



Cubed Circle Newsletter – 168 : January 4th Tokyo Dome 2015, WrestleKingdom 9

We are back this week with our first regular issue of 2015, and the first in a number of weeks. In this issue we will be looking at the 2015 Tokyo Dome Show, WrestleKingdom 9, New Japan's post-Dome plans, and Ben Carass is back with his artery straining, eye bulging, and brain aching look at this week's WWE programming: RAW, SmackDown and NXT.

Ryan Clingman – Cubed Circle Newsletter Editor

Tokyo Dome Show 2015, WrestleKingdom 9: Potential Show of the Year

To call New Japan's January 4th 2015 Tokyo Dome show, WrestleKingdom 9, one of the greatest pro-wrestling shows in history would be an overstatement – there have been a number of shows, both in New Japan and elsewhere, that were from top to bottom, wholly better than this past week's show just in the last few years. However, the card's final two matches, Hiroshi Tanahashi defending his IWGP Heavyweight title against Kazuchika Okada, and Shinsuke Nakamura defending his IWGP Intercontinental championship against Kota Ibushi, were a pair of main events worthy of special recognition.



The Intercontinental Championship match was, if not an all time classic, certainly one of the best matches of the last five to ten years. It was one of the most experimental matches the company has seen since Nakamura/Sakuraba or even Tanahashi/Suzuki, with both men working in spots that many a fan may have dreamed up on occasion, but that are rarely if ever implemented. Nakamura stuck his boot into Ibushi's mouth during heat segments, Ibushi popped up from a Boma Ye smiling, and Ibushi executed one of the most impressive spots I have seen in years when dead-lifting the heavier Nakamura into a springboard release German suplex, with only the ropes beneath his feet as support. It wasn't the most heated match of the night and featured lacking reactions at times, but the duo worked a match so

perfect (apart from Ibushi's convoluted and incredulous ducked highkick into a standing moonsault) that the bout still, simply based on influential layout, may be remembered as a classic. However, what was perhaps more important for the legacy of the match than specific aspects of its layout was its ability to elevate Kota Ibushi into someone who I could not only see as a main event star for the promotion, but one whose elevation I will actively support in future months.

Nakamura was in large part responsible for the match working out as successful as it did – when Nakamura is on he is as good as anyone in the business, despite his off days being perhaps lower than those of Okada or Ishii, the later never truly experiences off days at all. However, even with Nakamura performing at his optimum, beyond the level needed to carry the likes of Shelton Benjamin when he was far from hot in Japan years ago, Ibushi deserves much of the credit for the match's unique flair. It was Ibushi's facial expressions that, whilst perhaps not igniting the crowd, elevated the match from potential match of the night to match of the year front runner and five star classic. Similarly, it was his athletic ability that aided the match's progression immensely on a more visceral level. Ibushi, whilst perhaps not performing as many flips per match, has improved to an incredible extent on a psychological front from when he first became a semi-major international name in 2007-2008. Consequently, it was Ibushi as much as Nakamura who made the bout the spectacle it was, and Ibushi that aided Nakamura in his own elevation.



Directly following the Nakamura/Ibushi bout was the IWGP Heavyweight Title match between Kazuchika Okada and Hiroshi Tanahashi. It wasn't the “six star” classic that challenger, Kazuchika Okada, had promised before hand, nor would I have expected it to be. But, what Tanahashi and Okada were able to do, albeit with the aid of the company's most protected nearfalls, was follow Nakamura/Ibushi, and that was in and of itself an accomplishment.

In the opening moments of the Tanahashi/Okada match, whilst I was still sitting in my chair thinking

more about the previous match than anything in the main event's opening stretch, the crowd was arguably more alive than in equitable moments of Nakamura/Ibushi – so it would be unfair to flaunt the main event's nearfalls as its sole defining feature. Where as Nakamura/Ibushi was in some ways experimental, or at least as experimental a match one will find in modern day New Japan, Tanahashi and Okada worked the typical New Japan heavyweight title style. This is by no means a criticism of the its structure, as a solid build to nearfall reliant closing stretch has worked exceedingly well for the company in the past, and even produced my 2013 match of the year in Okada/Tanahashi from Invasion Attack. However, in terms of memorable moments, Ibushi/Nakamura was the larger producer.

Okada and Tanahashi still produced what may become long-lasting images, with both men utilising most everything they had in an attempt to steal the show. Okada kicked out of a High Fly Flow straight to the gut, as Nakamura did at last year's Dome show, and Tanahashi kicked out of the Rainmaker clean, something that has yet to happen without addition of a pre-pin-attempt double down or something of a similar ilk. Considering the use and protection of the Rainmaker for close to three years, however, the reaction to Tanahashi's survival of the move was not as great as one may have expected. Still, as far as big New Japan main events go, both in execution and layout, Tanahashi/Okada VII was the best Tokyo Dome main event since at least 2010 for my tastes, besting Tanahashi/Suzuki, Tanahashi/Okada IV, and fairly easily Tanahashi/Nakamura.

Underneath the best main/semi-main pairing in many years, there was a strong midcard with almost everything following the Suzuki/Sakuraba match ending strong to great. Unfortunately, the Suzuki/Sakuraba match, whilst the third or fourth best match on the show, had the potential to be the second or even very best, but was cut short on time. This, frustratingly, came as a consequence of not only the usual Tokyo Dome time constraints, but the 4-hour US PPV block too – ultimately, the US broadcast finished early. The show finished early not only due to match time cuts, which were thankfully not all too plentiful in the post-Sakuraba/Suzuki matches, but also due to cutbacks on entrances and special Dome attractions. The 2014 WrestleKingdom was a much lesser overall show than its 2015 counterpart, but, to its credit, featured more spectacular entrance in almost every equitable instance, apart from Nakamura's Golion/Voltron inspired costume. The additional spectacle would have been a positive for the new US traditional PPV audience, with the show disallowing as great of an amalgam of theatrics and pure wrestling as the 2013 Dome show, the promotion made the correct choice in its decision to cut entrances short in favour of increased match times. This show trounced every major WWE, TNA, or Ring of Honor event since Extreme Rules 2012 or Money in the Bank 2011 without effort, and even tops those shows upon inspection. To say this was the single greatest wrestling PPV ever to air on traditional US pay-per-view is of course highly subjective, and when evaluating a recent show in comparison with others the newer show will often times win out the debate simply due to fresher memories.

The availability of traditional North American pay-per-view was a major financial talking point for the company, as was the show's attendance, which at points leading up to the show was rumoured to have nearly sold out. Unfortunately, the attendance, even after a year of further growth, was 36,000, an increase of only 1,000 on last year's number. Of course, this is by no means a failure, as 36,000 will stand, barring exceptional circumstances, as the second highest pro-wrestling attendance of the year behind WrestleMania 31. Still, the fact that the company's most successful pairing of the past few years failed to elevate the attendance on any meaningful level, does beg the question as to what extent current New Japan can grow financially.

I would like to believe that with the right match, like an Okada/Nakamura for the Heavyweight or IC title, the Dome could perhaps come close to a sellout following a couple more years of further growth. However, there does exist a possibility that given current television, economic and cultural circumstances that the promotion has reached a ceiling of some sort. Next year's Dome number, provided they are able to build an anticipated main event, will be an important one, as another 35,000 may place some cap on future attendances, at least for the next few years.

The Japanese television situation is such that New Japan won't get a TV deal analogous to that of the 1980s or 1990s, however if they find, create or mold a cross-over star their product may be captivating enough to draw a wider audience. However, with MMA no longer existing on the major stages it once did in Japan, apart from general popular culture, I don't know where that cross-over star would come from. This is obviously fantasy, but if (something like) an amateur wrestler or boxer becomes a national star in the 2020 Olympics and enters pro-wrestling, then perhaps the landscape could drastically change.

The performance of the North American broadcast will only become apparent within the next few months, such is the nature of pay-per-view. I assume that anything above 10,000 or so will be considered a success, especially given Global Force's distinct lack of cable company cooperation.



AJ Styles, pinning Naito on 01/04 following a middle-rope Styles Clash, and consequently looked to be the man next in line for an IWGP Heavyweight title shot. After pinning Tanahashi clean on the annual 'New Year Dash' show on 01/05 in Korakuen Hall these suspicions were all but confirmed. Okada was

also pinned clean by Bad Luck Fale and that is most probably the post-Dome direction for him. Yuji Nagata challenged Shinsuke Nakamura on the same show placing Nagata in the IC title picture for 'New Beginning', and for those that saw Nagata/Tanahashi from Tanahashi's 2010 title run, it is quite apparent that Nagata can perform as well as anyone in the company as far as big title matches go.

The NOAH/NJPW partnership is already influencing the direction of NOAH with Suzuki-gun invading the promotion in preparation for a GHC Heavyweight title match, with Suzuki challenging Marufuji on March 15th at the Tokyo Ariake Colosseum (source: @STRIGGA). Long term this is a positive move for Suzuki and NOAH, although this development unfortunately dashes hopes of a Sakuraba/Suzuki rematch for the time being. In much the same vein as Nagata in 2014, Suzuki will most probably become the next GHC Heavyweight champion on March 15th. New Japan owner, Takaaki Kidani, has also discussed the idea of a split roster, which in the context of New Japan alone would be a terrible idea, although if the second brand ends up as Pro-Wrestling NOAH with a silent purchase by New Japan (Bushi Road), then it may not be the worst idea for both companies, whether that has actually transpired is still very much unclear.



It is arguable that the 2015 post-Dome line-up is stronger from a working perspective than its 2014 counterpart. The 2014 'New Beginning' tour featured Nakamura/Tanahashi as a Tokyo Dome rematch on the Hiroshima show, where as there is no such analogous match this year. The undercards for both shows feature Dome rematches, however, the Osaka show is particularly heavy on them with the Junior Heavyweight title, IWGP Tag Team championship, and IWGP Junior Tag Team championship matches all being rematched – although the junior tag match is a three way tag and not a four-way, with the Forever Hooligans out after Koslov announced his pro-wrestling retirement/hiatus following WrestleKingdom. The only rematch announced at this time for Osaka is Ishii/Makabe, which should be just as great as their 01/04 match, if not better.

Whilst Okada has been paired with Bad Luck Fale, which is less than desirable, the post-WrestleKingdom shows for 2015 do look, at least for my eyes, markedly better overall than those of last year. They seem to have cut down on Bullet Club interference, which can only be a positive for the main event picture, and Tanahashi/Styles and Nakamura/Nagata are strong main events, main events far stronger than

Nakamura/Tanahashi from Hiroshima in 2013.

New Japan's ceiling for growth in 2015 is unclear, with no major Japanese television deal in sight, essentially equal Dome attendance as 2014, and no Yokohama or Seibu Dome type arenas scheduled

for the near future. However, their roster, booking, and financial leadership has been strong enough over the past few months that it is fairly easy to conclude that, at the very least, New Japan will continue to produce great wrestling at the standard they have established over the past three to four years in 2015 – and may very well better it.

New Japan WrestleKingdom 9 January 4th 2014 Tokyo Dome, Tokyo, Japan

0. New Japan Rumble

Thuggish Gedo and Jado stole this novel concept from wrestling pioneer and all time great idea man, Dario Cueto. It was essentially Royal Rumble rules with pinfalls and submission too. Nagata and Tiger Mask started off. The impressive titan-tron-esque screen counted down every now and again before flashing "GO!" when the next entrant would make his way down to the ring. Strangely though, everyone entered from a secondary entrance, from behind the fans, as it was the pre-show I suppose. All of the Suzuki-gun juniors, Desperado, Taka Michinoku, and Taichi entered as a unit, followed by Jushin Thunder Liger and his dubbed-over music. Sho Tanaka sprinted out at full-speed next. Then we got our first surprise entrant, Hiro Saito (53), jogging his way to the ring. Unfortunately, the surprise pop was muted due to the loss of the crowd feed during dubbed-music playback. Yohei Komatsu was out. Captain New Japan in green camouflage ran down. Tama Tonga got the first elimination sneaking in behind the Captain. Desperado and Liger were clumsily eliminated by Tiger Mask and Taichi respectively. YOSHI-HASHI took a leisurely stroll down to the ring. Desperado and Liger brawled on the floor, and Nakanishi walked down slower than HASHI. YOSHIAKI FUJIWARA managed to take time out of his busy Dradition schedule to make an appearance with the 'Ride of the Valkyries' (essentially Bryan's theme, 'Flight of the Valkyries') dubbed in over his usual music. Nagata and Fujiwara locked up, before THE GREAT KABUKI (!) complete with mist and nunchucks walked out leaving all his fellow participants stunned. Kabuki, who looked half dead, spat mist in Taka's eyes, before Fujiwara tapped him out to a big pop. The Young Lions eliminated Taichi, and Kabuki and Fujiwara were collectively pinned. Saito killed poor Komatsu with a back senton, before too being collectively pinned by all remaining entrants. Tiger Mask was double-dropkicked from the top by Tanaka and Komatsu. This left Nagata, Komatsu, Tanaka, HASHI, Nakanishi and Tonga. Tanaka submitted to Nakanishi's torture rack. Tonga pinned Nakanishi with a small package. Komatsu was eliminated with a Tonga flying DDT. Tonga went for a splash on HASHI, but was pushed over the top taking a big bump to the flower. HASHI survived the Demon Armbar, but was pinned with a backdrop. Nagata was then awarded a trophy that may very well have been a FIFA World Cup replica. This was something else.

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1. IWGP Junior Heavyweight Tag Team Title Match reDragon vs. Time Splitter vs. Forever Hooligans vs. Young Bucks

Entrances were clearly rushed here, with each team only making it half way down the ramp before the next would enter. They dubbed generic hip-hop over what was presumably the Hooligans' Rick Ross theme, the dubbed song works significantly better as a pro-wrestling theme song. Still. I don't see why they couldn't just let the licensed music make the broadcast like the UFC does, and then edit it out for World and DVD releases. Koslov did his kazatzka kicks on Romero and 'O Reilly landed one of his own. Nick accidentally punted Matt Davey Richards style from the apron. Romero landed Forever

lariats from all four turnbuckles. 'O Reilly looked for his running missile dropkick to the floor on Shelley, but was met with a superkick in midair. Everyone dived onto everyone else. The Bucks landed three superkicks. Romero looked for a double doomsday device clothesline on the Bucks held by Koslov and Shelley, but they landed on their feet! The Bucks hit the Meltzer driver on Koslov, but had it broken up. There were a whole bunch of moves from reDragon culminating in reDragon pinning Koslov following Chasing the Dragon to retain the tag titles.

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2. Satoshi Kojima, Hirooyoshi Tenzan & Tomoaki Honma vs. Jeff Jarrett, Bad Luck Fale & Yujiro Takahashi w/ Karen Jarrett Scott D'Amore

Karen shoved poor Honma before the match. Honma was far and away the most over man in this match, and on the undercard. Jarrett went for the guitar shot on Honma who was restrained by Takahashi, but he moved and Takahashi was clocked. Honma then finally landed the top-rope Kokeshi and claimed his victory – a culmination of months worth of build! Thankfully they didn't waste all too much time getting to the finish here.

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3. Naomichi Marufuji, Mikey Nichols, Shane Haste & Toru Yano vs. Davey Boy Smith Jr., Lance Archer, Shelton 'X' Benjamin & Takashi Iizuka

The participation of TMDK and the GHC Heavyweight Champion was meant to be somewhat symbolic of the new NJPW & NOAH partnership, presumably. Iizuka and Yano started off, so it could only go up hill from there. Marufuji kicked the iron finger out of the hands of Iizuka and landed a knee setting up the TMDK double powerslam and Marufuji running knee for the win. Nothing match.

** ¼

4. UWF-i Rules: Submission or Knockout Minoru Suzuki vs. Kazushi Sakuraba

Suzuki, hearkening back to Pancrase days, or attempting to impersonate Jun Akiyama, was wearing white trunks and boots. He was neither accompanied by Taka Michinoku nor Taichi, and has dyed his hair blond! A very smooth hold exchange started the match with Sakuraba, in the ensuing moments, locking in a cloverleaf of all things. Suzuki, standing on the apron, began a slap battle with Sakuraba before locking in an armbar in the ropes. Sakuraba engaged Suzuki out on the floor, as they would have done back in the UWF-i or PRIDE, of course. The referee battled to get Sakuraba to relinquish a Kimura, which Suzuki sold like death once Sakuraba returned to the ring. This made a lot of sense, as Suzuki, realising he was equally matches on the mat for once, had to take Sakuraba, the MMA fighter, to the outside. Sakuraba landed repeated kicks to the arm, Suzuki responded with numerous slaps before going back to selling the arm. Sakuraba looked to armbar the healthy arm, but with his other arm injured Suzuki found it difficult to clasp his hands, Sakuraba locked in the hold, but Suzuki made it to the ropes. A slap and arm-kick battle ensued. Suzuki flipped Sakuraba over in a sleeper winning when Sakuraba "passed out". This suffered due to time constraints, unfortunately. Still, Suzuki's selling was world-class here, even if the work on the outside took time away from the realistic in-ring work. Suzuki accepted a Sakuraba handshake and pulled him in for some words. A rematch on one of the 'New Beginning' shows as a semi-mainevent may be the way to go. .

**** ¼

5. NEVER Openweight Title Match Tomohiro Ishii vs. Togi Makabe

Predictably, both men went straight at one another with lariats, forearms, and chops before a double down. Ishii, the perennial underdog babyface garnered some early control over Makabe. Another exchange followed with Ishii knocking Makabe down. Ishii bumped onto the back of his head for a lariat and took a powerbomb for two. The pair fought on the top rope with Makabe catching Ishii with a Samoan Drop from the top rope. Ishii kicked out of a lariat at one. Makabe no sold a German suplex, popped up and was caught with a lariat, kicking out at one for a double down. Makabe retaliated with some over hand chops, was caught with a sliding D, but still kicked out. Ishii kicked out of a dragon suplex. More forearms followed with the two trading headbutts and then sledges! Makabe won the battle, but Ishii kicked out at one again! Ishii survived an absolute wild-man lariat, but was caught with a king king knee to the back of the head for the finish in what was easily the best match until this point on the card. Still, Makabe may not be the right fit for the NEVER title.

****1/4

They aired a video for their big events this year: 'New Beginning' in Osaka (Bodymaker) February 11th, 'New Beginning' in Sendai (Sun Plaza) February 14th, 'New Japan Cup Tokyo' March 5th, 'New Japan Cup Hiroshima Plaza' March 15th, 'Invasion Attack' April 5th Sumo Hall, April 29th in Kumamoto, May 3rd in Fukuoka, May 2015 in the United States, 'Best of the Super Juniors' June 7th Tokyo, Dominion July 5th Osaka Hall, G1 Climax 25 July 20th Sapporo, August 14th Sumo Hall, August 15th Sumo Hall, August 16th (Final) Sumo Hall.

6. IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship Match Ryusuke Taguchi vs. Kenny Omega

Omega with “The Cleaner” gimmick looks to be Razor Ramon 2015 (or Brian Pillman more likely), only without the cocaine, that stuff's reserved for Jon Jones. Omega sprayed hairspray in Taguchi's eyes out on the floor. Historically speaking singles juniors matches haven't performed too well at the Dome, although multi-man matches have improved over the last few years, and the same can be said here, with a largely silent crowd. The Young Bucks attempted to interfere, but had Omega dropped onto them before being caught, along with Omega, with a Taguchi giro. Regardless of crowd reactions Omega is a superb crazy man. Omega went for a buckbomb, but was hurricanrana'ed into the buckle. Omega kicked out of a chicken wing facebuster. Taguchi locked in an ankle lock, but the Bucks interfered. Taguchi went for a leapfrog, but was caught in the Croyt's Wrath and then landed the Katayoku no Tenshi (electric chair driver) for the win. The right man went over here, hopefully Omega can lead the Junior title in a new direction.

*** 1/4

7. IWGP Tag Team Championship Match Karl Anderson & Doc Gallows vs. Hirooki Goto & Katsuyori Shibata

I can now confirm that Anderson's shoulder tattoo is in fact real. Gallows and Anderson got some fairly standard heat on Shibata, with Goto/Shibata landing a Poetry in Motion/Corner Dropkick from Hell. Goto and Shibata landed their over the knee neckbreaker on Anderson. Moments later Shibata and Goto landed a tandem GTS and Shibata landed the PK for the win. Much like the IWGP Junior Heavyweight

title victory of Omega, I hope that this freshens up a long stale division. Goto and Shibata then had a heart-warming moment putting their belts around each others waists, posing on the ground, legs folded, smiling, and arms crossed. Knowing how intense Shibata is, it is surprising that he didn't sprint up the ramp with his belt before Goto had a chance to fasten it. These two deserve a long and important reign.

8. Tetsuya Naito vs. AJ Styles

They were clearly felt pushed for time at this point, with Naito's music hitting as AJ bent through the ropes. Styles attacked Naito right at the bell looking for the Styles Clash, Naito fought out of it. Styles went for it again, but was dropped to the apron by Naito. Naito landed a dropkick from the apron. Styles landed a couple of leg kicks, working the legs over for a calf killer. Naito hit the middle-rope assisted swinging DDT. Styles springboarded off the top with a flying forearm. Styles came down on Naito with a sloppy looking neckbreaker, the sloppiness working for the match rather than against it. Styles landed a Chaos theory style German suplex, Naito hit one of his own, but for whatever reason couldn't perform an effective bridge. Naito went up top for the stardust press, but was hung up. Styles looked for a back superplex, Naito landed on his feet, sold the leg, but was then caught in the calf killer. Naito fought and fought, finally making it to the ropes. A gloria and dragon suplex followed, but Styles landed a pele and Bloody Sunday. Naito countered the Styles Clash, dumping Styles out to the floor, selling the leg. Styles milked the 20 count to 19. Naito went for a frankensteiner, Styles caught him, he attempted to kick his way out; I was scared for his life, but Styles held on and landed a top rope Styles Clash for the win. It's good to see that they have cut down on Bullet Club interference in big matches.

9. IWGP Intercontinental Championship Match Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Kota Ibushi



Hyped! Ibushi got the Mysterio trap-door entrance. Nakamura, King of Strong Style, made it down in his flashiest jacket yet complete with flames, robe, and crown – in actuality he was in Zarkon from Voltron, or, more specifically, Daibazaal from Golion. They started out with leg-kicks and MMA-influenced take down attempts. Nakamura attempted his head rest on Ibushi's chest, but Ibushi retaliated with an elbow – this launched them into an athletic exchange and stalemate. Ibushi avoided the Boma Ye following an axe-kick to the top of the head and did Shinsuke's vibrations in the corner. Nakamura demonstrated for Ibushi, before delivering his knee drop guillotine, which always makes me cringe for the future of the man's knees. Ibushi looked to engage Nakamura with elbows, which Shinsuke simply brushed off before slapping Ibushi in the face repeatedly. Ibushi ducked a high kick and delivered a couple of slaps. Ibushi landed on his feet off of an attempted back suplex, and moonsaulted out to the floor. He followed with a kick flurry, but Nakamura responded with repeated knees to the face following a double down. Ibushi's frankensteiner connected and was followed by a snap dragon suplex, and the ducked highkick into the standing moonsault, a move that I deplore. A Kota highkick connected. Nakamura was killed with a powerbomb for another nearfall, but he avoided the phoenix splash and landed a Boma Ye for a double down. Nakamura landed repeated knees and kicks to Ibushi in the ropes, sticking a boot in his mouth. Ibushi smiled and responded with palm thrusts! Red shoes was pushed into Ibushi and Shinsuke ran at Kota with a lariat. Nakamura grabbed an armbar, the referee was not dead as he would have been in any other promotion, but Ibushi clasped the hands and began to stomp on Shinsuke's face Kawada style! Ibushi then landed a Boma Ye, Nakamura out at one! Nakamura stomped further, shoving his foot back into Kota's mouth. Slap battle! Ibushi then landed a standing double footstomp on a running Nakamura! Double down. Ibushi whilst standing on the top rope, pulled Nakamura up into a dead lift German suplex for two! This was the craziest spot I have seen in years, and had me, hands behind head, gasping in awe. Ibushi went for a powerbomb, but Nakamura followed with headbutts and elbows before delivering a Boma Ye to the back – Ibushi up smiling! Ibushi checked the Boma Ye, but Nakamura hit a death valley driver and Boma Ye for the win. A classic, with Nakamura and Ibushi fist bumping afterwards. If you were someone who gave Shibata/Tanahashi five stars, this deserve six. This was a match on the level of Tanahashi/Suzuki, and may most probably have the same effect on first time pay-per-view viewers, as that match had on the iPPV audience

10. IWGP Heavyweight Championship Match

Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Kazuchika Okada

There were no dinosaurs in either man's entrance, unfortunately. Okada continued his subtle heel ways , elbowing Tanahashi in the face off of a clean break. Poor Red Shoes, who had already had a tough night, almost got run over by Tanahashi as a result. Okada went for a tombstone on the ramp and started trading with Tanahashi who ran up the ramp playing airguitar only to be fireman's carry slammed on the ramp. Okada landed a running dropkick in the ring. Tanahashi made it out of the 3/4 face-lock. Okada called for Tanahashi to hit him before coming back with another forearm, an interesting twist on the usual subtle heel Tanahashi tactics. They did the Suzuki spot where each guy grabs the others' hair and makes a mean face. Okada dropkicked Tanahashi like he had been shot out of a cannon. Okada was bludgeoned off the top, missed the high fly flow, and was caught with a Cesaro-style running forearm smash. Okada did the Rainmaker pose, but was caught with a dragon screw. Okada slid to the floor off of another dragon screw, selling the leg. Tanahashi thankfully didn't die

when he landed a standing high fly flow from quadruple his usual distance, only just clearing the guardrail! Tanahashi landed the slingblade and caught Okada with a standing high fly flow, Okada rolled through into a tombstone, but Tanahashi countered it into one of his own! Tanahashi landed a high fly flow to the back and one to the stomach, but Okada kicked out, something that almost never happens – this should have perhaps come later in the match though. Okada landed a European uppercut, selling his stomach like he was hemorrhaging from every major organ. Tanahashi kicked out of the Rainmaker – many would have thought this to be the right time right place, but it wasn't. They teased a double KO, which got the crowd back up. The two traded strikes, with Tanahashi selling the severity of the rainmaker. Okada looked for a tombstone, but was cradled for two. Tanahashi repeatedly slapped Okada, with Okada collapsing to his knees. Okada grabbed a backslide and pulled Tanahashi up for a rainmaker, but was caught with a dragon suplex for two. Okada grabbed his German for two and went for the rainmaker, but Tanahashi landed a dragon suplex of his own. Tanahashi continued with more dragon screws, and caught Okada with a high fly flow whilst Okada was in the ropes, before hitting yet another dragon screw. Tanahashi then landed another high fly flow and a third for the win. Where was my new suplex? Okada left the Dome crying on his knees, Tanahashi continues with a promo. These two managed to follow Nakamura/Ibushi with a match of the year level match of their own.
**** ¾ (As in not six stars, sorry Okada.)

Raw Ramblings – January 5th 2015

American Bank Centre: Corpus Christi, TX.

Ben Carass.

After the fun and games of the Yearbook, regrettably it's back to business this week with, and wait for it, a...terrible episode of Raw! The eternal optimists out there may have expected the first show of 2015 to be the first step towards the build for WrestleMania season, however the bumpkins in Creative couldn't help but regurgitate the same old periodic atrocities that plagued the shows throughout the majority of 2014. The regular readers of Cubed Circle may have noticed that towards the end of last year I was reaching the end of my tether with the inexcusably poor writing, scripting and overall booking of the WWE's product. Well, my New Year's resolution is not to cut these bozos some slack and lighten up a little; far from it in fact. This year I avow to take even less crap from these so-called "professional" writers – with their salaries in the tens of thousands, and point out even more, how incompetent they are at their jobs – until the TV starts to resemble something at least half-decent. With that, let's look at this abomination of a show, which will likely turn into an exercise at how many synonyms for "horrendous" I can come up with.

There was barely any mention of the Royal Rumble, nor did they bother to follow up on the great **Daniel Bryan** promo last week. Even more incomprehensible, they didn't bother advertising **Bryan** or **Brock Lesnar** for next week's show; it's like they have completely given up on everything at the moment. Story of the show was **the Authority** screwing with all the members of **Team Cena** from the Survivor Series. The entire roster was in the ring for the opening segment, of course **HHH** and **Stephanie** came out to bury all of them. After a whole lot of useless blather, **HHH** changed the main event of the Royal Rumble to a Triple Threat: **Cena** vs. **Lesnar** vs. **Seth Rollins**, who was on the stage with **the Authority**. **Stephanie** then announced it was "**John Cena** Appreciation Night", which consisted of them showing old clips throughout the night in order to build to a ridiculous and boring main event segment. **HHH** booked **Dolph Ziggler** to defend the IC Title against **Bad News Barrett** and that was the first match of the night. **Ziggler** got the clean pin in 2:40, but **Barrett** beat the hell out

of him forever and **Kane**, who I guess is Director of Operations again, came out and said the match was 2-out-of-3 Falls. **Barrett** immediately hit the Wasteland and got the fall to make it 1-1. Third fall only went 5:30 and the finish saw **Kane** distract **Ziggler** in order for **Barrett** to hit the Bullhammer and become the new IC Champ. **The Authority** screwed with **Erick Rowan** by booking him against **Luke Harper** and they made **J&J Security** the referees. **Cole** was flabbergasted at TWO referees and said it must have been a first; clearly he is not a fan of the old EMLL trios matches. So, **Noble** and **Mercury** screwed **Rowan** and **Noble** fast-counted the pin for **Harper** in 1:09. It is beyond comprehension to me that they have twice now thrown **Harper** and **Rowan** into a match with each other for no reason at all with zero build. **Ryback's** punishment (and ours) was to wrestle **Seth Rollins & Kane** in a handicap match. Went 11:50 – Sucked. Their insistence on exposing **Ryback** in matches with the likes of **Kane** and/or **Big Show** is becoming quite laughable. For the main event segment, **HHH & Steph** called out **Cena**, who **HHH** couldn't help but bury and take credit for noticing his potential before anyone else. It was quite astonishing. Long, childbearing labour story short, **Ziggler, Ryback** and **Rowan** were all summoned out to be FIRED by **the Authority**. **Steph** said they could all thank **Cena** for losing their jobs then confetti and balloons fell from the ceiling to end a truly miserable three hours of television.

The “B” story, as in “backwards booking”, was the blow-off Ambulance match between **Dean Ambrose** and **Bray Wyatt**. **Wyatt** won a seen-it-all-before brawl in 19:45, taking his record over **Ambrose** to 3-1-1 in TV/PPV matches. They worked hard and all; **Ambrose** dropped an elbow off the ambulance through a table, but the match was hard to get into and the goofy ambulance stip was a fittingly blasé end to a feud that had the potential to be great but was ravaged by lazy storytelling and zany gimmick matches.

Perhaps the biggest indictment of the beyond hopeless writers is the promo they scripted for **Roman Reigns**. Somebody had the genius idea that since **Reigns** does the Superman Punch, he should recite some of the catchphrases associated with the Man of Steel. It was an embarrassment on all fronts that the author of the promo, the head writers, **Vince McMahon** and **Roman Reigns** himself, are all accountable for, because not one of them took any action to stop this abortion of a promo from reaching the air. Worst of all was the crowd reaction; aside from the usual handful of squeals from the obviously frustrated women, you could almost hear the collective groan of contempt from the audience. If they keep scripting **Reigns** like this then he is going to be crucified in Philly at the Rumble. If that wasn't bad enough, **Reigns** beat **Big Show** by DQ in 5:30 when **Show** used the steps. **Reigns** speared **Show** afterwards and the steps landed on his giant head. I find great humour in the irony that they did everything in their power to stop **Daniel Bryan** from getting over, but he got over anyway and no matter how hard they try, they are completely unable to get their chosen guy over.

Sundry Crud: The Ascension squashed two amazing looking jobbers. Beforehand, they name dropped **Demolition** and the **Road Warriors** and claimed they would beat both of them. So they challenged a team that has not been active since 1991 and another with only one member still alive. Just to make them look like bigger geeks, the announcers buried them and scoffed at their promo. They should bring in **Animal & Kensuke Sasaki** as the **New Hell Raisers** and just put **the Ascension** out of their misery. I for one would love to see **Sasaki** chop the hell out of **Konnor** and **Viktor**. **Lana & Rusev** cut a promo about celebrating the Russian Christmas, which is like normal Christmas only all the reindeer have red noses. **Natalya** pinned **Nikki Bella** in 1:15 of a non-title match when **Paige** attacked **Brie** at ringside for the distraction. They played up the new season of Total Divas; the first episode of which was the worst hour of television I have ever seen, all time, all my life. **Miz, Mizdow & Alicia Fox** beat **The Usos & Naomi** in a match designed to reignite the break-up angle of **Jimmy** and **Naomi**, because

Vince changed his mind again. **Big E** and **Adam Rose** fought to a No-Contest in 1:55 when two Rosebuds in body suits and masks attacked **E** and **the New Day**. The mystery Rosebuds hit an ugly powerbomb/blockbuster combo then unmasked to reveal themselves as **Tyson Kidd & Cesaro**.

Apparently, Vince McMahon had one of his weekly freak-outs and rewrote the entire show at 3pm Monday afternoon. So Vince is ultimately the one to blame for this disaster of a show, although I suppose the original script could have been worse, but who knows. One thing I do know is the writers are responsible for the abominable dialog and there was plenty of that to go around. I don't know what can be done about it; probably nothing. There is an entire generation of writers that doesn't even know what a natural promo sounds like because they have grown up watching the last decade of over-scripted drivel. To make things worse, even some of the wrestlers will be incapable of delivering a realistic promo since they are used to reading everything from a script. Take that Ryback promo last week for example. The sentiment of letting him speak about his real life experiences was a step in the right direction, however Ryback's wooden delivery made him somehow come off disingenuous, plus nobody in Creative realised that having this big bad monster talk about some self-help book called, "The Secret", is beyond preposterous.

WWE NXT – January 8th 2015

Full Sail University: Winter Park, FL.

Ben Carass

Show opened with Sami Zayn's championship celebration. Fans chanted, "Ole" and he went out into the crowd with the belt. "You deserve it" chants. Sami cut a fiery promo about doing things his own way and did the old babyface thing of claiming the title belonged to him and all his "Zayniacs." He talked about Kevin Owens ruining his big moment but said he was back and ready to defend the title. Adrian Neville showed up and said Sami was the better man at Takeover then the two shook hands. Zayn said Neville was entitled to a rematch, so William Regal came out and put over their Takeover match then booked the rematch for the next week.

Wacky black and white backstage promo from the Vaudevillains setting up the tag title match later. English did the talking while Gotch did some squats.

Hideo Itami vs. Curtis Axel – Itami via pinfall at 5:45. Match was fine, but a little dull. Itami sold for 90% of it and, naturally, did a solid job. He landed a nice flying lariat to start his comeback and used a spinning gamengiri for the finish. – *They really need to start letting Itami do more than just a couple of strikes. Axel failed to show anything resembling desire and it is clear why he has been demoted back to developmental.*

Tyson Kidd and Natalya were in the back with Byron Saxton. Kidd claimed he loved their cats more than Nattie because he regurgitated food for them to eat when they were sick. I swear I'm not making that up. He sent Nattie off to give the cats some milk then said he would become the face of NXT and also the SPCA. Kidd said he was not just a man of the people, but was a man of the animals; especially cats. Oh, I forgot to mention, he was wearing a hoodie with cat ears on. – *Greatness. I love this Tyson*

Kidd character so much.

A recap of Baron Corbin and Bull Dempsey's jobber killing feud aired and they hyped their match for next week. There were also a bunch of reminders that NXT is moving to Wednesdays. I wish someone would have told me that with the Network finally being, *cough*, "available" in the UK meant that Main Event would be taking NXT's timeslot on Sky Sports. Boo!

Sasha Banks w/Becky Lynch vs. Alexa Bliss – Sasha over in 2:06. Virtually an enhancement match, which Sasha won with her lung-blower into the Just Facelock. Alexa appears to be gaining more confidence and is starting to get more of a clue. Sasha was good as always.

Tyler Breeze vs. Chad Gable – Breeze in 2:27. Gable is former Olympian, Chas Betts and he looked pretty good during his brief bouts of offence, even doing a Minoru Suzuki armbar in the ropes; his selling wasn't bad either. The only issue I had was this former Olympic wrestler sitting in a chinlock for the male model, Breeze. It just looked silly and the announcers pointing it out didn't help either. Breeze won with his beauty shot kick.

Finn Balor cut a promo in the back on Tyson Kidd and used the inevitable line, which I demand they never use again, "Tyson loves his cats, but he's going to need a lot more than nine lives." Ugh.

NXT Tag Team Championship: Lucha Dragons (C) vs. The Vaudevillains – Dragons retained in 9:20 (TV Time). This match was brought to you by referee, Drake Younger's forehead scar tissue. Decent affair. The hoodies did a double tope during their shine then the 'Villains got the heat on Kalisto after a nice wrist clutch belly-to-back from Gotch. The latest hot-tag spot from the Dragons saw Kalisto make the tag while giving English a head-scissors takeover. Sin Cara made the comeback and for the finish they used a new wacky move which was kind of a powerbomb/corkscrew reverse lariat off the top. Don't worry, I'm sure it will be given some terrible gimmick name soon enough.

Despite this being a below average show for NXT standards, the streak of NXT being a better show than both Raw and SmackDown continues into another year. There wasn't much to get excited about here, but they did a great job of promoting and loading up the card for next week's move to Wednesdays. Even though it doesn't really make a difference given the on demand nature of the Network, it was nice to see some actual effort put into promoting and making next week feel important.

WWE SmackDown – January 9th 2015.

Laredo Energy Arena, Laredo, TX
Ben Carass.

SmackDown was the usual waste of time show, so for everybody's benefit, especially my own, the over-analysis of every match is out the window and this week's report will be similar to the generalised Raw Ramblings. After all, there are only so many times I can write: "[Insert babyface name] got some

shine in. [Insert heel name] got the heat. [Insert babyface name] made a comeback and they did some near-falls before going to the finish.”

Seth Rollins opened the show with a promo; he was with **Noble** and **Mercury** and laughed about manipulating **John Cena** into bringing back **the Authority** and the firing of **Ryback, Rowan & Zigler**. **Rollins** tried to have a ten bell salute to their careers but **Roman Reigns** interrupted him and recited some god-awful comedy insults to **Rollins** then looked at the hard camera and winked. It’s stuff like this that is encouraging all the hardcores to turn on the him. They had a brief brawl and **Reigns** cleaned house; **Big Show & Kane** showed up and **Kane** booked **Reigns** against **Rollins & Show**, however he was nice enough to allow **Reigns** to find himself a partner for whatever reason. **Show** did a promo too; he said he would KO everyone, including the audience. So the main event was **Rollins & Show** vs. **Reigns & Dean Ambrose**. There was a rare occurrence for WWE TV in this day and age, as we got a clean finish to a main event when **Reigns** pinned **Rollins** with a spear at 11:12 (TV Time). Match was decent, although **Ambrose** wasn’t selling anything from the Ambulance match on Raw. He did, however, do the selling in this match and **Reigns** ran wild with his usual power spots. **Ambrose** dropped an elbow off the post onto **Show, Kane, Noble & Mercury** then **Reigns** avoided the curb-stomp and hit the spear for the finish.

Big E w/The New Day beat **Adam Rose w/Cesaro & Tyson Kidd** in 4:00. Match had no heat and **E** did way too much selling. **Cesaro & Kidd** did nothing. **The Ascension** did the same promo as on Raw and beat two more tomato cans in 0:40. They of course didn’t get over and the announcers made fun of them again. **Alicia Fox** downed **Naomi** at 1:19. **Bray Wyatt** cut a rambling pre-tape about killing **Dean Ambrose**, however clearly he didn’t do a very good job, then said he would be in the Royal Rumble. **The Usos** retained the Tag Team titles over **Gold & Stardust & Miz & Mizdow** in a triple threat tag match at 12:45 (TV Time). It was a pretty fun TV outing. **The Usos** did a **Time Splitters**-type tope, with one of them holding the rope for the other to dive through then **Cody** did his falling ass-dive. **Mizdow** did a few babyface spots then was cut off by **the Dusts** for the heat. They did a parade of finishers and near-falls and **Jimmy Uso** pinned **Goldust** with the Superfly Splash. Get a load of this idiocy: **Sin Cara** pinned **Bad News Barrett** clean in 2:53 of a non-title match then **Barrett** laid him out afterwards. It was the stupidest thing I have seen since they beat **Charlotte** on Raw. Just when you thought the IC title couldn’t sink any lower. Before the match, **Barrett** had some good news and said he was entering the Rumble match then mocked **Dolph Ziggler** for being fired. You can make your own jokes about the IC title being bad news.

They followed up on the “firing” storyline with the usual **Triple H** dotcom interview that nobody in the world actually watches. He was typically smug and buried **Cena** for essentially being a douche. They also showed interviews with **Ryback, Rowan** and **Ziggler** after Raw; they were all terribly lifeless, especially **Ryback**. Who could possibly take this angle seriously? Believe it or not, they miraculously advertised **Daniel Bryan’s** return match for next week’s SmackDown. No word of **Bryan** or **Lesnar** for Raw, though. Genius.

Bits & Pieces

Bryan Rose will be taking an indefinite hiatus from the newsletter to focus on some other projects. However, we will be keeping you updated on said projects when they are released.

I planned to have reports of New Japan's 'New Year Dash' show, their annual post-Dome Korakuen Show, in this week's edition of the newsletter. However, for the past several weeks I have been experiencing a series of internet related technical issues, primarily due to the fact that my DSL box is completely exposed to the elements and has been shrouded by my neighbors avocado tree. We should have coverage of the happenings of that show, as well as star ratings for some of the 'Road to' shows next week.

Go Shiozaki, who has improved a great deal since joining All Japan with the BURNING Group, claimed his first Triple Crown this week, defeating Joe Doering on January 3rd at Korakuen Hall. Times have changed immeasurably, but this places Shiozaki in an elite group alongside Kenta Kobashi, Mituharu Misawa, Jun Akiyama, Akira Taue, Kensuke Sasaki, and Yoshihiro Takayama, of those who have held both the All Japan Triple Crown and GHC Heavyweight Championships. The show drew 1431 fans.

David Otunga wrestled for the WWE for the first time in nine months this week at a WWE house show on January 9th in Chattanooga, Tennessee, teaming with Titus 'O Neil in a losing effort against Los Matadores.

A tremendous quote from Dave Meltzer's twitter account on January 6th: “You realize that if I used the treadmill each week only during the bad parts of Raw that I could challenge Dillashaw at 135.”

Next Week's Issue

Next week's issue may be delayed due to the fact that I will be, in all unfortunate likelihood, having my wisdom teeth cut out, which may perhaps cause some delays. Regardless, in next week's issue we return with a look at the WWE's continued build to the Royal Rumble, RAW ratings for the last few weeks (including some that we missed out in late December), star ratings for recent NJPW shows, NXT, and perhaps a special review, but that is by no means confirmed.

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