



Cubed Circle Newsletter 175 – WWE Fastlane 2015

The newsletter has returned to its regular weekly state with the new semester settling and WrestleMania fast approaching. This week we take a look at WWE's Fastlane pay-per-view, and what such an unassuming, mediocre show says about the current state of the company, Ben looks at a disappointing follow up, a solid NXT, and the never noteworthy Thursday Night SmackDown.

– *Ryan Clingman, Cubed Circle Newsletter Editor*

WWE Fastlane 2015: The Road to WrestleMania 31 Runs Cold

To say that WWE's Fastlane pay-per-view was as bad as its title, in comparison with most WWE events over the past eight or so months, would be an overstatement on my part. The majority of the matches were slightly below average to fairly enjoyable, with the exception of the main event, which was laid out extraordinarily, and saw Roman Reigns best Daniel Bryan to reclaim his position in the main event of WrestleMania 31. However, when evaluating the show within its context as the final pay-per-view on the Road to WrestleMania, then the state of, not so much the event itself, but the company's creative direction towards their biggest show of the year, becomes all the more dire.

Unlike in decades past, the financial security of the company is by no means reliant on the success or failure of this year's WrestleMania, and of course the WrestleMania name alone too means far more than it did pre-1998. However, when creative fails to pick up in a season where, historically, it has been so difficult to fail, then the promotion's problems lie far beyond the scope of WrestleMania and the build there in. Despite what those in or outside of the company may think, the success of their key financial metrics in television rights fees, Network subscribers, and attendance, do fluctuate based on the long-term creative success of the promotion. For a metric such as attendance, feedback is far quicker than the other two, although still markedly slower than the likes of television ratings. Where as Network trends take a much longer time to develop, especially when non-current factors such as the archival content come into play, and of course television rights fees are a financial barometer far more dependent on outside variables such as the state of the television market, and only change every four or

so years. Regardless, whilst it is evident that a "dire" creative state does not directly correlate to a equitable financial one, it does over longer periods affect the company's ability to grow in popularity, and hence, maximize revenue – with the definition of “long” in this instance changing based on the metric in question.

Perhaps such a long term creative downfall will fail to occur, with those in the company possessing large amounts of experience, and the company itself facing no true competition and holding a fair amount of reserves, at least pre-Network. However, we have seen creative continue to decline for months, during states when they should by all means be accelerating, and similarly, television ratings have mostly been on the decline; a decline at an obviously far steeper rate than general television viewership erosion. What metrics such as these and analysis of the company's booking, specifically at a time when they should be on a steep ascent, tell us about the creative process is that it's significantly flawed – that the creative system is simply broken.



There is no singular reason for this breakage of course – general creative misdirection is a major contributor – and another may simply be that there now exists a greater audience/promotion and audience-to-audience disconnect. More so than in any other major American promotion's history, the WWE in 2015 is attempting to cater for two very different markets, the hardcores and the casual viewer. There are times when the opinions of the two sets will correspond, as is the case with the likes of a Brock Lesnar or Undertaker; during other times there is a clear conflict, such is the case with Roman Reigns, John Cena, and others. Catering to either one of these audiences exclusively would be a

naive move, as Jim Cornette's model would suggest – pandering to only the hardcore fans leaves a product simply open to the most loyal and vocal viewers leaving the casual fans alienated, whilst chasing only the casual viewers has the opposite effect. What further exasperates this problem is their additional focus on the views and ideas of those within the company, as if they were their own unique audience. With creative attempting to control every facet of the product's direction, when aspects of pro-wrestling, such as the fans themselves, are directly uncontrollable.

Choosing Roman Reigns as the next top star for the promotion is a clear example of this, as is the constant placement of Kane & Big Show in roles far beyond their current scope as performers, as though it was still the 1980s. Of course, the WWE audience, specifically the hardcore group cannot be allowed to steer the creative direction as they see fit, but even in the territorial days, where fan backlash of the current sort was far less prevalent, successful promotions were most often times the ones who gave the audience what they wanted, but simply not when they wanted. Last year's WrestleMania direction is a strong example of using this principle successfully, although for how great the final stretch of Daniel Bryan's push to the top was, Bryan in the Mania main event was not the original plan for Mania 30, and instead it was the fans who swayed the Mania direction. This year's WrestleMania card was seemingly booked with little regard for the general opinion of their audience, which is why the majority of the card feels so cold. In essence, by booking Roman Reigns as the winner of the Royal Rumble, when it was clear that he would be booed out of the building, only to switch the decision again in booking the Fastlane main event, the strings have been exposed to many times for most to enjoy the puppet show.

The current WrestleMania card would seem to consist of: Brock Lesnar/Roman Reigns, Sting/Triple H, Undertaker/Wyatt, Goldust/Stardust, Intercontinental title ladder match featuring Daniel Bryan, Rollins/Orton, and Rusev/Cena as the main matches, as well as something involving Jon Stewart. The cast for the upper half of the show is more than sufficient to put on a great card if only the respective participants in the top matches had been placed in a different configuration/ I have a desperately hard time believing that Lesnar/Bryan, Reigns/Cena, Sting/Undertaker, and Rollins/Orton wouldn't have garnered much greater interest. This is especially true with respect to the World Title and Undertaker matches, as there now exists a distinct lack of an explanation for Undertaker's return, either creatively or in kayfabe, and the World Title match has a decent chance of falling flat against one of the most hardcore crowds of the entire year. Had Undertaker been booked opposite Sting, he have held a perfectly acceptable reason to return, with the streak over, but an opportunity to wrestle Sting in his first WWE match at WrestleMania.

I don't feel anger towards the product, nor am I even all too annoyed, however the current outlook for

creative is sad and highly frustrating. Whilst I can see the likes of Sami Zayn, Kevin Owens, and Finn Balor freshening up the main roster, especially if they are given something to work with, creative incompetency, as it exists now, is bound to hold them down on the main roster. Change will come eventually, and at that point the company may very well begin to heat up, but as of right now, during the build to the supposed biggest show of the year, they couldn't feel much colder.

WWE FastLane 2015 February 22nd 2015 FedExForum, Memphis, Tennessee, USA

The opening video contained the following: "Speed the full, maximum or optimum rate of motion" -- I don't believe this would hold up in a high school physics exam some how. "destination: the predetermined end of your journey", also a poor choice of words, but for completely different reasons.

1. Dolf Ziggler, Erik Rowan & Ryback vs. Seth Rollins, Big Show & Kane w/ J & J Security

I would probably be a hypocrite if I criticized the booking of this match on pay-per-view whilst praising NJPW shows that feature similar matches. However, whilst this was not a traditional pay-per-view, it was also a much weaker card than most every major NJPW show over the past few years, and that company doesn't have well over five hours of first run programming each week. Rowan missed the world's slowest windmill kick, connecting with the pole, which led to a beat down from J&J Security -- dueling "we want Ziggler"/"feed me more" chants followed. If you were given the choice to have Rowan, Ziggler, or Ryback sell for the majority of a six-man who would you choose -- clearly Ziggler, right? Well, not in this match, as Rowan was the main babyface in peril. Regardless, as Dylan Hales has said for years, Rowan is far better than he is given credit for, and was fairly good in the selling role, just not as good as Ziggler would have been. Regardless, the tag was made to Ryback, who was very over. They teased a distraction finish, Ryback caught Rollins in mid-air landing the shell-shock, but Big Show ran in with a splash. The hot tag was made to Ziggler, who ran wild on Mr. Suit Pants himself, but was caught with a punch from Show on the floor, leading to the victory. This was better than it had any right to be, in all honesty, most probably thanks to this Memphis crowd, who was pretty did for the more important parts of the show. The Authority looked to beat down Ziggler after the match, Rowan and Ryback attempted to make the save, but were all laid out in turn. "Randy Orton" chants were then followed directly by his return, as a tremendous fighting babyface sending Rollins running off to the back.

** 3/4

2. Goldust vs. Stardust

Goldust was in the back with Dusty, who said both his sons meant the world to him. Goldust recounted

going to the arena to see Dusty wrestle, and then cut a very believable promo saying that he would beat Cody so badly that he wouldn't even think of putting paint on again. Cody is now wrestling in tights and no shirt and with new gloves. He is acting crazier than ever too. Goldust was tremendous walking to the ring with no theatrics and tears in his eyes. Cody was slapped, leading to a light "Cody" chant, which Rhodes sold as Steen would the "Ole" chant, only not to the same extent. Stardust worked Goldust over out on the floor and got the heat back in the ring. I don't know why, but I cannot disassociate Stardust and Super Buu. Cody then looked towards the tron and asked "who's your favourite?" to Dusty in the back. Goldust then got a very quick backslide for the win, which was a strange finish booking wise. Goldust offered Cody his hand, which he shook and walked off. It's a shame that the crowd wasn't more into this, as both men were great as they almost always are. Then again, in terms of the position of both men on the card, they haven't been given much to care about.

*** 1/4

They aired a cheesy Jon Stewart pro-wrestling parody cellphone video, followed by a Rollins response. Goldust was talking to Dusty in the back, but Cody laid Goldust out. Cody then cut an amazing promo on Dusty saying that it was he who killed Cody Rhodes. He then laid out his own father. I wish these two hadn't been relegated to prelims before the genesis of this angle, as all three of these men are tremendous in their roles.

3. Cesaro & Tyson Kidd w/ Natalya vs. The Usos w/ Naomi

Cesaro has too donned Beats by Dre headphones, as a fabulous parody of Beats plebs. Cesaro and Kidd worked over an Uso's leg, with Cesaro even executing a one legged swing. Cesaro landed his outside-in middle rope suplex leading into a splash from Kidd. Kidd avoided a slide, went for a kick on the apron, but was caught in a Samoan drop, which was delivered into the barricade with Uso losing his balance. Jey Uso and Cesaro did the Frye/Takayama spot brawling out onto the floor, which this crowd didn't know what to make of. Kidd landed a fisherman's swinging neckbreaker for the win.

There was a hype video for the HHH/Sting face to face. In the package Sting's face was overlaid Hunter's, which may have been the scariest thing I have seen all year. Hunter walked out with his water bottle, leather jacket, jeans, and t-shirt. Sting entered in a surprisingly low key fashion to overly dramatic, unfitting, music. Hunter said that Sting was WCW, and it was guys like him who put WCW out of business, it was his legacy -- lies! WCW's legacy is putting WCW out of business. With Sting now the living embodiment of 13+ year long dead company, I'm surprised Vince has yet to make the call to simply have himself come out and pin the man. Hunter offered Sting everything from DVDs and Network specials to action figures and the Hall of Fame, saying he would be bigger than he had ever been. If they had a match, HHH threatened that Sting's very legacy would be erased. There was a fan in the crowd delivering a long monologue to Sting saying "you started in Memphis..." and, I assume,

rattling off his career history. Hunter went for a cheap shot, Sting preempted it, but Sting was dropped to the ground. Hunter grabbed the sledgehammer, but Sting debuted the baseball bat, forcing Hunter to drop his hammer to the floor. He then pointed to the Mania sign with his bat. Both men were unmiced with Hunter accepting and Sting saying that he would see Hunter at Mania. HHH went for another cheapshot, but was caught with the bat and a Scorpion Deathlock.

4. Divas Championship Match

Nikki Bella vs. Paige

Paige took Bella down with ground and pound before being dropped onto the apron. Paige kicked out of the Alabama Slam during the heat. Nikki kicked out of a superkick. Paige was met with a big powerbomb, but looked for the Scorpion Crosslock before Bella made it to the ropes and rolled her up with a handful of tights.

* 3/4

Vince's 'Muscle & Fitness' cover and related article were shown -- natural and unphotoshopped Vince was not. Triple H/Sting is official for WrestleMania -- their billing of it as a match between the two biggest promotional stars of an era is a major stretch though.

5. Intercontinental Championship Match

Bad News Barrett vs. Dean Ambrose

Ambrose went straight after Barrett, but was dropped onto the steel steps to kick the heat off. Ambrose kicked out of the Wasteland, and connected with a clothesline for two. As an excuse for a tope, Barrett looked to escape with his title, and then, in everyone's favourite finish, Ambrose was DQed for winning too much. Ambrose, knowing how stupid the decision was, and always is, walked off with the title.

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There was a trailer for the Flinstones & WWE, 'Stonage Rumble', digital release. Undertaker's druid music hit! I don't know if the Memphis indie scene is simply a producer of clumsy druids, but these druids were far from the greatest. A casket was wheeled out, but Wyatt was revealed as the man on the inside -- well played. Wyatt called Taker old and broken, and said that his soul is now stuck in limbo -- Wyatt's mission is to send "him" home. He finally used Undertaker's name, saying that he would claim Taker's soul -- they do remember that they ended the streak, right?

6. United States Championship Match

Rusev w/ Lana vs. John Cena

Lawler referenced "Reckless Abandon" mistakenly in place of "Ruthless Aggression". The

WrestleMania logo truly is one of the ugliest in recent memory. Rusev wore Cena down. Someone in the crowd, perhaps the heckler who had been attempting to show how smart he was or wasn't, managed to give the camera a double middle finger during the admittedly very boring heat. The pair traded strikes, Rusev looked for an inverted black hole slam, but was caught in a crossface. Rusev escaped for further work over Cena's back. Cena grabbed an STF, but Rusev made it to the ropes once more. Rusev kicked out of an AA for a double down. On second thought, the middle finger guy was in a Cena t-shirt, so he probably wasn't the heckler. Cena fought out of the camel clutch. Lana leapt into the ring, setting up for a lowblow into another camel clutch, which led to a win by passout, although this was announced as a submission, which they have never done before.

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7. Number One Contender's Match for WWE Championship Match at WrestleMania 31 Daniel Bryan vs. Roman Reigns

There were dueling chants with a slight Bryan slant early. Bryan did a puroresu clean break in the corner. They started off with a fun story, with Bryan attempting to out wrestle Reigns, but Reigns overpowering Bryan. Bryan worked over Roman's legs. Reigns violently bludgeoned his way out of a leg lock. Bryan countered Reigns' superman punch with a kick to the mid-section, with Patton repeatedly pulling Bryan off. Reigns sold his diverticulitis. Bryan continued with his always entertaining running dropkicks into a standing position. Reigns landed a middle rope powerbomb for two. Bryan locked in the yes lock -- Reigns made it to the ropes. Bryan shot out with two topes, but was caught with a belly to belly suplex on the floor and thrown into the steps. Bryan kicked out of a spear. Bryan countered a second spear into a rollup and landed a high kick before a busaiku knee for two -- Cole claimed that no one had every kicked out of that move; doubtful. Reigns caught Bryan's knee, Bryan responded with slaps and locked in an yes lock from an armbar position! Reigns bombarded Bryan with forearms for what I thought would be a TKO, but Bryan grabbed a triangle, which resulted in a powerbomb and double down. Bryan landed repeated kicks on the ground followed by the buzzaw kick. Bryan then ran into the spear for the win. This was an outstanding match with a less than outstanding outcome, oh well, there's always New Japan. Bryan then offered Reigns his hand and said "you better kick his ass".

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Raw Ramblings – February 23rd 2015 **Bridgestone Arena: Nashville, TN.** *Ben Carass.*

4 weeks. The WWE has 4 weeks of TV left before WrestleMania, so let's just forget about SmackDown, because let's be honest, nothing of importance is going to happen on that show, and focus on Raw. That's 12 hours of TV, 13 if you factor in a 15 minute overrun on each show, for them to ramp things up for the biggest show of the year. I don't need to bang on about how poor the product has been for months, because it's clear for all to see, so let's focus on the 4 remaining weeks. I have not been this

underwhelmed for a WrestleMania card in a long time, or at least since XXVII, and unfortunately I cannot see what the company can do in terms of the build to turn around their creative slump. I don't know what the deal is with Brock Lesnar, but he wasn't on the show last night despite being advertised on WWE.com 20 minutes before they went on the air. I suspect it won't take long for us to find out what went down. Anyway, from the reactions **Reigns** has been getting, **Lesnar** could very well be the babyface in their title match and pretty much nothing they can do will change that. Even **Daniel Bryan & Paul Heyman** failed at babyfacing **Reigns** on Raw. **Brock** killing a bunch of guys is always awesome, but that will only help in making **Lesnar** look like the cool badass and **Reigns** like a cheap knock-off. If they book **Reigns** like a monster and have him run through everyone there will surely be a bigger backlash from the majority of fans that already resent him for being the chosen one. So either way they are pretty much screwed. Trying to make **Lesnar** more of a heel will only get him more over as a face, likewise anything they do to try babyface **Reigns** will only make him more of a heel. But hey, that's the price they pay for not going with **Daniel Bryan**. There's the **John Cena**, Rocky IV stuff, which I suppose is good, although I'm so sick of the 'Murica vs. the evil foreigner story. **Rusev & Lana** are great and all, but it's 2015 and I would have thought we could have moved passed the, "my country is better than yours" trope. Still, If we get vignettes of **Cena** training in the snow to "No Easy Way Out" I may even forgive them when **Cena** taps **Rusev** clean. **Sting** has already laid out **HHH** twice, so I guess **Trips** will beat him down at some point and they'll be the usual hocus-pocus vanishings and so forth. So where does that leave **Undertaker** and **Bray Wyatt**? I don't expect many, if any, physical angles before their match, which means it's all on the promos and **Taker's** magic ga-ga. There are only so many tricks they can use when it comes to the supernatural stuff and I don't think the booking team is creative enough to come up with different ways to present **Sting** and **Undertaker** without one infringing on the other.



The point of all that rambling was that I just cannot see the WWE turning its product around in 4 weeks and we're headed into the coldest Mania in at least 18 years. I'm sure there will be a couple of good

angles along the way, but boy there certainly weren't any on Raw this week. The show was as long and terrible as ever; you could see them lining things up for the weeks to come, however what they set up was typically moronic. Story of the show was **Randy Orton** coming back and getting a big pop at the top of the show, however by the end of the opening segment he had virtually joined the **Authority** again. Main event was **Orton & Seth Rollins vs. Daniel Bryan & Roman Reigns**. We'll get to the bewildering **Bryan/Reigns** segment shortly, but the main event saw **Bryan** pin **Rollins** at 16:10 of a good match with the busaiku knee. **Orton** was mad that **Rollins** made a blind tag and set up for a punt on **Seth**, however **Joey Mercury** came in and took an RKO. **Orton** patted **Rollins** on the back and went to the back. Now, **Orton** came out to a huge pop at the start of the show and by the end of it nobody cared at all. Everyone was expecting him to RKO **Rollins**, which I thought the whole show was building up to, but no. They have to tell a goofy story about **Orton** playing MIND GAMES with **Rollins** instead of letting **Randy** be the babyface out for revenge.

Daniel Bryan, Roman Reigns & Paul Heyman were involved in a disaster of a segment. **Reigns** talked about deserving his match with **Lesnar** and acknowledged the fans booing him. **Bryan** came out and tried his best to put **Reigns** over and give him the rub. He said he too was booing **Reigns** like all the fans, but **Reigns** earned his respect at FastLane because he was the better man. The crowd hated this and could see right through what was going on. **Bryan** was booed, **Reigns** was booed; it was a mess. Things got worse when **Paul Heyman** showed up. **Heyman** stated that **Reigns** could beat any man in WWE history: **Bruno, Hogan, Austin, Rock** and the fans absolutely hated it. It's not like the heat was on **Heyman** all it did was put heat on **Reigns** because clearly, in the fans' minds, he doesn't measure up to any of those guys. It was mind-boggling. **Brock Lesnar** didn't even appear, so they wasted a date for nothing. That will teach this guy not to sign a new deal!

There was a **Cena/Rusev** segment. **Cena** no-sold the loss at FastLane (did you expect anything less?) then asked for a rematch but **Rusev** said no. They did the usual pro/anti USA stuff and the fans liked it, after all they were in Nashville. A pre-tape from **Bray Wyatt** aired: He had an open casket and cut a promo about **Undertaker** being a scarred pile of broken bones. **Wyatt** slammed the casket and told Taker to come find him.

Bric-a-brac: Dolph Ziggler pinned **Bad News Barrett** at 11:05 of a non-title match. **R-Truth** was on commentary since he beat **Barrett** last week. **Dean Ambrose** came out afterwards with the IC belt and taunted **Barrett**. Looks like some kind of wacky 3 or 4 way at Mania. Why **Truth** is involved is anybody's guess. **Rollins** protested to the **Authority** about letting **Orton** back into the fold, so **Stephanie** castrated him and yelled at him like a total chump. **Prime Time Players** over **The Ascension** in 3:05. Sucked. They showed an **Ascension** inset promo about the **Bushwhackers** going into the Hall of Fame two hours before they made the announcement on TV. **Cesaro & Tyson Kidd w/Natalya** the Tag Titles in a rematch with **The Usos w/Naomi** by DQ at 9:45. The wives got involved at the finish and **Nattie** showed some flashes of a heel turn, which would do her the world of good. **Miz** was mean to **Mizdow** during a pre-tape and officially announced that there would be an Andre Battle Royal this year and he would be in it. Oh the excitement. **Jack Swagger** tapped-out **Stardust** in 1:55 when **Goldust** showed up for the distraction finish. After 3 years of waiting for this program, the poor **Dusts** are being booked like utter prelim geeks. The **Bella Twins** beat **Paige & Emma** in 0:28; **Paige** didn't even tag in and **Emma** was buried to the realm of Hades. **Curtis Axel** did his #AxelMania gimmick again then was squashed by **Ryback** in 45 seconds.

Raw Ratings for 02/23 & 02/16 2015

02/16

The February 16th edition of RAW drew a 3.00 rating and averaged 3.99 million viewers, meaning a 10% viewership increase off of the disastrous 02/09 edition of the program, which drew a near record low number. The show's first hour drew 4.138 million viewers (1.44 rating and 1.829 million viewers in the 18-49 demo) , the second 4.026 million viewers (1.40 rating, and 1.783 million viewers in the 18-49 demo) and the third and final hour with a 10 minute overrun drew 3.828 million viewers (1.37 rating and 1,744 million viewers in the 18-49 demo.). Once more, the drop in viewership throughout the show every week is indicative of a show that simply isn't working layout or content wise.

02/23

The February 23rd edition of Monday Night RAW drew a 2.97 rating and averaged 4.12 million viewers . The positive about this week's edition of the show was that it saw a show-long increase in viewership, peaking in the third hour – a pattern we haven't truly seen in months. What may have perhaps led to this increase was the fact that Big Show and Kane were positioned outside of the main event picture, which may have explained the dip in viewership over recent months. Additionally, the Bryan/Reigns versus Rollins/Orton main event was a fairly attractive one, especially coming off of a pay-per-view and weeks of programming strongly featuring Big Show and Kane. The first hour drew 4.082 million viewers (1.37 rating and 1,742 million viewers in the 18-49 demo), the second 4.109 million viewers (1.43 rating and 1.813 million viewers in the 18-49 demo, and the third and final hour with a 12 minute overrun drew 4.176 million viewers (1.51 rating and 1.920 million viewers).

As always, a big thanks goes to @STD_85 for his 18-49 contributions – follow him on Twitter for up-to-date 18-49 ratings data.

WWE NXT – February 25th 2015

Full Sail University: Winter Park, FL.

Ben Carass

Hideo Itami vs. Bull Dempsey – Itami over in 2:55. Match wasn't much. Dempsey got the heat right away; Itami made a comeback with his strikes then hit the flying boot for the finish. Tyler Breeze showed up and superkicked Itami on the stage then posed for a selfie. Itami recovered and chased Breeze down to the ring and landed a few kicks but Breeze managed to escape. – The next couple of weeks are going to be crucial for Itami. We'll have to see where he stands after coming out on the losing end of a feud with Tyler Breeze, however I cannot imagine that doing him any good at all and it is going to be extremely distressing for me at least to see Itami jobbed out to a mid-card heel.

They aired a video package on THE Brian Kendrick circa SmackDown 2008 and announced that Finn Balor would face him in the main event.

Lucha Dragons vs. Tye Dillinger & Jason Jordan – Dragons over in 3:45. Basic tag affair. Solomon Crowe interrupted Jordan & Dillinger's entrance with a promo about being on a mission to become NXT Champion. Dragons hit all their lucha and double team spots cleanly. Finish saw Jordan walked out on Dillinger and the Dragons got the win with the shiranui and a senton off the top. – Good showcase for the Dragons. The breakup angle was just weird.

Finn Balor was backstage with Chumpstain Greg. Balor said he wasn't thinking about Kevin Owens and was focused on taking on Brian Kendrick in the main event.

Baron Corbin vs. Tye Dillinger – Dillinger was still in the ring and he called out Jordan to explain himself. Corbin showed up instead and killed him in 0:15. – Well that break up angle did nothing for either guy. How is anyone supposed to get behind Dillinger after getting murdered like a geek? Bizarre booking.

Devin was with Charlotte in the back. Charlotte said Sasha had never beaten her one-on-one and the title would come back to where it belonged next week. Tyler Breeze cut a selfie promo on Hideo Itami and said he would squish him like a cockroach. They hyped Sami Zayn for next week's show and showed footage of him in Abu Dhabi.

Bayley vs. Becky Lynch – Lynch via submission at 4:30. Decent match, with a good finish. Becky landed her nice T-bone suplex again and got a little heat. Bayley tried a dropkick through the ring post on the floor, kind of like Sami Zayn's DDT, but it didn't look very good at all. Bayley made her comeback and went for a superplex, however Lynch shoved her off and Bayley's arm got hung up on the ropes which played into the finish. Bayley went for her belly-to-belly but Lynch countered into a Fujiwara armbar to get the tap. – Both women looked good here and I loved the psychologically sound finish. They are building to Lynch challenging Sasha Banks so it will be interesting to see who they position as the babyface in that program.

Devin was with Rhyno. Said he came to NXT because he saw the same intensity in all the superstars that he had in himself. The roving anonymous reporter caught up with Jason Jordan and asked why he turned on Dillinger. Jordan said he would explain when he was ready.

Finn Balor vs. The Brian Kendrick – Balor over in 8:12. Match was decent. Kevin Owens was on commentary, sadly it wasn't like his stints doing colour in PWG, but he was still good. Owens ended up getting into a tense disagreement with Alex Riley and he went to the back before he "did something he might regret". It was back-and-forth early. Kendrick sold like he had twisted his ankle on a flip, but it didn't play into the match at all. Kendrick hit a tornado DDT and a Tiger-suplex for a couple of near-falls. Balor countered sliced bread and hit a sling blade then the shotgun dropkick and followed up with the double stomp off the top for the finish. Kevin Owens came back out on the stage. He and Balor stared at each other then Owens went over to the announcers and threw Alex Riley over the table. Corey Graves and Tom Phillips took off their headsets to check on him and the show went off the air in silence with everyone showing concern for Riley getting tossed to his doom. – It will be interesting to see if Kendrick is kept around post-Mania in a Tyson Kidd type role, he could offer a lot as a recurring character not just for TV, but also as an experienced worker for some of the greener guys in NXT to get in the ring with. I liked the angle at the end with Owens attacking Riley, the only downside is that we're going to have to see Riley wrestle again, which is ZERO buys in my book.

We're back to the normal pacing of NXT TV after the hectic build to the TakeOver: Rival show. The show was still fun and the angles they shot were given time to breathe. No stand-out matches, but the women were good as usual and the main event was fine for what it was. Not a must-see episode, but still the best hour of WWE TV you are going to see.

WWE SmackDown – February 26th 2015.

Philips Arena: Atlanta, GA.

Ben Carass.

Well, the most popular babyface in the company is not going to be in the main event of WrestleMania; far from it in fact. It appears that **Daniel Bryan** will be at least 6th from the top at Mania, along with at least 4 other guys, in a meaningless IC championship match. To be fair, the horrendous booking of late has certainly hurt **Bryan's** popularity, however he is worth more than an 8 minute multi-man prelim match at the biggest show of the year. No doubt there will be some people optimistic of **Bryan** winning the IC title and making the belt important again. Well, all the hope in the world isn't going to change the WWE's mentality when it comes to booking the secondary champions. IT IS JUST NOT GOING TO HAPPEN. What's even more stupid is that the IC title program has been built around **Dean Ambrose** and **Bad News Barrett**, which would be a much better choice as a singles match as opposed to throwing a bunch of guys in a cluster. Anyway, **Ambrose** will probably come out of Mania with the IC title, and if you think they are going to book **Dean** any better than every IC champion of the last 15 years, you are absolutely crazy.



On that note, SmackDown was all about the mess of the IC Championship picture and getting **Daniel Bryan** into the mix, because **Vince McMahon** is a crazy old man. **Bryan** was out at the start of the show and cut a promo about the Yes movement not being dead. **Bad News Barrett** interrupted and said nobody cared about **Bryan's** sob story and told him he didn't deserve a WrestleMania moment this year. **Barrett** brought up **Dean Ambrose** stealing the IC belt and **Ambrose** showed up for a brawl with **Barrett**. **Bryan** picked up the title and stared at it; **Barrett** demanded it back but **Bryan** and **Ambrose** laid him out and **Ambrose** took the strap back. Opener was **Ambrose vs. Miz**. **Ambrose** won with his DDT at 4:40; **Barrett** showed up and took back his IC title. Later, **Barrett** and **Bryan** had a decent match. **Bryan** hit his running knee for the win at 9:15, however **R-Truth** was on commentary and did a

fantastic job of being annoying and completely ruining the match. **Truth** kept referring to **Byron Saxton** as “**Coach**” and he said he couldn’t understand **Barrett’s** accent, which is one of my pet peeves, not just in wrestling but in life. If you are so ignorant that you are incapable of training your brain to understand different variations of the English language then I’m sorry, but you are an absolute moron. I know **Truth** wasn’t serious, but **Kevin Dunn** is notorious for not liking different accents and has some bizarre, “He don’t talk ‘Murican” obsession. **Truth** also said **Bryan** looked like “a chicken on Rogaine”; he was honestly worse than the **Bellas** on commentary. Anyway, **Truth** stole the IC title from **Barrett** then in a blitheringly stupid backstage skit, he handed it over to **Dean Ambrose** again.

Main event was a rematch of the average FastLane opener, **Dolph Ziggler, Ryback & Rowan vs. Big Show, Kane & Seth Rollins**. And it was in fact average. Babyfaces got their win back in 9:25 (TV Time) when **Ryback** pinned **Seth Rollins** with the shellshock. There’s not much to say about it really, as it doesn’t affect WrestleMania at all. **Ziggler** looks like he’ll be in the IC title match, **Rollins** is presumably facing **Orton** and the other big goofballs will surely be in the Andre Battle Royal.

Byron Saxton conducted a sit-down interview with **Roman Reigns** and it was like pulling teeth. **Roman** showed zero charisma and no personality while he blindly recited his poorly scripted lines. It also had no focus whatsoever. **Reigns** talked about training harder and such then claimed he wanted to win so he could provide a better life for his family, however, sadly unlike **Kevin Owens**, he came off utterly disingenuous. I don’t know what they can do with this guy now. He’s not going to get any better on the mic in 4 weeks, so they might as well just give up on the terrible promos and just have him be the silent badass again. Either way, it isn’t going to matter at WrestleMania when the majority of the crowd surely boos him out of the building.

Down in the Doldrums: **Naomi** beat **Natalya** in 3:58. **The Usos** and **Kidd & Cesaro** were at ringside and got into it. It was fine. **Rusev & Lana** came out to cut their usual promo. **Rusev** said he would be involved in a match at WrestleMania but it would not be against **John Cena**. **Jack Swagger** interrupted and did the, “We the People” bit then proceeded to get his ass kicked by **Rusev** and **Swagger** tapped to the Accolade, despite it not being an official match. **Curtis Axel** did his #AxelMania deal and had a new gimmick of a running clock to signify how long he had been in the Royal Rumble, kind of like **Santino’s** old IC title gimmick. The clock said 32 days, but **Axel** said “32 hours”, oops, then he proceeded to be squashed in 0:38 by **Fandango**. Not that I care or am clambering to see the guy pushed or anything, but why is **Fandango** working matches against other prelim heels? Backstage, **Mizdow** was filming a commercial for a “little pill” that would “set you straight” – Comedy, everybody. **Miz** showed up and kicked him out and the director said he would love **Miz** to be in the commercial. **Goldust** squashed **Adam Rose** in 1:09. Post-match, a **Rosebud** dressed as some kind of monkey thing attacked **Goldie**. It turned out to be **Stardust** and he left **Goldust** lying with his finish. **Bray Wyatt** pre-tape on the **Undertaker**; same deal as always. **Bray** told **Taker** to come find him.

And that was the show. 4 weeks everybody, 4 weeks.

Next Week's Issue

But four weeks remain on the Road to WrestleMania, will they turn things around in time for the biggest show of the year? Plus, in celebration of Samoa Joe's return to Ring of Honor we take a retrospective look at a legendary battle that took place close to 15 years ago in Samo Joe versus Kenta Kobashi from 2005.

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