



Cubed Circle Newsletter

Hopefully you are reading this newsletter a tad bit early, as I wanted to get the Royal Rumble preview out before Sunday so most people could read it. This week we cover Kidani madness, preview the Royal Rumble, Wrestling Observer Newsletter Awards 2012, the Royal Rumble go-home show, the All Japan January 2nd show, Impact, a quick look at the RAW ratings, WWE games to 2K Games, Ben Carass covers NXT and SmackDown as always, plus more!

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The News

Kidani Still Possesses Radical Plans

We covered the story of Takaaki Kidani's... resignation would be the wrong word, but relinquishment of power as New Japan president a couple of weeks ago. It was thought at the time to be a positive move for the company as Kidani had some radical ideas that wouldn't have worked for New Japan, and probably would have served as a detriment to the company. Well, despite Kidani relinquishing everyday administrative power in New Japan he is still the president of Bushi Road and he still has some big plans.

His plans as a heel authority figure have fallen to the wayside to a certain extent, but it still looks like he is interested in copying quite a few things from the American business. He has said recently that he still wants to start the equivalent of a Diva's division in the actual New Japan promotion, which wouldn't be catastrophic, but it is something that by all indications would fail in Japan.

He has also stated that he plans on purchasing other wrestling promotions together with MMA promotions, which could help with the growth of New Japan, but I don't know to what extent Kidani would be able to pull the unification of multiple promotions off – and I don't know if it would even work in Japan right now. Kidani's enthusiasm to integrate MMA into pro wrestling is something that I find quite scary. Sure, one or two MMA guys can work, but we have already seen with Inoki how bad things can get if you keep trying to push aspects of the product as "legitimate" while

letting other aspects falter. One of the main reasons that Shibata and Sakuraba worked so well as a tandem was due to there being no one else like them in the promotion, but if you bring in more MMA guys that wouldn't be the case.

Scariest still, he has stated that he wants to incorporate quite a few aspects of the American product into New Japan, which is fine by me. However, when the key aspect that he wants to incorporate is a brand split – then I have a problem. The RAW and SmackDown brands in the WWE simply wouldn't work in New Japan, especially at this point. Plus it isn't like the separation between the two brands even really exists anymore, as for all intents and purposes they are basically one show excluding the different touring groups. There are certain aspects of American wrestling that just won't work in Japan and there are certain things that the WWE does that other promotions simply cannot do.

One good thing that Kidani is looking to do is increase the amount of New Japan merchandising that is available, which should be a good thing for the promotion considering how hot it is. If royalties work in a similar manner to other promotions the wrestlers should see more income, which is always good, and obviously the promotion will have another revenue stream, which I would view as a positive.

There are things that Kidani can change for the better. However, his want to mimic aspects of American pro wrestling that either won't translate well to the Japanese product or didn't work in America is a worry.

WWE Royal Rumble This Sunday

The Royal Rumble show is always newsworthy, but this year's show from Phoenix, Arizona is set to be even more so than usual. There is the Royal Rumble match as always, but then there is also what will probably be the most important match on the show, in CM Punk versus the Rock for the WWE championship. There is also a last man standing match with Alberto Del Rio defending his World Heavyweight Championship against Big Show, Team HellNo defending their WWE tag team championships against the Rhode's Scholars and a United States championship match with Cesaro defending against Miz on the pre-show.

There is obviously tons of interest going into the WWE championship match, as Punk has held the WWE championship for over 400 days and the chances are that Rock will be winning the title. From what I've read the top matches of the WrestleMania card have already been decided, and I fully expect one of those to be Rock/Cena II, which would probably mean that Cena will have to win the Royal Rumble.

However, I also have a feeling that they will leave the title on Punk, one because they don't like their booking to be too predictable and the second reason being that they might actually have a match with a larger hook at WrestleMania, something that is doubtful, but you never know. I don't want to say that the Rock's match at Mania doesn't matter, because that would be complete idiocy as it is probably going to be the biggest hook of WrestleMania – a show that will certainly be one of the company's largest money makers ever. However, I could see a possibly more experimental finish simply because there is going to be so much top-tier talent at Mania this year – I don't

necessarily agree with that line of thinking, but I could see that being a direction that they could go in.

I have said on a few sites and even when making some predictions that I could see them putting the Rumble on last and then having the loser of the WWE title match as entrant number thirty, but then again for all we know the WWE title match may be going on last.

There is very little value in beating Alberto Del Rio and putting the championship on the Big Show, so I would be flabbergasted if they didn't have Del Rio retain the championship. I don't think that this is the right time for a last man standing match, but then again we are very close to the WrestleMania season, and they probably want to get this program over and done with before then so they can focus on something else for the world title program.

The tag team championship match could go either way. I could see them leaving the championships on Bryan and Kane, but if they have a specific Mania direction for Bryan then they should put the tag team championships on Rhodes and Sandow. The Bryan and Kane team has run its course at this point, sure it was fun at the beginning, but there is so much more that they could be doing with Bryan at this point.

There is also the matter of the pre-show match, Antonio Cesaro versus the Miz, which I don't expect much of considering the fact that the pre-show matches barely get any time. They have been protecting Cesaro pretty well since his debut, so I can't see them just taking the title off of him here, unless of course they have big plans for him either later on in the night, or for the WrestleMania season.

I would say that there is probably a 50% chance that Cena wins the Rumble and he is probably followed by Zigler, Bryan and Ryback all with 10% and the other 20% going to other people in the Rumble. If nothing else it should be an interesting show, and I am looking forward to what will most likely be a very fun evening of wrestling.

Wrestling Observer Awards 2012 Are In

Arguably the most prestigious annual wrestling awards in existence, the Wrestling Observer Newsletter awards, are out for this year, and I am pleased to report that voters probably took the most objective stance that they have taken ever this year. Yes, there were a few awards that I didn't agree with, but that will almost always be the case, after all these awards are often held as a balanced metric for the year. There were some very interesting notes coming out of the awards and that is what we are going to look at today.

If there is one story coming out of the 2012 awards and the year as a whole it was definitely New Japan and their continued rise in quality and prominence as a promotion. As a company they racked up nine awards, which included most of the major awards such as the Lou Thesz/Ric Flair award, which went to Tanahashi, Most Outstanding, which also went to Tanahashi, Feud of the Year, which went to Okada/Tanahashi, Most Improved, which went to Okada, Promotion of the Year, Match of the Year, which went to Suzuki/Tanahashi from King of Pro Wrestling, Best

Wrestling Move, which went to Okada and the rainmaker and Best Booker, which went to the team of Gedo and Jado.

New Japan won just about every award where they had a decent footing, and that definitely shows a change in the mindset of voters, as in the past and even over the last few years a foreign candidate would have to work extra hard to win an award. Okada winning Most Improved, along with best Move and the Match of the Year going to Suzuki/Tanahashi really demonstrates this, as the awards that Okada won really shows a knowledge of the current New Japan product. Although Suzuki/Tanahashi was one of the best matches in a very long time, the fact that it won over Richards/Elgin and Lesnar/Cena also surprised me, because it came late in the year and I thought that most people would be voting for Elgin and Richards.

Elgin and Richards actually only placed third in the award, behind Lesnar/Cena and Tanahashi/Suzuki, which debunks the argument that Dave Meltzer automatically influences voting by his opinion, as he gave Richards/Elgin five-stars and Lesnar/Cena considerably less.

Tanahashi winning the Thesz/Flair award is also quite interesting, as CM Punk held the WWE championship for the entire year. However, I think voters saw through that and looked at how many times he actually headlined pay-per-views and drew business compared to Tanahashi. That isn't to say that Punk failed in that regard, because he did more than what was expected of him. However, Tanahashi did, much like last year, carry New Japan on his back...well with a little help this time around.

New Japan ended the UFC's six year long streak as best promotion, which I was personally happy to see considering the quality of the New Japan product over this past year – they were clearly the best wrestling product in the world.

What is interesting to note is that while TNA won Best TV Show they also won (lost) the Worst Promotion Award. The reason for the outcome was probably that people didn't really know what show to vote for as the best TV product of the year, and due to TNA's post Russo stint they decided to go with Impact. As for Worst Promotion, I can also see that, as that was my vote this year. RAW was the show that won (lost) Worst Television Show, which should really tell you something about the move to three hours.

Pretty much everything else was either what I voted for – for those thoughts you can read the end of the year newsletter last year, which had a run down for each award. Despite what I have read around the internet I am extremely impressed with the Wrestling Observer community and how they voted for this award, as they really did show an international grasp (even voting Dinastia for Rookie of the Year) and it will be even more interesting to see how this year's awards pan out, because many of this year's winners look to be in the 2013 running as well – regardless I am very proud to be apart of the Wrestling Observer community with an award turn out like this.

Reports

**All Japan Pro Wrestling 2013 New Year's Shining Series January 2nd 2013
Korakuen Hall, Tokyo, Japan**

Overall Thoughts:

This was a fun show from All Japan to kick off the New Year. The majority of the undercard and the main event were mediocre, but the double Junior Heavyweight championship and Tag Team championship matches both delivered in a big way. The rest of the card wasn't bad by any stretch, as it was thoroughly entertaining. I wouldn't necessarily recommend the entire show, but I would definitely recommend that you go out of your way to see the two title matches.

Match by Match:

1. SUSHI vs. KENSO

SUSHI feigned a dive and KENSO responded with some of his slaps, which the crowd were into as always. KENSO landed his fall over the top rope, because that's really what it is. KENSO then proceeded to jump onto the apron, run across it and land a shot to the head of SUSHI. They exchanged chest slaps, SUSHI got some offense in, but KENSO strangled SUSHI with his scarf and said something to the amusement of the crowd. KENSO went to the top rope, but immediately dropped down, landed a vertical suplex and followed it with an elbow drop for the win in 07:13. This was your typical KENSO match, I don't really get the act, but the crowd was really into it and it served as a fine opener.

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2. Koji Kanemoto & Minoru Tanaka vs. Osamu Nishimura & Andy Woo

Nishimura and Kanemoto exchanged some stiff uppercuts and they worked out of a couple of holds. Kanemoto landed some face washes on Woo. Tanaka flew in with a missile dropkick, which led to a strike exchange. Woo was caught with another dropkick, Kanemoto took Nishimura to the floor and Woo grabbed a spin kick for two. Tanaka landed a standing highkick and then a dropkick to a grounded Woo for two. Tanaka shot in off of the nearfall with an armbar, Woo attempted to block, but eventually submitted in 06:23. A fun match with Tanaka and Woo doing some fun stuff at the end following mostly nostalgia from Kanemoto and Nishimura.

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3. Seiya Sanada & Yasufumi Nakanoueno vs. Tomoaki Honma & Kazushi Miyamoto

Both teams didn't wait for each other and immediately went at it before getting in the ring. Honma ran wild on Sanada up until Sanada landed an ace crusher and the tags were made. Miyamoto bullied Nakanoueno and teed off on him in the corner. Nakanoueno fought out with some fiery shots and landed a backdrop for the count of two. Nakanoueno unloaded with some really stiff slaps and went to the top rope where he was met with slaps from Miyamoto. Miyamoto landed a superplex and the tags were made to Honma and Sanada. Sana landed a frankensteiner and together with Nakanoueno they locked in double abdominal stretches. Honma fought out of a sleeper landing a hybrid blaster. Honma tore a chair from under a fan and swung at Sanada who ducked and landed a flurry of shots, but Miyamoto pulled the leg. A beat down with the chair ensued and Sanada and Nakanoueno won the match via DQ in

07:46. Honma landed the Dudley style headbutt to the groin and strangled Sanada with his shirt after the match.

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4. Suwama & Joe Doering vs. Akebono & Ryota Hama

Akebono and Doering had a frantic battle of strength. Doering went toe to toe with Akebono, but then landed a knee to the gut and took him to the floor. All four men then started to brawl. However, Akebono missed a splash against the ring post and was thrown back into the ring. Akebono and Doering went toe to toe again, but Suwama grabbed Akebono and Doering just stood their taunting Akebono. Akebono fired back with an exploder and in came Ryota Hama who was fired up and landed a pelvic thrust in the corner. Doering came in with a bulldog and the tag was made to Akebono who steamed rolled Doering with hard shots and a big elbow drop. Suwama and Doering teed off with splashes in the corner and Akebono took a Flair flop style bump after a double dropkick. Suwama then landed a very impressive belly to belly suplex on Hama, but Akebono managed to pull off a spinout side slam for two on Doering. Doering then got Akebono up for a Death Valley driver and the win in 08:15!

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5. Taiyo Kea, Minoru Suzuki & MAZADA vs. Keiji Mutoh, Kaz Hayashi & Masanobu Fuchi

This was Taiyo Kea's second last match at least for a while as he is taking a departure from wrestling to study business management – admirable. He came out together with Suzuki and MAZADA to what sounded like a mash up between Kaze ni Nare and Bonnie Tyler's 'I Need a Hero', I could be wrong, but that seemed to be the case. Fuchi now 59 and Mutoh now 50 started off. Suzuki was tagged in. Hayashi and MAZADA had a couple of exchanges. Hayashi and Suzuki had a slap battle, which Kea came in to end. Mutoh landed a shining wizard on Kea and locked in the figure four. Suzuki countered a dragon screw into an armbar, but Hayashi was in there to break it up. Fuchi was now legal and Suzuki grabbed his sleeper on Fuchi before making the tag to MAZADA. Hayashi landed a topé onto Suzuki. Mutoh caught Kea with another shining wizard. Fuchi then grabbed a rollup on MAZADA for the win in 12:08. The finish of the match was a little strange, but it didn't really matter considering that it was really a nostalgia match.

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6. World Tag Team Championship Match

Takao Omori & Manabu Soya vs. Masakatsu Funaki & Masayuki Kono

Both teams went straight at it, landing slaps and Funaki locked in a triangle and went for the hybrid blaster straight out of the gate. However, Get Wild fired back with a guillotine leg drop combo on Funaki. Funaki and Kono then locked in a figure four armbar combination on Soya. Kono landed a big running knee on Soya and Funaki came in with kicks in the corner. Funaki landed some kicks on the mat; Soya rose to his feet in defiance, but fell to the mat after another flurry of kicks. Soya finally got an opening with an attempted counter to a guillotine, but Kono kicked Soya back down to the mat, which got quite a few boos out of the crowd. Soya survived a combination

of knees and finally landed a deadlift suplex out of a front facelock to make the tag to Omori. Omori went for a belly to back piledriver, but Kono got out of it and made the tag to Funaki following a knee. Funaki shot in with an armbar; Soya broke it up, but was tossed to the floor by Kono. Soya and Omori had both men up for their finishes, but Funaki and Kono countered into a guillotine and sleeper respectively. They made it out and Funaki was left in the ring with both men. He went crazy with strikes knocking Soya down and he landed a backdrop on Omori. He went for the hybrid blaster; Omori countered and landed his finish of Kono and then Funaki. He then landed his lariat on Funaki for the win in 14:44. This was a great mainevent style tag match with tons of great action. Kono and Funaki made for a great heel team doing some really subtle things to get the heat on Get Wild. Get Wild also worked a heck of a match as always.

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7. World Junior Heavyweight & GHC Junior Heavyweight Double Championship Match

Hiroshi Yamato vs. Shuji Kondo

Kondo lifted Yamato up Cesaro style, but he was caught with an enzuigiri and Yamato landed a topé in an awesome sequence. Kondo side stepped a spear and Yamato went shoulder first into the ring post. Following the spot in the corner Kondo continued to work over the back of the neck of Yamato both inside and outside of the ring. Kondo landed a DDT on the exposed floor and followed it with a big lariat back in the ring. Kondo German suplexed Yamato on his head and signalled for his big lariat, but Yamato cut him off with a big spear. Yamato landed a rolling senton followed by a back senton for two. Kondo and Yamato were perched on the top rope, Yamato was dropped down into the tree of woe, he sat up, but Kondo pulled him back up and landed a neckbreaker over the knee, which continued the neck work. Kondo landed some boots followed by a backdrop, but Yamato countered Kondo's lariat and landed one of his own. Yamato grabbed a cradle, was hung up by Kondo, but Yamato landed a big backdrop and both men were down. Both men worked their way back up with elbows and Yamato unloaded with slaps. Kondo however landed a powerslam. Kondo landed a powerslam and crucifix bomb for two. He went for another, Yamato refused to go up, but Kondo landed an elbow to the back and lariat once again for two! Kondo went for the crucifix bomb, but Yamato made it out again this time with a backdrop. Yamato landed a pair of releases German suplexes, but this time Kondo kicked out. Kondo kicked out of another big back senton, and Kondo showcased his resilience by kicking out of a headbutt and lariat. Kondo powered his way out of a straight jacket suplex and landed crucifix spike powerbomb, once again Yamato kicked out. Yamato landed a big lariat, but was caught with two King Kong lariats for the win in 18:36 to win the World Junior Heavyweight Championship. This was a phenomenal match from two great champions. The story at the start of the match was that Yamato absorbed tons of punishment on the neck and that he would not give in. Yamato was finally able to dish some punishment out and Kondo couldn't put him away, but finally he gave in to multiple King Kong lariats – a great match.

8. Heavyweight Battle Royal

Nakanoueno was the first one eliminated followed by pins on Miyamoto and Honma. They did their usual battle royal spots like the centipede headlock, sumo wrestling contest and group pin on Hama. Joe Doering and Suwama were both pinned at the same time. Kono was eliminated next followed by both members of Get Wild soon after. Everybody did a shining wizard on KENSO, but they turned on Mutoh and he was group pinned. Nishimura followed. KENSO survived repeated elimination attempts but was eventually thrown to the outside by Kea and Kea landed a driver for the pin on Siyanda. This was exactly what you would have expected from an All Japan heavyweight battle royal, it was filled with comedy spots and didn't take itself all that seriously, which was fine as no one expected much else

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WWE Monday Night RAW January 21st 2013 HP Pavilion, San Jose, California

Overall Thoughts:

This edition of RAW, which happened to be the go-home show for the Royal Rumble, was, with the exception of the Rock/Punk segment, very weak. Cena was out there for five minutes cutting a nonsensical promo about what fans do on their Sundays, which ultimately led to a giant brawl to close off the show. Cena's promo should have never been in that position and while the brawl probably should have gone on last, it was booked in the least interesting way possible.

Making matters worse the show long beat the clock challenge was rendered pointless by having Ziggler win the challenge only for Vickie to tell him that he could choose between spots one and two. I could definitely see this playing a major role in the Rumble match, but this segment was so poorly executed and blown off that it was rendered inconsequential on this show.

Despite the show's short comings they managed to get over what they needed to do for the most part. They had Punk and Rock cut some awesome promos and made everyone else in the company look completely inept. They had the Shield beatdown Rock, which accomplishes two goals. The first is that it gives them an out if they want to beat Rock, in that he was injuries going in, and the second is that the Shield are basically unable to interfere. They probably couldn't have closed the show off with Rock being laid out, but most things would have been better than what they did.

As a whole this show did some things well for the build to the Rumble, namely Rock and Punk and everything else they didn't manage to pull off at all. However there were tons of logical inconsistencies up and down the show, whether you look at the fact that Rock made it into the ring with a ticket, to Brad Maddox who is not an employee being let into the building. Even Ziggler winning the beat the clock challenge was badly done. I don't think that any of these things will really affect the buyrate to a large extent, but apart from the awesome promo work from Punk, Rock and Heyman they did put a damper on the build for the Rumble with this show.

Segment by Segment:

They played a quick little Martin Luther King Day video before the show. To kick off the show Vickie Guerrero came out arm in arm with Paul Heyman. She said that the right thing wasn't the popular thing especially when it came to the Rock. Heyman said that he was there in solidarity with Vickie Guerrero. They showed clips of the Rock concert and claimed that they were defamed. Vickie said that Rock was there, but he was banned from the arena and he would be arrested if he attempted to enter. Vickie was alerted that Rock was entering the building and they showed Rock outside of the arena in front of some policemen. The officers threatened to arrest Rock. Rock did some crude comedy. Rock basically said that he would make it in some way somehow. Vickie did Rock's shtick asking what "the Vick is cooking". This was a perfectly fine opening segment. I felt that Rock didn't come off as all too believable in front of the guards, in the sense that it felt like he was simply performing in front of the love crowd as opposed to having a conflict with the guards, but then again that probably wasn't the intention. Lawler and Cole announced that there would be a beat the clock, and the winner would decide their Rumble entrance number.

1. Beat the Clock Challenge

Randy Orton vs. Antonio Cesaro

Orton pinned Cesaro in a claimed time of 11:36 with the RKO. Orton was in control prior to the break, but when they came back at 6:44 after the break Orton was dropped to the floor from the top rope and sold the back of the head. Orton made his comeback, but Cesaro grabbed a jackknife pin and landed a huge uppercut. Orton was sent shoulder first into the post, but when Cesaro got in the ring Orton landed the RKO. I was half expecting lighting to strike twice with Orton losing to the United States champion this week after losing to the Intercontinental champion last week, but it was not to be.

There was an awesome 2013 Hall of Fame video for Mick Foley. There were tons of clips and pictures of a young Mick Foley and tons of clips ending in his WWE title win. Ambrose picked up a camera they said that they would open everyone's eyes and some clips were shown. They basically celebrated all the beat downs they had given and said that they were just getting started – I am a big fan of these Shield videos.

2. Big Show vs. Zach Ryder

Brad Maddox was on commentary, even though he isn't employed with the company. What was his excuse you ask? Why twitter followers told him to commentate of course. Big Show squashed poor Zach with his KO punch in less than 30 seconds. Big Show started counting saying that's what he would do to Del Rio on Sunday, the crowd gave him the "what" treatment, but he got even angrier, freaked out and walked off.

Heyman was talking on the phone saying that he didn't know how Rock would get in the arena. Maddox came by with his camera man – so they can keep the Rock out of the building, but not this man? Heyman said that he was wrong about Maddox and said that he would make him famous and they shook hands. So I guess they really are going somewhere with this.

3. Ryback vs. Heath Slater w/ Jinder Mahal & Drew McIntyre

Ryback sold for less than a minute, knocked Mahal and McIntyre off the apron and landed his marching Samoan drop for the win. Ryback said that he loved his job and said that the Rumble was his perfect match and it would lead him to Mania.

Rock was still in front of the policeman negotiating with them. He said that they were there for the people and the policemen were shaking their heads in agreement; still silent. Finally the one guy talked and said that he had a ticket and his wife and kids were out there. Vickie came by and they refused to arrest Rock because he wasn't breaking any laws. Vickie said that she was their superior and would suspend them – is she a sheriff now? She wanted an apology from Rock, but he called her a “biatch” and said she still looked horrible. Vickie stormed off.



Punk came out and claimed that the title was his life's work and he held it dearer than most people hold their family members. He said that while Rock was there to tell jokes and be jolly he was there to hurt people. The title was important, because he made it important. He called the

people the most insignificant things imaginable; the things that the Rock holds most dear. Punk looked into Rock's eyes and he realised that Rock knew that he could not be “this” referring to the WWE champion. He went on about how he had earned the right to be the man. He told Rock to enjoy the people, because the people do not matter. After Sunday he would still hold what the people could not give him – the WWE championship. This was another phenomenal promo from Punk, really proving that he was on another level from just about everyone else in the company when it comes to promos and there was really no place where that was more apparent than in the main event segment.

4. Beat the Clock Challenge Dolph Ziggler vs. Miz

Ziggler pinned Miz with a Zig Zag off of a double distraction in a claimed 10:56. The closing stretch of the match was really great with tons of tense exchanges that the crowd was really into. The match was strange in a way, because apart from the AJ/Langston distraction Ziggler really was the one that worked the face roll. At one point Miz clipped the back of Ziggler's leg and he sold it like his leg had just been ripped off. There were also points where Miz would just tear into Ziggler, and Ziggler is so great at selling that he came off as the sympathetic face. Miz grabbed a figure four at 1:20, but Langston pulled Ziggler to the ropes off of an AJ distraction. Ziggler then landed the Zig Zag off of another distraction for the win with 0:42 left on the clock.

There was a recap of the Dr. Shelby segment from last week. Shelby was in the ring in full graduation attire for the Daniel Bryan/Kane anger management school graduation. Bryan and Kane came out looking like druids in their gowns and Bryan had his hair combed in a way so that he looked just a tad bit like Rasputin. Bryan attempted to stay calm as Shelby mentioned how grotesque his beard was. Shelby said the top student normally talks as valedictorian, he asked for their opinion on who should speak. They both repeatedly recommended each other. The crowd wanted Bryan. They argued and Shelby cut them off; screaming. Shelby proposed that everyone hug at the same time. Cole and Lawler hugged, followed by Dr. Samson and Justin Roberts and they go people in the crowd to hug. They freaked out asking everyone to hug at once, but he didn't look like a lot of people were doing it. This was a fine way to end the Shelby series of skits, even though like most of the series it was a bit too hokey for my liking. There was another recap of Eve quitting.

5. Kaitlyn vs. Alicia Fox

Tamina Snuka was shown looking on backstage, Kaitlyn landed a Thesz Press off the apron, they wrestled badly and Kaitlyn pinned Fox with a spear for the win.

Heyman arranged a skybox for Punk, because he wanted Punk to watch him drop what he called a "Paul bomb" on the Rock. After the break Heyman was in the ring.



He basically said that he had to dumb down his promo for the fans. Heyman called Rock the January flavour of the month in Vince's grand scheme to get the title off Punk. Heyman called Rock stupid like the people, which led to Rock's music hitting and out came Rock, ticket in hand – so the police

officer gave him the ticket, a weak way to get around the whole situation and it wasn't even explained all that well. Heyman told Rock that the ticket didn't allow him to step into the ring, but Rock simply threatened him and off he fled. Rock looked on to Punk in the skybox. Rock called it Punk's last RAW as WWE champion. Rock threatened to rip Punk's face off and Punk responded with a completely blank look. He said that he earned his shot over the past ten years. Through the big buyrate with Cena? He promised to beat Punk for the title at the Rumble and said that the people would be saying "free at last". Punk smirked and did his "do you know what the Rock is cooking" shtick. Just then the Shield came out for a beat down, again brief comeback, but Rock couldn't hold them back and he took the triple powerbomb. I guess this will be their out if they beat Rock at Rumble. Punk got on the mic saying that there was only a spot for one man at the top of the mountain. There was blood coming out of Rock's mouth and Punk said that he wasn't great enough to beat the best in the world. After the break they aired a recap.

6. Beat the Clock Challenge

Sheamus vs. Wade Barrett

Barrett went after the arm before the break. They came back with 4:57 on the clock. Sheamus countered a powerslam, but Barrett ducked a brogue kick and landed a superkick to the gut and jaw. Sheamus landed white noise with 1:30 on the clock. Sheamus signalled for the brogue kick, but AJ, Langston and Ziggler came down to the ring. AJ actually stepped into the ring, but there was no DQ, which I always find stupid. Both men were down with 0:20 left and Sheamus landed a brogue kick with 0:02 left and time ran out. I wasn't a big fan of the finish, especially in this kind of situation, but at least they didn't beat Ziggler. There was a trailer for the Rumble.

Ziggler and AJ kissed in front of Vickie and Vickie said that Ziggler could either choose spots one or two, which just made absolutely no sense and made the whole theme of the night meaningless – really stupid booking unless they use it to set up a Ziggler face turn. There was another Shield beatdown recap. Punk and Heyman were walking backstage when they bumped into Vince McMahon. He wanted to know what they were up to and both of them said they had nothing to do with it. Vince said that if the Shield were involved in the match on Sunday there would be serious consequences – he would strip Punk of the championship. There was a trailer for the RAW Roulette RAW next week.

7. Alberto Del Rio vs. Tensai

This was basically a squash match with Tensai getting less than two minutes of offense in. Del Rio landed a hurricanrana and German suplex, which Lawler called a belly to belly suplex, it was impressive. He then landed a step up enzuigiri and a second rope moonsault for the win – so I guess that's his new finisher, which is a perfectly fine move for a babyface such as Del Rio. After the match Del Rio cut a promo saying that he would count Big Show out in Spanish. He proceeded to count in Spanish.

The second 2013 Hall of Fame nominee was announced – it was Bob Backlund. Looking at who is in the Hall of Fame Backlund probably deserves the induction more than many many people – a legitimate Hall of Famer. Cole proceeded to call Backlund the reason that he got into “wrestling” and then followed it up by calling it “sport's entertainment”.

Cena came out for his promo. He went on with very little direction going on about Sundays and how the kid in the crowd was holding him back in Call of Duty. He said that a woman in the front row posts pictures of herself on Facebook, and went on about here love life. He switched to another guy in the crowd saying how he woke up drunk. This had nothing to do with anything. His point was that this Sunday people would be watching the Royal Rumble. He said that he would win the Royal Rumble and out came Sheamus – what? Sheamus called the speech bizarre and said that he would win the championship again, out came the Prime Time Players, then Randy Orton, then Miz...eventually Kane, Bryan, Cesaro, 3MB were all out there and the locker room emptied into a big brawl in the ring to close off the show. They did some stuff well to close of the show, but this was one of the weakest closing segments for a Royal Rumble go-home show that I have seen in a long time. The Cena promo was

unbelievably bad, and when you have a guy like Punk on the show cutting great promos and then you have to deal with this kind of thing, Cena almost feels antiquated. The brawl was fine, but with no hook it was basically just your usual lumberjack brawl – very poor booking.

RAW Ratings For January 21st 2013

Unfortunately due to the segment by segment source not being available that portion of the report has been omitted. However, we will be back next week with two ratings reports. Thank you.

This Monday's RAW from San Jose did a 3.0 rating and 4.32 million viewers, down from last week. There was a large third hour drop-off, which probably is a sign that a lot of the build that they did to certain segments throughout the show wasn't all that effective.

Hour one did 4.37 million (1.47 rating and 1,862,000 viewers in the 18-49 demo), hour two did 4.42 million (1.53 and 1,930,000 viewers rating in the 18-49 demo) and hour three did 4.16 million (1.48 rating and 1,867,000 viewers in the 18-49 demo). There weren't any major changes in the 18-49 demo, which at least shows that there was no major third hour drop-off there. RAW was second for the night on cable behind the History Channel's 'Pawn Stars'.

WWE – NXT **January 23rd 2013 – Full Sail University, Florida.** **Ben Carass.**

As the show opened, we joined Shawn Michaels in the ring; Tony Dawson said HBK had a, “monumental announcement” to make. After his trademark entrance, Michaels claimed Dusty Rhodes was unable to be at the arena and had asked Shawn to make a statement. Michaels was handed one of the new NXT Tag Team title belts then HBK said there was going to be a tournament to crown the first Tag Champs. Shawn stated he was, “once in a tag team” and told all the talent in the back that winning the belts would be a, “springboard to a terrific career”; Michaels finished with the “two words for ya” bit, which the crowd lapped up then the titles rolled.

Shawn didn't exactly make the announcement feel “monumental” and the Full Sail crowd reacted to the inception of the tag division with mere polite applause. That being said, the audience made it clear who they paid to see, as everyone in the building was on their feet for HBK. The people certainly got their money's worth after this set of tapings and were treated to a Kliq reunion with Billy Gunn playing the part of Scott Hall for the night; sadly PJ Polaco was unable to make it and Nash et al. had to carry their own bags.

Bray Wyatt brought out his “Family” then took a seat on the ramp; Yoshi Tatsu & Percy Watson headed down to face Harper & Rowan.

NXT Tag Team Championship Tournament, 1st Round Match: Yoshi Tatsu & Percy Watson vs. “The Family”: Luke Harper & Erick Rowan

The babyfaces used their speed and technique to get the early advantage, however Rowan countered a cross body from Tatsu into a backbreaker which put the heels in control. The Family made frequent tags while they pounded away on Tatsu for the heat. Yoshi fought up from a chinlock to score with a hope spot jawbreaker on Harper, but Rowan tagged in to cut off the face with a body slam. After prolonging the heat spot further, Harper tried to suplex Tatsu from the apron back inside; Yoshi (almost) landed on his feet and made the tag.

Percy came in with as much fire as he could muster then delivered a spinebuster to Harper; Rowan broke up the pinfall, however Yoshi took him out with a Cactus clothesline. Harper covered Percy for the victory after a discuss lariat.

“The Family”: Luke Harper & Erick Rowan defeated Yoshi Tatsu & Percy Watson via pinfall, at 5:02.

Nothing special here; I like the idea of The Family working a straightforward rugged style, as they don't need to be hitting 50 flashy moves during a match. The problem is the team has yet to establish the necessary presence to compliment their deliberate unsophisticated in-ring style.

Dusty Rhodes was in fact in the building; the GM was backstage with Alex Riley and Derrick Bateman (remember those guys?). Big Dust said the Tag title tourney was important to everyone and only the “best talent” would get the best shots; Dusty then ludicrously booked the uninspiring duo in a first round match with Kruger and Ohno next week. Corey Graves showed up, complaining about not getting a rematch for the NXT title and was incredulous at the decision Dusty just made. Riley punked out Graves with the trite line, “if you're feeling Froggy then jump” and the ponderous babyfaces walked away. Dusty told Graves he was not in the tournament because nobody in the locker room wanted to be his partner, “not even Jake Carter”. Dust then had a “brilliant idea” and booked Graves vs. Carter for later on; Graves told the GM that his path to the NXT title started tonight with Jake Carter's head.

This segment was horrendous in all sorts of ways; first of all Shawn Michaels looked foolish after he said Dusty was not in the arena only 15 minutes early; surely that line could have been edited. Dusty giving Riley & Bateman a spot in the Tourney after claiming only the “best talent” would enter was beyond paradoxical and Riley acting like a tough guy was laughably pitiful. Plus the Jake Carter stuff made no sense and came completely out of nowhere; even the stellar talker Graves was unable to salvage this.

A graphic hyped “The New British Invasion” of Adrian Neville & Oliver Grey vs. Heath Slater & Drew McIntyre in a tournament match.

Commercial Break.

After the break, Alicia Fox and Sasha Banks both made babyface entrances before their one-on-one encounter.

Alicia Fox vs. Sasha Banks

Alicia controlled early, but was soon taken over by a tilt-o-whirl head scissors and rolled to the apron, where she caught Sasha with a boot then followed up with a dropkick for a two count. Alicia delivered a bridging northern lights suplex for two before applying a rear chinlock. Dawson asked Regal what the name of the habitual hold was, to which the Englishman replied: “if you need me to explain that to you then you shouldn’t be sat next to me.”

Sasha came back with a monkeyflip then performed her lucha-style springboard armdrag, but Alicia countered from the wheelbarrow position to stop the momentum. Alicia went for a bodyslam, however Sasha reversed into an inside cradle for the three count.

Sasha Banks defeated Alicia Fox via pinfall, at 2:30.

This was a little dull, but fine; I think Alicia tried to work more on the heel side, however having both women come out smiling and waving was a strange move. On the other hand, Regal burying the clueless Dawson was just fantastic.

A Paige vignette aired; it was the same one from several months back, in which she professed to have been trained to be a champion since she was thirteen years old, only with new footage of her in the ring edited in.

Renee Young had been promoted from the shows that nobody watches (Bottom Line, Experience etc) to interview Aksana on a show, which only slightly more people see. Renee asked about next week’s match with Paige and Aksana claimed the English Diva stole her look, but made it more “trashy”. Aksana said she didn’t understand why Paige was all the rage in 2012 then stated that in 2013, she would be “in” and Paige would be “out”.

A graphic hyped Neville & Grey vs. 3MB.

Commercial Break.

A brief vignette for Conor O’Brian aired; O’Brian was lit with the moody blue lighting and said he was the “true ascension” then stated he would “rise”.

I guess after all the time and effort they put into The Ascension, repackaging O’Brian was not an option.

Jake Carter was already in the ring then Corey Graves was introduced by Summer Rae.

Jake Carter vs. Corey Graves

Carter shone for a little while, until Graves delivered a belly-to-back suplex to gain the advantage; Carter fought up from a quarter nelson to land an inverted atomic drop and a clothesline for a two count. Graves sidestepped a charging Carter in the corner then unleashed a chop block and locked in the Fuller lock to get the tap out victory.

Corey Graves defeated Jake Carter via submission, at 2:29.

After the match, Graves got on the mic and said he hoped management was watching, because if he was not entered into the tournament then “anarchy” would be declared on NXT. Graves added, the next time he saw Alex Riley, Riley would do the same thing as everybody else and “stay down”.

Not much of a match here; Graves looked strong even though he gave his old tag partner a lot and let Carter shine, which is a good thing since Graves would be near the top of my list of candidates to take the belt from Big.E.

A graphic hyped Big E. Langston; Dawson said Big E. would be facing Axl Keegan later on then another graphic set up Neville & Grey vs. 3MB for after the break.

Commercial Break.

Slater and McIntyre proved they could perform their goofy entrance without Jinder then Neville and Grey hit the ring to face 3MB.

NXT Tag Team Championship Tournament, 1st Round Match: Adrian Neville & Oliver Grey vs. 3MB: Heath Slater & Drew McIntyre

McIntyre used his size to overpower Neville early on, however Neville got in a couple of spots to show his speed and ability. Slater came in and went for a belly-to-back suplex, but Neville landed on his feet then brought Slater to the face’s corner to make the tag. Grey worked a wristlock then landed a dropkick; Slater rolled to the outside and Grey tried to catch both heels with a baseball slide. 3MB avoided the move, but Grey dodged a shot from McIntyre and Slater ate the right hand; Neville took out McIntyre with a summersault plancha.

Commercial Break.

McIntyre had the heat on Grey after the break and dropped Neville off the apron with a cheap shot; 3MB took advantage of the referee’s position and double teamed Grey in the corner. Slater came in with a back heel kick, which caused the ref to pull out the plastic gloves, despite there being no blood on Grey at all. Grey made the tag after a transitional belly-to-back suplex and Neville fired up on McIntyre, but was dumped off the top turnbuckle to the apron. Neville came back with a kick to McIntyre’s head then went up top; after taking care of Slater, Neville brought the people to their feet with British Airways and picked up the win.

Adrian Neville & Oliver Grey defeated Heath Slater & Drew McIntyre via pinfall, at 4:02.

A pretty solid match here and it was nice to see more of Neville after his disappointing debut last week. We still didn’t get much of an indication as to how much Neville’s style has been altered, but I’m sure it will become clearer in weeks to come.

Commercial Break.

Axl Keegan was introduced in the ring by Summer Rae; Big E. Langston made his way down for the non-title match. Regal called the champ “controversial” and Dawson talked about his association with Dolph Ziggler; the Full Sail crowd didn’t seem to care, as they reacted to Big E. with the familiar “Five” chant.

Non-Title Match: Big E. Langston (NXT Champion) vs. Axl Keegan

Big E. no-sold a couple of shots and took out Keegan with a body check then hit his inverted front powerslam for the three count.

Big E. Langston defeated Axl Keegan via pinfall, at 1:30.

The crowd chanted “one more time” and Big E. hoisted Keegan onto his shoulder, but before he could hit his move the familiar gimmick lighting of The Ascension hit and Conor O’Brian appeared on the tron. O’Brian claimed it would only take three seconds to take Big E’s most valuable possession then stated in two weeks, he would show Big E. what he thinks about the five count. Big E. hit his move after the lights came back up and counted to five then repeated the process after encouragement from the fans.

A solid show this week in terms of storyline advancement; virtually every segment was intended to get talent over or to set up future shows. We got the Tag title Tourney, Graves declared “anarchy”, Big E. was faced with a new challenger and even the Diva’s got in on the build with Aksana’s promo on Paige. There was not much to shout about in regard to in-ring action; Neville & Grey vs. 3MB was easily the best match, but by no means is it worth going out of your way to see, but if you like logical pro wrestling story telling then this was the show for you.

TNA Impact January 24th 2013 Impact Zone, Universal Studios, Orlando, Florida

Overall Thoughts:

It could have been the fact that I started with the show earlier in the evening or even the fact that I was watching this show with somebody else, but I thought that this was a fairly enjoyable edition of Impact. There were quite a few things that got on my goat, namely Ray coming out even though he supposedly is and acknowledged that he is on suspension. Taz was fine as a part of the Aces & Eights, but even by mentioning vague leaders and goals it still feels like the Aces & Eights are directionless.

Taz was obviously far more of a heel on commentary, but at points he detracted from the product in the same manner that JBL does a lot of the time. I enjoyed the Hardy/Daniels mainevent, but it didn’t get all that much time. They did a great job with some of the video packages, but it simply did not feel as important as it should have. If they still had the B-shows they probably would have used it to set up a mainevent for one of those shows, but due to the fact that those no longer exist they probably couldn’t have gone anywhere with it anyway.

The Aces & Eights of course had some part in the final segment with Hardy being struck in the knee with a hammer, but Hardy did an awful job at selling the knee and

these Aces & Eights hammer shots have no meaning at this point. I enjoyed this week's Impact; it had a considerable amount of good, but also suffered from most of the same problems that plague just about every show.

Segment by Segment:

They showed a recap of last week's wedding and the post show. Mike Tenay said that he had never been more shocked in the blandest manner possible. They cut to the Aces & Eights freaking out backstage and then cut to an opening package. This means that TNA has officially swapped roles with WWE in that WWE now have the recap video and TNA the video package. Taz came out with the Aces & Eights. Taz said that he couldn't pass up the opportunity to be a part of the group that is under the vision of a higher power and everyone is out for revenge, with a purpose – they have a purpose? He called the wedding just a method for them to show what they had to offer and Taz basically did the Big Show deal saying that he had a contract that wouldn't allow anyone to touch him. I presume the higher power is Eric Bischoff, but simply referencing a higher power and beating the Aces & Eights left and right won't help anyone. Jesse and Tara were backstage talking about Tara's match with Velvet Sky. There was a video package with the Knockout's for Valentine's Day. It was followed by a great package highlighting Daniels. They cut to Daniels and Kazarian backstage. Daniels called his match a turning point and said that he was going to take his place at the head of the table. Taz was back on commentary making fun of Todd Keneley; so basically nothing has changed.

1. Knockout's Championship Match

Tara w/ Jesse vs. Velvet Sky

Tara retained the TNA Knockout's championship after Jesse tripped Sky and held Sky's foot down. After the break Sky landed some awful offense, Tara landed a standing moonsault and Sky landed a final cut. Taz endorsed Bellator saying how cool it is. Jesse jumped up on the apron and distracted Terrell. Tara collided with Jesse, Sky grabbed a rollup, but Tara kicked out. Sky went for a suplex, but Jesse pulled the leg and held Sky's leg for the win.

There was a trailer for Open Fight Night in the UK. Sting was harassed backstage with question and said that he would answer all questions in the Impact Zone. There was a commercial for Lockdown Fan Interaction. King was backstage talking to himself. Ion came by and they threatened to show each other up in their tag match later on. Joe Park came out for a promo. He said that his place was as a member of the Impact roster. His loss made him realise that he wanted to be the best that he could be. He showed his passport and said that he would be in England for Open Fight Night. He was going to study every member of the Impact roster and then decide who he was going to challenge, but regardless next week would be his TV debut. He was getting to get that W!

2. Rob Van Dam & Christian York vs. Kenny King & Zema Ion

This was a fun match with a fun little opening stretch. Ion and King got the heat on Van Dam, Ion missed a 450 splash and Van Dam made the hot tag. Van Dam tagged York back in and went for the five star frogsplash. However, King ran in, Van Dam

was hung up and Ion pushed him to the floor. King landed a springboard neckbreaker on York and Ion made the cover for the win. Taz left the announce table after the match saying that he had a phone call.

Ray and Brooke were shown walking into the arena, also saying that they were going to talk in the ring. Samoa Joe was backstage with Bischoff and Briscoe. He didn't want to give them the time of day, they wanted to know how Angle was and Angle came by to greet both of them. There was another wedding video package. Ray came out saying that the greatest moment in their lives turned into a nightmare. Ray wanted Taz. He was angry due to the harm that Taz caused to Sting, Hulk and Brooke. Ray couldn't even describe the actions that he would perform on the Aces & Eights and he wouldn't sleep until he kicked all of their asses. He wanted Hogan to lift his suspension – again why was Ray allowed into the ring if he was under suspension? Sting came out and wanted Hogan to announce that Ray would be reinstated in England. Even though this makes no logical sense, Ray is such a phenomenal promo that I couldn't help but care for the first half of the promo at least.

Aries and Roode were backstage discussing who would face Hernandez and they tried to talk each other into challenging Hernandez in the way of compliments. Aries finally talked Roode into it and walked off - there was a commercial for the Road to Lockdown and a Jeff Hardy video package. Hardy was backstage talking gibberish this time with his mouth moving.

3. Bobby Roode vs. Hernandez w/Chavo Guerrero

Hernandez and Roode had a pretty average match for the most part. Hernandez overpowered Roode up until the point that Roode grounded him. Hernandez got out of a headlock and ran wild. Roode was knocked to the floor following a pounce and Aries ran by to pull Roode out of the way. They bickered back and forth, but Chavo ran after Aries. Hernandez and Roode were back in the ring and Roode won clean with a bulldog – yes a bulldog.

There was a recap of Kurt Angle versus Austin Aries. Angle came out saying that he expected the Aces & Eights to be temporary. Angle told Taz that he didn't even know what revenge was and next week he would demonstrate that against Anderson. He called Anderson out and out he came through the Aces & Eights entrance. Anderson asked if Angle wanted to fight next in the most humorous manner possible and said that he didn't want to fight and then levelled Angle with a cheap shot. Angle made his way up, went after the ankle, but Anderson slid to the floor. Angle then said that their match next would be a steel cage. The Aces & Eights were backstage and Anderson yelled “hookers shut up!”, which was just astounding. Devon calmed Anderson down saying that they would have a game plan.

4. TNA World Heavyweight Championship Match Jeff Hardy vs. Christopher Daniels w/ Kazarian

Hardy took a big bump after missing the corner dropkick. Hardy was thrown to the floor and Kazarian ran in to lift Daniels' hand victoriously before the break. Daniels was in control after the break. Hardy landed a neckbreaker and they had an exchange of strikes. Daniels landed a Death Valley driver and grabbed a Koji Clutch. Hardy



fate sending Daniels into Kazarian and followed it with the actual twist of fate and swanton bomb for the win. They probably could have done more with the Hardy/Daniels dynamic, but considering that there are no longer B-shows and only four major pay-per-views they couldn't have gone far with it anyway.

was perched on the top ropes, but countered into a front superplex for two. Daniels landed the Angel's Wings, which should have been a big nearfall, but hardly anyone reacted to it. Hardy moved out of the way of the BME and Daniels averted the whisper in the wind. Finally Hardy countered the Angel's wings into a hurricanrana, landed the stunner twist of

Taz got on the mic and went down to the ring for an interview. He asked Hardy what would happen when Aces & Eights destroy everything around him. A member of the Aces & Eights came down with a hammer and landed a strike to the knee, which Hardy took hardly any interest in selling, to close off the show.

WWE SmackDown – January 25th 2013.
Sleep Train Arena: Sacramento, CA.
Ben Carass.

The video recap this week focused on The Shield's attack on The Rock and Vince McMahon's announcement that CM Punk would be stripped of the WWE title if The Shield gets involved in the match on Sunday; this was of course edited due to Vince flubbing his line on Raw. Also the narrator speculated about whom would be the last man standing at the Rumble: Alberto Del Rio or The Big Show.

Team HellNo headed to the ring to kick off the show; footage of the mass hug attempt from their graduation on Raw which got over like the proverbial flatulence in church, aired. Kane said they were out there to address the rumour that the Tag Champs had "gone soft", because they had learned to channel their anger. Bryan stated "nothing could be further from the truth" and Kane added after they retain the belts against The Rhodes Scholars, he would go on to win the Rumble and main event WrestleMania. Bryan took exception to his partner's remark and Kane told him he had been in more Rumbles than anyone: thirteen then referenced his monster performance in 2001. Bryan replied, "but you've never won a Royal Rumble match" and claimed he would win the Rumble instead; the two argued for a while until The Big Show came out.

Show informed Kane and Bryan that nobody cared about their plans, because they only had a 1 in 30 chance of winning the Rumble, whereas he had a 100% guaranteed chance of regaining the World title. Show continued to say that the only plans HellNo should make are retirement plans if they intend on facing him at WrestleMania. Bryan reminded the giant that he beat him for the strap; Show told him that he wasn't taking any of his crap then claimed Del Rio stole the World title from

him and managed to get in the obligatory “boarder jumping” line in the process. Show declared, he would squash Del Rio like a bug and told Team HellNo he would do the same to them if they didn’t get out of the ring. Kane responded, “We are not bugs; we are the Tag Team Champions and we’re not going anywhere”; Bryan began to yell, “No!”, only to be interrupted by Team Rhodes Scholars, who headed to the ring.

Sandow said Team HellNo should be more concerned with defending their belts than winning the Rumble and stated the Rhodes Scholars’ destruction of the Champs would be, “of biblical proportions”. Cody put it in layman’s terms for the people: “we’re going to take your Tag Team Championships”, he alleged. Sandow proposed an alliance with Show to decimate Kane and Bryan, but before that could happen Alberto Del Rio hit the ring.

Del Rio squared off with Show, while Team HellNo stared down the Rhodes Scholars; Booker T’s music hit just in time and the GM showed up right on cue to book a six-man elimination tag for the main event. Sandow and Rhodes fled the ring, but Show charged at Del Rio; Alberto caught him with a dropkick to the knee then sarcastically winked at the giant. Show backed off at the 4-on-one odds (including Ricardo).

This was a standard WWE opening segment; it was fine and everybody played their part well, but it felt a little long-winded to me. Also, there was too much information to digest: Kane & Bryan put over the importance of the Rumble, whereas the Rhodes Scholars & Show did the same for the Tag belts and the World title. I understand trying to elevate the Tag titles by mentioning them in the same segment as the Rumble or the World title, but with so much to try get over in one segment, I wonder how much the importance of each really resonated with the people.

A graphic hyped a CM Punk promo; Josh said Punk would call out The Shield then another graphic hyped The Rock’s appearance on the show. Sheamus and Wade Barrett were shown on a split screen; Josh told us they would go one-on-one after the break.

Commercial Break.

Sheamus was out first and Barrett followed.

Non-Title Match: Sheamus vs. Wade Barrett (IC Champion)

The two traded some heavy blows during an even opening to the bout; Barrett slid outside to avoid the Brogue kick then brought his opponent to the floor as well, however Sheamus got the advantage with some shots and tossed Wade back inside. Barrett countered the clubbing forearms spot then dropped Sheamus off the apron with a big boot to the face.

Commercial Break.

Sheamus took a clothesline over the top, but came back in with a slingshot shoulder block then threw a series of axe-handles; Barrett avoided a knee-lift, although Sheamus sent him over the top and delivered the clubbing forearms then landed a Finlay roll for a two count. Sheamus went for the white noise, but Barrett escaped to

land a kick to the gut, only to be caught with a schoolboy for two then scored with the white noise on the second attempt.

Barrett recovered and cut off his foe on the top rope then connected with a superkick for a two count before coming off the top rope; Sheamus somewhat awkwardly tried to transition to a Texas cloverleaf, but Wade reversed into an inside cradle for two. Sheamus came back with white noise then hit the Brogue kick for the finish.

Sheamus defeated Wade Barrett via pinfall, at 7:50.

A stellar TV match; there were not many heat or shine spots and no noticeable story other than two guys trying to beat each other up to win a wrestling match, but the back and forth narrative was certainly entertaining and Barrett looked strong despite losing. I am a little concerned to see Wade losing so many matches; sure he beat Randy Orton clean a few weeks ago, but this kind of booking only extenuates the “wins and losses don’t matter” philosophy. The fact that Sheamus pinned the IC Champ clean and was it not even mentioned by Josh or JBL furthers this ludicrous booking mentality.

A graphic hyped Team HellNo & Del Rio vs. The Rhodes Scholars & Big Show then another showed us The Shield standing over The Rock from Raw.

Commercial Break.

The Raw Rebound aired then Josh said The Rock would comment on The Shield’s attack later on. CM Punk was shown talking with Paul Heyman backstage; we couldn’t hear them but I imagine Paul E. was laying out the finish for Sunday’s WWE title match as if it was booked for the ECW Arena in 1997; complete with ten “lights out” spots and a billion run-ins.

Natalya came out to The Great Khali’s music; she was accompanied by her large handed friend and Hornswoggle.

Commercial Break.

For the second week running, we joined the show with Rosa Mendes gyrating in the ring; I think they should come back after every commercial with Rosa dancing, even during main event matches...Ok, maybe not. Khali and Horny joined the announce team, as did The Colons.

Natalya vs. Rosa Mendes

Nattie tried to get the crowd into it with an Owen Hart-style handspring after a headlock takedown; Rosa took a comically bad front bump and landed on her face when Nattie rolled through into a submission.

After fighting up from a necktie, Nattie scored with a discuss lariat for a two count then following a near slow-motion transitional spot, Rosa countered the Sharpshooter to hit a clothesline. JBL asked if Khali had met The Anvil yet and referred to Nattie as “Natalie”; The Colons made fun of Khali’s indecipherable English. In the ring, Rosa began to dance over her fallen opponent; Hornswoggle

jumped on the announce desk and mimicked Rosa's spicy Latin moves. The distraction caused Nattie to lock in the Sharpshooter for the victory.

Natalya defeated Rosa Mendes via submission, at 2:45.

Nattie tried to carry the hapless Rosa, but it was apparent the match could have fallen apart at any moment. It's nice to see Nattie pick up a win after being buried six feet under the earth for far too long; unfortunately she is still stuck in this fruitless group with a giant and a leprechaun.

A graphic hyped The Rock and another set up CM Punk's promo for after the break.

Commercial Break.

Punk and Heyman entered the arena then a graphic hyped Punk vs. Rock at the Rumble. Punk said he could not sleep at night, because he was scared of his own potential and he had only scratched the surface being the champion for 432 days then claimed the only thing that could stop his dominance was not The Rock, but The Shield. Punk stated Vince McMahon had officially handed down a letter which stated the terms of the title match stipulation; Heyman pulled out the document and began to read. The letter said Punk would be stripped of the belt if The Shield interferes on Sunday; Punk claimed the "toupee wearing, flesh peddling promoter" was trying to do what no man could and take the WWE title away from him. The WWE Champ then did what nobody else in the company had "the stones to do" and called out The Shield.

Ambrose, Rollins and Reigns came down through the crowd; Punk made it clear he never asked them for anything and told the trio to stay out of his way then



stated there would be no injustice bigger than his historic title reign coming to an end due to their interference. Punk promised he would beat The Rock all on his own then informed The Shield he did not need their help, before telling the triumvirate if they truly stood for justice then they would never

have to cross paths again.

The Shield stepped down off the apron and took their leave through the crowd; Punk gloated, "That's how the Champ takes care of business" and proceeded to declare he would beat The Rock to prove he is the greatest of all time.

The Rock came out "to put an end" to Punk's "garbage"; he called Punk a liar and said he believed the WWE Champ was working with The Shield, but this didn't matter as Rocky would stick his boot up Punk's "candy ass" on Sunday. Rock declared Punk would "panic and crack", because "the walls were closing in" then he informed the Champ, time would stand still when he is hooked in the Rock Bottom and Punk's last thought would be: "it's over". Rock delivered his "if you smell..." line

in a very serious tone then dropped the mic and walked away; Punk held up his belt as the two stared each other down.

I wouldn't call this captivating, because the Rock/Punk angle has not caught fire like I expected, but it was an excellent go-home segment; Rock's promo may not have been money, however his "it's over" line has got to be worth at least a couple of thousand extra buys. Personally, I would have kept The Shield out of this programme unless they were going to cost The Rock the match, which obviously cannot happen now. It was great for them to lay out Rocky on Raw, but I can't help think the title match on Sunday would seem like a bigger deal than it already is if Punk & Rock were focused solely on each other.

A graphic hyped the six-man elimination main event then Randy Orton was shown walking down the hall in the back; Josh said he was in action next.

Commercial Break.

3MB were acting goofy in the ring; Orton made his entrance to face Drew McIntyre.

Randy Orton vs. Drew McIntyre

McIntyre took control quickly then delivered some stomps in the corner; Orton came back with his traditional routine and scored with his inverted headlock backbreaker then went for the hangman's DDT. Jinder Mahal jumped in the ring to cause the DQ, but Orton took him out with an RKO.

Randy Orton defeated Drew McIntyre via disqualification, at 1:06.

Orton planted Drew with the hangman then drilled Slater with an RKO; Randy completed the burial of 3MB with an RKO to McIntyre.

If the intention was to make Randy look strong for the Rumble, then I don't see why this needed to take place under the guise of a match; 3MB could have cut a promo about Mother Slater's Rumble odds and Randy could have taken them out, which would have achieved the same goal.

Commercial Break.

The Miz headed down for a match with Darren Young; Antonio Cesaro was on commentary and they showed us Miz TV with Ric Flair from two weeks ago.

The Miz vs. Darren Young

Young went for the immediate heat after a distraction from Titus; Miz fired back with left hands then scored with his clothesline in the corner and caught Titus on the floor with a boot. Miz delivered an axe-handle off the top then went for the skull crushing finale; Young countered, but Miz recovered to lock in the figure four to get the tap out.

Miz defeated Darren Young via submission at, 1:55.

After the match, Cesaro stood on the announce table and waved his giant American flag; Miz and Cesaro stared each other down then they showed a replay of The Rock's promo from earlier.

A nothing match; at least Miz applied the figure four correctly this time: a hold which I figured out the mechanics of as an adolescent while wrestling with my friends.

A graphic hyped Team HellNo & Del Rio vs. The Rhodes Scholars & Big Show.

Commercial Break.

The traditional Royal Rumble “numbers” video package rolled then Lilian Garcia announced the six-man main event. Ricardo introduced Alberto Del Rio before the break.

Commercial Break.

Team HellNo joined the World Heavyweight Champion then Team Rhodes Scholars appeared; a graphic hyped the Tag Title match on Sunday. The Big Show was out last for the main event; a graphic hyped the Last Man Standing match at the Rumble.

Alberto Del Rio (World Heavyweight Champion) & Team HellNo (Tag Champions) vs. Big Show & Team Rhodes Scholars

Del Rio shone at the start and pulled out a flying head scissors off the second rope to Rhodes; Sandow came in, but Alberto made the tag to Bryan, who drilled Damien with a series of kicks. Kane entered with a basement dropkick, however Rhodes caused a distraction and Sandow delivered a chop block; Kane soon recovered to land a chokeslam for the three count.

Kane eliminated Damien Sandow via pinfall, at 2:20.

Show joined the match for the first time, but ate a DDT and a clothesline off the top from Kane; both men spilled over the top to the floor, where Show landed the KO punch and caused a count out.

Kane was eliminated via count out, at 3:40.

Commercial Break.

Rhodes had the heat on Bryan after the break; both men tried a crossbody for the double down, but Cody made the tag to The Big Show. Bryan escaped a chokeslam with leg kicks then took the giant down with a dropkick to the knee, before coming off the top rope. Show swatted him in mid-air with a big chop and smashed Bryan with a KO punch; Bryan fell to the outside and was counted out, just like his partner. *Daniel Bryan was eliminated via count out, at 6:27.*

Del Rio fired off some shots, but Show planted him with a chokeslam and Alberto rolled to the floor; Del Rio beat the count at nine then sent Show over the top rope with a couple of kicks. Show sold his knee and was unable to get back in the ring before the ten count.

Big Show was eliminated via count out, at 8:36.

Rhodes tried a quick schoolboy then caught Del Rio with a dropkick; Alberto avoided the disaster kick and went into his babyface comeback. Del Rio fired up then scored

with a superkick for a near fall, before delivering his step up enziguri for the three count.

Alberto Del Rio & Team HellNo defeated Big Show & Team Rhodes Scholars at 10:12.

After the bell, Big Show came back out and hit Del Rio with a spear; Show then dragged Alberto to the floor and unleashed a KO punch behind the announce position, before turning the table upside down onto Del Rio. Show counted to ten then repeated the process in Spanish.



The main event was fun, despite all the count outs. However the attempt to get some heat on the World title match was pretty lacklustre; I don't think anyone actually believes Del Rio will lose the belt so soon

and rehash of the Last Man Standing match finish two weeks ago just felt contrived.

A typical hit and miss go-home edition of SmackDown; the Punk and Rock segment was great as Rock was dead serious after being laid out by The Shield and about winning the title. Depending on how you look at it, the Tag and World title build was either thrown together to save time or strategically positioned to give equal importance to each title; I suspect the former, since they have not found time on 6 hours of weekly television to build the Rumble match properly. Either way, it is clear there is one big match on Sunday and a bunch of prelims; one of which just happens to be the Royal Rumble.

Bits & Pieces

As a quick follow up to last week's story on Kazuchika Okada re-signing, he did not in fact sign your standard one year deal, but an extended two year deal, which is even better news than we suspected. This means that there is no reason for New Japan to stop grooming Okada to be the next ace of the company, or if not the ace at least one of the top two or three stars in the promotion for the next few years. Suffice to say this story made me very happy. Others to sign one year deals were Satoshi Kojima, Tiger Mask and Yuji Nagata, all people that you would pretty much expect.

Kobashi announced the date and location of his retirement show on January 23rd, the date that would have been Giant Baba's 75th birthday had he been alive today. His last match will be held on May 11th at Budokan Hall, a place that has held some of the biggest matches of his career. I know that there were plans of having his retirement show on February 26th, the 25th anniversary of debut, but obviously there wasn't enough time to get people ready for that date.

Former NOAH employees Go Shiozaki, Kotaro Suzuki, Atsushi Aoki and Yoshinobu Kanemaru will be making an appearance at the January 26th All Japan show from Ota Ward Gym. It looks like the four will be starting full time from that date forwards and it will be interesting to see what All Japan do with them and how they are handled. It is the same show featuring the in-ring return of Ric Flair.

After the majority of THQ's video game properties were auctioned off it was finally announced who would be taking over as the developers of the WWE video games. Take 2/2K Sports games are going to be taking over the series presumably with the next instalment later on this year. It is an interesting situation since THQ just revamped the game engine in 2011 and released another game based on that engine in 2012. This means that we could be getting another very different game so close to the launch of the new engine, which could either be a good thing or bad thing for fans depending on their viewpoint. The Los Angeles based video game developer has developed many critically acclaimed games such as Borderlands 2, XCOM: Enemy Unknown, Spec Ops: The Line, Mafia II and Bioshock 2, as well as the highly anticipated 2013 title Bioshock: Infinite.

Next Week's Issue

Next week we look at (again, hopefully) New Japan Fantastica Mania, the second night of the All Japan New Year shows, RAW, the Rumble, WWE's plans leading into Mania, two weeks of RAW rating, Ben Carass covers NXT and SmackDown as always, the news and so much more!

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