



Cubed Circle Newsletter 164 – CM Punk Sparks a Firestorm

We have an action-packed issue for you this week, with a look at the hottest story in pro-wrestling this week, the CM Punk interview, New Japan's take on the WWE Network – New Japan World – the Wrestling Observer Newsletter Awards Part V with Bryan Rose, another mind-numbing edition of RAW, hopefully made non-mind-numbing, by Ben Carass, NXT, and SmackDown!

There is also major news regarding our year-end issue in that, whilst it is normally our biggest issue of the year, perhaps only behind our annual WrestleMania issue, this year's newsletter will be, not only the biggest issue of the year, but the biggest in the history of the newsletter. What we hope to do with this year's issue is to encapsulate the many themes, stories, moments and trends of 2014, with the help of close to 10 other people on-board. Whilst, perhaps not as grand, what we had in-mind for what has ultimately become a year-book idea, is for it to spiritually succeed the incredibly entertaining and informative DKP annuals of 2011/2012. We will of course have more information on the year-book, some of the people involved, and so much more leading up to the end of the year.

– *Ryan Clingman, Cubed Circle Newsletter Editor*

CM Punk on the Art of Wrestling Breaking a 303 Day Silence

In recent years the late-November and December period is one of little significance for the pro-wrestling. New Japan runs the World Tag League, which harbours little relevance to the company's most important show of the year on January 4th, the Mexican scene pretty much shuts down, and more often than not WWE continues to churn out its creatively-stunted Fall/Winter product in preparation for its hottest run of the year. Perhaps the later stages of this year have been made even more uneventful as a result of TNA's absence, although, realistically speaking, TNA's television presence was of very little overall consequence regardless. This is a generalization, as Ring of Honor is building to its biggest show of the year, Final Battle, and Dragon Gate has its big December show coming up, but generally speaking most of the world's major promotion's experience some degree of slow down or downtime in the November and December months.

However, despite a distinct lack of major pro-wrestling canon, at least in the context of some of the world's largest promotions, one pro-wrestling related media source has created quite the fair bit of

interesting content over the past couple of weeks, and perhaps the non-Network story of the year – podcasts, namely those of Colt Cabana, The Art of Wrestling, and Steve Austin's, which was live on the WWE Network this week with special guest, Vince McMahon. It should be stated that the two shows were most certainly scheduled independent of one another, with the Vince McMahon interview announced on last week's edition of RAW, two days before the release of the unannounced and massively prolific CM Punk appearance on the November 26th Art of Wrestling. Undoubtedly, however, the guests of the two shows, Vince McMahon and CM Punk, ended up playing major roles in the appearances of the other, whether explicitly or implicitly. What this, of course resulted in, was what may have been the single most enthralling week of pro-wrestling content in many months, as well as one of the most historically significant of the year.



The subject of discussion, or at least one of the main ones, in all three interviews was the departure of CM Punk from the WWE earlier this year, and the various factors that led to his firing on his wedding day, which may quite possibly be one of the most important details of the entire story. The antagonist in the tale, from the argument Punk made on Cabana's podcast, whether it was in the discussion of Vince's alleged deception and insincerity, or perceived lack of product awareness, was clearly McMahon, the extent to which you believe this to be so of course varies greatly based on personal perspective however. Still, McMahon's rebuttal, however reluctant it may have been, on the Steve Austin podcast, was not nearly enough to turn the tables and portray Punk as the one at fault. At the same time, Vince, once coaxed into the position by Austin following a great deal of hinting, looked to paint Punk as an introvert in the archaic sense of the word, a loner, and more specifically one with poor communication skills. Both men came off as somewhat likable from a neutral standpoint in their respective appearances, albeit in profoundly different ways.

Punk was by his own volition, highly aggressive in the week's leading up to his departure with the company. He was tired, over-worked attempting, in his own words, to be a Harley Race-esque champion in modern times. He was physically broken, suffering numerous concussions over the last

three years, as well as broken ribs, elbow injuries, and perhaps the largest indictment of the WWE, as a company, an diagnosed, severe MRSA staff infection. Add to this his personal and professional disputes with the company, with Punk still to this day never receiving a true WrestleMania main event, as well as issues with pay-offs, sponsorships, lack of communication, deception, and creative frustration, and you have, as Punk out right stated, a number of major issues contributing, ultimately, to his departure. In this sense, Punk was very much the sympathetic character, and, in fact, apart from disparaging Punk's communication skills, McMahon made no attempt to dilute Punk's moral character in his interview with Austin. Punk, most probably then came across as a positive character to most people, although there must have undoubtedly been those made more unsympathetic to his plight, simply as a result of his complaints about putting part-timers like the Rock and Undertaker over, as well as his strong reluctance to work with Triple H at WrestleMania 30. In this way, whilst perhaps at points quite polarising, Punk's lack of agenda, apart from wanting to have his story heard, which I honestly believe, served him well, at the very least as a consistent figure in his story.

Vince, on the other hand, came across as a far more erratic of a personality on the Austin show, which is of course to be expected when one man has a corporate image to uphold and the other doesn't. McMahon was, at times, quite the endearing figure, particularly in discussions of past exploits. Seeing McMahon and Austin go 15 minutes over with a discussion of their feud, as well hearing tales of McMahon's rise to WWF prominence (pre-expansion), was perhaps the closest Vince, even as a non-performer, is going to come to being a relatable figure. On the other hand, however, we had strong indictments of McMahon's mindset pertaining to the current product. Steve Austin, from words he has spoken on his podcast seems to be a large proponent of Antonio Cesaro, and in his Network interview brought up Cesaro's current plight, more specifically, asking what specifically he was missing. Vince, whilst first arriving to the conclusion that Cesaro lacked a certain charisma or talking ability, then followed by affirming that Cesaro was simply missing a certain something, which came across, in the context of the interview, as but a euphemism for "I don't like the guy's work". Other personality traits that arose were very much expected, Vince's confirmation that he had in fact not listened to the Cabana podcast, but had only been told about it, which of course was the case with TNA and WCW, and perhaps a major problem for the company's future as far as remaining relevant is concerned. And, Vince's somewhat delusional historical recounts and clear abject irrational hatred for the term "pro-wrestling" came across as far from endearing.

McMahon even went so far as to issue an apology to Punk, albeit after stating that Punk's termination papers arriving on his wedding day was nothing more than a "coincidence", and that he "Hope[d] that one day [he and Punk] will be able to get back together again", like Austin, Hogan, and Warrior before. This apology was acknowledged and disparaged by Punk in his second Cabana interview earlier this week, as if McMahon was truly sorry, Punk claimed, he would have phoned Punk, and wouldn't have needed to issue his sole apology in public. This stands, as a valid criticism of many of McMahon's responses in the interview, in that some came off as simple corporate white-washing of the situation, which ultimately painted McMahon as wholly less sincere than Punk in his appearance.

But, with Austin, Hogan, and Warrior all in the conversation, the question must be asked if Punk will ever appear in a WWE ring again. On the one hand, each seemingly analogous departure brought up, does, on closer inspection, vary quite greatly from that of Punk. On the other, what seemingly stands as a truth in the pro-wrestling business, or at least in almost all cases, is that, at one time or another, no matter what the circumstances, big stars will always come back. One does not need to look far to see why Hogan, and his departure, was so different from Punk's. Whilst Punk, at least at the time being,

seems contempt with his life, lives modestly, and doesn't seem to crave the spotlight, Hogan was very much the opposite. Punk, at least at one point, clearly loved the pro-wrestling business more than Warrior, but at the same time, Warrior seemed quite contempt to never appear as a performer again, and may never have, if it wasn't for his want to have his daughters see him as a performer. In this way, Warrior, whilst by no means fully similar to Punk, is more so than Hogan. Then you get to Austin, who, at least in terms of his original, non-medical related, departure, was also somewhat similar to Punk in 2002. He was mentally burned out, and creatively disgruntled, but, as was mentioned by Vince and Austin on their show this week, there was a Jim Ross character to connect the two and organize a return plan – there is no such person for Punk and Vince, or Punk and Hunter. What is more, is that Punk has a far greater personal vendetta against the company due to the date on which he was fired, as well as for creative and medical reasons. The other three men mentioned were also possibly more business orientated than Punk, which combined with the above reasons, make them quite dissimilar.

It may be thought that this implies that I believe that Punk was perhaps the most poorly done by out of any major WWE/F star that has departed unceremoniously from the company in the last few decades; but this is far from the truth. Bret Hart, who was not only double crossed at the 1997 Survivor Series, in his home country, but also lost his brother in a WWE ring, arguably due to pure negligence/stupidity, all before having a stroke himself whilst working for WCW, as well as being disgruntled with their creative direction, had perhaps far more to feel bitter with the company and business about than Punk. Thirteen years may have passed, but even Bret Hart returned to the company, and he too, whilst clearly feeling strongly indebted to his fanbase, perhaps more so than Punk, still returned. Bruno Sammartino, who also lived a humble financial existence, with no need for the spotlight, also returned, which very few thought possible. However, this case too differs from that of Punk, in that Sammartino's departure, whilst heated, was not as hot as Punk's, and his return was also aided by an intermediary in the form of Triple H, one that, at least at present, simply does not exist for Punk in the WWE.

Punk, whilst by no means stating any current plans to ever return to the ring, did state in his second Cabana interview that he does not entirely rule it out. In fact, he even brought up, in jest, the notion of showing up on a PWG show to wrestle the Young Bucks. I would be surprised if we never see Punk appear in pro-wrestling again, and looking at past performers of his caliber, chances are that he will show-up on some show, in some capacity, at some point. And it is a positive for the business to have a star like CM Punk still young, but inactive, as if any potential competition emerges, and Punk is interested in performing for them, then it could only be a positive. Whilst left unmentioned on both Cabana podcasts, according to this week's Wrestling Observer newsletter, the possibility of Punk appearing for Bellator or UFC is far from negligible.

The impact that these appearances will have on Punk's Observer Hall of Fame candidacy is unclear. Given that Punk garnered an unexpectedly low 19% this year in his first appearance on the ballot, the manner in which Punk departed – that he "just walked out", as so many believed prior to the first Cabana podcast – most assuredly had a negative impact on his standings as a candidate. Now that Punk's story is out, and was delivered in such riveting fashion, I would hope, as a proponent of Punk as a Hall of Famer, that his percentages improve next year.

As a selfish fan I would like to see Punk perform again, perhaps one day if he regains a passion for pro-wrestling. Of course, this would most likely be outside of the WWE. And, if Punk never wrestles for the WWE, or anywhere for that matter, ever again, then perhaps that will simply add to the always evolving, and yet ever-growing, CM Punk legend.

- Ryan Clingman

Takaaki Kidani Announces New Japan World Streaming Service – Repeating Others' Mistakes?

It was apparent very shortly following the purchase of New Japan Pro-Wrestling by Bushi Road in 2011 that, Bushi Road president, Takaaki Kidani, was, if nothing else, highly ambitious. It was made clear from the time of the purchase that Kidani's ultimate aim was to surpass UFC as the second largest sports entertainment (for lack of a better term) promotion in the world, at which point sites would be set on the WWE's top spot. Now, of course, the gap between WWE and New Japan is immense, even ignoring the severe linguistic and cultural disadvantage of the New Japan product, but that hasn't stopped Kidani from making major strides as New Japan's business front man. The move to internet pay-per-view in 2012 was an introduction of a major new revenue source for the company, with the 2013 Dome show often reported to have done well over 100,000 buys, which is, of course, incredibly impressive for a company in a country who has a far weaker pay-per-view culture than the United States. Other brazen decisions include the choice to run the Seibu Dome for the 2014 G1 Finals, and running two major shows per tour instead of one, amongst others things. These had somewhat mixed results, although, Kidani as a promoter has been a huge asset to the promotion, helping to push it higher than Yukes era management ever could.

Keys to this success, is also derived from Kidani's willingness to relinquish creative power completely to the old (pre-2012) management, which only served to benefit the product when considering Kidani's worrying creative input. Kidani was of course heavily influenced by the likes of Vince McMahon and Eric Bischoff, for better or for worse, and in the case of creative, it may have, if it wasn't for Kidani's willingness to relinquish creative power, been for the worst. Still, Kidani showcased not only his drive to push the company forward as an international promotion this week, but also his very clear admiration for Vince McMahon as a promoter – this was, with the announcement of New Japan World.

New Japan World, is a subscription based internet service similar to the WWE Network and UFC Fight Pass, with a 999 yen monthly price point, which certainly sounds familiar. The company will be airing every major show it runs on World, with a 24 hour live stream, and a moderately strong, albeit not blow away by any means, event library. In this respect, it is clear that Kidani is, for whatever reason, mimicking the WWE's Network move, with that reason being, most probably, that Kidani looks up to McMahon as a business person. However, this does pose a number of problems to NJPW, some of which are similar to WWE's, and others that are very much unique to its own situation. The first major issue with starting a service such as this, partnered with TV Asai who own much of the NJPW library, is that by going in with a 999 Yen price point, they will be severely undercutting their ever-growing, new, and successful pay-per-view business both in and outside of Japan. Whilst, Japan has, by no means, a strong pay-per-view culture, with Tokyo Dome shows over recent years doing in excess of 100,000 buys, they will be losing a major revenue stream. For arguments sake, say they were making \$15 off of each Dome show purchase, after a split with a provider, if they have a 50-50 split with TV Asai they will have to garner over 350,000 subscriptions simply to make the non-live revenue generated from the Dome as lucrative. It is in this way that concerns related to the WWE Network are somewhat applicable to New Japan World.

With New Japan World also having no region-block, and even if it did, barriers of this nature are fairly easy to circumvent, they will also be undercutting Jarrett's GFW North American Tokyo Dome show

broadcast. Perhaps, this isn't as great of an issue as one would expect, as the language barrier on the 'World' website, coupled with the fact that the commentary is strictly in Japanese, may limit its potential with prospective PPV buyers, who have been drawn in by JR's commentary. Factor in the lack of exposure of such a service to a fan who is new to the product, and perhaps it isn't as large of a problem as it would seem at first glance. On the other hand, though, this does limit the potential of Jarrett's pay-per-view offerings in the future, as it is only a matter of time before they launch an English language version of World, and this is disappointing for GFW PPVs. The extent to which this move will affect GFW, and its relationship with New Japan, is still unclear, with its biggest offering to date being that of the Tokyo Dome show.

Even if World completely cannibalizes the Japanese pay-per-view business, it probably won't have as great of an effect on the overall New Japan business as one would expect. Indeed, perhaps more so than any other major wrestling promotion in the world, apart from CMLL and AAA, New Japan is heavily reliant on its live attendance as revenue stream, with pay-per-view following, and then perhaps merchandise and other streams. However, if World does completely destroy the company's pay-per-view business, or at least destroys a great deal of it, New Japan will still lose one of its major revenue streams, and that is perhaps even more important to the growth of the company, given that they cannot rely on television rights revenue, as the WWE can.

With these concerns in mind, it should be noted that the Japanese pay-per-view culture is by no means wholly analogous to that of North America, as not only is traditional pay-per-view weaker, but also, technologically speaking, far fewer homes have pay-per-view capabilities in Japan than in the United States. With that being said whilst, according to current Ookla mobile data metrics, the United States is ahead of Japan as far as mobile internet speed is concerned, Japan not only has a higher percentage of wired internet subscriptions (30.4% to 28.31% according to the International Telecommunication Union 2011), but also trounced, in 2012 at least, the United States when it came to percentage of mobile subscriptions -- 110.91% to 95.45% of their respective populations. Given that World is available on mobile platforms, and the Japanese tech-culture is such that they are more open to the idea of such a platform, New Japan may have a larger possible base than one would think at first glance. Additionally, given that their first year goal is 100,000 subscribers, and the product is pretty hot right now, at least hotter than WWE's, if they are able to retain that number throughout the year, then they may have generated a healthy new revenue stream, even if they will be sacrificing another.

- *Ryan Clingman*

Raw Ramblings – December 1st 2014

BOK Centre: Tulsa, OK.

Ben Carass.

You know, instead of criticising the entire generation of “Millennial” wrestlers with no ambition and blaming one of his most talented worker’s shortcomings on being “Swiss”, maybe Vince McMahon should challenge his useless team of writers to script a television show that isn’t absolutely dreadful. Some of the booking this week was downright laughable and I was ready to turn the show off after a 22 minute opening segment that for all the world felt like a go-home angle.

The good news was that the **Anonymous GM** stuff was kept to a minimum, although the laptop booked **John Cena** vs. **Seth Rollins** in a tables match for TLC with the stipulation that if **Cena** loses he will no longer be the #1 contender for **Brock Lesnar**. **Rollins** and **Cena** traded insufferable dialog that in no way made you want to see them fight each other then finally **Rollins** and his stooges attacked **Cena**. Thus began a series of run-ins – picture the scene: all these guys politely queuing at Gorilla. I imagine it was like those idiots that queue for Black Friday and have no idea what they are actually standing in line for. **Kane** hit the ring first and chokeslammed **Cena**. **Ryback** was next and he powerslammed **Rollins** then **Kane** nailed him with a chair. **Rowan** showed up and took out all the heels. **Big Show** came down and hit **Rowan** with the steps. **Dolph Ziggler** stormed the ring and posted **Show** then pulled out a ladder, but **Luke Harper** appeared and took out **Dolph**. Finally, **Show** KO'd **Cena** then **Rollins**, **Noble** and **Mercury** gave **Cena** the old Shield triple powerbomb through a table. Like I said, it felt like the final push for TLC however it was actually an angle to set up **Cena**, **Ryback** & **Ziggler** vs. **Rollins**, **Kane** & **Harper** in the main event. The match went 25 minutes, going through two commercial breaks and with two long heat segments on **Ziggler** and **Cena**. Still, it was pretty good and for the first time in an eternity we got a clean finish in the main event of Raw, with **Ziggler** pinning **Harper** with a sunset-flip. Post-match, **Big Show** ran down; **Rowan** made the save and nailed all the heels with the steel steps. **Cena** gave **Show** the AA and all the babyfaces stood tall to close the show. Why the steel steps you say? Well **Show** and **Rowan** went to a DQ in 4:20, due to **Show** hitting **Rowan** with the steps then he carelessly dropped them on his head while he was selling on the floor. They are doing a “Stairs match” at TLC, which sounds like a rib to me, but it is in fact a real thing. If you needed more proof that every last one of the writers needs to be fired immediately, they revealed that **Rowan** was a genius, a classically trained guitarist and an award winning vintner. Character development everybody!



So after all the brawling involved in the opening segment and after the main event, what did they do to set up the co-main event of TLC? Why, another brawl of course! **Bray Wyatt** squashed **R-Truth** in 4:22 then filled the ring with tables, ladders and chairs for a promo about Jacob's Ladder. **Dean Ambrose** interrupted and the two brawled on the floor; **Ambrose** set up **Bray** on the announce table and climbed the ladder, but **Bray** escaped and

some referees ran down to break up the schmoz. **Ambrose** then smashed up **Bray's** rocking chair and **Wyatt** sold it by nearly bursting into tears; it was utterly stupid.

Miscellaneous filler: The opener was a tag team turmoil match for the #1 contendership; it went 19:10, so after the 22 minute opening segment, they had already killed most of the first hour. Get this booking: **The New Day (Big E & Kofi)** beat **The Dusts** in 1:40, so naturally I thought they were going to run through everyone and, you know, get over. But no, **E & Kofi** were eliminated in 2:40 (TV Time) by **Tyson Kidd** and a guy buried to death by Vince, **Cesaro**. How did this get OK'd? **The Usos** eliminated **Cesaro & Kidd** in 7:36 then **Adam Rose & The Bunny** were the last team – another baffling decision,

and **the Usos** downed them in 1:55. **Miz & Mizdow** approached **Naomi** backstage and **Miz** said he knew a producer in Hollywood that would love to work with her. This led to **Jimmy** coming out during **Mizdow vs. Fernando** and slapping **Miz** for talking to his woman. It was the most believable thing on Raw in weeks. **Mizdow** won by the way with the figure-four in 2:25. **Fandango** was booked to face **Jack Swagger**, but **Swagger** didn't show up because **Zeb Colter** had been attacked in the back by a mystery assailant. Apparently **Zeb** has been written off TV, so good luck getting yourself over **Swagger**. **Fandango** won via forfeit then **Rusev** and **Lana** came out for a promo. **Rusev** hinted that he took out **Zeb** then **Lana** did the Pledge of Allegiance and basically changed the word "America" for "Russia". **Swagger** stormed the ring and a BRAWL broke out. Refs showed up to break it up. **AJ Lee & Naomi** beat **The Bellas**; **AJ** tapped-out **Nikki**. The only thing worth noting is that there wasn't nearly as loud "CM Punk" chants as you would have expected, although this crowd sucked and they were in Tulsa, which is hardly renowned as a hot city. **Mick Foley** was dressed as Santa and shilled merch for the website; his daughter **Noelle** made her TV debut as an elf. **Paul Heyman** cut a promo from WWE Headquarters on all the people that complain about **Lesnar** not being on TV every week. Could you imagine what these idiot writers would do if **Brock** were on TV every week? Segments with the Bunny, love interests with the Divas, perhaps. **Paul** said that **Brock** is special and it would defeat the purpose if he was on TV every week then used the analogy that they don't book WrestleMania every Monday. They also hyped **Vince's** appearance on **Steve Austin's** podcast by having **Renee** interview him. **Vince** said the interview would be "fun", which may have been a sly dig at CM Punk, then again maybe not. After all the babyfaces posed to close the show, they went off air with a shot of **Austin** sitting in a makeshift studio and Cole did a final sell for the podcast. They didn't bother putting the biggest star they ever had on TV to plug his podcast, why bother? Just let Michael Cole do it.

I'm running out of ways to say that Raw was a miserable show. It's the same complaints every week: illogical, slovenly booking and insipid, worthless dialog. Vince McMahon can protect his team of incompetent writers all he wants and point the finger at the talent, but it is clear to even the most loyal of WWE fan that the problem isn't with the workers. Something is rotten in the state of Connecticut and there is no Heaven to direct the WWE out of its festering pit of moral and political corruption. Don't worry though true believers, we've got the Slammys next week and we can all find out who wins such illustrious awards as, Best Twitter Handle or Social Champion, Animal of the Year and LOL Moment of the Year. Vince McMahon, out of touch? Never.

RAW Ratings for December 1st 2014

Monday's edition of RAW was down from last week's post-Survivor Series edition of the show, most probably due to the lack of Sting intrigue heading in. The show averaged 3.883 million viewers over three hours, with the first drawing 4.227 (a 1.51 rating in the 18-49 demo), the second 3.952 (1.39 rating in the 18-49 demo), and the third and final hour dropping to 3.471 million viewers (1.24 rating in the 18-49 demo). Large viewership drops throughout the show like this generally signal an noneffective creative direction, which is most probably the case here. CNN drew abnormally large ratings with Anderson Cooper 360 from 21:00 – 22:20 and CNN Tonight from 22:21 – in the 5 to 6 million viewer range.

Bryan Rose on the 2014 Wrestling Observer Newsletter Awards Part V

Here is PART FIVE of this look at the Wrestling Observer awards. It's been a long, arduous process, but hey, after five weeks of this we're actually nearing the deadline for this year, so everything worked

out in the end.

Best Booker(s): Jado and Gedo. I had some qualms with them this year, though. I wish they would have axed the Gracie angle when it bombed the first night in and I never really knew what they were doing with the Bullet Club for most of the year. But you put those aside and they're really, really great at making people matter, unlike other promotions in North America. Everything on their shows, at the very least, make sense. Matches call back on previous matches from months, or even years ago. Everything is so intricately book you'd imagine that they think this stuff matters. It's really amazing how a little effort can make a product feel hot and awesome.

Promoter of the Year: Takaaki Kidani of New Japan. Dana White of UFC has won this award for so many years. But frankly, I think the UFC is plummeting in popularity due to over-saturation and the failure of many, MANY main event matches over the course of 2014. Now, the latter part is not his problem. The fact that there's almost always a UFC show on with a bunch of names that don't even have Wikipedia pages fighting is. UFC wants to grow, but it's growing too fast for its own good with not enough names to garner interest, and the ratings continue to prove that. Vince McMahon did not have a good year with the Network doing poorly and creative continuing to plummet towards new levels of awful. Dixie Carter should be commended that someone actually took Impact at the very last second. Kidani's New Japan grew over the year in popularity and took some risks. Some worked, some didn't. But he had more growth this year than anyone else and made it work, something that can't be said for really anyone else this year.

Best Gimmick: No idea. I want to instinctively go with the Vaudevillans since I just watched NXT and their silent movies are so awesome. But I think of the four or five people who got called up the main roster this year and I don't see anything. Nothing's working over in WWE right now, really. TNA, nope. Maybe Tomohiro Ishii wanting to kill himself in every match is a gimmick. I don't really know, honestly. If anyone wants to send me ideas, please do so!

Worst Gimmick: Bray Wyatt. Last year, the gimmick was cool and interesting. So, as per usual, WWE found a way to make it boring and lame. They seem to find ways to kill gimmicks a lot, don't they. He's the new Undertaker who pops in and pops out and lays out people who have far more upside. Plus, Wyatt's promos are starting to get really bad. They were unique when they first started because Wyatt has a delivery that's uncommon to the rest of the roster. But his problem is that he rambles. His stuff is never straightforward, and it often ends up being a boring, rambling mess by the end.

Best Wrestling Book: Only one I read this year was the updated Death of WCW, so that if it counts. Funny how in 2014, that book still continues to be relevant because neither TNA nor WWE learned from WCW's mistakes.

Best Wrestling DVD: Paul Heyman's DVD. I enjoyed that one a lot. Beyond WWE's usual stuff, can't really think of anything else, so I'll be voting for this. Some pretty interesting insights into how Heyman got into the business and how ECW was run, as well as his backstage problems in the WWE. Savage's documentary is pretty good as well.

AND THAT'S IT! All the Observer awards have been run down. I've had fun figuring this one out. That's what it's all about in the end, right? Fun, and I don't mean the forced fun WWE tries to throw at the fans every week on Raw. Don't even know how I threw a jab there at WWE again. It wasn't their

year, that's for sure. I'll be back next week as I'm sure there's a lot to talk about given recent events...

-Bryan Rose

WWE NXT – December 4th 2014.

Full Sail University: Winter Park, FL.

Ben Carass

Non-Title Match: Charlotte (NXT Women's Champion) vs. Mia Yim – Charlotte over in 0:49. Mia got no intro and the commentators didn't bother to say her name either. She was completely squashed and Charlotte won with her finish. Sasha Banks came out to the stage and said she had more "flair" than Charlotte and her old man put together then claimed Charlotte would end up a loser just like her dad. Bayley showed up on a crutch and told Sasha to shut her "stupid ratchet face up." Sasha kicked her crutch out and Charlotte ran up the ramp to help. Charlotte picked up Sasha and headed back to the ring, screaming, "Get me a ref!" Becky Lynch ran down and distracted Charlotte then Sasha hit a backstabber and stood tall with the Women's Championship. – *Nice little angle and it's refreshing to have a women's division without any unnecessary lesbian overtones. I'm sure some people will be outraged about the Shine champion getting trounced like a geek, but this was taped months ago before Yim beat Ivelisse, so just be happy that she got a spot on a WWE produced TV show.*

There was another wacky silent movie vignette from the Vaudevillains. This time they had to stop the mini-Lucha Dragons from dropping water balloons off City Hall. English lifted a "500lbs" weight with one arm and Gotch fought off a lion. The punch line was English tying the mini-Lucha Dragons' legs together then handing them an anvil, which took them off the edge of City Hall and then inexplicably blew them up with a big mushroom cloud. It was funny and all, but like last week, did nothing to make me want to see them fight the Dragons.

The Vaudevillains vs. Wesley Blake & Buddy Murphy – Vaudevillains over in 3:30. Match was kind of dull. 'Villains worked over Blake's leg forever; Murphy made a brief comeback. Finish saw Gotch land a European uppercut then English pinned Murphy after a running neckbreaker. – *Blake & Murphy usually work heel, but here they were the faces and basically just sold for the #1 contenders. Maybe it was a test to see how they did, but regardless they certainly deserve more than just being the designated jobber team.*

Tyler Breeze was with William Regal in the back. Regal said Marcus Louis had not been seen since he walked out last week so he couldn't book a rematch. Breeze didn't care then Tyson Kidd walked up and wanted a rematch with Finn Bálor. Instead, Regal booked Breeze & Kidd against Bálor & Itami.

Bull Dempsey vs. Elias Sampson – Squash for Bull in 0:25. Crowd counted along and Bull won with the diving headbutt off the top. Baron Corbin made his entrance and he walked right past Dempsey without taking his eyes off the ring.

Baron Corbin vs. Steve Cutler – Squash for Corbin in 0:08. Fans counted again and Corbin won with his move; Dempsey watched on from the stage. – *Great stuff again. I don't have high hopes for the actual match, but they are doing a hell of a job at making Dempsey & Corbin seem like badasses.*

Another Kevin Owens vignette aired. He talked about wrestling Seth Rollins, being tag partners with

Daniel Bryan, meeting Adrian Neville in England in 2006 and travelling with his best friend Sami Zayn for 10 years. They also showed pictures of Owens, as Kevin Steen, with the aforementioned guys. The point was that the WWE called all of them first before they called him and it hyped his debut for next week at Takeover. – *Letting Owens be more-or-less the same Kevin Steen seems like the best possible decision and I suspect he will become one of the more believable characters in the whole company, if – and that’s a big “if” – if they don’t screw him up with horrendously over-scripted promos, which he will have to overcome anyway if he ever makes it to the main roster.*

Finn Bálor & Hideo Itami vs. Tyson Kidd & Tyler Breeze w/Natalya – Bálor & Itami over in 7:55. OK match. Bálor sold for the heat segment; Kidd and Breeze worked over his knee when they felt like it, but they seemed to forget and both of them hit neckbreakers. Bálor hit the Pele kick and made the hot tag; Itami ran wild and kicked Breeze to death. Finish saw Bálor hit a double stomp to Breeze’s back then Itami pinned him after an execution kick. There was some weird crowd sweetening for whatever reason, which they don’t usually do on NXT so it was very noticeable and out of place. Bálor cut a promo and said he would bring something to Takeover that the Ascension had never seen before. – *Itami still seems to be lacking the connection with the crowd, however his comeback looked really good and hopefully if they just let him show what he can do in the ring then he will start to get a better reaction. Bálor was as smooth as ever and I look forward to seeing who he and Itami are paired with after they blow off the Ascension stuff at Takeover.*

Main event segment was a face-to-face promo with Adrian Neville and Sami Zayn. Neville was out first; he said he would win at any cost and claimed that he wasn’t proud of how he retained his title over Sami in the four-way and in their match two weeks ago. Neville talked about Sami lacking the cutting edge and being “too nice” to be the champion. Zayn came down and Neville told him he would not be responsible for ending Sami’s career. Sami said it was his decision to make if he called it quits or not. Neville stated that he respected Sami and said the two would have the match of their careers at Takeover then offered a handshake. Sami thought about it then said it wasn’t about respect and slapped Neville in the face. Sami fired up and told Neville he didn’t get to end him and that he would end his reign as NXT champion; Zayn walked up the ramp and the two intensely stared each other down to close the show. – *What a great angle and story. Sami is sick of losing in title matches and wants more than anything to beat the champion. It’s so simple, yet so effective and puts the main event garbage on Raw to shame. This is how pro wrestling should be booked, not how many unfunny jokes can we script for Mr “titles come and titles go” John Cena. Neville still needs a little work on his promos, but they could go either way with him after Takeover, heel or face, and I’d quite like to see how he performs as a heel. There is no way this match can be anything but great.*

A solid go-home show. None of the matches were that great, but the build to Zayn/Neville is up there with the best stuff the WWE has done all year. Takeover should utterly wipe the floor with Survivor Series, and TLC for that matter. Other than the great main event build, the set up for the other matches has been OK at best. However the fallout from Takeover should be very interesting, as I fully expect Sami to win the title, Itami & Bálor will likely be given something new and we’ve got Kevin Owens to fit somewhere in the mix. NXT is quickly assembling an impressive roster of top workers that in my opinion rivals, if not tops, the current WWE main roster. There are still a lot of greenhorns down in Florida, but how can you not be excited about a product with, Zayn, Neville, Bálor, Itami, Owens and Kidd in the top spots? Sure they will likely get screwed up with dumbass booking on the main roster – case in point, Tyson Kidd, but it sure is fun to watch them work in a much more relaxed environment and, in case you have been livening under a rock, makes for a much better and more enjoyable product.

WWE SmackDown – December 5th 2014.
Chesapeake Energy Arena: Oklahoma City, OK.

Ben Carass.

Santino Marella was the GM for the night and he opened the show from his office which was decorated with all his wacky gimmicks; the cobra, the Italian flag etc. They then showed a 4 minute recap of what happened on Raw; I can't imagine anyone not fast-forwarding it.

IC Championship: Dolph Ziggler vs. Luke Harper (C) – Ziggler via DQ at 6:36 (TV Time). Harper controlled early; Ziggler landed a foot stomp, so JBL dropped a Babalu reference. Dolph hit a neckbreaker, but Harper cut him off and continued to get the heat. Ziggler made his comeback then they went into the near-falls, with Dolph using a DDT and Harper coming close with a superkick. Ziggler got a bunch more near-falls with the fameasser, a high-cross, the sunset-flip he used on Raw and a superkick. Finish came soon after and Harper kicked Dolph in the nads right in front of the ref for the DQ. Post-match, Harper pulled out a ladder and tried a powerbomb onto the edge of it, but Zigger countered with a facebuster then he threw the ladder into Harper's face. Santino came out and booked a ladder match for the IC title at TLC. – *Decent match. Finish was kind of cheap, although it made sense for where they are going; story was that Harper was close to losing so he got himself disqualified, however the announcers didn't bother pointing that out.*

Seth Rollins, Kane, Big Show, Noble and Mercury came out. Rollins said he hated Christmas and talked about his tables match with Cena. He noted that all he had to do to take away Cena's title shot was put him through a table. Show blabbed about his "stairs" match with Rowan then picked up the steps and slammed them down a bunch of times. Finally, Kane yacked about feeding Ryback chair after chair. Santino came out again and booked Rollins and Show against Ryback and Rowan. – *The whole thing was long and pointless.*

The New Day (Kofi & Xavier) w/Big E vs. Cesaro & Tyson Kidd w/Natalya. – New Day got their win back in 2:41. Match was nothing at all. Short heat segment on Woods. Kofi made a quick comeback and got a near-fall with the SOS. Finish saw Woods and Kofi hit a backbreaker/knee drop of the ropes combo. Gold and Stardust appeared on the tron and cut promos about darkness falling on the New Day. Each member of the New Day responded by doing a short preacher promo about darkness not holding them down. – *Can you believe the idiocy of this company? The New Day tried to get fans to clap along with them and it was embarrassing to see the shots of the crowd with absolutely NO ONE joining in. They killed them dead on their second night in. What a bunch of clowns.*

Naomi was in the back with some roses. Apparently she didn't bother reading the card, because she thanked Jimmy Uso for sending her them. Jimmy looked at the card and said they were from Miz then smashed the vase on the floor. Naomi was sad.

Dean Ambrose hit the ring for the match with Rusev they advertised on Raw, however we never got it. Instead, Ambrose cut a promo about destroying Bray's rocking chair and said he would take Bray apart at TLC. Rusev and Lana showed up on the stage; Lana said the match would not take place because they would no longer stand for American intimidation. Rusev declared he would do the same thing to Jack Swagger that he did to Zeb Colter and that the US title belonged to Mother Russia. Ambrose started to go after Rusev, but Wyatt attacked him from behind and they brawled on the floor. Wyatt got

the better of it and landed a couple of chair shots then did the old Undertaker gimmick of setting up the chair under Dean's throat and slamming it into the steps. They did a stretcher job for Ambrose and the announcers did the inappropriate Owen Hart voice. – *I'm used to them advertising matches and not delivering, so that didn't really bother me. The angle was also pretty good; Ambrose should probably be off Raw, but I suspect there is zero chance of that happening. They should also have Wyatt explain the significance of the rocking chair at some point, although, again, I may be asking too much of these so-called "writers".*

The Miz (Tag Team Champion) w/Damien Mizdow vs. Jey Uso w/Jimmy. – Miz over in 2:23. Miz did a promo beforehand about Jimmy being jealous and his Hollywood agent thinking Naomi was hot. The ref threw Jimmy out for trying to go after Miz. Match wasn't much; Jey was distracted by Mizdow taking a bump into the ring and Miz won with the skull crushing finale. Jimmy didn't bother coming back out afterwards because the writers didn't think that far ahead. – *Miz is a great sleazy heel, but they are making Jimmy out to be a total Neanderthal. Just because another guy is interested in your woman doesn't mean that she is going to leave you and jump on board with any guy that pays her the least bit of attention.*

Naomi vs. Brie Bella w/Nikki – Naomi via pinfall at 2:02. AJ was on commentary and talked about missing the Divas title. Match was fine for WWE women's standards, although they botched a lucha wheelbarrow spot, which I have no idea why they even tried. For the finish, Nikki got on the apron and AJ pulled her off then Naomi pinned Brie with a roll-up. – *Still no explanation why Brie turned to be a heel with Nikki. Clowns, I tell you.*

Santino was in his office with the Bunny for some unfunny comedy. I think the point of it was that Santino told the Bunny to be careful around people he thinks are trustworthy. Rollins and Kane were in the locker room and they told Big Show they needed to stick together. Show said they weren't a team because they were all selfish and the only thing they had to do was work together in the main event.

Ryback & Erick Rowan vs. Big Show & Seth Rollins w/Kane, Noble & Mercury – Ryback & Rowan over in 10:01 (TV Time). Ryback and Rowan shone with big guy power spots. Ryback sold for some false heat and Rowan made the first comeback. Show cut him off with a clothesline on the floor and Rowan took a turn at selling, so we had two babyfaces that don't know how to sell in the same match. Ryback ran wild off the hot tag then he and Rollins traded a couple of near-falls. Rollins made Ryback look as good as he possibly could and bumped like a trooper for him. Finish was all kinds of stupid: Kane got on the apron and the ref threw him out, so he missed Rollins tagging in Show and wouldn't let Show into the ring. The heels complained and the faces attacked them while they weren't ready then Ryback pinned Rollins with the shellshock. Dumb, dumb, dumb. Rowan and Ryback stood tall to close the show, as Tom Phillips hyped "Tables, Ladders, Chairs & Stairs!" and Cole pushed the Slammys on Monday. – *Rollins saved the match from being a plodding sack-o-crap fest and at least made it watchable. Finish seemed dumb to me. Just have the faces win clean, a loss for Rollins or Big Show on SmackDown isn't going to do them any harm.*

More insipid Friday night buffoonery. Supposedly they want to make SmackDown the second "A" show and get it "on par" with Raw for the move to Thursday nights. So I guess that means the shows are going to get a lot worse, with terrible comedy segments, even shoddier dialog and a complete disregard for continuity. Roll on 2015! I've got 4 weeks of ROH TV to catch up on before Final Battle, so I fast forwarded all the entrances and Raw recaps, and I was still bored out of my skull. There is

literally nothing to check out from this show, so do yourselves a favour and watch something worthwhile.

Bits & Pieces

CM Punk's vitriol wasn't solely directed at Vince and Hunter on the first Cabana podcast, with Punk lashing out against Ryback, Ryan Reeves, or as Punk called him "steroid guy". Punk claimed that Reeves had purposely broken his ribs, and was an overall terrible person to work with. Reeves responded on Twitter, but later took the tweets down. However, he did appear on the Zach McCrite 107.7 Sports Radio show this week, saying, "I don't want to harp on this, but I want to say the comments that he made were not accurate...we have a roster full of WWE talent that know the real Ryback...everyone knows the truth and what he said was not the truth...I was the one, for a lack of a better term, put him over time and time again, and then he walked out and left". He continued by saying that everyone on the roster works hurt, and they all get beat up, and he was hurt for 11 months before he got his surgery.

New Japan, in addition to getting US pay-per-view coverage through GFW, will now be on AXS TV, the former HDNet, and will begin its weekly television on January 16th. It will be a best of style show, focusing on the best major NJPW matches of the last few years, with Mauro Ranallo and Josh Barnett on commentary. Whilst perhaps not as big of a story as it may sound, simply due to the fact that it is AXS TV, should NJPW perform well, then perhaps it may open other doors for both them and Jeff Jarrett.

Next Week's Issue

In next week's issue we look at the World Tag League Final, the continuing road to TLC, major news, NJPW's road to the Dome, miscellaneous star ratings and more!

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