

CUBED CIRCLE NEWSLETTER



PRO-WRESTLING YEARBOOK 2015

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A year ago, inspired by the Dr. Keith Presents Annuals of 2011 and 2012, we published the inaugural Cubed Circle Yearbook, attempting to encapsulate what was a pivotal year for professional wrestling in 2014. This year we hope to do the same, albeit for a year of a decidedly different sort.

2015 was dissimilar to 2014 in many respects. It didn't see moments as grandiose as the end of the Undertaker's Streak, Daniel Bryan's WrestleMania victory, or the Guerrero-Atlantis mask match. When evaluated from afar 2015 may even appear stagnant in comparison, as did many of the world's largest and most influential promotions during the year – WWE, NJPW, and CMLL in particular. But, upon closer inspection, the seemingly motionless landscape of 2015 wasn't only very much alive, but both morose and vibrant, disheartening and emboldening.

The open wrestling fan of 2015 had more choice and freedom than perhaps ever before, with some ardent observers of the industry even abandoning Monday Night RAW for lack of faith in the lumbering weekly juggernaut. Some turned to Lucha Underground, a show that garnered considerable cult popularity. Others looked to alternative facets of the company such as NXT, which grew beyond what many considered its zenith at the end of 2014, harbouring one of the better years for American women's wrestling in decades. AAA showed promise and ambition on several fronts, but was subject to unfortunate, and at times tragic, circumstances. NJPW was as repetitive creatively as it had been under the Kidani administration, but produced one of the best nights of wrestling of the last several years in WrestleKingdom 9 – made more readily available to an American audience than ever before. And for as cautious as they were creatively, New Japan was positively adventurous on its business front, with NJPW World only strengthening an already impressive catalogue of options for the internationally inclined wrestling fan. A catalogue further enhanced by a continued boom in the realm of podcasts, news sites, commentary, and analysis produced by those in and outside of the industry alike.

All of these stories and more contributed to the broader tale of a schizophrenic year. It is in this yearbook that we hope to investigate, discuss, and celebrate 2015; a year that was at times frustrating, but was a thrilling one in the wonderful world of professional wrestling regardless – particularly for those who knew where to look.

– Ryan Clingman, Cubed Circle Newsletter Editor



FINANCIAL STATE OF WWE IN 2015 WITH CHRIS HARRINGTON

Financially speaking, the story of WWE in 2015 was how it wasn't 2014. Thank God.

Between Q4'13 and Q4'14, WWE posted five consecutive negative quarters of operating income.

Things turned around in Q1'15 for a variety of reasons. There was a first quarter WrestleMania. WWE started receiving new revenue from a bevy of domestic and international television rights agreements. WWE finally expanded the WWE Network distribution to the U.K. marketplace. In the parlance of business, 2014 was a "transition year" for World Wrestling Entertainment.

Already, WWE has posted three quarters of positive double-digit OIBDA for 2015. Final OIBDA (operating income before depreciation & amortization – a sort of "profit" calculation) for 2015 should be somewhere north of \$60 million. That's a huge improvement over 2013 and 2014 numbers.

While that may sound terrific, it's worth reminding readers that from 2007 to 2010 adjusted OIBDA bounced between \$78 million and \$94 million. WWE started investing in what would eventually become the WWE Network in 2011. Simply put, 2015 is a positive development. It is certainly not close to record WWE profits. Digging deeper, let's examine what is propelling the turn-around for WWE.

First of all, WWE is driving more revenue from their live events. This is mostly in the form of extracting more revenue per person (higher ticket prices, new travel and VIP packages) rather than actually expanding the overall number of people attending each show. However, it is worth commenting on how NXT has emerged as a notable live event highlight for 2015. The ascension of NXT as an independent event

capable of drawing large crowds when they piggy-back on major

WWE PPV event weekends are among WWE's most noteworthy achievements this year.

WWE Network paid subscriptions in 2015 are much higher than they were in 2014. It helps that WWE cut-costs in Q3'14, hastily rolled out the WWE Network internationally in August 2014 and added UK/Ireland to the mix in January 2015 (at a 50% price premium). Using WWE's numbers, they would need to achieve an average of 1.36M paid subscribers for 2016 to return to the levels of profitability that WWE had in the late 2000s under their traditional PPV model. As it stands, WWE will probably end 2015 at an average of 1.1M paid subscribers. It's a respectable number. However, the company seems to be crawling closer and closer to the artificial interest ceiling for subscribers. Breaking beyond two million paid monthly subscribers still seems like quite a reach.

WrestleMania 32 will undoubtedly attract new subscribers in 2016. The decision in November 2015 to finally add a multitude of archival territorial footage (NWA, SMW, AWA) should please many fans. Yet, it's difficult to assess the ultimate WWE Network growth potential.

Most of the accounts are still registered domestically (80% of WWE Network accounts have U.S. billing addresses) and this year has seen a wild decline with live Raw ratings. Can WWE really expect to keep growing the WWE Network when their best promotional vehicle, Monday Night Raw, is losing traction?

The surprise of 2015 has been the continued moderate

success of pay-per-view. WWE generates about the same amount of revenue from PPV that they do from segments such as Venue Merchandise or WWEShop (about \$21 million). PPV business is larger than established divisions such as Home Entertainment (DVDs/BluRays - a long-shrinking business) or Digital Media (WWE's golden calf; big social media numbers but tiny revenue now that webcast PPV aren't available). PPV is still profitable, even though the majority of the buys are through international distributors at a much lower price than historic US prices.

Television rights continue to fuel the WWE's growth. That's how it is. That's unlikely to change in the near future. The bundle of deals that WWE negotiated in 2013/2014 have built-in escalators. WWE will take home more revenue every year regardless of whether ratings grow or ratings shrink. It's a pretty sweet deal. The only hitch is when partners don't pay. That was the issue with Thailand's CTH. In that situation, WWE took the company to court to demand their \$23 million in TV fees. Extracting such a bounty from an international corporation can be a lengthy and exhausting process. While the Thai deal only represents a small portion of the overall throng of new TV deals (US, Canada, UK, UAE, Mexico, India), the precedent is unnerving.

The WWE Network was recently rolled out in India at a \$9.99 price-point. WWE didn't include any special mobile-phone support and live PPVs are blacked out for 24 hours. It doesn't appear WWE is making much effort to gain huge traction in some of these markets.

In January 2016, WWE Network will expand into Japan and Germany. Moving into Deutschland is a worthwhile venture, but it is unclear how many consumers will join the WWE Network fresh and how many customers will merely switch over existing "domestic" accounts.

There are only a handful of markets left for the WWE Network to launch. They include the Philippines (where WWE had to sue their TV partner Solar in 2013 over missed TV rights fees), Thailand (where WWE is suing TV partner CTH) and China.

One of WWE Chief Financial Officer George Barrios'

favorite narratives has been how India is the future. In 2016, I expect that tune will switch to talking about the endless possibility of China. Yet, navigating the Chinese media landscape requires precise dealings in a bureaucratic albatross. Media providers must agree to state oversight (some say outright censorship) to gain licenses and distribution.

There is a family connection. Shane McMahon left WWE to join a media company called "You on Demand". YOD touts themselves as a "leading multi-platform entertainment service company delivering premium content, including leading Hollywood movie titles, to customers across China via subscription and transactional streaming services."

It's completely fathomable that WWE will end up partnering with YOD or possibly even outright buying the company in order to pursue their dreams of achieving WWE Network distribution in China. It's a noble mission, but my assessment is that will more remain an aspirational talking point for WWE conference calls rather than an executed 2016 project.

With television negotiations locked up and television ratings slipping, WWE's motive in 2015 was to focus investors on their year-over-year WWE Network subscription growth (an easy target when you're moving around WrestleMania timing, comparing domestic-only to internationally-distributed platforms) and bragging about their Twitter followers, YouTube video views and Facebook fans.

The vague but omnipresent "monetize digital and social media presence" objective remains a company mantra.

By adding together all of the accounts for each of the WWE's superstars, the company loves to brag about their half-billion followers. Obviously, the true number of unique people with a 'WWE-affinity' (to use the company's phraseology) is certainly far lower. The underlying thesis is solid - WWE will figure out a way to turn those eyeballs into dollars. While they insist they aren't rushing the initiatives, one wonders who exactly is leading this initiative.

WWE's last Chief Digital Officer (Lou Schwartz) only lasted 5 months and left quietly in February 2015.



Vince McMahon at the WrestleMania 32 press conference, January 2015.

Before him, we had Matthew Singerman, Lisa Fox Lee and Perkins Miller. With the WWE Network still in their infant phase, that's a lot of leaders who have come and gone. What WWE needs is a steady, dedicated, knowledgeable hand leading the WWE Network initiative and separate guidance for their entire social media strategy.

The glory of the WWE business model is that they've got guaranteed revenue streams that won't dip even when interest wanes. And they have a loyal fanbase which will continue to support their large event initiatives (such as WrestleMania and SummerSlam). It's an environment where the company can afford some mistakes, and carry some unprofitable divisions (WWE Films, for instance).

However, a pat hand isn't going to satisfy investors. WWE has been talking about reaching lofty subscriber goals of three to four million monthly paid subscribers. Meanwhile, the organic limit of steady-state demand seems to be more like 1.5M worldwide. Will new international markets fuel the demand? Will over-the-top streaming culture carry the service to record levels? Will targeting initiatives and innovative programming connect with the fanbase? Questions abound.

The last major narrative of 2015 is WWE's collection of legal conundrums. The company has faced an onslaught of lawsuits from jilted investors (claiming

WWE misrepresented NBCU television rights negotiations), to past performers over concussion-related injuries, to so-called "patent trolls" over technology used by the WWE.

So far, the company has dealt with the proceeding deftly. They were able to squash the "confidential informant" in the shareholder lawsuit. They were able to consolidate the concussion-claims and wrongful death lawsuits into a single case in the friendlier state of Connecticut. The hyperbolic nature of wrestlers mixed with lawyers inexperienced with the realm of sports entertainment has left a multitude of legal holes in many of the concussion-lawsuit filings.

While these lawsuits can be time-consuming and expensive, the latest developments indicate that WWE has firmly retained the upper-hand. WWE will not allow any case precedence to be set which would invalidate their "independent-contractor" relationship with their performers. They'll settle long before things reach a courtroom. The company also does not want to be on the hook for any long-term medical liability due to wrestling-related injuries. The company will fight the concussion suits tooth and nail. And thus far, WWE has outmanoeuvred the plaintiffs.

WWE is willing to fight these cases for years. They will and they have ground the proceedings to a halt. There

are significant and far-reaching legal questions being discussed. However, as it stands, the assortment of wrestlers bringing these charges don't have the legal counsel or the substantive standing that is necessary to affect far-reaching change in the pro-wrestling world. The risk to WWE is too high for the company not to dedicate serious resources to dismissing these cases.

WWE's financial situation is strengthening. The WWE Network appears to be viable platform. While there have been some significant financial sacrifices to get to this point, WWE finally has locked down more guaranteed revenue (from TV rights contracts) than at any point in their history.

The dismal slide of live Raw ratings is alarming, but until we see the 2016 trends, it's difficult to alarm investors in the wake of a changing television landscape.

WWE's goal is to expand internationally. WWE wants to generate more and more revenue outside of North America. We've seen this strategy before with expansions in Europe and Latin America which didn't fully take. Perhaps, the situation and leadership has evolved sufficiently that we'll see a true fundamental shift.

If WWE can focus on growing the WWE Network, minimizing lawsuit burdens and monetizing their digital footprint, there is a rosy future awaiting the company.

THE 2015 YEAR IN WRESTLING

WITH BRYAN ROSE

What a weird year 2015 was. For me, personally, it was about finding more than just WWE to get into. There's always the mentality that Raw is the be all, end all of professional wrestling. It's true in North America, and sure WWE is the barometer that many promotions follow. But, if you base all of your wrestling knowledge on what you watch on Mondays, then not only are you missing out, but you're also kind of a masochist at this point.

There was plenty of wrestling to watch in 2015, ranging from WWE to TNA to Lucha Underground on TV, New Japan on iPPV, Ring of Honor on PPV, CMLL on their weekly streams, PWG on DVD and so much more. We have more wrestling now than ever before at our fingertips; it's truly amazing. In the past, whenever a big show from New Japan or NOAH dropped, we would have to wait forever before it would be uploaded to torrent sites, where we would have to wait hours just to get a Misawa title defense. But now it only takes seconds to load a main event from NOAH on Vimeo or a old Riki Choshu match from New Japan World. Incredible!

But, as we head into 2016, fewer people are watching professional wrestling in general. Mexico's numbers are inconsistent. Japan gets many people to watch wrestling, but wrestling is no longer a mainstream sport like it was twenty years ago. WWE is the only real game in town in North America, and their numbers are steady, but not excellent. It's becoming an increasingly niche product.

It also doesn't help that television companies don't view pro-wrestling like they do other live sports, which have received giant contract deals in the last few years (UFC and Fox, for example). So despite generally good ratings, televised promotions never get their fair shake on cable, despite the existence of a ton of other TV shows that garner lower ratings. It's a sad state of affairs that's only getting more prevalent as the years go on. It's becoming very obvious, despite WWE's best efforts to portray themselves as something cool, hot and hip, we've reached a record low in overall mainstream interest in pro-wrestling in 2015.

WWE is the biggest wrestling promotion in the world, so let's take a look at them first. The story of main roster WWE in 2015 was Roman Reigns and his rise to the top. Roman has been crowned as THE GUY, and no one else. And when I mean "no one", there's Roman, Cena, part timers, and nobody else. They've neutered their roster with so many nonsense finishes and 50/50 booking that frankly, no one else on the roster matters. Their goal all year was for Roman Reigns to get over at the expense of everyone else. And while making everyone look like an idiot is stupid, pushing someone new is great because now, more than ever, there is a severe lack of star power on the WWE main roster. So let's see what they did with Roman Reigns this year. This is how you make a star, according to WWE.

It all started at the Royal Rumble. Reigns won the lamest WWE Royal Rumble in who knows how long, with the crowd turning on him because the perennial underdog favorite, Daniel Bryan, was dumped with little fanfare. Keep in mind, WWE had zero idea this would happen, despite everything ever telling them otherwise, including the 2014 Royal Rumble. They had him lose to Big Show for no real reason during his build to face Brock Lesnar when he was approximately undefeated. He lost his match at WrestleMania in a fluke, the finish changing just hours before the

show because, shockingly, stuffing a guy down peoples' throats and pushing him over Daniel Bryan didn't work all that well. He feuded with Bray Wyatt for months, the only basis of the feud being Wyatt saying "anyone but you", whatever that is supposed to mean. Add the fact that he's been given some of the worst verbiage in WWE history (and boy, that's saying a lot) to say that he isn't over now would be an understatement.



Roman Reigns, upon winning the 2015 Royal Rumble.

It's not just Reigns that has been through the WWE star making system. It was a whole year of garbage booking that defined the WWE. Anyone who got over that they didn't want to was squashed into oblivion, or just not booked. Raws consisted of multiple DQ and count-out finishes. Astonishingly, finishes of this kind, and Raw being three hours long, resulted in some of the lowest Raw ratings since 1997. Smackdown continued to lose relevancy, quickly becoming an even more boring version of WCW Thunder with slightly better wrestling. I can't tell you how many crowds were killed this year by WWE's long shows and hideous main event finishes. Special events were highlighted by stupid finishes that resolved nothing feud wise and were designed to annoy people.

A big injury spell, which took out Tyson Kidd, Cesaro and Seth Rollins among others, depleted the roster big time. And it didn't help that, despite having a large talent pool both in WWE and NXT, more people were being taken off TV, to the extent that by the end of 2015 a lot of the roster were competing at least twice on Raw just to fill time. WWE's weird mentalities have been getting the better of them, and as we enter 2016 there will be more of the same. Will Roman Reigns get over? They've been booking him a bit better in recent weeks, so perhaps they finally get it. And will WWE find more band aids to supplement WrestleMania and SummerSlam? They already got The Rock, so we know that answer. But if they continue with this kind of booking mentality, where no one but Roman Reigns and the already made stars matter, then we're in for an even rougher ride in 2016.

NXT is a bright spot in North American wrestling. The reason is simple – it's a TV show that's designed to make stars, is only an hour long, and has only one head writer, thus a lot of things make sense on the show. Also, it helps that Vince McMahon's antiquated thoughts on women and anyone

who doesn't have a ripped body are not represented there. If you shine bright and get over in NXT, you'll get recognition. If you don't, you're given time to improve and retool yourself. It's a novel concept, and is a far easier show to watch than Raw, which is three hours full of long matches, plodding character development and WWE's own self-promotion.



Bayley, Sasha Banks & Triple H ahead of Takeover Respect in October.

Triple H is behind the rise of the NXT brand. It's a show he oversees – his personal project – so he's made it clear this year that NXT is to be the alternative touring brand to WWE, meaning that they run smaller arenas in direct competition with Ring of Honor and other independent promotions. It's an interesting approach that's led to a number of workers, who WWE would have never been interested in even a few years ago, suddenly making their WWE debuts on NXT. If you would have told me last year that Samoa Joe and James Storm would leave TNA to go to WWE developmental at their ages, I would have called you crazy. But here we are at the end of 2015, and Samoa Joe is a top heel on the brand, having just lost an important match to Finn Balor, NXT's top star. James Storm has done some appearances, with more being a

possibility in the new year. Lots of names are rumored for 2016. Anyone who's a free agent and has a name will get a look, and it leaves open a number of interesting and fun possibilities.

The biggest story to come out of NXT this year is the resurgence of women's wrestling, at least on that brand. Charlotte, Sasha Banks, Becky Lynch and Bayley had tremendous matches with one another, producing some of the most high profile women's matches in North America in years, probably since the days of Wendi Richter/Fabulous Moolah – just a bazillion times better in terms of workrate. Bayley won the NXT Women's championship from Sasha Banks in front of a sold-out Barclay's Center in an amazing ****½ star match, which was a highlight of the year, not just in terms of women's wrestling, but the entire North American wrestling scene.

It is truly amazing how one viewpoint of the main roster WWE is so completely different from that of NXT. Based off of their awesome reps in NXT, Sasha and Becky Lynch, along with Charlotte, were called up to the main roster during the summer. They had tremendous matches with one another in NXT, so the thought was that they could do something about the women's title scene, which had basically been an afterthought most weeks on Raw for years.

The problem with women's wrestling in WWE was never really about match quality. Sure, the women they had weren't that great, but the presentation was an issue more than anything else. It was only a few years ago that women were told not to work like the men. Now they have more leeway, but the presentation issues that have been plaguing the division for years are still apparent.

The women still turn face and heel on whims. The storylines still make absolutely no sense. Women are still being portrayed as crazy or difficult to deal with. Hell, if you watch Smackdown you usually get a line from Booker T about how secretly all women hate each other. This isn't even a line the announcers come up with their own. I was recently watching a Raw from twelve years ago with Jerry Lawler saying the same exact thing.

You get absolutely none of this on NXT TV. These women all have goals, they all have dreams and these are expressly said on NXT TV. Who could forget Bayley's essay written in junior high about one day wanting to be a wrestler? Or Becky Lynch working as a waitress, and other assorted jobs, just so one day she could make it to the WWE? These women feel like real human beings who have had realistic goals and dreams in making it to WWE, and, as a viewer, you respect the hell out of them for it. None of that happens on WWE TV. It's just the same 'ol, same 'ol.

NXT will continue to expand in 2016. That's both a great thing and a bad thing. There are plenty of name talents on NXT now – Finn Balor, Apollo Crews, Samoa Joe, Asuka and many others are probably ready to be called up right now. But what happens when they are replaced with more indy names, leaving those who have been training in The Performance Center for years to languish? That needs to be addressed in 2016. While finding new indy talent is great, how many are actually going to be called up, and which ones are going to stay in NXT for the long haul? These are all interesting questions with no real answers, so we'll have to see what they do in the next year.



EC3 vs. Rockstar Spud in one of the best TNA matches of the year - March 13th.

TNA existed. What more can I say about the promotion at this point? They got a new TV deal with Destination America, and that kept them afloat most of the year. Problem is, by May there was already talks of cancellation, and by the fall it was apparent that they wouldn't have a home come 2016. When Destination America decided to air TNA, they thought it would be great since they'd be bringing in one million viewers to their fledgling network. Now, it's true that many wrestling fans, no matter what channel it's on, will find their favorite

wrestling show. Raw's numbers stayed largely the same when they moved from USA to TNN in 2000. But simply put, Destination America was in far fewer homes, and when the show started to average only a quarter of a million at most, that was a bad sign. And the fact that no one wanted to buy TV ads during the show pretty much sealed their fate.

But hey! Now they have yet another television deal, this time with Pop Network, the former TV Guide. Pop TV is hoping for big things from their network, especially since TNA has brought in over a million viewers to Impact in the past. Wait...didn't I just say that? Well, hey, I guess TNA's best quality is the ability to pick the right people to negotiate with – finding those who are so aloof of their previous failures, that they'll give TNA a shot just because of their more successful past, regardless. Worked for Vince Russo for years, didn't it?

TNA's entering another year of uncertainty. Basically, just copy and paste what I said last year about them, or even the year before. They will have a TV taping, then the UK tour, then who knows what

else. Their roster at this point has been watered down to pay-per-appearance deals, with one or two big deals still in the balance. They've been booking far more in advance than ever before, their house show attendance (when they actually run shows) continue to dwindle and they still have that aura of death hanging around them. But hey, TNA's dealt with that for years now. They always find a way to survive. And I expect 2016 to be more of the same. I just never thought that, at this point, their biggest ratings rivals would be 'Days of Our Lives' reruns.

I won't dwell on New Japan too much here, as there will be a whole eBook out soon from Voices of Wrestling, but I will touch upon something that I go into more detail about in the book. Their year overall wasn't as great as the last couple, but still very strong. They are, very clearly, the number two promotion in the world, and they make a lot of money. They have a strong roster full of awesome workers.

But their main problem, which is becoming more apparent as the months go by, is that their booking is very stale. Tanahashi/Okada will headline the 2016 Tokyo Dome show yet again for the third time. Togi Makabe and Tomohiro Ishii had FOUR different Never title matches. KUSHIDA is challenging Kenny Omega again for the third time. Tiger Mask and Jushin Liger, after feuding over the NWA Jr. Heavyweight championship last year, just finished another feud over the NWA Jr. Heavyweight championship. It doesn't help that the booking reasons for these matches don't go much beyond "because". It creates a stale environment where the matches are great, but the interest level isn't there until the matches actually begins.

This is a solvable problem. All it really takes is bringing in new talent that gives the promotion a breath of fresh air. We've seen new guys come into New Japan this year, but they have mostly been rookies who pad out six man matches on the undercard or junior heavyweights. Aside from EVIL, who mainly serves as Tetsuya Naito's sidekick, there haven't been that many new heavyweights on the roster. It's time to change that.

Booking problems and the staleness of the roster are things to fix as New Japan enters 2016. The Okada/Tanahashi program needs to end and we need to see some fresh faces in the mix. Otherwise, we'll probably see more of the dwindling attendance, which has started to appear on recent shows. It's a problem other promotions have faced in the past. Crockett Promotions had it in the eighties, WCW had it in the 90s and you can argue WWE had it in 2015. If New Japan bucks the trend and brings in new people that connect with the crowd, they should have no problem having a successful 2016.

ROH continues to solidify itself as the number two promotion in North America. They aren't going to go any higher than they are now, but it's a safe place for them and they don't seem to have any real financial problems. They spent the year pushing established acts such as the Kingdom, Adam Cole, reDragon and Jay Lethal, while also promoting relatively new talents like Moose, War Machine and ACH. It helped that PPVs were added back to the fold last year as more people were able to watch their product.

There's a lot of roster turn around heading into 2016. Michael Bennett and Maria are officially gone, and Matt Taven's contract is up in a few months. Jay Lethal has many options in front of him. The status of AJ Styles is currently unknown, and so is reDragon's, as they are currently in negotiations. With their New Japan deal and their syndication package, Ring of Honor is as strong as they're going to get heading into the new year. They do a good job of pushing younger guys and getting them over, so it'll be interesting to see who rises to the top with the current roster shuffle.

I did not watch a ton of CMLL this year. I occasionally watch the YouTube streams, which airs on Mondays and Fridays. The big match I watched was on the 82nd anniversary show, where La Sombra faced Atlantis in a mask vs mask match. It was weird, as it appeared to be a pretty rushed feud that didn't have enough build, unlike the previous main event of last year's anniversary show where Ultimo Guerrero lost his mask. While the booking didn't make sense, the match was awesome, demonstrating completely why La Sombra is one of the best workers in Mexico in terms of telling a story, selling, and creating an air of drama.

He lost that match, for reasons that soon became apparent – he was signed to a WWE developmental deal a few months later. It's a big blow to CMLL, who responded by bringing back their former top draw Mistico, now named Caristico (combination of Sin Cara and Mistico) since there is already a Mistico whose drawn a fraction of what the former one did. The old Mistico hasn't brought numbers up much either, but it's interesting to see him back in the fold considering CMLL almost never forgives guys who leave on bad terms. CMLL's storylines sometimes feels rushed and don't make a lot of sense, but there are plenty of talented guys to watch in the ring, and with all the streaming options available to people as well as iPPV, many of us outside of Mexico now have the opportunity to watch their programming consistently.



Rey Misterio, victorious over Myzteziz at the ill-fated TripleMania.

I felt really bad for AAA this year. At the start, they had three top guys in the promotion with Alberto el Patron, the returning Rey Mysterio and Mysteziz. They also had a great top foil with Perro Aguayo Jr., and it seemed a lot of 2015 would be built around having those guys, along with other assorted rudos in the Perros de Mal group. Add Lucha Underground stars coming in and the rise of iPPV, plus the fact that they got a US PPV deal for Triplemania, it seemed like everything was going great for them.

But things happened, and none of them were for the better. In a freak accident, Perro died in the ring from heart failure due to a cervical stroke. Although a minuscule consequence compared to the death of someone who everyone loved in the lucha libre community, AAA had to change their course as a result. But they didn't even get a chance to do so, as by the end of the year, both Alberto del Rio and Myzteziz were gone from the promotion. It didn't help that TripleMania, their biggest show of the year, had some of the worst production in televised pro-wrestling history. If the stream

wasn't a complete mess, the audio was, leading to several instances where commentators Matt Striker and Hugo Savinovich (when their audio was actually on the air) appearing lost. Add in the fact that matches ranged from okay (main event of Mysterio and Rey Mysterio) to downright terrible (Villanos vs. Psycho Clowns), the show was so bad the chances of AAA being on US PPV anytime soon seem very implausible.

So while the start of the year looked promising for AAA, the end of the year leaves many questions. Rey Mysterio stands as the last real big star they have, and with his injuries (as well as a future spot on Lucha Underground) he's questionable at best. AAA will probably spend 2016 recouping from everything that went on in 2015, and hopefully find a way to rebuild themselves.

Speaking of Lucha Underground, the rest of the season aired through early summer, leaving many critics impressed with the show in general. LU doesn't aim to be another WWE, like what TNA has done for years, but rather present itself as television show with wrestling, but also with an overarching story. The end of the season left many questions. Who is Dario's brother Metanza? Who is Marty the Moth's sister? What will happen to Mil Muertes now that he is champion, and where does that leave Prince Puma? The action on the show is great, but there are also many mysteries in the storylines which will be played out, as the second season is due to air in late January.

The future of the promotion is unclear. It was months before we heard that season two was officially a go, and there's no word if there will be a third. While the El Rey network is behind the show, the costs involved are high, and without another partner like Univision or other big name Spanish stations, the costs involved may make investing in another season less cost-effective considering that ratings aren't that high. If they continue what they've done in the first season, creatively Lucha Underground will continue to be an intriguing show. But its future, much like the fates of some of their own stars, are in question.

That's a big look at the promotions in 2015. There are others (PWG is becoming a really big cult like deal, for example) but these are all the major promotions in the world that I can cover to the best of my ability. The theme of 2015 is that more than ever, you have options to watch whatever kind of wrestling you want. Ten years ago, iPPVs were in their infancy and were pretty much confined to the United States. But as more people get the internet worldwide, the more options everyone gets. If WWE, TNA and maybe even ROH aren't your cup of tea, they don't need to be. Fewer people than ever before are watching wrestling, but that doesn't mean the options for those who still do are limited. They're greater than ever before.

2015 PODCAST YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH JOE GAGNE

“**A** podcast is a form of digital media that consists of an episodic series of audio, video, digital radio, PDF, or ePub files subscribed to and downloaded through web syndication or streamed online to a computer or mobile device. The word is a portmanteau of ‘(i)Pod’ and ‘broadcast.’” – Wikipedia’s entry on Podcasts

When podcasts began to gain steam as a viable entertainment format, wrestling was at the forefront. And that only makes sense – if you were a fan of say, professional football, you had many outlets to hear discussions on the matter, like your local sports radio. But you never had anything like that for professional wrestling. Hearing lengthy discussion on wrestling news and interviews had a novelty that didn’t extend to other subject matter. And while it was once the domain of wrestling reports and diehard fans, the concept has exploded in popularity. Not only does everyone seem to have a podcast, *wrestlers* have podcasts now.

I write a weekly column for Voices of Wrestling covering all the big-name free weekly Podcasts, so basically the Podcast One shows, MLW, Ric Flair, and Art of Wrestling. I grade those shows based on thumbs up, down, or in the middle, and also award the best of the week. My good friend The Cubs Fan went back and added up all the stats

2015 Best of The Week Standings

1. Talk is Jericho (21)
2. WOOOOO! Nation (7)
3. None (5)
4. Art of Wrestling (4)
4. Human Podcast Machine (4)
6. Austin Unleashed (3)
7. MLW Radio (1)
7. Talk n' Shop (1)
7. The Jim Cornette Experience (1)

Also, if

thumbs up equals +1
thumbs in the middle equals 0
thumbs down equals -1

64 Talk is Jericho*
34 Art of Wrestling
33 Bauer & Pollock
32 Talk n' Shop
26 MLW Radio
21 WOOOOO! Nation
19 Human Podcast Machine
14 The Ross Report
12 MSL & Sullivan
5 Steve Austin Show*
4 Austin Unleashed
-3 Piper's Pit
-5 The Jim Cornette Experience
-8 Goldberg

* - includes the WWE Network episodes.

The numbers are a bit skewed, as I missed a few weeks of columns due to vacations and the like. Flair’s podcast only started in May, Jericho does two shows a week, Bauer and Pollock had a lengthy hiatus, and Taz stopped being a part of the column as it switched to a daily format. That said, this is a fair representation of the current landscape. So Jericho’s podcast is clearly #1, right? Well, actually...

The year’s best podcast is also the unlikeliest

I was not excited by the idea of a Ric Flair podcast – the whole idea just seemed like a train wreck waiting to happen. But Flair has proven to have a pretty amazing memory about wrestling and isn’t afraid to tell any story or bury any wrestler. Add in his pal Conrad to keep things on track and an amazing guest list (Kurt Angle, Bret Hart, Mick Foley, Ricky Steamboat, Terry Funk, Hulk Hogan, and many more) and you have 2015’s best listen.

The best podcast episode of the year had Lance Storm on it

Chris Jericho had a match at Madison Square Garden against Kevin Owens to celebrate a quarter century in the business. The match itself was decent but forgettable, but the ensuing podcast (#184) was amazing. Jericho sat down with old friends Lance Storm, Don Callis, and Lenny “Dr. Luther” St. Claire, to discuss their early days in the industry for 2 hours. Everyone has such a blast discussing the good old days even Lance Storm couldn't stop laughing.

Podcasts made headlines this year

And I don't mean guests making newsworthy statements (like Buff Bagwell claiming on Steve Austin's show that Jim Ross ruined his career, which prompted a response from JR). The “backstage” machinations of podcasts became news fodder. Colt Cabana and CM Punk were sued for comments made on the Art of Wrestling. Steve Austin had Roddy Piper fired from Podcast One for a show where Will Sasso imitated Austin. Konnan had Mister St. Laurent briefly removed from the MLW Podcast network in a very public fashion. Jim Cornette's recent comments about Islam created a firestorm for MLW and caused his co-host, Alice Radley, to quit.

We are getting amazing insight into the backstage of the WWE

With the likes of Chris Jericho and Steve Austin regularly interviewing current WWE superstars, we're getting a peek behind the curtain into the creative process of the WWE. And it's not even salacious stories, but little tidbits like the fact New Day was offered the name “Fresh Coat of Paint” or that Vince McMahon once yelled at Luke Harper for not sounding “Southern” enough. These are stories that would not break in any other way, yet paint a vivid picture of life in the WWE.

The expansion of wrestler podcasts looks to be slowing down

While 17 fan podcasts have launched since you started reading this article, big time podcasts look to be receding. The Podcast One network started this year with a Big Five of Steve Austin, Chris Jericho, Jim

Ross, Roddy Piper, and Bill Goldberg. Goldberg no longer does shows for site, and Piper left under very public circumstances. Neither was replaced. CBS had gotten into the podcast game with Taz's Human Podcast machine in late 2014, but the only other show they added was Ric Flair's (they did add shows with Mike Tenay and Josh Matthews, but those shows were about gambling and men's fashion, respectively).

Fans rule

Without a doubt, the best stuff I listened to was produced by fans. Sure, the Chris Jericho interviews with current WWE stars were great, but nothing was as engaging as a Between the Sheets, or Voices of Wrestling, or Exile on Badstreet.

The great thing about podcasts is anyone can do them. If you have a computer, spring for a mic, and download some programs, you can offer a product on the same platform as Steve Austin or Jim Ross. Some fans grumble that there are too many shows, but that's silly to me. The more podcasts there are the better chance something great will emerge. And a lot of the best stuff came from fans.

What does the future hold?

Steve dedicated a couple of shows to doing audio commentary over some of his more famous matches. It was a fascinating use of the medium that he sadly hasn't revisited. Given the intense competition for an audience, will we see other podcasts try new things? Will live shows become more prevalent? Will wrestlers try more off topic guests like Chris Jericho? Podcasts are the ultimate meritocracy, and if you're not good, people have plenty of other alternatives, and it will be interesting to see what the future has in store for the format.

And if any of it is no good...I'll let you know.

STOP WATCHING RAW LIVE ALREADY: ON HOW BEING A “WRESTLING FAN” DOESN'T NECESSARILY ALIGN WITH “WRESTLING FANDOM” BY DARYL SURAT

I tend to wonder how many people are fans of “media” versus “brands.” When WCW died, the majority of fans loyal to that brand simply gave up watching wrestling entirely rather than finding an alternative. “Their wrestling” was simply gone, no matter how much TNA carried on WCW’s questionable legacy. And so we must ask the question, as awful and “elitist gatekeeper”-y though it may be: “were all of those people truly fans of ‘professional wrestling’ or did they just love ‘WCW’?” Surely if they loved WCW or its predecessors for the core components that made them excel—the roster, presentation, in-ring product etc—they could have found more where that came from. But they vanished altogether instead. That’s brand loyalty for you.

In the 15 years since WCW ceased to be as an active wrestling promotion, it has become abundantly clear that when it comes to professional wrestling, especially among native English speaking fans, the only major brand is WWE. Concurrently, several new technologies have come into existence that fundamentally altered how audiences interact with media as well as one another. Home high-speed Internet, search engines, user-maintained databases and encyclopedias, high-quality streaming video, social media: none of this existed during the Monday Night Wars. However, these are now the mechanisms by which “fandom” persists. The result is that brand loyalists may now self selectively convene together and form their own communities. In short, “brands” now drive “fandom.”

You don’t hear the term “fandom” used often regarding professional wrestling. Personally, I hate the similarly-intended phrase “the Internet Wrestling Community,” or “the IWC” for short. For it lacks precision: it suggests the existence of a mono-culture as it pertains to online professional wrestling fans, with the added implication that they’re merely a vocal minority compared to “the

real fans.” In 2015 this is absurd; the Internet is our primary medium of fan communication. You may want to just summarily write off users of that phrase as it pertains to having any sort of valid insight relating to contemporary modern wrestling fans, as defined by the advent of the technologies listed above more than any single personal preference. Or, you may want to give them the benefit of the doubt. For there is a difference between “being a fan of media” and “being involved in the ‘fandom’ of that media.” The former requires “active” consumption: the act of not just watching media, but thinking about it and supporting it financially when possible. The latter is more a matter of community involvement and voluntary adoption of sub-culture, generally by way of memetic catchphrases, images, and/or videos. “Being a fan” may overlap with “fandom,” but it is not synonymous. So while there is no single “IWC,” there are large amounts of fans who follow professional wrestling who don’t know the speciality jargon native to the various online wrestling fandom communities such as the Something Awful forums’ Punchsport Pagoda/Rowdy Ringsports sub-section of its Sports Argument Stadium, the r/SquaredCircle sub-Reddit, the anonymous image board /wooo/, Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, or the message boards of Death Valley Driver Video Review, Figure Four Weekly Online, Voices of Wrestling, etc. I am one such person.

In the English-language world, whatever WWE broadcasts live is what drives the overwhelming majority of wrestling discussion on message boards, news publications, blogs, vlogs, podcasts, and other social media to such a degree that “WWE” is effectively synonymous with “professional wrestling,” even to those fans that are keenly aware of the existence of other promotions, such as readers of this publication. The result is that fans realize that if they don’t like WWE, they generally decide there’s no sense

in sticking around for any sort of wrestling at all; when WWE is popular, traffic and subscriptions to wrestling sites/publications increases, and when WWE is in the doldrums those outlets suffer. We as a collective unit are fans of “WWE” first, and “professional wrestling” second...for those of us that even HAVE a second.

For any entertainment medium, there now exists far more content than any of us can ever consume in our lifetimes. Yet as our free time remains finite, WWE live programming continues to increase. With Raw running roughly 3 hours and 15 minutes every week, plus all the don't-call-them-PPVs as well as major NXT shows, you may be watching 8-10+ hours of live WWE programming in a single week. (I'll ignore the taped programming such as Smackdown or Main Event, since most everyone else does.) Chances are good that you have multiple interests besides professional wrestling, such that in the event you even care about non-WWE promotions, your remaining “time willing to spend watching pro wrestling” is just enough to watch maybe one or two other feds. You're likely to gravitate towards promotions with “buzz”: New Japan, Ring of Honor, perhaps Lucha Underground and Pro Wrestling Guerrilla. There's all kinds of stuff going on in Japan, Mexico, the independents, and Europe to look into, but aside from the intrepid year in review authors in this publication, most everyone decides “I just don't have time for those.” WWE, after all, has priority.

What I find interesting is that for a great many fans, particularly those inclined to read publications such as this, a widely-held consensus is that much of that massive amount of live WWE programming simply isn't very good now that they have no true competition. WWE Raw alone won the 2014 Wrestling Observer Newsletter award vote for “Worst Television Show,” a feat it had previously accomplished four additional times since 2001, when WCW folded. Within that same 15-year time frame, all of the Worst Feud of the Year winners, two thirds of the Worst Matches of the Year, roughly half of the Worst Gimmicks, 12 of the 15 Worst Announcer Awards (placing second the remaining 3 times), and every single Most Disgusting Promotional Tactic award aside from TNA signing Pacman Jones were given to WWE. There's good stuff to be had in WWE, but there's a vast amount of bad to go with it. And yet, despite the massive quality ratio imbalance we continue to watch, albeit in ever-declining numbers, because “we are fans of professional wrestling.”

But is that actually the truth? From my perspective as a self-identified “professional wrestling fan,” the logical action seems apparent: “just watch the good parts of Raw and don't watch the bad parts.” In other words, don't watch Raw live. Why not simply fast forward past all the segments you KNOW will be bad, and just watch the good bits? It's what I do, and on average I have found there is roughly 20-40 minutes maximum worth of decent content in your average 195 minute installment of WWE Raw. As it turns out, very few fans follow my practice despite readily admitting how often Raw is subpar. For there's a fatal “problem” in this approach which prevents it from catching on as widespread, and that is this: nobody will see you doing so, and you'll exist outside of the online wrestling zeitgeist.

Remember how I said technology now enables brands to drive fandom? If you watch WWE programming live, ask yourself the following questions: do you chat in real-time with others online who are also doing so? Do you live-tweet with a hashtag or post your real-time reactions to a chat room or message board? Do you check out scene-by-scene recap coverage of the shows within a week of broadcast, if not 24 hours? Do you relish doing so when what's being presented is bad? Do you create images or audio expressing your feelings on what you've seen or wish to see, and/or seek out the output of others who do? If all of that were taken away such that you had to just watch the show on its own without anybody or anything else, would you still be as interested?

If you answered “yes” to most of the above and “no/unsure” to the last, then maybe what you truly love isn't WWE or Raw at all. Perhaps your true devotion is to the communal fandom that emerges from sharing an experience for the first time—be it good or ill—with a greater whole. Maybe it's not enough to just merely “see.” Maybe what you also want is “to be seen,” and that can't happen if you forego the live reaction environment. Maybe what allows you to allot time to watch other promotions such as New Japan is the comfort in knowing that you can still “be seen”: that enough of a critical mass of others exists in your language to watch and react alongside you as it broadcasts live to the world. Such is “fandom”: the desire to react to a common stimuli.

Then again, maybe it's just what you deem most easily accessible. You can turn on a channel or head to a streaming site that's in English to see first-run WWE programming, after all. Still, the operation you're performing—turning on the TV/PC, selecting a channel/website, perhaps typing what you want into a search box—is basically the same. To that end, it's never been easier than now to instantaneously access so much great wrestling from the past and around the world with equal or greater ease than current WWE programming. You may just need to check a different channel or website. So why not do so? You know nothing of importance will happen during the first 30 minutes of Raw that won't be replayed. That's enough time to watch an entire match from somewhere else that you otherwise wouldn't have time for.

Think about it. What if you stopped watching Raw live, instead watching just the good parts which you could identify from either reading the results prior or skipping ahead until you saw something you cared about on screen, and then used the approximately 2 hours you've freed up to watch notable matches from the less talked about promotions like Dragon Gate, AAA, EVOLVE, DDT, and so on? Or delved into the bygone glory days of feds you always heard were great but never had free time/access? These days, the great matches of formerly tough to find stuff like 80s-90s joshi from AJW, JWP, and LLPW are on Youtube. With similar ease you could be watching UWFi, NWA classics, vintage shows on New Japan World, Mid-South, Memphis, the AWA, and then some. You could limit yourself to just MOTYCs (as others long decided on in the past) and have endless variety of great wrestling to choose from, AND you'd be caught up on the major WWE developments to boot!

Still...nobody will see you. You'll have fewer people to talk to about this other stuff you're watching. Your Match of the Year Candidates may not be things most other voters will have heard of. And wrestling won't be something you can just have on in the background as you do other things, because you may actually miss important developments. But are you a fan of "wrestling," or a fan of "wrestling fandom," with the understanding that more or less means "WWE" for English speakers? I won't condemn fandom, but I will say this: at some point it expends significantly less energy to just watch something that's good now rather than spend a great deal of time clamoring for a resurgence of the brand you're loyal to. At some point

all the time spent complaining about John Cena or Nikki Bella or Roman Reigns or whomever isn't worth any emotional fulfillment gained from writing "RAPADOO" in Impact font on a picture or splicing in some wacky morning radio show bit into a Vine video with the gain set to maximum. Now that there's so much first-run WWE programming every week, and with so much of it not being very good, you are at increased likelihood to burn out on wrestling entirely in favor of something else the more you see your favorites being underutilized, no matter how swept up in the moment you get on Monday nights.

Though it's been relatively lonesome, my decision to walk away from the "gameday" mania that dominates our English-speaking pro wrestling fandom has saved me from that fate. And, as it turns out, having just a few people willing to watch and discuss whatever stuff I'm watching meets the same "fandom" experience as having hundreds or thousands do so. Try it.

DETRIMENTAL DEVELOPMENTAL?

BY BEN GARASS

For the 2014 yearbook, I discussed the chances of the top NXT talent making it to the main roster and how they would almost certainly have to overcome terrible booking to have a chance of getting over. Let's have a quick update on some of the names from this time last year who I heralded as potential main roster material: Finn Balor – still in developmental. Sami Zayn – still in developmental, although he may have had a shot if he didn't injure his shoulder. Charlotte & Sasha Banks – marginalised immediately as part of the cataclysmic “Diva's Revolution.” Bayley – still in developmental. Kevin Owens – had a shot at becoming a top monster heel when he beat John Cena in his first WWE match, but subsequently lost the feud with Cena 1-2 and is currently toiling in the mid-card. Tyler Breeze – brought up with no direction whatsoever, jobbed in his first match on RAW and lost Summer Rae from his act after two months. Neville – he's got big ears and a funny accent. As expected, the incendiary WWE creative process, with its labyrinth of one-way streets, dead-ends and sketchy alleyways where you might end up with a knife in your back, couldn't help but contaminate the pool of fresh, new NXT call-ups, all of whom have failed to reach their full potential as of yet. In this day and age, pretty much no one is beyond hope, unless you are Adam Rose or Heath Slater, and everyone can be rehabbed to some extent, even Neville and Breeze. Still, it is clear that nothing is going to change with the way NXT talent is booked on RAW so there is little point in another article about how if only they use Finn Balor and Bayley correctly they could be top stars on the main roster instantly.

Instead, let's debate whether NXT is an entirely separate company from WWE. It's not. There, that was easy.

One thing that is rarely talked about however, is the effect of top independent stars being signed to WWE developmental contracts. The indie wrestling scene has no doubt undergone a big resurgence in the last couple of years. PWG has become one of the hottest tickets in all of North America and their shows are almost always stacked with great action. Evolve and Shine have kept WWNLive afloat and, along with FIP, provided enhancement talent for NXT TV tapings. WWE and Gabe Sapolsky even embarked on a tentative relationship which saw Johnny Gargano and Tommaso Ciampa become semi-regular NXT performers under their indie names and Sami Zayn make an appearance at an Evolve iPPV. ROH, despite parting company with the hillbillies at Destination America, have a promising relationship with New Japan and, provided they don't get bogged down with contract disputes or lose too many of their top stars, should remain a strong challenger to those bumpkins in Nashville for the claim of “number two” in the US. It's not just the mainstream indies that have benefited from this micro-boom though, as AIW and Beyond Wrestling have garnered some notoriety by putting on great shows and established loyal fan-bases. Even on the other side of the Atlantic, the once baron European scene has erupted with Progress, Rev Pro and ICW leading the charge for the UK and WXW flying the flag for Germany. So with no shortage of places to work, what effect does the WWE cherry-picking the best indie workers have on the independent scene overall?

When a new class of recruits at the WWE Performance Centre is announced, hidden among all the body-builders, fitness models, football players, amateur wrestlers and no-hopers, there are usually a couple of names that are very familiar to those who follow independent wrestling. In 2015, Sesugh Uhah (Uhaa Nation/Apollo Crews), Christopher Girard (Biff Busick) and Richard Swann were all

given developmental contracts and the indie wrestling scene lost three well-known, talented, guys, each with vastly different styles. Obviously independent wrestling isn't going to collapse because WWE signed three mid-card guys from PWG, Evolve or Dragon Gate, but even so there are still three less experienced voices to help guide the younger wrestlers on the circuit. It's not even necessarily about the in-ring side of things, as there are aspects of performing that you can't really learn during seminars or at wrestling school.



John Cena and Kevin Owens face-off during their early 2015 programme.

Let's say you are an aspiring, young wrestler who is still wet behind the ears and greener than Sean Morley's fingers after a day dishing out medicine at his Kaptain Kannabis store. You could listen to all the retired ex-pros tell stories for hours about "this is how we did things in my day, kid" and maybe that information will stick in your brain, or maybe it will get lost amidst the other ten thousand pieces of advice, most of which will no doubt be contradictory, from other old-timers you have encountered along the way. But listen to any professional wrestler talk about how they became at least somewhat competent and virtually all of them will say that they became a better performer by working guys who were more experienced than them. For instance, Uhaa may have been able to tell you about working in front of 7,000 people at Bodymaker Colosseum in Osaka and maybe there were a couple of spots that got over really well, which you could then recreate in your match with him to try and understand what about the spots worked, or didn't work. Perhaps Biff could have passed on some knowledge he picked up while training with Lance Storm about how to perform for a bigger crowd, or the nuances in working a match for television, which again you could try and pick up through osmosis in a match with Busick. Hell, maybe Rich Swann could even teach you how to sing like Lionel Richie and when it is appropriate for a well-timed dance-off in the middle of your match. Even with those three particular guys taken out of the independent picture there are still plenty of experienced workers on the scene to help guide and nurture young talent. But what will become of the indie scene if the WWE keeps poaching the cream of the crop? Won't the overall standard of workers slowly be eroded until we are left with the blind leading the blind?

Over the last couple of years the WWE's impression of the top indie stars has completely transformed – from viewing them as a bunch of small guys who couldn't work or draw money, to

highly sought after assets who, with a little “polishing,” could become part of the WWE machine. If you think the narrative won't be spun so Triple H and NXT come off as the cause for Finn Balor, Kevin Owens, or Sami Zayn finding that “missing piece” to take them to the next level then I don't know what to tell you. Within the space of three months Hideo Itami, Balor and Owens all debuted on NXT television towards the end of 2014. Sami Zayn and Adrian Neville were already established main-eventers in NXT and it was abundantly clear that the five of them were light years ahead of WWE's in-house prospects like Bo Dallas and Baron Corbin. Sure, signing top international stars and the cream of the US indies makes Triple H look like he has a great eye for talent and gives Trips the chance to bask in the adulation of the internet as a “visionary,” which a decade ago would have been unthinkable. But in addition to creating some internet buzz and stacking the NXT roster with guys who are pretty much main roster ready from the moment they signed, bringing in experienced workers who have been around for over ten years to work with the less experienced guys under a developmental deal is a canny move on WWE's part. Look no further than Samoa Joe, who has worked all over the place for fifteen years and at one time was one of the hottest independent stars in the US during his paradigmatic ROH world title reign a decade ago. Joe, who WWE passed on in 2004 after Mick Foley recommended him and CM Punk as guys WWE should take a look at, has had a career renaissance since making his NXT debut in May 2015. Unlike Balor, Owens and Zayn, however, the goal of the Joe deal appears not to be get him ready for the WWE main roster.



Finn Balor vs. Kevin Owens from NXT Takeover: Brooklyn.

Instead, Joe's role in NXT is to provide some drawing power for the NXT house shows and to work with a guy like Baron Corbin, who WWE have nailed their colours to, for some on the job training. If WWE spent \$2.3 million on the Performance Centre and NXT is being run on a budget because it is a money loser, why would they offer Joe a full-time contract, presumably for more money than he would make elsewhere, if the intention is for him never to make it to the main roster? WWE didn't have to bring in Samoa Joe and work out an unprecedented deal for him to still work his remaining indie dates before starting in Florida full-time. It is certainly no coincidence that WWE brought Joe in around the same time that ROH announced their ill-fated deal with Destination America and they could have brought in somebody in on a smaller deal for far less hassle. However, when it comes to star power on the NXT house shows and taking the developmental talent to finishing school in a

live setting, there was arguably nobody better suited to the role than Samoa Joe. Having an experienced veteran like Joe to work with is great for the young guys under a WWE developmental contract, but what about the guys on the indies? Are they really going to get the same level of invaluable experience if WWE keeps poaching the top workers from the scene?

There is always going to be a turnover of talent that doesn't make it out of developmental and while



Triple H posing with a newly signed Manuel Alfonso Andrade Oropeza, the former La Sombra.

it is certainly disappointing for the guys and girls who don't make it, going back to the independents having learned what the WWE are looking for in their performers is certainly more of a positive than a negative. Chris Hero for example, with the possible exception of Seth Rollins, was as close to being main roster ready as anybody during the early days of NXT back in 2012; the only thing Hero lacked was the WWE physique. Already a walking encyclopaedia on pro wrestling and a crisp performer, proficient in virtually every style of professional grappling known to mankind, Hero returned to the indies in 2013 armed with everything he had learned from his time in the Performance Centre as yet another weapon in his arsenal. Even for the more established indie guys who have built a name for themselves, like Johnny Gargano, Tommaso Ciampa and Biff Busick, all of whom are currently under

contract or on a per-date basis with NXT, working with someone of Hero's experience assuredly served them in good stead. It is only logical to assume that Hero told one of, or all three, guys what to expect during their NXT try-outs and offered them some advice on what to do and what to avoid doing at all costs. Additionally, for promising up and coming names like Mike Bailey, Tommy End or Timothy Thatcher, getting in the ring with Chris Hero not only led to some great matches in 2015, but undoubtedly each man also learned something new/different to help them become a better all-round performer.

Though he was never part of NXT, the same can be said for Matt Sydal, who has looked better than ever after leaving WWE and going back to work the indies and Japan. This past summer I witnessed first hand the benefit of a world-travelled sixteen year veteran working with a hot young prospect, when Sydal and Will Ospreay tore the house down at Revolution Pro's Summer Sizzler on June 14th in a fantastic two-out-of-three falls match. Ospreay, 22, has only been in the business a little over three years, but is already one of the top talents on the UK scene and that night inside the York Hall Sydal took Ospreay to school, as the two men put on one of the top five matches I have ever witnessed live. Four months later, Ospreay was involved in possibly the best three-way match I have seen in person when he main evented Rev Pro's "Uprising" show against ten-year British pro, Marty Scurll, and arguably one of the best performers in the world over the last couple of years, AJ Styles. Just twenty four hours later at the Rev Pro/New Japan "War of the Worlds" show, Ospreay once again was involved in the match of the night when he faced the reigning IWGP Heavyweight Champion, Kazuchika Okada.

Likewise, Big Damo O'Connor, a ten year journeyman of the UK scene, had an outstanding 2015 and encountered a big step up in terms of the quality of his opponents. Other than a handful of

matches against UK legends and veterans, such as, Doug Williams, Jackie Polo and Johnny Kidd, for the majority of Damo's career he had mostly worked with guys on the British scene with the same, or less, experience as himself. After working Chris Hero and Drew Galloway twice in a two week period at the end of 2014, Damo headed into 2015 with more exposure than at any point during his decade in the business. The promoters certainly took notice, as he was booked in some seriously big-time matches against some of the very best workers in the entire world. On June 14th for Rev Pro he faced Tomohiro Ishii in a great match. August 8th saw Damo take on Samoa Joe at PWE's fourth anniversary show. Then, during the Rev Pro/New Japan double-header weekend in October, Damo had excellent matches with Shinsuke Nakamura and Hiroshi Tanahashi on consecutive nights. For a guy on the UK indie circuit, who nobody other than the real hardcore British wrestling fans had heard of a couple of years ago, the chance to work with world-class performers such as this is really quite rare, however with the expansion of the independent wrestling scene as a whole there will likely be more opportunities in 2016 for indie guys to gain experience and exposure by working with some of the best in the world.

Regrettably, or thankfully – depending on your personal preferences, it is not 1984 any more and there aren't 20 NWA territories or an AWA for the WWE to raid. There is however, an independent wrestling scene which is stronger than it has been in at least ten years with an abundance of talented performers, a lot of whom the WWE have already snapped up. If the trend continues and WWE go after more of the top unsigned stars then obviously it will effect the indie scene not only in terms of losing valuable experienced in-ring workers who can nurture the younger generation, but it will also surely hurt the business side of things too. ROH contracts aside, what would happen if WWE made a serious play for Jay Lethal, Michael Elgin, Adam Cole, Roderick Strong and the Young Bucks?

Interest in the ROH product would likely go down and as a result, so would attendance, TV ratings, iPPV sales and any other measurable business metric. Similarly, PWG would have a hard time packing out the American Legion Post #308 and attracting celebrity fans, no matter how hot their product is, without the top independent stars from around the world. If a theoretical mass exodus of the top indie stars were to ever happen, the future of the independent scene would be left in the hands of the younger generation of wrestlers, who as we have discussed may or may not have enough experience to be charged with such a task. In all likelihood such a scenario is highly improbable, but even if the next list of WWE Performance Centre recruits is stacked with the best indie talent from around the world, the chances of all of them making it WWE full-time are infinitesimally small and a good percentage of them would end up back on the independent circuit within twelve to eighteen months anyway. Not because the major indie stars aren't talented enough to make it out of NXT, but, as we have seen an



Sami Zayn, shortly after his shoulder injury in early 2015.

incalculable number of times, the WWE is all-but guaranteed to make poor choices and terrible booking decisions which makes it possible for even the most gifted performers to fall through the cracks.

History tells us that a mass exodus or talent raids rarely ever work out well for the company on the wrong end of the deal. But by its very nature independent wrestling simply cannot be killed off like the territories were by the start of the 90's. All the established indie feds could be wiped off the face of the Earth with one scribble of the McMahon chequebook and all it would take is a foolhardy aspiring promoter to run a spot show in a town hall or high school gym somewhere and independent

wrestling would still, barely, be alive. Even if all the experienced US indie workers are poached by WWE, there are still plenty of options for young wrestlers to learn their trade elsewhere: Mexico, Japan, the UK and Germany, are all currently viable places for guys to become skilled in different forms of professional wrestling. So maybe it isn't the independent scene we need to be worried about. Perhaps there is a company who has experienced considerable growth over the last five years or-so, a company who WWE have finally taken notice of and decided to go after talent-wise.



Samoa Joe starring Kevin Owens down in the 'Takeover: Unstoppable' main event post-match in May.

Just five days into 2016 and what will surely be some of the biggest news of the entire year broke when it was leaked that AJ Styles, Karl Anderson, Doc Gallows and, unbelievably, Shinsuke Nakamura, all gave their notice to New Japan with the intention of heading to WWE in the very near future. At this stage it is unclear how everything will play out, however if the WWE has decided to aggressively go after New Japan, who had a relatively successful US PPV and TV show on AXS in 2015, then the future of everybody's favourite wrestling company, and the real “number two,” could be in the balance. This isn't like Muta taking Kojima and Kashin to All Japan in 2002, as even if New Japan does lose some of its top stars, the chances of Gedo going insane and utilising the Inoki-ism school of booking is highly unlikely to say the least. Still, New Japan were already set for a tough year with the phasing out of the Tanahashi era pretty much complete and one of their potential future main eventers, Kota Ibushi, out with a neck injury. Losing three possible challengers for Okada, and Doc Gallows, is certainly going to sting, but Nakamura going to WWE would undoubtedly hurt New Japan the most.

Wrestling territories have always experienced ups, and downs and regardless of independent and international stars being poached by WWE, the mini-boom of the indies and New Japan's hot run cannot, and will not last forever. It is down to the bookers and promoters of each company to come up with the next big angle or to find new talent that can keep business up for as long as possible. Up until now, the WWE have been fairly benign in their talent acquisition and how it effects the smaller companies. There have been a handful of indie guys brought in here, and a couple of international stars signed there, but as of yet no real damage has been done to the scene as a whole. However, if the WWE wanted to they could make life extremely difficult for the other promotions and

intentionally speed up the decline in business by pillaging all the top talent at once without giving the parent companies a chance to put a contingency plan into place. Depending on who WWE brings in during 2016, this time next year the independent and international wrestling scene could be in a very different state indeed.



Samoa Joe working Baron Corbin as part of their mid-year programme, which saw Corbin improve a great deal.



Tatsumi Fujinami, Hideo Itami & Triple H posing together during the WrestleMania Weekend NXT event.

KICKING BAD HABITS: WAS RAW REQUIRED VIEWING IN 2015? BY RYAN CLINGMAN

At the age of eight, when my wrestling interest first manifested, I developed an unhealthy compulsion. Regardless of what was airing, RAW or SmackDown, Velocity, Bottomline, or Afterburn, no single show could go unwatched. The compulsion progressed, as I was no longer content with watching it all, and began to hoard VHS copies of every show that hit the airwaves. Tapes piled, and what began as a phase morphed into a strenuous obsession. Taping all of the shows, filling cabinets, drawers, and cupboards to the brim was but satisfactory, and pausing the VCR during commercial breaks essential.

This bizarre ritual continued for years; anxiety spiking for even the most trivial of excursions during what was, on South African television, Wednesday Night SmackDown and Sunday Night RAW. My collection was by no means pristine, with only a single hour of RAW airing weekly in South Africa, but to an unknowing child my collection was as close to perfection as I could have realistically achieved. Present were some more obvious archival holes, however, with adverts still featuring on the occasional tape, most probably from a night when I was forced to leave the house.

I researched as best could be expected from the average nine or ten year old and discovered the DVR. I barely left the house for the next nine or so months, for non-wrestling-related reasons, and saved for what was the apparent solution to my VHS woes.

But, even with a then impressive 80 hours of storage space, and DVD writing capabilities, my thirst for archival perfection only intensified. Soon I would spend many a weekend morning manually removing commercials from months worth of footage before formatting and burning spindles worth of shoddy DVD-R and DVD+Rs (some took, others didn't).

Habitual weekend burning proceeded for months, years – WWE, TNA, and even WSX at a time. This was until I failed to keep up on my archival duties one week, for whatever reason, which began a game of catch-up that I eventually lost. And upon losing this game, I quit. After years of hoarding, archiving, obsessing over content that I would likely never watch again in the case of RAW and SmackDown, certainly Velocity of all shows, I stopped. After the anxiety had tapered off, the spindles ran out, and interest waned – reason prevailed. This was a stressful ordeal at the time, but in hindsight is one that I view as wholly necessary, and indeed, quite liberating.

Perhaps this was only a nostalgia-gratifying tale, but I do see an important analogue between it and the changing mindset of the 2015 wrestling fan, myself included. For as long as I have been interacting with other wrestling fans on the internet, RAW has been touted by many as required weekly viewing for any observant self-respecting wrestling fan or commentator.

Parallels are often drawn, and not unduly so, between RAW for wrestling fans, and Monday Night Football for hardcore American Football fans – there aren't ardent football fans that consistently skip Monday Night Football are there? I am sure there exist similar sporting analogs that I would be just as likely to butcher. There is some validity to this view, as RAW can be seen as not only the WWE's, but by proxy, the entire industry's flagship show – the context in which much of the other happenings in the business may be viewed. But similar analogies may also be found in the critique of other forms of media: film, comics, literature, and so on. Does one need to be a reader of the New York Times Best Seller's list to be considered a book reviewer, even if the books one reviews are unrelated to anything that would appear on such a list? Does one need to listen to the Billboard Hot 100 to

write about indie music? Are the Summer Blockbusters required viewing for every film critic?

I think that most people would answer "not really" to these questions. But wrestling is different, isn't it? It's different than the NFL – it's different than any traditional sport. It's different than MMA in the manner in which it is assessed most certainly. It isn't music, television, cinema, comics, or video games. And it is for these reasons that analogy may only lead us so far, and ultimately we have to answer questions directly – to be a follower or commentator of wrestling, do you have to watch RAW on a weekly basis?

This is a question I asked myself throughout the year, as I began a weekly RAW reviewer, but due to university-related time constraints handed that responsibility to Ben. And after witnessing the quality of the WWE product deteriorate over the course of not only 2015, but since the destruction of the Shield in 2014, and perhaps even the creative slump of winter 2012, I realized that I had been sitting on a more accurate analogy for years. It was during the months after abandoning RAW quietly, and perhaps without even direct intent, that I realised I had been punishing myself in ways similar to that of my unintended childhood VHS-based masochism.

For many, particularly those who are not required to cover RAW, and even some that do, RAW is an obsession, and so is the rest of WWE's weekly canon. A significant portion of the core audience know that they don't have to watch RAW, a show that they do not enjoy, and yet they still do. They know implicitly that they could be watching something better, but they don't. Just as I knew that I would never view those shows again. Just as I knew that I was aimlessly exhausting excessive amounts of DVDs, tapes, disk space and my own time, I carried on with my compulsion regardless. I made mostly irrational justifications for my habit, but I kept on with it, in the same way many continue to watch RAW for the sake of it, every Monday, because they "have to" as followers of professional wrestling.

These were my sentiments, but when forced to give the show and reports up due to exam pressure in June; I missed neither – the DVDs were left unburnt; DVR unplugged, and it wasn't a bother. Upon inspection I saw that I had been shackled to my couch every Tuesday, agonizing for several hours in a forgettable

haze of boredom and irritation, and much like with my archival obsession, felt liberated after forgoing a form of unnecessary weekly torture.

More questions arose once I had left the show for some time. Perhaps I would fail to keep up with the product and my wrestling fandom would wane consequently – thoughts of this sort are habitually-driven delusions to be ignored. Keeping up news-wise with most every major promotion, WWE in particular, no longer requires much more than a couple of podcast subscriptions, a few news sites, and a newsletter or two; and even this is excessive. There no longer exists a barrier to re-entry; if the company catches fire again, there is very little reason why one shouldn't be able to easily fall back in love with the product straight away through maintained familiarity. It was through this process that I found my fandom as likely to die off as a result of dropping RAW, as it was due to relinquishment of my DVR habit.

Whilst I was mostly content with listening and reading about RAW throughout the latter portions of this year, with little inclination to seek out anything more than a snippet of the show every other week or so, I kept up with the most of the major pay-per-views. Returning to the product once a month can be quite jarring, and provides at least minor insight into some of the products continued failings.

When returning to the product after periodic, month-long hiatuses, I noted just how synthetic it all felt. This isn't a phenomena limited to overly-scripted promos or cookie-cutter in-ring work, but is a symptom plaguing the entire package.

WWE's production values have been a strong asset since the mid-to-late 80s, aiding them greatly in their national expansion. But, when comparing the aesthetics of the program to that of NJPW, Lucha Underground, or even UFC, it could perhaps be argued that the company's production philosophy belongs far more to the early 2000s than it does to the mid 2010s. The desire to plaster arenas with brightly lit screens, for one, is quite dated, as can be seen from the ludicrous screen on the ring apron, or oversized Tron. The Titan Tron is a staple, but the 2015 variants feels less iconic and more excessive and over-played than anything else. The lack of unique pay-per-view sets other than for the biggest of shows, whilst an effective cost cutting

measure, makes these flaws even more noticeable.

Michael Cole, JBL, and Jerry Lawler are grating and incredulous, robotic and shallow. The glossy multicoloured ring attire of the Usos, New Day, and the Lucha Dragons are befitting of an early-to-mid 1990s undercard of race-car drivers and plumbers, not modern athletes. The same can be said for Dean Ambrose and Roman Reigns, who wrestle in modified street clothes for no apparent reason (at least in the case of Roman Reigns). To have a couple of members of the roster in luminescent trunks and t-shirts, tank tops and ripped jeans, is in theory fine, but when non-traditional wrestling attire seemingly dominates, the aesthetics of the in-ring product too take a wrong turn.

Cutting far deeper than mere aesthetics is the mid-card haze, lack of star power, at times soulless in-ring work, and creative dissonance that has plagued the main roster for years. This amalgam of problems has only escalated and spread to unbearable scales in 2015. So few, if any, of the neon-draped, over-scripted performers strike an emotional chord with me as a viewer, that missing months worth of weekly television doesn't seem to matter as a fan. This is by no means the fault of the wrestlers, and on the contrary, the 2015 WWE roster in terms of raw talent may be one of the best they have ever had. But when working in a creatively-stifling environment, where matches are a collection of inconsequential spots leading into strings of nearfalls, and promos are the creation of a bloated and incompetent writing staff, then even some of the best talent in the world – Dean Ambrose, Antonio Cesaro, Seth Rollins, and others – may as well be create-a-wrestlers in a procedurally generated match web-series.

It doesn't have to be this way, however. We cannot change, on a large scale, what WWE as a publicly traded juggernaut decides to do. But, just as no one was forcing me to waste my Saturdays editing and burning DVDs for no logical reason, no one is forcing anyone else to watch Monday Night RAW. For most it isn't a job, or an assignment, and whilst it is most often times newsworthy, it isn't required viewing in 2015. With the wealth of options available – NJPW, EVOLVE, PWG, Lucha Underground, and many more – RAW is a habit easier to break than it may seem at first sight.



They are still connected, everyone. After close to a decade, they are still connected.

THE 2015 LUCHA YEAR IN REVIEW WITH THECURSFAN

This past year in lucha libre had successes, new stars, and a breakthrough show which connected Mexican wrestling to a new audience and gave birth to new possibilities. Despite all of those positives, 2015 will be remembered as a year of missed opportunities and tragedy. It'll forever be seen as the year Perro Aguayo Jr., a hall of fame wrestler still in his prime, died as the result of in-ring injuries. The void he left behind could never be filled, and may have helped lead to the chaos that enveloped AAA by the end of the year. 2015 was a rough year for CMLL more quietly, as years of disappointing business appeared to finally take their toll. There were still plenty of positive moments for lucha libre fans in 2015, but also a general feeling of decline in the biggest groups.

May 24th was AAA's best day of the year, perhaps one of their greatest days of all time. It was the first ever Lucha World Cup, a one night trios tournament featuring wrestlers from across the world. It was AAA's attempt to create an international sporting event, both to draw mainstream press attention in Mexico and to raise awareness of the promotion outside of Mexico. The World Cup was a success on those fronts in addition to being a strongly attended and watched event, considered a strong overall show even despite its lack of a match of the year candidate. The main sponsor of the event, beer company Victoria, was still raving about how well everything had gone for them and are interested in bringing the concept back as quickly as next year. AAA will have to overcome some challenges to do so – bringing in special foreign talent is difficult with WWE off limits and the CMLL/NJPW/ROH alliance – but May 24th was a very positive night for AAA where everything went according to plan.

That might have been the only day which went AAA's way. It's a slight overstatement to say bad things happened during all the other 364 days, but it was a year filled with far more downs than ups

Look no further than the winning team from that World Cup: Rey Mysterio, El Patron Alberto and Myzteziz. They, along with Hijo del Perro Aguayo, started off 2015 as the four giant pillars of AAA. The plan appeared to be to mix and match those four over the following years, creating new giant matches, while slowly bringing others up to their level. Instead, of all those possible matches, the disappointing Myzteziz versus Rey Mysterio match at this year's TripleMania will have been the only one of those giant matches to take place on a big AAA event. Mysterio had a resurgent year, in and outside of AAA, but is the only one still working for the promotion. Myzteziz and Alberto had tremendous personal issues which may have influenced each man's decision to abruptly depart from the company in the fall, leaving AAA suddenly without their major TripleMania match for 2016 and without their top champion. The loss of Hijo del Perro Aguayo is the hardest of all.

Everyone reading this already knows about Aguayo's passing. If you're reading this year in review in 2035, you need to understand that the combination of multiple handheld videos, Mysterio's WWE notoriety, the freak but unclear moment of his fatal injury, and the desperation of internet sites for gripping content meant there was a week where a wrestling fan couldn't go on any site on the internet without risking the sight of a beloved luchador dying in front of them. It was a causality on

infinite loop. It's harder to fully understand what Perro meant to the people around him. He was a friend, mentor, leader and idol to people throughout the lucha libre world. Aguayo was a linchpin to AAA's recent run of success and future goals: he feuded with each of the three other big stars and his name and popularity was being (and still is being) used to raise the profile of a next group of stars. AAA did their very best to honor Perro's contributions to lucha libre and to find others to pick up the rivalries left behind. They had much more success with the latter than the former.



Team Mexico, winners of AAA's 2015 Lucha World Cup – Alberto El Patron, Rey Misterio & Myzteziz.

One tragedy is too much for anyone, and AAA had suffered from an unfairly high amount of them in recent years. AAA luchadors el Brazo, Hector Garza and Mini Chessman, as well as long time office worker Jesús Núñez passed away in 2013 and 2014. The list would grow to include both Perro Aguayo Jr. and office worker Irma Osorno in 2015. An AAA bus, making an originally unscheduled trip to Mexico City after the March Rey de Reyes show had been twice postponed, collided with another vehicle on the highway. Osorno died as result of the accident, and others were left injured. Aguayo passed away just a few days later, piling on the pain.

The problems with Rey de Reyes – first postponed due to rain, then postponed again due to lack of permits, with only a scattered amount of fans attending the third show – were not an isolated event for AAA. AAA attempted to run six major shows in 2015. As mentioned, the Lucha World Cup was a tremendous success and Rey de Reyes struggled to exist. Two other events, Verano de Escandalo and Heroes Inmortales, were mild successes, tempered by the feeling that they were build up shows to much bigger events to follow. One of those bigger events, December's Guerra de Titanes, was abruptly postponed less than two weeks before the show with no explanation or make up date. AAA implied the event would instead take place in January 2016, though that was less certain as the year came to a close. AAA's other bigger event, their biggest show of the year, TripleMania, might have been better off had it too been cancelled, but we'll get back to that in a bit.

AAA's great year long success took place outside of Mexico. Lucha Underground began in 2014, and took off in 2015. Lucha Underground focused on episodic storytelling instead of building to named big events, but careful viewers could pick out a pattern of setting up climatic shows every month or two, as a sort of chapter point. One took place on the first episode of the year, a modified Royal Rumble called Aztec Warfare, and ending as one of the best one hour wrestling shows of the year. Intense high speed wrestling met payoffs to storylines which had been percolating over the prior thirteen weeks while the seeds of future issues were planted. The show had been appreciated as quirky, with some good matches and a few interesting ideas during 12 episodes in 2014, but the Azteca Warfare match marked the moment where everything clicked into place for Lucha Underground. It became the show of the year for many during the period it aired



Alberto El Patron as AAA Mega Champion.

No other wrestling TV show did as good a job of building storylines as well as Lucha Underground, or consistently paying them off as well as LU. The wrestling was fantastic too, and the show gained a following that surpassed its expected reach. This was a show with a largely unknown cast, airing in English only on a network few knew existed, at a time where most English speaking wrestling fans see WWE as the only type of wrestling, and hyped as something presenting a style of wrestling that had long been derided as either backwards or limited. By the time the season finale (Ultima Lucha, the one event of the year) had taken place, Lucha Underground had grown a sizable cult fanbase online among people who had largely never watched lucha libre, with big followings for both the American stars and the previously little known Mexican stars. Weeks of short squashes (and arm breaking) took Pentagon Jr. from a guy well respected by a dedicated few to one of the most over characters in the wrestling world. Fenix broke out from being one of many high flyers to one half of one of the best matches of the year. Angelico, who had toiled in obscurity for half a decade, leaped his way onto WWE's radar. Even lesser profile characters like Drago and Aerostar went from being almost unknown outside of Mexico to in demand.

The big problem for Lucha Underground, and why it can't be considered a complete success yet in 2015, is that the strong interest in the product by fans has not been met by the corporate world. The show did decent numbers for El Rey and its Spanish language airing on Unimas, but the growth of the program was largely fueled by unauthorized uploads to video sharing sites. 2014 ended with the hope of a video on demand deal with the likes of Netflix, a better Spanish language deal than Unimas, and a presence on Mexico's Televisa or other networks around the world. 2015 ends with the same exact hopes and no public progress on a single one of those deals. Lucha Underground is visually designed for toys, videos games and comic books, and none of those appear to be coming any time soon. An obvious merchandise deal has never come together; while Lucha Underground struck a partnership with Pro Wrestling Tees at the end of the year, it seems at best a place holder and less than what would be expected for a national television show. The silver lining is the lack of progress off screen has not affected on screen quality. It took longer than expected, but the show was renewed for a second season and will return early in 2016, largely because current investors still believe the carrot of profit can be reached with a little more time. Early indications on the new episodes are positive. It's disheartening that a quality wrestling product hasn't been rewarded for that quality, maybe another year will bring better fortune.

Lucha Underground's acclaim benefited AAA beyond the bottom line. The show, along with the World Cup, were part of a larger 2015 plan to raise their name in other markets and very specifically the United States. AAA's greatest period of success in the early 90s included running strong events in the United States and the modern growth of the company would be tremendously



Fenix, Drago & Pentagon Jr. in Lucha Underground.

enhanced if they could reach into the wallets of US fans. For 2015, the attempt at reaching Americans (and Canadians) would be through airing major AAA events via traditional pay-per-events, starting with TripleMania. The timing was sublime: the show was taking place days after Lucha Underground's Ultima Lucha, when the type of wrestling fans who had taken a chance on an unknown show were enthusiastic about the luchadores on the show and lucha libre in general. Many of those same wrestlers

were available to appear on TripleMania, and the show would have three ex-WWE stars in big singles matches as well as English language commentary by one of the voices of Lucha Underground and a name familiar to WWE audiences. AAA and their partners had a fantastic press tour in the days leading up to the show, getting the word out of its existence and enticing consumers to give them a shot. A successful TripleMania, beginning a solid revenue stream of US PPV dollars and opening the door for events in the US, would have been a game changer for the promotion.

AAA instead fell flat, with all of their worst tendencies and lapses coming to the surface at the same time, the wrong time. TripleMania has or will likely win worst PPV from anyone who considers it. It was a technical disaster, with large portions of the PPV broadcast either unwatchable or unlistenable due to commentary issues (both of the equipment and lack of knowledge.) The show was an equal creative disaster, with multiple matches hoping that long term respect towards certain luchadores would lead fans to overlook their greatly declined status, neglecting the first time viewers who wouldn't have that respect, and only see old men having terrible matches. All the hot stars from Lucha Underground were generally tossed into one nonsensical and lousy cage match, handicapping their ability to do anything memorable and completely minimizing their roles on their show. The two big matches on the show – the only two matches with any sort of long term coherent build, a peculiar scarcity repeated on many of AAA's big shows in 2015 – didn't deliver at nearly the level they had to save the night. Alberto versus Brian Cage was alright, arguably the best match of the night, but a rivalry build around a heroic flag waving Mexican against an evil nationalist flag waving American was ill-fitting on a show desperately trying to sell itself to those same Americans. The main event dream match between Rey Misterio Jr. and the original Místico lived up to no one's dreams. It was a cold match, with Myzteziz struggling to work as a heel, and struggling in all other respects, throughout the entirety of the match. The crowd reacted poorly to the match, and the chaotic post-match attacks and alliance shifting suffered from the PPV feed cutting away and Myzteziz confusing the already confused angle by going into business for himself. It was truly the rancid cherry on top of a three day old sundae.

TripleMania one again drew a giant high-paying crowd, enough that the optimist sort might feel it a slight success, but a realist would note how many equivalent giant crowds were lost due to one poor night. Plans for other PPVs were quickly scrapped, though AAA seems to hold out hope of trying again in 2016. Perhaps a year away will cause enough people to forgive and forget, but they'll never

have the perfect timing of the first show and will be (at best) trying to make up for lost ground.



Perro Aguayo and Myzteziz do battle.

The larger metaphor a fan might come away with in 2015 is Lucha Underground as the talented prodigy and AAA as its screwed up brother. It's almost fair, but it's inaccurate. AAA failed in its biggest moment and isn't in Lucha Underground's league in week to week (or any time to any time) storytelling, but its weekly television show frequently produced great matches. Occasionally it was with the higher profile names, like Perro Aguayo and Myzteziz' match in February, which would turn out to be the last great match for both of them in AAA, or a big show title match like Fenix and Hijo del Fantasma. More often, it was on one of the many undercard matches featuring young wrestlers going all out to have exciting matches. Those who crossed over into Lucha Underground – like Fenix, Pentagon, King Cuerno/Hijo del Fantasma, Aerostar, Drago, Angelico, Jack Evans and others – are already well known, but there are nearly as many luchadors still unknown to those who only watch El Rey. The trio of Daga, Steve Pain and Hijo del Pirata Morgan, finally together full time after false starts, quickly became as good a rudo unit as there is in Mexico. Names like Dinastia, Australian Suicide, and Mini Psycho

Clown have been consistently good in their appearances. Talented but rarely used luchadors like Machine Rocker and Sexy Lady have been given new life and stronger roles as Taurus and Lady Shani. AAA's continued to add on more talent by reestablishing ties with the likes of Laredo Kid and Flamita (now Fireball), adding new talent like La Hiedra, and recruiting talented foreigners like Mike Bailey, all of whom continued to memorable individual moments.

The challenge for AAA going forward is to consistently develop those talents into important stars, the way Lucha Underground has done, and then to use them as stars on the biggest shows of the year. AAA's biggest weakness over the last few years has been its over-reliance on those who are (or have been) main event draws in the past, as one after another has left them high and dry after leaving the company. It's a strange situation when a season of US TV made Pentagon Jr. a bigger name star than years of AAA booking, but it's the present situation. Perhaps the departures of 2015 will force AAA's commitment to making new names in 2016; they might not have any other options.

CMLL did not suffer the same volume of high profile difficulties as AAA. It was generally another mostly status quo year in a period of many – the third straight where the biggest gate of the year

was built around the possibility that Atlantis may yet lose his mask, where young stars were showcased, and where stories were often told at the usual snail's pace. Yet, it was also a year when the oldest promotion's slip behind the rest continued to erode the remaining fan base. CMLL seems aware enough that there are problems, but reacted similarly to AAA, bringing back old stars in hopes of energizing the product. It hasn't worked out.



Atlantis executes the Atlantida on La Sombra in their mask match.

CMLL oddly shared the same general problem as Lucha Underground: no matter how good their product was, few people could watch it. LU was much more consistent than CMLL, though. CMLL has never been able to replace their lost national Televisa slot with one on rival Azteca, despite occasional rumors of being close and CMLL luchadors appearing on other Azteca programming, with speculation of Azteca being put off by lack of names and lack of modernization of the product. A secondary television show airing with good distribution in Mexico City was abruptly canceled when the network itself was shut down. The parent company has plans to start a third national network in early 2016 and decided not to keep the smaller version around while it was making the transition, but it's unknown if the CMLL show will return when the channel does. That has left CMLL ending the year with its only regular television content on niche cable channels, unavailable on all systems due to carriage issues; only the diehard fans even know these shows exist, which doesn't help in the creation of new fans.

Ironically for an historically backwards company, CMLL has taken to internet broadcasting as an alternative. They've broadcast weekly events for the last few years, likely transmitting the most hours of free wrestling content to internet of any promotion in the world. The shows which were streamed moved around during the year, ending with those all important Friday events broadcast live. CMLL's even caught up to AAA by attempting iPPV offerings, though with their own set of problems. The first attempt, a paid broadcast of the Anniversary show, was via an unlisted YouTube link which was quickly discovered and passed around to anyone who wanted to see it. Later attempts would go smoother, but the Anniversary experience exposed the still limited reach of internet content: at its peak, around 100,000 people were watching CMLL's biggest show of the year. That's a great number for the internet, and about 100x more than the usual CMLL free stream, but it's also a fraction of the number of people who would have watched the same show if it had aired on TV. CMLL is stuck for the moment where only the people who already know of the product can find it.

CMLL is also stuck in a moment of creative difficulties. 2015 was largely dominated again by Los Ingobernables, with Rush, La Sombra, La Mascara, Marco Corleone, and a very rarely appearing Tetsuya Natio, growing in popularity with their t-shirts becoming the most popular lucha gear in Mexico. However, the act generally seemed to driven only by the efforts of the luchadors themselves, and the CMLL programming department could not make the best use of them. Los Ingobernables, cheating and belittling the fans, continued to be booked on the tecnico side. Their best matches were the rare "tecnico vs tecnico" matches against the likes of Volador, Valiente, and Maximo, but they instead spent more of their time against rudos like Shocker, Terrible, Rey Bucanero, as well as Ultimo Guerrero and his soldiers. There have been periods in CMLL where rudo vs rudo feuds have propelled business forward, but the crowd who were still attending shows didn't find either side frequently worth cheering. Plus, for every Negro Casas who could still go, there were many more who are deep in their decline phase or plain unmotivated to try much any

more. Almost all the top rudos are veterans who've been with the promotion for many years, adding to the general repetitive and uninspiring feeling of main even trios matches.

Given that context of low attention (and the lower amount of money which comes with it) and the lack of creative fulfillment, CMLL's biggest loss of the year shouldn't have come as a surprise. Still, most people were caught off guard when La Sombra lost his mask to Atlantis at this year's Anniversary event. The expectation, when the match was hurriedly and unexpectedly set up, was the match would be a passing of the torch, with Sombra taking both Atlantis' mask and his role as standard bearer for the next decade or two. Instead, Atlantis kept his mask for the third straight year, and Sombra left his behind, then left the promotion itself behind a month and a half later when he signed with WWE. At 26, Sombra had already done everything there was to do with CMLL, and CMLL had failed to present him with new challenges and mountains to overcome. It was always going to be hard to compete with the wealth of the biggest promotion of the year, but CMLL has seemingly settled for being a second choice promotion, some place that will always exist if you have no where else to go. It didn't seem as permanent of a farewell, but Mascara Dorada choosing a year of wrestling in NJPW preliminary matches over a year of wrestling in CMLL main event matches points to the same issue. CMLL may lack ambition, but its top luchadors do not lack that quality, and the promotion will have to deal with losing and replacing top stars regularly unless it can make itself a more satisfying place to work.



Kamaitachi vs. Dragon Lee.

CMLL's biggest strength is in recruiting young luchadors and making them into new stars. The now annual new star competition En Busca de un Idolo was a flop in 2015, but the success stories of previous years continued to excel in 2015. La Sombra himself around the age of twenty years when he began his first big breakout on CMLL shows. Dragon Lee found success at a similar age this year, rising from a promising high flyer to one of the most exciting stars in the promotion. His year and feud with NJPW's Kamaitachi (Hiromu Takahashi) featured breathtakingly dangerous action and dramatic finishes. Their mask match in March and title matches in August and November all rank in the top matches of the year. Kamaitachi will return to Japan in 2016, but Dragon Lee is so obviously the next big star for the promotion that CMLL itself has started to catch on and treat him as such. 2014 En Busca de un Idolo winner Barbaro Cavernario continued his own rise, winning championship gold and being an irregular main event wrestler. More experienced luchadors Maximo and Volador cemented their places at the top of roster with their strong 2015 performances. The two defeated Bucanero & Terrible in a double hair match at Homenaje a Dos Leyendas, and Maximo's heavyweight title win and defenses contributed to what was arguably his best in-ring year. Volador continued as one of the most popular figures in the promotion, while salvaging the La Nueva Era Mistico project as best possible. The best moments of the year for the second Mistico involved Volador throwing his partner at his opponents. Luchadora Zeuxis' progression into a top flight wrestler was a bright spot in a quiet year for women's wrestling, and others took lesser steps forward.



Rush and La Sombra raise the Los Ingobernables banner in one of Sombra's final CMLL matches for the foreseeable future on November 13th.

Many of these improvements, and things like the Ingobernables coming up with some of their signature looks, seemed to be mostly luchador self generated. It was generally more positive than CMLL's own attempts to make stars. CMLL's infatuation with tall, muscled and very untalented Australian luchador Thunder continued in 2015, despite no shred of evidence of success. Thunder was paired up with Ultimo Guerrero the year prior to disguise the foreigner's weaknesses, to help him improve, and to set up a big match between the two in 2015. All three goals failed. Thunder got even worse with more ring time, making first day mistakes now years into his career. CMLL did set up the Ultimo Guerrero/Thunder hair versus mask match, but pulled it off the drawing board multiple times, with Thunder being removed from the cards at least twice after the apuesta match had been scheduled. The only positive from this situation is a long teased Ultimo Guerrero/Rey Escorpion hair match took place as a replacement on one occasion, and turned out to be one of the better matches of the year. It was overshadowed by the CMLL's refusal to either do the horrible match or to stop building to it. The match will be terrible if it happens, but the more depressing aspect is CMLL putting so much energy into an unpromising wrestler, while not protecting anyone else at nearly the same level. CMLL knows how to get behind someone to make them a big star, but have decided to do it with the person least likely to make something out of it only because he's kind of tall.

CMLL's not the only promoter for Arena Mexico, with some strange choices. A promotion originally known as All Elite, later as Elite Lucha Libre, begin renting out CMLL's arenas to run their own shows. Elite seemed to be a money-losing promotion on its surface – if CMLL can't draw in their buildings, how would a lesser known group do better in the same places – but came with a lot of big ideas to shake things up. They tried a league style tag tournament, matching up CMLL wrestlers with independent and foreign talent, which failed when the outside talent didn't draw big and became tough to deal with. They tried bringing back names from the past, like LA Park, Dr.

Wagner and Octagon. One time appearances drew better than regular CMLL shows, but were much more expensive and didn't do as well the second and third times. The failures didn't discourage them, but caused them to redouble their effort in a new direction: raid AAA for talent and use their access to CMLL wrestlers to run their own pseudo AAA/CMLL matchups. Both CMLL (Invasors) and AAA (Consejo) had tried this to slight success in past years, and Elite pivoted its promotion around the concept and the first name they brought from AAA: Myzteziz, CMLL's original Místico himself. Myzteziz, who would eventually retitle himself Carístico, gave no notice to AAA before shockingly appearing in Arena Mexico. Elite piled on, talking to many other AAA wrestlers about jumping. They eventually convinced Cibernetico to give up what seemed like an AAA job for life to be the lead rudo for their once a week promotion, and added a (released from prison) Charly Manson as his ally. And it still failed! The crowd for the Sunday afternoon Elite shows did indeed rise for the teases of debuts, but went back to or below normal CMLL levels when they were just back to having matches. The promotion remained as mostly just a lot of tag matches; there were plenty of challenges for big matches, but those challenges went nowhere. The group has only been around a few months, but has shown no more ambition in storytelling than its CMLL partner. As with CMLL – and again, like Lucha Underground – the carrot at the end of the stick is a spot on TV (Azteca), but there's no particular sign Elite is close to getting that. Elite has poured in enough money to be a disruptive force in lucha libre, upending AAA's plans in particular – but they may not have the ability to make this work long term. It's hard to see how Elite can continue to make this work long term, but they don't seem to be playing by normal business rules and they go into 2016 as a wild card in lucha libre.

The biggest mystery with Elite is how deeply CMLL is involved with them. Both sides originally framed it as Elite simply renting the building and some luchadors for shows, no different from any independent promotion. (This is something Último Dragon has done for years for his shows, as strange as it sounds.) By the end of the year, CMLL had handed over one of their weekly Arena Mexico shows to Elite and are pushing the weekly Sunday shows as a copromotion between the two companies. Many luchadors who seemed unlikely to ever return to CMLL – AAA original Octagon, LA Park, Dr. Wagner, even Carístico – returned to Arena Mexico first as part of the Elite shows. LA Park and Dr. Wagner made the leap all the way back to CMLL shows afterwards, only for everyone to go back to not working with each other three weeks later after some infamous and unauthorized comments on a live microphone by LA Park. Despite that poor outcome, there's a suspicion that Elite has become a try out for CMLL, testing out luchadors to gauge the reaction (externally and internally) of bringing them back into the main CMLL fold. Both Carístico and Cibernetico have made the same leap to main CMLL shows to close out their year, under the auspicious guise of only being Elite contracted luchadors, and the growing entanglement of the two companies is something to follow in 2016.

It's hard to decide if it's a negative year of disappointing results or positive year of groundbuilding for Elite. It's easier to make that call for other traditional style independent lucha libre promotions. Hijo del Santo's Todo x el Todo promotion returned in 2015, though it's not clear how many people noticed. A run of shows in London (run on the same days as AAA luchadors were brought in for different shows) drew moderately well and might be repeated in 2016. Attempts at running events back in Mexico did poorly. A planned tour of cities instead only last two shows after drawing disappointing crowd in Leon and Puebla. Hijo del Santo is close to the end of his career and suggested that those appearances could be the last in those cities, but the hint of retirement did not do anything to draw fans. It seems possible that he will retire for real in 2016, assuming he can find the promotional support to run a show worthy of his ego. The third generation Santo quietly debuted on the London shows on his Tempestad identity, but didn't wrestle the rest of the year and it's hard to see how he's going to make much of an impact with so little ring time.

Mexico State's IWRG had a year of small crowd and diminishing sponsorship. The Naucalpan based promotion appears to be stuck in a mindset even more conservative than CMLL's. Despite frequently debuting the best young talent in the area, those in charge seem disinterested and actively resistant to creating new stars. Cards are generally built around old luchadors well about of their primes and a decade past being stars in major promotions, or sons of famous wrestlers who never quite made it themselves. The practice of bringing in that class of luchador was a patch to cover over losing CMLL (and later AAA) regulars in that spot, but the fans have been disinterested in the current mix for quite a while. Again, it's not as though IWRG is capable of producing new luchadors or new acts – the new Ninja Turtles remained one of the more sought after indie acts, but were infrequently used by the promotion who created them, and never as anything more than an underneath act. A young wrestler or two will be used in a stronger position for a couple of months, then mysteriously be forgotten soon after. It's never been publicly known who decided on the matches for IWRG, but the reluctance to make changes suggests that power is probably among those on the veteran crew (and that ownership is strangely content with the status quo.) Fellow Mexico City area traveling indie promotions Leyendas Inmortales was built around similar older veteran acts and got the same poor results, and are generally ignored by the wider lucha libre audience.

The biggest growth area, perhaps more in aesthetics than economics, are the group of US styled “super indie” promotions. Chilanga Mask (as it was known most of the year; things got confusing later) and Cara Lucha, which became high profile places where wrestlers could quickly make a name for themselves with good performances. Both promotions are fuelled by the imbalance between the high volume of people training to be full time luchadors in the Mexico City area and the few spots for full time luchadors. Chilanga Mask deserves credit for being the first group to break from the mindset of IWRG and the other groups, moving away from main eventing last generations stars to instead building around young guys and helping them become the next generation of stars. (DTU's gone in this direction too, but the eight year old hardcore group started out more as an AAA crossover; they broke that tie this year in a slightly less active than usual year for the Crazy Boy led promotion.)

The idea of building around young wrestlers who haven't made it to the big time yet is nothing new for the US, but it hasn't been tried as much in Mexico: the greater amount of guys still hanging around after their major league careers are over makes those guys the easier option. Taking the tougher path, and building new stars seems like it's at least working for the luchadors: the Indystrongibles and el Caifan of ChilangaMask, the Kriminal Boys and Sky Stars of CaraLucha, and hardcore wrestler Pagano (of just about every promotion) are among those who've never been featured on a big TV show, but are in demand and starting to mean something simply off indie buzz. These guys are not on the level of the wrestlers in the big two promotions, but they're doing better for themselves and seemingly helping their promotions – it seemed deeply telling that the well attended shows at IWRG's Arena Naucalpan this year were rarely for the home promotion shows, but more often for others group renting the building and using the hot indie names. The biggest problems for these super indie promotions is they don't have the revenue streams of their US counterparts: it's pretty much all the live event ticket revenue, and the market may not be big enough for multiple groups of this same style. Still, they were the breaths of fresh air desperately needed this year.

The success of the super indie groups shows that there's plenty of hope for the Big 2 to become bigger. There needs to be a similar commitment to building young talent as top stars, and the business sides of the promotions need to take better advantage of their talent. Mexico doesn't have

the economic advantages of the United States, Japan or Europe, but it still has a great base of luchadors – there just needs to be a bigger plan and vision surrounding them. Lucha Underground has that vision, and went as far as they could in 2014 without much business success. AAA's vision and plan changed throughout the year, and was damaged by outside events, and betrayed by lack of awareness at their most critical moment. CMLL's vision seemed either non-existent or misguided, and its best moments were handed to them by circumstance. Great lucha will definitely continue to occur in 2016, because it happened in 2015 despite moments of chaos. Lucha libre, however, will only become successful with some new vision, and a person with the power to execute that vision.



AAA and Lucha Underground wrestler, Pentagon Jr., at an AAW event.

INDIES YEAR IN REVIEW

REBOURNE: THE STELLAR YEAR OF MATT SYDAL BY ALAN COUNIHAN

For the better part of 2012 and 2013, Matt Sydal's career as a pro wrestler was shrouded by uncertainty. His WWE tenure as Evan Bourne, which had once appeared full of promise, had gone completely off the tracks and many speculated it was possibly over. Nobody was really sure what the issue was. Was he struggling to recover from injuries? Had WWE soured on him? Were their wellness policy issues? Many people guessed, but nobody really knew. Truth is, Matt himself didn't really know. He was at a crossroads in his life and he didn't know where things were headed. Rather than going into the details, I'll simply direct you to Matt's appearance on Colt Cabana's Art Of Wrestling podcast to get the full rundown on how he used a trip to Peru to find himself and regain his passion for wrestling. He left WWE, Evan Bourne was history and Matt Sydal was Rebourne.

Sydal's first match back was at the 2014 Kobe World show for Dragon Gate in a dream partner tag match featuring Ricochet, CIMA and Masato Yoshino. Ring rust was definitely evident in that one, and it would take Matt a few months to get his wheels back under him. However by the end of the year, things were moving in a very positive direction and Sydal seemed poised to enter 2015 with a bit of momentum.

Rather than keep that momentum rolling in a slow & steady manner, Sydal took off like a rocket. In PWG, he formed an exciting but short-lived tag team with Chris Sabin known as "Love Gun" and they tore the house down on two occasions with The Young Buck\$ and The Monster Mafia. With an injury taking Sabin

out of the equation, Sydal ended up doing most of his Reseda work in the singles ranks. In February at "From Out Of Nowhere" he had one of the best PWG matches of the year against Ricochet. It was an absolute masterclass in state of the art athletic wrestling with a teacher vs student vibe. Sydal was a standout at the Battle Of Los Angeles also, tearing the house down with Fenix on Night 1 and then having an excellent bout with UK import Will Ospreay on Night 3. The Ospreay match was America's exposure to a rivalry that had wowed fans on another continent.

One of the major goals of Revolution Pro UK this year was to establish Will Ospreay as a major player. One of the tactics they employed to achieve this, was pairing Ospreay up with essentially the more experienced version of himself in Matt Sydal. Ospreay can really be compared to 2004-2006 era Sydal, right down to the detail of AJ Styles taking both under his wing. The pair actually had their first meeting last October, but it was their second and third outings which really got a ton of hype.

The second match was on an episode of Rev Pro TV and with the added eyeballs the show brings through YouTube, it got a lot of praise. The third bout is where the story is though. A 2/3 Falls contest on the big Summer Sizzler show at York Hall in front of 1,000 fans.

In this incredible match, Sydal put forth the performance of his career. He masterfully worked as the aggressor allowing the fans to really get behind Ospreay on an emotional level. He did not put a foot

wrong throughout the whole bout. It was an incredible display, which combined his natural athleticism with veteran savvy and nuanced pro wrestling storytelling. The most jaw dropping fact about all of this was that Sydal arrived at the building from the airport after a long distance flight only a few hours before he got in the ring. A flight which he paid for himself after he missed his original flight. Through all this, Sydal had a smile on his face and was the happiest, most positive person in the building. That day was not just an example of the world class wrestler Matt Sydal is, but also the world class person.

Sydal missed his original flight due to passport issues brought about by the visa process of returning to Japan which he had the opportunity to do in July. He returned to Dragon Gate for a tour, which built to Kobe World Hall where Sydal teamed with Ricochet as Monster Express reps against Twin Gate champs YAMATO and Naruki Doi. Sydal looked phenomenal throughout the tour, keeping up with all of DG's finest. The World tag, along with a trios match at Korakuen and a tag against The Millennials, were the highlights.

Whilst Dragon Gate technically remains his Japanese home, Sydal was courted by New Japan and has been working for them regularly since September. He faced Kenny Omega for the junior title at Sumo Hall, in a match that put him in a tough position. The New Japan fans were clearly not familiar with him and were not pre-disposed to reacting to the all-gaijin match. But through sheer effort and talent, the two world class performers dragged the crowd into the match and by the end it was very well received. From an execution point of view it was amongst the most impressive bouts of the year. He resumed teaming with Ricochet for New Japan's junior tag tournament and they had three excellent contests on route to winning it.

Back on home soil, Sydal was one of the outside talents that Ring Of Honor used the most throughout the year. His biggest contribution was the incredible Best Of 5 series with ACH which legitimately produced four star or better matches every time out. The highlight was match 2 in Chicago, an absolutely classic contest and one of ROH's best of the year. The chemistry the two exhibited was fantastic and they did a great job of weaving little stories across the fives matches.

As you can see Sydal has become one of the most in

demand performers in the world. Three continents and some of the world's best companies tell the story. It was easily the career year for the man from St. Louis. Once just simply considered a talented babyface flyer, Matt has become one of the most well rounded wrestlers in the world. He can work quasi-heel, he can strike, he can grapple, he can build stories and of course he can still fly as well as anyone. What he says is true – Matt Sydal really is Rebourne.



Matt Sydal & Ricochet perform stereo shooting star presses in Dragon Gate 2015.

A RAVE REVIEW

BY DYLAN HALES

In 2015 the best wrestler in the world was from Georgia.

On the surface that is not a controversial statement. After all, the winner of last year's Wrestling Observer Newsletter Award for the Most Outstanding Wrestler of the Year was a wrestler from Georgia, who has a better than decent chance of winning that award again this year.

I had the good fortune of seeing the best wrestler of 2015 live this year on a show in Piedmont, Alabama. The town barely registers on the map and the venue was tiny and difficult to find. Once I arrived I waited in line for well over an hour before taking my seat in a makeshift bleacher directly under a framed photo of "Prettyboy" Doug Somers. It was brutally hot inside, as the local promoter had clearly oversold the show, prompting the promotion to open a garage door to accommodate extra outdoor seats that were still no more than 40 feet from the ring.

After sitting through a couple of hours of middling-to-bad wrestling, and two intermissions, a video package played setting up the main event. Then the best wrestler in the world came out. And in a building in the middle of nowhere, in front of a crowd that was two times too big to legally fit into it, with the temperature nearing triple digits, he had a classic 25 minute match against a longtime friend and rival.

I was extremely lucky to see that match, because as it happens the second best wrestler in the world in 2015 was also in it. He is the guy I mentioned earlier who won the Observer Award last year, and is likely to win it again this year. His name is AJ Styles. His opponent that night was Jimmy Rave, or as I call him, the Wrestler of the Year for 2015.

For those who have listened to me on various podcasts this year or followed me on Twitter, the revelation that I believe Jimmy Rave was the best wrestler on Earth over the last 12 months won't come as a big surprise. Ever since I saw Rave's performance against Styles in Piedmont, I have actively sought out any match of his I could find. Along the way I discovered a multitude of good matches, quite a few great ones, and a degree of versatility and adaptability that is remarkably refreshing in a modern context.

Though I am probably one of the more obsessive followers of the Southern independent wrestling scene, I am not at all sure how many matches Rave worked this year. The delightfully resourceful CageMatch.net database has 60 documented, but I know of at least one that didn't make the list, a 20-plus minute match against a teenager named Matt Develine that was taken on a day's notice. In some respects it was Rave's most impressive performance of the year, as he did everything to build the local hero up before taking him down decisively. The match was exceptionally well paced, and see's Rave give a ton to an obviously green opponent, bringing all the potential out of Develine in the process. It's the kind of match that veterans should be having with newcomers on independent shows every week – they aren't.

If one assumes that Rave wrestled roughly 60-65 matches in 2015, I had the pleasure of seeing about half of them, and Develine was hardly the only young talent he worked. For Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment, Rave wrestled Ryan Vega, who has only been in the business for a couple of years

and only started to travel away from his home promotion in 2015. The match was great. Drew Adler has more time in the business, but is just now starting to develop into a top regional talent. He went 30 minutes with Jimmy in a legitimately excellent match that featured exciting matwork, strong build to big spots, sound psychology, and tremendous drama down the stretch. Rave worked up-and-comer Chris Crunk on another AWE show, in a genius match that had the feel of a Ric Flair v. Sam Houston match from the old Techwood Drive studios in Atlanta. Here Rave presented himself as the clear superior to Crunk, giving him just enough to look credible, before putting him away with a flurry that definitively communicated “I’m the boss.”



Rave as GWC champion. Photo Credit: Kody Wynne via gwhnewsandnotes.blogspot.com.

Perhaps the best example of Rave working with young talent and getting the most out of them was on display at the inaugural Scenic City Invitational. On the first night Rave had a Match of the Year candidate with Anthony Henry that saw Jimmy get legitimately knocked out by a late head kick. Despite being out of it, the two men actually incorporated the injury into the finish of the match. I

was there live and have been going to shows in the greater Chattanooga area for fifteen years – this was the only time I have ever seen a match receive a standing ovation.

Having worked a face v. face type of match on night one, night two saw Rave work as an outright heel against the local star Gunner Miller, using the actual injury he sustained the night before as a Trojan Horse to steal a win from Miller and nearly touch off a riot in the process. Rave capped off the event by winning perhaps the best four person elimination match I've ever seen over Kongo Kong, Corey Hollis, and Gunner, turning back babyface by match's end.

While some didn't care for the finish of the main event, the tournament saw Rave have a great match with Henry that has been used to expose him to other promoters, a good match and great angle with the still young Miller that could easily be used to draw a good house for a return match at the Empire Arena, and a very good 40-minute main event against three guys that work radically different styles.

It is this ability to adapt to setting, style, and opponent that makes Rave's 2015 so incredible. Expanding beyond the particulars of matches, here it is notable that for much of the year Rave was the top heel star and champion of Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment, while also being the top babyface star and champion of Peachstate Wrestling Alliance. The ability to play two drastically different roles at the same time is even more impressive when one considers that these two promotions have completely different visions, and bring in radically different audiences. This did not stop Rave from regularly putting on great, nuanced performances for both promotions.

This diversity of setting meant that Rave was asked to be an underdog babyface against someone like Geter in Peachstate, and a cheating jerk of a heel against someone like JT Dunn for AWE. Both promotions also leaned heavily on Rave at times to deliver lengthy matches, against very different types of opponents.

In AWE, Rave's longest match of the year was a 35 minute long bout against the Northeastern indie talent David Starr. The match was not part of any long term storyline, and yet it was a captivating affair that managed to effectively mix elements of comedy, brawling, mat wrestling, and dramatic spots without ever feeling muddled, let alone boring. It was a great match, the second best of the year in AWE, topped only by Rave's January bout against Kyle Matthews, another longtime rival who is among the best unsigned wrestling talents on the planet.

In Peachstate Rave's longest matches were against Tyson Dean. The three match series escalated in length each time, with the second match seeing Rave get busted open and going to a 30-minute draw. The final match of the trilogy was an Iron Man match that took place on the fourth of July. The match made good use of the hour, with an especially dynamic finishing run that played off of spots and events that had occurred in the previous matches. Tyson Dean lost the feud, but came out of it with the reputation of being one of the most improved and talented wrestlers in an absolutely loaded Georgia scene.

Rave's ability to work long against so many different types of opponents, and his strong psychology, pacing, and use of staple spots for maximum effect, remind me a great deal of Bryan Danielson in 2006. Rave is also similar to the Danielson of that era in having a multitude of signature spots, and smart finishes he can fall back on to get near falls or win matches, including "the smallest package in wrestling" which may or may not be a Danielson call back. The comparison to Danielson seems especially strong in AWE, where Rave has a cult like following as the heel ace, much like Bryan did in ROH during his title reign.

If one were looking at the raw metrics of my personal rankings, Rave's 2015 would immediately jump out. While I don't use star ratings, Rave was in sixteen of my top fifty Southern indie matches of the year, with six of those matches in the top ten. If I were to expand the field to the global level, he'd still have two or three matches in my top ten, and perhaps ten in my top fifty.

Still, what really sets him apart is the way he engages with a live crowd, and brings a match up and down to fit the setting. Having seen him in person four times this year, I was extremely impressed by the subtlety of his work. Yes, his opening grappling exchanges are often flashy and nice, but it is the way he uses those spots and that pace to build to a big singular moment that really makes him a master craftsmen. There is absolutely no one in wrestling who gets more out of a single punch to the nose, or stomp to the face than Rave does. In his arsenal they are highspots of a sort, illustrating that delivery is more important than flash.



Rave during his May 2nd time limit draw against Tyson Dean. Photo Credit Hart Photography.

Rave will talk to a crowd mid-match, but only as a means of latching on to their taunting or energy and channeling it back into the match. He never fixates on an individual that isn't his opponent, but he never leaves the crowd feeling like they are watching someone who is unaware of their presence. At the Scenic City Invitational he stomped Gunner Miller in the mouth while blowing a kiss at Miller's mother, and used my dad as a second opinion in a dispute with an official. That's not "hard work" but its smart work, and something that isn't done enough in a wrestling world dominated by a "play to the cameras" mentality.

It's actually possible that I'm underrating Rave's 2015. Several highly touted matches of his that were taped, have yet to emerge from the vault. These include a Cedric Alexander match from AWE that Georgia Wrestling History reporter Larry Goodman called a match of the year candidate, a bout v. KT Hamill that Scenic City invitational promoter Scott Hensley raved about on Twitter, a recent match in Alabama against Spi-ral that was talked up by multiple wrestlers and live attendees on Facebook, and his final Georgia Wrestling Crown title defense of the year against Gunner at the AWE "Show of the Year" event. In fact, it is arguable that Rave's biggest bout of the year hasn't surfaced either, as he worked an up to this point unseen on tape match against Davey Richards in Rome, Georgia on October 24th in front of nearly seven hundred fans.

Is this an exceptional year from Rave or just Jimmy doing what Jimmy does? The truth is that the answer may be both. In 2015 the number of talents on the independents who could work matches and play roles as diverse as what Rave did v. Chris Crunk, AJ Styles, Matt Develine, Anthony Henry, Kyle Matthews, Geter and others might have been large (though I am not at all sure of that),

but the number who were *willing* to do so was astoundingly small. That ability and willingness to shape his talents, spots, and approach to the situation he found himself in on a given night is why myself and others took note of Jimmy Rave in 2015. It's also the primary reason why he enters 2016 as both the Georgia Wrestling Crown champion, and the best wrestler in the world.

A Brief Interview With Jimmy Rave

Dylan Hales: I've seen you work this year [2015] as a tweener, a cowardly heel, a more hard edged heel, an underdog babyface, and probably a few things in between. Do you have a preference for any of these sort of "roles?"

Jimmy Rave: *My preference is whatever is going to work best for the situation I am in. In most cases I have a lot of creative freedom on the independent level so I adapt my role, as you put it, to the crowd I am in front of. I love being able to go out there and just wrestle but in the south that isn't always what is going to work. There's a lot of time I have an idea in my head and once I get in the ring I realize, "well that's not going to work" and I have to change it.*

DH: This may seem odd, but I'd like to talk a bit about the match with Matt Develine. The match is available on YouTube, and Matt is clearly a young kid, though one who appears to have potential. If I'm not mistaken you were booked for that show on relatively short notice. How did that match come about, and what was it like working in that setting against Matt? Building on that a bit you have worked a lot of young talent this year (Matt, Ryan Vega, Gunner Miller), and you seem to have shown a lot of trust in those guys to work with you and put on a good show. The result? Good matches. We hear a lot as fans about younger guys trusting the veterans to lead them and help them through, but how critical is it in your eyes for veterans to trust the young talent to hold up their end of the bargain?

JR: *Matt Develine's father, CC Develine, actually booked me in my second match ever. He helped me a lot when I first started wrestling. That day I had a show cancel on me and called them up to see if they had any leads on shows around here. They hooked me up with a show in Eton, GA that they had been doing. They worked it out so it would be myself and Matt Develine in the main event. Then we went out there and had a good little match. I love to be able to go out there and give back to a sport that has given so much to me. Also, wrestling Matt was a way to pay it forward. His dad took a chance on a 16 year old kid back in 1999 and this was my opportunity to do the same.*

Honestly, I put a lot of trust in most guys I wrestle. I think if you asked a lot of guys I've worked with they would tell you that. I feel like I know what people's strengths and abilities are so if something comes up and I really don't feel comfortable about it then it probably isn't going to go down. I think allowing people to have creative input in something they are a part of is extremely important for growth. Look at all the guys doing well in WWE or NXT: Kevin Owens, Sami Zyan, Cesaro, Daniel Bryan, Neville, Samoa Joe, Scott Dawson & Dasher Wilder. Then there's Jimmy Jacobs who is doing creative with that company. These are some of the most creative minds I've been around and I think that's what pro wrestling needs.

DH: You are one of the very few people wrestling regularly in 2015 who has worked several matches that have gone 30 minutes or longer. I myself have seen at least 5 of these matches, and probably another half dozen or more that have gone around 25 minutes. How many of these long matches (by contemporary standards) have been creative choices made by yourself? Do you enjoy working longer? Why do you think that working long isn't more common place in independent wrestling (or do you think it is and I'm missing the boat)?

JR: *Usually it's my choice, but there's a lot of time I am asked to do longer matches (like the 60 Minute match with Tyson Dean). I do enjoy having a slow build for a match. I think you can tell a great story if given time. Some stories can be told in 10-15 minutes but I think to have that main event, big match feel then 20-30 minutes is a good amount of time.*

I think good long matches aren't common place. A lot of times I see matches that go way too long and lose the crowd. I think it is an art form that is lost to keep a crowd engaged for a long period of time. I like to challenge myself to do that and I'm sure sometimes it doesn't work. There probably aren't as many because guys are not able to do them successfully. I used to watch Flair do the 60 minute draws and more recently Bryan Danielson do them. The crowds were right there with them the whole time, they had them! During the last 10 minutes of the 60 minute match we did this year the fans were on their feet. I really didn't think we would be able to do that because society's attention span is so short now. When a pro wrestler understands himself, the crowd and his opponent ... He can make magic every time.

DH: You once told me that when you go into a match your aim isn't to have a good match. I thought this was an interesting comment, and I was hoping you would expand upon what you think a wrestler's goal should be going into every performance. Is there a singular goal he should shoot for every time, or does it differ depending on his opponent?

JR: *My aim is also to wrestle for my position on the card, to get the match over and to work towards the crowd I'm in front of. When you do those things, great matches occur. I had to learn that because I simply cannot do the amazing things other guys can do! If guys shoot for those things every time then the things that create a great match fall into place.*

DH: You have had an interesting year in that you have been the top heel star for AWE (where you have a strong fan following even as a "bad guy") and one of the top babyface stars for Peachstate Wrestling Alliance. Obviously these two promotions have very different approaches and audiences, but I was wondering how this experience has been for you and if your approach to working one place is different from working in the other?

JR: *I really just use the same approach I just described. Whether I'm the hero or the villain it works the same way. But the last aspect I described, work towards the crowd you're in front of, is the key for these two different venues. AWE is much more of an in the know crowd and they want to be dazzled, whereas PWA is a much more old school crowd where they want good vs evil played out in front of them. I've seen guys fall flat for not knowing the difference.*

DH: A big part of seeing you live is that you actually engage with the crowd in a fashion that not a lot of wrestlers (independent or otherwise) seem to do any more. Do you think that direct engagement with the audience is central to "working" or is it something you do out of habit because of how you came up in the business?

JR: *I realized in my Embassy run at ROH that the fans want to be a part of the show, like when they threw toilet paper at me. The fans want to be engaged everywhere you go. I learned this a lot from sitting down and listening to Ricky Steamboat in ROH actually. What I realized though is to not make them the focal point. For example, I'll say something to the crowd and go right back to the focal point, which is wrestling. I never point one person out in the crowd and let them "get to me" because, well, I'm the star they aren't. Right?!? So engaging the crowd is one thing but a lot of guys focus on the crowd or someone in the crowd. Guess where the focus goes then? The crowd.*

DH: I have dubbed you "the ace of the South." That said I assume there are other places you'd like to work and people you would like to wrestle. Are there any places in particular you'd like to end up in 2016, or any wrestlers you would like to have a shot to work with?

JR: *To have the opportunity to wrestle on a larger level again would be awesome. Ring of Honor, Evolve, Lucha Underground, House of Hardcore, AIW, CZW, & Beyond Wrestling are definitely places I love and pay attention to so any of those places would be awesome.*

As far as wrestlers I would like to work with that's such a hard question. There are so many talented guys out there now. It's really an exciting time to be in pro wrestling. I would love the opportunity to work with guys like Sami Callahan, Lio Rush, AR Fox, Shane Strickland, Adam Cole, Bobby Fish, Kyle O'Reilly, Team IOU, Drew Gulak, Zack Sabre Jr, John Skylar, Ricochet, Moose, William Huckaby, & Joe Black but there's so many more.

DH: Final question - do standards change in pro wrestling? By this I mean do you think fans are looking for radically different things in the wrestling product now than they were twenty or thirty years ago, or do you think at heart what we want has never really changed?

JR: *At the heart I think things will never change. They want good vs evil, they want to see ability, and violence, and comedy ... They want the 3 ring circus. How we get there however is always evolving. Just like anything trendy or in pop culture it changes with the times so we as performers need to change. Those of us who do will continue to reinvent themselves and still be talked about at different stages of their careers.*

Follow Jimmy on Twitter: @TheJimmyRave

The Best of The South

If you are a fan of Southern independent wrestling, 2015 was a great year. Promotions all over the South regularly put on strong events, with good matches, in front of hot crowds of varying sizes.

In North Carolina both AML and CWF Mid-Atlantic presented regular television shows (available on YouTube), which featured a combination of regional and national stars delivering strong matches and quality storylines. PWX maintained its status as the super indie of the Carolinas and regularly brought in the top names in independent wrestling, while WrestleForce in South Carolina remained the top operation in my home state.

The North Georgia area continued to thrive with Peachstate Wrestling Alliance and Empire Wrestling Entertainment putting on several major events that are available on DVD. Empire was also host to the inaugural Scenic City Invitational, a first of its kind event in the South, which was nearly universally praised by those who attended the show live or viewed the event on VOD. Veteran promoter Woody Hullender has also remained very active in the area, continuing to promote shows under the DSCW moniker in Blue Ridge, with the rest of his operations around the state now being done under the GPW banner.

In Atlanta, the upstart Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment put on some incredible shows, consistently bringing in talent from outside of the area to work against top Southern independent stars like Chip Day, Jimmy Rave, and Kyle Matthews. Meanwhile just south of Atlanta there has been a wrestling resurgence in the town of Barnesville, where Luke Gallows' WrestleMerica promotion has done very good business.

While Anarchy closed up shop in Cornelia, the Church of Southern Wrestling venue was quickly taken over by a new group – Why We Wrestle – who appear to be starting things off with a bang by bringing in many of the most talented wrestlers in the region to compete in their title tournament.

East Tennessee was also host to several promotions of note, the most significant of which is NWA Smoky Mountain out of Kingsport, who sold out the Kingsport Civic Auditorium for their Collision Course event, and are probably the most under the radar success story in independent wrestling. Down in the Chattanooga area several groups have maintained weekly or bi-weekly schedules (most notably the aforementioned Empire though they technically run across the state line in Georgia), including Ultimate Extreme Wrestling, a group that started late in the year reviving the name of an old independent show that my family religiously attended for years.

In Middle Tennessee, NWA SAW has maintained a television presence and a core following, while the Western portion of the state still features old staples and legends like Bill Dundee, Jerry Lawler, Brian Christopher, and Derrick King.

The year also saw Southern talents like Fred Yehi and Pete Kaasa start up with Evolve, Georgia wrestling star Chip Day debut with CZW late in the year, former Anarchy stalwarts Xavier Woods and Dash Wilder become major successes in WWE and NXT respectively, Corey Hollis and John Skyler appear on NXT television, and Jimmy Rave emerged as one of the top in ring performers in independent wrestling.

With so much good stuff going on in the South, it feels like 2016 could be the year where Southern indies start to get a closer look from fans outside of the region. In an effort to help that along, and to document the great year that was, I have put together a list of the top fifty Southern independent wrestling matches of 2015. But before we get into the list, a few things should be addressed.

What we are missing

Some matches that received a great deal of praise from fans who saw them live either did not make tape, or have yet to be released. Perhaps most notable would be Empire Wrestling Entertainment's "Chasing The Grail," and Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment's "Show of the Year," both of which got great reviews from live attendees and had multiple matches that may have appeared on this list.

What I am missing

Perhaps controversially there is no PWX on my list, and I elected to exclude FIP. The lack of PWX should not be read as a knock on the promotion, but rather a failing on my part. While I saw some PWX this year (including the very solid series between Chip Day and Joe Black, which just barely missed representation on my final list), I did not see many of the most touted matches in real time, and ran out of time as I was scrambling to catch up at year's end. I will do my best to make sure this doesn't happen again in 2016.

As for FIP, I saw all but two of their shows in full, and enjoyed much of them. That said, their status within the WWNLive family, and the close working relationship they have with Evolve, makes them feel less "Southern" in orientation than any of other promotion based in the South. That is by no means an insult, and I readily concede it is a perception that may be at least partially unfair. In any event, the only matches I likely would have included would have been from the Fallout Six-Man tournament. For the sake of inclusion I will note that the Team PGP v. Team ACW match from

night one, and the tournament final, were absolutely among the best 50 matches I saw take place in an independent promotion based in the American South this year.

In part because of the imperfections and limitations that come with any personalized list, I decided to bring in some outside voices and perspectives. Each of the people I asked to participate is either a regular attendee of independent wrestling shows in the South, or directly involved with a Southern independent wrestling promotion(s) (or both!). Though I told them to pick only their absolute favorite or best match they saw from a Southern indie in 2015, some skirted the rules a bit, and others may have misunderstood my admittedly sloppy prose. Either way, I have included their contributions in full, and feel they only serve to buttress and enhance the list I have created. The following is my list of the top 50 Southern independent matches of 2015, in descending order. Match stipulation (where applicable), promotion where the match occurred, and date of the match are provided. Following my list, will be the written selections and contributions of the panel I referred to above.

50. Chip Day/Corey Hollis/Ryan Vega v. Corey Coxx/Chris Ganz/Mr. Sports Entertainment – Empire Wrestling Entertainment 7/11/15
49. Team IOU v. Wild Stallions – Empire Wrestling Entertainment 1/24/15
48. Caprice Coleman v. Cedric Alexander – America's Most Liked Wrestling 9/27/15
47. John Morrison v. Jason Kincaid – NWA Smoky Mountain 5/19/15
46. Chip Day v. Andrew Everett – Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment 4/17/15
45. Chip Day v. Shane Strickland – Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment 8/3/15
44. Southside Trash v. Trinity v. Young Lions v. Washington Bullets – WrestleMerica 5/9/15
43. Anthony Henry v. Jaxson James – Ultimate Extreme Wrestling 12/26/15
42. Jimmy Rave v. Sal Rinauro – NWA Atlanta 4/11/15
41. Gunner v. Ace Rockwell – Scenic City Invitational 8/8/15
40. Shaun Tempers v. Logan Alvey, Cage Match – Empire Wrestling Entertainment 4/4/15
39. Ethan Case v. Andrew Everett – CWF Mid-Atlantic 6/27/15
38. Jason Collins v. Ray Ray – Deep Southern Championship Wrestling 12/19/15
37. JT Dunn v. Chip Day – Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment 10/18/15
36. Jimmy Rave v. Davey Vega – Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment 10/25/15
35. Kyle Matthews v. Trevor Lee – Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment 4/17/15
34. Trevor Lee v. John Skyler – CWF Mid-Atlantic 3/14/15
33. Jimmy Rave v. Martin Stone – Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment 10/18/15
32. Sugar Dunkerton v. Lio Rush – Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment – 11/15/15
31. Jimmy Rave v. Chris Crunk – Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment 9/20/15
30. Jimmy Rave v. Ryan Vega – Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment 8/16/15
29. Kyle Matthews v. Talon Williams – Deep Southern Championship Wrestling 7/19/15
28. AJ Styles v. Sonjay Dutt – America's Most Liked Wrestling 4/19/15
27. Sal Rinauro/Nigel Sherrod/The Dragon/Dusty Mac/Tommy Too Much v. Rick Michaels/Ace Haven/Stupid/Iceberg/Simon Sermon, Street Fight – Peachstate Wrestling Alliance 5/16/15
26. Chip Day v. Fred Yehi – Southern Fried Championship Wrestling 10/2/15
25. Joey Lynch v. Drew Delight, 2/3 Falls – Empire Wrestling Entertainment 4/4/15
24. Jimmy Rave v. Chip Day – Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment 6/18/15
23. Cedric Alexander v. Jimmy Rave v. Kyle Matthews – Peachstate Wrestling Alliance 10/17/15
22. Rick Michaels/Ace Haven/Stupid/Iceberg/Simon Sermon v. Nigel Sherrod/Sal Rinauro/Dust Mac/The Dragon/Tommy Too Much, WarGames – Peachstate Wrestling Alliance 6/20/15
21. Damien Wayne v. Preston Quinn – Vanguard Championship Wrestling 3/7/15
20. Jimmy Rave v. Fry Daddy v. Kyle Matthews – NWA Atlanta 3/28/15
19. Kyle Matthews v. Brandon Collins – Deep Southern Championship Wrestling 12/19/15

18. Corey Hollis/Adam Page/John Skyler/BJ Hancock v. The Bravado Brothers/Chase Stevens/Cedric Alexander – WrestleForce 11/1/15
17. Kid Kash v. Chase Owens, Kash's career v. Ricky Morton's career – NWA Smoky Mountain 12/19/15
16. Trevor Lee/Chet Sterling v. Worst Case Scenario – CWF Mid-Atlantic 10/3/15
15. Jimmy Rave v. Drew Adler – AWN Adrenaline 1/16/15
14. Slim J v. Fred Yehi – Anarchy 1/24/15
13. AJ Styles v. Chase Owens – NWA Smoky Mountain 5/9/15
12. Jimmy Rave v. Tyson Dean, Iron Man Match – Peachstate Wrestling Alliance 7/4/15
11. Trevor Lee v. Brad Attitude – CWF Mid-Atlantic 8/8/15
10. Corey Hollis v. Gunner v. Kongo Kong v. Jimmy Rave – Scenic City Invitational 8/8/15
9. Jimmy Rave v. David Starr – Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment 11/15/15
8. Trevor Lee/Chet Sterling v. Nick Richards/Zane Dawson – CWF Mid-Atlantic 1/24/15
7. Jimmy Rave v. Tyson Dean – Peachstate Wrestling Alliance 5/2/15
6. Kyle Matthews v. Fry Daddy – NWA Atlanta 2/28/15
5. Jimmy Rave v. AJ Styles – Pro South 5/8/15
4. Slim J v. Fred Yehi, 2/3 Falls – Anarchy 3/28/15
3. Jimmy Rave v. Kyle Matthews – Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment 1/29/15
2. Jimmy Rave v. Anthony Henry – Scenic City Invitational 8/7/15
1. Rush v. Kyle Matthews, Street Fight – Empire Wrestling Entertainment 7/11/15

Dan Wilson

2015 was quite an interesting year in the southeastern independent scene, particularly in the state of Georgia. We saw the end of the staple standard bearer promotion in Anarchy wrestling and several promotions stepped their game up to try and claim the throne. Between Empire, Peach State, DSCW, AWE, Wrestlemerica, NWA Atlanta, PCW and the Anarchy Successor, Why We Wrestle etc I am hard pressed to think of a time when there was so much high quality indie wrestling in the state presented with several varieties and flavors.

I have been involved most heavily with Empire Wrestling out of Rossville, GA. 2015 marked for me a year of phasing out managerial duties and accepting (less hazardous) more administrative and announcing duties and I was pleasantly surprised at the warm response to my return to the booth. From that vantage point I was able to hone in on details that I may have otherwise overlooked, so picking a favorite match proved difficult.

There was the incredible SCI Tournament which is a must see for true wrestling purists where Jimmy Rave put on a two night clinic en route to victory. There was the amazing DragonCon "Tiny Dockery" memorial event in front of a couple thousand electric fans where I reunited with Tank and Iceberg, there were so many great moments; if I start going down the line I'll never shut up. But, my absolute favorite match of 2015 is the Kyle Matthews vs Rush Street Fight from Empire's Crazy From The Heat 2015.

This bout had all the ingredients of what makes wrestling great for me and it was an honor getting to help tell that story on commentary. It was a simple backstory. Kyle Matthews has been honored over the years by fans and his peers as perhaps the best pure wrestler in the state. He's earned those stripes competing against some of the best in the world. Rush, an Empire original and the first Empire Heavyweight Champion, took great exception to this and began to pick at Matthews. Rush got in his head and defeated him in a series of singles matches causing Kyle to struggle with the pressures of hype and even question his future in the sport.

It all led to a huge street fight at Empire's summer spectacular. This issue was now personal and the

only thing that could settle it was a knock down drag out brawl. These two men embodied pro wrestling to me on that night. A good guy vs. a bad guy, settling an overdue score, while telling a brilliant story to a brightly illuminated and bloody climax. Kyle pushed himself to darker places to compete with Rush's level of brutality (he finished him by kicking a handful of thumbtacks down Rush's throat) and while tempted, he didn't give in to the "dark side." I love great wrestling matches, but nothing says pro-wrestling to me like seeing two great in ring competitors turning up the heat and building it to a satisfying conclusion, not unlike your favorite TV drama. This match accomplished that and so much more.

Known as both "The Reverend" and "The Dragon," Dan Wilson has long been one of the top managers and commentators in the South. The former voice of NWA Wildside, is now the regular commentator for Empire Wrestling Entertainment's mega events, and also provided commentary for WHOO! Wrestling releases. He is also the host of the Midnight Black Mass Podcast available at www.youtube.com/user/PoddyHumor/videos . Follow him on Twitter @dragonsrejects.

Brett Wolverton

WrestleForce

Best Match of 2015: WrestleForce Champion The Southern Savior John Skyler, The Modern Classic B.J. Hancock, & WrestleForce Tag Team Champions Country Jacked (Adam Page and Corey Hollis) vs. The Natural Chase Stevens, Cedric Alexander, & The Bravado Brothers (Harlem and Lancelot Bravado)-All Star Survival Games Elimination Tag Team Match (Wrestleforce Survival Games, November 1, 2015, Spires Recreation Center, Cayce, South Carolina)

Every superstar in this match has held a WrestleForce Championship at one time or another (John Skyler the current Champion as well as former Tag Team Champion, B.J. Hancock a former co-holder of the Tag Team Championship, and current Tag Team Champions Country Jacked against former Champion Chase Stevens, former two-time Tag Team Champions The Bravado Brothers, and former two-time Champion Cedric Alexander). Everyone had something to prove in this one. Skyler wanted to prove he could beat Chase Stevens, The Bravados wanted revenge on Country Jacked for defeating them for the titles in August at Meltdown, Cedric Alexander was looking to get back in the title hunt and Hancock had been looking to put a series of embarrassing matches against Zane Riley, Eugene, and Ricardo Rodriguez behind him and be taken as a serious competitor.

Before Team Stevens could make it to the ring, Team Skyler announced that, with their assistance, The Natural Chase Stevens hadn't arrived to the Spires Rec Center and would be unable to compete in the match, leaving Team Stevens at a 3-4 disadvantage in this elimination contest.

B.J. Hancock would be the first eliminated at the hands of Cedric Alexander bringing the match to a three on three affair. John Skyler pinned Lancelot Bravado three minutes later making it 3 on 2 for Team Skyler. Harlem Bravado would pin Adam Page to bring the match back to a traditional tag team match before quickly being pinned by Corey Hollis leaving Cedric Alexander on his own to battle Corey Hollis & John Skyler. After almost ten minutes of a handicap match, Chase Stevens appeared and limped to the ring apron, with his knee heavily taped. Alexander would get a tag to Stevens, but the damage had already been done and Chase Stevens would pass out to a variation of the figure four leglock applied by Skyler. A miscue by Skyler lead to Corey Hollis being eliminated and Cedric Alexander quickly capitalized on the mistake and put Skyler away as well to be the sole

survivor for his team for the second year in a row.

Video of this match can be found at youtu.be/52zF5ugFpjA

ANARCHY WRESTLING

Slim J vs. Fred Yehi-Best Two out of Three Falls (Anarchy Wrestling Hardcore Hell 2015, March 28, 2015, Anarchy Arena, Cornelia, Georgia)

The early part of 2015 was dominated by a series of matches between Slim J and Anarchy newcomer Fred Yehi. While no stranger to the Georgia scene, Yehi was only a couple of matches into his run at Anarchy when he found himself across the ring from Slim J. Their initial contest earned both superstars a standing ovation. A decision was made to put the two in a best of five series. Slim J would win the fifth and final match via count-out, a decision he wasn't happy with and he asked for one last match with Fred Yehi, and this time it would be Best Two out of Three Falls at one of Anarchy's signature events, Hardcore Hell.

Each fall of this contest was different. The first saw Yehi use his technical ability (He's only the second wrestler in the seven year history of the Georgia Wrestling History awards to be voted Best Technician and the year he was victorious, he tied with Kyle Matthews, who had swept the award every year prior). The second fall would see both men switch to a submission based offense with the more experienced Slim J coming out on top. The third and deciding fall was a steady flow of action dazzling the Cornelia faithful. In the end, Slim J would try to counter a Yehi powerbomb with a headscissor, but Yehi rolled through and scored the pin and the series.

This match can be seen (in edited form) on Anarchy Wrestling's 481st episode of television at youtu.be/JuojNjfu1KU

Based out of Greenville, South Carolina, Brett Wolverton is the ring announcer and social media specialist for the South Carolina based WrestleForce promotion. Wolverton was also the co-host of the now defunct Anarchy wrestling syndicated television program, and is active as a ring announcer and commentator for various other promotions across the Southeast. Follow him on Twitter @BrettWolverton.

Brad Stutts

It's genuinely tough to pick one favorite or designate one as "the best" when we've been SO blessed this year to have SUCH a wonderfully talented, dedicated, rich talent pool grace our ring. It's been a joy to watch guys like Ethan Case, Smith Garrett and others develop into some of the best wrestlers on the circuit today. It's been a privilege to have guys like Cedric Alexander, John Skyler, Chase Owens, Prakash Sabar, and others come from all over because they want to be here.

I absolutely have to recommend the 30 Man CWF Rumble (ep #22 of #CWFworldwide: www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMMeGJo1wNY.) as that match really captures what CWF is about in a nutshell every year.

I also feel compelled to mention the Elimination Six Pack Challenge from Battlecade XVI, which airs on Wed., Jan 13 on our YouTube channel youtube.com/CWFMidAtlantic as it was such a joy to have John Skyler, Roy Wilkins, Lance Lude, Chet Sterling, Trevor Lee, and Brad Attitude in the same ring at the same time creating their art together and they painted one amazing picture for us all. In a year filled with wonderful moments and memories those are probably the two matches that best epitomize the spirit, the drive, and the work-ethic of the entire CWF Mid-Atlantic crew.

Brad Stutts is a commentator and matchmaker for the critically acclaimed CWF Mid-Atlantic. He has worked for several other independent groups based out of the Carolinas including OMEGA and PWX. You can follow him on Twitter @Stuttsy.

Josh Wheeler

Jimmy Rave v. Chip Day - One week after Dusty Rhodes passed we converged on the historic Masquerade. A venue that launched so many music careers was now the scene of crowning our first champion. The show was "To Be the Man" and after two grueling rounds a hobbled Chip Day took the fight to a man he never beat, a man he looked up to, and a man for years he called "brother". But on June 18th, Chip Day fell short again, and a triumphant savior of Atlanta Wrestling ascended to his throne as the personification of RESURRECTION – personal and professional but also geographical. On June 18th Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment became more than just a showcase of Southern Talent, it became a place where wrestling was alive and well.

Josh Wheeler is the promoter of the Atlanta Wrestling Entertainment promotion, which put on many of the best matches and events in the state of Georgia in 2015. Follow him on Twitter @JoshVonWheeler and AWE @ATLWrestlingEnt.

Scott Hensley

My favorite live Southern Indy match of 2015 was the three-way battle I witnessed between Champion Jimmy Rave and challengers Cedric Alexander, and Kyle Matthews at Peachstate Wrestling on October 17. The match was compelling and the dynamic was a little unusual, as all three were fan favorites. It had a big match feel, because I think most people there knew that they were watching something special between three of the best, as they traded stiff strikes and worked through skilled sequences as a fast pace that impressed.

Scott Hensley is a Chattanooga based ring announcer and commentator who has worked with various promotions in Tennessee and Georgia. In 2015, Hensley promoted the Scenic City Invitational tournament in conjunction with Empire Wrestling Entertainment. Follow him on Twitter on @ScottCHensley.

John Moorehouse

NWA Smoky Mountain Match of the Year: AJ Styles vs. Chase Owens, Collision Course 10, 5/9/15

I was fortunate enough to be ringside commentating at almost every NWA Smoky Mountain event in 2015. I saw a lot of very entertaining matches, but this battle between Styles and Owens stood out above the rest. Styles was IWGP Heavyweight Champion at the time and brought that strong style to Kingsport in a match that raged back and forth and spilled outside of the ring. Owens came up on the losing end, but earned the respect of everyone in the Civic Auditorium – Styles, included. Coincidentally, Owens would join Styles as a member of the Bullet Club in New Japan later in the year.

John Moorehouse is the lead commentator and director of website content and social media for NWA Smoky Mountain Wrestling. Follow him on Twitter @john_moorehouse.

Al Getz

Looking at Peachstate Wrestling Alliance, WrestleMerica, and NWA Atlanta, the match that stands out most to me is the 60 minute Iron Man match between Jimmy Rave and Tyson Dean from Peachstate on July 4th.

The match was a culmination of a several month long angle between Rave and Dean, plus an even longer storyline of the redemption of Rave, which was rooted in reality.

The match itself started very slowly, but at no point dragged, and the crowd peaked at all the right moments. Several nods to past spots and events were included, and the post-match show of respect opened the door for the next chapter in both men's storyline arcs.

Al Getz is one of the top managers in the state of Georgia, where he worked for NWA Atlanta, Peachstate Wrestling Alliance, and WrestleMerica regularly in 2015. The proprietor of the Southern indie info service WHOO! Wrestling, Getz released and did commentary on this year's inaugural Scenic City Invitational tournament, as well as the Jimmy Rave v. AJ Styles match from Piedmont, Alabama in May. Follow him on Twitter @WhooWrestling

Kris Zellner

Matt Hardy vs. Tyson Dean - 8/15/15 WrestleMerica had already run three shows in Barnesville, Georgia growing each time but this show was the biggest one yet, as Matt Hardy easily drew the biggest crowd of the year for the upstart promotion.

At the time of the match Tyson was the crown jewel of Al Getz Enterprises and the top heel in the promotion, so he was a natural choice to face Hardy. Dean has become such a good worker and was the right choice to have a good match with Matt.

Hardy had been working for TNA for a while and you could tell how motivated he was to be working in front of a red hot crowd that actually paid to see him. Having already killed it at the gimmick tables, the match was gravy to him. Hardy went out and had a damn good 15+ minute match with Dean as the fans ate out of their hands throughout. Hardy would win of course and after the match, Getz's charges attacked Hardy, but Dean wouldn't join them and actually helped Hardy in a shocking face turn which changed Dean's trajectory in the promotion, as he went from the top singles heel to pretty much the top babyface not named Doc Gallows and he has flourished in the role since.

WrestleMerica had a tremendous 2015 in Barnesville, Georgia drawing no less than 300-350 and that was their first show. 2016 should be even better and starting off with A.J. Styles vs. Jimmy Rave on January 8th is a great way to get it going.

Kris Zellner is a wrestling historian and host of the award winning podcasts Between The Sheets and Exile On Badstreet, available via PlaceToBeNation.Com. Follow him on Twitter @KrisZellner.

Woody Hullender

DSCW

I have run so many shows this year they kind of all run together. My two favorite DSCW shows would be The Pure Wrestling Classic II and Woody's Birthday Bash.

The Pure Wrestling Classic is an annual tournament where I remove the top rope and the guys have to use their mat skills and no high flying is involved. In this tournament there is great talent such as Kyle Matthews, Kameron Kade, Ray Fury, Jason Collins, Shane Marx and others. It's always good to see the guys get back to their roots.

Woody's Birthday Bash has special meaning to me because all of the guys really pulled together and worked their hardest to put on a great show for me. The whole show flowed well and went off without any hitches. There were featured matches like Kyle Matthews VS Brandon Collins, The Ultimate Underdog Ray Ray VS Jason Collins, also The Good Old Boys presented me with a cake, but out came Logan Chase III with Leroy Lewis and Chip Hazard to jump The Good Old Boys and put Cousin Shaggy's face in the cake to set up a six man tag match for later in the show. It's been a great year for DCSW and hoping for an even greater 2016.

GPW

Georgia Premier Wrestling started off 2015 swinging for the fences and has been a success. My two favorite shows would be Fighting For A Cause (a show for Relay For Life) raising over \$2200 for RFL, and our July show in Jasper, GA at the Pickens County Middle School.

Fighting For A Cause wasn't a flashy card by any means, but it was definitely a success. Kyle Matthews took on Talon Williams tearing down the house. Cyrus The Destroyer with Logan Chase III had an amazing big man little man match with Torque. It was a blessing to help run an event like this for such a great cause.

The July show in Jasper, GA had some great matches and a huge crowd of roughly 350 featuring Mad Man Pondo VS Brad Cash. These two fought all over the building and really delivered the goods. Also on the show, Dementia De Rose and Crazy Mary Dobson had one of the most enjoyable ladies matches that I've ever seen. These two girls brought their A-game and had a spectacular match.

“Big Wood” Woody Hullender is one of the most prolific and successful promoters in the Southeast, co-owning and operating both DSCW and GPW. A retired professional wrestler, Hullender’s twenty-five plus year career has seen him work against, train, or mentor most of the top talent in the South. Follow him on Twitter @LUMBERJACKWOODY.

Kerry Awful

NWASAW

Cookville, Tennessee

7/26/2015

youtu.be/0jzpVDCPbFE

I was not present for this match live. Jeremiah Plunkett called me shortly after the match had happened to tell me about it. NWA-SAW is a former home promotion of myself and my tag partner [Nick Iggy], and has made its self a standout of the new NWA regime. This was the culmination of the new National Heavyweight Championship. For anyone without background information –

This was pre-Bulletclub Chase Owens, but he had already gone overseas to work for New Japan. You can tell by his home stretch of near falls. Arrick "The Dragon" Andrews is a staple of Middle Tennessee wrestling and has been a high level talent for the better part of a decade, but don't let that fool you, he is well travelled and has had his hand in nurturing young talent in the area. He has a very "WWE Main Event" flavor to him. Most known for his work as a heel, he is extremely over as a babyface on his home turf. Chase Owens is referred to as "The Crown Jewel of The NWA". Stateside he is the cornerstone of Tony Given's well respected NWA Smoky Mountain and one of the prize students of Ricky Morton.

What makes this match so special is that it embodies the evolution of the modern southern wrestling scene in Tennessee. Don't get me wrong, there is tons of beautiful gaga that makes the match so wonderfully southern in its presentation (EX: Chase hitting a double axe handle "I'm better than Macho Man! Why? Because I'm still breathing," or Chase literally knocking a bottle out of a child's hands just for Arrick to rectify the infraction by delivering the bottle back to the mother with child in hand and giving a Clint Eastwoodesque cool, calm, and collected nod), but they merge transitions into such crisp near falls that it leaves you questioning when the finish is actually going to happen. The smug demeanor of Chase just oozes from every pore, and Andrews constantly battling with every fiber of his being is the classic struggle of good vs evil done so right that it's hard for this match not to be a success.

The thing that truly sets this match apart though is the investment of the crowd. Great pro wrestling matches get turned mediocre when there isn't a correct response from a crowd to feed off of. You live through the match with the crowd as they stay on edge until the bell rings.

This is a match that deserved to have as many eyes on it as possible, and truly deserves your time. *Kerry Awful is a professional wrestler based out of Tennessee. With his partner, Nick Iggy, he is one half of the well-traveled, and widely praised, Team IOU. Follow him on Twitter @kerryawful.*

EVOLUTION OF EVOLVE

BY BILL THOMPSON

Take a trip back in time with me to the second weekend of May in 2014. EVOLVE Wrestling held a pair of events that weekend. Some of the wrestlers who appeared that weekend included; JT Dunn, Rich Swann, Johnny Gargano, Jigsaw, Chuck Taylor, Uhaa Nation, Anthony Nese, Drew Gulak, AR Fox, and the Bravado Brothers. Not necessarily a bad grouping of talent, but a collection of wrestlers who were in line with the vision of EVOLVE Wrestling and its lead booker, Gabe Sapolsky, at the time. Every one of those men works, or can work, a style with a heavy influence on fast moving, highly athletic spots. This is the style that EVOLVE had become known for; it was the style that the fans expected from the promotion.

One need look no further than Johnny Gargano to find the very embodiment of the high flying, fast moving, more spot based style of wrestling that defined EVOLVE for much of its early existence. I've never hidden the fact that I do not care much for Gargano as a wrestler, and when his style represents your promotion there's a high probability that I will not be watching it regularly. Such was the case for my relationship with EVOLVE around May of 2014. Outside of a match sent my way every now and again, I didn't view EVOLVE as a promotion worth the time to check out.

Others seemingly came to the same conclusion, albeit for different reasons. The scoring system that EVOLVE Wrestling operated under had become a heavy burden to the cohesiveness and continuity of the promotion. Numerous times announcements had been made that everything was being reset and that with a fresh start all issues would be resolved. Reading Tweets at the time, this couldn't be further from the truth.

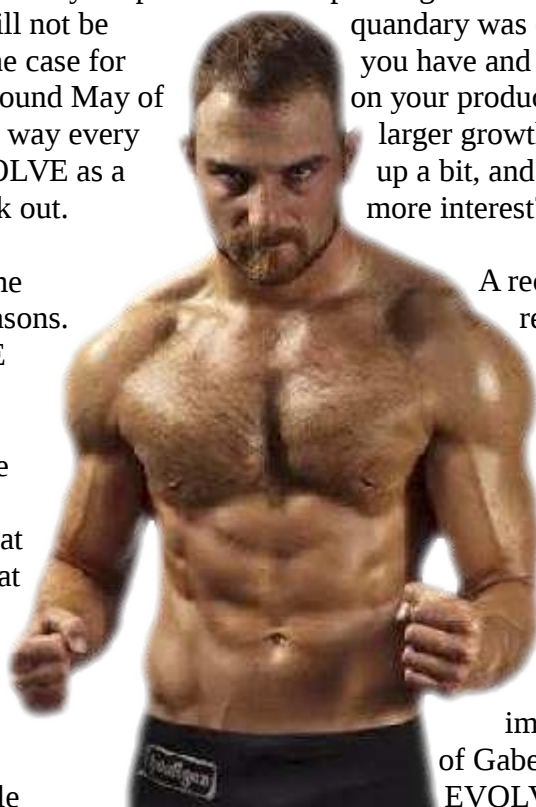
Perhaps I am falling prey to bubble

mentality here, but every Tweet I read about EVOLVE spoke of a promotion that had lost the interest of the fans.

It would have been easy for Gabe to keep things going the way they were. The fans still popped

for Gargano after all, and they loved the high flying antics of a Ricochet and AR Fox. But, the all-important buzz that an indie promotion needs to sustain itself had all but left EVOLVE Wrestling. What did it matter if people enjoyed Gargano if they didn't enjoy the promotion as a whole?

The easy answer to the question above is that it didn't matter much, if at all. World Wrestling Entertainment has provided the blueprint for steady business for years now. At the same time they've provided a blueprint for stagnant booking and reliance on old stars consistently driving viewers away. EVOLVE Wrestling wasn't operating on the same scope as WWE, but their quandary was essentially the same. Stay with what you have and maintain a respectable number of eyes on your product while sacrificing any chance for larger growth. Or, try something new, shake things up a bit, and see if maybe your product garners more interest?



A recent conversation with Gabe Sapolsky revealed that he knew he needed to change things up around the weekend of WrestleMania XXX. The larger World Wrestling Network umbrella of promotions put on an event called A Wrestling Odyssey that weekend. One match on that card featured WWN newcomer Timothy Thatcher versus the aforementioned Drew Gulak. It was a match that was well received by fans, but more importantly it sparked something inside of Gabe. In Thatcher he saw the future star of EVOLVE Wrestling and in the match worked

by Gulak and Thatcher he saw the future of EVOLVE Wrestling itself.

Everything changed for EVOLVE Wrestling on their August 2014 event, 31: Hero vs. Galloway. Sandwiched around the typical EVOLVE product of Matt Sydal versus Johnny Gargano and the Premiere Athlete Brand versus the Inner City Machine Guns was the Style Battle and Drew Galloway as a new title contender. In a most innocuous way, at least from the outside, Gabe had begun the process of shaking EVOLVE up.



EVOLVE Champion, Timothy Thatcher. Photo Credit: Modern Myth Photography.

The three key wrestlers in the Style Battle were Gulak, Thatcher, and Biff Busick. They had become known throughout the independent scene for wrestling a heavy grappling style. Bereft of the more commonplace highspots they wrestled a style more akin to World of Sport of Catch-as-Catch-Can where the focus is on hold for hold wrestling and big moments as opposed to death defying spots. They were called throwbacks by some, boring by others, and a welcome infusion of new blood by most. At first they only had one another, and the product appeared ready to stall before it even had a chance to restart as a result.

That is where Galloway came into play, because he wasn't a grappling guy. He's shown that he can adapt his style to work with heavy grapplers no problem. However, for the most part Galloway is a burly brawler who throws heavy strikes and wrestles more like Steve Williams than Steve Wright. He was fresh blood as well, a WWE castoff whom Gabe decided upon as the man to bring in the next era of EVOLVE Wrestling.

The importance of Galloway cannot be overstated. While Gabe maneuvered the pieces of his promotion to their new positions Galloway provided stability and let fans know that things were changing. He delivered in the ring as well, and gave fired up promos that conveyed to fans that EVOLVE was the place to be on the indie scene. He may not be the face of EVOLVE as I type this, but without Drew Galloway there's little chance that EVOLVE would be in the position it now holds.

With Galloway in place, and the new grapplers doing their thing Gabe now moved to provide the most important aspect of EVOLVE's new look, variety. He brought in guys like Roderick Strong, TJ Perkins, and Zack Sabre Jr. They were good indie names, but they could also work the emerging grappling heavy style or any other style thrown their way. Guys like Tracy Williams, Jonathan Gresham, and Matt Riddle were brought in to bolster the ranks of grapplers. Established EVOLVE stars like Gargano and Chris Hero were kept around both to work with the new guys and to bring their own voice to the party.

The ranks filled up and let out on a consistent basis. Through it all Gabe kept one thing consistent; the fans could expect to see an assortment of match types when they tuned into an EVOLVE show. Grappling has become the heavy style of the promotion, but on any given card you're just as likely to see Peter Kaasa flying all over the place as Hero slugging dudes in the face, Galloway destroying Caleb Konley in a brawl, or new talents like Lio Rush or Fred Yehi proving their wares. EVOLVE had become what all promotions clamor to be; a little bit of everything for everyone.

There are still kinks in the armor of EVOLVE. The crowds they draw remain questionable. I've been told that the streaming audience is respectable and has actually grown over the past couple of years. At the same time Gabe, and co-owner Sal Hamaoui, continue

to run terrible venues in Florida that draw the same two hundred fans who are content to sit on their hands no matter what match is put in front of them. All the while I read the reviews from other wrestling sites, check out the Twitter, and listen to podcasts where more people than ever come away with a positive impression of the EVOLVE product. Imagine how much better the product would come across with live fans who actually cared to watch pro wrestling?

The viability of the grappling style remains to be seen. I'm a huge fan of that style, but it still isn't clear if the style will ever be more than a niche presentation on the indie market. While it's true that Gabe has hitched EVOLVE to the main representation of that style in Timothy Thatcher, he's been smart enough to reboot EVOLVE around a combination of approaches and styles. If someone doesn't necessarily care for the grappling style there's always an Ethan Page character driven match to watch, or a Drew Galloway brawl, or match from Fred Yehi that contains a more Southern bend to it. Grappling may not end up being a massive draw or crowd pleaser, but EVOLVE will not live or die based on what people think of grappling.

As we end 2015 and turn towards 2016 I eagerly anticipate what Gabe and company have in store for the new year. I have no qualm stating that as I have watched EVOLVE over the past year and a half it has risen from a sputtering indie promotion to one of the best overall promotions in the world. I may not always enjoy every match or every wrestler, but I almost always enjoy every card. The evolution of EVOLVE has resulted in a wrestling promotion worth watching every time out, and that's no small feat.

Cheers,
Bill Thompson



Zack Sabre Jr., EVOLVE 2015. Photo Credit: Bryan Wright Photography.

PURO YEAR IN REVIEW

NJPW YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH RYAN CLINGMAN

Much like 2014 before it, 2015 is a difficult year to assign a binary, good or bad, constructive or destructive, value for New Japan Pro-Wrestling. Neither year was a 2012 or 2013, where strides in the realms of content distribution, strong leadership, match quality, and attendance in comparison to previous years made them clear net positives for the company.

This isn't to say, however, that 2015 was a disappointing or mediocre year for New Japan. Rather, it was a year of many stories. Where they built the likes of Honma and Ibushi off of the successes of prior years, an already deprived heavyweight tag team division was left to atrophy to its lowest depths of the decade. They drew an impressive 30,000 plus to the Tokyo Dome on January 4th, but average G1 attendance numbers fell. It was a year littered with dualities, and how 2015 will be evaluated historically is a question to which no one has a well-defined answer.

WrestleKingdom 9 - Best Show of 2015, Four Days In

The 2015 January 4th Tokyo Dome show was a return to form, after 2014 saw, what many would call a disappointing show, headlined by Hiroshi Tanahashi and Shinsuke Nakamura. Whilst failing to reach the heights of WrestleKingdom 7 in 2013, what may have been one of the best shows of the past five years, this year's show came closer than any other major event of the past couple of years – and featured one bout that bested everything that the 2013 Dome Show had to offer.

It was a show that captured much of WrestleMania's gravitas, whilst producing more quality matches from top to bottom than any WWE show has in years. This is not to undermine WrestleMania 31, a good show, but WrestleKingdom 9 safely sits several levels higher.

The show was headlined by two fairly different encounters, the co-main event in Shinsuke Nakamura versus Kota Ibushi for the IWGP Intercontinental Championship, and the main event rematch of the 2013 Dome main event in Hiroshi Tanahashi versus Kazuchika Okada for the IWGP Heavyweight Championship. In many years Tanahashi-Okada would have been a decisive match of the year, but didn't win over any critics of their prior performances. Shinsuke Nakamura-Kota Ibushi, however, was a transcendent match in many respects. Regardless of the regular and often times valid critiques of both men, Nakamura-Ibushi was as universally beloved a match that we are likely to see this decade.

Ibushi failed to capture the IWGP Intercontinental Championship, but in losing, more so than in their G1 matches, or in his DDT and NJPW matches with Okada for the IWGP Heavyweight Title, was made a superstar. Ibushi has improved steadily throughout the course of his New Japan career,

but matured far more rapidly since following Prince Devitt to heavyweight in 2013. It was during that year's G1 that in the eyes of many, including myself, Ibushi went from an exceptional flyer with an inconsistent match catalogue, to a great all-round performer. And it was his first match with Nakamura during the 2013 tournament that earned him much of that respect.

Becoming a superstar is a different matter entirely, and whilst Ibushi was an upper mid-carder and occasional maineventer following that run, his return from concussion in late 2014 to challenge Nakamura to the Dome match, the matches leading up to the WrestleKingdom, and the January 4th match itself showcased him as something more, as perhaps a future IWGP Heavyweight Champion.



Kota Ibushi gives Shinsuke Nakamura a hard slap during their 2015 Tokyo Dome classic.

After his Tokyo Dome loss, Ibushi had proven himself as a complete performer, with some of the best facials in the business, and as perhaps the most outstanding worker amidst a roster of great ones.

Apart from the Tokyo Dome's artistic success – derived predominantly from the main and co-main events, a grappling battle between Minoru Suzuki and Kazushi Sakuraba, and NEVER title bout featuring Togi Makabe and Tomohiro Ishii – was also a financial triumph. Whilst attendance numbers are not exact, the general consensus was that the show drew approximately 35,000 fans, the vast majority of which were payed. This was a decent increase over 2014, and was the largest drawing wrestling show worldwide since the mid-2000s, excluding WrestleMania, of course. The show was also a success on American pay-per-view, which was promoted without television through a partnership with Jeff Jarrett's otherwise unnewsworthy GFW, with English announcing courtesy of Jim Ross and Matt Striker.

Despite this success, and reported offers from the likes of ROH and GFW to promote the 2016 Dome show, WrestleKingdom 10 will be available exclusively through New Japan World outside of

Japan.

Whilst New Japan has been somewhat complacent in some facets of their international expansion (such as pay-per-view) an idea that Kidani has, since the Bushi Road buy-out in 2012 been publicly vocal about, other ventures both in Japan and abroad fared quite differently.

Business Experimentation & Journey to the West

With New Japan experiencing significant growth from 2012-2014, in order to ensure further progress in a region whose modern ceiling for pro-wrestling is yet to be defined, some innovation was, and still is, imperative. What Takaaki Kidani and company had to ensure was that the search for new and creative ways to grow the company didn't create instability in what has been a stable and strong promotion for years.



Kazuchika Okada and Shinsuke Nakamura prepare to lock up in the finals of the 2014 G1 Climax – a match featured on the season two finale of 'NJPW on AXS' series in August 2015.

One of the biggest stories, apart from the aforementioned Tokyo Dome partnership, was the company's continued and ever-growing relationship with Ring of Honor – the de facto number two promotion in the United States. Apart from the now annual Global Wars and War of the Worlds shows, a New York and Toronto double shot, now quadruple shot, the likes of Kazuchika Okada and Shinsuke Nakamura also appeared on a couple of secondary TV tapings in August. This still strengthening relationship places New Japan's biggest stars in front of what is, realistically, their largest possible American television audience at present.

Ring of Honor, whilst the largest, was not the only televised program airing footage of New Japan talent in 2015. In late 2014, New Japan inked a deal with AXS TV, the former HDNet, for a program which debuted in January featuring Mauro Ranallo and Josh Barnett on commentary – quite easily the best English television announce duo on a major stage this year. The downside of

the program was the months, and at time years long, delay between the date on the original matches and AXS air-dates. This made for a great "best of" type series for this era of New Japan, but only extenuated the already niche nature of the product.

New Japan also had an international presence outside of the United States, with Okada, Nakamura, Ishii, AJ Styles, and others appearing on several Revolution Pro shows throughout the year. Appearances of this sort granted even more momentum to what has been a blossoming UK scene.



Nakamura takes a big forearm in a match with Roderick Strong on May 16th (broadcast debut June 10th).

Of course the biggest of the company's experiments was New Japan World, the streaming service announced in December 2014. Born most assuredly from Takaaki Kidani's appreciation for Vince McMahon and the WWE, it shouldn't come as too much of a surprise that the service has many of the same difficulties as the WWE's streaming platform. Being primarily directed at a country with a far weaker history of pay-per-view was both a major positive and negative for NJPW World.

New Japan had arguably less to lose by streaming most every one of their major shows live, and some special shows, such as Tenryu's Retirement than WWE. With a less mature pay-per-view market, less of NJPW's business model hinged on the technology. Similarly, the WWE Network had a large PPV audience to cannibalise, where as even proportionally speaking, New Japan's had far less.

Less effort was made on New Japan's part to expand into markets outside of Japan than in previous years, with no English or foreign language translation offered for NJPW World, apart from Google Translate.

This lack of effort is not a deal breaker for the small core foreign fanbase, those who probably joined the site within a few months of its launch, but it may very well be for more casual or curious fans looking to give the product a chance.

Content wise, NJPW World is most everything that hardcore fans of the product could have hoped for, with what were traditional PPVs and iPPVs, the G1 (which was in previous years prohibitively expensive to watch in full), and additional archival content all available for ¥999. However, the

question of whether it was worthwhile from a company standpoint is just as pertinent a question for New Japan as it is for WWE.



2015 G1 Climax winner, Hiroshi Tanahashi, facing off with Kazuchika Okada following the champion's October 10th 'King of Pro-Wrestling' victory against AJ Styles.

A similarly bold move in the short term was revealed in part during WrestleKingdom, and in full during April's Invasion Attack show. The final three G1 shows took place in Sumo Hall, capping off an astonishing 19 show tournament with a seven show concurrent run in the general Tokyo region. Similarly bold steps were taken in 2014, when the Seibu Dome was booked for the G1 Finals. They filled approximately half of that 35,000 seat building, and achieved similar results during the 2015 G1 tour.

In addition to running seven shows in Tokyo (including a Yokohama show, which is close enough to Tokyo to cause significant audience cross-over) they ran in smaller towns than would generally be considered for the G1 – Beppu and Iwate, for example. This choice led to underwhelming crowd reactions for many first time match-ups and big G1 rematches, and even underwhelming houses in smaller venues. The first two Sumo Hall shows were only half and three quarters full, but the finals came just a couple of hundred short of a sell out.

More fans in total attended the 2015 G1 than any other of the era approximately, 71,000. This is an impressive increase over 60,000 in 2014, 50,000 in 2013, and 45,000 in 2012. But, 2015 was the third consecutive year to see a drop in average attendance per show – 5,000 in 2012, 5,600 in 2013, 5,000 in 2014, and 3,700 in 2015. 2014 was a better G1 attendance wise than 2012, but to conclude whether 2013, 2014, or 2015 drew better is difficult.

The healthiest of the results may be 2014, as it drew 20% more fans in total from 2013, whilst only dropping the average fans per show by approximately 11% or so. Though 2015 may have generated the most revenue, the 19 show model wasn't the healthiest of options, as more shows in smaller towns diminishes the overall quality of the tournament, which is itself a major drawing card.

Booking only one block per show didn't decrease injury rates either. Whilst the 2015 number may not have been objectively worse than that of 2014, diminishing attendance per show is a warning sign, not a major one at this stage, but a warning sign nonetheless.

Optimistically, New Japan's financials don't rest solely on the shoulders of the G1, and the company is intelligent enough in its general operations to make necessary changes to the tournament – perhaps the most important being to cut the tournament back down to a maximum of 12 shows, and spending less time in Tokyo.

The 25th annual G1 Climax wasn't the white hot affair those within the company were likely

expecting, but to say that it was cold would be unfair. Realistically, they had a good tournament that took but a couple of steps back on what has otherwise been a positive and consistent walk of progress.

They experimented some with their existing business models this year, from Pro Wrestling Tees to AXS and a 19 day G1, and the results were ultimately mixed. But, for a promotion seeking to break through a ceiling that they have perhaps yet touched, stagnation must be avoided.

Creative Stagnation

As bold as New Japan was with its business endeavours, it was complacent in its creative direction. Artistically speaking, New Japan was on point at many times throughout 2015 – they were willing to push Tomoaki Honma based on fan response alone, for example. However, much of the best talent in the company went underutilized, such as Yuji Nagata, whilst both tag team divisions continued to wither.



KUSHIDA vs. Kenny Omega at 'Destruction' on September 23rd – the site of KUSHIDA's first and last title defence of his first reign.

The singles junior division experienced a resurgence of sorts, although is still a division positioned a great deal lower than in 2010-2011, when it was much stronger, and the same can be said to an even greater extent in comparison to the prior decade. KUSHIDA, who has evolved from a very good to an outstanding worker in the past several years, when given a chance to work outside of the standard junior tag mould, picked up a fair amount of momentum in the second half of the year, and won the IWGP Junior Heavyweight Championship from Kenny Omega at Dominion in Osaka.

For whatever reason, KUSHIDA dropped the championship back to Kenny Omega but a month latter. Presumably, the switch was intended to break KUSHIDA down and build him back up for a big win at the 2016 Tokyo Dome show. This logic is flawed, however; historically speaking the Dome has not been the best of venues for juniors (although, this has changed in recent years), and keeping the championship on KUSHIDA for a longer period of time would have done far more for the division and KUSHIDA than a single WrestleKingdom moment could likely ever do.

Trent Barreta served as a welcome addition to the junior tag division, but unfortunately it remains shallow and unfulfilling, which is in no way the fault of the talent. The Young Bucks, Time Splitters (although Alex Shelley was out injured for three months), reDragon, and RPG Vice are essentially the only featured junior teams, working very similar matches on the same positions on the card, and all for approximately 15 or so minutes, with few exceptions. This has in turn created a one dimensional story-less division. It doesn't have to be this way, as Jushin Liger & Tiger Mask and Taichi & Taka Michinoku had a riveting program revolving around Liger's mask and the titles in 2012; and those two teams were more limited than any from the current core group.

The Junior Tag Team Titles have been relegated to the undercard on most NJPW shows since, at the very least, the time of the Forever Hooligan/Young Bucks matches. Surely it doesn't have to be this way, as the IWGP Tag Titles are often times featured towards the top of big ROH/NJPW joint shows. Although, ROH is a different product, one that has built itself around smaller stars like Bryan Danielson, Low Ki, Davey Richards, and Jay Lethal since its inception. New Japan has a storied history of junior wrestling, with Tiger Mask, Gran Hamada, Dynamite Kid., and others, serving as cornerstones of the early 1980s boom – one of the most successful runs in company history. Similarly, Jushin Liger and Great Sasuke were instrumental in the 1990s boom.*

Ailing the juniors is certainly not tradition or audience resistance. The division has been in decline for years, but the decision to bring Devitt and Ibushi up to heavyweight in 2013/2014 was a critical blow. With Ibushi and Devitt moving up with minimal weight gains, the IWGP Junior Heavyweight Title was made secondary – if Ibushi and Devitt were too good to fight for it in 2013/4, what makes either the singles or tag team titles any more than a stepping stone to the heavyweight division, a better booked Japanese variant of the X-Division Title?

The IWGP Heavyweight Tag Team Championships, are in worse shape than their junior counterparts, or at the very least have fallen from greater heights.

The Gedo/Jado era hasn't been particularly kind to tag team wrestling. The 2015 division was dominated primarily by Gallows & Anderson, a decent team, but no Bad Intentions, and most definitely not a team around which the division should be built. Their main opponents were Matt Taven & Mike Bennett, an act that doesn't complement the current promotional aesthetic, and doesn't contribute much work wise. The Kingdom is a blatant excuse to get the scantily clad Maria Kanellis time on big shows, which is acceptable on the periphery, but not in the main title picture.

Like most of the other traditional championships in the company, the IWGP Heavyweight Tag Team Titles were defended fewer times in 2015 than any year in recent memory due to the switch to two major shows per tour in 2014. They were defended five times in total, as was the IWGP Heavyweight Title, but unlike the singles championship, of those five occasions the tag titles were retained but a single time. The yearlong reign of Gallows & Anderson in 2014 was harmful to the championships, but constant hot-shotting is even more so.

Tag matches are booked involving major stars numerous times a year, and regardless of whether the team is Okada & Gedo, Tanahashi & Captain, Styles & Tonga, or any number of B and C show teams, the effort required to integrate their already existing tag team matches with the tag team division is minimal.

Bringing Karl Anderson up for a singles run would have been just as healthy for Anderson, as it would for Goto to be removed from the singles mix for a few months, and the same could be said

for Yuji Nagata, Togi Makabe, Katsuyori Shibata, and even Hiroshi Tanahashi and Kazuchika Okada depending on which portion of the 2015 singles picture you choose to focus.



Togi Makabe and Tomoaki Honma upon winning the NJPW World Tag League in December - earning them a shot at Guns & Gallows on January 4th 2016.

Are there signs of a decline in roster depth?

Many have expressed concerns over the year of an aging, injured, stale and unsustainable roster in NJPW. One of the loudest and most notable proponents of this view is Dave Meltzer, who has noted on several occasions that the 2015 New Japan roster is reminiscent of a late 80s Jim Crockett Promotions. The talent is great and is performing at an elite level, but have been at the forefront for years, and with a lack of younger talent to replenish the current supply, may be headed for a roster-driven down turn in the coming years.

These are real concerns; with AJ Styles discussing the possibility of retirement at some point within the next few years should his body fail to hold up, and Tanahashi turning 40 next year. Whilst still a top-tier performer, as the G1 showcased, Tanahashi was unable to perform at a main event level year round due to back injuries. Nakamura, four years Tanahashi's junior, is still physically worn. Hirooki Goto is younger than Nakamura and is the bridge between the Naito-Okada generation and the Nakamura-Naito generation, but for related reasons coupled with unfortunate career booking has never connected at the same level as the other two. With this in mind, there is definite credence to the views of Dave and others; observations from which they can infer an impending decline.

There are of course those who hold the opposite view, however, and whilst the future of the company's upper card is far from certain, I am still fairly optimistic for the future. It would be difficult to argue that Tanahashi is not physically broken, and is undoubtedly past his athletic prime, but I believe that he will still be able to perform when need be for the next several years. Regardless, the company hasn't been built around Tanahashi for several years, and nor should they have been.

The main event of the 2016 Tokyo Dome show, more so than New Beginning 2012, the 2013 G1 Climax, the 2014 Tokyo Dome Show, or even the 2015 Tenryu retirement match will be the official coronation of Kazuchika Okada as the top star of a company he already rejuvenated in 2012. Okada, unlike most anyone else on the roster, is capable of carrying the world's second largest wrestling promotion for the next decade and beyond. Thus, at the very least, New Japan will have a major draw and top star for the foreseeable future, provided that Okada can avoid serious injury and is sensible enough to avoid WWE.



Tomohiro Ishii and Tomoaki Honma ram heads in one of their three stand-out singles matches.

But, one star does not a great roster make, and even with Okada as a top star, if Tanahashi, Nakamura, and Styles depart from the title picture by 2017 or 2018, stars of a similar calibre will be required. Given that we are dealing with elite talent, some of the very best of their generation, this will be far from trivial, if at all possible. AJ Styles is a talent that can be more easily replaced than Tanahashi. But it is exceedingly rare for any performer, let alone a gaijin with notoriety exclusively at the TNA level, to connect with an audience to the extent that Styles has over the last several years, let alone as quickly as he did. They will eventually require a new gaijin star, and to wait for Styles' eventual departure would be a monumental gamble.

Anderson could step up, as he did so well in 2012 as a single, but he is not an AJ Styles, certainly not in this incarnation. The current selection is small, and with NXT cultivating top indie talent at a rate unheard of in recent years, will become minuscule.

This does not imply that there is no man suited for the role, however. Roderick Strong is the strongest American candidate for this role in 2015, as one of the most complete talents in the world. He is different from Styles in several respects, and may not connect at the same level. But, even if Strong cannot perform quite at the level of Styles in New Japan, he will, at the very least work at somewhere approaching that level, and as such should be New Japan's top Ring of Honor talent request of 2016.

Kota Ibushi, is a likely future superstar for the company. He is five years Okada's senior, but doesn't

have the same physical wear as a Shinsuke Nakamura (apart from a recurring shoulder injury), and if 2015 is anything to go by, will be just as good of an in-ring performer by the time he reaches 35 in 2017. More importantly, he has the star potential to draw from a similar audience as Hiroshi Tanahashi, and will most probably be IWGP Heavyweight Champion at some point.

Tetsuya Naito broke through what was for the past several years, a vanilla babyface ceiling that threatened to limit his career to that of an Hirooki Goto. He is in the process of finding himself as a heel, and could potentially become Okada's career rival everyone thought he would so easily prior to his 2012 knee injury.

2016 should also see New Japan send Yohei Komatsu and Sho Tanaka on their learning excursions, as Takaaki Watanabe returned in the later stages of the year as EVIL, affiliated with Naito's Los Ingobernables stable, and Hiromu Takahashi will return at the masked Kamaitachi. Whilst New Japan does not have a direct relationship with PWG, Ring of Honor does, which will hopefully allow for another excursion promotion for Tanaka and Komatsu – both should work more regularly than Watanabe and Takahashi did.

Creative Triumphs

For as hesitant as the promotion was creatively, 2015 still delivered on the overall artistic and performance end, although foreign perceptions may have changed due to several factors.

Apart from some of the overplayed programs throughout the year, namely Ishii/Makabe, Goto/Nakamura, Styles/Okada, and Tanahashi/Yano, a secondary factor contributing to fan burnout, particularly outside of Japan, was the introduction of NJPW World. The service has resulted in full, cheap, and immediate access to almost every show the promotion runs – including mediocre house shows, and minor spot-shows in smaller cities, for every tour. The overwhelming majority of fans who consume not only these shows, but also A and B level events including their undercards will have eventually succumb to overexposure.

Had content been this easily accessible in 2012 and 2013, perhaps those years would be discussed with a lesser degree of reverence, not because they weren't great, but because we would have seen much more of what was produced between the high notes.

Most of their higher end content was standout this year, looking past the post-2014 undercards, which have been largely unnewsworthy on B and C shows. As we discussed at the beginning of the recap, Ibushi had one of the better in-ring years of anyone, able to serve as a versatile base for any style, much like a Roderick Strong or Zack Sabre Jr.. Whether it was a Makabe brawl, Shibata fight, traditional Naito or Tanahashi match, or a high drama, high stakes, classic with Nakamura, Ibushi could do it all, not only demonstrating for the second year in a row why he isn't just a misplaced flippy junior, able to be carried when need be, but why he is one of the best in the world.

Personal feelings on the Tomoaki Honma domestic abuse allegations aside, he was one of the most consistently over members of the roster of the past couple of years, despite his inability to win a single match in the 2014 G1. When Ibushi forfeited the 2014 G1, Honma served as the replacement, which began a year long storyline of Honma seeking his big singles win. Honma was partnered with Tomohiro Ishii for a series of wars scattered throughout 2015, and got his big emotional victory against Tomohiro Ishii at Korakuen Hall during the G1 Climax. He then went on to close the year, even after the domestic abuse allegations that NJPW didn't seem to be all too trusting of, by

winning the World Tag League with former tag team partner, Togi Makabe.

With the exception of PWG, who in terms of putting shows together, have numerous advantages over most every other promotion in the world, NJPW has been the best big show company of 2015. Every tour closing show was all but guaranteed a couple of great matches, where as some, like the aforementioned Tokyo Dome show, as well as Dominion in July, offered far more. But due to over exposure, and running two major shows per tour, like 2014 before, they produced the same amount of quality content as 2013, but distributed it over twice as many shows. This created a false and unfair perception of a wholly weaker product, when 2015 was, at the very least, an equal to 2014 in-ring.



The new and improved heel scumbag Tetsuya Naito.

Conclusion & 2016 Prospects

New Japan was a company run well in 2015. Kidani and company took risks when they should have, and were otherwise reserved. This didn't lead to the best results possible, but was another progressive step towards an even more successful company. Creatively, less stood out, but we had access to more content than ever before.

Are there still concerns on the horizon? Most certainly. The company may encounter star power related issues in the coming years, and sacrificed a good revenue stream in iPPV and traditional PPV for a service that will take many years, if ever, to be as successful. The product felt stale and worn to a much larger degree than in years past, but even so, they managed to produce not only some of the best shows of the year – but one of the best matches of this decade in Ibushi-Nakamura.

Time may be kinder to an already positive 2015, but the biggest question leading into 2016 and beyond is whether 2015 was the start of a plateau, the beginnings of a decline, or a smaller growth step than in years past. Intuitively, I lean slightly towards the latter. The big matches and shows delivered even if some of the top programs were overplayed, and leadership showed clear intent to fend-off the ever-present risk of stagnation without taking undue risks – Kidani and company are

hard to count out; expect a strong 2016 and 2017 ahead.



Hiroshi Tanahashi, victorious over Shinsuke Nakamura in the finals of the 2015 G1 Climax at Sumo Hall.

AN INTRODUCTION TO 2015 BIG JAPAN BY ALAN COUNIHAN

There's something about Big Japan that I just can't put my finger on. Something that really makes it appeal to me. The obvious is the hard-hitting, intense performances by their wrestlers, but that goes without saying. A lot of wrestlers and promotions around the world provide that, and while I always love it no matter where it is, there's just something about it in a BJW ring that makes it special.

If I was to try to describe what this magic ingredient is, I would say it's a feeling of genuine, honest enthusiasm that their wrestlers bring to their matches. There's just a feeling when you watch Yuji Okabayashi screaming to psych himself up that has me believe he's truly living in that moment and fully invested in the battle he's in. Okabayashi might be the hardest working wrestler in the world, busting his ass in every match he's in. He's the top guy now in BJW and all of the wrestlers underneath him follow in his footsteps. The result is a roster of hard working bad asses, which may not have the most depth, but one where you can put the same guys against each other in different combinations over and over, and it's great every time.

SINGLES GOIN' STEADY~!

It was a great year for BJW in the singles ranks. After a disastrous 2014 for the Strong World Heavyweight Title which saw injuries and retirements kill the momentum of the belt, 2015 saw it rebound in a big way. There was legitimately not a single title match that was anything less than great. Here's some of the best.

Shuji Ishikawa vs. Yuji Okabayashi (February)

Okapi tries his damndest to knock down the wall of a man that is Shuji Ishikawa. He comes as close as is humanly possible, but it wasn't enough and Shuji retains.

Shuji Ishikawa vs. Daisuke Sekimoto (March)

An absolute epic! Daisuke knocks down the wall after

one of the craziest matches of the year.



Daisuke Sekimoto on his way to knocking down "the wall" that is Shuji Ishikawa.

Daisuke Sekimoto vs. Yuji Okabayashi (July)

The marquee BJW match of the year as they made their debut in Sumo Hall. Protégé went up against mentor and finally took the throne for himself.

Yuji Okabayashi vs. Hideyoshi Kamitani (December)

Kamitani is the youngster on the rise and this was a big chance for him on a big show. But for Okapi it was a chance to firmly cement himself as the man to end the year and boy does he ever.

It may not have been for the title but there's one other match that needs to be mentioned. Okabayashi going up against Abdullah Kobayashi Jr. in August in what ended up being one of the miracle matches of the year and a testament to what an incredible worker Yuji is. How he got the match he did out of Abby Jr. I'll never know.

TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK~!

BJW, never gets credit for it, but has had one of the best tag team scenes in wrestling for the better part of 10 years. 2015 may have been its peak year in that regard.

The two corner-stones of the division were The Twin Towers (Ishikawa and Kohei Sato) and Strong BJ (Okabayashi & Sekimoto). We had the pleasure of witnessing those tandems go at it three times in 2015. We also saw some other guys step up to the plate and get into the mix. Here are some of the best tag and trios matches we saw in 2015:



Strong BJ partners, Daisuke Sekimoto and Yuji Okabayashi, hold nothing back.

Strong BJ vs. Twin Towers (May)

The BJW MOTY and one of the best matches in the world this year. An electric Korakuen Hall crowd is treated to 30 minutes of non-stop intense action in a match that should be seen by everyone.

Okabayashi/Twin Towers vs.
Hama/Kawakami/Kamitani (August)

Ryota Hama – you may know him as the Wrestle-1 guy who dresses like Rikishi and is really really big. This just in: He's awesome in Big Japan!

Twin Towers/Sekimoto vs.
Okabayashi/Kawakami/Kamitani (June)

Daisuke, Sato and Ishikawa team up as a super-team of sorts but the Okabayashi-led underdog team are not just going to be rolled over!

Strong BJ vs. Twin Towers (October)

A more concise version of May's war of attrition, only with a far more decisive finish to put an end to their tag tournament.

This is all just a sampler of how great Big Japan can be.



Shuji Ishikawa & Ryota Hama!

Oh and hey if you're into Deathmatch stuff they have guys that do that too! (not my cup of tea!!!)



Yuji Okabayashi as BJW Strong World Heavyweight Championship, 2015.

DRAGON GATE 2015 YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH ANDREW PUGH

There comes a point in time where the status quo becomes mundane and the time for a change draws near. Something is needed in order to freshen things up again. When that day comes, you can generally feel it. As Dragon Gate Pro Wrestling entered into 2015, there was an unfamiliar feeling amongst fans; an uncommon felling within the promotion. Despite their small roster, Dragon Gate does a great job with creating and maintaining a very fast faced, exciting atmosphere. But at the beginning of 2015, the unit structure that consisted of MAD BLANKEY, Jimmyz, Millenials, MONSTER EXPRESS and Dia.HEARTS was starting to lose its luster. Perhaps that was to be expected after a very exciting 2014, which saw an equally amazing finishing stretch. Still, the staleness was palpable.

Normally, Dragon Gate goes about two years before a massive unit shuffle occurs and changes the landscape. Since the Blood Warriors vs Junction Three feud ended in February of 2012, the units have stayed the same for the most part. Coming out of the feud we saw MAD BLANKEY, Jimmyz, WORLD-1 INTERNATIONAL, Akatsuki, Team Veteran Returns and Windows all form. And while over the years units such as WORLD-1 and Akatsuki disbanded, they basically fused the remains to create MONSTER EXPRESS. And eventually, in 2013, the veteran based units Windows and Team Veteran merged to create one veteran unit; We Are Team Veterans. Even with the Millenials cropping up in 2013 to give the unit structure some "juice", that "juice" had all but dried up in the beginning of 2015.

But while the first five months saw the company move in a very lethargic manner, it became clear that something big was approaching and when it came, something that would give Dragon Gate the shake up it needed. The main players that would be responsible for this didn't reveal themselves right away. But over time, they all took their separate paths until they uniting. It all started with DEAD or ALIVE 2015 inside the Survival Cage.

Just like 2015, six men (YAMATO, CIMA, Don Fujii, Ryo "Jimmy" Saito", T-Hawk and Naruki Doi) would enter into the Survival Cage match and just like other incarnations, this year's version had it's own set of complicated rules. The match resulted in CIMA (who spent the first five months with MAD BLANKEY alongside the remains of We Are Team Veterans: Don Fujii, Gamma and K-Ness) losing his hair and being promptly kicked out of MAD BLANKEY alongside the rest of his veteran comrades. However, on the Korakuen following the PPV, K-Ness turned on his veteran peers and rejoined MAD BLANKEY, this time as a full time member (more on him later.)

Tides continued to change in July at Kobe World. While the show will be remembered for a great Twin Gate match between Doi & YAMATO and Matt Sydal & Ricochet, depending on who you ask, the polarizing Dream Gate main event involving future company ace T-Hawk and champion, Masato Yoshino, (who dethroned BxB Hulk in June's CHAMPION GATE Night 2.), was perhaps the most important match of the year given its ramifications for match four.

On the surface, match four was supposed to be a "special" match. Former ECW and NEVER Champion Masato Tanaka showed up in Dragon Gate to team with the most important player this year, Shingo Takagi, to take on Big R Shimidzu, the upstart the company has high hopes for, and Shingo's eternal rival, BxB Hulk. And while the match was solid, if not unspectacular, the finishing

stretch was noteworthy. Shingo, who always pulls out all the stops against Hulk, managed to put down the former Dream Gate champion in a decisive manner. He accomplished this through straight brutality. He was relentless, sending a barrage of Pumping Bomber and other strikes towards Hulk until he put him down for good. In the moment, it wasn't perceived as much, but as the weeks after Kobe World showed, it was the beginning of a new Shingo Takagi.

When Yoshino retained his Dream Gate championship against T-Hawk, Yoshino showered his younger adversary with praise and offered to team up with him on the first show after World. The match would see the two taking on two of Yoshino's unit-mates, Akira Tozawa and Shingo. Shingo confronted T-Hawk on that very same show before the match, bad mouthing the youngster. He was a loser. A young punk that, alongside with his Millennial peers and Big R, thought they could overtake the Big Six and become the top dogs of Dragon Gate. He didn't understand why Yoshino would even want to team up with T-Hawk, nor why someone like him got a Dream Gate title shot at the biggest show of the Dragon Gate year. This drew the ire of both Yoshino and Tozawa. They tried to calm Takagi down, who simply replied that he was "venting out his frustrations".



Shingo Takagi lands the Last Falconry on Masato Yoshino in their Dream Gate Championship match at Dangerous Gate, August 16th 2015 in Tokyo.

However, Takagi battered and brutalized T-Hawk before pinning him decisively – just as he had done to Hulk. Takagi followed up this brutal showcase by delivering an encore at the August Korakuen on BxB Hulk once again, this time during a triple threat match between the two and Yoshino. After his display, Takagi continued to release his anger. He was infuriated that everyone in MONSTER EXPRESS had experienced title success except him. Tozawa won the Brave Gate, and Yoshino won the Dream and the Twin Gate with Shachihiko BOY. Even Ricochet managed to return to the company for a month and got a Twin Gate shot. Takagi made it clear that he was done waiting. He accused Yoshino of being an unworthy champion. Steaming from claims that he was more concerned with forming a "good buddies club" than being a pro-wrestler, for being blamed for the fact that the Dream Gate Championship was missing (The Dream Gate title fell out of the bus that carries the titles to the Dragon Gate dojo for safe keeping after World. So at the time, Yoshino had to carry the older incarnation). The

boiling point was when Shingo took aim at Yoshino's best friend Shachi, calling him weak and stating that he was the weak link in MONSTER EXPRESS. Shingo coined a phrase that would become his mantra going forward; "the weak get eaten and only the strong survive". Yoshino was incensed that Takagi would talk down his friend and a fellow comrade, and he gave him a title shot

at the DANGEROUS GATE PPV a week later.



Masato Yoshino as Open the United Gate Champion, 2015.

The stage was set for an explosive encounter and in a rare move for Dragon Gate, they ended the show without a happy ending. A big reason why there has only been one heel Dream Gate champion (Magnitude Kishiwada in 2005) is because the company appeals to young children, women and families. Dragon Gate caters their shows for the whole family to enjoy. This factors into the loose, yet fun atmosphere Dragon Gate has crafted over the years. Shingo's ruthless streak went against that formula and consequently made the audience members very unconformable. And at DANGEROUS GATE, Takagi used his anger to dethrone Yoshino as champion and then immediately attacked Shachi. When he tried to appeal to Tozawa (who was torn throughout the strife between Takagi and Yoshino & BOY), an emotional Tozawa finally stood his ground and sent a slap across the face of his former friend. Takagi was unmoved by this. It didn't matter that he had now severed his ties to MONSTER EXPRESS. He was the king. The strongest. The Dream Gate Champion now for a third time. "Mr. Selfish" Shingo Takagi was born.

Meanwhile, another main player was trying to find his footing amongst the top. As the leader of the Millenials, T-Hawk spent the year battling the likes of Naruki Doi, YAMATO and CIMA in MAD BLANKEY. His rise was inevitable but as the company placed him in more high profile matches, the crowd didn't exactly get behind the young power fighter. Even after getting to the finals of the KING OF GATE tournament, in which T-Hawk valiantly lost to Masato Yoshino, the crowd still didn't accept T-Hawk as a top line player. A part was due to T-Hawk's match quality. While he had solid fundamentals, he didn't have a match where he showed that he was what the company perceives him to be; the future Ace of the company. He had a chance to make a profound statement in the main event of Kobe World against Yoshino and yet, he seemingly failed to reach that mark.

After Kobe World, T-Hawk found himself in a slump. At the August Korakuen, the Jimmyz, MAD BLANKEY and the Millenials found themselves competing against each other with their units' existence at stake. In the end, it was the youngest unit of them all that perished. In a fitting ending, it was T-Hawk, the leader, that was pinned by YAMATO; thus causing the Millenials to break up almost two years to the date that they made their debut.

T-Hawk then quickly formed a team with generational peers, Big R and Eita to challenge for the Triangle Gate Championship at DANGEROUS GATE after being provoked by the champions;

familiar foes CIMA, Gamma and Don Fujii. That challenge also ended in failure. To make matters worse, his long time ally, Eita, and a newly unhinged Kotoka (who during the month of August started to rely on heelish actions such as using low blows and various other cheating methods) placed the blame on T-Hawk for the demise of the Millenials; and they banded together to make T-Hawk's life a living hell. Now without a home and without any friends, T-Hawk turned to the one man that wanted to team with him.

Shingo Takagi.

During his title celebration, Takagi appealed to T-Hawk. Takagi had just left MONSTER EXPRESS. T-Hawk was a man without a country. Together, they could band together and take the Twin Gate Championship titles. After all, one half of the champions was the man that pinned T-Hawk to end the Millenials; YAMATO. Takagi and T-Hawk would unite to take on the team of Naruki Doi and YAMATO; the other main players of the year.



Shingo Takagi makes T-Hawk an offer during his Dangerous Gate title celebration.

The DoiYAMA team on paper is what many would call a “dream team”. Individually, Naruki Doi and YAMATO are two of the most skilled wrestlers in the world, and their status as two sixths of the Big Six is undoubted. Together, they have proven that they are on par with the best tag teams in wrestling. When you look at these two, it's hardly a surprise. The gold standard team in Dragon System history is SpeedMuscle; consisting of Masato Yoshino and Naruki Doi. YAMATO has been apart of two very successful tag teams; one with Shingo, the other with Cyber Kong. Doi and YAMATO, as a team, won the Twin Gate titles in 2013, however this reign, which started in June, will go down as the greatest.

At the moment, DoiYAMA has collected seven defenses; thus making them the most successful Twin Gate Champions in history. Throughout 2015, Doi and YAMATO were the clear leaders of MAD BLANKEY, as well as the top heels in the company. They often antagonized their foes using their teammates for assistance. After putting an end to the Millennials, Doi was unsatisfied. The Jimmyz, who survived, were the next ones to go. A challenge was made at CHAMPION GATE. MAD BLANKEY vs Jimmyz. 5 on 5 Elimination with the losing unit disbanding. The Jimmyz were quick to accept. At DANGEROUS GATE, the two teams fought in one of the best matches the company produced all year. It came down to YAMATO for MAD BLANKEY and Jimmy Susumu for the Jimmyz. What happened next caught everyone off guard. In the final moments, K-Ness(See? Told you I would come back to him.) turned his back on MAD BLANKEY in favor of his long time friend, Susumu and with his assistance, MAD BLANKEY was finished. This left Cyber Kong, Punch Tominaga, Mondai Ryu and most importantly, DoiYAMA without a unit and K-Ness joining the Jimmyz(to the dismay of Mr. Quu Quu Tanizaki Naoki Tonoyaka Dolphin.)

And then, August 30th came. DoiYAMA was set to defend their Twin Gate Championships against the make shift duo of Shingo Takagi and T-Hawk. The match was hard hitting and fierce. However, this is where everything comes together. As it turned out, this match was nothing more than a set up by Shingo Takagi. With one Pumping Bomber to his partner late in the match up, he allowed DoiYAMA to pick up the pieces and retain their titles. The three shook hands with each other and stood united in the ring. They weren't alone for long, as Shingo called two people out in particular that he knew wanted to revel in T-Hawk's misfortune; Eita and Kotoka. By the end of the night, Cyber Kong, Mondai Ryu and Punch Tominaga joined these five men.

These seven men had bonded together and soon they would have an identity – VerserK. Claiming they were the strongest and most “berserk” fighters in the company, Shingo turned his mantra into a way of life. VerserK would prey on the weak using vicious methods because in their eyes, the weak didn't belong in Dragon Gate. Dragon Gate was only for the strong and that's what VerserK represented. Instantly this generated an aura that no other heel unit in Dragon Gate, besides Blood Generation, had been able to create. The trademark Dragon System heel unit consist of two things; an excessive amount of interference and a combination of either box attacks or salt throws. And while VerserK continues this tradition, it isn't the main element that defines them.

What makes VerserK stand out as a unit is the way they conduct themselves in the ring. They are violent. They make the audience feel uneasy. All of this starts with Takagi, who set the tone for how the unit would be presented and it resulted in the best run of his career. Ever since he came out the dojo, Dragon Gate always wanted Shingo to be the top babyface. In his ten year career, that hasn't happened for a multitude of reasons. One of the main factors is, well, the DG audience just isn't into Shingo. Turning him heel and having him become an arrogant bully has given the crowd the chance to do what they've always wanted to do; boo him. His Dream Gate run has seen Takagi provoke and then destroy veteran favorites. His first target was Don Fujii in October where the veteran fought the champ to the wire, but eventually lost. His next opponent was Masaaki Mochizuki at GATE of DESTINY in November. In a match that perhaps may perhaps be the company's finest of 2015, Mochizuki and Shingo engaged in an incredible match. Mochizuki's performance, in particular, has been praised, and Shingo also received his fair share. Unfortunately, his December defense against Gamma was the complete opposite of Shingo vs Mochy masterpiece. Despite this blemish, the hatred from the audience towards Takagi only festered. As Takagi prepares to defend his Dream Gate against the only veteran he hasn't squared off against in CIMA at FINAL GATE, he has embraced his new role, and VerserK is reaping the benefits of the foundation he has laid.

VerserK's introduction was the first domino to fall in the unit shuffle. In September, on the same day the name was announced, Eita was kicked out of VerserK by Kotoka during a Summer Adventure Tag League match against DoiYAMA. After bickering with his fellow Jimmyz over the inclusion of K-Ness (who changed his name to Jimmy K-Ness J.K.S.), Mr. Quu Quu turned his back on the Jimmyz by attacking an injured Jimmy Kagetora at the October Korakuen, and quickly pledged his allegiances to VerserK. However, Punch Tominaga (who wasn't an official member, but was instead Takagi's slave) had enough of Takagi and cost them an important match for the Triangle Gate match on the same show. Aligning with Eita, who was looking for revenge against VerserK, the pair later formed a team with up and comer, El Lindaman, and rookies Kaito Ishida and Takehiro Yamamura. Their crusade was later given a massive boost thanks to CIMA and Gamma joining. These seven soon became OVER GENERATION.



Naruki Doi, Shingo Takagi & YAMATO, VerserK, the Open the Twin Gate and Open the Dream Gate Champions backstage at Final Gate 2015.

As far as T-Hawk goes? Well, he found a home in MONSTER EXPRESS (ironically.) That move has turned out to be a fruitful one as he, Tozawa and Masato Yoshino won the Triangle Gate titles against, you guessed it, VerserK's "A-Team" of DoiYAMA and Shingo – with T-Hawk getting the pinned. Dragon Gate started the year dragging their feet in the mud. Thanks to a well timed unit shuffle and some key players, it will leave 2015 with a fresh coat of paint. 2016 looks to be another exciting year in Dragon Gate.



Akira Tozawa, Masato Yoshino & T-Hawk, MONSTER EXPRESS, Triangle Gate Champions at Final Gate 2015.

Inspired by my friend @Alan4L, here's a few "Stocks Ups" and "Stock Downs" in which I will name two wrestlers I feel increased their stock and two wrestlers I feel lost some stock.

Stock Ups

Kotoka: It's been a long six years for Kotoka. His career has been nothing but a roller coaster – mixed with highs and some lows. Whenever he seemed to gain some momentum, it would only be short lived. Well, after numerous name changes, gimmick changes and having to see those that came after him surpass him, Kotoka has finally found something he can sink his teeth into in VerserK and it's led to him winning his first ever title, the Brave Gate, at GATE of DESTINY. Even before the Millenials' end, he had started to shown growth as a singles wrestler. It was in August that he started to grow erratic and rely heavily on cheating tactics. DANGEROUS GATE was the moment he snapped. After attempting to cut former Millenials teammate U-T's hair, he assisted Eita in turning on T-Hawk. From there, he dyed his hair red, started wearing face paint and became the annoying, crazy character we see today. We'll see if he can hold on to his Brave Gate title as he defends it against Eita at FINAL GATE. Some love his new persona, some hate it, the one thing you can not deny is that Kotoka is finally relevant. And for those who don't like it, he has only one thing to say to you. BLEEEEEH!

Kzy: He entered this year as the longest tenure heel on the roster. Since 2009, Kzy had sided with every heel unit in the Dragon System lineage. This all changed when he revealed that he was under the Dr. Muscle mask in the beginning of the year and joined Dia.HEARTS. Thing is, Dr. Muscle competed in the tournament for the vacant Brave Gate title and in the finals, won against Eita. This made Kzy the Brave Gate champion, his first singles title. While his reign was short, it featured an underrated defense in February against Mondai Ryu (yes, THAT Mondai Ryu) and then a great match in March against Akira Tozawa, in which he lost the title. He didn't really have a noteworthy year after losing the title, but it's clear that without the heel tropes, Kzy has quietly become one hell of a wrestler and perhaps, one of the most improved wrestlers in the world.



Kzy & Don Fuji!

Honorable Mentions: El Lindaman for his constant improvement over the year.

Stock Downs

Big R Shimizu: A year ago, Big R Shimizu looked poised to have a breakout 2015. Having dropped the anime character and joined Dia.HEARTS, he finished 2014 strong. For a brief moment, he started 2015 the same way, including a really solid main event against Jimmy Susumu at the February Korakuen. However after that, he has steadily lost all the steam that he generated for himself. He's grown a reputation for stumbling over his words during promos, he is a bit stagnant with his progress as an in ring performer, and to make matters worse, he lost his ring gear and had to wear simple spats for a good month. And CIMA made sure Big R paid the price for being so forgetful at the August Korakuen. This year was a definite step down for Mr. Big. Luckily, he is still in line to be one of the future headliners of the company. But he's going to have to recapture some of the fire that he had at the end of 2015 and carry that into 2016.

U-T: Ah, the forgotten Millennial of the original trio. Forgotten is the best word to describe U-T over the last two years. As a worker, he's decent to good, and he has upside. But this year he was at the bottom amongst the youngsters. This was highlighted by the end of the Millennials. A guy like U-T would be perfect for OVER GENERATION, but he was passed up by the rookie class of Ishida of Yamamura. U-T is in danger of finding himself in the position Kotoka held for many years. A decent youngster that gets surpassed by his peers and by the dojo graduates after him. Out of all the Millennials since disbandment, he's the only one that's treading water. And unfortunately for him, it doesn't appear that the trend will change any time soon.



Yosuke ♥ Santa Maria and Kzy.

DDT 2015 YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH JAMIE O'DOHERTY

After a strong 2014 for DDT, 2015 will be remembered as a year that promised growth after a strong springtime but instead was stalled by several setbacks. The year began with all attention given to DDT's debut inside the Saitama Super Arena. The show took place inside the building's Community Hub rather than the main arena itself. It was a success with 6,500 fans in attendance to see Kota Ibushi vs. HARASHIMA for the KO-D Title, Strong BJ winning the KO-D Tag Titles from Happy Motels and Super Sasadango Machine's wacky attempts to defeat Kazushi Sakuraba.



Kota Ibushi vs. HARASHIMA for the KO-D Title at The Saitama Super Arena, February 15th.

But come the summertime DDT's momentum came to an end. The company's annual Peter Pan show in Sumo Hall only drew 6,670 fans for the conclusion of Yukio Sakaguchi's rivalry with KUDO. DDT's previous Ryogoku shows had claimed around 8,000 fans, to drop by 2,000 fans was a surprising turn of events. KUDO was put on the shelf shortly afterwards with an ACL injury. Disaster struck again in October when Ibushi was mysteriously taken off shows until it was revealed he had suffered a herniated cervical disc with no timetable for his return. With two of its veteran stars out of action, DDT struggled to fill the gap. Sakaguchi wasn't the answer and HARASHIMA, despite being always reliable, had already gone through a strong year as the unbeatable champion. Plus he had a separate big storyline to keep him busy. Their young prospects Konosuke Takeshita & Tetsuya Endo are still years away from being cornerstones of the company.

DDT hopes Isami Kodaka is the answer to its current dip in form. The ace of DDT's spin off Union Pro had a banner year by winning the Dramatic Election popularity contest, becoming the final Union MAX Champion as the brand closed down and winning the KO-D Title. He is also the centrepiece of Union's replacement brand Pro Wrestling BASARA. He has always had a cult following and DDT has previously booked him in a Peter Pan main event but this is the first time the company has really given him the ball and allowed him to run with it.

Aces High & Low



HARASHIMA slaps Hiroshi Tanahashi.

The Sumo Hall dream match between HARASHIMA and New Japan's Hiroshi Tanahashi turned sour afterwards when Tanahashi criticised HARASHIMA's performance in the post bout interview. He gave an uncharacteristic rant about how disappointed he was in the match because HARASHIMA was not his equal but he tried to wrestle as one. HARASHIMA was given a shot of redemption thanks to Ken Ohka. Ohka was insulted by Tanahashi's complaints and felt he and HARASHIMA needed to defend DDT's honour. When his #OhkaEmpire stable won the right to book a show in Korakuen Hall in November, Ohka was somehow able to bring in Tanahashi and Yoshei Komatsu for a big tag team match. The DDT team won a very heated contest to save HARASHIMA's reputation and earn Tanahashi's respect.

DDT New Attitude

There are other things for DDT fans to be optimistic about. The DNA shows have been an underrated gem for the company all year. After announcing a new class of rookies from out of nowhere last November, DDT has run small shows mostly in Kitazawa Town Hall to showcase their new talent. Former sumo wrestler Kazusada Higuchi has shined brightly throughout the year and

was pushed as the unbeaten super rookie all the way towards a KO-D Title match with HARASHIMA. Amateur MMA fighter Ryota Nakatsu has been another highlight of the shows and ended the year graduating from DNA to BASARA. Part of DNA's success comes from DDT being an attractive company for upcoming wrestlers to work for. Whereas in the past DDT would sign wrestlers who had dropped out of bigger companies' dojos, now there are trainees joining DDT because they want to be DDT wrestlers.

Changes In The Family Tree

DDT's family of sub-brands saw some major changes this year. Union Pro closed down in October after 10 years of indie sleaze. Union's promoter Naomi Susan retired from her role and everyone felt the brand could not continue without her. It will be replaced in 2016 by Pro Wrestling BASARA with most of the roster returning. The big exclusions are Shuji Ishikawa who has gone freelance, Cherry who has moved over to DDT and Mio Shirai who retired from pro wrestling in September.

Ken Ohka's Ganbare☆Wrestling established a gigantic goal of wanting to become a major league promotion. Ohka made a big leap of character advancement this year. He is no longer the "Eternal Young Lion". Instead he has transformed into an Atsushi Onita style sleazy indie cult figure fighting his heart out for his company. In June Ohka even became the KO-D Champion for 5 minutes due to Money In The Bank style shenanigans. Since then he returned to DDT to form #OhkaEmpire to see his popularity rise even further.

Tokyo Joshi Pro saw some growth with the additions of new girls including a wannabe super hero called Hyper Misao. Saki Akai entered the promotion but felt that everybody was beneath her due to her beauty and fame. She decided to leave after her winning streak was ended by Syoko Nakajima, but quickly returned wearing an iron mask and claiming to be an evil force named Saki Akamiya. Nakajima and Miyu Yamashita were the two girls heavily pushed for most of the year. The two will fight each other at the start of 2016 to determine Tokyo Joshi's first champion.

Tavern Wrestling is a spin off run by the wrestlers who work for the Dropkick Bar in Shinjuku. Plenty of beer is available for the audience during the shows. Recent events have been overwhelmed by "American" wrestlers who represent a group called Ultimate Superstars Action.

The shoot style brand Hard Hit changed management during the summer. It is now completely controlled by Hikaru Sato and DDT still provides a ring and some talent for its shows. With that said, it is now a separate independent company run by Sato.

They Did What?

As always there was plenty of fun and silliness to be found in DDT. Of the many ridiculous things to happen here are some of the highlights:

The King Of Dark Championship was created. It is a belt awarded to the worst wrestler in the company and the champion is forced to wrestle exclusively in dark matches until they win a match and transfer the title over to the loser. Gota Ihashi currently holds the least wanted title in pro wrestling while former champions include KENSO and DDT president Sanshiro Takagi.



Goto Ihashi after losing another match as King of Dark Champion. Photo courtesy of dramaticddt.wordpress.com.

Kota Ibushi played mind games with HARASHIMA before their big title match by beating him in games of Rock-Paper-Scissors at every opportunity.



HARISHIMA loses again on January 18th! Photo courtesy of dramaticddt.wordpress.com.

Aja Kong held the Iron Man Heavymetalweight Title for eight months, the longest reign in the belt's history! The belt was also won by Gota Ihashi's wrestling tights. Twice.

Hiroshi Fukuda tried to cash in his Money In The Bank contract during a show, but wasn't allowed because the champion left early.



Aja Kong in the lead up to her Saitama Heavymetalweight title defence. Photo courtesy of dramaticddt.wordpress.com.

Ibushi and Yoshihiko had a rematch of their infamous bout from 2009.



Yoshihiko gives Ibushi a Canadian Destroyer on March 21st. Photo courtesy of dramaticddt.wordpress.com.

Ibushi almost fell off the Korakuen Hall balcony while brawling around the arena with Jun Kasai. He broke a few fingers from hanging on to the edge.

Danshoku Dino became a buddhist wanderer, leading to a match with Jinsei Shinzaki.



[Description courtesy of dramaticddt.wordpress.com]
 “Danshoku Jinsei was shaking with nerves as he began wrestling against Jinsei Shinzaki. However he gained enough confidence to use some of Shinzaki’s own moves against him, most notably the Rope Walk. Yukinori Matsui was knocked out by an unintentional Lip Lock and that allowed Makoto Oishi to interfere. He tried to shove Shinzaki’s face into Danshoku’s rear end but that backfired. Shinzaki then attacked Danshoku’s ass and forced him to submit to the Paradise Lock. After the match Shinzaki asked Dino to stop his Danshoku Life pilgrimage. Dino said he would if he could get a kiss from him. Shinzaki reluctantly agreed to kiss him on the cheek but Oishi told him that tomorrow is Dino’s birthday so it should be on the lips. After being urged by everyone in the arena, Shinzaki kissed Dino on the mouth. Dino suddenly transformed back to normal and chased Suguru Miyatake around ringside. Oishi proclaimed that Danshoku Dino has returned from Hades and regained his sanity!” – Jamie O’ Doherty

Antonio Honda wrestled against an invisible Mel Gibson.

[Description courtesy of dramaticddt.wordpress.com] “Antonio Honda entered Shin-kiba 1st Ring today to face one of the toughest challenges of not just his career, but of his entire life. Transparent Mel Gibson flew into Japan on his



transparent private jet to answer Honda’s challenge and the two went face to face in the ring as the live commentary team talked about Gibson’s movies. When Honda took control he drank from a bottle of whiskey and began impersonating Jack Nicholson’s character from Easy Rider. Gibson fought back until Honda started Hulkling up. Honda applied a Guillotine Drop and told the ref to ask if Gibson would submit. Gibson yelled “Freedom!” Honda let Gibson go and talked about watching a match from a college wrestling club called HWWA. In that match a young wrestler named Harley Rape was fighting the Invisible Man. The point of the story is Honda learned that every person has their struggles, even invisible people. Honda invited Gibson to dance as Leonard Cohen’s “Bird On A Wire” played over the speakers.

The two danced together until Honda hit Gibson with a cheap shot and pinned him with a Backslide. They still hugged afterwards.” – Jamie O’ Doherty

Hiroshi Fukuda defeated Super Sasadango Machine to earn the name Muscle Sakai II. Fukuda also earned all of Sakai’s financial debts and responsibility for his family.

Hiroshi Tanahashi presented his own Powerpoint project to announce his plans to enter the 2016 Dramatic Election. DDT management were reduced to tears, not of pride, but of despair. What Japanese wrestler can beat Tanahashi in a popularity contest?!?

Joey Ryan's penis became a worldwide hit after it overpowered Danshoku Dino in a test of strength. A Danshoku Dino clip appearing on ESPN and BBC is something that I still cannot believe happened



[Image and description courtesy of dramaticddt.wordpress.com]

It looked like he was about to leave but he instead walked over to the timekeeper's table and opened up a MacBook. "Although this is immediately after the match has ended, I want to start the presentation!" That's right, Tanahashi was going to present everyone his very own Powerpoint presentation! Titled "How To Liven Up More Worlds Of Professional Wrestling" Tanahashi introduced himself as "New Japan flesh that has been carefully trained in the dojo." He also revealed he got written permission from Super Sasadango Machine to do this.

Tanahashi wants to spice up pro wrestling and spoke about the famous Keiji Muto Vs Nobuhiko Takada match from 1995, a match that at the time featured the ace of New Japan against the ace of UWF-I in an exciting dream bout. Twenty years later Tanahashi wondered if he and HARASHIMA would be able to elicit the same kind of excitement and enthusiasm for their match this past August. Unfortunately that didn't happen and Tanahashi let his emotions get the better of him in his post-match comments. He now apologises to HARASHIMA and encourages him to continue down the road as the ace of DDT. Going back to spicing up the wrestling world, Tanahashi had some announcements to make in regards to his 2016 plans. He will win the IWGP Heavyweight Title at the Tokyo Dome in January, he will win the G1 Climax in August, he will enter the 2016 DDT Dramatic General Election and he will also enter the unit portion of the election in order to win and book his own DDT show next November! Learning his lesson from last time, HARASHIMA did not try to shake hands with Tanahashi. Instead he stuck out his fist and Tanahashi gave him a fist bump in response. Tanahashi offered to fist bump Ohka but Ohka told him to headbutt him instead. They gently bumped their heads together, smiled and gave each other a nod before Tanahashi left. HARASHIMA admitted feeling a bit confused but thanked Ohka, Danshoku Dino and Muscle Sakai for doing everything they could to make the match happen. He also thanked New Japan, Tanahashi and Komatsu for accepting their request.

– Jamie 'O Doherty

LISTS & AWARDS

THE 3RD ANNUAL BEN CARASS YEAR END AWARDS

It wouldn't be a year-end special without the ubiquity of a list of stuff that happened in 2015, so here is my third annual, not to be taken seriously at all, best and worst of the year awards. Enjoy!

The Mid-South Wrestling Award for Promotion of the Year:	The Total Nonstop Action Award for Worst Promotion of the Year:
1) New Japan	1) WWE
2) PWG	2) TNA
3) Pro Wrestling NOAH	3) Global Force Wrestling

The Kenta Kobashi Award for Wrestler of the Year:	The Raja Lion Award for Worst Wrestler of the Year:
1) Shinsuke Nakamura	1) Eva Marie
2) Hiroshi Tanahashi	2) Thunder
3) AJ Styles	3) Big Show

The Shinya Hashimoto/Masahiro Chono/Keiji Mutoh Award for G1 Climax Match of the Year:	The Kobashi/Misawa/Kawada/Taue Award for Non-G1 Climax Match of the Year:
1) Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Shinsuke Nakamura (NJPW "G1 Climax 25 Day 19")	1) Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Kota Ibushi (NJPW "Wrestle Kingdom 9")
2) Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Kazuchika Okada (NJPW "G1 Climax 25 Day 18")	2) Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Kazuchika Okada (NJPW "Wrestle Kingdom 9")
3) Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. AJ Styles (NJPW "G1 Climax 25 Day 17")	3) Shingo Takagi vs. Masaaki Mochizuki (Dragon Gate "Gate Of Destiny")

Iron Sheik & Nikolai Volkoff vs. The Bushwhackers Award for Worst Match of the Year:	The Claire Lynch Award for Worst Angle of the Year:
1) Ryback vs. Sheamus vs. R-Truth vs. King Barrett vs. Mark Henry vs. Dolph Ziggler (WWE Elimination Chamber)	1) Charlotte/Paige contract signing where Paige made fun of Reid Flair. (RAW Nov 16 th).
2) Los Villanos vs. Psycho Circus (AAA "TripleMania")	2) James Storm murders Mickie James by pushing her onto a rail-road track. (TNA iMPACT June 3 rd).
3) Royal Rumble Match. (WWE Royal Rumble)	3) Brock Lesnar & Roman Reigns tug of war over the WWE title. (RAW Mar 23 rd)

The Dick Murdoch Run-in & Brainbuster on the Floor Award for Best Angle of the Year:	The Steve Austin vs. Vince McMahon Award for Feud of the Year:
1) Suzuki-Gun invades NOAH at Korakeun Hall. (NOAH Jan 10 th)	1) Kevin Owens vs. Sami Zayn
2) Mount Rushmore 2.0 Forms. (PWG Mystery Vortex III)	2) Suzuki Gun vs. Pro Wrestling NOAH.
3) Brock Lesnar kills Michael Cole & a camera man. (RAW Mar 30 th)	3) Sasha Banks vs. Bayley.

The Kane vs. Gene Snitsky Award for Worst Feud of the Year:	The Conor McGregor Award for Best Promo of the Year:
1) TNA vs. Global Force Wrestling	1) Paul Heyman
2) Matt Hardy vs. EC III	2) Kevin Owens
3) Dolph Ziggler & Lana vs. Rusev & Summer Rae.	3) Jay Lethal

The Matt Turner & Anthony Franco Award for Worst Promo of the Year:	The New Japan, “This is too Easy” Award for Show of the Year:
1) Roman Reigns	1) Wrestle Kingdom 9 – Jan 4 th 2015
2) Charlotte	2) G1 Climax 25 Day 19 – Aug 16 th 2015
3) Nikki Bella	3) Tenryu Produce “Genichiro Tenryu Retirement Show” - Nov 15 th 2015.

The WrestleMania XXIV Award for North American Show of the Year:	The Any WCW PPV from 2000 Award for Worst Show of the Year:
1) PWG “Mystery Vortex III”	1) TNA Slammiversary (June 28 th)
2) PWG “Threemendous IV”	2) TNA Bound for Glory (Oct 4 th)
3) Lucha Underground “Ultima Lucha”	3) WWE Elimination Chamber (May 31 st)

The Trish Stratus Award for Most Improved:	The Velvet Sky Award for Least Improved:
1) Chad Gable	1) Eva Marie
2) Jay White	2) Titus O'Neil
3) Will Ospreay	3) Tyrus

The Ricky Morton Award for Babyface of the Year:	The Fred Blassie Award for Heel of the Year:
1) Brock Lesnar	1) The Entire WWE Creative Team (Third Year in a Row!)
2) Hiroshi Tanahashi	2) Kevin Owens
3) Bayley	3) Tetsuya Naito

The Dario Cueto Award for Best TV Show:	The WCW Thunder/TNA iMPACT/Wrestlicious Award for Worst TV Show:
1) Lucha Underground	1) WWE Raw
2) New Japan on AXS	2) TNA iMPACT
3) NXT	3) WWE SmackDown

The Hansen & Brody Award for Tag Team of the Year:	The Vince Russo Award for Utter Stupidity and Blithering Incompetence.
1) The Young Bucks	1) The atrocious booking of Roman Reigns. "Sufferin' Succotash!" "Tater Tots, Son."
2) Jason Jordan & Chad Gable	2) WWE trying to recreate the NXT Women's division by having Stephanie McMahon being Mother Hen and telling her kids to play nice.
3) reDRagon	3) Hulk Hogan.

RYAN'S 2015 MOTY LIST

At the beginning of 2015 a goal of mine was to expand my pro-wrestling horizons further than those of 2014, or any year prior. And with my match of the year listings serving as a quantitative representation of my viewing diversity year on year, I can state quite confidently that this goal was left unfulfilled.

University related delays are mostly to blame, with many of the year's biggest and (reportedly best) joshi, lucha, indie, and ROH matches accumulating in my ever growing unwatched backlog.

This is in some ways a major disappointment. I had hoped to categorize definitively the best bouts of the year through the lens of my personal wrestling tastes and opinions. I wanted to gather as complete a list as possible. But, with this yearbook published, the bulk of my 2015 viewing will cease, and whilst this won't stop me from looking back at some crucial EVOLVE, Dragon Gate, NOAH, CMLL, AAA, Big Japan, DDT, and Lucha Underground matches that I missed out on over the course of the year, and that have yet to surface at the time of writing, every 2015 match I view henceforth will unfortunately be excluded from this structured and formal evaluation.

With this said, when putting the yearbook together I felt reassured. The 2015 team of over a dozen writers, and many additional contributors, achieved our ambition of encapsulating the year that was on a general level. We have built something memorable from what was an important starting point in 2014. It may not include the most worldly and comprehensive match of the year list on my part (although the yearbook itself most certainly includes some comprehensive lists), but nevertheless below are the top matches of 2015, seen through the eyes of a university student lacking in free time (many would say otherwise) – a memento of sorts.

1. Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Kota Ibushi NJPW 01/04 *****
2. Roderick Strong vs. Mike Bailey PWG 06/26 Mystery Vortex III ***** $\frac{3}{4}$
3. Chris Hero vs. Zack Sabre Jr. PWG 06/26 Mystery Vortex III ***** $\frac{3}{4}$

4. Timothy Thatcher vs. Chris Hero WWN Live Super Show 03/28 ***** $\frac{3}{4}$
5. Kota Ibushi vs. Katsuyori Shibata NJPW 07/29 ***** $\frac{3}{4}$
6. Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Hiroshi Tanahashi NJPW 08/16 ***** $\frac{3}{4}$
7. Kazuchika Okada vs. Shinsuke Nakamura NJPW 08/15 ***** $\frac{3}{4}$
8. Tomohiro Ishii vs. Tomoaki Honma NJPW 08/12 ***** $\frac{3}{4}$
9. Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Kota Ibushi NJPW 07/20 ***** $\frac{3}{4}$
10. Tomohiro Ishii vs. Tomoaki Honma NJPW 02/14 ***** $\frac{3}{4}$
11. Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Kazuchika Okada NJPW 01/04 ***** $\frac{3}{4}$
12. Mike Bailey vs. Drew Galloway PWG 08/29 BOLA Night Two ***** $\frac{3}{4}$
13. Zack Sabre Jr. vs. Roderick Strong PWG 04/03 Don't Sweat The Technique ***** $\frac{3}{4}$
14. AJ Styles vs. Kazuchika Okada NJPW 07/05 ***** $\frac{3}{4}$
15. Shingo Takagi vs. Masaaki Mochizuki Dragon Gate 11/01 ***** $\frac{1}{2}$
16. Biff Busick vs. Mike Bailey PWG From Out of Nowhere 02/27 ***** $\frac{1}{2}$
17. Kota Ibushi vs. AJ Styles NJPW 07/26 ***** $\frac{1}{2}$
18. Brock Lesnar vs. Seth Rollins vs. John Cena WWE Royal Rumble 01/25 ***** $\frac{1}{2}$
19. Chris Hero vs. Mike Bailey PWG 07/24 Threemendous IV ***** $\frac{1}{2}$
20. Chris Hero vs. Timothy Thatcher PWG 08/29 BOLA Night Two ***** $\frac{1}{2}$
21. Timothy Thatcher vs. Zack Sabre, Jr. EVOLVE 08/15 ***** $\frac{1}{2}$
22. Zack Sabre Jr., Marty Scurll & Tommy End vs. Young Bucks, Roderick Strong & Super Dragon PWG 08/28 BOLA Night One ***** $\frac{1}{2}$
23. Timothy Thatcher vs. Chris Hero EVOLVE 07/11 ***** $\frac{1}{2}$
24. Zack Sabre Jr. vs. Roderick Strong EVOLVE 07/10 ***** $\frac{1}{2}$
25. Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. AJ Styles NJPW 08/14 ***** $\frac{1}{2}$

26. Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Tetsuya Naito NJPW
07/26 ***** ½
27. Roderick Strong, Hanson, Row & The Briscoes
vs. AJ Styles, Young Bucks, Doc Gallows &
Karl Anderson ROH 05/15 ***** ½
28. Katsuyori Shibata vs. Kazushi Sakuraba NJPW
07/05 ***** ½
29. Chris Hero vs. Tommy End PWG 04/03 Don't
Sweat The Technique ***** ½
30. Adrian Neville vs. Sami Zayn WWE NXT
12/11 ***** ½
31. Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Tomihiko Ishii NJPW
08/09 ***** ½
32. Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Katsuyori Shibata NJPW
08/08 ***** ½
33. Kazuchika Okada vs. Yuji Nagata NJPW 08/12
***** ½
34. Bayley vs. Sasha Banks WWE NXT TakeOver
Brooklyn ***** ¼
35. Bayley vs. Sasha Banks WWE NXT TakeOver
Respect ***** ¼
36. Zack Sabre Jr. vs. Marty Scurll PWG 08/30
BOLA Night Three ***** ¼
37. Roderick Strong vs. KUSHIDA ROH 05/16
***** ¼
38. Mike Bailey vs. Tommy End PWG 08/30
BOLA Night Three ***** ¼
39. KUSHIDA vs. Kenny Omega NJPW 07/05
***** ¼
40. Timothy Thatcher vs. Tommy End EVOLVE 40
03/27 ***** ¼
41. Timothy Thatcher vs. Biff Busick PWG 06/26
Mystery Vortex III ***** ¼
42. Daisuke Sekimoto & Kazuyuki Fujita vs. Yuji
Okobayashi & Suwama Tenryu Produce Final
Revolution 11/15 ***** ¼
43. Tomohiro Ishii vs. Michael Elgin NJPW 08/15
***** ¼
44. Katsuyori Shibata vs. Tetsuya Naito NJPW
09/27 ***** ¼
45. Timothy Thatcher vs. Roderick Strong
EVOLVE 04/17 ***** ¼
46. Biff Busick, Trevor Lee & Andrew Everett vs.
Young Bucks & Super Dragon PWG 08/29
BOLA Night Two ***** ¼
47. Zack Sabre Jr. vs. Axel Tischer wXw 03/06
***** ¼
48. Tracy Williams vs. Biff Busick EVOLVE 08/15
***** ¼
49. Minoru Suzuki vs. Takashi Sugiura NOAH
09/19 ***** ¼
50. Hirooki Goto vs. Shinsuke Nakamura NJPW
07/05 ***** ¼
51. Hirooki Goto vs. Shinsuke Nakamura NJPW
05/03 ***** ¼
52. AJ Styles vs. Kota Ibushi NJPW 04/05 ***** ¼
53. Tetsuya Naito vs. Kota Ibushi NJPW 03/15
***** ¼
54. Hirooki Goto vs. Kazuchika Okada NJPW
08/01 ***** ¼
55. Jay Briscoe vs. Jay Lethal ROH 06/19 ***** ¼
56. Hirooki Goto vs. Kota Ibushi NJPW 03/15
***** ¼
57. Hirooki Goto vs. Katsuyori Shibata NJPW
03/08 ***** ¼
58. Daniel Bryan vs. Roman Reigns WWE Fastlane
02/22 ***** ¼
59. Kota Ibushi vs. Tomoaki Honma NJPW 02/11
***** ¼
60. reDragon vs. Time Splitters ROH 12/07 ***** ¼
61. Jay Briscoe vs. Adam Cole ROH 12/07 ***** ¼
62. Kevin Owens vs. John Cena WWE Elimination
Chamber 05/31 ***** ¼
63. Fenix & Aerostar vs. Pentagon Jr. & Drago
PWG 08/29 BOLA Night Two ***** ¼
64. Tomohiro Ishii vs. Togi Makabe NJPW 01/04
***** ¼
65. Tomohiro Ishii vs. Togi Makabe NJPW 07/05
***** ¼
66. Mike Bailey vs. Chris Hero vs. Zack Sabre Jr.
PWG 08/30 BOLA Night Three ***** ¼
67. Sasha Banks vs. Becky Lynch WWE NXT
TakeOver 05/20 *****
68. Charlotte vs. Sasha Banks vs. Becky Lynch vs.
Bailey WWE NXT 02/11 *****
69. Chris Hero vs. Mike Bailey EVOLVE 08/15

70. Chris Hero vs. Biff Busick EVOLVE 40 03/27

71. Michael Elgin vs. Hirooki Goto NJPW 08/12

72. Timothy Thatcher vs. Biff Busick EVOLVE
08/16 *****
73. Mike Bailey vs. William Ospreay PWG 08/30
BOLA Night Three *****
74. Tomohiro Ishii vs. Tomoaki Honma NJPW
10/12 *****
75. Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Hirooki Goto NJPW
09/27 *****

76. Michael Elgin vs. Tomoaki Honma NJPW 08/01

77. Young Bucks vs. reDragon NJPW 08/16 ****
78. Katsuyori Shibata vs. Tetsuyo Naito NJPW
07/24 *****
79. Young Bucks vs. Andrew Everett & Trevor Lee
PWG 06/26 Mystery Vortex III ****
80. William Ospreay vs. Matt Sydal PWG 08/30
BOLA Night Three *****
81. KUSHIDA vs. Ricochet NJPW 08/16 ****
82. Brock Lesnar vs. Roman Reigns WWE
WrestleMania 31 03/29 *****
83. Yoshiaki Fujiwara & Yoshihiro Takayama vs.
Minoru Suzuki & Kazunari Murakami Tenryu
Produce Final Revolution 11/15 *****
84. Kevin Owens vs. John Cena WWE Money in
the Bank 06/14 ****
85. Matt Sydal & Mike Bailey vs. Andrew Everett
& Trevor Lee PWG 05/22 DDT4 *****
86. Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Tomoaki Honma NJPW
08/09 *****
87. Finn Balor vs. Adrien Neville WWE NXT 02/11

88. Tetsuya Naito vs. AJ Styles NJPW 01/04 *****
89. Tomohiro Ishii vs. Yuji Nagata NJPW 08/04

90. Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Togi Makabe NJPW
08/11 *****
91. AJ Styles vs. Adam Cole ROH 05/16 ****
92. Mark Andrews vs. Will Ospreay PWG 08/28
BOLA Night One ****
93. Seth Rollins vs. Roman Reigns vs. Dean
Ambrose vs. Randy Orton WWE Payback 05/24

94. Young Bucks vs. RPG Vice NJPW 04/05 ****
95. Christopher Daniels, Kazarian & Cedric
Alexander vs. Young Bucks & ACH ROH 12/07

96. Pentagon Jr. vs. Zack Sabre Jr. PWG 08/30
BOLA Night Three *** ¾
97. Daniel Bryan vs. Dolf Ziggler WWE 03/28
*** ¾
98. AJ Styles vs. Katsuyori Shibata NJPW 07/20
*** ¾
99. Kota Ibushi vs. Tetsuya Naito NJPW 08/05
*** ¾
100. Timothy Thatcher vs. Drew Gulak EVOLVE
39 03/26 *** ¾
101. Togi Makabe vs. Kota Ibushi NJPW 09/23
*** ¾
102. Roderick Strong vs. Trevor Lee PWG From
Out of Nowhere 02/27 *** ¾
103. Drew Gulak vs. Chris Hero PWG From Out of
Nowhere 02/27 *** ¾
104. AJ Styles vs. Hiroyoshi Tenzan NJPW 08/08
*** ¾
105. AJ Styles vs. Kazuchika Okada NJPW 10/12
*** ¾
106. Sami Zayn vs. Kevin Owens WWE NXT
02/11 *** ¾
107. Young Bucks vs. Andrew Everett & Trevor
Lee PWG 07/24 Threemendous IV *** ¾
108. Minoru Suzuki vs. Yoshiro Takayama NOAH
07/18 *** ¾
109. Karl Anderson vs. Tomohiro Ishii NJPW 07/28
*** ¾
110. Hirooki Goto vs. Tomoaki Honma NJPW
07/28 *** ¾
111. AJ Styles vs. Bad Luck Fale NJPW 08/11 ***
¾
112. Kazuchika Okada vs. Michael Elgin NJPW
07/23 *** ¾
113. KUSHIDA vs. Kenny Omega NJPW 09/23 ***
¾
114. Intercontinental Championship Ladder Match
WWE WrestleMania 31 03/29 *** ¾
115. Mike Bailey vs. Biff Busick EVOLVE 05/31
*** ¾
116. Kazuchika Okada vs. Tomoaki Honma NJPW
07/25 *** ¾
117. Luke Harper vs. Dolf Ziggler WWE TLC
12/14 *** ¾
118. AJ Styles & The Young Bucks vs. Adam Cole,
Mike Bennett & Matt Taven ROH 06/19 *** ¾
119. Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Tomohiro Ishii NJPW
08/01 *** ¾
120. Tomoaki Honma vs. Satoshi Kojima NJPW
08/04 *** ¾
121. Satoshi Kojima, Michael Elgin & Ryusuke
Taguchi vs. Tomohiro Ishii, Kazuchika Okada &
Gedo NJPW 07/20 *** ¾
122. RPG Vice vs. Young Bucks vs. reDragon
NJPW 05/03 *** ¾
123. Roderick Strong, Super Dragon & Young
Bucks vs. Inner City Machine Guns, Fenix &
Angelico PWG 08/30 BOLA Night Three *** ¾
124. Hirooki Goto & Katsuyori Shibata vs. Karl
Anderson & Doc Gallows NJPW 02/11 *** ¾
125. Hirooki Goto & Katsuyori Shibata vs. Karl
Anderson & Doc Gallows NJPW 12/07 *** ¾

126. Tommaso Ciampa vs. Johnny Gargano PWG
06/26 Mystery Vortex III *** ¾
127. Zack Sabre Jr. vs. Ricochet PWG 08/29
BOLA Night Two *** ¾

This list follows the Observer calendar – 2014/12/01 – 2015/11/30



Kota Ibushi lands a Boma Ye on Shinsuke Nakamura, 01/04.



Tomohiro Ishii and Tomoaki Honma face-off before one of their four highly ranked singles matches this year.



Roderick Strong delivers a flying knee to 'Speedball' Mike Bailey at PWG's 'Mystery Vortex III'. Photo Credit: Chad Simpicio (@ChaosNOrder626).



Drew Galloway and Mike Bailey during their epic second round BOLA match. Photo Credit: Mikey Nolan Photography (@MIKEY_NOLAN)

CONTACT DETAILS, SOCIAL MEDIA & FURTHER READING

Alan Counihan

- Dr. Keith Presents Podcast – Alan hosts one of the best and most eclectic pro-wres podcasts around, available exclusively at f4wonline.com.
- Greatest Wrestler Ever Project – Alan writes periodic updates for fightgameblog.com, detailing his pro-wres viewing for Pro-Wrestling Only's Greatest Wrestler Ever Project
- Fighting Spirit Magazine – Alan contributes frequently to FSM, the UK's premier newsstand wrestling magazine (also available digitally with more information at www.fightingspiritmagazine.co.uk).
- Voice of Wrestling – On one of the hottest pro-wrestling sites of 2015 you can also find Alan's writing, including his match of the year listings dating back to 2007, at www.voicesofwrestling.com/alan4ls-prowres-paradise/
- wXw English Commentary – Apart from his podcast and writing related work, Alan is also a member of the official wXw English announce team, with the English edition of Shotgun available at www.youtube.com/user/wXwGER/.
- Twitter – @Alan4L

Andrew Pugh

- Twitter – Andrew pro-wrestling, sports and general musings can be found on his highly active Twitter account, @Angry216.

Ben Carass

- Cubed Circle Newsletter – As co-author of the Cubed Circle Newsletter, Ben contributes weekly news summaries, reviews, and more at cubedcirclewrestling.com.

- Twitter – @BenCarass

Bev Garth

- Bev was unable to contribute to this year's yearbook, but contributed some great Yosuke Santa Maria and emoji infused writing to last year's yearbook, which you can find at www.cubedcirclewrestling.com. You can follow Bev on Twitter @BevGarth!

Bill Thompson

- Blue Thunder Driver – At The Blue Thunder Driver Blog (Match After Match), Bill writes about great matches. matchaftermatch.wordpress.com
- Random Match Generator – You request, Bill reviews. randommatchgenerator.wordpress.com
- Tag Rope Magazine – The Tag Rope Magazine is quite simply one of the very best sources, both in-print and online, for long-form wrestling-related writing. You can read some of their stellar content, including some of Bill's contributions, and find out how to get yourself a print copy, over at thetagrope.com.
- Wrestling with Words – Bill regularly writes for one of the very best review and opinion blog and podcast networks on the internet, Wrestling with Words. He is currently writing his way through the DVDVR 1001 matches list! wrestlingwithwords.com/author/billthompson/
- Twitter – @MOTYPod

Bryan Rose

- Fire Pro Podcast – Bryan is a cohost of the fun-loving, banter-filled, Fire Pro Podcast, now on the Wrestling with Words Network. wrestlingwithwords.com/podcast/

- Voices of Wrestling – You can find Bryan's regular WWE and NJPW reviews for Voices of Wrestling at www.voicesofwrestling.com/author/br2k62/.
- Twitter – @br26

Chris “Mookie Ghana” Harrington

- Wrestlenomics --Chris Harrington is a pro-wrestling business analyst. His websites are <http://wrestlenomics.com> and <http://indeedwrestling.com>.
- Twitter – @mookieghana
- Email – Chris can be reached via email at chris.harrington@gmail.com.

thecubsfan

- Lucha Blog – The most up-to-date, extensive, and well-respected English language lucha libre news site in the world. www.thecubsfan.com/cml/
- Twitter – @luchablog

Daryl Surat

- Anime World Order Podcast – For the past decade the AWO podcast has delved deep into both modern and classic anime and manga, major industry news, and much more, producing hundreds of hours of highly entertaining (and ever-green) audio available at www.awopodcast.com.
- Otaku USA – Daryl is a long-time writer for anime, manga, and Japanese pop-culture magazine, Otaku USA. You can find his web contributions and learn more about the publication at otakuusamagazine.com.
- Twitter – @DarylSurat

Dean Knickerbocker

- Twitter – Dean co-edited the 2011 and 2012 DKP Annuals alongside Alan4L. He also

provided infographics of all sorts for the 2014 Year Book, from Tomoaki Honma's Kokeshi hit-miss ratio to the RAW ratings line graph. You can follow Dean on Twitter @dknick, where you will find his thoughts on pro-wres, football (soccer), and more. Lover of Don Fuji and Genichiro Tenryu!

Dylan Hales

- Twitter – Dylan is a freelance writer and wrestling pundit who tweets frequently @DylanWaco.
- Wrestling Culture Podcast – Listen to Dylan Hales and Dave Musgrave discuss everything from the careers of Ken Patera, Andre the Giant, John Cena, and Bob Backlund, to the Wrestling Observer Awards, Hall of Fame, The History of WWE Developmental, and wrestling's wackiest gimmicks, in one of wrestling's most thought provoking podcasts.

Jamie O'Doherty

- DramaticDDT – There isn't an English language DDT-related site better than JamieOD's dramaticddt.wordpress.com.
- Twitter – @JamieOD

Joe Gagne

- Fun Time Arcade – Joe Gagne's Fun Time Pro-Wrestling Arcade sees Joe review pro-wrestling video games from Pro-Wrestling on the NES to Legends of Wrestling on the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 in what has become a beloved YouTube series. www.youtube.com/user/MikeAndTomPresent/
- Joe vs. the World – Joe has his own podcast, Joe vs. the World, with co-host Justin Shapiro over at www.joeversustheworld.com, where they have been, over recent years, talking their way through WWF 1992 and on-wards, year by year.
- Weekly Podmass – As he alluded to in his Podcast Year in Review, Joe provides a weekly roundup of major pro-wrestling podcasts in The Weekly Podmass over at voicesofwrestling.com.

- Twitter – @joegagne & @JoeGagneFTA

Ryan Clingman

- Cubed Circle Newsletter – Ryan is the editor of the Cubed Circle Newsletter, and contributes reviews and columns every week at cubedcirclewrestling.com.
- Twitter – @RyanClingman

In addition to the direct contributors to this yearbook, we would also like to plug the great independent wrestling photography of Kody Wynne (kodywynne.com), Hart Photography (hartpro.smugmug.com/Pro-Wrestling), Modern Myth Photography (@TheModern_Myth), Bryan Wright Photography (@Bryanxvx), Chad Simplicio (@ChaosNOrder626), and Mikey Nolan Photography (@MIKEY__NOLAN).

We wish to thank our regular readers for their yearly support of the newsletter, and hope to produce better coverage than ever before in 2016 on the new and improved cubedcirclewrestling.com.

If you enjoy the newsletter and would like to assist us with server bills and the like, you can do so by visiting cubedcirclewrestling.com/support/. And if you don't wish to assist monetarily, you can greatly assist us by continuing (or beginning) to share and enjoy the content of the Cubed Circle Newsletter, and our regular and yearbook contributors!



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