



Cubed Circle Newsletter 170 – Royal Rumble 2015 Preview & WON Awards 2015 Results

We are back with a more diversified newsletter this week, as we preview the 2015 Royal Rumble as it relates to WrestleMania and the company's future direction, review the RAW and SmackDown go-home shows with the Brock Lesnar babyface turn, NXT, general, and on occasion specific, thoughts on the results of the 2015 Wrestling Observer Awards, plus, have you ever wondered who the 25 wrestlers are who have worked ECW, WCW, WWE/F/, AJPW, and NJPW? Well today's the time to find out!

– Ryan Clingman, *Cubed Circle Newsletter Editor*

Royal Rumble 2015 Upcoming: Beginning the Road to WrestleMania 31

Ryan Clingman

After months of horrendous television spawned by misdirected creative, the WWE will be running its second largest annual "pay-per-view" event from the Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia in the 2015 Royal Rumble – the first live Rumble to appear on the Network. In addition to the Royal Rumble match, the show is also headlined by a WWE World Heavyweight Championship defence, a title that hasn't been defended since September, in a triple threat match between Brock Lesnar, John Cena, and Seth Rollins.

The addition of the later man, Seth Rollins, strikes me as a peculiar, not in that he shouldn't be in the WWE title picture, because even with creative faltering he's still a tremendous talent and asset to the company, but rather due to the fact that he has the Money in the Bank briefcase. Placing a Money in the Bank title holder in a championship match without having him cash in the case first, isn't something the company is prone to do, and with Lesnar in all likelihood set to leave the promotion after WrestleMania, he will either be dropping the title here or at WrestleMania itself. If they want to keep Lesnar strong, then having him survive the triple-threat only to have Rollins cash in on him would make sense, and they could then lead off of that into a non-title Mania program for Lesnar. However, with Lesnar/Bryan and Lesnar/Reigns as big first time matches perhaps in both cases capable of headlining WrestleMania, having Lesnar drop the title at that show may very well be the best move. On the other hand, if they wish to get the title on Reigns or Bryan and have the other still in a major WrestleMania match, then Brock Lesnar may be an ideal opponent without the title.

Rollins as champion around this period would pose a couple of other creative problems, namely that he

and Reigns have already faced each other on RAW, and a match between he and Reigns, or Bryan, lacks marquee value. Still, with the future main event star role clearly earmarked for Reigns, it would be constructive to see two full-time roster members headline the show, which hasn't truly been the case since 2009. The question as to whether or not Reigns is ready for that position is also very much an open one. From my experience, the fan who watches the product on occasion, but that still has some familiarity with the current roster, is a fan of Roman Reigns, most probably due to the Shield influence. However, for those that watch RAW every week, the audience that buys the Network and comes to live events, television and pay-per-views in particular, it would seem that months worth of bad scripting, reportedly written by Vince McMahon, has damaged him.

For my tastes, a Bryan/Lesnar main event would be the prime main event direction, with a Sting match on the undercard, and Reigns/Rollins underneath. But, with the reactions that Reigns has garnered on TV during his matches, either a match with Rollins would need to be carried by the championship, spurred on by controlled and precise creative acting that we haven't seen in months, or simply not take place at WrestleMania. A dead WrestleMania crowd for the company's "future top star" would of course be a negative situation, and once more, as the weeks wear on, Roman's star quality diminishes, not only due to poor scripting, but perhaps also main event immaturity. That isn't to say that Reigns shouldn't be a top star, but he hasn't shown qualities of THE top star, apart from sparse glimpses during his run with the Shield.



This segues into the pay-per-view's namesake in the 2015 Royal Rumble match, which should be, as almost all Rumbles are, fairly predictable in terms of layout, but still very fun. Favourites are Roman Reigns and Daniel Bryan, and with the memory of last year's shunning of Batista following his Rumble victory, they are going to need to choose not only their winner very wisely, but also the finish. Should Daniel Bryan be eliminated early and Reigns go onto win the Rumble there is little doubt that there will be crowd problems. No one is predicting a riot, or anything even remotely close, as neither man is hot enough to warrant that kind of response, and even if they were, riots don't take place in modern pro-

wrestling all too often, certainly not for the Royal Rumble and the winner therein. However, I would expect massive booing and inappropriate chanting should Bryan be anything other than final two, as not only do they want to see him win, but unlike last year, there isn't a true CM Punk type entrant to play the fan's "second best" – the closest they have to the second cult favourite here is Ziggler or Ambrose. If they decide to put Reigns over in the Rumble, and don't find some creative way to get Bryan out, perhaps Lesnar after losing his championship storming into the ring to destroy Bryan, then current Mania plans will be rerouted, whether creative is willing or not.

A certain magic has been stripped from the Rumble in recent years, as with the current roster being as shallow as it is, the number of stars in the running for a Mania headline are strikingly low, which has only left a couple of plausible winners at best over recent years. Still, there are a few dark horses worth considering here, as even if they will almost certainly fail to secure victory, there does exist at least the slightest chance that the Mania direction will be going in an entirely unforeseen direction. These entrants will be Rusev, Randy Orton, who will most likely return from a shoulder surgery layoff at this show, and Bray Wyatt. Rusev, however, may be working with THE ROCK of all people, that is if the Rock is set to return, which is doubtful at this stage. Randy Orton was fairly hot as a babyface before he got the injury and filmed a movie, and so they may have some semi-major or major Mania plans for him. Wyatt is pegged for the Undertaker, should he also unlikely return this year, although with there no longer exists a streak, and therefore it isn't as if he could win the Rumble and challenge for a shot at the Streak. Even fainter and slimmer hopes of winning the Rumble lie with Ambrose and Ziggler, who, unless something drastic occurs creatively and internally within the company, won't be winning..

Other matches on the show include Paige & Natalya versus the Bella Twins, Miz & Mizdow versus the Usos for the Tag Team Championships (again!), The New Age Outlaws versus the Ascension, and the New Day versus Cesaro, Kidd & Rose, which may be on the pre-show – a thoroughly underwhelming undercard when compared with Bryan/Wyatt under last year's title and Rumble matches.

I am always excited for the Royal Rumble, as, despite the fact that it isn't always the greatest match in the world, the company is lacking in star power, and the layout is almost always the same – it is also, more often than not, a fun time. The title match has an opportunity to be special in front of a Philadelphia crowd, but, as is the case with most every triple-threat match booked, a singles match between either Lesnar and Rollins or Lesnar and Cena, would probably be better match quality wise. Still, Cena/Lesnar is a match that I have no interest in seeing again, and it will be interesting to watch Brock, at this stage of his career, work a triple-threat match. His matches are almost always different, and given the mostly patterned nature of WWE three-ways, this offers exciting possibilities. What excites me most for this show however, is that we will see the first few big Mania pieces falling into place, even if, as we learnt last year, where those pieces fall isn't always where they stay.

Wrestling Observer Newsletter Awards 2014 – A Mixed Bag?

Ryan Clingman

The Wrestling Observer Newsletter Awards and Hall of Fame are entities that have, in many ways, superseded the scope of the publication itself, which is why I feel they have warranted discussion over the years -- the 2014 WON year-end awards are no different. I have almost always been generally satisfied with the Observer Awards' outcomes, and I believe that went as far as to state in 2013 (following the release of the 2012 results), with many New Japan candidates winning out when the promotion had only run but a few iPPVs, that the results made me proud to be part of the Observer

community. The 2014 awards simply didn't elicit such feelings. This isn't to say that I was highly negative on many of the results, as 2014 was very much an open-ended year as far as most of the categories were concerned. Styles/Suzuki stood as the strongest community candidate for match of the year, but unlike in years prior where the likes of Okada/Tanahashi, Shibata/Ishii, Suzuki/Tanahashi, Richards/Elgin, or Punk/Cena were all but guaranteed to claim top prize, 2014 held far more uncertainty -- any one of Nakamura/Okada, Goto/Ishii, Suzuki/Styles, or Tanahashi/Shibata could have been chosen as plausible winners. The same holds true for many of the other top awards, such as the always debated 'Best Box Office Draw', given that drawing is in some ways objective, although influence needs to be in many instances, 'Most Outstanding', and so on.



For other awards, such as "Best Gimmick", "Worst Gimmick", and "Best Feud" there didn't seem to exist a single front-runner at all, with any feud garnering even the slightest trace of critical acclaim from a major promotion looking to be eligible. Ultimately, it was a starting configuration that made not only the voting process very interesting, but also the results themselves.

The main singles award, the Thesz/Flair award, was claimed expectedly by Shinsuke Nakamura, who won quite handily over second place AJ Styles, and third place Hiroshi Tanahashi. AJ Styles, whilst not performing on a business front to as great an extent as some may say, has been a substantial indie draw, and performed well enough in Japan to warrant a second place position, even if he didn't do much as IWGP Heavyweight Champion for the company itself. Hiroshi Tanahashi seems to be a questionable pick over Okada, simply due to the fact that he worked tags and midcard matches for a large part of the year, although he did have some very good in-ring performances, and drew well with Styles and Nakamura.

Where Styles did place too highly for my specific tastes was in the "Most Outstanding" category, which may be the third most prestigious award behind Thesz/Flair and Match of the Year, where he placed first. Ishii was far and away the strongest candidate here, but it would seem that Styles won, as is often times the case in polls of this kind, based on second and third place votes over Ishii, who had a slightly higher number of first place votes.

Best Box Office draw went to a non-wrestling performer in Ronda Rousey, who, given the lack of a clear pro-wrestling candidates, was by no means a bad first place pick. Behind Rousey was Cena, which is in some ways very much arguable, as the face of what is by far the world's largest promotion, but individual draws do mean less for that company in 2014 than they have ever before. A result that does annoy me somewhat is the fact that Hiroshi Tanahashi was voted above Shinsuke Nakamura as third, when quite clearly Nakamura was the best draw the company had in 2014. Tanahashi drew very

well with Styles and Nakamura, but that was whilst Nakamura was continuing to carry the bulk of the main event weight with the Gracies and Bad Luck Fale of all people. Tanahashi was working the midcard mainly. This would seem to be a default reaction, much like the voting of Daniel Bryan for "Best Technical" was for years.

Bryan didn't claim that award for 2014 due to being injured for its majority -- he still placed 5th however, in the set of results I question most. In a year abundant with more great technical mat wrestling than we have seen in years courtesy of the likes of Zack Sabre Jr., Timothy Thatcher, Drew Gulak, Biff Busick, Kyle 'O Reilly, and so on. Despite this, AJ Styles of all people was voted in at number three, placing him ahead of not only Gulak, who only appeared as an honourable mention, but also Timothy Thatcher at nine! This doesn't annoy me, as I understand that most of the voters probably wouldn't have been exposed to him, but the fact that Daniel Bryan, a man who hasn't wrestled in that style for many a year, was voted ahead of the likes of Thatcher is telling. Placing in a rightful second was Kyle 'O Reilly, who, as everyone is well aware, is exceedingly talented -- and a worthy candidate won the award in ZSJ.

As many had anticipated, Suzuki and Styles from the G1, was voted Match of the Year, and deservedly so. Underneath it was the G1 Final of Shinsuke Nakamura/Kazuchika Okada, which I could have seen in first too. What is telling, however, is that the Shibata/Tanahashi match that Dave gave ***** only placed third -- Dave's rating would have played a much larger factor in year's prior with this readership, or this may simply indicate that, according to general consensus, Dave's rating of Shibata/Tanahashi from September was a minority opinion, which I believe was pretty clear at the time. Tanahashi/Shibata is still a match that, once more, could be argued for the spot, and to it placing in that position I harbour ill-will. What I did find surprising, however, was that Goto/Ishii from Power Struggle only placed fifth, as it did in the annual VOW poll where it place 9th. Also akin to that poll, in my view, the unexpected appearance of Guerrero/Atlantis in the fourth spot. This may signify a more diversified voting pool, or reiterate the impact the match had, either way it's good to see diversity in polls such as these.

In the "Best Non-Wrestler" category, Stephanie McMahon, thankfully, didn't claim the "Best Non-Wrestler" award, as despite being incredibly effective in her role, the role had a net negative effect on the quality of the product. Instead, Heyman claimed both the "Best Non-Wrestler" and "Best on Interviews" award.

One of the stranger award winners as a consequence of timing was Jon Jones/Daniel Cormier winning "Feud of the Year", as the feud's pay-off took place outside of the voting period. However, begrudging those who voted for Jones/Cormier purely based on the pay-off falling just out of the voting period would be hypocritical, as I voted for Zayn/Neville, which too concluded a pay-off just outside of the voting period. When a feud is such that the near entirety of the build lies within the voting period itself and the pay-off follows soon after at a time outside of the given period, I don't see any problem in voting for that feud.

The label of "Most Disgusting Promotional Tactic", one of quirkiest of all the Observer Awards, went to WWE's ridiculing of their pay-per-view customers following the launch of the Network. It isn't a "tactic" that I contemplated voting for, but I could most certainly see an argument for it over firing CM Punk on his wedding day, which only placed fifth -- very surprising. Placing third, was TNA's building of its TV for months around the Dixie Carter table spot, which I could see from a creative standpoint, but in no way stands out as something that was morally wrong, or even worse than the company lying

about the participation of Vince Russo in the production of their television. Placing second, also quite unexpectedly, was Dixie Carter tweeting that a "storm" was coming to Japan during a typhoon, which strikes me as far more ignorant than disgusting.

Whilst I have largely disagreed to varying degrees with some the above awards and I do feel that the 2014 awards produced more disagreeable awards than in years prior, generally speaking I agree with much of what the Observer Awards said about the year that was in pro-wrestling. I agreed, mostly, with many of the major and minor award winners such as for "Worst Announcer", "Best Announcer", Best TV, Worst TV, "Worst Match", "Worst Weekly Television Show", "Best Weekly Television Show", "Thesz/Flair" and "Most Improved". In any awards process, especially when the criteria are largely subjective and the subject niche, there are bound to be personal disagreements with the results. Some of these discrepancies in the 2014 Observer were due to a percentage of the readership only willing to watch WWE or NJPW, some due to influence of the newsletter, and others simply as a consequence of an opinion differential. The 2014 awards, whilst exhibiting minor flaws, did so as much as can be expected from an opening poll to a very large readership, which is why, despite being slightly annoyed at a couple of the results, I have no major qualms with the results overall.

Reviews

Raw Ramblings – January 19th 2015

American Airlines Centre: Dallas, TX.

Ben Carass.

Let's get this out of the way because there is a lot to get into on this show. They showed the usual Martin Luther King Day video package then cut to shots of African-American fans in the arena, which I'm sure was just a huge coincidence and not at all a blatant display of sycophantism. For the go-home show they didn't really focus too much on the Rumble match, as for whatever reason that was left to SmackDown this week, but they shot a great angle for the WWE title three-way and by having a really good main event segment, the show overall just about reached the "passible" level.

The big angle on Raw was the babyfacing of **Brock Lesnar**. He called out **Seth Rollins** at the top of the show then threatened to kick **HHH's** ass when he came out instead. **Rollins** appeared on the tron and rambled then **John Cena** came out to do the same. The segment went 22 minutes with the payoff being that the fans got to vote on whether **Cena** was booked in a match where if he won **Rowan, Zigler & Ryback** got their jobs back but if he lost, he would lose his title shot at the Rumble. Of course the fans voted "Yes" and the Authority booked **Cena** against **Big Show, Kane & Seth Rollins** in a wacky backstage segment involving a guy providing a drum roll. **Brock Lesnar** and **Seth Rollins** had a backstage confrontation where **Brock** told **Seth** he wasn't going to hurt him tonight because he was a "Prize Fighter." It didn't really make much sense given that **Brock** wanted to kill **Rollins** earlier, but by the end of the show it didn't matter. So, they had the match. It went 13:45 and wasn't very exciting until the finish. **Cena** was taking a beating, when **Sting** appeared on the tron; they cut to a backstage shot and he walked through the curtain onto the stage where he pointed at the **Authority**. **Rollins** was distracted and **Cena** rolled him up for the win then jumped in the crowd to celebrate.

HHH stood on the announce table and blew a gasket, but **Sting** had already vanished. **Brock Lesnar** hit the ring and took down **Rollins**; **Kane** and **Big Show** tried to pull him off but **Brock** gave them both F5s which the fans popped big for. **Rollins** ran for his life and **Brock** stood tall in the ring to close the show. It really was a great closing angle and if traditional PPV still meant anything it would have added plenty of buys. **Brock** going after all the **Authority's** heels and F5ing the two biggest made him come off like a fighting badass who is not scared of anything. They can now go a number of ways with **Lesnar**: Keep him the dominant heel champion. Have him keep the belt and go face to possibly go against **Rollins** at Mania, as **Seth** could always align himself with **Heyman**. He could lose the title but stay heel to put over one of the babyfaces at Mania on his way out, **Bryan** or **Reigns** maybe. Or, drop the title and go face. If it were up to me it would be **Daniel Bryan** vs. **Brock Lesnar** for the title at Mania, but I doubt they will do that so I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if **Heyman** screws **Brock** and joins the Authority on Sunday.

Speaking of **Daniel Bryan**, he lost his first match back on Raw since he was stripped of the WWE title to **Bray Wyatt** in 15:52. Match was good, but starting **Bryan** out right away with 50/50 booking is just absolutely moronic. It's not like this is Japan and a guy fresh back from injury has a little ring rust; that logic doesn't apply in WWE land. Plus they had **Bryan** pin **Kane** on last week's SmackDown and [spoiler] he did the same this week. This was just a case of WWE's ineptitude and lack of foresight when it comes to booking. I know the rumour is they are making **Wyatt** into a monster heel just in case the **Undertaker** comes back, but I really don't see that happening at all. **Kane** did cause the distraction which led to the finish and he also gave **Bryan** a chokeslam afterwards, but that didn't make it any less stupid.

Believe it or not, in a move right out of Nitro from 99, the **Bryan/Wyatt** match was the only wrestling in the first 90 minutes of the show and in fact was not the last WCW-ism of the night. Since it was "Raw Reunion" they had a Legends Panel with **Shawn Michaels, Hulk Hogan & Ric Flair**. They all put over the importance of winning the Royal Rumble and **Flair** tried his best to keep a straight face while claiming that winning the 92 Rumble was the biggest moment of his entire career. They all made Rumble picks: **Shawn** went with **Bray Wyatt**, **Hogan** chose **Daniel Bryan** and **Flair** picked **Dean Ambrose**. **Big Show** waddled out and was upset nobody picked him to win, so he cut promos on all the fogies. **Flair** went rouge and hit **Show** with some stiff looking punches, but **Show** gave him a KO punch which was **Roman Reigns'** cue to come out. **Reigns** dumped **Show** over the top with a clothesline, immediately killing the gimmick of the giant that cannot be eliminated. At least **Reigns** didn't cut a promo this week.

Later on, **Scott Hall, Kevin Nash & X-Pac** came out in NWO attire. **Hall** tried his old, "how many people came to see the NWO" bit and it was met with mild applause. **The Ascension** showed up and said that nobody was better than them, especially not a team from WCW. **JBL** got up from the booth and said he had a feeling this might happen so he made a call to an old friend. He removed his shirt to reveal an **APA** t shirt and **Ron Simmons** came out to the old **APA** music. The **New Age Outlaws** were out next and they attacked **the Ascension**. **Road Dogg & Billy** beat them up like chumps then **JBL** gave **Viktor** the Clothesline from Hell. For those of you that weren't around back then, young guys

getting obliterated by old timers was virtually every episode of Nitro from 1996-1999. I'm not going to complain too much, it was a fun segment and **the Ascension** were dead before they even shot this angle. They have booked the **Outlaws vs. the Ascension** at the Rumble, so maybe this will be the last hurrah for **Konnor & Viktor**. There is surely no coming back after this burial of epic proportions.



Best/Worst of the Rest: **The Kliq** had a backstage segment that involved **Hall, Nash & Michaels** ribbing on **HHH** for wearing a suit. **Damien Sandow** showed up dressed as **X-Pac** then **Sean Waltman** appeared and he was amused with **Sandow**. **Miz** walked in and said **Mizdow** was his stunt double, before being shunned by the still cool in 2015 50 year-olds. **Nash** asked **HHH** what kind of show he was running; **HHH** put his face in his hands and said he was so ashamed. It was quite funny, if only because **HHH** nearly cracked up delivering his closing line. **Dean Ambrose** pinned **Bad News Barrett** clean in a non-title match at 8:10, because the IC champion must lose every TV match ever; they didn't even mention that **Ambrose** beat the IC champ. Even though it has been going on for over a decade now, it will never stop infuriating me that they book the IC champions like losers. **The New Day** cut promos during their entrance and were somehow even less over than usual. **Big E & Kofi Kingston** beat **Tyson Kidd & Cesaro w/Adam Rose** in 3:04. They beat babyfaces in their hometown, but they can't beat the **New Day** on MLK Day? **Paige & Natalya** over **Summer Rae & Alicia Fox** in 2:55 when **Paige** tapped **Fox** with the PTO. **Cole** announced **Paige & Nattie vs. The Bellas** for the Rumble, presumably because **Nikki** pulled her hamstring and can't work a singles. **Rusev** squashed **R-Truth** in 0:45, sadly **Lana** didn't get to cut a promo. **Jey Uso** pinned the **Miz** in 2:55. There was no mention of the **Jimmy/Naomi/Miz** storyline, so maybe they have dropped it again, however they did announce that **Miz & Mizdow** are in the Rumble. So expect **Mizdow** to eliminate himself when **Miz**

gets tossed out or for **Mizdow** to turn on **Miz** and eliminate him.

WWE NXT – January 21st 2015

Full Sail University: Winter Park, FL.

Ben Carass

There was a great video recap of the Sami Zayn/Kevin Owens story to open the show then William Regal was shown behind the desk in his office. Regal announced the next Live Special for February 11th and booked a tournament for the #1 contender for the NXT title, plus Charlotte vs. Sasha Banks for the Women's title for tonight.

Sami Zayn vs. Tye Dillinger Match never got started because Sami attacked him before the bell and tossed him over the top. He called out Kevin Owens but William Regal showed up instead and blasted Sami for the way he acted. Sami said he would not wrestle another match unless it was against Owens. Regal told him that Owens needed to earn a title shot, but Sami said he didn't care about the belt and told Regal to make it non-title. Regal agreed and booked Zayn vs. Owens at the February 11th Takeover. After the break, Regal was in the back and told the anonymous interview guy that there would be a contract signing deal next week. – Nice little segment and great fire from Sami, although the non-title stip is kind of weird. What happens if/when Owens wins? Will there be two #1 contenders? If so, that could end up diluting the Zayn/Owens program.

#1 Contenders Tournament: Finn Balor vs. Curtis Axel – Balor over in 4:01. Balor did a big dive early. Axel got the heat and the crowd miraculously didn't fall into a slumber when he slapped on a chinlock. Axel missed that goofy "timber" splash of the ropes that Ryback used to do then Balor made his comeback and used the slingblade, which Rich Brennan bothered to lookup the name of this week. Balor won with a double stomp off the top. – Decent match, nothing wrong with it at all. Axel is still as bland as a bland thing, but the people are so into Balor that they cared about the match.

Sasha Banks was with Devin in the back and said she would beat Charlotte again this week. There was a commercial for Total Divas with some lesbian shenanigans between Rosa Mendes and Paige. A short pre-tape from Bull Dempsey aired; he talked about beating Baron Corbin next week in the tourney. The main thing I took away from this was the way they shot it: It opened with Bull rubbing his hands together then the camera pulled back and Bull stood looking at his open hands while cutting his promo. It was just like how Heyman directed promos for Benoit in ECW.

NXT Women's Championship: Charlotte (C) vs. Sasha Banks w/Becky Lynch – Charlotte via DQ at 2:30. They did a super long intense collar-and-elbow, which was cool and something you never see from the woman because most of the Divas can't lockup to save their lives. Becky Lynch attacked Charlotte for the DQ and Bayley made the save and ran off the heels. Bayley picked up the Women's championship and Charlotte snatched it off her, so Bayley gave her a belly-to-belly. The fans popped and chanted for Bayley and Regal came out again to book a 4-Way for the Women's title at Takeover.

Some new generic chumpstain interviewed Kevin Owens in the locker room. Owens basically said he would do his talking next week. – Owens gimmick is quickly becoming the guy who never does interviews. I don't mind, as it is wholly believable that someone would get sick of the asinine questions the WWE interviewers ask them, however he is one of the better talkers they have.

Wesley Blake & Buddy Murphy vs. The Vaudevillains – Blake & Murphy over in 4:01. Match wasn't much. Murphy sold for the heat and the fans didn't really care because he and Blake have been jobber heels for weeks. Finish saw Blake pin English after Murphy hit a gamengiri from the floor. A few fans cheered the upset victory.

Tyler Breeze cut a selfie promo in the back and said he would rid the world of ugos when he became NXT Champion. Then New Generic Chumpstain was with Blake & Murphy. Blake said it wasn't an upset and Murphy challenged the Lucha Dragons for the titles next week. – This whole Blake & Murphy becoming tag champions thing is moving awfully fast, maybe they don't want Sin Cara on NXT anymore or perhaps Kalisto is getting a call up, however I seriously doubt the latter. It is a weird deal though.

#1 Contenders Tournament: Hideo Itami vs. Tyler Breeze – Itami via pinfall at 10:25 (TV Time). Good match, not great, but solid. Itami missed a bunch of kicks then eventually landed a PK before selling for the heat. Itami's comeback consisted of clothesline and his first move came in the form of a fisherman's suplex that got a near-fall. Breeze used a superkick for a near-fall and the crowd chanted, "This is awesome." – It wasn't. Itami kicked out of a crucifix-bomb then fired up with a flurry of strikes and won with a big diving boot to the face. – Itami finally felt like he is capable of being in the mix with the top guys and he is slowly adapting to the WWE style. He could still do with adding a couple of signature moves. I know they don't really like bridging so the Tiger suplex is probably a no-go, but I'm certain he could use the Falcon Arrow safely.

Not the best episode of NXT, but still it was an enjoyable watch for the most part. The booking of the women's 4-way felt a little rushed, but the match itself should be fun. They pushed the date of the Takeover show forward from March to February, so they are burning through angles quickly over the next couple of weeks with only two shows left before Takeover. Still, there is a lot to look forward to before we get to February 11th: A surprise Tag title switch, Balor vs. Itami, Neville & Zayn vs. Owens & Kidd. It's kind of a shame that they don't have more time to build the top matches up more, but the women's 4-way and especially Neville/Balor and Zayn/Owens should be absolutely great.

WWE SmackDown – January 22nd 2015.

Frank Erwin Centre: Austin, TX.

Ben Carass.

SmackDown was an easy watch this week and the show actually served its purpose as a go-home episode. They even did the tumbler gimmick with guys drawing numbers, namely the **Dust Brothers**

and **Fandango**. The latter of whom was so engrossed in tasting what **Rosa** had in catering that he failed to notice that **Dean Ambrose** switched numbers with him. Referee **Rod Zapata** was watching the whole thing and just let **Ambrose** steal **Fandango's** number which was quite funny.

Story of the show was all about guys fighting for their spots in the Royal Rumble. **Daniel Bryan** opened the show and brought out **Dolph Ziggler, Ryback & Rowan**, who all cut promos about what it meant to have their jobs back. **The Authority**, minus **HHH & Stephanie**, came out; **Rollins, Big Show & Kane** all blathered about the usual heel stuff. They must have cut part of **Kane's** promo because he didn't book any of the matches for the show, instead **Michael Cole** was left to explain that **Ziggler, Ryback & Rowan** would have to fight to earn their Rumble spots. **Ziggler** pinned **Bad News Barrett** at 7:18 (TV Time) of a decent match, however they did two shoulder to the ring post spots, one for the heat and one to start the comeback. **Dolph** did a good job of selling his arm and it still sucks to be the IC champion. **Ryback** beat **Rusev** via count-out in a not-too-bad mean guy match at 9:58 (TV Time). There was one spot that bordered on being out of control; **Ryback** gave **Rusev** a vertical suplex but was too close to the ropes and **Rusev's** legs caught the top rope on the way down. It was pretty dangerous and could have been a very bad deal. **Ryback** also took two bodyslams and sold his knee, which was wacky to say the least. **Ryback** went for the shellshock afterwards and **Rusev** escaped up the ramp. Poor **Rowan** was the only guy to lose his Rumble Qualifier when he put over **Luke Harper** in 3:20. Most notable thing about this was the, "It's Yersel" sign in the crowd. **Rowan** took most of the match before losing to the discuss lariat. Main event saw **Daniel Bryan** go over **Kane** in 8: 56 (TV Time) of a standard No DQ TV match with the usual kendo stick and chairs shots. **Noble & Mercury** tried to get involved but **Bryan** fought them off and pinned **Kane** with the busaiku knee. Post-match, **the Authority's** goons attacked **Bryan** and **Ziggler, Ryback & Rowan** hit the ring to help. The **entire locker room**, expect for **Seth Rollins** who isn't in the Rumble, stormed the ring and they did the pre-Rumble mass brawl. **Dean Ambrose & Roman Reigns** got special treatment by having their music play and the show ended with, **Bryan, Ambrose, Reigns, Ziggler, Ryback, Big Show & Kane** **starring** each other down. It was a predictable main event and final angle but it all made sense and set up the Rumble nicely.

Other Notes: **Renee Young's** ugly new hair interviewed **Roman Reigns** and he actually cut a half-decent promo, mostly because he wasn't given any sickeningly bad lines to recite. One goofy line he had was about **Big Show** reminding everyone he is a giant and **Reigns** claimed that **Andre the Giant** never had to do that...despite his name being **Andre THE GIANT**. **Brie Bella w/Nikki** beat **Naomi** in 2:19. Match was nothing. **Paige & Natalya** were on commentary; they are doing the partners that don't really get a long gimmick. **Mizdow** apologised to **Miz** for dressing up like **X-Pac** on Raw by giving him a pumpkin spice latte. **Miz** told him the fans never cheer for him and walked off. **The Usos** showed up and tried to convince **Mizdow** that it's every man for himself in the Rumble and told him he should eliminate the **Miz** if he had the chance.

Bits & Pieces

Alan4L of the Dr. Keith Presents show sparked an interesting Twitter conversation this week when asking those on the platform if they could name the six people he had come up with who had worked for WWE, WCW, ECW, AJPW, and NJPW at some point in their careers. From the ensuing conversation, as well as a little extra research, the number of people who have worked for all five companies is 25 and many of them you may find quite surprising:

Abdulla the Butcher, Bushwacker Butch, Bushwacker Luke, Chris Candido, Davey Boy Smith, Dick Murdoch, Dean Malenko, Don Muraco, Doug Furnas, Greg Valentine, Jimmy Snuka, Joe Malenko (on a technicality, as he worked a NJPW/AJPW/WWF joint Dome Show), Ivan Koloff, Kerry Von Erich, Kevin Sullivan, Nikolai Volkoff, Rick Rude, Rob Van Dam, Sabu, Scott Steiner, Stan Hansen, Steve Williams, Tatsumi Fujinami, Terry Funk, Too Cold Scorpio

There is also an extraordinarily long list of people who worked just for ECW alone, but failed to work for but one of the other four companies.

Next Week's Issue

In next week's issue we look at all of the news heading out of the Royal Rumble 2015, and preview some of NJPW's upcoming events including, on their next major iPPV, future greatest match ever KOTA IBUSHI VERSUS TOMOAKI HONMA.

Contact:

Subscribe Via Email: www.cubedcirclewrestling.com/subscribe-via-email

General Questions/Feedback/Suggestions: ryan@cubedcirclewrestling.com

Ben Carass's Twitter: @BenCarass

Bryan Rose' Twitter: @br26

Ryan Clingman's Twitter : @RyanClingman