainstream media as envisioned by Gerbner. Modern professional wrestling is not as wide-spread as a media format as the crime dramas and westerns explored by Gerbner during the original

application of the theory, but the evolving nature of television media and our approach to it as consumers suggests a need for an evolution of the theory.

The modern television world, dominated by widespread (satellite television) and emerging (DVR, internet television) media technology, allows the viewer access to multitudes of programming options accessible in a larger frame of time. This means that the idea of widespread mainstream television programming, as found in George Gerbner's media world, no longer exists. Existing cultivation study, such as Reyes' (2008) study of *Desperate Housewives*, and Meades' (2009) examination of audiences exposed to television dating shows, exhibits the necessity for the evolution of cultivation theory to examine genres of television not considered mainstream by Gerbner's original application.

My study offers further advancement of the core assumptions found in cultivation theory. Beyond sample size and a message-based focus related to mainstream media, the theory's core assumption that media exposure plays a role in the creation of audience worldviews directly relates to my own focus. Additionally, the concept that the creation of those worldviews is significantly affected by the amount of viewership is fundamental to the exploration of my own media habits. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, I chose to adopt those fundamental beliefs and apply them to my own media consumption and the subsequent creation of beliefs about my world.

Understanding the differences between my own study and classic cultivation theory, in addition to the necessity for an evolution of the theory in a modern television world, two concepts reveal further insight into the role that my media exposure played in my life as an aspiring wrestler. The first aspect, the concept of media viewership applies

even in the classic application. A key piece of cultivation theory addresses the idea of the "heavy viewer," consuming over 4 hours of television daily (Gerbner, 1998). During the peak years of my wrestling passion, it was common for me to consume more than 30 hours of wrestling media per week, between various sources. At one point, I estimated that I owned a footage library of over 700 hours, with nearly 2000 hours of footage consumed in my life to that point. Clearly, I was a "heavy viewer" of professional wrestling. With an average of four or more hours of wrestling consumed daily, according to cultivation theory, I was more likely to develop beliefs about my world that may have been inaccurate. Regardless of the validity of those beliefs, they were still no less important to my understanding of my world.

In addition to heavy viewership, cultivation theory operates under the assumption that repeat exposure to ideals on television will lead to identification with those ideals and influence the individual's worldview (Gerbner, 1998). Typical cultivation theory research "focuses on the consequences of exposure to recurrent patterns of stories, images, and messages" (Gerbner, 1998, p.191). Essentially, the theory focuses on message content and long-term audience effects based on that message. As content is gradually "cultivated" into the mentality of the audience, "mainstreamed" beliefs will develop. In the case of my study, I am still operating under the assumption that my media habits cultivated ideas into my understanding that led to my creation of a very specific worldview. However, instead of focusing on the specific message itself, my autoethnography illustrates how that cultivation manifested itself in my beliefs and actions.

Adopting and modifying the concepts of heavy viewership and cultivation offers a way to consider the creation and evolution of my self-identification with the wrestling business. As I consumed myself with the wrestling world, I began to internalize the idea that I understood everything about that world. I felt completely justified in identifying with the wrestling world and its performers. Watching documentaries and reading books led me to believe that I knew the behind-the-scenes operation of the wrestling business, as well as the personal lives of those involved. I felt as though I knew what each one of my favorite wrestlers was like outside of the ring, creating a sense of connection to them. That connection only strengthened through repeated extensive exposure to the wrestling business. I consumed hours of wrestling media per day, and with each passing day, that exposure only increased my identification with the wrestling business.

Once the wrestling world presented a dark side that did not fit within my created worldview, my heavy viewing habits led to a feeling of personal guilt and shame in the connection I had developed. I had developed a worldview that led to beliefs about professional wrestling and wrestlers, a worldview that led me to act as though I understood my favorite wrestlers. I believed wholeheartedly that Eddy Guerrero had cleaned up his life, living completely drug-free, and that Chris Benoit was a wonderful caring person without any sort of personal demons. These beliefs led me to "know" Eddy Guerrero and Chris Benoit, and when Benoit's condition led him to killing his wife and son, I felt guilt in my support of his career. I believed as though I knew exactly who Chris Benoit was, and when he committed murder, I personally felt as though I had supported a murderer for years of my life. When it was revealed that Eddy Guerrero had continued to use steroids up until his death, I felt betrayed by the man I admired more

than anyone other wrestler. My viewing habits were so heavy during my peak as a wrestling fan that a worldview developed making me vulnerable to such events.

Following my decision to end my dream, my wrestling consumptions limited significantly, and I found myself less affected by events in the wrestling world. No longer a "heavy viewer," my worldview began to shift as I settled into life as a graduate student. Wrestling served as merely an interest, a hobby in my life. Whereas earlier in my life it was common for me to consume at least 30 hours of wrestling media per week, following the Benoit tragedy it lowered to only 4-5 hours. Wrestling did not occupy a significant portion of my life and in turn, my perceptions of that world changed. I began to understand the dark side of wrestling, reached a point of sad acceptance, and no longer took the wrestling business personally. I could watch *The Wrestler*, and not feel an overwhelming connection to the characters. Instead, I could empathize with Randy "The Ram," and apply my own experiences to achieve a greater appreciation of his.

My life, led by a devotion to my wrestling heroes, exhibited George Gerbner's concept of the "heavy viewer" remarkably well, and my developing identification with the wrestling business related to that extensive exposure as outlined in the key assumptions of cultivation theory. Once events transpired conflicting with my perceptions, I felt an emotional link that deeply affected my life. Eventually, my habits changed, and I found myself no longer identifying with the wrestling business in the same way. Wrestling went from being my entire life, to another hobby among many.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

Studying my life as an aspiring wrestler provided a unique perspective from which to consider the effects of media exposure on audience members.

Autoethnographic writing is created to gain deep personal insight into the lived experience of the individual, and throughout the lived experience narrative, such understanding is afforded. Rather than simply reinforcing previous concepts of media effects, this project focused the lens of research to expose explicit themes and actions that occurred during and after my consumption of wrestling-centric media.

A further understanding of the long-term relationship between hero worship and media consumption results from the analysis of personal narrative. As the story progressed, my devotion to a career in wrestling increased dramatically before critical points in my life caused the end of that goal. However, as the narrative continued to evolve, evidence revealed that a certain amount of my connection to that world would always exist. No matter how much pain my loyalty to professional wrestling caused me, I still felt linked to wrestling in some way. That realization provides crucial understanding regarding the long-term effects of media exposure and consumption. In circumstances such as my own, media consumption can foster such a pronounced connection to a world that the effects will be ongoing and potentially permanent.

Implications for Research

The purpose of this study was twofold. Initially, I wished to gain insight into my experience as an aspiring wrestler. However, the primary goal of this study was to create

an individual case study exploring media exposure as it applies to hero worship. Mass communication study has resulted in a vast amount of research, much of it created with the purpose of understanding how media exposure affects the audience. The chief drawback to mass media study is that it relies heavily on either analyzing large numbers of audience members or focusing on the message. While they allow for universal, generalizable results, traditional media studies do not consider lived experience, and fail to explain the micro details of media exposure. Previous research in hero worship follows similar methodology, exploring the subject without revealing deep insight into the experience of individuals living through the phenomena. Lived experience accounts for the emotions and behaviors that cannot be identified well using larger study samples. My study, an autoethnography, provides the opportunity for such results.

In this study, I argue that the phenomenon of hero worship will result in similar themes of validation and identification with those heroes. Throughout my experience as an aspiring wrestler, the validation of those around me and my own identification with my heroes led to a worldview that personally and permanently affected my life in a permanent way. Exploring my lived experience as it progressed through my time as an aspiring wrestler illustrates a side to media exposure unexplored by more traditional studies. Conventional media research can explain basic motives for consumption, and theorize about potential effects, but only an autoethnography can provide deep comprehension of the personal behaviors and emotional effects prompted by specific types of media consumption. During my life as an aspiring wrestler, I exhibited many key aspects crucial to mass media theories. My media habits demonstrated the primary

assumptions of uses and gratifications theory and cultivation theory, and this research allowed a case study to explore the application of such assumptions.

Challenges

Due to the autoethnographic nature of this study, a number of challenges existed during creation of the thesis and the resulting findings. First, this was a recount of my personal narrative, and as such presented me with the challenge of presenting my lived experience in such a way that I could create a scholarly final product. I had to ascertain a way to present my story without discounting the academic merit of the study. Secondly, I spent my life striving to become a professional wrestler. The professional wrestling business has been the target of stigma and negativity, as seen in the coverage performed during the Benoit tragedy, and revealing that side of my story presented the potential that it will be discounted on that basis.

In terms of the actual content provided, I found myself with the difficulty of having to choose what to present in the time and length allotted for this study. Therefore, certain scenes were removed or never included in the first place. I chose which actions made the final narrative, therefore coloring the experience as presented. Even if insignificant, the very fact that I chose what to present from my own lived story affects the experience of the reader.

Finally, the methodology chosen for this study presented a challenge. Autoethnography is a constantly changing and relatively new type of academic study. Therefore, my organization of this piece, as well as execution of the study in general, resulted in a great deal of experimentation on my part. Just as each individual's story is unique, each autoethnography is unique.

When I chose to create an autoethnography, it was due to an understanding that something about my own lived experience could be used as a tool for understanding the effects of media consumption on individuals. We are exposed to mass media every day, and for quality media to be created, in-depth studies of personal effects need to be completed. Standard mass communication research allows for a great deal of understanding in media effects, but only a personal study such as my own could give an explicit look into the life of someone whose very existence hinged on a devotion to media consumption. Future media studies incorporating such information could pave the way for media creation that takes into account the deep emotional impact of content on the viewer. This study helped liberate me from the experiences of my past, and will help media scholars understand other cases in a new light.

EPILOGUE

January 24th, 2010: I'm not entirely sure how I feel right now. I just finished watching the 2003 Royal Rumble WWE Title match between Kurt Angle and Chris Benoit for the first time in almost three years. I used to consider the bout one of my favorite matches of all time, and I never thought I'd watch it again. Finally, after spending weeks reflecting on my past as an aspiring wrestler and "writing the story," I decided that it was time to watch the match again.

The first thing that occurred to me as I watched the DVD menu load, was just how hard this same activity was for me to even attempt just over a year ago. Seeing "Kurt Angle vs. Chris Benoit Royal Rumble 2003" on my television screen today still caused a slight feeling of uneasiness as I sat staring at it, but nowhere near the nauseous fear caused a few years prior. Sitting for a moment to let my thoughts collect, I finally pushed the "OK" button and let the match begin.

Watching the match, the first thing that went through my mind was a surreal feeling as I realized that I was watching a Chris Benoit match for the first time since his death. I have tried to watch Benoit matches multiple times, never getting past the DVD menu. However, months of self-reflection and exploration finally made it possible (and I dare say, required) for me to revive this match. In order to understand the situation I lived through, and in many ways am currently living through, I had to watch this match again

As the action unfolded, an avalanche of memories and feelings crashed down upon me. I remembered what it was like to watch this match as it aired live, sitting in the living room with two of my friends and passionately reacting to each and every near-fall. I remembered what it was like to be an aspiring wrestler, citing the match as one of my influences. I remembered showing the match to other friends when I wanted to impress them with a great piece of professional wrestling. I remembered the painful sorrow I felt when Eddy Guerrero died. I remembered learning that Chris Benoit killed his family. I remembered giving up on my dream.

Now, mere minutes removed from letting myself be transported back to the world I inhabited seven years ago, I find myself sitting in front of my computer in a strangely peaceful state. For some reason, simply watching the match seems to have freed some part of me that has been holding onto the actions of Chris Benoit since June of 2007. Nothing about the events of that day, nor Chris Benoit's part in them, has changed in terms of how dreadful they were. The one thing that has changed is that I somehow no longer feel like I should hold guilt over them.

Following the life changing events of June 2007, everything in my life seemed to fall apart. I no longer felt welcome in the world I had spent so many years creating. Graduate school found me wondering if every choice I made was completely wrong, looking for somewhere to belong and finding nowhere to go. Finally, receiving a graduate assistantship and teaching communication classes forced me to separate myself from wrestling due to scheduling conflicts. Sitting here and writing, there is no doubt in my mind that I am in the next stage of my story.

Reliving and recording my failed journey as a professional wrestler has given me the chance to put some perspective into the life I created for myself. With this "perspective," I am becoming more capable of considering how everything affected me when the life I created didn't follow the anticipated path. Watching the first Benoit match in my post-wrestling life, I can now put words to the events of my life without feeling an overwhelming sense of guilt and shame.

Don't get me wrong; nothing about the actions of Chris Benoit are excusable, nor are they less horrifying. Instead, I can sit here and recognize that they were the results of a man who spent decades of his life abusing himself in a risky line of work, causing irreparable and dangerous brain damage that ultimately led to his final actions. Years of wear and tear on his body created a condition that would ultimately make him capable of murdering his wife and son. The events of that weekend were not the work of a man who was a lifelong "monster." Calling Chris Benoit a "monster" merely simplifies the larger issue he represents. Twenty years of high-impact wrestling made Benoit ill, changing him in a manner that led to tragedy. No amount of illness can excuse what happened to Nancy and Daniel Benoit, but nothing about their demise should cause me to feel personally responsible. I spent years of my life as an aspiring wrestler, and there is no reason why the actions of a man I knew only as a performer should cause me to feel guilt in regards to his actions.

Did I cheer him on?

Yes, eagerly and passionately.

Did I want to learn from him as a young wrestler?

Absolutely, I wanted to learn from Benoit more than nearly any other wrestler.

Was he one of my favorite wrestlers?

Undoubtedly, with only three or four above him.

Does my love for Benoit mean I deserve to suffer now?

No, just because I was a fan doesn't mean I'm to blame.

I spent seven years of my life wanting nothing more than to be a professional wrestler, spending night after night stepping into the ring and entertaining the crowd with every ounce of my soul. I spent two years feeling personally responsible for idolizing a wrestler whose lifestyle changed him into a murderer.

Thousands of hours watching wrestling footage, reading wrestling magazines, and playing wrestling videogames led me to believe that I could somehow be like the men and women I admired. That belief internalized when I decided to become a wrestler, strengthening with each and every additional exposure to the wrestling business. Soon, I came to believe not only that I fully understood the wrestling business, but the wrestlers themselves. That belief led to such a strong sense of self-identification with my heroes that their actions resonated personally, to the extent that I felt guilt and remorse over crimes committed I didn't.

Now, everything is finally becoming clear to me. Nothing about Chris Benoit will ever be the same. He will never be on my list of favorite wrestlers again. I will rarely watch his matches. Still, that doesn't mean I'm going to let his actions make me suffer. Professional wrestling was integral to my life for more than ten years, and there is no way I can let the actions of a man I knew only as a performer take that passion from me. Will I ever work in the wrestling business? Probably not, but I learned a long time ago to never say never when it comes to professional wrestling. That still doesn't mean

that I will let myself quit following it with fervor. Even if I never get to the "squared circle" and simply spend the rest of my life as a devoted fan, professional wrestling taught me a great deal about myself, and I should never feel guilty about that.

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