

CWRESTLING

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Cubed Circle Newsletter 225

We have a gigantic issue this week as we look at the impact of NXT on international and independent wrestling in what was the most popular post in website history, the tragic passing of the legendary Eiji 'Hayabusa' Ezaki, news from the week, RAW from Monday Night, WrestleMania 32 direction, and Mid-South from 1982 with Killer Khan greatness!

– *Cubed Circle Newsletter Editor, Ryan Clingman*

The Pro-Wres Digest for February 28th – March 5th.

Ben Carass.



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“The Flying Assassin,” “the Phoenix,” Eiji “Hayabusa” Ezaki tragically passed away on Thursday March 3rd from a sub-arachnoid haemorrhage at the age of just 47 years-old. It is hard to put into words just how heartbreaking the death of Ezaki really is. For many Japanese wrestling fans of a certain age, Hayabusa was hugely influential during the mid/late 90's when tape trading and P2P file sharing became more accessible due to the growth of the internet. I remember buying what must have been a fourth or fifth generation VHS tape of the 1994 Super J-Cup off a tape trader's website in 2001, which for the life of me I cannot remember the name of. All I can recall is that the site was extremely primitive and had a striking sky blue background. Anyway, the tape was almost un-watchable due to terrible colour-bleeding and constant dropped frames every ten seconds or so, however I still watched the thing over and over again. There were countless things about the show

that made an impression on me as an inexperienced viewer of Japanese pro wrestling, but the final first round match of Hayabusa vs. Jushin “Thunder” Liger might very well have been the most significant in forging a connection with this young fan. I had never even heard of Hayabusa, but this guy looked every bit the striking real-life comic book hero that Liger did and the second I saw him start the match with a huge somersault plancha, I became a fan of 'Busa for life. Shortly after my exposure to Ezaki, I found as many Hayabusa matches as I could through the old P2P sharing programs like Kazaa and LimeWire. There were Exploding Cage matches with Onita, Barbed Wire Time-Bomb death matches against Terry Funk & Mr Pogo, hybrid-style matches with Mike Awesome and Masato Tanaka, and a bizarre pair of matches between “H” and “Hayabusa II” that saw a firecracker being inserted into Ezaki's anus and the follow up with Shawn Michaels as special referee. I had no idea what to make of the H/Hayabusa II stuff at the time, but I later learned of the whole Ezaki/Gannosuke story and it all started to make sense. Well, except for the Exploding Anus Match. There was also the famous clip of Hayabusa's last match with Mammoth Sasaki when he slipped on the middle rope while performing a Quebrada and was paralysed from the neck down. I have only ever watched the clip a couple of times, the first when I was 15 and it was one of the most harrowing things I had ever seen in my life. The last time I saw the clip was when I received the three-disc Hayabusa DVD from Highspots in 2008 or-so and watching it again was just as, if not more, upsetting than the first time six years earlier. When footage emerged last year of Ezaki getting out of his wheelchair and walking into a wrestling ring at Korakuen Hall, the outpouring of support and congratulations from fans and wrestlers alike for the inspirational achievement was unanimous. Ezaki had actually done something similar before in 2014 when he was helped out his wheelchair by the likes of Taka Michinoku, Kota Ibushi, Kikutaro and a lot more wrestlers, who assisted Ezaki into the ring. However on August 5th 2015, in front of his peers and legends such as, Genichiro Tenryu, Kenta Kobashi, Keiji Mutoh and many others, Ezaki got out of his wheelchair and walked up the ring steps completely unassisted, except for the use of a single cane, and stepped into the ring to deliver his official retirement speech. *“With all my heart, I will do my very best to connect as many people as I can with the dreams and the never-give-up attitude I have received from professional wrestling, even if it's just one person,”* Ezaki said. It is impossible to watch the clip from 5/8/15 without getting chills and tearing-up, and if you are ever having a bad day or letting something trivial get you down, just watch a man who was never supposed to move again and who could very well have died from the severity of his injury, get out of his wheelchair and achieve his goal of walking into a wrestling ring again. It is one of the greatest examples of the indomitable nature of the human spirit you will ever see and solidifies the legacy of Eiji “Hayabusa” Ezaki as a cult-hero and a true trailblazer. Our condolences go out to Ezaki's family, friends, and fans. He will never be forgotten.

Mike Johnson of PWInsider broke the story on 26/2 that TNA was actively seeking investors for the company. TNA's Executive Vice President of Creative & Talent Relations, John Gaburick, confirmed the news with a statement about Dixie Carter spending a lot of time in New York & Los Angeles for, “media interviews about the company’s execution of its 5 year growth plan.” Johnson followed up on the story on 27/2 with some key information, the most notable of all is that Panda Energy is no longer financing TNA and the Carter Family's main company hasn't been signing pay cheques since Jeff Jarrett's minority stake in TNA was bought out last year. According to Johnson, the wrestler's cheques that used to be sent from Panada's Texas office have been coming from TNA's Nashville headquarters. TNA's international TV deals should be enough to keep them afloat, however Dixie Carter still has the ludicrous idea that TNA could become a “player” in the pro wrestling industry and that certainly isn't going to happen while they are on PopTV. Johnson also reported that Dixie had held meetings with people from PopTV, although there is no word on whether Pop are interested in buying the company. There have been rumours about a company from the UK wanting to buy TNA, but again there is nothing concrete at this time to report on. Johnson

noted that his sources have specifically told him that TNA are looking for partners, which means the company isn't necessarily up for sale, however, according to Johnson, the Carter's would not be dismissive if "the right offer came along." The Carter's had a chance to offload the malignant TNA brand in 2014 when Jeff Jarrett and Toby Keith wanted to buy the company while they were still averaging 1 million viewers every week on Spike. Things didn't work out because Bob Rider insisted that Dixie was to be promised a role in the company and remain as an on-screen talent and Keith pulled out of the deal which was likely TNA's last chance at being salvaged. It has pretty much been downhill ever since for TNA.

There were some interesting notes in this week's Observer about the WrestleMania 32 card, not least of which is the news that Sami Zayn is scheduled to be wrestling on the show. There were no other details, although Zayn is booked for the post-Mania European tour and should be starting on TV, "very shortly," according to Dave Meltzer. Zayn's role on the show is unclear, however he could very well fit into a multi-man Ladder Match for the IC title, which would make all the sense in the world since Kevin Owens is the champion. Still, this is WWE we're talking about so there is always the chance of them screwing it up. Meltzer also reported that a New Day vs. League of Nations match of some form is pencilled in for Mania, either a traditional tag or a six-man. Alberto Del Rio looks to be going back after Kalisto for the US title, although another match between the two hasn't been given the okay yet. There will also be, "another singles match with top guys," with any luck AJ Styles & Chris Jericho, a second women's match in addition to Charlotte vs. Sasha Banks vs. Becky Lynch for the title, plus the Andre the Giant Battle Royal for everyone else with nothing to do. The top three matches are set in stone, with Brock Lesnar vs. Dean Ambrose in a Street Fight, Shane McMahon vs. Undertaker in Hell in a Cell for control of RAW, and HHH vs. Roman Reigns for the WWE World title. However there has been very little talk or promotion on TV for the likes of Steve Austin, Shawn Michaels, Mick Foley and the Rock, all of whom are advertised to be on the show. The Observer states that, "the roles of all but the Rock have been defined," so why on earth they haven't been promoting the legends on TV is a mystery.

New Japan's annual 16-man single-elimination tournament, the New Japan Cup, got under way on 3/3 with the first night at the Ota Ward Gymnasium in Tokyo. Before the event, New Japan owner Takaaki Kidani made a series of big in-ring announcements. First he talked about the "Lion's Gate trails," which will essentially be a series of scouting try-outs held across Japan to find a new crop of Young Lions. Next Kidani announced that Michael Elgin had signed a two year contract with New Japan and Elgin came out to cut a short promo about how his two goals growing up were to become the one of the very best and to wrestle in New Japan. Kidani then brought out Katsuyori Shibata and declared that he had officially signed with New Japan after four years of freelancing since his return in 2012. Shibata signed his contract in the ring and said there had been too many goodbyes this year and promised to keep fighting for NJPW. The third announcement was possibly the most interesting of all, as Kidani announced that the Super J Cup would be returning for the first time since 2009. The tourney is scheduled to take place after the G1 in August and they showed a graphic on the screen of the other promotions that will be involved in the J Cup, including, NJPW, CMLL, ROH, Kaientai Dojo, NOAH, Zero One, Dragon Gate, Suzuki-Gun & Ryuku Dragon. Naomichi Marufuji and Taka Michinoku came out as representatives from NOAH and Kaientai Dojo. Marufuji noted that he was now a heavyweight but said that the young juniors from NOAH would be part of the J Cup. Taka said he was there not as a member of Suzuki-Gun, but as the president of K-Dojo and that he had plenty of young K-Dojo wrestlers he wants to showcase. What is notable about the timing of the Super J Cup is that comes one month after the WWE's Global Cruiserweight Series, which I'm sure is no coincidence. The final announcement was that revival of the Tiger Mask anime which was big in the 1970s and led to the birth of the Tiger Mask gimmick. Kidani said he hopes to get more kids interested in New Japan and even commented that this was something WWE would

not be able to do. I guess Kidani isn't familiar with the WWE's working relationship with Warner Brothers Animation and isn't a fan of the recent WWE Scooby-Doo and Flintstone movies.

As a show, the first night of the New Japan Cup was pretty fun overall. The big news is that Bad Luck Fale downed Hiroshi Tanahashi and eliminated him from the tournament in the main event; Tanahashi usually does a very good job of carrying Fale and this match was no different. Match of the night was Tomohiro Ishii over EVIL in a typical hard-hitting Ishii affair; EVIL looked really good in his first big singles match. Elsewhere on the show, there were surprisingly good matches from Yoshi-Hashi, in a losing effort against Tetsuya Naito, and Hiroyoshi Tenzan, who put over Michael Elgin in a solid little match. Satoshi Kojima eliminated Tomoaki Honma in a very good match that had a lot of heat and some great spots. Hirooki Goto pinned Yuji Nagata in a decent match to advance to the quarter-finals, as did Tama Tonga, who got possibly the biggest win of his career with a clean pin over Togi Makabe. The other first round match saw Toru Yano beat Yujiro Takahashi by count-out in about 2 minutes or-so. The only non-tournament match on the card was Katsuyori Shibata & Kushida vs. Kazushi Sakuraba & Kazuchika Okada; match was good and Okada pinned Kushida after the Rainmaker. Afterwards, Okada got on the mic and said there was a new member of Chaos. The arena went dark and Will Ospreay appeared on the screen and declared himself the newest member of Chaos. Ospreay said he was coming for Kushida's at Invasion Attack on April 10th and stated he would become the first ever British IWGP Jr Heavyweight Champion. Ospreay is one of the hottest guys on the UK indie scene right now and his style should fit perfectly into the New Japan Jr division. It came as a little bit of a surprise that he was given a spot in Chaos, however Gedo was clearly impressed with what he saw from Ospreay the last time the New Japan guys were over in the UK in October 2015 when Ospreay had back-to-back **** matches, first in an outstanding three-way with Marty Scrum & AJ Styles then a tremendous singles match with Okada the following night.

The second night at Korakuen Hall on 4/3 was also a good show, however I personally liked the first night a little more. There was a very good 10 man tag match with Ryusuke Taguchi, Kushida, Togi Makabe, Tomoaki Honma & Katsuyori Shibata beating Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Jushin Thunder Liger, Tiger Mask, Manabu Nakanishi & Yuji Nagata in about 10 minutes when Shibata pinned Nakanishi with a PK. The New Japan Cup quarter-finals saw Toru Yano upset Satoshi Kojima in a short match which pleased my girlfriend, Bev, to no end. Hirooki Goto downed Tama Tonga in a solid match but the crowd weren't really into it. Michael Elgin had a decent "mean-guy" match with Bad Luck Fale and Elgin won with a powerbomb out of the corner. Main event saw Tetsuya Naito pin Tomohiro Ishii with Destino in the best match on the card by a wide margin. The semi-finals and final will take place on 12/3 and the two semi-final matches are Goto vs. Elgin and Naito vs. Yano.

FMW had claimed that if their 26/2 show at Korakuen Hall did not sell-out then the promotion would fold once again. As it turns out, they did in fact draw a sell-out of 1,800 people to see the card full of mostly nostalgia acts and it appears FMW will continue to promote shows in the same vein as they shot an angle after the main event which saw Yoshihiro Takayama & Mitsuya Nagai attack Atsushi Onita and declare that UWF was coming back to challenge FMW. Takayama said he would bring Masakatsu Funaki as part of his team with Nagai for a UWF vs. FMW showdown on April 27th at Korakuen Hall. Some of the highlights from the 26/2 show included, Dump Matsumoto & ZAP-T over Miss Mongolia & Miss Koharu in a Stretcher match in 12:11. Shiro Koshinaka, Ricky Fuji & The Last Samurai over Yoshihiro Takayama, W*ING Kanemura & Kotaro Nasu when Koshinaka pinned Nasu with the Samurai Powerbomb at 11:18. Masato Tanaka & Kotaro Suzuki went over Tomohiko Hashimoto & Buffalo in 14:13 when Tanaka hit the Sliding D on Buffalo. Main event saw Atsushi Onita, Hideki Hosaka & Sean Guinness defeat Raijin Yaguchi, NOSAWA

Rongai & Sabu in a Street Fight, Barbed-Wire Board & Barricade Mat, Bunkhouse Tornado, Lumberjack, Certified Weapon OK, 7 Million Yen Contention Death Match. Onita pinned Yaguchi with a Lariat at 18:21 and he suffered a gruesome 11 inch scar on his stomach earlier in the match from the barbed-wire. But because he is Atsushi Onita, he worked the very next day for Zero One. Also on the show, veteran female wrestler, Ray, came out in her ring gear after her announcement two weeks ago that she had an inoperable brain tumour, and told the fans that she would fight her tumour and vowed to return to the ring one day.

Speaking of nostalgia shows, Dradition president, Tatsumi Fujinami, joined up with All Japan president, Jun Akiyama, for a press conference on 24/2 and they announced that the two would square off for the first time ever on opposite sides of a tag team main event on March 29th at Korakuen Hall. Fujinami spoke about his regret of never getting to wrestle Jumbo Tsuruta and noted that wrestling Jumbo's protégé, Akiyama, would be a great honour. In addition to the Fujinami & Hiro Saito vs. Akiyama & Yuma Aoyagi main event of the 29/3 show, Fujinami's son, LEONA, will be facing Seiya Sanada, plus, Daisuke Sekimoto & Super Tiger vs. Mitsuya Nagai & Kengo Mashimo and Masakatsu Funaki vs. Taka Kunoh have been also booked.

Antonio Inoki's IGF ran the Tokyo Dome City Hall on 26/2 and drew a near sellout of 2,875 fans to see "Genome35" which was main evented by Naoya Ogawa beating Shinya Aoki in 11 minutes via referee stoppage in a pro wrestling match billed as Inoki's 73rd Birthday Special Match. Bob Sapp was also on the show and lost in 5:44 to Kendo Kashin with an inside cradle. The semi main event saw Kazuyuki Fujita beat Crusher Kawaguchi in just over 4 minutes as part of Kawaguchi's farewell tour. In typical Inoki fashion, there was one shoot fight on the card which saw Rodrigo submit Mohammad Bahrami with an armbar at 3:42 of the first round.

Akebono's new promotion, Ōdō Royal Road, is running their debut show at Korakuen Hall on April 20th with a main event of Akebono, Ryota Hama & Taiyo Kea vs. Daisuke Sekimoto, Yuji Okabayashi & Masato Tanaka. I find the disparity in talent between the two teams quite amazing. Akebono announced that they are bringing in three Lucha Underground wrestlers, however there is no word yet on whom AAA will send over for the show. Daichi Hashimoto, Masa Inoue, Mazada & Nosawa are also currently advertised as well.

WWE's live Network special, "Road Block", is next week on 12/3 from the Ricoh Arena in Toronto, Canada. The main event, which was set up by the big angle on RAW, is Dean Ambrose challenging HHH for the WWE World Heavyweight title. Also on the show is Brock Lesnar vs. Bray Wyatt, which at one time was pencilled in for WrestleMania, and an NXT Tag Team title match with Enzo Amore & Colin Cassady challenging The Revival (Scott Dawson & Dash Wilder). Roman Reigns vs. Sheamus is being advertised locally, however it is unclear if Reigns will even be back for the show or whether the match with Sheamus will be dark and not on the Network portion of the show.

Lucha Underground was made available on iTunes this week. The entire first season is available for \$44.99 in HD and \$34.99 in SD, while a "Season Pass" is purchasable for the second season, which enables access to new episodes the day after they air on El Rey, at \$39.99 HD and \$29.99 SD. Unfortunately the deal is only for the US market for the time being, so us international viewers will have to continue to find "alternate means" to watch the shows.

Rey Mysterio worked a WWC show at a baseball stadium in Caguas, Puerto Rico and helped draw a crowd of 3,250 fans for his match against "Mr 450" Hammet on 27/2. Mysterio won the match after Hammet missed the 450 and he hit the 619 and a big splash off the top. Afterwards, Rey challenged Hammet for his Universal Championship and Hammet accepted, so it looks like

Mysterio will be going back to work for WWC again in the future.

Kurt Angle did an interview with ESPN UK and spoke about his final match with TNA against Bobby Lashley, which was taped back in January but will air next week on 03/08. Angle said, "I'm not gonna say I'm gonna retire. I am pretty much done with TNA. Not sure, maybe down the road, maybe I might come back, but most likely I probably won't, because there's a chance that I might not wrestle again. I just wanna get a feeler this year and see what I wanna do and see where I wanna go." Angle also told ESPN that he suffered a concussion during a match with Drew Galloway on 29/1, but was "cleared by a doctor" to work the next two nights of the tour against Bobby Roode and Lashley. If this is indeed true then the doctor in question needs to be asked some serious questions about the decision to let Angle compete. The ESPN article also mentions an interview Angle did with Sports Illustrated last month, where Kurt commented on the concussion he suffered during the famous triple threat main event of SummerSlam 2000 against HHH & The Rock.

"There was a spot where Triple H was going to hit me with his sledgehammer, but I had the concussion and didn't even know I was out there. [...] My mind was blank. I came to two hours after the pay-per-view. When Triple H was going to hit me, but he actually put his hand on my head and made sure I ducked. If you watch it over, you'll see that I was clueless, but he was looking out for me the whole match. They literally had to walk me through every step of the match to make sure I was safe. I don't remember any of it."

The RAW ratings were down 4%, which isn't bad at all considering last week's show was the day after the FastLane PPV and featured the return of Shane McMahon. The 29/2 show did a 2.62 rating with 3,709,000 viewers across the three hours. 8pm did 3,951,000. 9pm did 3,660,000 and 10pm did 3,551,000. The third hour was the second highest behind the RAW the day after the Royal Rumble, since August 2015. SmackDown on 25/2 did a 1.74 rating with 2,395,000 viewers, the second lowest viewership of the year. iMPACT on 1/3 did 258,000 for the 9pm first-run and 68,000 for the midnight replay for a combined 326,000 viewers, up from last week's 297,000 (9pm: 210,000, 12am: 87,000).

On a brief note, AAA Tweeted out on 4/3 that Fireball, who has worked in Dragon Gate as Flamita since 2013, will be taking on the gimmick of Octagon Jr. This has led to a lot of speculation from fans about a Pentagon Jr/Octagon Jr feud, which would no doubt be tremendous. Speaking of tremendous lucha feuds, I stayed up until 5am on Friday night/Saturday morning to see the seventh match between Dragon Lee and Kamaitachi. The match, just like their previous six, was phenomenal and easily worth going up to the Claro Sports website to watch. Dragon Lee won back the CMLL World Super Lightweight championship that he lost to Kamaitachi back at Korakuen Hall on January 24th. The match was filled with insane high spots and crazy bumps on the floor; I personally thought the FantasticaMania match was a little better and their fifth match from December 2015 remains my favourite of the series, but once again these two somehow managed to deliver a match that lived up to the expectations of their previous encounters.

The Final Conquest: Why NXT May Be A Long-Term Negative For The Wrestling Business

Ryan Clingman

Triple H has served, since his initial rise to prominence in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as one of the most controversial figures in contemporary professional wrestling. His influence in the complex web of WWE backstage politics during the Attitude Era, particularly in the later years cannot be denied – from his role as the mischievous voice in the ear of an already shrewd Shawn Michaels, to his relationship and eventual marriage to Stephanie McMahon – a matrimony that saw the couple emerge as the heir apparent pair to the WWE throne. Controversial or otherwise, Paul Levesque may very well be one of the greatest politicians in the history of pro-wrestling, or at the very least, of the last several decades.

Few of his major programmes, perhaps since his true star making rivalry with Mick Foley in 2000, have failed to yield discussion of his true motives and allegedly unprofessional political strategies, as he went on to dominate the early 2000s title scene – using his political sway, to, as some may argue, cut-down potential main event talent such as Scott Steiner and Booker T. Debates continued for the majority of Hunter's main roster in-ring career, with the lines between work, shoot, politicking, and self (un)-awareness blurring further as the years wore on. The term "buried" juxtaposed with images of Triple H and his numerous championship belts became a common meme, perhaps even losing meaning in some circles as a result. Levesque, and the company's creative, seemed well aware of this public perception leading into WrestleMania 30, where perennial underdog, Daniel Bryan, was seemingly emasculated, undermined, and as some argued "buried", before overcoming in the main event of 2014's largest show.

The "buried" term has given way on a smaller scale to the "political hit" phrase coined by Dylan Hales, with the booking of the supposed future face of the company, Roman Reigns, so poor that the notion of Hunter sabotaging Vince's main project for his own political gains seeming far less absurd than it would at first site, despite becoming a meme of sorts in its own right.

And yet, despite close to two decades of controversy, well known to observers of the industry, Hunter has in some sense donned a fourth persona, distinct from that of his on screen character, political hit figure, or corporate identity. Paul Levesque, Executive Vice President of Talent Relations, Live Events & Creative, is now to many core fans, perhaps even a majority, the unlikely saviour of the company – a messiah waiting to ascend to position of CEO and spawn a new boom period, fronted by indie darlings, with a focus on the in-ring product, and emphasis on non-scripted promos, and believability. As ludicrous as this notion may be, given out of context and with the above backdrop, there is at least some degree of credence that we may lend to this idea of Hunter as a future positive figure for the business. After all, NXT has become one of the most beloved properties in wrestling over the past several years.

Whilst Triple H is a man to have openly acknowledged perceived differences between the NXT and main roster audiences, he is also the man who signed (or at least approved) El Generico, Prince Devitt, La Sombra, Samoa Joe, Austin Aries, Kevin Steen, Uhaa Nation, Rich Swann, Biff Busick, Axel Tischer, Shinsuke Nakamura, AJ Styles, KENTA, Karl Anderson, Doc Gallows, KANA, and perhaps even Kota Ibushi. He created one of, if not the very best, women's division the company has ever seen, certainly pushing female NXT talent harder and further than any women's division at any other time in company history. NXT offers a back to basics approach as far as storylines are concerned, and from an in-ring perspective, at least on the Takeover specials, has often out-shined the main roster. Levesque has even gone as far as to announce a cruiserweight tournament to feature unsigned talent from around the world, a concept nearly incomprehensible but a couple of years

ago. Why then, given the successes and positive decisions made in NXT, should we question Hunter's intentions and NXT's potential impact on the business? If he is attempting to change the way that the company treats wrestling in ways craved by generations of pundits and observers, why question NXT, and moreover, why question Paul Levesque?

One could turn to conspiracies, suggesting that Hunter is simply attempting to win the support of those in and outside of the company, and given his reputation as one of wrestling's all-time great politicians, perhaps there is some degree of truth in this assertion. But, for as intriguing as such conjectures may be, what really bears mentioning is not the set of potential deceptions behind the developmental brand, but the very nature of the NXT model itself.



From the perspective of individual international talent, NXT is a wonderful entity, offering better pay and status than any WWE/F developmental system prior. For some independent companies affiliated with NXT, such as WWN, the existence of such a system with whom to partner may be beneficial, at least in the short term. And most certainly in the short term, wrestling fans are receiving a world class product, in some respects superior to the main roster, with a bevy of potential dream matches few would have thought possible but a year ago. However, in the long term, the NXT model of signing indie talent at a rate never before seen, and running NXT shows in direct opposition to the de facto number two promotion in the United States, Ring of Honor, is an unsustainable one – one wholly unhealthy for the wrestling business.

NXT is by no means the first of WWE's developmental extensions to sign indie talent, as the likes of Jon Moxley (Dean Ambrose), Claudio Castagnoli (Cesaro), and Tyler Black (Seth Rollins) worked their way through NXT's predecessor, FCW – as did Bryan Danielson (Daniel Bryan). However, these signings were opportunistic in nature, with the majority of company investment going not into refining indie stars, but for better or worse moulding from scratch prospects from

outside of wrestling (for better most certainly in the case of OVW generations prior to Punk, with the likes of John Cena, Randy Orton, Brock Lesnar, and Batista all graduating within a few years of one another). In contrast, the current rate of indie signings is more akin to Vince McMahon Jr.'s talent raids of the 1980s. NJPW's loss of two of its biggest stars within the span of a year, and a similar situation for CMLL, coupled with the high frequency at which NXT runs opposite Ring of Honor stand as a testament to the validity of the need for concern. (*)

By all accounts, the Samoa Joe and Austin Aries of the world, who have been liberated from their years long TNA limbo, may very well be NXT exclusive performers, which is a blessing for younger roster members. However, it would seem that the current faces of NXT, Finn Balor and Bayley, are likely to remain in NXT for at least the next few months, this is despite their months long preparedness for a long stale main roster. These tactics have their respective positives and negatives, but are not the actions of a traditional developmental extension. Developmental brands don't tour the country in opposition to Ring of Honor shows, run internationally, or retain main event calibre talent primed for the main roster for extended periods of time unduly – the latter in particular defeats the objective of a developmental territory to begin with. It is in this way that NXT is not a true developmental system, but a third, Network exclusive touring brand, run by the next in line to the McMahon throne.



Whilst both the independents and NXT are seemingly flourishing, it takes years for a Biff Busick to ascend to the level of an "indie star", where they can work less experienced talent and aid in the creation of new names recognised on a national and international level. In the mid-to-late 2000s Ring of Honor experienced the adverse effects of having Punk, Joe (TNA), Danielson, and McGuinness (TNA) signed away, dropping significantly in popularity and losing much of their cult momentum, which they have only begun to regain in recent years. Those signings were largely independent of one another, and it is doubtful that Ring of Honor in the mid-2000s was targeted by WWE as competition, unlike the 2016 case, where Hunter and NXT may very well be out for blood.

What this process amounts to is tantamount to the "over-fishing" of the independents – signings that reap great rewards in the short term, but that will, given time, deplete what has been the

company's most successful source of new talent for the better part of five years in the American indies. Of course, the notion that it takes in excess of five years to make a star is preposterous, but very few independent talents break out on a national level before surpassing that milestone, and worryingly, if the Biff Busicks, PACs and Rich Swanns are signed away as they breakout, then there will be less marquee talent for those on the ascent to work, which will ultimately stunt talent growth, not only for the bigger non-WWE brands, but for WWE and the business as a whole.

As damaging as these practises may be for the indies, the extraction of top New Japan talent – Styles, Anderson, Gallows, Nakamura, and now a rumoured freelance Ibushi – will have lasting consequences on New Japan – possibly dire should Kazuchika Okada be signed at some point. Precautions can and have been taken by three of the four major non-WWE/TNA outlets: ROH, New Japan and Lucha Underground – all implementing multi-year contracts either over the past few years, or in the case of Lucha Underground, from their inception. But, this is only a temporary barrier in most cases, and whilst there do exist performers like Kenny Omega, Michael Elgin, and The Young Bucks, who are seemingly content with the possibility of never working WWE, the goal for most is, and has been for the better part of two decades, to make it to the WWE. This is by no means a flaw in the thinking of talent, as the WWE, for all of their creative faults, offers not only some of the best pay and the biggest platform, but also safer working conditions, and downside guarantees, where contractual perks of this nature can rarely be implemented in other promotions.

On the other hand, however, there is only so much main roster space available, even with five hours of first run USA content per week. At the same time, however, there is only so much the company is willing to do with talent of a certain type. AJ Styles was pushed as "the hottest free agent in sports entertainment" upon his debut, a huge statement given the company's reluctance to acknowledge the existence of products other than their own. Within weeks of receiving this moniker and garnering one of the biggest reactions in recent memory within the confines of WWE programming, AJ Styles was positioned as a mid-carder, albeit one on the upper end of the midcard spectrum. Whilst the majority of the roster is positioned in this mid-card malaise, the constant reiteration of Styles having yet proven himself in "the big leagues", deeming him the "Red Neck Rookie", and so on demonstrates that whilst the company is able to recognise world class talent and the benefits they can offer the roster, many times talent signings are more about the act itself, than what can be done with the performers in question. This mentality falls well in-line with the company's aggressive history of talent acquisition – perhaps some talent is signed simply to deny other promotions access.

This mentality is a lasting relic from the Monday Night Wars in a sense, a time when signing talent to high-end contracts just to go unutilised was umpteen times more favourable than letting the competition get hold of them. And historically speaking, this strategy has been a cornerstone of WWE promotional practises, at least during the transitions to cable and pay-per-view, competition with WCW, and now the migration to the WWE Network. The company has demonstrated a strictly predatory mentality towards talent acquisition in recent history, and have only sought to reconstruct the present and past of wrestling in their image. To think that NXT will not be used as a weapon in this conquest, is to underestimate a mentality on which the very foundations of the modern company were built.

Perhaps this company trait was overestimated in the 2000s by fans on the internet, with terms such as "slave name" being thrown about during the signing and renaming of Bryan Danielson. Thankfully, it would seem that most have moved away from this thought process, and understand that on an individual level, WWE signings are often times wholly positive life events for performers who have devoted years of their life and sacrificed greatly for their craft. Attention must, however, be brought to the macro-processes at work – as whilst the company may exhibit much of the same

competitiveness and hostility, the NXT encroachment on independent and international wrestling is nowhere near as blatant as the talent raids of the 1980s were. No, NXT's cannibalisation of the alternative wrestling scene is one hidden behind an ingeniously constructed facade, with one of Triple H's many faces at the forefront.

Top names from across the globe are being picked off at a rate wholly unsustainable, and with the indies as the company's most successful talent source for years, this is far from a wise move on the company's part. As if the systems that created the decades biggest fresh crop of stars collapse, it will have far reaching consequences, both on the smaller companies, and WWE itself.

So, in the future, when Paul Levesque's NXT persona announces his next talent acquisition, don't begrudge the signee of their potentially positive career decision, but think not only of the quality of the NXT product or what truly lies behind the understated grin of Triple H in the photo-op, but also the far-reaching ramifications that the company's latest conquest will have on the industry.

(*) To name a few instances of NXT/ROH cross-over over the last six or so months – ROH 02/05 Nashville Tennessee v. NXT 02/05 Nashville Tennessee, ROH 01/16 Collinsville Illinois v. NXT 01/16 Chicago Illinois, ROH Final Battle 12/18 Philadelphia Pennsylvania v. NXT TakeOver London 12/16 London, ROH 12/05 Fort Lauderdale Florida v. NXT 12/05 Citrus Springs Florida, ROH 09/19 San Antonio Texas v. NXT 09/19 San Antonio Texas, ROH 09/18 San Antonio Texas v. NXT 09/18 Austin Texas, ROH 08/22 New York City New York v. NXT 08/22 New York City New York.

RAW Ramblings – February 29th 2016

Bridgestone Arena: Nashville, TN.

Ben Carass.



RAW was interminably boring this week. The whole point of the show was to set up **Dean Ambrose** as the challenger for **HHH** and the WWE title at the Toronto, March to WrestleMania special on March 12. **Trips** opened the show with the exact same promo he cut on SmackDown about the fans bowing down to authority. **Ambrose** came out and they exchanged some ill-

conceived dialogue about **Roman Reigns**, **Brock Lesnar**, the Oscars and some other nonsense. Eventually, **Ambrose** challenged **HHH** to a title match and **Trips** said he would let **Dean** know by the end of the night what his answer was then **HHH** booked **Ambrose** against **Alberto Del Rio** in the main event. **Hunter** showed no vulnerability and absolutely no concern about the challenge from **Ambrose**; he basically just laughed at the idea of this chump coming after his belt. What a great heel. The **Ambrose/Del Rio** main event started at 11:00pm and went to an apparent DQ when the **League of Nations** attacked **Ambrose** at about 9 minutes. So that's another screwy finish in the main event of RAW. It sucked. **HHH** showed up and **Ambrose** got a brief flurry in on him, but **Hunter the Destroyer** soon made it clear who the big star was and put **Ambrose** down with the Pedigree. **HHH** said **Dean** could have his title match then went to leave but **Ambrose** got on the mic and thanked him, so **Trips** went back down to the ring and beat the hell out of **Ambrose** some more. Some refs came out and broke it up and **HHH** walked off with the WWE title to close the show. They didn't officially announce the match for the Toronto show on 12/3, but that is when the match will take place. I suppose it wasn't a bad angle to set up the match, however the opening promo exchange was not very good at all considering that **Ambrose** is one of the better talkers in the company and once again **HHH** was booked to look like the unconquerable Goliath who is in a different league to these loser babyfaces that are coming after him and the title. It's the same thing we've seen for 16 years, so there isn't any point in complaining about it. I also fail to see how losing to **HHH** will do **Ambrose** any good heading into a match with **Brock Lesnar**, which he will also probably lose. I suppose they could turn **Ambrose** heel after Mania for a big feud with **Reigns** over the WWE title in the Summer, but who do you think the fans are going to get behind in that feud? It certainly won't be the big tough Samoan badass, who missed RAW this week because he had a boo-boo on his nose.



They trotted out **Vince McMahon** and **the Undertaker** at the top of the third hour, presumably to try and stem the tide of the third hour ratings plummeting every week. **Vince** talked about **Shane** needing a miracle to beat **Taker**, whom **Vince** called his own personal phenom and instrument of destruction. **Undertaker** made his entrance then grabbed **Vince** by the throat and told him that the blood of **Shane** would be on his hands, not **Taker's**. **Taker** just turned and walked away, leaving **Vince** to ramble some more about disowning **Shane** after he loses to **Taker** then he said **Shane** would no longer be his son and would simply be a “son of s b*tch.” - That was their big explanation

for **Undertaker** willingly accepting the match with **Shane**. It was beyond weak; they didn't even try to make any of this make sense. I guess the idea is that **Taker** is the old gun-slinger who will put down anybody that is put in front of him at WrestleMania, but my goodness did they do a horrible job explaining that. This weird and mind-bending storyline continues to baffle and amaze.



Top of the second hour saw **Stephanie McMahon** come out for a promo. Deal was that she still wanted to give her acceptance speech for winning the **Vince Sr** Award last week, but the fans interrupted her with some “**Randy Savage**” (which you can imagine led to some top banter in the RAW thread on the BOARD~!), and “**Shane O Mac**” chants. **Steph** flipped out and tossed the podium over and began yelling about **Shane** blackmailing **Vince**. She still managed to get in her “I’m every Woman” gimmick and said **Shane** thinks he can just comeback and run the company because he is a man. **Steph** added that the idea of her and **HHH** working for **Shane** made her sick then she compared the fans to **Shane**, whom she labelled: “narcissistic, apathetic, lazy, weak minded wastes of life who think the world owes them.” **Steph** finished her tirade by shrieking that the fans would have to bow down to their king and queen. All things considered, this was a very good promo from **Stephanie**. I imagine they lost some viewers when she told the fans that **Shane** wasn’t there, but still on a show like this it is hard to find much to be positive about and **Steph** was still really good here.

AJ Styles & Chris Jericho beat the **New Day** clean in 8:59 when **Kofi Kingston** tapped out to the Walls of **Jericho**. Match was decent, nothing special. Afterwards, **AJ** got on the mic and said that the win put them at the top of the list for a Tag title show then **Jericho** challenged them to put the belts on the line next week. With any luck, **Y2AJ** will be done next week. How close-minded and pigheaded do you have to be to waste **AJ Styles** at WrestleMania by putting him in a meaningless tag match? The best scenario seems to be for **Jericho** to turn on **AJ** next week to set up another match between the two at Mania. Another **Jercho/Styles** match doesn’t particularly do much for me, however I would take that all day long over **AJ** being in a potential multi-team Tag title match

which could very well end up on the pre-show.

Surplus Stuff: **Sasha Banks & Becky Lynch** went to a draw in 9:40. **Charlotte** was watching at ringside with **Ric Flair** since the match was a #1 contenders match for her title. Finish was utterly ludicrous, as **Sasha** gave **Becky** a Sunset Flip Powerbomb out of the corner and both women just collapsed on impact so both their shoulders were down when the ref counted three. This was not like the NXT deal with **Samoa Joe & Sami Zayn**, which actually looked like it both men just happened to cover each other at the same time, and came off completely contrived. **Bray Wyatt** cut a pre-tape about the definition of insanity; how ironic. **Miz** pinned **Dolph Ziggler** in 1:04 with a roll-up. You read that correctly. **Sheamus & Rusev** beat the **Lucha Dragons** in 5:05 when **Rusev** pinned **Kalisto** with a Superkick. **Del Rio** gave **Kalisto** his double foot stomp afterwards to set up another US title match between the two. **Ryback** squashed **Adam Rose** in 2:00; he was booked like a total babyface after seemingly turning heel last week. **Bubba Ray Dudley w/D-Von** over **Jey Uso w/Jimmy Uso** in 2:05. **D-Von** hit **Jey** in the face with a table then **Bubba** pinned him with the Full Nelson Slam. **R-Truth** told **Goldust** that he was sick of him trying to be his tag partner; **Goldie** was sad. **Big Show** beat **Kevin Owens** via count-out in 2:30 because **Owens** beat **Show** by count-out on SmackDown last week. **Brie Bella** did an interview with **Renee** in the back; **Lana** showed up and made fun of her. This led to **Naomi** beating **Brie** in a bad 4 minute match with a wacky Crucifix submission then **Lana** came out on the stage and laughed at **Brie**. **Becky Lynch & Sasha** bickered in the back about who won their match. **Charlotte** showed up and told them they would have a rematch on SmackDown to see who would lose to her at WrestleMania. **The Freebirds** were announced for the Hall of Fame; even **Jimmy “Jam” Garvin**.

Mid-South Wrestling (TV #155)
August 28th 1982
Irish McNeil Boys Club: Shreveport, LA.
Ben Carass.



General Skandor Akbar was our guest colour commentator this week and he joined **Boyd Pierce** at the desk to open the show. **Boyd** hyped **Dick Murdoch** challenging his former protégée, **Ted DiBiase**, for the North American Heavyweight title. **Akbar** said he would conduct himself as a gentleman and would not interfere in any matches while he was commenting. They showed “**Iron**” **Mike Sharpe** beating **Killer Khan** for the Louisiana title last week then **Boyd** chastised **Akbar** for interfering in the match and told **Akbar** he had lost his mind by challenging **Buck Robley**. **Boyd** threw to the clip of **Akbar** challenging **Robley** last week, where **Akbar's Army** hit the ring and triple-teamed **Robley**. Back at the desk and **Akbar** said he was merely standing on the apron, which he noted was completely legal, and claimed **Sharpe** brought him into the ring and tried to “molest” him. **Akbar** added that he was not finished with **Robley** and stated that the **General** would get him one way or another.

Non-Title: “Iron” Mike Sharpe (Louisiana Heavyweight Champion) vs. Mike Bond. - **Sharpe** over in 1:45. **Akbar** said that **Bond** didn't pose much of a threat to **Sharpe** and noted that **Killer Khan** should be facing **Sharpe** in a rematch for the Louisiana title. **Sharpe** won a basic squash with a Piledriver. It was short, but that was to **Sharpe's** benefit as his weaknesses were hidden and he also looked very strong one week after becoming a champion.

Killer Khan vs. Cocoa Samoa. - **Khan** over in 2:20. **Akbar** said he was going to stay at the desk to prove he didn't need to interfere to help his guys win. **Khan** was so awesome in the match and he beat the hell out of **Cocoa**, who resorted to raking **Khan's** eyes because he was getting beaten up so much. **Khan** returned the favour and raked **Cocoa's** eyes then Mongolian stomped the crap out of **Cocoa**. **Cocoa** raked **Khan's** eyes twice more, however **Khan** wasn't in the mood to give **Cocoa**

anything and he completely no-sold the eye rakes. **Khan** gave **Cocoa** a Hot Shot and a big double chop to the throat then finished him off with his Killer Knee Drop off the second rope, which **Akbar** pointed out was a completely legal move. - Nobody does a squash match quite like **Killer Khan**; he was so, so great at killing men in short matches. He barely sold or took any bumps until it came time for him to do so and as a result he came off like a total monster, plus it made the guys that **Khan** would sell and bump for look like world-beaters for taking it to the unstoppable “Mongolian” killer.

“**Hacksaw**” **Duggan vs. Frank Monte**. - **Duggan** over in 4:09. **Akbar** corrected **Boyd** and spelled out **Duggan's** name so he could pronounce it properly. Apparently **Bill Watts** wasn't listening since he continued to call **Duggan**, “**Doogan**” for the next three years. **Akbar** played the heel's union card and put **Duggan** over big time; **Boyd** called **Duggan's** wrestling style, “Wacky and Silly.” Match was an extended squash for **Duggan**, who hit a bunch of moves including a Neckbreaker, a Suplex and his Flying NFL Headbutt then got the win with his “wacky” Avalanche Backbreaker. - Typical **Duggan** match: Wacky and silly.

North American Heavyweight Championship: Ted DiBiase (C) vs. Dick Murdoch. - **DiBiase** retained in 9:10. So the story is that **Murdoch** took **DiBiase** under his wing when his father died and became like a big brother who taught him everything he knew about pro wrestling. When **DiBiase** turned heel on **JYD** to win the North American title, **Murdoch** was away in Japan and sent a video back to Mid-South saying how disappointed he was to learn about his protégé's actions. Match was awesome; the work was hardly smooth, but for the story they told it didn't need to be. **Murdoch** hit the ring and immediately started brawling with **DiBiase**, who quickly rolled outside



and complained to the referee about the closed fists. It felt like an actual fight, as both men constantly traded punches in between the odd wrestling hold like a snapmare. **Duggan** showed up at ringside and distracted **Duggan** which allowed **DiBiase** to get the heat and he worked over the back of **Murdoch**. They traded shots on their knees and **Murdoch** got the advantage, but **DiBiase** cut him off and got a couple of near-falls with a Bodyslam and a Backbreaker. **Murdoch** picked the ankle and worked over **DiBiase's** leg then went for the Figure Four. **DiBiase** kicked free, but **Murdoch** sent him through the ropes with a right hand. **Murdoch**

prevented **Duggan** from getting in the ring and **DiBiase** jumped him from behind then went for an Atomic Drop. **Murdoch** countered with an O'Connor roll and **DiBiased** kicked out, which sent **Murdoch** into **Duggan**, who had got back on the apron. Finish was wacky, but executed very well: **Murdoch** hit a crossbody and the referee took a bump to the outside. **Murdoch** hoisted **DiBiase** up for the Brainbuster, however **Duggan** came in and landed his Flying Headbutt. **DiBiase** fell on top of **Murdoch** and the referee got back inside to count the pin. - **Watts** sure loved him some ref bumps and it clearly became a crutch to get out of doing clean finishes on TV. Still, like any time-worn trope, the ref bump at one time was a revolutionary idea and it became overdone because it was effective and easy to get heat with. We've mentioned the booking chain of **Bill Watts**, who learned from **Eddie Graham**, who learned from **Dory Funk Sr**, before. I've not seen enough Amarillo footage to determine whether ref bumps were commonplace, however I certainly have seen my fair share of ref bumps in Florida. So even here in 1982, hardcore fans with access to different territorial footage would have been exposed to the finish and aware it was a booking device to get out of clean finishes. However, I'm sure most of the Mid-South audience like old

Cooter and Mary Ellen sat on their coach in Texarkana, AR weren't trading tapes and probably weren't subscribers to the burgeoning Wrestling Observer. My point is that while the ref bumps are becoming excessive for the more discerning viewer, I doubt the majority of people watching Mid-South in 1982 were offended by the occasional ref bump finish.

Mr Wrestling II vs. Billy Starr. - **Wrestling II** over in 2:36. **Two** hit his Knee Lift early but **Starr** rolled outside. **Two** controlled with holds for a while then **Starr** cut him off briefly to get a little heat. **Two** came back to hit a Suplex and his Knee Lift to get the pin in a basic enhancement match.

Buck Robley vs. Tug Taylor. - **Robley** over in 2:21. **Boyd** announced that **JYD & Mr Olympia** would defend the Mid-South Tag Team titles against **Ted DiBiase & Hacksaw Duggan** next week with **Mr Wrestling II** as the special guest referee. **Akbar** said he was declaring war on **Robley** and constantly accused him of cheating. **Robley** won with the Sleeper, which **Akbar** claimed was a choke.

One Man Gang vs. Vinnie Romeo. - **Gang** over in 1:39 **Akbar** again noted he would stay at the desk to prove he was a gentleman and that his guys didn't need help to win. **Gang** destroyed **Romeo** and won with a Bodyslam and a big elbow drop.



Boyd & Akbar were at the desk to wrap up the show. **Boyd** hyped the **JYD/Olympia vs. DiBiase/Duggan** Tag Title match for next week and **Akbar** reiterated that he was declaring war on **Mike Sharpe & Buck Robely**.

This was a really solid and easy show to watch. It's always fun to have a guest commentator, as it gives the guys chance to get themselves over with their personality and character, and **Akbar** was able to do a lot with his evil foreigner general gimmick. The matches on the show were mostly the usual enhancements and squashes, except for **Killer Khan**, who is always great. In three years time, **Murdoch & DiBiase** would be involved in one of my favourite angles, not just in Mid-South but in

all of pro-wrestling history, in November 1985 when the show TV show was built around **DiBiase** challenging **Ric Flair** for the NWA World title. **Murdoch** told **DiBiase** he should step aside and let his mentor have the shot at **Flair**, but when **DiBiase** refused **Murdoch** bloodied him up and the match with **Flair** seemed in jeopardy. Later in the show **DiBiase** came back out to face **Flair** and during the match **Murdoch** ran in and gave the bloody **DiBiase** a Brainbuster on the floor and **Flair** won via count-out. Not only did the angle produce amazingly gripping television, but they also pulled off an unlikely double turn with the top heel **DiBiase** turning face and the beloved legend, **Murdoch**, going heel. Seeing them wrestling three years before that famous angle here was a great prelude of things to come and helped contextualise one of the most famous episodes of Mid-South Wrestling ever.



Next Week's Issue

Apart from the major surge from the NXT piece, we have an exciting week in store, with new additions to the website, more on the Road to WrestleMania, Mid-South and much more!



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