



Cubed Circle Newsletter 119 – Royal Rumble Preview & Observer Awards 2013/14

We have a fun issue for you this week previewing the WWE's upcoming Royal Rumble pay-per-view, the last of the traditional PPV A shows, we take a look at the general trends of the 2013/14 Wrestling Observer Year End Awards, review the RAW go-home show for the Rumble, investigate the great ratings that it drew, NXT, SmackDown and more! And with the preview out of the way I hope that you enjoy the newsletter and have a great week!

- Ryan Clingman, Cubed Circle Newsletter Editor

Royal Rumble 2014 in Pittsburgh This Sunday

This Sunday WWE runs what is traditionally its second biggest show of the year based on name value alone, the Royal Rumble from the Consol Energy Center in Pittsburgh. Although most want to see it as such, it is in some ways an historic event, as it is the final major show to be distributed live by the company exclusively on traditional pay-per-view, at least for a very long time. Headlining the show are John Cena and Randy Orton for the WWE World Heavyweight title, which is being built as a monumental rematch despite even the most basic evidence pointing to the contrary. The real main event and drawing card of the show will be the Royal Rumble match itself however, even if Cena/Orton is placed ahead of it. Batista has been entered into the match, which judging from simple TV viewership this week, should be a major factor in the show's success. Still, even without Batista the Royal Rumble is the real last remaining drawing card as far as stipulations go.

The build to Cena/Orton has been lackluster even when comparing it to what they had available. From watching the weekly television it is quite apparent that Daniel Bryan is the act that the fans, in attendance at least, are most interested in. A point could be made for this Sunday's top pairing as the stronger couple than one involving Bryan, as far as how over they are with the general public that don't go to arenas. And Cena is a draw irrespective of what demographic you analyze. However, Orton on the other hand is someone who is not over to the level that he should be in arenas, is sub-par as a ratings draw and has, if anything, been a detriment to pay-per-view business during his recent WWE and WWE World Title runs. There exists a collection of strange justifications that the company has come to as to why Daniel Bryan isn't in the top picture, and we could delve into them, but the majority of this newsletter's readership have deduced many of those reasons themselves I am sure.

Cena/Orton on this show is clearly a product of stipulation show driven backwards booking, with

the recent TLC show forcing them into booking a TLC stipulation match exhibiting little bearing on the "decades in the making" pure wrestling title unification that they were attempting to push. Now the rematch, with the main angle being Orton's assault on Cena's father on RAW last week, has been made a singles match pushed as a grudge match - there is clearly no continuity in the escalation of these events whatsoever, which creates a problem when you are asking people to invest their emotions and money into something.

The central angle was based upon an already tried premise of Cena's top opponent, Orton in this case, laying out Cena's father with a couple of punches. Cena's father had already been laid out twice in the past, once by Edge and Lita who "broke into" Cena's house and the second by Orton who has laid Cena's father out with a punt a couple of years after the break in. The concept was already stale at this point, and they therefore needed some strong follow-up to make it work. This we did not get. Instead of having Cena come out like a house of fire on RAW and having a fiery pull-apart or at least something of that nature, Cena essentially showed up two hours and forty minutes late in order to have an emotionally stunted brawl culminating in Orton driving off in a mystery van, leaving Cena to stroll back into the arena in good spirits.

As for who is set to win the match, I would have to go with Orton, simple because the general consensus seems to be that Orton will be facing Batista at WrestleMania for the title. From the very select group of casual fans that I have spoken about the Mania main event, what is far and away the biggest match available to them right now is Batista/Lesnar. That match should probably be kept safe for as long as possible, but that doesn't mean that Batista should be facing Orton. Orton, whether you are a fan of his in-ring work or promo abilities is immaterial; he is not a top draw in any of their key demographics no matter how they are skewed. Ergo the best decision would probably be to place somebody else in the top spot. Batista will be a top drawing card in the future, as long as they use him in the correct positions and so far Del Rio & Orton those positions are not - but that could change.

Brock Lesnar will face off against the Big Show in a match that has surprisingly been built up better than anything else on this entire card. The premise of the match is pretty simple, Lesnar destroyed Mark Henry, Big Show got upset and challenged Lesnar, Lesnar didn't take him seriously and was man handled and now they are going to have a match. Simple, to the point story telling. Of all the matches that Lesnar has had up until this point this one that on face value seems to have the least amount of potential, but provided that they go out there looking for a mean man match and not a classic singles affair they may surprise a lot of people. There is no scenario that I can see where putting Show over would be favorable, and I expect Lesnar to go over clean. Big Show has been put down so much over the past few months that it wouldn't really matter anyway. However, a match where Lesnar goes out there and has an all out manly brawl with the Big Show might mean something for Lesnar going forward into an expected title program.

The only other singles match that was announced as of this Monday is the Daniel Bryan/Bray Wyatt match coming off of Daniel Bryan's recent face turn. It is somewhat of a rushed match for the culmination of a program that should have never been sent in the direction to begin with. Daniel Bryan suffered a conclusion during a steel cage match last week, and so this match was only booked once Bryan passed his imPACT testing on Monday. Wyatt has grown quite a bit in-ring since his debut and his dreadful match with Kane at SummerSlam of last year. He still doesn't have very good conditioning, but even if they go 15 plus minutes, which I don't believe they will, if Bryan is put in a ring with a warm body for 15 minutes chances are that the match will be good.

Of course the main focus of the show this year is on the Royal Rumble match itself, which is most

often the case, although exceptions do exist; last year's show with the Rock going up against Punk's 434 day long title reign standing as a strong example. Odds are that Batista will win this year's match, but there is still the possibility for a Punk or Bryan to clinch it. There is then of course the probable return of Sheamus to contend with, but I highly doubt that with the star power involved in this year's match that they would place Sheamus in the winning slot. Every year on the Alan4L section of the wrestlingobserver.com message board there is a Royal Rumble lottery, where 30 users choose the number they believe will win the Royal Rumble in a bid to win 20 pounds. This year I chose number 28 for a group of specific reasons. With Batista as the favorite, and the length of time that he can perform probably limited due to a lengthily hiatus, he will need to enter late, and the 30th slot would be very predictable. Also the 28th slot has only produced one winner in the past, and that was in fact Dave Batista in 2005, it would therefore be apropos to have Batista win with the same number nine years later.

With every single WWE pay-per-view from SummerSlam last August onwards being either mediocre or sub-par if all goes well the last of the PPV A shows will probably be the first in many months to break that unlucky streak.

Wrestling Observer Newsletter Awards 2013 - New Japan Basks in Glory Yet Again

Apart from the annual Observer Hall of Fame issue, my favorite annual Observer release of the entire year is the awards issue. Last year's issue was surprising on a number of different fronts, from the successes of TNA, to the then unexpected dominance of New Japan amongst the general Observer readership. The 2013 set of awards was different however. Sure, there were some awards that I expected to sway in different direction, but as a general rule this year's awards followed the mental picture that I had formulated months back. Why was this the case? Well, New Japan as a promotion from the mid-point of 2012 onward became a general hit with a niche subsection of the non-Japanese wrestling fanbase, a group comprised in large part by Observer subscribers and those that follow the opinions of Dave Meltzer quite closely. And there is also the glaringly obvious spike in New Japan's business, exposure and match quality that made it a large talking point.

New Japan itself and the talent associated with it managed to take home ten awards from class A and two from class B. Among those awards were the highly coveted Worked Match of the Year (Okada/Tanahashi from Invasion Attack), Show of the Year (The 4th night of the G1), Wrestler of the Year (Hiroshi Tanahashi) and Most Outstanding (Hiroshi Tanahashi) awards. Some of the awards can certainly be argued in different directions, such as the Wrestler of the Year award, which ended up on Hiroshi Tanahashi when by all accounts Okada was just as worthy. Most Outstanding was more difficult to argue in the context of the Wrestling Observer simply due to how good Tanahashi was this year, although Ishii, Bryan, Nakamura and Okada had their cases. The top three matches for match of the year mirrored mine with Tanahashi/Okada IV at number one, Shibata/Ishii as two and Okada/Tanahashi VI in third place. The Show of the Year results came close to mine with the only difference being the third place spot, which on my ballot went to Invasion Attack and in the end went to SummerSlam instead.

In the year end issue Dave saw a problem with Most Charismatic award going to Tanahashi over the Rock, but I personally have no problem with it. After all, the Rock garnered what were generally lesser reactions than in the past, while Tanahashi seemed to be at the height of his powers when capturing the New Japan audience. What is more is that Tanahashi didn't have the added leverage of being a returning star from an era where wrestling as a whole was much hotter, he is a full time roster member who got great reactions throughout the year. I was a little disappointed that Shinsuke Nakamura came 5th with how much charisma he exudes. And Kazuchika Okada, who placed third

on my ballot for most charismatic, didn't even feature in the honorable mentions!

Speaking in a broader sense, as I said in the year-in-review issue a few weeks ago, the results did in fact show a lack of strong candidates for some of the semi-important categories. Awards such as Best TV show or Best Announcer felt very thin with NXT winning the Best TV Show. This makes sense considering the quality of the show, but the clear lack of strong TV content is disheartening. The same goes for the Best Announcer award, which went to William Regal this year for the outstanding job that he does on NXT. However, with commentators like Kevin Kelly, Michael Cole, JBL & Jerry Lawler all placing high in both the best and worth of categories it does speak clearly to the state of the profession and the same goes for wrestling on TV.

Yohei Komatsu won Rookie of the Year behind DDT's Konosuke Takeshita and Dragon Gate's U-T. This result presented me with one of my biggest surprises of the entire issue. I was fully expecting Sho Tanaka to win, which was more a matter of name value than anything else. And if he didn't make it in the first place spot I assumed that he would have ended up somewhere close to Komatsu seeing as how they are most often paired together. However this assumption proved incorrect, Sho Tanaka finished in fourth place, three spots behind Komatsu. Regardless of position both men have a bright future along with Watanabe and Takahashi.

In an outcome that surely triggered feelings of pain and sorrow in the heart of one Dylan Hales, Kazuchika Okada's rainmaker won the award for Best Move for the second straight year. In terms of the booking of the move and how much it means in the context of big matches it makes sense to me. Shibata also won the award for best brawler, and Ibushi the award for Best Flyer. Ibushi is a multi-time winner, although from the perspective of work this was the first year that he should have won it in my mind. Apart from it being a great year for New Japan, it was also a great year for the Shield with Rollins & Reigns winning best tag team, Roman Reigns winning most improved and the Shield as a whole coming third for best gimmick. If the actual main premise of the gimmick was made clear they may have taken the award away from the Wyatt Family and The Bullet Club.

TNA picked up the Worst Promotion award for the seventh consecutive year and won Worst Television show again after a one year hiatus last year where a good four month plus run of good TV won them Best Television Show! Now that Regal beat out Joe Rogan as best announcer the only MMA/wrestling crossover award that really went to an MMA figure was the Best Box Office Draw, which rightfully went to GSP. The case could be made for the Rock, but in the context of his business he didn't draw as much money as someone like John Cena, or in the context of another, GSP. Fighters featured in other categories, but for the most part wrestling dominated the crossover this year, which isn't always the case.

With the logic behind the majority of the awards remaining sound in 2013/14, I was generally happy with these results. A lot of what we saw last year was repeated in the 2013 results, but I have a feeling that 2014 will yield something quite different.

WWE Monday Night RAW January 20th 2014 Ervin J. Nutter Center, Fairborn, Ohio

Overall Thoughts:

From what I remember from last year's Royal Rumble go-home show this year's show delivered far more compelling content. Personally no single segment apart from the return of Batista made an individual impact, but they tried very hard with Cena/Orton, as detached as I may feel from the

angle. The Batista return couldn't have been dull under almost any circumstances, but they could have placed the return in a better slot on the show than they did in order to make it seem like a bigger deal. Daniel Bryan, even with the return of Batista, was far and away the most over person on the show, which will make the Rumble interesting. He did more than I would have expected coming of a concussion, but he was booked in a match for Sunday. He seems to have recovered well, which is good news from someone who has suffered multiple concussions over his career. As an overall go-home show things could have been better, but as we saw last year there was far more space to go up than down for this time around.

The show opened up with a Martin Luther King video as they do most years. In the ring were Hunter & Stephanie hyping up the Royal Rumble match. Hunter looked to be introducing Batista as a former member of Evolution, a friend and a foe, but Orton came down to interrupt. Stephanie spewed out a blatant fallacy saying that more people were watching the product now than ever before - if ever means "since the start of football season", then sure. Stephanie called Orton's



assault on Cena's father "unbecoming of a WWE champion" and "deplorable", and threatened to strip him of the title if it happened again. Orton cited the Rumble rematch and the return of Batista & Lesnar as the source of his aggression. "Randy sucks" chants followed, which I am sure came as a welcome change from chants of "Randy Savage" and the like. HHH spoke about their faith in Orton as the complete package, a faith that has wained since his lost to Kofi Kingston. A well delivered promo demanding for Orton to step up came from Triple H. He announced a rematch with Kofi for later on. A live feed from the parking lot popped up on Hunter's command, so that Orton would know when Cena arrived in the building and would be able to call him out. This brought Batista down, which from my view wasn't the best spot on the show to place him given how jolting it felt in the opening segment, and it showed with the sizeable, yet smaller than anticipated reaction. Batista bent down on his hands and knees in order to kiss the canvas after many a turnbuckle-mount. Brief "Batista" chants followed. Batista affirmed that he was back to win the Rumble, win the title and headline Mania in a brief promo spot. Dull this return couldn't have been, but there was most certainly some squandered potential here.

The Shield were out for a six-man tag against the Brothers Rhodes & Big E Langston. The Shield had the heat on Cody coming out of the commercial, but he laid Reigns out with a disaster kick before making the hot tag to Roman Reigns. Reigns laid Goldust out with a superman punch, Cody with a spear, but Langston made the save before Rollins nearly exploded Langston's head with a face-down stomp for the clean pin. If it wasn't for the Rumble coming up I would say that they were leaning back on the Shield breakup, but I expect some major divisions coming out of Sunday's show. I don't know if I have mentioned this before, but irrespective of his working ability and charisma Roman Reigns has a tremendous move set. There was a recap of the Bryan face turn. Daniel Bryan, a full-time roster member just coming off a poorly developed angle with the Wyatts,



made it out to what was easily double the reaction of Batista who we haven't seen in 3.5 years. He justified the heel turn by stating that he had to break Bray Wyatt down mentally, and as a result he CHEWED ON HIS CARCASS and exposed him. Bryan informed everyone that Rowan & Harper would be in the Rumble leaving Bray for one-on-one match - why this would prevent interference is anybody's guess. Before the break the lights went off, leaving what I imagine to be an overtly awkward stall during the break. Wyatt told Bryan to hug his mother and tell him he loved her, because he would kill him basically, among other threats as the crowd chanted "Daniel Bryan". They came back from another break with Fandango putting Xavier Woods away with a legdrop with Truth on commentary. Once again Emma was shown briefly in the crowd,. In case anyone hasn't figured it out yet, Fandango and Emma are of the opposite sex so I don't see a program between the two coming up unfortunately. Stephanie approached Kane in the back and reprimanded Kane for chokeslamming Punk on SmackDown, telling him not to put his hands on talent. Like a school teacher she ordered Kane to go down and apologize to Punk, an idea that Kane wasn't too high on - the babyfaces are who exactly?

Kane reluctantly made it down and called out Punk. The hash tag for this segment was verbally announced by Cole as #CorporateKane -poor. Kane apologized, Punk acted as if he couldn't hear Kane, and eventually said that he was sorry too. But, Punk attacked Kane sending him to the floor. Kane looked to retaliate, but Maddox made it down and placed Punk in a match with one of the two New Age Outlaws. Billy Gun and Punk with Road Dogg on commentary followed in the next segment. Dogg helped Gun to the floor. Punk laid him out with a tope. Gun gained some brief offense off of the distraction, but Punk pinned him with the GTS moments later. Maddox and Kane

made it down announcing Punk's Rumble entrance slot as one. Heyman & Lesnar were shown walking into the arena looking very cold. Lawler, Cole and JBL talked about Mae Young before a very nice video package. Stephanie seems to be going out of her way to say "professional wrestling" as of late, as was the case with this package. Mysterio was out for yet another match with Del Rio. This one in particular went very very long, and like a GHC title match it didn't need to. The final moments were well put together with Del Rio clasping the bottom rope before locking in the cross armbreaker for the submission. This brought Batista down who laid Del Rio out with a spinebuster and spear. He went for the Batista bomb, but instead of sitting out and tearing his very tight jeans he gave brief pause and decided to just drop poor Alberto.

Big Show did some Paul Heyman impersonations and called Lesnar out. Heyman walked out, looked like he was about to say something, but Lesnar's music hit and out he came. After making it



about half-way down Lesnar and Heyman walked to the back. Show called him out again and this time Lesnar made it to the ring for a face off. Show nudged Brock with his stomach, Lesnar shot for a take down, but was completely man handled and dumped to the outside in what looked like the most reckless manner possible. Brock went crazy destroying things on the outside, leaped in with a chair, but Show stole it and back to the outside Brock slid. They dragged this segment out, but they did a good job of building to Show/Lesnar at the Rumble by the time the climax rolled around. Tamina & AJ were down for a match with the Funkadactyles. There was an app clip of Barrett giving bad news during AJ's title record celebration; basically "no one" likes you. He left and in came Josh Matthews to ask the rather redundant how-did-that-make-you-feel type question. AJ responded with a death cry that woke up a sleeping family member of mine and threw her celebratory cake in the direction of Mathews; ended up connecting with Tamina. Naomi rolled AJ up to further screaming. There was a Mania 30 WWE Network "did you know". We got the annual Royal Rumble Buy the Numbers video. There was a similar Martin Luther King video from the opening segment.

The Usos and Wyatts were set for a tag team match. Wyatt got on the mic during the match with the heat on Uso saying that hell awaited Bryan. Bryan ran down to ringside going after Bray and laying Rowan out allowing Jey Uso to grab a rollup on Harper off the distraction for the win to "yes" chants. Bryan wasn't too physical, but he did more than I would have expected with a concussion.

Kofi Kingston was out for his rematch with Randy Orton. The usual Orton match followed; long and boring for the most part. Cena was shown running into the building and a brawl broke out between the two, which Kingston seemed A okay with. They brawled into the crowd with Cena looking for an AA off the stands, Orton escaped and looked for the exit. They brawled into the sky-box and then outside with Orton jumping into a random car and driving off. It looked frigid. Glad to see that all of this hatred is going to culminate in a singles match. Cena fooled around in the crowd to end the televised show. He shook that anger off rather quickly for the good of the people.

RAW Ratings January 20th 2014 – Batista Draws Big Numbers

RAW this week with the return of Batista benefiting from being advertised quite the ways in advance drew the show's best rating and viewership in months. The show drew a 3.5 rating, which was the highest since July 15th for the show where Cena called Daniel Bryan out for his Summer Slam title shot. It is even more impressive when looking at the average viewership, which was 4.68 million viewers - their best overall viewership since the March 11th show of last year. The first hour drew a colossal 5.25 million viewers, but viewership dropped off drastically from there, which is why it was a pretty dumb move to have Batista come out in the first hour with little build and nothing to hook viewers leading into the second and third apart from a poorly thought out Cena/Orton confrontation. The first hour drew 5.25 million viewers. which may very well be the highest single hour that the show has done since RAW 1000, if not longer. It was a 1.71 in the 18-49 demo, which equates to 2.173 million viewers. The second hour showed a major drop off drawing 5.00 viewers. which is still a good number (a 1.65 and 2.097 million viewers in the 18-49 demo, third for the day behind the first hour and Love & Hip-Hop). The third and final hour drew the lowest number of the three 4.36 million viewers, with a massive drop-off (a 1.53 and 1.945 million viewers in the 18-49 demo, which ended up fourth for the day). Of all the segment by segment ratings that we have missed over the course of the last few months, this show's data is possibly the most upsetting, given how interesting the viewership patterns must have been. Seeing how high the ratings were I can't see the WWE being all too upset with them, although there was certainly a very negative pattern displayed throughout the show. The show could have been far more successful ratings wise if they had left the return until later on in the show, although these are still very good numbers.

WWE NXT – January 22nd 2014. Full Sail University: Winter Park, FL. Ben Carass.

A wacky 1980's style shot of the announcers standing at the announce desk with the ring in the background opened the show. Tensai and Saxton yacked about Bo Dallas's championship celebration then Tom Phillips introduced us to cookie-cutter diva ring announcer number 1000, Eden.

Adrian Neville vs. Wesley Blake

No intro for Blake, who has been saddled with a cowboy gimmick. Neville pretty much took the whole match. He shone right from the bell and did a bunch of flips just because then landed a missile dropkick. Blake cut him off for a second with a boot and some shoulder blocks to the gut, but Neville quickly came back and hit the twisting shooting star for the finish. - *Adrian Neville defeated Wesley Blake via pinfall, at 3:58. – I've complained about ass-backward squashes recently, however this was everything an enhancement match should be. Neville completely out-classed the tomato can in the ring with him, which is exactly how the babyface number one*

contender should be booked.

The BFF's were with Devin in the back. Charlotte did a heel promo about turning on Bayley and said she had been enjoying "limousines" and "jets" since joining the mean girls. She delivered her lines admirably, but was simply not as believable as Summer Rae, who said 2014 would be the year of the BFFs and she vowed to destroy Natalya in their match later on.

Xavier Woods vs. Alexander Rusev w/ Lana

Rusev had done away with his goofy skirt thing and was wearing some generic black tights. Somebody must have remembered they initially pushed him as a Muay Thai expert, because Rusev did some phony "striker" spots, like a mounted ground-n-pound and a series of awkward body kicks. Woods made a comeback and got a near-fall off a shining wizard, but the finish saw Rusev cut him off with another poor body kick and he got the win with the camel clutch. - *Alexander Rusev defeated Xavier Woods via submission, at 3:01.* Lana told Rusev to put his hold on again and he obliged; Sin Cara ran down to save Xavier and he took out Rusev with a headscissors. - *Rusev playing the big dominant heel I'm ok with, but I hated the phony Muay Thai thing from day one. They had played it down in recent weeks and it was back with a vengeance here. Rusev has potential, but I just don't see what the WWE higher-ups see in him.*

Antonio Cesaro vs. CJ Parker

Cesaro was over like a hero, CJ was not. Cesaro got his knees up to counter a back splash and got the heat; CJ started his comeback with a flying clothesline and got a near fall with a crossbody off the top. Finish saw CJ pull out an airplane spin, however he became dizzier than the unaffected Cesaro, who then did his giant swing and delivered the neutraliser. - *Antonio Cesaro defeated CJ Parker via pinfall, at 3:45.* Sami Zayn showed up on the stage; he was using a crutch and talked about all the great matches he had in 2013, specifically the NXT match of the year against Cesaro. Sami said losing that match was the one blemish on everything he had accomplished so far and he challenged Antonio to a rematch. Cesaro walked up to the top of the ramp, took the mic from Sami, simply said, "No" and strolled away. - *Nothing match; CJ is being prepared for his heel turn by losing every week, which is hardly anything new as we have seen that kind of booking from the WWE for years. The angle between Sami & Cesaro was a nice little tease and is proof that not every angle has to be overcomplicated.*

Miz joined Devin in the back; he threatened to do a Miz TV, but CJ Parker showed up and was complaining about the fans booing him. Miz put himself over as the greatest thing ever, so CJ accused him of having a massive carbon footprint due to all the toxic waste he was spewing and slapped him right across his undeniably punchable face. CJ walked off and Miz tried desperately to look mean; he of course failed miserably. - *CJ Parker vs. The Miz? We may have an early candidate for worst feud of the year.*

Natalya w/ Bayley vs. Summer Rae w/ Sasha Banks

A pre-tape from Nattie rolled; she said she would make Summer's head touch her toes (it took all my willpower to get this image out of my head and to concentrate on the match) then quoted her dad's famous "[I'm] going to get hungry and forget [my] manners" line. There was a cool spot that saw Nattie literally run over the back of a seated Summer; Summer got the heat after a spinning heel kick and applied an Indian deathlock. Nattie landed a snap-suplex for the transition to her comeback then for the finish, she countered another spin kick into the sharpshooter. - *Natalya*

defeated Summer Rae via submission, at 3:33. – Yet again Summer looked a million times better than any of her matches on Raw, still I'm sure a lot of the credit has to go to Nattie and the agents for putting a match together that hides any major weaknesses.

Backstage, Enzo Amore and Colin Cassady were with Devin. Aiden English interrupted and reminded Cassady that he beat him last week then prepared to show the Jersey boys that he still had a great singing voice. Cassady walked off and Enzo ran over English's foot with his motorised wheelchair. It was all around goofiness.

Bo Dallas came out for his "banner raising ceremony". He did his usual denial laden promo about the fans supporting him then he unveiled a banner that read, "Bo Dallas, NXT Champion, 224 Days". Adrian Neville hit the ring and told Bo, on behalf of the entire WWE, to shut up and the fans started a "he's a wanker" chant in honour of Neville's thick Geordie accent. Neville declared he would take the strap from around Bo's waste, however Bo stated Neville beat a nobody in 4:45 to get his last title shot and as the champ, Bo claimed he could easily beat Neville in under that time. Triple H appeared on the screen and booked a match between the two with the stip that if Neville could last the 4:45 then he would get his title shot on the live show on February 27th.

Non-Title Beat the Clock Match: Adrian Neville vs. Bo Dallas (NXT Champion)

Bo, still wearing his pink shirt and slacks, tripped Neville on the apron for an early count-out tease then went for several pinfall attempts. Neville made a comeback with a minute to go and went for his finish; Bo rolled to the floor and with ten seconds left he went after Neville, but took a backdrop over the top and the time expired. – *Adrian Neville beat the clock to earn an NXT Championship match, at 4:45.* Bo tried to go after Neville, but he ended up taking the twisting shooting star; Neville counted his own pinfall then posed with the belt to close the show. – *Unlike Raw, NXT mostly has good continuity with their angles and storylines; Bo bringing up the beat the clock deal from last month was a nice way of getting to a match where the story was that Bo couldn't beat Neville. For me, it is definitely time to take the belt off Bo; sure he draws Chernobyl heat, but his run of cheap victories has been building for a long time and what better pay off than having Neville beat him for the strap. Of course, a pinfall victory over Dallas would send the NXT fans into a riot, however we're getting a ladder match so there is always a chance that there will be another screwy finish. Neville is the right man to dethrone Dallas in my opinion, as Sami Zayn doesn't need the belt and all the other babyfaces haven't been positioned to take it.*

Another example of an NXT show where the wrestling wasn't anything special, however pretty much every segment advanced a storyline and because of that I can't say anything too negative; apart from the impending Miz/CJ Parker feud, which is a terrible idea on many levels. You can't help but get into the show watching characters that are consistently written for, as well as an attention to detail that has been missing from the main roster for damn near 15 years. If you ever feel disheartened by the tripe we get most weeks on Raw, then take consolation in the fact that NXT proves that at least a handful of people know what they are doing in this company.

WWE SmackDown – January 24th 2014. Van Andel Arena: Grand Rapids, MI Ben Carass.

A graphic in memory of legendary wrestler, promoter, booker, George Scott opened the show. As many stories as I've heard about the man responsible for helping to organise a lot of the early WWF PPVs, this may have been the first time I've actually seen him in any form. Josh Matthews and JBL

welcomed us to the arena; they didn't explain where Cole was. Still in his wheelchair, Zeb Colter and the Real Americans were in the ring; Zeb buried the Big Show for attacking him last week and they showed the 64 year old Colter getting knocked out by Show. Zeb claimed Show and Rey Mysterio were not a real team because they didn't have a team name and he offered some options for them; "Los Tacos Supremeos" was the funniest. Rey and Show made their entrances for the opener.

Big Show & Rey Mysterio vs. The Real Americans w/ Zeb Colter

Show tossed around Cesaro then the Americans got the heat on Rey; Cesaro used the giant swing and Swagger did very little apart from work a couple of holds then took a rana into the buckle for Rey's hope spot. Rey hit Cesaro and Swagger with a double DDT as the hot tag transition then Big Show ran wild on both Americans. Show simultaneously hiptossed Cesaro and Swagger out of the corner then for the finish Rey caught Cesaro with the 619, Show landed the KO punch and Rey came off Big Show's shoulders with a splash. - *Big Show & Rey Mysterio defeated the Real Americans via pinfall, at 5:31 (TV Time)*. Paul Heyman came out on the stage; he put Show over for stuffing Lesnar's double-leg on Raw and for dumping Brock over the top rope. Paul said beating Show on Sunday would not be enough and declared that Brock would make him suffer then go on to conquer the rest of the WWE Universe. - *Match was fine, although having Rey do the selling didn't help. Big Show obviously had to make the big comeback in order to look strong before the Lesnar match, so it was unavoidable that the hot tag led to nothing more than a few big man spots. Paul tried to sell the match, but Show has been booked as Lesnar's kryptonite; I don't think Big Show comes off as vulnerable enough for the people to believe that Brock will make him suffer and pay to see the giant overcome the odds. Show isn't a bad-ass like Triple H wanted to be or the underdog like CM Punk and he definitely isn't John Cena, so what is the appeal of this match?*

The Miz vs. Brodus Clay

Wade Barrett and his rising podium appeared before the bell; he talked about the ten man main event, but the bad news was everyone had to suffer through "one of the worst matches in WWE history" with Miz vs. Brodus. He started a "Miz is awful chant" and Brodus jumped Miz, who was of course distracted by Barrett. Barrett kept chiming in with unfunny insults and they would show him on a little screen in the bottom of the picture. Miz won with a DDT. - *Miz defeated Brodus Clay via pinfall, at 1:48*. After the match, Miz ran over to Wade's podium only to just stand there and have Barrett laugh at him from above. - *I'm afraid I've got some bad news; it looks like Barrett will be feuding with the Miz*.

Non-Title Match: AJ Lee (Diva's Champion) w/ Tamina vs. Cameron w/ Naomi

Cameron made an atrocious comeback. For the finish, she hit Tamina with a baseball slide for no reason and AJ rolled her up; she kicked out, but AJ hit her with a shining wizard to get the pin. - *AJ Lee defeated Cameron via pinfall, at 1:28*. Post-match, Naomi took out AJ; she seemed to get confused and crawled over to make a pinfall then realised that she was not actually involved in a match.

A great pre-tape from the Shield rolled; Ambrose and Rollins said this year's Rumble match would be all about the Shield then Reigns stated that "the big dog" would go on to win the whole thing. Roman had a tremendously exuberant smile on his face, while Ambrose and Rollins looked perturbed by that statement.

Los Matadores w/ El Torito vs. Ryback & Curtis Axel

The heels got the heat on Diego right away. Axel missed a corner splash and Fernando came in off the hot tag to run wild then planted Axel with a hammerlock DDT, but Ryback broke up the pin. Finish saw Diego then Ryback take a ride over the top, Fernando set up for a dive however Axel rolled him up from behind. - *Ryback & Curtis Axel defeated Los Matadores via pinfall, at 3:10.* – Torito took Axel to the outside with a rana then Fernando landed his dive; Torito finished off the stupidity by coming off the top with a crossbody to Ryback and the Matadores left triumphantly. – *Absolutely nothing match. Why even bother putting Ryback over if they are just going to be made to look stupid by getting attacked by the mini?*

CM Punk hit the ring for a promo; they showed Kane giving him a chokeslam last week and Punk getting some revenge on Raw. He took a shot at Triple H and Steph, with the line: “Vince McMahon’s wicked spoiled brat daughter and his doofus son in law” then Punk talked about Kane assigning him number one spot in the Rumble and said he had done everything in his career, however the one glaring omission was not winning the Rumble match. Punk declared he would walk right into the lion’s den and punch him right in the face then throw him over the top along with 29 other superstars. Punk vowed to do everything in his power to be the last man standing then Kane appeared on the stage and wished Punk luck on behalf of the authority. Kane claimed that Punk’s odds were 0.000000186 or 1/500,000,000 in winning from number one, which is unbelievably absurd. Punk accused Kane of handing over his manhood as well as his mask then finished by noting that the number one entrant had won before and he would do the same because he has been the best since day one. – *Punk showed some great fire, which he hasn’t really done recently. I still think we’re getting Punk vs. Kane, possibly at Elimination Chamber or possibly on Raw, if not then it should be much clearer at this point that Triple H is the one screwing with Punk. Instead we get ambiguous tweener Hunter, being the top heel and top babyface depending on what mood he is in when he shows up for TV.*

The Wyatt Family w/ Bray Wyatt vs. The Prime Time Players

Harper drilled Young with a big boot then dropped Titus off the apron with another; Rowan squished Young with a corner splash and Harper connected with his discuss lariat for the finish. - *The Wyatt Family defeated the Prime Time Players via pinfall, at 1:01.* Afterwards, Bray got in the ring and hit Young with his move then cut a promo about how he wanted to hurt Daniel Bryan at the Rumble. Bray added that he would “change the world” and no one would be able to deny him anymore. Bryan hit the stage; he told Bray that he would no longer be trapped in his “prison of madness” and on Sunday, Wyatt would be trapped in his. Bryan stated that Bray would find out who the real monster was when the entire Universe chanted “Yes” – *Bray saying he will “change the world” is definite hint at something, however I have no clue what; maybe it was just another Bray Wyatt line and I’m reading too much into it. Bryan’s lines were terribly scripted: “trapped in a prison of madness”, who speaks like that? These writers have no concept of believable dialogue. Again, this segment did little to excite me for the Rumble.*

Kofi Kingston vs. Fandango w/ Summer Rae

An inset promo from Kofi rolled and he talked about all the wacky spots he pulled off in the past Rumbles. Kofi shone early on and sent Fandango over the top; Emma was in the crowd again and Summer acknowledged her with a condescending look. Fandango started the heat after a clothesline on the floor, which lasted approximately zero seconds because Kofi made his comeback then Fandango got a near-fall with an enzuigiri. Finish saw Kofi avoid the legdrop off the top and score

with the trouble in paradise. - *Kofi Kingston defeated Fandango via pinfall, at 2:50. – Standard SmackDown filler. Kofi goes from pinning the WWE champion to working nothing matches with Fandango; tremendous. They teased a potential feud between Emma & Summer, perhaps they will fight over which one is the better dancer. Exciting, I know. I suppose if they wanted to turn Fandango they could put him with Emma, either way I doubt that anyone will care.*

The Shield & The New Age Outlaws vs. The Usos, The Rhodes Brothers (Tag Team Champions) & Big E. Langston (IC Champion)

The Usos started the shine then Big E did some power spots, however Reigns cut him off and the heels worked him over in the corner for some false heat. E landed a belly-to-belly and Cody tagged in to make the first comeback. Billy Gunn cut him off and Cody sold for the heat; all the heels took a turn in working him over. Cody caught Reigns with a moonsault press for the transition and Goldust fired up after the hot tag. Goldie came off the second rope and pulled out a rana on Billy



Gunn then hit Road Dogg with a powerslam for a near-fall. It was everybody hit a move time: Rollins took out Goldust with his flying knee, Big E landed his body-check, but Reigns saved Rollins from E's finish with a spear, Jey nailed Reigns with a superkick and Jimmy followed up with a splash off the top. Jimmy wiped out the Shield with a plancha, but Gunn hit Jey with the fameasser; Cody nailed Billy with the disaster-kick then Road Dogg delivered his pump-handle slam. Goldust rolled up the Dogg, however all three Shield members broke up the pin to cause a DQ. - *The Usos, The Rhodes Brothers & Big E Langston defeated The Shield & The New Age Outlaws via disqualification, at 9:12 (TV Time). A wild brawl broke out between the two teams and the locker-room emptied to join in the annual pre-Rumble schmoz. Punk's music hit and he joined the fray and the show closed with Josh plugging the Rumble. – Decent main event; the closing move-a-minute sequence was fun and we got the perennial multi-man brawl on the Rumble go-home show, which I was expected on Raw and let's be honest it would have been better than that stinker of an angle with Cena & Orton.*

For a go-home show heading towards the second most popular PPV of the year, SmackDown missed the mark on many levels. There wasn't anything as horrendously poor as the final angle on

Raw, but a lot of the angles here were very predictable and there was an undeniable feeling of the writers and the talent just going through the motions. The interaction between guys involved in “major” deals for the Rumble for the most part was flat: Heyman tried but failed to make Brock/Show seem important, the Bryan/Wyatt exchange of words was right out of a Vince Russo B-movie special. The only shining light was CM Punk, but even his segment was nuked by some absurd math and friction with Kane that nobody cares about. We have entered the unofficial, official “wrestling season” and I’m still waiting for everybody in the company, but mostly the creative team, to pick up their game. Last year things briefly picked up after WrestleMania, so don’t count on them suddenly turning things around in time for Mania 30.

Bits & Pieces

Impact this week with a title vs career match in Magnus versus Sting drew their highest viewership in over a year with 1.56 million viewers.

I had a chance to watch the top matches from the January 5th NOAH show at Korakuen Hall this week, and what I saw I enjoyed. I picked three matches from the show, the Daisuke Harada/Atsushi Kotoge match, TMDK/Ishikawa & Okabayashi tag and of course the world title match between the defending KENTA and new champion Takeshi Morishima. The main event suffered from the usual length issues that have plagued the majority of KENTA's title defenses over the past year, and they certainly brought the match done some. Watching the match and how over both guys were, and it looked like the right move was to keep the title on KENTA for the time being. The reality is that they needed to take the title off KENTA, simply due to the amount of top level talent that they have on the roster, but Morishima at this stage of his career doesn't have the star power to carry that belt in the same way that KENTA has for all these months. Harada/Kotoge ended up being one of the best matches that I have seen the two have during this long standing programming with the closing stretch and near fall catapulting the match to levels approaching *** ¾. Considering that it was an undercard match they did fantastic job working this crowd, bringing them up to levels past Morishima/KENTA by the closing stretch.

Next Week's Issue

Next week we will be covering WWE's Royal Rumble show, all of the matches, follow-up on RAW, Mania direction, NXT, SmackDown and tons more!

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