

CUBED CIRCLE NEWSLETTER



YEARBOOK 2016

INTRODUCTION

I claim that there exists a law in the world of professional wrestling – simply, that in this strange land, there are no wholly uneventful or mediocre years. When the American wrestling scene was languishing, perhaps as cold as it had ever been in the early to mid 1990s, Japan and Mexico were booming both financially and artistically. Similarly, when NJPW was stumbling, groggy and directionless from its most dire of periods, NOAH appeared radiant in the last of its golden years, the US indies had just begun to sprint into their own, and Mistico was near the height of his powers.

This law was predictably obeyed by the year that was, 2016. Where WWE stagnated further creatively, they saw regular injections of major international talent, producing more content in a wider assortment of niches than at any time in their history. Consequently, NJPW lost two of their biggest stars, but by beginning restoration efforts immediately, they elevated a pair of upper carders to superstar status in the eyes of their loyal fanbase. All the while, two of the promotion's most grizzled veterans went on to have arguably the best in-ring years of anyone on the roster. And the indies, facing the largest talent raids the business has seen in well over a generation, still retained and continued to cultivate phenoms on the mat and in the air.

The year in lucha libre didn't feature spectacles at the level of 2014, nor did it house the stunning news stories of 2015, but was by no means uneventful. AAA drama characteristically boiled over into the public eye as CMLL's simmered behind the curtain. And whilst 2016 was a similarly quite year for one of the country's most prominent independent groups, IWRG pulled off a *de apuestas* match some will call the match of the year.

Through all of this – the departures, signings, spectacles, debates, absurdity, and five-star matches – wrestling coverage was as broad and eclectic as it has ever been. Through the escalation of WWE's international vision, the bolstering of their roster, and atrophy of creative, viewing habits had to change. Some fans decided to focus on programming that strictly aimed to satisfy their niche interests, others immersed themselves entirely in the ethos of the global juggernaut, and many more drifted away almost entirely.

The footage boom, which started in the 2000s, has accelerated to the extent that future slowdown appears near inconceivable. This content isn't strictly limited to footage either. The podcast bubble refuses to burst both for "personality podcasters" and hobbyists alike. Reviewers, wrestlers, commentators, and historians continue to introduce fellow fans to new promotions, eras, regions, and styles as footage reaches ever greater standards of accessibility. With increasing exposure at nearly every point on the pro-wrestling globe, interest in the examination of wrestling culture, and the manner in which it interacts within broader society only intensified.

Within this rapidly-flowing torrent of content, any fan – regardless of how casual, jaded lapsed, or burnt out – can *somehow, somewhere*, find pro-wrestling footage, writing, reviews, or podcasts to engage with, grapple with, ponder over, and enjoy. And it is this sentiment that we hope to capture, or at least approximate, in the 2016 edition of the CCN yearbook. We hope to make those *somehow's* and *somewhere's* just a little clearer, to chronicle the feelings of the year's wrestling pundits, fans, and historians, and hopefully to honestly showcase the overwhelming diversity on offer from professional wrestling and its coverage in the year 2016.

– Ryan Clingman, *Cubed Circle Newsletter* Co-Editor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

WWE IN 2016: NEW ERA, BRAND SPLIT, AND THE PRESIDENTIAL SWERVE

BY ANDREA GREGOVICH

1

WWE FINANCIAL YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH CHRIS “MOOKIEGHANA” HARRINGTON

6

THE RISE OF WRESTLING TOURNAMENTS

BY DAVE MUSGRAVE

9

THE TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY OF THE CRUISERWEIGHT DIVISION IN 2016

BY TODD MARTIN

13

THE 2016 LUCHA LIBRE YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH THECUBSFAN

17

2016’S MOST INDELIBLE MOMENTS

BY PAUL COOKE

30

ALL IS SEMBLATIVE OF A WOMAN’S PART: A MODERN AND HISTORICAL LOOK AT INTER-GENDER PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

BY BEN CARASS

34

THE 2016 ANNUAL PODMASS

WITH JOE GAGNE

46

A 2016 PRO-WRES OVERVIEW

WITH BRYAN ROSE

49

WARRIORS

BY ALAN COUNIHAN

53

THE INDIE PURO YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH IZZAC

57

TO PROVE ONE’S VALOUR THE STORY OF ISHII AND TANAHASHI’S SECOND G1 CLASSIC

BY RYAN CLINGMAN

61

THE 2016 DRAGON GATE YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH ANDREW PUGH

64

THE 2016 DDT YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH JAMIE ‘O DOHERTY

78

PLUGS & CONTACT!

85



WWE IN 2016: NEW ERA, BRAND SPLIT, AND THE PRESIDENTIAL SWERVE

BY ANDREA GREGOVICH

I spearhead The Spectacle of Excess, a blog I like to describe as Barthes-inspired wrestling theory and criticism. We look at wrestling as a theatrical art form, and examine its political, economic, literary, linguistic, and thematic angles. While we're interested in all areas of professional wrestling and wrestling fandom, we have until recently been primarily concerned with WWE. From our point of view, 2016 was a year of upheaval, evolution, and swerve in WWE, the effects of such dramatic shifting causing ripples of change for everyone associated with the industry.

Early in 2016, WWE was noticeably stagnant. Everyone was still grumbling about Roman Reigns, the embarrassing divas division, and the tone deaf booking that was sabotaging one of the most talented rosters in memory. Triple H cut a series of promos in which he postured like an angry oligarch, casting Vince McMahon as God and WWE as religion, taunting the audience about their pathetic

insignificance in the world. And yet one of his historic promos hinted at the profound changes on the horizon, in which he framed his own character's career narrative in terms of the Rolling Stones classic "Sympathy For the Devil": "Please allow me to introduce myself: I'm a man of wealth and taste. I been around for a long, long year, and lay many a man's soul to waste." At the time I posed the question: was Trips perhaps hanging around St. Petersburg (as the song goes) because he saw it was a time for change?

Indeed, profound changes were already underway while Triple H was delivering his series of tyrant promos. Various NXT call ups, including several revolutionary women, were gradually finding their rhythm and revitalizing the main roster, and AJ Styles bypassed NXT and debuted at the Royal Rumble in January without WWE's customary name change, billed instead by the name he made iconic in his storied career in NJPW, TNA, and ROH. Not only did

Styles move almost immediately into the main event picture, he did so wearing a vest often adorned with kanji characters, as a kind of hieroglyphic reminder of his prominence in Japan. This, I contend, caused a monumental revision of WWE's self-narrative, and a dramatic shift in wrestling's economic structure: WWE was finally admitting, implicitly at first, but eventually as a rule, that they are competitors in a dynamic global market rather than an unshakeable corporate monopoly.

“But really, the most memorable moment of 2016's Wrestlemania was Stephanie McMahon performing a sort of homage to the “There is no Dana only Zuul” scene from Ghostbusters”

On a RAW just a few weeks before Wrestlemania came the sudden, unexpected return of prodigal Shane McMahon, who dropped a mini-pipebomb condemning the direction of the company under Stephanie's leadership just as she was accepting the highly ironic Vincent J. McMahon Legacy of Excellence Award. Shane's promo seemed to have been written using IWC talking points: he laid bare the company's plague of injuries, lagging stocks, and abysmal ratings, and demanded his rightful place in the McMahon family legacy. Shane challenged both his sister and his father, claiming his own children as the rightful heirs to the company. Things got all Shakespearean for a minute, the tired McMahon family drama suddenly full of new intrigue and possibility.

Shane's return was a clear sign that a tide of evolution had begun to surge. But there were still a few months when the product still felt more fish than lizard, if you will. Unlike the powerful spectacle of Wrestlemania 31 in 2015, which had Rusev riding in on a tank and Triple H entering in full Terminator regalia flanked by a squadron of apocalyptic robots,

Wrestlemania 32 felt mostly like average pay-per-view fare. Sure, the new women's championship belt was revealed to replace the sad old divas butterfly belt, and Charlotte beat both Becky Lynch and Sasha Banks for it, which was certainly cool. And Shane McMahon's Hell in a Cell match against the Undertaker for control of RAW was at least an attempt at a Wrestlemania-caliber spectacle, even though the scenario felt capricious, and he got to run RAW the next night anyway even though he lost the match. But really, the most memorable moment of 2016's Wrestlemania was Stephanie McMahon performing a sort of homage to the “There is no Dana only Zuul” scene from Ghostbusters, atop a set that was some kind of cemetery/industrial hybrid, which didn't actually seem apropos of anything in particular.



AJ Styles after winning the then WWE World Championship, September 2016. Visible in this picture is “club” written phonetically in kanji on the side of his jacket.

In late April, WWE started hyping the New Era with periodic promos and an abundance of mentions, and at first it seemed like little more than a marketing push aimed at creating a more auspicious main roster environment for the influx of talent coming up from NXT. Payback featured a match between the Vaudevillains and Enzo & Cass, two newly ascended, well crafted tag teams who were in the process of revitalizing a tag division that had been mostly stagnant for years, as well as a long awaited grudge match between fresh (relatively speaking) faced Sami Zayn and Kevin Owens, after which Owens made note of their fourteen-year friendship/rivalry as independent wrestlers. Extreme Rules featured

several intriguing spectacles, including a tornado tag match between the Usos and new NJPW recruits Anderson & Gallows, an action-packed fatal four-way for the Intercontinental Belt featuring a Cesaro, Miz, Zayn, and Owens, and an asylum match between Dean Ambrose and Chris Jericho, which ended in thumbtacks (to my delight!). Money In the Bank saw Ambrose finally break free from his booking sabotage to take both the briefcase and the title from Seth Rollins, who had just beat Roman Reigns for it: a thrill for Shield marks everywhere, even if Ambrose proved to be a lackluster champion. But the newness of the New Era still felt like a slow burn, and didn't really launch until the brand split was announced in July.



Daniel Bryan and Shane McMahon on the July 19th edition of Monday Night Raw -- the first night of the 2016 brand split.

The brand split exploded the prodigal Shane narrative into the story of a complete company re-org, and the draft of talent to either RAW (under the leadership of Stephanie and Mick Foley) or Smackdown (under Shane and Daniel Bryan) was like shuffling the deck, forcing everyone out of their stagnant old storylines and into new conflicts and partnerships. RAW took

on the feel of the flagship pageant every week, still at three hours and showcasing of the generation's most iconic talent. Charlotte and Sasha Banks have pioneered a new, badass women's narrative with cage and iron woman matches. Kevin Owens and Chris Jericho have found a way to evolve their lone wolf/douchebag heel personas into a strangely adorable friendship. Rusev and Lana continue their reign as a legendary foreign heel duo, and Roman Reigns has found a way to own his deeply troubled gimmick. RAW has also, for better or worse, taken on the challenge of trying to sell the mainstream audience on the cruiserweights, a collection of smaller international wrestlers who were a runaway hit during their NXT-style tournament on the WWE Network. The cruiserweight division has had a rough start on RAW, but is showing signs of narrative progress with the arrival of a very bitter heel Neville to the mix.

But the New Era's true revolution has occurred on Smackdown. Once little more than a filler show, Smackdown under Shane and Daniel Bryan suddenly became the renegade brand, a venue for fiery, offbeat outliers Becky Lynch and Alexa Bliss, to dominate the women's division, and painfully stale faceprint wrestlers, the Usos, to burn down their limiting gimmick and rebuild it from the ground up as thugs with grudges and tremendous fashion moxie. The voice of Mauro Ranallo, who narrates the play-by-play like the natural-born sports announcer he actually is, comes like an answered prayer after years of little more than utilitarian commentary. And Daniel Bryan has perpetrated one of the most subtle, devious heel turns in memory, weaving it into the central threads of Smackdown's corporate narrative: once a renegade outlier who shouted "Yes!", Bryan has rapidly evolved into the Smackdown GM role of corporate yes-man on both Smackdown Live and Talking Smack. Unlike the lagging cruiserweight division on RAW, Smackdown's story-within-a-story segment is this feisty and inventive interview show hosted by corporate Daniel Bryan and charismatic and hilarious Renee Young, which is sometimes a bigger draw than Smackdown itself. An outlet for the oft neglected art of the extemporaneous promo, Talking Smack has proven to be a platform for memorable and even game-changing shoot promos, like The Miz's rage-filled, personal takedown of career-shortened, medically-uncleared Daniel Bryan, after yes-man Bryan dared to assert the smack that long-suffering Miz wrestled like a coward.

The New Era has been characterized by innovations, as well as by a return to more old-school wrestling tropes, like the Braun Strowman strongman squash match series, and the emergence of iconic underdog Sami Zayn to compliment Strowman's Goliath with a much beloved David. Of course the New Era hasn't been without its booking snafus, like Enzo and Rusev's feud based on babyface Enzo doubling down to crass and awkward indecent exposure with Lana, or the chinless James Ellsworth comedy act that refused to die and arguably weakened AJ Styles' Smackdown title run. But the New Era and brand split have made for a year in which WWE was worth following, and that's actually a rather generous compliment for a company that had been in a rut of senselessly burying talent and undermining all of its storylines. The New Era felt like a passing of a torch, from the generation that excelled at Attitude Era shock value to a generation that views wrestling's classic and artistic potential as the source from which to draw new material, and that felt like progress.

“What I describe as WWE's carny-corporate aesthetic has spilled out of the ring and into the arena of "real" global politics.”

But as the year came to a close, and in perhaps the most monumental swerve in professional wrestling history, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States of America.

This was truly an unprecedented moment: not only was a WWE Hall of Famer becoming the leader of the free world, he postured during the election and its controversial aftermath like a combative heel, making larger than life facial expressions as he called out his detractors, cutting bombastic Twitter promos on his foes, and formulating a foreign policy that might best be described as a crotch chop to the rest of the world, all before even taking office. With Trump now appointing Linda McMahon to head the Small Business Administration, a strange new reality seems to have taken root. What I describe as WWE's carny-corporate aesthetic has spilled out of the ring and into the arena of "real" global politics. Professional wrestling has always been politics, but now politics

has lost its own veil of kayfabe and has evolved into professional wrestling.



Donald Trump and Bobby Lashley shaving Vince McMahon's head bald at WrestleMania 23 in 2007.

As critics of a carny art form that is widely regarded as "fake", the "real" election of Heel Trump has thrown our theoretical framework into disarray. We've always gritted our teeth and accepted a certain degree of callous and cutthroat "best for business" decision-making by WWE because we can see it as part of professional wrestling's historical narrative. Wrestling is inherently delusional and self-destructive, those carnies are a different breed, they've all had too many concussions, we might as well go ahead and enjoy what they do for us. But a president styling his gimmick after Million Dollar Man Ted DiBiase is a level of bizarre that has us questioning our complacency with this company, whose intent must now be examined more closely.

We're now less willing to give WWE credit for acknowledging the existence of independent wrestling, and more willing to consider the point of view recently expressed by NJPW superstar Kenny

Omega: that WWE's embrace of independent wrestling is in fact an effort toward a monopoly on the core talent that keeps the independent promotions afloat. And even more ominously, in a time when issues of identity have everyone triggered on a daily basis, we must necessarily doubt the supposed harmlessness of WWE's tendency to toy with themes of race, gender, and nationality. I mean, all of that stuff is now connected by cash and cronyism with a heel president; we critics would be lame to bury our heads in the sand about it. In other words, we're not saying we're boycotting the company exactly, since it is the biggest player in the industry we write about, but we do assert that "best for business" has taken on an ominous new meaning for us in the Trump Era.

So while 2016 ushered in WWE's New Era and all of its fresh potential, it was also the year that convinced us at The Spectacle of Excess to step back from this convenient corporation for a while, so we can observe and get our bearings in this strange New Era. Instead, we are shifting our focus to the art of wrestling in its bigger independent picture, rather than continuing to fixate on the over-packaged product WWE makes so convenient for us to consume. We're looking forward to 2017, a year in which wrestling theory and criticism will enjoy its own New Era with a face turn toward puroresu, lucha libre, and the many offerings of the American independent wrestling scene. ■



Shinsuke Nakamura takes a Boma Ye from Omega in their New Year's Dash tag match.



Nakamura poses with Triple H at his official signing announcement in January.

run out of options. I want to be one of the options for people. You want to go eat a McDonald's hamburger? That's cool. McDonald's can be good. Do I like them every day? Do I want to eat McDonald's seven days a week for every meal? Probably not. Eventually, I'm going to want to go someplace for a triple-A grade steak. I may not necessarily have the traffic flow of McDonald's, but guess what? The quality is there, and it's for the distinguished wrestling viewer. People who are wanting something more out of their programming. That's what I want to provide for people in 2017."

"It seems as though we're headed towards a monopoly, if I were to speak honestly. WWE is hiring people just to hire them. That's fine, and I'm happy for whoever's happy to collect a paycheck from them. A lot of my good friends are now receiving work and receiving money. But sadly, a lot of those people are signing with WWE just to ride the pine. You can't put all these guys on TV. On one end, you have these mom-and-pop indy superstars getting TV time, and people all around the world are able to see the art of what they do. And in a lot of cases, they're enjoying it, which is fantastic. I'm really happy about that.

But as everyone gets picked up, as all these independent promotions have to shut down and close their doors because of WWE scooping everyone up, everyone's going to lose an option. And that guy you saw for that one tournament, you're not going to see him anymore. You can't put him on TV, there's only so much time. So eventually, people are going to

– Kenny Omega, in conversation with Austin Heiberg of Uproxx in December 2016



WWE FINANCIAL YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH CHRIS “MOOKIEGHANA” HARRINGTON

World Wrestling Entertainment revenues grossed \$542 million in 2014 and \$659 million in 2015. 2016 will be another gargantuan year for WWE with revenue in excess of \$700 million. WWE’s narrative is simple: escalating TV rights plus explosive WWE Network revenues equals massive success.

And it’s true that WWE has experienced a windfall of television rights over the past decade. In 2006, WWE earned about \$93 million for their TV programming. That number grew 2.5x times to \$231 million by 2015.

Meanwhile, the real story on the consolidated “Network + Cannibalized” segments of business is murkier. When you look at this group (specifically WWE Network, traditional Pay-Per-View, WWE Classics on Demand, Home Entertainment/Home Video, Digital Media/WWE.com/Online PPV) there has not been steady growth. These segments earned a combined \$170 million in 2007-2008 but slipped down to about \$120 million by 2010-2011.

The WWE Network launched and quickly grew into a major revenue stream (\$70 million in 2014, \$140 million in 2015, estimated \$170 million in 2016). Meanwhile, cannibalized segments have whittled down to less than \$50 million for 2016. Yes, on a net revenue basis, WWE is able to achieve record net revenues. However, profitability tells a very different story.

From 2006 to 2010, average OIBDA (operating income before depreciation & amortization) was \$84 million. The high was \$94 million in 2010 and low was \$74 million in 2006. From 2011 to 2015 WWE averaged \$35 million OIBDA with a high of \$63 million in 2012 and low of negative \$15.5 million in 2015. WWE expects 2016 will finish between \$80 million and \$84 million. While that would be the highest OIBDA in five years it will certainly not set a company record. WWE has gone from achieving double-digit OIBDA as a percentage of net revenues (18% average between 2006-2010) to single digit (7% average between 2011-2015). 2016 will be an inflection point as this year, WWE hopes to hit about 12% OIBDA %.

This speaks volumes about how WWE has used their lucrative television contract to subsidize the WWE Network business. It brings in higher net revenues at a much lower margin. In fact, the OIBDA on the Network segment (PPV+WWE Network) will probably be lower in 2016 (about \$45 million OIBDA) compared to 2015 (which was \$49 million OIBDA) despite almost \$31 million more in net revenues generated by the WWE Network. That's stunning.

“While WWE is certainly not a professional wrestling monopoly (they would fail either the legal or economic definition and tests), they are a already financial juggernaut when it comes to professional wrestling. What do they intend to do with all this money?”

While some of this is related to how much WWE is allocating on WWE programming for the WWE Network the reality is that in 2016 the WWE Network is generating just at or slightly below the amount of profit that the traditional pay-per-view model was generating in the mid-2000s. That's on a base of 1.42 million average paid subscriptions in 2016. With the entire world (save China) able to subscribe to the WWE Network, how many people are really waiting to pull the trigger on ordering a wrestling-driven over-the-top subscription service?

So, why does WWE tout their new model over the tried-and-true pay-per-view delivery system? One important difference between the traditional PPV model and the modern OTT model is the ability WWE has to observe the viewing and browsing habits of their WWE Network customers. In March 2016, WWE announced that Pamela Murrin was joining The company in a SVP of Data Strategy role as part of Tandy O'Donoghue's Strategy and Analytics division. This is an area of the company that WWE has been quietly beefing up. It's likely that

WWE is applying their improved data segmentation and audience models to invest in programming such as the Cruiserweight Classic.

Increasingly, we're seeing the WWE Network positioned for their current content and modern material as opposed to marketing their archival library. In fact, WWE CFO and Chief Strategy Officer George Barrios himself recently suggested that people wouldn't pay ten dollars a month for the premium content unless they watched the television shows. Otherwise that would be like “only watching episode 10 of the Walking Dead”. This challenges the notion that WWE really sees opportunity in the WWE Network as a conduit for their older tape libraries or that WWE will be expending additional marketing dollars and effort to recapture lapsed fans beyond the current strategy of bringing back WCW stars (such as Sting, Goldberg) for nostalgia runs on the current programming.

It's important to remember that WWE didn't need to put all their eggs in a single basket. Now that they've run WrestleMania on domestic WWE Network (2014), WrestleMania on international WWE Network (2015) and free WrestleMania (2016) – there's really no special tricks left in the hat.

WWE acknowledges that growth for 2017 will be at slower rate than 2016, which demonstrates they understand that it's getting harder to attract and retain new subscribers in the increasingly crowded world of OTT-subscription apps. Meanwhile, WWE continues to position themselves price-wise against Hulu and Netflix while their programming is still uniquely niche professional wrestling reality and sports entertainment shows.

Among the most interesting WWE financial developments of 2016 was the December 12 announcement that the company would be offering \$200 million in convertible senior notes due in 2023 at 3.375% annual interest. The purpose? A delightfully vague statement about “supporting the execution of the company's long-term growth strategy and for general corporate purposes”. While WWE is certainly not a professional wrestling monopoly (they would fail either the legal or economic definition and tests), they are a already financial juggernaut when it comes to professional wrestling. What do they intend to do with all this money?

“Vince McMahon is still emperor of his kingdom. He’s still the Chairman of the Board, Chief Executive Officer and running the ship when it comes to creative direction.”

Did WWE CFO George Barrios seek this financing so he could capitalize on all those appearances at bank & investors conferences with this credit line of “start-up”-esque financing (convertible senior notes)? Some have noted that WWE regularly pays out higher dividends than their free cash flow. Is this just insurance against the next television rights deal?

Where the company goes from here is difficult to ascertain. While the brand split has revitalized the relevance of SmackDown, it’s ultimately insufficient to pull against the waning forces of sliding television ratings. WWE wants a big television rights deal once their current bundle of major league deals expire in late 2019, but the landscape is evolving at such a pace it’s questionable that anyone is going to bring a big money offer to the table. Instead, we may just see a series of concessions – change in exclusivity on Raw/Smackdown rights or reducing number of live hours of content while maintaining similar TV rights. WWE talks a big game about new international markets and has done extensive hiring campaigns to find new athletes in Brazil, India & China, but it’s still questionable whether these markets will ever deliver the growth that WWE promises or whether markets like India have also reached the peak of their media bubble. WWE is certainly doubling down in the United Kingdom marketplace (interestingly, one of the places they did make a pricing exception for the over-the-top WWE Network) with the new U.K. tournament and additional U.K. focused programming. This is a much safer bet than volatile emerging markets or content-restrictive regimes like China.

Vince McMahon is still emperor of his kingdom. He’s still the Chairman of the Board, Chief Executive Officer and running the ship when it comes to creative direction. WWE’s inner circle obviously includes both Paul and Stephanie Levesque (both sit on the board of directors) but also key executives like Chief Strategy Officer and CFO George Barrios (who joined the company in 2008). While we’ve seen McMahon family members come and go (and come back), it’s a different story when it comes to top executives.

It was telling that when the WWE President of International Gerrit Meier quietly left WWE in June 2016. There was a significant restructuring on international divisions and Meier’s position (President of International) was eliminated. We’ve seen this before. For instance, in 2011, WWE removed the COO (Chief Operating Officer) role after high-level executive Donna Goldsmith left the company. She’d worked for WWE for a decade and reported directly to Vince McMahon. Ian Frisch spoke with a former top level WWE executive who described the experience of working for Vince McMahon as such: “You are treated like a commodity —just a barrel of corn. You are only a piece of talent, cultivated and developed, until they need to blame you and fire you and bring someone else in.”

Financially WWE is stable. They get guarantee rights fees with built-in quarterly escalators. The WWE Network isn’t likely to break two million paid subscribers in 2017 (beyond possibly for a single WrestleMania month), but the subscriber base isn’t likely to collapse any time soon. They’ve found ways to run more live events annually and extract higher and higher ticket prices as domestic live events have grown from \$64 million in revenue (2008) to \$93 million in revenue (2015). WWE is set up to have successful 2017 and 2018 years, but there is still a serious reckoning awaiting in 2019 when it’s time to pivot and position themselves with new television rights deals.

It’s imperative that WWE finds a way to either effectively monetize their over-the-top WWE Network through raising prices to achieve a much higher OIBDA % per subscriber, creating new access tiers (free with video ads, mobile-only), or striking meaningful partnerships with other streaming services to provide an OTT bundle. It will be fascinating to see whether the same inner circle is advising Vince McMahon in a few years or whether we’ll see another significant leadership turnover. ■

THE RISE OF WRESTLING TOURNAMENTS

BY DAVE MUSGRAVE

IN RECENT YEARS, TOURNAMENTS HAVE BECOME A KEY PROMOTIONAL TACTIC IN PRO WRESTLING, BOTH AT THE INDY AND MAINSTREAM LEVEL. I DON'T KNOW IF YOU COULD SAY THAT 2016 HAD THE MOST TOURNAMENTS OF ANY YEAR IN WRESTLING HISTORY, BUT I CAN'T THINK OF MANY YEARS WITH MORE.

Whether in indy or mainstream promotions, the history of tournaments can be divided into two categories: championship tournaments (for vacant or new championships as well as to determine a number one contender); and special event tournaments.

A notable early example took place with the International Tournament at the Manhattan Opera House in 1915. This tournament was famous for the debut of The Masked Marvel, a masked man who crashed the tournament and gained a lot of media attention. He eventually lost to the legendary Frank Gotch in the tournament, but not before being identified in the media as Mort Henderson.

Fast forward a few decades and you will find the strange practice of fictitious tournaments being used by the then-named World Wide Wrestling Federation. This includes the use of a tournament supposedly held in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil to crown Buddy Rogers as the first WWWF Champion in 1963. The same locale was fictitiously used to crown Pat Patterson as the first Intercontinental Champion in 1979. It has always been a mystery to me that the company did not capitalize on what could have been a draw in actual tournaments. I also feel that Zack Ryder missed out in recent years when he declared

himself Internet Champion, but didn't say he won it in a tournament in Rio.



Kenta Kobashi as winner of the 2000 AJPW Championship Carnival.

The pro wrestling scene in Japan has made use of tournaments in building their business. This has included the Japan Pro Wrestling Association putting on tag team tournaments starting in February 1954 with a tournament featuring Rikidozan and Masahiko Kimura against Ben and Mike Sharpe. JPWA also had the World Big League singles tournaments starting from 1959 until 1972. Giant Baba carried forward this tradition into All Japan Pro Wrestling with the

Champion Carnival which was initially single elimination and was later round robin.

Antonio Inoki also brought this concept to New Japan Pro Wrestling, initially with the World League tournaments, later with the IWGP tournaments, and starting in 1991 with the G1 Climax tournament, which has become the biggest tournament in modern Japan. AJPW also had very successful World's Strongest Tag League Tournaments which still run today on a much smaller scale.

Mexico has a more recent history of tournaments including the Universal Tournament and Parejas Increibles tournaments (a tournament with unlikely partners, usually a rudo and a tecnico) as well as AAA having their Rey de Reyes tournaments and the Lucha Libre World Cup.

The use of tournaments became a promotional tool during the wrestling wars of the 1980's. This included the PWI Cup in the UWF in 1986 which was featured prominently in Pro Wrestling Illustrated. The Jim

Matt Riddle and pro-wrestling community leader, Papa Hales, at the 2016 Scenic City Invitational – a highlight of the Southern Wrestling calendar.



Japan started featuring junior heavyweight tournaments starting with the Top of the Super Juniors tournament, first in 1988 and then from 1991-1993, before being renamed the Best of the Super Juniors tournament. The first Super J-Cup tournament was held in 1994 and was a huge success as was the 1995 edition. Later versions held in 2000, 2004, 2009 and 2012 were much less successful. It should be noted that there was a J-Crown title tournament to unify eight junior heavyweight titles in 1996 and that this tournament won by Great Sasuke could be considered a somewhat less successful, but still important coda to the 1994 and 1995 Super J-Cup Tournaments.

Crockett Sr. Memorial Tag Team Tournament started in 1986 and ran through 1988 through Jim Crockett's National Wrestling Alliance promotion. The World Wrestling Federation held the Wrestling Classic in 1985 which was the first wrestling show on pay-per-view -- featuring a tournament won by Junkyard Dog.

In 1988 the WWF had one of the higher profile tournaments to fill the vacant WWF Title at Wrestlemania IV. Randy Savage won a tournament that was exciting in build if not completely in execution. In 1990, the WWF had a tournament to fill the Intercontinental Title that also had some flaws in that there wasn't even a second round due to two double-disqualifications. The WWF had started holding the King of the Ring tournament as a house

show promotion starting in 1985. In 1993 the tournament was held on pay-per-view for the first time and won by Bret Hart. The tournament was then held annually until 2002, with major successes such as Steve Austin, much lesser winners such as Mabel and Billy Gunn and lots of examples somewhere in between.



The participants of the legendary 1994 Super J Cup.

The WWF had a number of other tournaments in the 1990's, mostly for vacant titles. This included a Royal Rumble for the WWF title in 1992 (and the Rumble could also be considered a regular tournament), a tag team championship tournament in late 1994 and early 1995, a WWF Title Tournament in 1998 and Intercontinental Title Tournaments in 1996 (Marc Mero), 1997 (Owen Hart) and 1998 (Ken Shamrock).

The renamed World Championship Wrestling had a number of tournaments in the 1990's. At Starrcade 1990, the Pat O'Connor International Tag Team Tournament legitimately featured a number of international stars with Rick and Scott Steiner defeating Masa Saito and Great Muta in the finals. A similar tournament was held in 1992 with the NWA Tag Team Title Tournament also featuring international stars. A month later the NWA Heavyweight title was filled in the 1992 G1 Climax tournament with Masa Chono of NJPW beating Rick Rude of WCW in the finals.

WCW also had tournaments for a number of vacant titles throughout the decade as well as some strangely-conceived special event tournaments. The Lethal Lottery/Battle Bowl tournament was actually fun to me in the first couple of years although many make fun of it. Other throw-away tournaments during the decade included the Jesse Ventura Strongest Arm arm-wrestling tournament, the King Of Cable, the

Slim Jim Challenge, and the Lord of the Ring tournament.

Extreme Championship Wrestling was formed out of the former Eastern Championship Wrestling in 1994 when Shane Douglas won the NWA Title tournament and threw the title belt down afterwards. This double-cross has come to overshadow the tournament itself. From that point forward, ECW did not have a significant history of tournaments other than a tournament for the vacant TV Title in 2000.

The beginning of modern indy tournaments can really be traced to the ECWA Super 8 Tournament starting in 1997. The tournament became a showcase for the best indy wrestlers for a number of years including Christopher Daniels, Low-Ki, Reckless Youth, and Bryan Danielson. Jeff Peterson was also a frequent participant prior to his death from cancer at a young age. He later had an indy tournament named after him.



Participants of the 2016 version of the Super J Cup with its winner, KUSHIDA.

All Pro Wrestling followed on the success of the Super 8 by holding the King of the Indies tournament. The first tournament was in 2000 with little fanfare, but the 2001 version is seen as the birth of modern indy wrestling. It featured future major stars such as Samoa Joe, Bryan Danielson and AJ Styles and led to the formation of Ring Of Honor.

Ring of Honor started in 2002 and had a successful title tournament in the summer with Low-Ki becoming their first champion. Their tag title tournament also saw Christopher Daniels and Donovan Morgan become the first tag champs. ROH had a very successful Race To The Top tournament in 2007 and also became known for their annual Survival Of The Fittest tournament.

During these years, Ian Rotten's IWA Mid-South Promotion became known for holding a number of tournaments including the Sweet Science tournament which was named after Ted Petty, aka Rocco Rock, after his death in September 2002. IWA-MS also had their own King Of The Deathmatch tournament based on the mythologized 1994 IWA Japan KOTDM tournament with Cactus Jack and Terry Funk in the

Internationally, the biggest tournament has continued to be the G1 Climax tournament in NJPW which was seen a resurgence in the past number of years. Other tournaments continue in Japan including the Champions Carnival in AJPW, the Global League in Pro Wrestling NOAH and the Fire Festival tournament in Zero1. Every promotion in Japan has a tag team tournament as well, though they are less-



Triple H and the entrants in the UK Title tournament.

finals. Similarly, Combat Zone Wrestling also started having KOTDM tournaments during these years as well as their annual Cage of Death and Best of the Best tournaments. The IWC Super indy tournament is a lesser-known tournament that has been held regularly starting during the early 2000's.

The current scene is dominated most prominently by the Pro Wrestling Guerrilla Battle of Los Angeles held in late August or early September every year. This tournament has become one of the highlights of the modern wrestling calendar. It is joined by other longstanding tournaments such as Chikara's King Of Trios and even the relaunched Ted Petty Invitational as a showcase for indy wrestling. Evolve has also had Style Battle tournaments in recent years and the concept is developing into its own promotion. Smaller tournaments such as the Scenic City Invitational in the Chatanooga area as well as AAW's Jim Lynan Memorial Tournament have also been a showcase for great wrestling.

celebrated as compared to the singles tournaments in recent years other than in Dragon Gate.

The WXW promotion in Germany has also become quite known for their Sixteen Carat Tournament, which is nice to see considering the history of Otto Wanz promoting tournaments in that country.

With the proliferation of current tournaments, one of the highlights of 2016 was the Cruiserweight Classic tournament held by WWE. It featured a number of wrestlers who have been featured previously in major tournaments including Kota Ibushi and Brian Kendrick, as well as wrestlers from the burgeoning UK scene such as Zack Sabre Jr. and Jack Gallagher. This has situated WWE well for their recently announced UK Tournament set for the early months of 2017. I look forward to following the great tournaments this year and hope that WWE taking such steps continues to make the indie groups and international companies up their game as they did in 2016. ■



THE TRIUMPH AND TRAGEDY OF THE CRUISERWEIGHT DIVISION IN 2016

BY TODD MARTIN

2016 WAS A FASCINATING YEAR FOR JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHTS/CRUISERWEIGHTS IN PRO WRESTLING.

After a long period of time during which increasingly smaller wrestlers were simply accepted as part of the heavyweight division, this year lighter weight wrestlers were given a distinct spotlight as cruiserweights by WWE. This new approach, to identify and designate light heavyweight wrestlers as different from heavyweights, had its successes and failures. It's likely to have lasting effects in the years to come and whether those changes are positive or negative remains to be seen.

With WWE offering poor storylines more often than not, these fans became more concerned with the in-ring product. As expectations rose for wrestling quality and fans grew less invested in the stories, wrestlers couldn't get over based primarily on size and character. Wrestling became much more of a meritocracy and so many of the best performers were smaller. Fans, educated to see smaller fighters like Oscar De La Hoya, Floyd Mayweather and Georges St. Pierre as major pay-per-view attractions, were happy to accept these smaller men as top stars.

Kota Ibushi drills Brian Kendrick with a high kick in their 08/27 (broadcast 08/31) CWC quarter final match.



The popularization of junior heavyweight wrestling in the 1980s and 1990s came because the junior heavyweights offered a distinct niche from their heavier counterparts. Tiger Mask vs. Dynamite Kid was a different sort of match than Antonio Inoki vs. Riki Choshu, Brian Pillman vs. Jushin Liger was distinct from Lex Luger vs. Sting and Rey Misterio Jr. vs. Psicosis was quite unlike Hulk Hogan vs. Roddy Piper. The heavyweight matches still tended to drive business but the lighter weight wrestlers offered a faster style that was often particularly popular among children and hardcore fans.

In the 21st century, weight in pro wrestling has played a less significant role. Particularly in America but also to a lesser extent in Japan, the fan base became more hardcore as pro wrestling's popularity declined.

It appeared that a continued gradual decline in the size of pro wrestlers was inevitable, and then the Cruiserweight Classic came along. At first, it felt more like the simple infusion of another group of the best independent wrestlers in the world. However, it ended up being marketed to a significant degree around the weight class, complete with legitimate weigh-ins. The Cruiserweight Classic was an unequivocal success both in terms of show quality and fan interest, which led to a cruiserweight division being brought to the main WWE product.

Unfortunately for WWE and the cruiserweights, the Raw cruiserweight division and 205 Live have not proved to be the successes thus far that the Cruiserweight Classic was. The matches and feuds haven't distinguished themselves relative to the rest

of the roster and none of the wrestlers have gotten over to any significant degree with the audience. Thus, 2016 concludes with both the most successful lighter weight concept in pro wrestling in years (the CWC) and a flat reintroduction of an American cruiserweight division that had been dormant for nearly a decade.

“The Cruiserweight Classic didn’t thrive because fans were dying to see a new cruiserweight division; it thrived because Kota Ibushi, Zack Sabre Jr., Gran Metallik, Akira Tozawa and Johnny Gargano are awesome.”

Going forward, the fate of the cruiserweight division could be crucial to the overall health of WWE and independent scene. That’s not because the cruiserweight division itself is likely to redefine the industry but rather that so much of the best young talent in the world could be funneled into the cruiserweight division if WWE so chose. The wrestling business can’t afford to waste top talents like Adam Cole in a division that isn’t over when it’s already having such trouble creating new stars.

Many have criticized the presentation of the WWE cruiserweight division relative to what the company did with the Cruiserweight Classic. While there is some merit to this, the biggest reason the cruiserweight division hasn’t gotten over as well as the Classic is talent. So many of the best performers in the Classic have been rarely seen or not seen at all on Raw or 205 Live.

The Cruiserweight Classic didn’t thrive because fans were dying to see a new cruiserweight division; it

thrived because Kota Ibushi, Zack Sabre Jr., Gran Metallik, Akira Tozawa and Johnny Gargano are awesome. Creating a cruiserweight division out of the Cruiserweight Classic without much of the best talent would be like a rival team trying to recreate the success of the 72-10 Bulls by signing John Salley, Bill Wennington and Randy Brown. WWE has signed to contracts so many of the worst talents in the Cruiserweight Classic that it’s hard to not conclude they think there’s specific cache to just having been in that tournament – even if you only lost a mediocre match in the first round.

While this has hampered the cruiserweight division thus far, it also offers promise for the future. If the big problem has been that the talent isn’t good enough yet, that means that the prospects of the division might improve when better talent is brought in. Austin Aries stands out in particular and WWE has at least shown Metallik and Tozawa on a stage even if they haven’t been put in the ring on 205 Live as of mid-December. There is more than enough talent out there to produce awesome episodes of 205 Live if WWE can figure out which wrestlers to feature.

Another reason for optimism along those lines is that WWE hasn’t yet done anything to suggest that the smaller wrestlers are inherently inferior to the larger talent. This is something various promotions would regularly do in the past, but that they’ve avoided doing this time around so far. This is likely in large part because WWE is already so divided out into different divisions. With 2 women’s divisions, 2 tag divisions and 2 men’s heavyweight singles divisions, the promotion is used to keeping wrestlers in their own separate ecosystems. It doesn’t feel like there’s a need to have the divisions mingle all that much.

If cruiserweights are kept separate and allowed to excel on their own, it also allows wrestlers to switch divisions in the future without any stigma. This year when New Japan needed a new top foreigner, it looked to Kenny Omega, who was elevated from the junior heavyweight division without any difficulty. Omega was a tremendous success in the role and now he’s headlining the Tokyo Dome. That certainly isn’t unprecedented in Japan, but it’s a welcome development given it was only a few years ago when many argued the decline in the popularity of Pro Wrestling Noah was linked in significant part to fans not accepting smaller wrestlers like KENTA and Naomichi Marufuji as the new top stars.

Of course, if lighter weight wrestlers are capable of succeeding in the heavyweight division and the lighter weight division isn't driving business, the natural question is why those lighter weight wrestlers aren't just in the heavyweight division to begin with. This is the existential question confronting the WWE's cruiserweight division. Why does it even need to exist when fans are more accepting than ever before of the most talented smaller wrestlers wrestling against larger wrestlers?

Some have pointed to the success of Conor McGregor and other lower weight MMA fighters and boxers as evidence of the benefits of weight classes. However, in reality what that success argues for is simply the promotion of lighter weight fighters. UFC benefits from the fact they're in the Conor McGregor business, not the size of his opponents. The size of his opponents is only relevant to the extent that he is able to be competitive with them since MMA is a shoot and size is a limiting factor in a shoot competition.

That issue doesn't apply in pro wrestling. A pro wrestling promotion can book a 95 pound woman to pin a 325 pound man if it so chooses. The only issue is if the fans don't buy it and fans care less about size now than they ever have before. If the UFC could promote Conor McGregor against Jon Jones or Anderson Silva while knowing that fans would buy it and either side could win, of course they'd book that. Junior heavyweight pro wrestlers are in the same boat. Fans haven't rejected the idea of Finn Balor, A.J. Styles or Daniel Bryan being able to compete with Roman Reigns and it's unlikely they'd greet Austin Aries or Adam Cole any differently.

If 2016 was the reintroduction of weight classes in WWE, 2017 will likely be the make or break year for the concept. If WWE can build interest in the idea of cruiserweights competing against each other, weight classes are likely to gain added relevance all over the world given WWE's dominance in the marketplace. On the other hand, the division faltering would have entirely different consequences. WWE is unlikely to give up on the division altogether so quickly, but it very well could decide not to filter the most marketable smaller talents into it. The cruiserweight division would become a slum of sorts for the less marketable smaller wrestlers while the more marketable ones just compete with the heavyweights.

The silver lining for lighter weight pro wrestlers regardless of what happens with the cruiserweight

division is that we are long past the point where the success of the division will be a referendum on smaller wrestlers themselves. Those wrestlers are here to stay. The question is now how to best frame and categorize them. 2016 reopened that question after it appeared settled for years and it will now be up to WWE to prove that tinkering with the status quo was a wise move. ■



In an August 5th conference call, then UFC Featherweight champion, Conor McGregor sparked controversy with his comments on various WWE performers

*"For the most part, those WWE guys are p*****, to be honest. They're messed up p*****, if you ask me. Fair play to Brock, he got in and fought, but at the end of the day he was juiced up to the f***** eye balls, so how can I respect that? And then what's the other guy? The other guy hasn't fought yet, so I don't know about him yet."*

On the 7th of August McGregor followed with the tweet:

"I didn't mean no disrespect to the @wwe fans. What I meant to say was that I'd slap the head off your entire roster. And twice on Sunday's."

Responses from performers were mixed – many touched on McGregor's size.

"Would you prefer to find us individually or have us all line up at once? I know your time is valuable, sir." – Big E Langston

"I think McGregor could do well in the featherweight division.....if the WWE had one." – AJ Styles

"[V]ery funny little guy. Why don't you get your head out of Dana White's ass" – Kurt Angle

"Your the size of my leg. Shut up." – Roman Reigns

"Never show a Jack Russell a mirror. It thinks it's a majestic Irish Wolfhound. Really, just an annoying wee yapper trying to sell tickets." – Sheamus

"Coming from a guy who built a career copying my persona, I expected the type of class we get from Ronda or Anderson." – Ric Flair



THE 2016 LUCHA LIBRE YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH THECUBSFAN

Wrestling in Mexico struggled in 2016. 2015 went out with a series of people bolting from AAA & CMLL, jumping to new full time TV promotion Elite or leaving Mexico entirely. In other parts of the world we saw promotions recover and rebuild with their existing talent. In Mexico, we saw the major promotions struggling to do the same, and losing even more talent in the process. There were plenty of notable and great matches in Mexico in 2016, but the biggest stories of the year were centered around the people who left, or were trying to leave. You could find good lucha in 2016, but the promotions themselves and the overall lucha libre scene was negative.

Even the good matches foreshadowed negative events. The AAA match of the year took place on March 4, in Toluca. It was more accurately the match which summed up the year for AAA than the best match, but it could be argued as both. It was the fourth, and final four-way qualifying match in AAA's annual Rey de Reyes tournament. The other tournament matches, held over the preceding month, had been mostly forgettable matches. This final match had a bigger purpose, putting together four of its young stars together as a sort of statement about the where the company was going. It was intended to be a hot match to kick off a reboot of the Octagon Jr. character, which would now be portrayed by the luchador best known as Flamita. It'd put him on the same level as three of their hotter luchadors coming into 2016: Fenix, Pentagon Jr. and Hijo del Fantasma.

The match came off well, with Pentagon Jr. advancing over his natural rival, but Octagon Jr. looking strong in his debut. It seemed like a tone setting match for the rest of the year.

“Konnan has gone from carrying the torch for AAA in all his media appearances to being the company’s harshest critic.”

That four way match never set the tone, but instead was an anomaly, a glimpse of an AAA that would never come to be. Flamita would only appear as Octagon Jr. a handful of times, was publicly humiliated after being caught up in an ugly divorce between AAA and the original Octagon, and became frustrated about being relegated back to the opening matches with no direction despite the new character. Fenix soon after had his own public breakup with AAA, deciding on his own to relocate to the US and focus on US indie work. Both things were allowed to others who had become stars through Lucha Underground, but Fenix acting without asking permission caused AAA to stop using him, even though they continued to advertise him on shows. Hijo del Fantasma would’ve joined the other two as being estranged from AAA had it been legally allowed. Fantasma tried to join his old friend La Sombra in NXT, and was only stopped by a long term Lucha Underground contract he’d been asked to sign without much thought before the series started. Fantasma took care of a back injury instead of returning, and wasn’t much a memorable presence in 2016. Only Pentagon Jr. remained with AAA the entire year, but even he seemingly became a US indie star first and foremost, a Lucha Underground wrestler second, and AAA luchador on days when he was available. The four way that was going to set up the future was really instead the end.

2015 AAA was a bet on Rey Mysterio, Myzteziz, and Alberto el Patron as the pillars of AAA. The bet failed. Business failed to increase to meet the added expense, and all three were out of the promotion as full timers by the start of 2016. Only Mysterio worked AAA shows, only a few. (Alberto was supposed to work for AAA once, didn’t, and that’ll be another long story someday.) AAA still had a core of

young promising talents, but had spent the year underplaying them to their new stars, and came into 2016 with a roster of second fiddles. AAA looked at its luchadors and, in its desperation to fill the void placed its bet on those who had been on top before rather than those who could be in the future. AAA’s 2016 seemed like a middling short term success, at the expense of frittering around the long term future.



Dragon Azteca Jr., Rey Mysterio, and Prince Puma at TripleMania XXIV.

AAA’s 2016 year saw a lot of turnover. Lots of people left, not just those mentioned above. Luchadors ranging from long time company star Cibernético, to popular foreigner Jack Evans, all the way down to opening match wrestler Ludxor were out of AAA over the course of the year. Those exits were almost always accompanied by interviews loudly complaining about how AAA was run. No one was louder than Konnan, who had been AAA’s booker in addition to on screen heel spokesperson role. Konnan was still with AAA to start the year, but didn’t last long. The disaster of the 2015 TripleMania was the fatal blow in Konnan’s relationship with the Roldan family, and it just took until early 2016 for them to finally part ways. Konnan had been a creative influence, even when not officially booker, since his return to the company in 2004. There’s not that many people who could replace exactly what Konnan

brought to AAA, but the Roldans haven't seem to have replaced him at all. The family itself seems to be directing their show, with long time company favorites protected, and veteran wrestlers seem to have the latitude to control their own rivalries. Meanwhile, Konnan has gone from carrying the torch for AAA in all his media appearances to being the company's harshest critic. Konnan started working with Tijuana's The Crash indie promotion by the second half of the year, which now includes many other ex-AAA luchadors on their cards.

Even though AAA's booking has been uninspired this year, that role had stopping them from being the most important thing AAA has to offer. He seemed burned out in that role, or at least like a coach who'd been with a team too long. Everyone had figured out his plays - large factions, evil foreigners, Konnan doing all the talking - and those plays seemed to be getting overruled or limited by management anyway. Konnan was a vocal backer of the young talent he discovered, but he wasn't ever able to get them to the top, or

Negra, a character that had been mostly ignored since his introduction a half a decade ago, was suddenly a main event luchador on spot shows. There was no build to any of this, and it only served to emphasise the sudden talent drain in the promotion.

The one new luchador to AAA who did get a push, got one all the way to the top of the promotion, Pagano, a deathmatch wrestler from Ciudad Juarez, had become a popular indie star for the craziest style of his matches. Pagano appeared on AAA TV in late 2015 when they visited his hometown. He didn't do particularly well, blowing his finishing move in a way that couldn't be hidden even in editing. (He was outshined by a high flyer named Aereo, who was then never seen again.) Still, Pagano was popular, so he was brought in as an associate of Damian 666, Halloween and Nicho as rivals of Pentagon's Perros del Mal. Pentagon himself is a fan of a hardcore matches, so it made some sense. Plans changed.

The young wrestler AAA has been the most behind, even during the period where the other stars came in,



“The most emblematic new AAA luchador of the year was the ridiculously named Dave the Clown, a third rate clown character who'd previously jumped the rail at an AAA event in hopes to get booked, and was well known only as one of the worst indie workers around.”

sometimes even be a protected part of the midcard. (Lucha Underground was much more effective in making Fenix & Pentagon than AAA ever has been.) Where AAA really missed Konnan was in being able to discover and recruit young talent. In 2016, AAA needed to find the next Fenix, the next Flamita, to start to replenish the talent pool as others were leaving. That talent appears to be out there, but AAA seemed isolated from the rest of the lucha libre community. The few new faces added seemed picked more because they were desperate to be in AAA more than being of any help to the promotion. The most emblematic new AAA luchador of the year was the ridiculously named Dave the Clown, a third rate clown character who'd previously jumped the rail at an AAA event in hopes to get booked, and was well known only as one of the worst indie workers around. Still, when AAA needed an extra rudo, Dave was brought in to (badly) work with high flyers. Argenis, who had been a mostly irrelevant TV figure for years, was suddenly an important part of the midcard. Parka

has been Psycho Clown. La Parka has long been the company's face, the children's hero character who won in the end, and Psycho's clown act followed in that path. AAA's wanted to give Psycho a big win at Triplemania to continue building him up, and were sure they needed a heavyweight to be his opponent for it to be an imposing enough opposition. (This bias towards heavyweights might also explain some of the disinterest to the smaller wrestlers.) Unlike other occasions, AAA actually looked for a heavyweight to face Psycho. Raw rookies got tryouts, veterans like Dr. Wagner Jr. appeared to be offered the spot (and deferred it for another year), and, with no better option, AAA decided to go in all on the deathmatch wrestler Pagano. Pagano's feud with the Perros del Mal was dropped cold, and he was instead given a super singles push, pinning Psycho Clown every time they met on TV for months, to build up his credibility for a hair versus mask match at TripleMania.



It was a tough sell, as Pagano didn't have much hair to begin with and had lost it many times before he made it to AAA. It worked well enough. The prices were reduced year to year for TripleMania, and they were able to fill most of the seats despite having less star power. The matches themselves weren't strong, and mostly required an appreciated for convoluted weapon usage. It didn't seem totally successful in building up Psycho Clown either, but AAA clearly saw it as a success and looked to immediately repeat it. Dr. Wagner, who had previously (and mostly nonsensically) interfered in the mask versus hair match, challenged Psycho Clown to a mask versus mask match for the 2017 edition of TripleMania. Psycho Clown agreed – and Dr. Wagner picked up where Pagano left off, beating Psycho Clown at every opportunity. The one note underdog tecnico style of the feud is being played even harder this time, with Psycho losing every big match again and his AAA turning Psycho Clown's partners (Murder Clown & Monster Clown) and his sister Goya Kong on him. They've still got many months left before the show, and it seems like they're just going to keep playing it this way.

AAA could likely handle this feud anyway they'd like and it's still be a big draw. Dr. Wagner putting up his mask against Psycho Clown with any sort of build is going to be a ticket selling match. AAA's centered its entire 25th Anniversary on that match. Yet, no one can be absolutely sure the match is going to happen. Dr. Wagner's mask has great value because Dr. Wagner has been a big name for a long time, and because Dr. Wagner is always his own top priority. Wagner's teased promoters by agreeing to mask matches and backing out before. It would surprise few if he backed out from this one, or if AAA eventually had to other people to the Psycho Clown versus Dr. Wagner match just to get an outcome they'd like. There's just no telling with Wagner. He could be professional to the end, or he could see a 20,000 seat building filling up and demand an extra 20% before going out there on the day of the show. AAA's already built this match up in a way where they can't back away from it without egg on their face. Whatever happens with this match will be one of the biggest lucha libre stories of 2017.

CMLL's 2016, if you look at it just right, was actually pretty similar to their rival. They had people leave their company, from all parts of their card. They generally weren't able to replace the big stars who left them near the end of 2015. They got behind the future star of the company on their biggest show of the year, having him defeat someone who wouldn't have anyone's first (or first dozen) guesses in that spot a year prior. The key difference is every AAA blow up happened publicly and loudly, while every thing CMLL related was kept quiet and usually didn't reveal themselves until long after it had happened. There are concerning trends around CMLL. In real time, however, 2016 was just a boring year, one of the least exciting in the promotion in a while.



Dragon Lee holding the mask of La Mascara after their Anniversario mask match.

The boring-ness of the promotion might be a feature, not a bug. The one visibly growing part of CMLL's business is their connections with government run tourist bus companies. At least three of their Mexico City shows include groups of fans who take a tour around the city and get a good ticket to the arena, with service being expanded to their Guadalajara and Puebla arenas by the end of the year. The amount of tickets sold via these buses isn't huge, but the tickets are sold at a nice premium and are part of an overall strategy of making their shows into a stronger tourist destination. It's not clear the marketing strategy extends into booking, but the product they're presenting now is probably best received by people who might just see one show in their lives. Modern

CMLL rarely tells complicated stories, but the stories were even slighter this year. Nearly all feuds were wrapped up over a couple weeks, teased attempts at characters or groups progressing stalled, and the big matches focused on a smaller circle of luchadors. Running the same singles matches over and over tired out both the core fans and the luchadors involved, but gives a more reliable possible show to a person who might be only check out the promotion a few times a year, or once ever. CMLL has never been more accessible than it was in 2016, with about seven hours of three events streamed free most weeks, but it's also been less worth watching in it's entirely with so little differentiation between those same shows.

Dorada's scouting came mostly through his Japan work, but it was part of a greater drive towards picking up smaller wrestlers, which suddenly makes a lot of CMLL in play for WWE.

The creeping simplification of CMLL has been seen over the last few years, but there were nods to more dedicated fans too. There's nothing more meaningful to long time fans than an Atlantis mask match at this point, and that was missed in 2016. The En Busca de un Idolo tournament, which wasn't much good in 2015 but had been a highlight of the previous years, was also not present. Another big feature of 2016 did stretch into 2016, as Kamaitachi and Dragon Lee stretched their feud through the early portion of the year. Kamaitachi defeated Dragon Lee on the annual FantasticaMania tour, and again in March back in Arena Mexico. Like their 2015 matches, their 2016 matches were the best matches of the year, and Dragon Lee himself was the center of CMLL's biggest plans of 2016. Lee took La Mascara's mask at this year's Anniversario's show, in CMLL's longest storyline of the year that actually went somewhere. Even that feud was incoherent, confused by Dragon Lee being hurt and CMLL not being sure exactly who La Mascara was supposed to be feuding with at any time. Still, it capitalized on Dragon Lee's momentum from his previous great feud to turn him into one of the top stars of the promotion.

Dragon Lee's future isn't as clear. He's obviously going to be a big star in CMLL if he stays, and might be a factor in NJPW too. Lee has other options, and those other options quietly seem to be a big story going forward. WWE plucked both La Sombra and Dark Angel from CMLL in the second half of 2015, but both seemed like the sort of exceptions that might happen once every few years. WWE's recruiting Mascara Dorada in 2016 made it clear this could be more of a regular state of affairs. Dorada, just back from a year loan to NJPW, spent half this year working for one promotion while hoping, then expecting to be signed by another. Dorada's career

same chance in 2017, and where Dragon Lee ends up at the end of 2017 is likely to be the biggest story of their year. CMLL can find talent and sometimes can even develop it but, if they're not able to retain the talent after they become stars, it's going to be a hard future for them.

It wasn't all boring and ominous for CMLL. This was their first full year of their Friday night shows airing (almost) always on ClaroSports, and they've gotten more attention than any of their other previous and current streaming shows. CMLL's focus on fewer wrestlers on top meant a bushel-load of Volador Jr.



Dorada 's CMLL farewell with many fellow technicos.

limbo didn't affect his CMLL work, as he managed some of the greatest efforts of his career even when given little to do after he started showing up on WWE TV. Dorada's scouting came mostly through his Japan work, but it was part of a greater drive towards picking up smaller wrestlers, which suddenly makes a lot of CMLL in play for WWE. AAA, without planning in it, is defended from this sort of raid by having more of their WWE-attractive talent tied up in long Lucha Underground deals. CMLL still operates mostly on handshake deals in most cases, outside of anything that would bind someone to their company if WWE came knocking. It's tough to know for sure if CMLL has anything to keep Dragon Lee to their company, but Dragon Lee confirmed he was offered a spot in the CWC and would've taken his chance there if he had been healthy. WWE's sure to offer him the

matches, both on his own and in trios part of the Sky Team. Those matches were usually the best of what CMLL had to offer, though their volume made some of his flaws a bit more apparent. Barbaro Cavernario didn't advance up the cards as much as Dragon Lee, but did defeat rival Rey Cometa in an exciting hair match once again and stole the Reyes de Aire tournament from Volador as part of an entertaining set of matches. The partnership with Elite and NJPW brought in a group of foreign names for an interesting middle of the summer run. And, impossibly, Negro Casas still was among the best luchadors in the promotion despite aging deeper into his 50's.

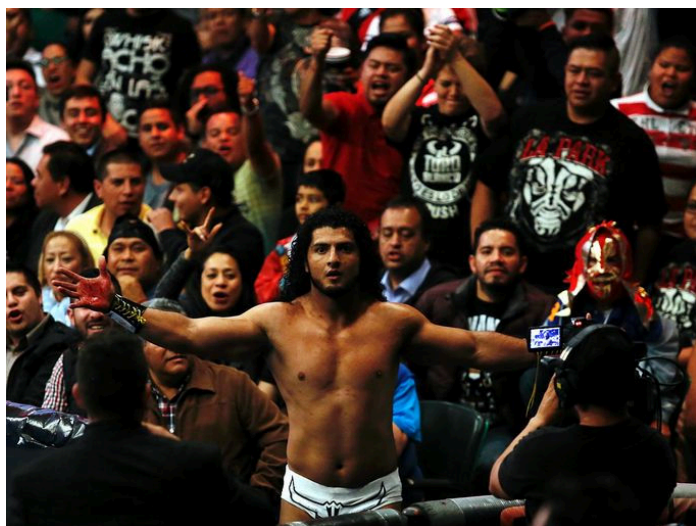
The highlights were there in CMLL if you looked for them, but there was also a lot of garbage to sift through. The most dispiriting moment of CMLL was the choices for new Ingobernables, with Sombra gone

and La Mascara estranged from the group for a time. Rey Escorpion, as an entertaining rudo, fit in fine, but adding old and never good Pierroth to the group wounded it beyond repair. The trio had been a young rebellious unit who could also have good matches, and Pierroth is none of those things. What Pierroth was is the father of Ingobernable Rush. 2016 was the year where CMLL finally revealed what most fans already knew, that Pierroth was the unmasked Poder Mexica from a decade prior, and still expected fans to believe him as a top level star despite his non-existent credibility and lacking performances. Pierroth's push was among many bits, like Super Parka's appearances to start the year and Mascara Ano 2000's one to end it, which seemed to stem from trying appease CMLL's current stars in disregard for what it would meant to the quality of the matches, and a feeling that anyone from a decade or two ago was automatically important to their crowd. Most strangely, this didn't apply to actual former star Carístico, who made a big surprise reintroduction in 2015, a tournament runner up finish in 2016, and then nothing at all. CMLL never invested fully in Carístico, using him more as a special guest star and out of any main feuds.

Elite provided the most surprises of any promotion in 2016, bringing in disgruntled AAA wrestlers, talking their way into a slot on national over the air TV, and seemingly having an unlimited budget for big ideas.

Carístico's lack of focus in CMLL might have been because of trust issues, or because he was also the star of the quirky associate promotion Elite. Few seemed certain what the Elite promotion was at the end of 2015. 2016 revealed the group not be some sort of experimental offshoot of CMLL, but the more familiar story of a group with a lot of money and not the equivalent amount of sense. Elite provided the

most surprises of any promotion in 2016, bringing in disgruntled AAA wrestlers, talking their way into a slot on national over the air TV, and seemingly having an unlimited budget for big ideas. By the end of the year, with all those advantages, they were down to only drawing half capacity crowds in small building around Mexico City, booted out of Arena Mexico after losing their deal, and were about to lose their TV deal as well. At least there were great and strange and greatly strange matches along the way.



Rush during his war with LA Park in Elite.

Elite's big concept was to present lucha libre like futbol. The tournament, called "Liga Elite", was so central to the promotion that many use the tournament's name to refer to the promotion. The television portion of the promotion was built around a league style competition, with twelve wrestlers facing each other in round robin competition in Arena Mexico. The tournament would culminate in December, with the top four finishes in a playoff to be crowned that year's winner. The bottom four would also face off, with the ultimate loser losing their hair or mask. Genuine big names from CMLL (Atlantis, Volador, Ultimo Guerrero, Negro Casas) were involved, and Elite had acquired a bunch of big names (Carístico, Cibernetico) of their own. Elite also brought in special guest outsiders to fill in the last spots: Lashely and Extreme Tiger from TNA, and LA Park back from his latest Arena Mexico exile. This concept isn't unique. It's the standard for Japanese tournaments, and Argentina's 100% Lucha used to run seasons around a similar concept. It was absolutely a success in providing unique and exciting singles match, the kind CMLL neglects or avoids booking, with wrestlers who were motivated to have a great match in front of a huge potential audience. In



a wrestling match quality sense, the Liga Elite was the best thing to happen to lucha libre in 2016.

In any sort of business or logic sense, it was a failure. Diehard lucha libre fans loved the concept, but it never seemed to resonate with casual fans. Part of it was the limitations of their various deals: Azteca didn't want to be old news by the time Elite aired on Friday, so Elite's original weekly schedule of taking over Sunday shows was out, and Elite instead was left running non-traditional Wednesdays and Thursdays, when fans weren't used to coming to the arena. (Part of that is on Elite for not using their TV much to promote their live shows, but the biggest mystery is why Elite wasn't just given the Tuesday slot CMLL wasn't doing much with.) The tournament broke with lucha libre tradition of focusing on técnico versus rudo feuds and matching up the same people to build those rivalries, because everyone was meant to face each other in a big match just once. The tournament itself had serious structural problems. Elite was looked foolish from day one when bald and unmasked Lashley was put into a competition where the loser had to shave his head or unmask. It never made more sense. Each Elite weekly event had two Liga Elite matches, a good number for an hour TV show, but also causing the competition to progress slowly. It was very slow compared to Japanese league tournaments, and the wins and losses never felt like they had any larger importance.

Stretching the Liga Elite tournament over the entire year was the biggest issue. It would've given a full year of programming had it worked, but anyone familiar with lucha libre knew this concept was going to fall apart given enough time, and it surely did. It had problems as soon as the first round of matches, with some people ending up with many more bouts than others for no explained reason. Veterans never used to doing frequent singles matches and disliking the idea of losing any of them instead came up with some absurd matching ending disqualifications and screwy finishes. Elite did little to help anyone who was interested in tracking how the Liga Elite progressed: the promotion never created a website, never mentioned the league's standings in their social media, and the only place an official table was ever shown would be the last 10 seconds or so of the TV broadcast. Elite never seemed all into their own concept, treating it as if it was something the TV network had imposed on it them, and wasn't very dedicated to it's integrity. They eventually kneecapped it by putting the Liga Elite on hold at various times to run other tournaments and gift championships to their top stars (which would never used or defended.) By the time the summer came around, luchadors had been shuffled in and out of the tournament with little explanation, trying to find logic in the standings was an impossibility and the only

upside to the tournament would be the rare dream match between those people still left competing in it.

“In usual lucha libre fashion, the obvious was not commented on, with Elite absurdly claiming their fans had demanded they travel around the country. Elite’s travelling never took them more than an hour from where they started.”

One of those Liga Elite matches, long after the Liga Elite itself had stopped being meaningful, was the most memorable lucha libre match of the year. Rush, always in search (and in need) of a passionate rival, found one with LA Park. The two proceeded to have enormous brawl, akin to the ones Park & Wagner have had over the last decade, but one not seen in Arena Mexico for years. Rush was cut and bled, usually prohibited in CMLL, but he was not stopped. LA Park went farther, bringing a wooden object all the way from the building entrance to toss at Rush’s head. It connected, and the CMLL employed referee in charge of the match freaked out and ruled the match over by disqualification. Both luchadors complained about the stoppage to the crowd, noticed the referee had walked out, and realized they could just keep fighting with no one left to stop them. The two men brawled and talked after the match for about longer than the match officially left. The level of violence, the rebellion against Arena Mexico’s antiseptic standards and the crowd’s full throated embrace of this rebellion made this match an unforgettable occasion. There are more technically sound matches, but no bigger moment.

LA Park’s done this sort of thing in Arena Mexico before, and ended up in exile before. This time, LA Park and Rush being uncontrolled mad man appeared to get the entire promotion booted out. Rumors followed about CMLL trying to get the Azteca TV spot for themselves, and then kicking out Elite when they complained, but those are the sort of things that only seem to happen when both sides are no longer happy with each other. Elite only ran a month’s more of LA Park-free shows before moving to smaller arenas. (In usual lucha libre fashion, the obvious was not commented on, with Elite absurdly claiming their

fans had demanded they travel around the country. Elite’s travelling never took them more than an hour from where they started.) Elite also lost access to all of CMLL’s wrestlers, with only Carístico allowed to work full time for both promotions. Elite tried to bring in replacements, but they could only persuade a broken down Blue Demon to come in as a main eventer. The remaining shows of the year seemed less an adjustment to their new status quo and more the top wrestlers trying to take whatever they could out of Elite while it still stood. Carístico’s brother, Argos, was pushed as a big star while having terrible and unsafe matches. Cibernético seemingly brought in everyone who ever teamed with him for a new mega stable. LA Park found new and amazing ways to make sure he either got the win or the glory, if not both. And Rey Escorpión made the jump, smartly taking advantage of the void in star power and leadership to get himself portrayed in a top rudo spot he wasn’t ever allowed in CMLL. When the TV season abruptly came to an end, the partly full Arena



Naucalpan crowd hardly seemed to care about Carístico defeating Rey Escorpión in the Liga Elite final, with the promoting making no effort to explain how those two had earned their way to the final. That sudden year end show came in early December, and it was not much of a surprise when rumors about

Azteca cancelling their show started to appear. It was a mess, and Azteca found some non-messy MMA to take it's spot, at least for the moment.

Elite's insisted that they would be back in 2017, and has kept much of the roster together to run shows during it's TV dormant period. The same rumors that revealed the possible Azteca cancellation seemed certain a TV deal with a different network would be coming and it wouldn't be the end of the show. There are signs to be optimistic if they can pull it together. The main events were decimated by losing CMLL, but Elite attracted a strong group of young luchadors for it's midcard which stayed with them. The power of being on Azteca TV, seemed to convince a lot of notable indie names to stick with Elite. Notably, but very quietly when it happened, Elite also seem to persuade a bunch of new talented CMLL luchadors to go with them in the split, hoping to make their careers by being on a big network rather than in barely visible early matches. Luchadors like Ciclon Ramirez and El Bandido probably would have been fixtures on CMLL shows by now (and have since been replaced by shockingly inferior rookies), and are nicely augmented by indie names like Golden Magic and Flamita. Elite didn't have great plans for this crew, and it's unclear who will take options elsewhere if Elite can't get TV, but the promotion has the raw talent to rebuild if they can find someone who can harness it and keep everyone working for the same goal.



Rush and LA Park following their war at Arena Mexico for Elite.



Pentagon Jr. attempting to "break the arm" of Rey Mysterio, Lucha Underground.

Lucha Underground had that advantage, at least among those working on the tapings. Not everyone stuck around – Alberto el Patron and Konnan were season 1 names who were discontented and left – but those remaining in the locker room and day of the show production staff came in 2016 unified by a strong positive reaction for season 1 of the El Rey series. The ratings jumped to new highs to start season 2, and continued to trend upwards through the reveal of the Matanza character and his first few matches. Those episodes turned out to be the peak, with the ratings numbers dipping down to a slightly lower level and never finding another boost. Beyond the numbers, which might not be all that accurate for a show as little watched as Lucha Underground, the general buzz for the show seemed to diminish the farther the series went along. There were some mistakes, but it seemed mostly that a show which had gotten attention for pushing limits had nothing left to push or had pushed past the limits of what a chunk of their audience wanted to see (especially in the areas of man/woman violence and announcing.) 2016 of Lucha Underground was the classic second year for a sports team that had come out of nowhere to succeed.



Lucha Underground luchador, Drago, some time in season 3.

Everyone saw them coming the second time around. LU still was enjoyable most episodes, but it wasn't the "wow" of season 1.

The viewership still increased from 2015 to 2016 but it's unclear if it matters. The numbers themselves still aren't impressive, and it's not clear if the business behind Lucha Underground would be able to take advantage of it even if they were. The parent company has signed international deals, notably in Canada, Germany and Japan, but the show not being legally available in the UK and Mexico is a glaring problem which hasn't been resolved. A US Spanish language version of the show is a distant memory at this point. Digitally, the show was finally made available on iTunes, but nowhere else, especially not the long teased partnership on Netflix. Even the

seemingly simple bit of selling the shows on DVD hasn't been done. Other revenue streams remain suggested or promised but mostly undelivered. Live non-taping events were rare. The promotion ran one show in Austin, the only LU event ever to charge for tickets so far, but only because they were part of a SXSW festival. Three other free events were held later that year, but only as part of a sponsorship deal with Cricket Wireless. Lucha Underground is set to be merchandised and toyetic and yet, two years in, the only thing you can buy are a few t-shirts from small webstores. Those with Lucha Underground insist these things are all being worked on, but the lack of progress will ultimately suffocate the promotion. If they can't get their support back on the upswing, the window might already be closed. They might have already missed their chance on Prince Puma. LU had to give him an opt out after three seasons to get him to sign out, and he's going to end up with a big deal wherever he ends up in 2017.

Lucha Underground has developed into AAA's Elite. AAA owns part of Lucha Underground, while it appears CMLL never owned any of Elite, but Lucha Underground has the same flexibility to use AAA's wrestlers independently of the wishes of AAA. AAA seems to have enough power to push LU to use

luchadors of their own (which is believed to be the case with late season 2 additions Dr. Wagner Jr. and Flamita/Nightclaw), but Lucha Underground is able to do whatever they want to do when they get there. LU might have to use Wagner, but they're free to use him as a C-level comedy figure if they so choose. They're just as free to make Sexy Star their champion, even after she walked out of AAA instead of losing a championship, in the most controversial lucha libre moment of the year. The creative portion being separated from ownership is probably overall good for the product, but it's also seemed to minimize the ownership's urgency in getting things done. LU being a small promotion governed by a large and confusing corporate structure has meant most of the people working on the day to day of the show tapings are stuck waiting to hear when t-shirts are getting done just like the rest of us. The lack of a singular

person being in charge, or even just a more focused leadership, was missing to help grow their business. Lucha Underground's 2017 story was all the more about finding a corporate direction than whatever creative changes they make.

LU still showed they had lots of positive in 2017. They started their year with a great amount of young talent, and have been the most successful second their promotion in the US as far as making stars over the last few years. Both Fenix and Pentagon became US indie draws (based almost all on their LU matches and almost not all on AAA), with others being buoyed as well. Despite mixed reactions on the Matanza character, his role on the show opened up doors for Jeff Cobb after he had been only a California wrestler with no national profile.

There was a disappointing reduction in AAA luchadors in season 3, implied to be due to visa issues, with the promotion instead adding to their roster via US indie name pickups and a one-time appearance by excellent guests from Stardom. All that talent produced some of the greatest lucha matches of the year over the episodes airing in 2016. Those include matches which still won't air for months and I'm not legally allowed to talk about, but would rank up with among the best in any promotion had more than the 300 or so people seen it before the calendar flip.

Their mask match, the best match in a month which included both major promotion's running their biggest show's of the year, featured blood, brawling, and one man winning with a neck brace on.

There, and kind of only just there, does Lucha Underground share a big similarity with the underground shows of Mexico's independent scene. The barriers to running a show seemed lower than every this year, with many indie promotions debuting or running more shows in the largely unregulated areas of Mexico State. The volume of matches between indie names increased, though the access to them did not. Footage of the smaller promotions only exists via fan made videos. With no video to generate interest and very few storylines, the increased number of shows has seemed to fracture and reduce the attendance. Cara Lucha had well received matches



thru the year, but turnout was low for their non-holiday shows and none of the newer groups managed to get a foothold. Two of the longer running indie promotions did a bit better: Lucha Memes' Chairó shows in Naucalpan regularly out drew IWRG in IWRG's own arena while putting on some of the better indie shows of the year, and DTU was able to gather interest in their bigger shows, despite both promotions choosing not to allow much more than highlights of most of their action. DTU seemed to be changing it's mind bit on that by the end of the year, running their year end anniversary show on iPPV. The show, with a Flamita versus Negro Casas vs Ronnie Mendoza main event, was liked by those who saw it, but there's still not a lot of people watching these matches.

The one lucha libre match which received the most attention beyond the usual lucha libre fans surprisingly took place in IWRG. The Naucalpan promotion otherwise had a boring year. There was no standout in their latest batch of rookies, their main events were largely built around unimpressive heavyweights, and the only thing people have generally been dipping into the promotion for have been Imposible's title defenses. IWRG ran fewer shows in 2016 and, with poor ticket sales for a lot of them, it seemed fair to wonder about the future. All it takes is one great match to remind you of what IWRG can be. Trauma I & Canis Lupus were among a group of people all feuding through the summer, vowed to fight each other in a mask match should they make it through their individual challenges, and actually did the match. Their mask match, the best match in a month which included both major promotion's running their biggest show's of the year, featured blood, brawling, and one man winning with a neck brace on. Both men fought like their lives were on the line, and fans bought into it because their masks meant so much to them. Not everything in lucha libre can be the Trauma/Canis mask match, but it showed what lucha libre could feel like when it comes across as real.

2016 was a year, another one in a sequence, where the real drama outside the ring felt much more real than anything the promotions were willing or capable of presenting inside it. Psycho Clown taking Pagano's hair doesn't feel nearly as important as Fenix or Cibernético leaving the company. Mascara Dorada's farewell to Mexico, at least for now, came off as more important for the future of the company than even young star Dragon Lee main eventing their biggest

show of the year. There were definite highlights out of the way. I'll probably look back at Liga Elite more fondly the farther we're away from the mess it became, but this was still another down and chaotic year for wrestling in Mexico. There still will be good lucha libre to pick and choose from, but there's no positive indicator for the future either. ■

LA PARKA NOT IMPRISONED



LA Parka with Billy Corgan of the Smashing Pumpkins in 2015

"There was a bizarre situation this week, as the Televisa news show, 10 En Punto, erroneously reported on 7/10 that La Parka had been in jail since 2014 on robbery and kidnap charges. Ernesto O'Campo of SuperLuchas pointed out the errors in the story and revealed that the man in question was actually Vitor Franco Cruz. The report used footage of Parka from the 90s which would have been Adolfo Tapia under the hood, who is still active today as LA Park. Cruz is serving a 32 year sentence and he managed to fool the TV reporters into believing he was the real La Parka during an interview. Cruz did wrestle as Misterio Verde and at times had posed as a knock-off Gran Misterio and a phony La Parkita in the past. LuchaWorld noted that Cruz currently runs lucha training classes in prison after he met up with Pentagoncito, who was also incarcerated at the time and he took over the training after Pentagoncito was released. Unsurprisingly, AAA were not happy with the report and they sent out a statement clarifying that Cruz had never worked for them and offered to tell the history of La Parka on the news show. LA Park was also outraged and he demanded a public apology from Televisa and the show for defamation of his character. "

— Ben Carass, *Pro-Wres Digest* (Oct 9th – 13th edition)



2016'S MOST INDELIBLE MOMENTS

BY PAUL COOKE

My favorite match of all time is War Games '92. There are a million reasons why but mostly it is because of how many seemingly little – even obscure – moments from the match resonate with me. Whether it is Paul E. Dangerously unfurling a blueprint of the double cage set as he goes over a game plan with his team, Jim Ross and Jesse Ventura exchanging brilliantly witty and well-timed quips, Arn Anderson finding yet another way to get his head stuck in between the dual rings, or even Gary Michael Cappetta's professional ring introductions, there are so many relatively small moments that are seared in my brain from the match. There is no doubt that the wrestling is great, the crowd is molten, and the story is fantastic, but when thinking about the match that's my all-time favorite, it is all of the great little moments that first come to mind.

Likewise as I am writing this right now, I cannot specifically recall a single move or sequence used in one of my all-time favorite tag team matches – Arn Anderson & Larry Zbyszko versus Dustin Rhodes & Ricky Steamboat from *Clash of the Champions XVII*. I love that match to death, yet aside from some educated guesses (I think it's a safe bet that Steamboat hits at least one deep arm drag) I cannot recall any specifics on the wrestling portions of the match.

What does stick in my mind are a couple of moments before the match really gets going that seemingly occur during the downtime in between the action. Arn's reaction upon finding out that Steamboat is going to be Dustin's partner – a stunned disbelief mixed with misplaced anger – is forever burned in my brain. The actual wrestling in the match was great of course, but I'll always remember the match for Arn ostensibly calming down his irate tag team partner – but in reality trying to convince himself that

everything will be alright – by murmuring that Steamboat “... *is only a man. He’s only a man.*”

As cheesy and clichéd as it might read, it is often those types of moments – that aren’t about moves being performed – that can leave the most indelible impressions. As is the case with those two excellent WCW matches, the best parts of a classic match are often seemingly benign happenings that for whatever specific reasons resonate and turn an excellent match into an unforgettable one.

There is a pair of moments and a pair of matches from 2016 where that sentiment held true for me.

On the surface, there was nothing small about Hiroshi Tanahashi and Kazuchika Okada’s IWGP Heavyweight title match from this year’s January 4th Tokyo Dome show. The two longtime rivals wrestled a broad, dramatic match that felt every bit as big as one would expect the “final chapter” (*yea, right . . .*) of the most talked about in-ring rivalry of this decade to be. The anticipation and excitement from the often hard-to-gauge Tokyo Dome crowd is palpable even on re-watch. The match is chalk full of flashy moves, major near falls, and enough drama to spare. The story had been built over many years. Okada needed a win over his rival at the Tokyo Dome – something he had failed to obtain in two previous tries – in order to cement his spot as the new ace of New Japan and he was determined to finally make that happen.

The seminal moment of the match, however, is not a breathtaking move or dramatic near fall. It was something far smaller in scale than much of the action, but it resonated just as much as anything else Okada or Tanahashi did that night.

With the match approaching the 30-minute mark and Tanahashi having already done the near impossible by kicking out of a Rainmaker lariat, Okada goes for his signature lariat yet again and has it blocked by an open hand slap from Tanahashi. The slap forces Okada to one knee. It also saps the last bit of strength from Tanahashi and he too falls to a knee. The entire time, Okada maintains his firm grasp of Tanahashi’s wrist. He refuses to let go. The symbolism and meaning behind that grip was both immediately evident and impactful. The camera work was wonderfully executed and captured the moment in expert fashion. Okada refusing to let go of Tanahashi’s wrist immediately became the symbolic moment of a match that is likely to finish high on

many MOTY lists. In a match with above average heat and plenty of impressive spots, it’s a hand holding onto a wrist that that I will always associate with it.

Nine months to the day of the Tokyo Dome show, a big match – though on a noticeably smaller scale – took place far away from Tokyo, just outside Mexico City in the city of Naucalpan.

“The match is so good that I watched three different versions of it in the 48 hours after it happened, and have viewed the match a couple more times in the months since.”

Trauma I and Canis Lupus wagered their masks in the main event of IWRG’s biggest show in several years; a show that took place in front of a capacity or near capacity crowd of 2,500 fans. Like the matches mentioned above, Trauma I and Canis Lupus wrestled a fantastic all-around bout that contained top shelf wrestling, indelible images (poor Canis lost a life’s worth of blood), and wonderful fan reactions. The match is so good that I watched three different versions of it in the 48 hours after it happened, and have viewed the match a couple more times in the months since. It is my favorite match of 2016 running away and one of the best matches I have seen this decade. For all that I love about it, there is one moment that I associate with the match and it occurred after the final bell rang.

The dramatic mask match concludes with one of the best finishes of 2016. Lupus had his opponent down after hitting an illegal *martinete* moments earlier. To add insult to injury, he starts to apply the Trauma’s signature hold, *Lo Negro del Negro*, the move he actually used to take the first fall. Trauma I knew that he could not let Lupus apply the hold so he fought and squirmed until he was able to reverse the hold,



apply it himself, and pick up the emotional win. As memorable as that finishing sequence was, I love what occurred after even more.

The referee – as is the tradition in Mexico – leapt in the air while waving his hands to signal the end of the match. The 2,500 fans screamed in joy. Before the referee’s feet had even touched the ground, Trauma I’s older brother, Trauma II – who the cameras showed watching nervously from the crowd earlier in the bout– jumped over the guardrail and into the ring to celebrate with his brother. Trauma’s actual second, Mr. Elektro, was right there as well. There are handheld versions of the match where you can see just how excited the fans are, jumping up and down and throwing things into the air.

With the proper build, mask versus mask matches are the last stipulation anywhere in the world that hold significant consequences for the fans and wrestlers involved. In a year without a great CMLL mask match, Truama I and Canis Lupus captured that emotion better than anyone. If the emotion from the wrestlers and fans was not completely genuine, then they sure have me fooled. There are few matches where the immediate post-match (not involving an angle) is as or more memorable than the match itself – but the aftermath of Trauma I/Canis Lupus was one of those moments.

I am not sure I fully believe that 2016 was a seminal year in the history of wrestling in terms of match quality, as has been suggested throughout the year. If nothing else however, the year left me with two of those great “only in pro wrestling” moments that will stick with me for years to come. ■



*Credit:
The
Gladiatores*

**“ALL IS SEMBLATIVE OF A WOMAN'S PART.”
A MODERN AND HISTORICAL LOOK AT INTER-GENDER
PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING**

BY BEN CARASS



For some inexplicable reason, I thought inter-gender wrestling would make a great topic for our annual Yearbook. After all, in 2016 even the most well-known wrestling journalists were castigating, “man on woman violence,” on a daily basis. Ultimately, it all comes down to a matter of personal taste and if for whatever reason you can't enjoy a man engaged in simulated combat with a woman that is absolutely fine. However, some of the accusations hurled at inter-gender wrestling by certain pundits seemed to be nothing more than sweeping generalisations based on very little evidence. Since the detractors of inter-gender wrestling didn't once bother to speak with anyone in the business with actual experience in the field, this seemed to be the best course of action for an article on the subject. CHIKARA founder, Mike Quackenbush, and the Wounded Owl, LuFisto, have a combined 41 years in the business, 25 of which include countless first-hand experiences of inter-gender wrestling. If anybody is qualified to comment on this topic, it's undoubtedly these two. Both were kind enough to provide me with their thoughts on inter-gender wrestling for this article, which will hopefully help put some of the myths surrounding the subject to bed once and for all.

LITTLE WOMEN?

So, what are some of the major problems critics of inter-gender wrestling came up with? At the top of the list appeared to be the issue of credibility and believability in terms of the performance. For some, the visual of a small women beating up and throwing around a much larger male stretches the realm of credulity. On the other hand, there is also a bizarre subtext that any offensive move done by a male wrestler to a female is somehow uncomfortable to watch simply because it is being executed on a women. The size issue is relatively straight forward to get past, given that it is 2017 and there have been innumerable “Big Man” versus “Little Man” matches throughout history. The fact that some people still need this explaining to them in the current climate is mind-blowing to me, but you could put a 5ft 2inch male in with a 7ft giant and, providing one or both

knows what the hell they are doing, you should be able to get an enjoyable and believable story out of it.

“There are two facets worth examining in that premise,” Mike Quackenbush commented. “Is it believable, just as an example, for Jet Li, at 5’6” and well under 200 pounds to beat someone like Triple H, who is 6’4” and well over 200 pounds? If you can believe that things like skill, discipline, stamina, technique and speed allow smaller competitors to beat larger competitors, then size isn’t the issue at all. The issue is whether or not you believe women can be athletes of the same calibre as men. On the other hand, if you can’t believe that a competitor like Jet Li can beat a competitor like Triple H, then I think certain kinds of media have probably influenced you to think the only factor in combat sports is size. And I got the spoiler of all spoilers for ya: it’s not.”



LuFisto noted: “I believe not all women are good at fighting guys but that’s like in everything. Not everybody is good at doing hardcore wrestling either. You can’t have too many cruiserweight battles, hardcore matches or tag team matches on the same card. You need diversity in wrestling to keep the people coming.”

“Sometimes, indeed, the storyline portrays it as 'man versus woman' and that is okay, no different than if it were in a movie,” LuFisto added. “However, this is about two competitors in the ring. We are trained the same way and most of the time, we are training with men. We are live stunt-women and stunt-men that don’t get to have many takes. Everything has to be

perfect. Errors are not acceptable. Wrestling is an art. Never forget also that if you see a woman fight a man, she **CHOSE** to do it. We are not forced to do it. This is our choice as independent and strong women to challenge ourselves any way we want. If you respect us, you will respect our choices as athletes.”

“In my mind, rejecting inter-gender pro-wrestling means that you must also reject the idea that Batgirl can fight the Riddler.”

“Men I wrestle do not hold back. I don’t either. And I do get back up,” she continued. Other female wrestlers will too. I have the endurance to endure a lot of pain and I put it to use. Not all women can take it but for those who can, we expect to be treated as equals in every way, otherwise, once again, it is insulting to us as athletes. Fighting is not only about strength and power but it is also about technique. I’m pretty sure a girl like Shayna Baszler or Ronda Rousey could take any average man, or even bigger, down.”

NO PLACE FOR A LADY

The issue of feeling discomfort while watching inter-gender wrestling comes down to individual personal boundaries. Nobody is right or wrong for feeling uneasy watching a woman get beat on by a man in the context of a pro-wrestling match, however this is a mindset that is utterly foreign to me personally.

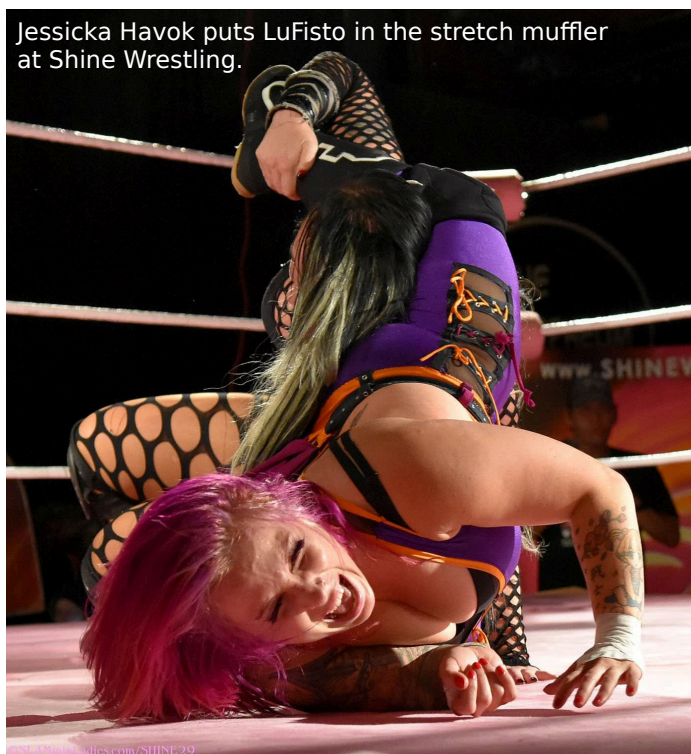
LuFisto commented: “I hear too often that it promotes violence against women when it does not. Wrestling is entertainment. It is no different from what you see in the movies or on TV. Female wrestlers are powerful. They are like Supergirl, Catwoman, Black Widow and all those female superheroes you see. Inter-gender presents a woman that stands toe-to-toe against a male opponent. She is an equal.”

“It is not for everybody, I can understand that,” LuFisto continued. “I don’t believe it portrays violence towards women. We chose to do it, we fight back and we are equals. If I am told that I portray violence against woman when I’m fighting a man, you are insulting me, my judgement, and my

capabilities. I was trained to do this and I will take on any challenges, man or woman.”

Mike Quackenbush shared a similar opinion: “In my mind, rejecting inter-gender pro-wrestling means that you must also reject the idea that Batgirl can fight the Riddler. To say that inter-gender wrestling is inappropriate is to say that Storm fighting Magneto is also inappropriate. You can argue that some wrestling is well done, and some is poorly done. Some makes it easy for you to suspend your disbelief, and some does not. You can argue that someone who is fast and skilled might not beat someone who is large and powerful. But if you can wrap your head around a story in which Wonder Woman defeats Solomon Grundy, then you cannot outright dismiss or oppose the idea of inter-gender pro-wrestling completely.”

Jessicka Havok puts LuFisto in the stretch muffler at Shine Wrestling.



Quackenbush added: “People are entitled to feel whatever they want to feel. If it makes you uncomfortable, don’t watch that. Do bloody matches make you uncomfortable? Don’t watch that. There was a 'kiss my foot' match once that saw Bret Hart jam his gnarly toes into Jerry Lawler’s mouth. I turned it off. To each their own.”

Having never really been into comic books or superheroes, it would be hard for me to make comparisons between Wonder Woman and a female wrestler doing battle with a man. However, I am informed enough to realise that such analogies are more than valid when it comes to discussing inter-

gender wrestling. Female superheroes are strong characters, presented on the same level as their male counter-parts, who frequently have to overcome adversity and often come up against maniacal male super villains. If superheroes aren't your thing either, all you have to do is imagine any type of action-based movie with a lead female protagonist and the chances are she will be performing physical feats of strength, and-or athleticism, which "regular" women could only hope to achieve. The Bride in *Kill Bill*, for example, taking on and slaughtering the entire Crazy 88 clan single-handedly is pretty improbable, however within the universe of the movie it made total and complete sense. Despite my lack of superhero knowledge, I can provide a rather strenuous analogy between inter-gender wrestling and a different movie genre: slasher horrors, of all things.

as the victorious heroine who defeats whatever monster she is up against in the end.

Halloween had Jamie Lee Curtis as Laurie Strode, who defeated the enormous Michael Myers by overcoming her fear in the original, and in the sequel, *Halloween H2O*, she goes full-on bad-ass by decapitating the hulking serial killer. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* saw Heather Langenkamp in the role of Nancy Thompson, who had to try and stop the reincarnated corpse of a child molester, Freddy Kruger, from killing all her friends. Nancy, just an average teenage girl, figured out she must go take on the undead Freddy on his own turf (in her dreams) in order to put a stop to the massacre. The Nancy character even made a return in the third *Elm Street* movie as a gatekeeper type of figure who had to save a new generation of kids from Freddy's boiler-room of horrors. How were viewers expected to believe that these regular teenage girls were strong enough and had the intelligence to defeat such unstoppable supernatural monsters? Once again, as if you needed telling, it is all in the storytelling and the established rules of the universe in which the stories play out. Are you telling me there were people yelling at the screen during *Terminator 2* or *Alien*, because they found the premise of Sarah Conner and Ellen Ripley battling time-travelling machines and parasitic xenomorphs too unrealistic?

Comparing pro wrestling to movies doesn't exactly amount to an apples to apples equation. If we start down that road, what's to stop us from judging aspects of professional wrestling against other artistic mediums, such as music or literature? Do we really want

to take our little niche world of predetermined violence out of its secure bubble and into a realm of reason reserved only for legitimate artistic endeavours? Well, why the hell not? If you try and convince a non-wrestling fan in 2017 that pro-wrestling should still be considered a sporting event, they would most likely laugh directly in your face. Explain to the same person that pro-wrestling is in fact an art form unto itself and the chances are they will become more open to having an intelligent discussion on the subject.



Princess Kimber Lee after winning the CHIKARA Grand Championship, December 2015.

On the surface, it would appear that most slasher horror movies portray the majority of women as sex-hungry, unintelligent, cold-hearted floozies, who usually end up being machete fodder for the mask-wearing psychopath killer. If you really did your homework however, you would discover that a sizeable number of horror movies feature a strong female protagonist, who goes through and witnesses all kinds of unspeakable atrocities, only to come out



Kari Hojo lands her world famous elbow drop on Pentagon Jr. as part of the 'Black Lotus Triad' in Lucha Underground.

Every artistic medium exists within its own universe, where the boundaries of possibility are restricted only by the imagination of the individual artists. The musical notes at fingertips of a composer, a director's visual concept, words in the head of a writer, colours on a painter's pallet, the choreography of a dancer, or the creativity of a pro-wrestling booker and the artistry of the wrestlers themselves. It's all the same in terms of creating great art. Additionally, the greatest of craftsmen are able to stretch the laws of what is generally accepted within each medium to produce more progressive and contemporary cultural artefacts. Pro-wrestling is no different; every individual promotion exists in their own universe and it is up to the bookers and wrestlers to define the limits of reason within.

In terms of pro-wrestling, there is arguably no other promotion in the US that embodies this ideology more than CHIKARA, who have featured inter-gender matches for well over a decade now. Princess Kimber Lee began 2016 still the Grand Champion, the only woman ever to hold the company's top prize, and in September more new ground was broken when

Team Sendai Girls defeated Team JWP in the King of Trios finals to crown the first ever, "Queen of Trios."

"In CHIKARA, between bells, there is no gender. There are only wrestlers," Mike Quackenbush said. "Our audience was pretty on-board with this [inter-gender wrestling] from the get-go. We eradicated division by gender and weight class over thirteen years ago. They've had plenty of time to understand the boundaries of our universe. The Sendai Girls winning would have played the same in 2011 as it did in 2016, in my opinion."

"Is too much made of man versus woman in pro-wrestling?" Quackenbush continued. "Yes."

GONE GIRLS?

The target for most of the anti-inter-gender sentiment was Lucha Underground, which is to be expected since it is the only wrestling show on national TV to feature men versus women inside the ring. The big claim was that inter-gender matches were one of the major reasons why Lucha Underground viewership showed very little signs of growth in 2016. Not only that, but due to the female demographic numbers also being poor, absurd claims that inter-gender wrestling was unsuccessful at attracting female fans were made. Forget that El Rey was only established in 2013 and is an upper-tier channel on most cable/satellite packages; it was all inter-gender wrestling's fault that no new viewers were being created. Never mind that as of May 2016 El Rey was only available in under 39 million homes, compared to the USA Network's 94 million and Pop TV's 74.5 million. No, it was the man on woman violence that was the problem, according to the experts. [TV Insider](#) reported the average viewing figures for the El Rey Network increased 31% from 26,000 in 2014, to 34,000 in 2015. Keep in mind, during 2015 Lucha Underground was doing an average 100,000 viewers a week on El Rey, so just imagine how bad some of the ratings for the other shows on the channel had to be for the yearly average to be 34,000. One of the lowest rated shows of season three was the November 30th episode, which featured Pentagon Jr. vs. Io Shirai, Kairi Hojo and Mayu Iwatani. The episode was one of the best of the third season, however due to the show being built around three non-regular characters it inevitably took a hit, doing a dismal 74,000 viewers for the first-run airing and an additional 27,000 for the reply; a total of 101,000 viewers. Using this as

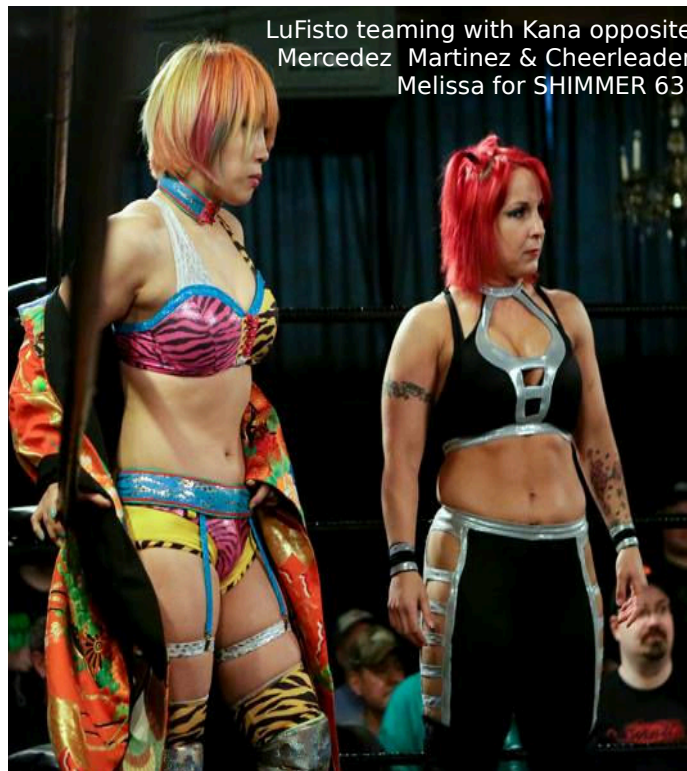
evidence to support the theory that inter-gender wrestling is damaging to the company is quite absurd, especially considering the November 23rd show, featuring Sexy Star defending the Lucha Underground championship against Johnny Mundo, was well above the season three average with 195,000 total viewers.

Trying to obtain accurate data isn't an exact science and the way Nielsen extrapolates the viewing figures doesn't particularly lend itself to measuring the small metrics generated by Lucha Underground, and the El Rey Network in general. Nevertheless, those opposed to inter-gender wrestling tried to manipulate the little data available to support their own stance that man versus woman matches were somehow damaging to the overall product. Pick any aspect of Lucha Underground – the outlandish cast of characters, insane long-arching storylines, dual Spanish and English languages, the heavily stylised look of the show – and you could make a similar argument about any one of those being just as detrimental, if not more so, to the show than inter-gender matches.

“Basing whether the entire inter-gender wrestling genre is successful at creating female fans solely on a few sketchy numbers from one television show is irresponsible journalism in action.”

Basing whether the entire inter-gender wrestling genre is successful at creating female fans solely on a few sketchy numbers from one television show is irresponsible journalism in action. Just because one show, on one network, has a low number of female viewers does not mean that other wrestling companies are incapable of successfully promoting inter-gender matches. Two of the most successful independent promotions in the US, PWG and CHIKARA, have been doing it for a long time and

both companies have extremely hardcore, loyal, fan-bases. Obviously the difference is that Lucha Underground has television and therefore sponsors to appease. However, with the ever-changing landscape of pro-wrestling consumption who knows how long a cult show like Lucha Underground will even last on a minor network like El Rey. Independent wrestling companies are more accessible than ever today, thanks a plethora of streaming services to choose from at the click of a button. WWE have the TV



LuFisto teaming with Kana opposite Mercedes Martinez & Cheerleader Melissa for SHIMMER 63.

wrestling market cornered; it would be virtually impossible for another company to come along and provide some real competition at this stage. It makes much more sense for independent promotions to start their own streaming platform and market directly to their target audience, while expanding their footprint as over-the-top technology continues to grow. If potential sponsors really are turned off by Lucha Underground's inter-gender matches, surely it is up to someone in the company to come up with better sales pitches which contextualise the “man on woman violence” as a positive for the series.

I asked LuFisto and Mike Quackenbush their thoughts on whether inter-gender wrestling was really unsuccessful at creating female fans. “This is so false.” LuFisto stated. “I've had several women and young girls tell me they love it because we show that women can fight, defend themselves, are fearless and that they represent a model of strength for the young generation.”



"I've never given this a moment's thought." Quackenbush said. "Generally speaking, we [CHIKARA] enjoy a much higher percentage of female fans than probably every other American independent group. So using inter-gender matches as a sales ploy or gimmick to attract more female customers is not really something that crosses my mind."

LuFisto also shared the following story about a meeting she had with a young girl and her mother after competing in an inter-gender match:

"During one of my inter-gender matches, a young lady of about 10 years old started crying after the fight. She came backstage where the mom told me that she had been a victim of domestic violence and that her daughter had witnessed some of it. She thanked me because these were tears of fear, but also happiness. The kid was overwhelmed because I had fought back, I had stood tall in front of my opponent and I had beat him. For her, I was the hero that fought the bad guy she knew. The little girl hugged me so tight. It is a moment I will never forget."

Let's face it. The days of professional wrestling being viewed as a legitimate sporting event are long gone

and are never coming back. As we head into 2017, not one single non-fan is going to give a second's thought as to whether pro-wrestling is on the level or not. The late 19th century press already began to have doubts about the legitimacy of wrestling as a sport, due to the money a wrestler could make in side bets if they took a dive, and by the 1930s it was widely publicised that the wrestling game was one giant racket. But people still turned up to the arenas to see the matches. It is hard to imagine any legitimate sport lasting very long after being exposed as phony by the press, however pro-wrestling managed to survive. Maybe people simply didn't believe the reports in the papers, or they wanted to see the action up close and make their own mind up about this wrestling thing. Perhaps some of them shared a similar mentality to the current-day wrestling fan and realised that terms such as, "real" or "fake," are completely irrelevant when you are caught up in the magic of a pro-wrestling show. If professional wrestling is going to be taken seriously on any kind of mainstream level ever again, it's about time the antiquated notion of the business being related to any kind of sport is eradicated for good. It's athletic performance art where anything is possible, including women beating up men. It's pro-wrestling.

HISTORY

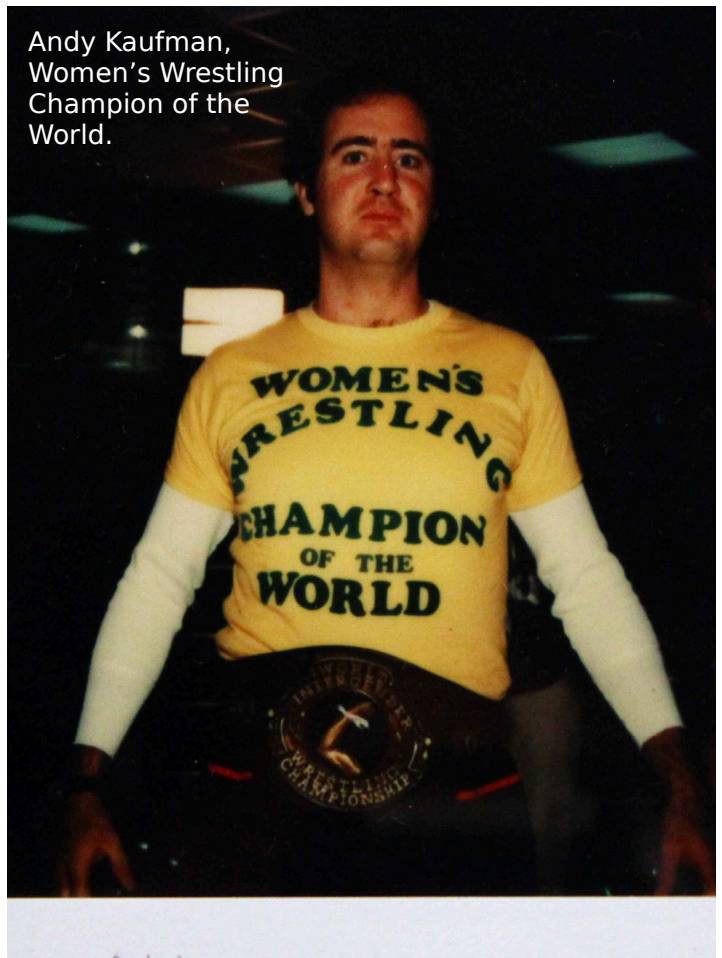
You might be forgiven for assuming inter-gender wrestling is a relatively new phenomenon. Over the past decade, the sub-genre has become more prevalent to the point where matches between men and women can be promoted by certain companies without anyone even batting an eyelid. In fact, it is outright expected of some promotions to feature inter-gender matches. In the late 90s/early 2000s, the mainstream pro-wrestling companies tried their hand at booking women against men, with varying degrees of success. The WWF had Chyna, who became the only woman to hold the Intercontinental title and to compete in the Royal Rumble. She wasn't the best in-ring performer, but Chyna was undoubtedly a huge star for the company and was protected well enough by the booking that her matches against the men were not egregiously offensive. WCW tried to emulate the success of Chyna with the likes of Asya and Madusa competing against males; Madusa even held the Cruiserweight title for a while. Unfortunately for the Atlanta-based group, they failed to realise that Chyna had been protected for years in the WWF and was pushed as an equal to the men from the beginning. WCW just threw their women in with the guys and expected the same results, which obviously didn't happen. ECW had Jazz, who was probably the best of the bunch, but the company was already on its last legs by the time she really started to get hot.

Prior to this brief flirtation with inter-gender wrestling by the big companies, matches between men and women were usually promoted for comedic purposes and resembled nothing even close to an athletic contest. So where did it all begin in the first place? Well, when it comes to inter-gender wrestling there is only really one place to start...

THE MAN FROM HOLLYWOOD

Historically speaking, inter-gender wrestling doesn't exactly have the most esteemed past. Before beginning research for this article the scope of my knowledge on the subject prior to the nineties started and ended with the late Andy Kaufman. Proclaiming himself the "World Inter-Gender Wrestling Champion," Kaufman began grappling with women in 1977 during his stand-up act, as an updated version of the old barnstorming, "take on all-comers," gimmick from the early 20th century. Kaufman, a

wrestling fan since childhood, reveled in playing the misogynistic heel, cutting real heat generating promos bashing women's lib and inciting female audience members with outlandish sexist comments.



Andy Kaufman,
Women's Wrestling
Champion of the
World.

On November 17th 1979, he famously performed the same routine he had done in the comedy clubs on Saturday Night Live and after winning his match Kaufman offered \$1,000 to any woman in the country who could beat him in three minutes. He also delivered a chauvinistic heel promo to ensure the viewing public would take the bait. And boy did they ever. NBC received thousands of letters complaining about Kaufman's antics from irate viewers who bought his act, however they also were sent 1,500 applications from women who wanted to accept the challenge. One of these women was Diana Peckham, the granddaughter of pre-television pro-wrestler, Alexander D. Peckham, from Massachusetts. Diana was called by Kaufman himself and he offered to pay for her travel to New York; all she had to do was beat three other women in preliminary bouts to get the spot on the show. And she did just that, downing a construction worker from Iowa, a police officer from Milwaukee and a woman from Texas who worked at the cosmetic counter in a department store.

The big match went ahead on the December 22nd edition of Saturday Night Live in 1979 and naturally Kaufman ended up winning, as his partner in crime Bob Zmuda, like he had done hundreds of times before, played the role of the referee to ensure victory for the comedian. Peckham would [later claim](#) that she had no idea Zmuda was going to be the referee for the contest. Once again, the letters of complaint poured in from outraged viewers who had no idea they were being worked and Kaufman, who was on thin ice with the SNL brass anyway, was taken off the show indefinitely.

“Regardless, one of the hottest and most famous angles in Memphis history owed its success to a skinny comedian, who liked to wrestle women because it helped him overcome his shyness around the opposite sex.”

Kaufman believed he had something with his inter-gender act and met with Vince McMahon Sr. to discuss the possibility of bringing his schtick to the WWF. McMahon was not on board with the idea due to his belief that it would make wrestling out to be a joke, however fabled journalist Bill Apter set up a meeting between Kaufman and Jerry “The King” Lawler, which spawned one of the biggest angles in Memphis wrestling history.

Kaufman showed up at the Mid-South Coliseum in late 1981 and began his famous “I’m from Hollywood” gimmick, mocking the people of Memphis and, of course, challenging the women in the audience. He even wrestled a couple of inter-gender matches at the Mid-South Coliseum and beat female wrestler, Foxy, on November 1st 1981, before returning three weeks later on November 23rd to win a handicap match over three other women. This all led to the famous showdown with Jerry Lawler on April 5th 1982 at the Mid-South Coliseum, where the

dastardly Kaufman finally got his comeuppance for years of running his mouth and taking advantage of women. Being 1982, it was hardly surprising that a man (Lawler) was the hero who stepped in as a surrogate for all the women who wanted to kick Kaufman's ass. Who knows what Kaufman's endgame would have been with his inter-gender gimmick if he had not been kicked off Saturday Night Live. Through modern eyes it is easy to fantasy book a scenario wherein Kaufman finally had his mouth shut and was eventually beaten by a woman. Maybe a hot young celebrity NBC wanted to get behind, a sports woman, a regular “housewife” who got her fifteen minutes of fame. They could have even struck a deal to bring in a trained female pro-wrestler as the big pay-off, which would have undoubtedly been the biggest thing to ever happen to women's professional wrestling in the US at the time. Regardless, one of the hottest and most famous angles in Memphis history owed its success to a skinny comedian, who liked to wrestle women because it helped him overcome his shyness around the opposite sex.

So that's it, right? Andy Kaufman brought inter-gender matches into the world of professional wrestling; end of story. Well, not exactly.

SOUTHERN BELLES

Southeastern Championship Wrestling, based in Knoxville, TN, and run by Ron Fuller, promoted a series of special “Women's Lib” matches which actually pre-date the Kaufman stuff in Memphis. In February 1981, female wrestlers Judy Martin and Joyce Grable were brought in for a loop of the circuit, working tag matches against Roy Lee Welch and Robert Gibson. Two documented accounts of the matches, although there were almost certainly more, took place on February 8th in Pensacola, FL, February 9th in Birmingham, AL, and were set up on the February 7th television [show](#). On the show, Welch and Gibson were interviewed about the matches and both men put over the contests as serious athletic events, noting that they were not taking their female opponents lightly. “It's not that far-fetched,” stated Welch. “These are professionally trained athletes. They've gone through the same rigorous training that we had to go through when we first started [...]. We're not talking about just any two women off the street, we're talking about two top professional wrestlers.” To further hype the “Women's Lib” matches, they aired an interview with Bob and Brad

Armstrong, conducted by Les Thatcher. Once again, Thatcher and the Armstrongs put over the women as credible athletes and sold the matches as legitimate sporting contests; just like every other match in the territory.



Judy Martin and Joyce Grable prior to a "Women's Lib" match.

Since I had zero knowledge of this intriguing piece of lost pro wrestling history, I contacted Les Thatcher to see if he could give me any further relevant information. My hopes weren't exactly high since it was nearly 36 years ago, but Mr. Thatcher kindly responded and told me as much as he could recall. At the time he had just left Southeastern in order to work for the Flair/Mulligan promotion out of Knoxville, which ran in conjunction with Jim Crockett Promotions, so he never actually saw any of the "Women's Lib" matches. However, Thatcher was able to provide this assertion: "I can say that I'm sure they went about working [the matches] as serious, because the territory was run for serious heat, with very little comedy thrown in from time to time." I also asked if either Welch or Gibson had a problem working with, and selling for, the women at the time. "I can't believe that Roy nor Robert had any complaints about working with the ladies back then," Thatcher said. "Roy was involved with running the territory so he could have opted out if he wished. My guess also would be that there was no heel/babyface dynamic, since both guys were faces there."

A serious territory, run on generating heat, like Southeastern promoting inter-gender matches as legitimate contests in 1981 was quite the eye-opening discovery. It didn't kill the towns, people still watched the TV show and turned up to the arenas every week. In fact, Judy Martin and Joyce Grable were brought back in June of 1981 for another go around the horn in tags against Roy Lee Welch and Tommy Wright, so there must have been at least some interest generated by the first "Women's Lib" encounters.

Incredibly, there is an even earlier documented account of an inter-gender tag team match than the Southeastern matches in 1981.

On Thanksgiving night, November 27th, 1980, Judy Martin and Joyce Grable competed in Georgia Championship Wrestling's annual one-night tag team tournament for the National Tag Team titles. Booker Ole Anderson had Martin and Grable face Jerry Roberts (Jacques Rougeau) and Steve Olsonoski in the first round in front of 12,000 fans at the Omni in Atlanta. [Clips](#) of the battle still survive today and the match provides an interesting watch through modern eyes. Roberts and Olsonoski were moderately sized, junior-heavyweight, wrestlers for the time, so they did not tower over their smaller female opponents.

The men were bigger and stronger, but the women still had a chance if they worked together and tried every trick they could to win. Martin and Grable frequently double-teamed the men and used a variety of illegal tactics such as punching, hair-pulling and choking.

Since nobody had actually seen women wrestle men in a sanctioned match, this was an important factor in establishing the element of believability. The men were bigger and stronger, but the women still had a chance if they worked together and tried every trick they could to win. Martin and Grable frequently double-teamed the men and used a variety of illegal tactics such as punching, hair-pulling and choking.

“Far be it from me to question the moral compass of Ole Anderson – perhaps he was in fact a secret progressive liberal – but it is hard to imagine in 1980 he really believed that female pro-wrestlers should be presented on the same level as the men.”

They were in fact working as the heels. The story of the match was based around the internal conflict of the male wrestlers, who had to restrain themselves from losing their cool, while the women seemingly had free rein to do whatever they wanted. Roberts and Olsonoski sold frustration by frequently conferring in their corner and balling up their fists in retaliation to the underhanded tactics, however they never unloaded on the women because they were chivalrous babyfaces.

“In the early 1980s, there was more downside to it than upside,” Olsonoski was [quoted](#) in 2012.

“We really didn't want to do it at first. It could make you look bad, or worse, if it didn't go over. Jacques Rougeau was more against it than I was. He was younger and wanted to make a name for himself. He thought it was a putdown to wrestle the girls. We had to drag him along. It was kind of a macho thing that Jacques took more seriously than I did.”

Despite their roles as heels in the match, Martin and Grable's storyline goal was to prove they could hold their own against the men; all they wanted was an opportunity. When given the chance, Martin and Grable seized their moment to shine and put on a display that quickly shattered any illusion of the women being out of their depth. Remember this was during an era when rehearsing choreographed sequences and laying out a bunch of high spots before the match was virtually nonexistent. “It wasn't like today, with all these moves scripted and worked out in advance,” Grable [commented](#) in 2012. “We never talked about it. We never said, 'I'm going to give you two hip-tosses and a dropkick.' You do what comes natural. A real wrestler can work with anybody.”

Regarding taking a hip-toss from Grable, Olsonoski recalled: “My options are to block it and make her look bad or go with it and make her look good [...]. In wrestling, you have to work together to make a good match.” Martin also had a big shine-spot, one that her opponent Jerry Roberts was apparently not expecting at all. “I rolled him up in a small package,” she [noted](#) in 2012. “I think he was surprised. I think he didn't realise, as girls, how strong we were in there.” Given that Roberts was not particularly enthralled with the idea of wrestling women, Grable remembered the spot fondly. “I could tell from his face that he could not believe she did it to him,” she noted. “That hold was the peak of the match because of who it was on. She realised she had to do something to him for him to respect her. It ain't just Joyce doing it to him now, it's Judy. A girl had put him in that position.”

Unsurprisingly, Olsonoski won the match for the men when he pinned Martin with a Powerslam, however the women had achieved their goal, both real and fictitious, of being taken seriously in a contest against male wrestlers. A rematch took place on Christmas Day 1980 in Columbus, GA, and the men went over once again. This time however, the encounter was featured as the semi-main event of the show. Reflectively speaking, there's no doubt what Grable and Martin accomplished over thirty six years ago was historic – ground-breaking even. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that at the time these mixed-sex matches were nothing more than another short-term promotional tactic designed to add a few extra dollars at the gate. These early inter-gender contests certainly were not drawing the majority of the houses, nor were they intended to. The objective was to try and grab the attention of the non-traditional

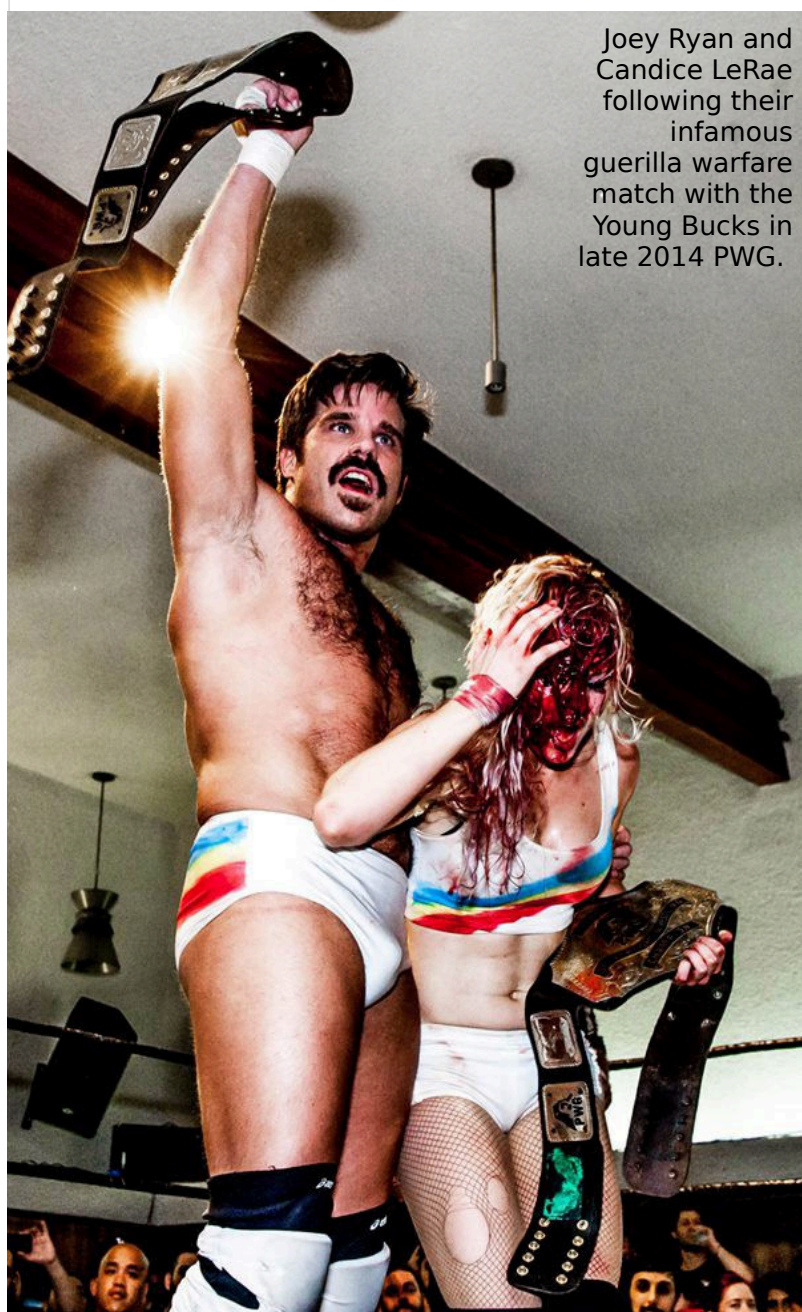
wrestling fan-base and provide an ancillary boost to the already established number of people going to the shows. Whether they were successful or not in terms of business is hard to say. Neither Georgia nor Southeastern ran any further mixed-sex matches following their brief foray with the gimmick in 1980/81, so it was definitely not a cash-cow they could milk for all it was worth. Maybe Anderson and the Fullers believed it would only work as a one-and-done, or a very infrequent, attraction and thought people would stop coming once they had already seen it a couple of times.

Far be it from me to question the moral compass of Ole Anderson – perhaps he was in fact a secret progressive liberal – but it is hard to imagine in 1980 he really believed that female pro-wrestlers should be presented on the same level as the men. In his autobiography, *Inside Out: How Corporate America Destroyed Professional Wrestling*, Anderson remarked about the match: “On the surface, I wasn't crazy about it, but I came up with an idea that I thought might draw some money.” Anderson had the foresight to look past his personal beliefs and do what he thought was the best thing for the business of the territory. He also explained that one promoter in particular wasn't thrilled when word of the match got around. “When Verne [Gagne] heard that I put the girls in the tournament with the men, he was really ticked off at me.” Anderson noted that Gagne called him afterwards and offered the following pearls of wisdom: “Boy, talk about exposing the business. How in the hell can the girls wrestle with the men?”

“Jeez, Verne.” Ole replied. “That's nothing compared to all the goofy stuff that's been done in this business.” Remember this is the curmudgeonly, hard-nosed, Ole Anderson saying this – in 1980. From a modern perspective, anybody with the opinion that inter-gender matches are simply far too unrealistic to suspend one's disbelief should know they are stuck in the same mindset as Verne Gagne from 36 years ago. “It was an idea similar to the tennis match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs,” Anderson wrote. “I used that as an example. I was just trying to create a little interest.”

It's always difficult trying to pin-point the “first time ever” something occurred. There's always new research being done and fresh results being dug up, which is what makes being a pro-wrestling historian so much fun because you never stop learning. “Mixed” tag team matches had been done before,

however the rules restricted the men from wrestling the women. These mixed tags would sometimes see some brief interaction between the men and women, although it would usually consist of the most basic of things such as hair-pulling or the men simply holding the women back from each other. It is safe to assume that no mixed tag match in history saw the same levels of physicality between the sexes as the Martin and Grable versus Roberts and Olsonoski encounter. Whether he knew it or not (probably not), Ole Anderson, by putting “the broads” in with the men as a one-off carnny trick in order to up the gate receipts, solidified himself as an unlikely early pioneer of inter-gender wrestling. “Of course I had the girls lose,” Anderson said. “If I had put the girls over, I would have had to go out and hang myself.” Ole Anderson: Women's equality crusader.



Joey Ryan and Candice LeRae following their infamous guerilla warfare match with the Young Bucks in late 2014 PWG.



FINAL SAY

I would like to give the final word on the subject to LuFisto, as her remarks towards anyone who refuses to accept inter-gender wrestling as an art form were more appropriate than anything I could have come up with:

“You being opposed to what I choose to do and not accepting that I want to be treated as an equal performer and wrestler is discriminatory. I trained with the male wrestlers and I chose to fight them. You don’t need to love what I do, but respect me as an athlete who represents a powerful woman, not violence against my gender.”

I would like to thank a few people who helped put this article together: Mike Quackenbush ([@MikeQuackenbush](#)) and LuFisto ([@LuFisto](#)), in particular, for taking the time to answer my questions when they really didn't have to. Les Thatcher ([@LesThatcher](#)), for providing his memories of the matches in Southeastern. Karl Stern ([@dragonkingkarl](#)), who informed me of the Southeastern matches and pointed me to his results archive at [When it was Cool](#). And finally, Jeff Leen, who wrote an outstanding piece on the Omni match in 2012 for [Slam! Wrestling](#).

A big thanks to all the great contributors who provided content for the Yearbook!

If you enjoyed my article on inter-gender wrestling, there is a whole lot more of my writing available right here at [Cubed Circle Wrestling](#)! Including, random independent show [reviews](#), WWE PPV [reports](#), classic Mid-South Wrestling TV [coverage](#), Rev Pro live show [experiences](#) – featuring such tales as Tomohiro Ishii's light worker handshake, Tomoaki Honma unsuccessfully shilling t-shirts and Jushin Liger being a human starfish. There's also the [Pro-Wres Digest](#) – a weekly round-up (ranging anywhere from 3,000 – 7,000 words) of all the news from the worldwide pro-wrestling landscape. In 2017, I'm aiming to complete a Mid-South Wrestling compendium of the year 1982, which will include all the TV reports, live show results and any other bits of information I can dig up. We're here every week, so make sure to come back and visit us from time to time.

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THE 2016 ANNUAL PODMASS

WITH JOE GAGNE

I write a weekly column for Voices of Wrestling reviewing all the big name podcasts (the Podcast One shows, MLW Network, and a few scattered others). I remain fascinated not only by the medium itself, but by its exponential growth and its increased influence on the wrestling scene. I reviewed the scene in 2015, and I can say 2016 was the most noteworthy year for the form yet, so let's recap exactly what happened.

THE PODCAST BUBBLE HASN'T BURST YET - IT'S EXPANDING FASTER THAN EVER

One of my main points in last year's article was that the podcast expansion appeared to be slowing down. But the major providers apparently didn't agree as they greatly increased the number of name podcasts. Podcast One gave Chris Jericho his own network, leading to new shows from Konnan and Cyrus & Lance Storm (and Team Tiger Awesome, but we don't count them). They also brought on Vince Russo FIVE days a week. MLW, for their part, brought in heavy

hitters like Ric Flair, Bruce Prichard, and Eric Bischoff (and Marty and Sarah, I guess) and gave all their shows separate feeds.

And it's not just the endless additions; it's the shocking lack of attrition. The only podcasts I regularly covered that ceased production this year were Bret Hart's show and Talk n' Shop. The former ended for reasons unexplained, and the latter was only because Karl Anderson and Doc Gallows signed with the WWE (and the show lives on sporadically on Talk is Jericho), and that was quickly replaced by a similar show in the Tiki Bar that ultimately never really got off the ground.

Jim Ross and Jim Cornette have each done roughly 150 episodes when you read this. Jericho passed the 300 mark this year. Steve Austin is approaching 400 shows. I know doing a podcast isn't exactly intensive manual labor, but given the mercurial personalities involved in wrestling it's stunning no one has really just up and quit.

“MVP lost his job at Lucha Underground because he revealed a plot point before it was mentioned on television (that Catrina was actually 200 years old – surely the dumbest reason anyone ever got canned).”

PODCAST HOSTS ARE JUMPING SHIP LIKE IT'S THE MONDAY NIGHT WARS

For his new network, Jericho poached Konnan (and Disco Inferno) from the MLW flagship show, which has yet to fully recover. He also lured Lance Storm away from his regular gig at the Observer site. MLW snapped up Ric Flair after Flair left the CBS family of podcasts. It makes sense – wrestling is a star driven business, and podcasts are the same. It's much easier to take someone with experience and an established audience than try to build one from scratch.

But will this trend continue? And the Konnan and Lance Storm departures were amicable, but will they stay that way if, say, Podcast One tries to raid MLW talent?

PODCASTS CONTINUED TO NOT JUST REPORT AND COMMENT ON NEWS, BUT MAKE NEWS AS WELL

MVP lost his job at Lucha Underground because he revealed a plot point before it was mentioned on television (that Catrina was actually 200 years old – surely the dumbest reason anyone ever got canned). Ric Flair got some notoriety for revealing he once hooked up with Halle Berry (which Berry denied). And the legal action against CM Punk & Colt Cabana continues. At this point we need a podcast dedicated to all the news generated from podcasts.

INDEPENDENT WRESTLING HAS LEARNED THE PROMOTIONAL POWER OF PODCASTS

Absolute Intense Wrestling and Chikara, longtime independent groups, both launched podcasts this year, and the results are palpable. Running an independent can lead to a lot of great stories (probably moreso than working in a more corporate, well funded environment like the WWE) so the tales they tell are

very entertaining, but it also keeps fans up to date on what the companies are currently doing.

Ryback, fresh off quitting the WWE, also started his own show. I know Ryback is not a traditional independent wrestler, but if he didn't have his show I wouldn't have given him a second thought after he left the WWE. I don't think his show is any great shakes, but it's a cheap and effective way to keep his name out there.

IS THE MEDIUM STAGNATING?

Most podcasts follow the same format – the host will do a short monologue with an update on the news or their everyday life and then welcome a guest or do a Q&A. And if there are two hosts they'll chitchat for a bit and then have a guest on or discuss a certain topic. It's a formula that works, but for how long? Episode #150 of Jim Ross' show didn't sound that different from episode #1, and will fans eventually be put off by such rigidity?

As far as those trying to break the mold, Steve Austin did several audio commentaries for his matches in 2015 but largely dropped the process this year (Ric Flair also did it a few times). Konnan's new show stands out from the podcast pack by acting like a traditional radio show – multiple guests, short segments, and a real morning zoo vibe. And the most original show is one I don't cover – Colt Cabana does the Pro Wrestling Fringe show at Howl (so you do have to pay for it), a short, NPR-style examination of a singular topic that's unlike any other show you'll hear.

THE BEST EPISODE OF THE YEAR WAS A DIFFICULT BUT NECESSARY LISTEN

Back in June Chris Jericho sat down with Sandra Toffoloni, the sister of Nancy Benoit, to discuss the Benoit family tragedy on its ninth anniversary. They

have a frank discussion about her personal relationship with Chris, when she knew things were deteriorating, the media blitz afterwards, and trying to find answers almost a decade later. It put a human face on an unspeakable tragedy.

The best podcast of the year was a brand new one. Special mention goes to *Something to Wrestle With*, Bruce Prichard's show that can provide amazing, detailed insight into both WWE and TNA, although it could certainly lean too hard into dirtsheet bashing shtick.

But my favorite podcast of the year was another new show: the previously mentioned AIW podcast *The Card is Going to Change*. John Thorne and Chandler Biggins' tales of running an independent group made for easily the funniest and most memorable show of the year. From the headaches of booking Vader, trainees puking, and one of the Headhunters going to

jail the day of the show, this is the rare show I would go back and listen to and laugh just as hard the second time. Bonus points for running a reasonable 45 minutes or so each week.

FANS STILL RULE

The worst part of my column (outside of listening to Jim Ross' endless griping) is that shows I cover take precedence over fan shows I often prefer. Shows like *Voices of Wrestling*, *Between the Sheets*, and the 6:05 Superpodcast put their professional brethren to shame in terms of passion, humor, and chemistry. These shows are all free, and in a perfect world these shows would be picked up by Podcast One. But as five Vince Russo episodes a week showed this year, it's far from a perfect world. ■

Christian and Chris Jericho at a live Talk is Jericho event in September.





A 2016 PRO-WRES OVERVIEW

WITH BRYAN ROSE

BOY OH BOY, 2016.

The wrestling world continues to change at a rapid pace, and 2016 was further proof of it. You can point to a myriad of things - the emergence and recognition of the UK scene, more promotions embracing streaming services, WWE making a play for anyone with a buzz, TNA continually finding ways to survive, New Japan continuing to shine despite four of its best heading to the west, and so much more

went down this year. I'll try and do my best to cover everything that went down in 2016, and I may not get to it all, but hey - there are a million other people talking about things I'm not in the know about.

WWE continued as the top brand in all of pro wrestling in 2016, without question. Expanding their network to all regions, WWE continued to prop up the Network with more original content (like Holey Foley and Camp WWE) and live, in ring action.

While it's great that more people are getting opportunities to get their names out there in the mainstream – and it's rather interesting that even though WWE is globalizing themselves and putting their name out all over the world – ratings continue to fall for Raw, and unless someone big returns, WWE continues to mean very little in mainstream media.

“One thing WWE is doing, very well mind you, is snatching up people from all around the world. Anyone with name value that isn't signed to another organization has been snatched up this year.”

One thing WWE is doing, very well mind you, is snatching up people from all around the world. Anyone with name value that isn't signed to another organization has been snatched up this year. Names you'd never thought would be on WWE TV like Akira Tozawa, Roderick Strong, Austin Aries, Shinsuke Nakamura, La Sombra, and so many others made their WWE debuts this year, with names like Chris Hero being considered for 2017. For years, the WWE mentality was not to these types because they couldn't become draws - they didn't fit the mold of what they viewed as a WWE superstar. But for all the talk that names like CM Punk and Daniel Bryan received, they were never given a fair shot, at least their work brought WWE to realize that hiring smaller guys wasn't the worst of ideas.

Something to look out for in 2017 is WWE's globalization, entrenching themselves in regions they'd only visit about once a year in the past. The last month of 2016 brought news that WWE would be introducing a UK title, with the aim of starting a touring brand featuring UK exclusive wrestlers. This could have a serious effect on the UK indie scene, which has been thriving in recent years with little interest from WWE until now. And not only that, but with the possible revival of the World of Sport brand and it potentially scoring a weekly gig on ITV, a major broadcaster in the UK, WWE looks to be

meddling in a scene it usually doesn't take part in, but is suddenly very interested in being in. What a cooky, crazy coincidence!

But onto other main roster issues. Hey, did you know Goldberg came back? And hey, despite the usual yearly talk of Undertaker never coming back, he did! And whaddya know, Shane McMahon returned after a seven year absence! Brock Lesnar was around too! This year cemented the fact that part-timers rule the roost in WWE, leaving very little for those who wrestle on a weekly basis to go with. It's been becoming a bigger problem for years in WWE, but this year it seemed most obvious.

That will be the problem for WWE in 2017, doing the right thing for those who will only compete on the big shows while everyone else just flounders with horrendous booking that sets them up to fail. It's been explained to death why WWE's booking is so atrocious, but until they realize that maybe doing 50/50 booking and looking completely ineffective during a Stephanie dress down does not, in fact, get people over, they're bound on making the same mistakes.



Brock Lesnar and Goldberg prior to their Survivor Series match in November.

Ring of Honor is leaving 2016 at a crossroads. On one hand, they still have their deal with NJPW, and along with CMLL get a great bevy of talent. Most of their shows aren't that bad. Problem is, when you start doing WWE style finishes and gimmicks people aren't into, that doesn't really work out – especially



Kyle 'O Reilly as ROH World Champion, Final Battle 2016.

since it usually doesn't work out for WWE themselves. Did anyone really want a revival of Kevin Sullivan's devil worshipping gimmick, or the Cabinet clinging to the worst aspects of the election? I don't think so. They have some evaluating to do deep down when it comes to booking, and that'll be their main issue for the new year. As of right now, they have the talent, but with no main direction other than "Here are some New Japan guys" it's hard to get into their product.

TNA sputtered into 2016 on death's door and will sputter into 2017 on death's door. They're literally

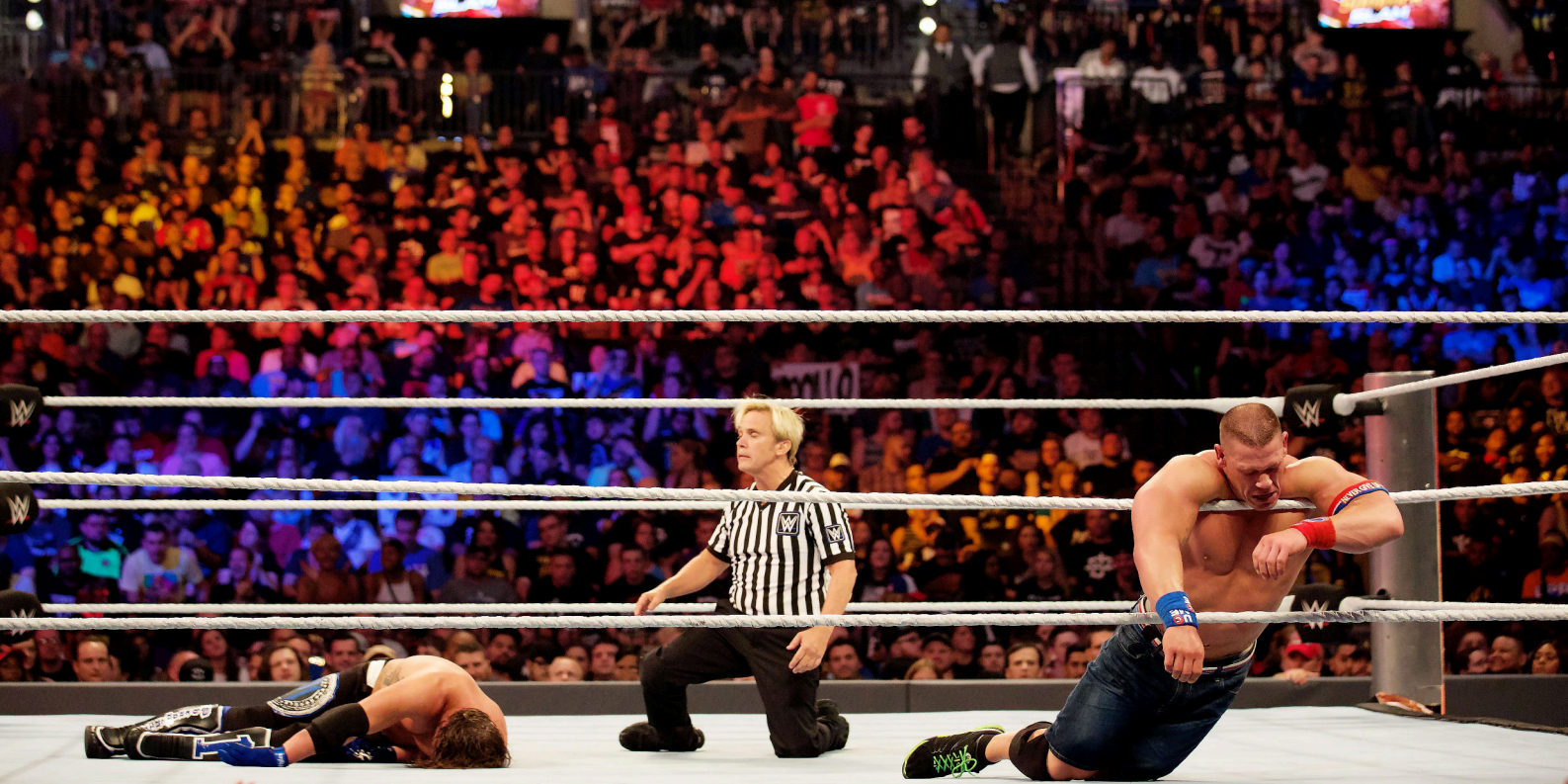
living on paycheck by paycheck, always finding a way to survive. This time, the Fight Network is propping them up. Why? Who knows, but they are. As long as they have a TV slot in the US and whatever they have left as far as international deals go, TNA can still exist, and I guess that's all that matters in the end.

But hey, Broken Matt Hardy, right? He was the sole bright spot in a year where absolutely nothing mattered in TNA. I think either Bobby Lashley or Eddie Edwards is the TNA champion right now, not really sure, but I do know the most over people in pro wrestling, at least in TNA, are Broken Matt, Brother Nero, Vanguard 1 (the drone) and Senor Benjamin (the gardener). Who would have known all you needed to inject new life into a character is to go completely insane? Matt Hardy's videos of his exploits with his crew were the only interesting thing going on in TNA, because it's so out there it's utterly fascinating. I used to think that they were overdoing it after the second video, but really the only thing people were talking about when it TNA-wise towards the end of 2016 is the Broken Matt Hardy saga, so by all means, Matt, just keep doing what you're doing. It's working great!

For all the years TNA emulated WWE, they finally did something totally different and it gave them some much needed attention. Not enough to dig themselves out of the hole they're in, as no one watches their TV and they're taping months worth of TV at a time, but hey, they still exist! Hooray!

New Japan suffered setbacks with the departure of four key talents in Anderson and Gallows, AJ Styles, and Shinsuke Nakamura. Especially when you consider the last two, you'd think NJPW would of had a rough year, right? Well...actually, they did just fine this year. It's mostly thanks to two new acts that caught fire very quickly: Naito continued to reach main event status by winning the IWGP title this year from Kazuchika Okada, and like the rest of Los Ingobernables de Japon, became a big time player with his new gimmick. He's anti- authority, anti-New Japan, anti pretty much everything else. He's taken

"Kenny Omega cemented himself as a heavyweight with a bang by laying out the departing AJ Styles, becoming the de facto leader of the Bullet Club."



the formula of Steve Austin and applied it to New Japan, not exactly in the same manner, but enough that it gives him a certain something that he lacked in 2014 when NJPW tried to headline WrestlingKingdom 8 with Okada vs. Naito for the title.

Meanwhile, Kenny Omega cemented himself as a heavyweight with a bang by laying out the departing AJ Styles, becoming the de facto leader of the Bullet Club. To say that he had an amazing 2016 would be an understatement. He was not only stupendous in every match and promo that he did this year, he became the first person of non-Asian descent to win the G1, putting him in the main event against Kazuchika Okada at 2017's WrestleKingdom 11 event. He has all the talent in the world to become a main event player in New Japan, and will continue to be one of the big time players of the promotion as 2017 approaches.

New Japan will never again reach the height of its popularity in the nineties due to cultural shifts, cable TV continuing not to be a big deal in Japan and a lousy timeslot, but if it continues to focus on big matches, long term planning and the right people, it should be just fine.

I don't follow the Mexico scene as much as I should, so I'll refrain from saying much other than there are a couple of things that I'd like to see change for 2017. You see, I'm all for dumping heel referees and 2 out of 3 fall matches. With the latter, I know they're a tradition and would be pretty hard to get rid of. But I

saw too many matches this year go to pinfalls super quickly, which makes me wonder why they even bother anymore. It's okay to do a one fall match here and there, especially if the match is built around one fall as opposed to three. And as for heel refs...if this were real, something would have been done about them ages ago. But they just are there and interfere because that's their role; all the lame stuff they do is out there and in the open because...blank.. It's lame in an age where wrestling promotions across the world are relying too much on garbage finishes, and here Mexico is still falling into the same traps.

Oh, and while we're on Mexico, someone needs to let me know the full story on Mr. Niebla. Why is he constantly suspended and why wasn't he fired years ago? Just wondering!

This year was unpredictable, bringing us all sorts of awesome wrestling action around the world. And now more than ever, we're getting to see it live thanks to streaming services like New Japan World and WWE Network. With more promotions going to live streaming, we'll have no shortage of content to watch in 2017. As much as 2016 changed the wrestling landscape, this upcoming year looks to change it even further. ■

WARRIORS

BY ALAN COUNIHAN



Tomohiro Ishii and Katsuyori Shibata wage war inside the Tokyo Dome on January 4th.



WARRIOR – “A BRAVE OR EXPERIENCED SOLDIER OR FIGHTER.”

Katsuyori Shibata and Tomohiro Ishii began the year in direct opposition to one another, but once they were separated they spent the rest of 2016 travelling down different roads. No matter what they were doing though, they were perpetually linked by, at all times, being the embodiments of the word "warrior".

January 4th 2016 at the Tokyo Dome

With little to no build, New Japan made a match for NEVER Openweight Champion Ishii to defend his title against Shibata. For most fans, the lack of build was a non-issue. This match didn't need a fancy story. It was arguably the two most smash mouth pro wrestlers on the face of the earth going head to head (literally) with the NEVER title on the line at the Dome. What more is needed? Plus, it just so happened to be a rematch of a legendary ***** classic from the 2013 G1 Climax.

The bout delivered on or even exceeded expectations. Ishii and Shibata went to war in a sick match featuring all the stiff strikes and displays of machismo that one would have hoped for. Shibata definitively won the gruelling contest with his trusty PK and became the new champion.

February 11th 2016 in Osaka

Ishii was granted an immediate rematch and the result was an even better bout than they had at the Dome. In front of a red hot Osaka crowd (the most passionate New Japan fans), Ishii brought even more to the plate of the former DREAM fighter, but it was again not enough as the challenger fell after 19 minutes of intense action.

TOMOHIRO ISHII

For Tomohiro Ishii, at 40 years of age, it would have been completely reasonable to think that his year would have peaked with those two wars. Having been a Match Of The Year machine consistently since 2013, it seemed like Ishii could have been poised to put his feet up somewhat for the rest of 2016 as new stars emerged. Perhaps a run in the tag division was calling his name, or maybe a stint with the NEVER 6 Man Titles. Nobody, and I mean nobody, was predicting him to get his first shot at the IWGP Heavyweight Title.

Ishii vs. Tetsuya Naito at Wrestling Dontaku on May 3rd was unquestionably the biggest match of The Stone Pitbull's career. However, it was not the first meeting of the pair in 2016. They locked horns at Korakuen Hall during the New Japan Cup in March, and had what was for many, the match of the tournament. Ishii was one of four CHAOS members

that Naito plowed through on his way to NJ Cup glory. Following victory over Kazuchika Okada at Invasion Attack to win the IWGP title for the first

Ishii clubs Kazuchika Okada with a lariat in their critically acclaimed G1 bout.



time, Naito stood tall over the CHAOS faction and he wasn't afraid to let them know it. Ishii simply would not stand for such disrespect and vowed to defend the honour of his team-mates. Naito accepted his challenge and the match was on.

When I think of the greatest single match performances I've seen in wrestling, I will always think of what Tomohiro Ishii did with the biggest prize on the line. From the moment he walked through the curtain, head down like a bull, Ishii was pro wrestling in its truest, most gritty form. Ishii was Tenryu. Ishii was Choshu. Ishii was embodying every tough as nails, hard nosed fighter who ever stepped in the ring. Yet as the match wore on, he was the most sympathetic, valiant hero you could ask for. The closing stretch, which proved that at the champ was just a step ahead of his challenger, was so good that the Fukuoka crowd (normally very quiet) were stamping their feet and screaming at the top of their lungs. A true epic in every sense of the word.

Following that bout, again it seemed like Ishii may have been primed to take the foot off the pedal a bit. We should know better. The G1 Climax was around the corner and NOBODY out-does Tomohiro Ishii in the G1. Right out of the gates, Ishii tore the house down with Hiroyoshi Tenzan in a match which got people thinking Tenzan could have had a huge run in the tournament because of how good Ishii made him look. From there he simply didn't have anything close to a bad match. Naomichi Marufuji, Hiroshi Tanahashi, Togi Makabe, and Okada all stood opposite Ishii in amazing matches. The Okada match was especially great, and for me the second best New Japan match of 2016 (one spot ahead of the Naito title match). It was the biggest win of Ishii's career, defeating the leader of his stable and then reigning IWGP champ.

The Stone Pitbull travelled to the UK for his final epic performance of the year on Rev Pro UK's Global Wars show in York Hall, Bethnal Green. It was a true dream match which lived up to all the hype as Ishii went to war with Chris Hero. It was the perfect capper to a remarkable year for Ishii. At 40 years old, he may have just had the best year of his career, because Tomohiro Ishii is a warrior.

KATSUYORI SHIBATA

Following victory in his series with Ishii, Shibata was firmly cemented as NEVER Openweight Champion. With the nature of the belt, his challengers could really come from any corner of the roster. Well his Spring and Summer saw him embroiled in a war with a very specific corner of said roster.

"The New Japan Dads" is the term of endearment that NJPW's 3rd Generation have become commonly known as. Yuji Nagata, Manabu Nakanishi, Satoshi Kojima and Hiroyoshi Tenzan have for the most part been moved down the card, and in recent years, have been given fewer opportunities. But Nagata and Kojima in particular have never seemed washed up. Conversely they have seemed ready to go at the drop of a hat. Kojima was the first to step up to Shibata's plate. They had one of New Japan's most underrated matches of the year – a gritty, old style hold for hold pro wrestling match.

Shibata was challenged by Tenzan at Sumo Hall for Invasion Attack and despite valiant effort from the veteran, he fell short. As Shibata stood tall over his



Katsuyori Shibata, RevPro British Heavyweight Championship, November 2016

fallen victim, he showed a rare glimpse of humility as he bowed to him. It was fleeting though, as the most Shibata moment ever would follow. As soon as the bow was complete the champ slapped the taste out of Nagata's mouth and essentially dared him to be his next challenger.

Shibata's story with the veterans was not going to be a simple case of running through them and moving on. No, New Japan tell better stories than that. Shibata was defeated soundly by Nagata at Dontaku and found himself in a position where he had to pull himself together, get back on his feet and get his belt back. The rematch between the pair happened in July at Osaka Jo-Hall and it was so good. A hard hitting, violent match where Nagata made Shibata EARN his title back and in the process the respect of the 3rd Generation. Shibata emerged from the feud with his title and with four men who were willing to fight by his side.

Heading into the G1, Shibata was banged up. Seven months of bruising NEVER title matches will do this to a man. Then in his first match of the tournament he got dropped hard on his shoulder and neck by Tomoaki Honma. This made matters a lot worse. Shibata trudged through the tournament amassing more and more medical tape as the month progressed. By the end he was like a Mummy! Yet somehow, it didn't effect his performances at all and he delivered gritty battle after gritty battle.

It was no secret that Shibata was in rough shape after the G1. He should have taken a break. Instead he picked a bunch of fights. Because he's Katsuyori Shibata, it's what he does. Shibata, along with the Dads declared war on Pro Wrestling NOAH following a wild pull apart brawl on August 14th. It was a feud which showed great promise, but had to end prematurely when NOAH was sold. Before it ended, Shibata went to NOAH and defeated Go Shiozaki in a fabulous match.

The NEVER champ would defend his title against both members of reDRAGON, Bobby Fish and Kyle O'Reilly, in September and October. The O'Reilly match was especially incredible. Like Ishii, Shibata ended his year with a dream match in the UK as he also faced off with Chris Hero. This was on the final night of the Global Wars tour and it saw Shibata emerge from an outstanding bout with a new title added to his collection – the British Heavyweight Championship.

After the year he's had, Shibata managing to get to December 31st with all his limbs attached is an achievement in and of itself. To do so, and have a title belt of each shoulder, well that's the definition of a warrior right there. ■



THE INDIE PURO YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH IZZAC

2016 WAS A FANTASTIC YEAR IN ALL OF WRESTLING.

Seriously, I don't think there has been a year like 2016 ever before, every single day there was something that shocked us. That's not what I'm talking about though, what I'm going to be writing about is independent wrestling in Japan. I'm known to all as being one of the biggest fans of independent Japanese wrestling on the online wrestling world. I was a big fan of NJPW in 2015 but in 2016 Lawrence O'Brien and myself started up the Puro In The Rough podcast where we cover Independent Japanese wrestling. Over time I dedicated all my wrestling watching time to the Japanese graps. I would now consider myself somewhat of an expert in the Japanese independent wrestling scene.

2016 was a coming out party for lots of the smaller promotions in Japan, there were more eyes on these companies than ever before. I've witnessed the fandom for independent Japanese wrestling grow substantially over the course of 2016. Due to the Realhero archive and the Wrestling With Words puroresu stream being so easily accessible it's become almost too easy to get into Japanese wrestling.

HEAT-UP



Minoru Suzuki and Kazuhiro Tamura during their October 31st match.

HEAT-UP is the first promotion I want to talk about. I remember watching their January show and not having a clue what was going on. They were running out of a basement in front of less than 100 people. They put on a hell of a main event with HEAT-UP owner, Kazuhiro Tamura, wrestling the king of the indies, Kenichiro Arai. They peaked my interest; and overtime they went from a laughing stock to one of the most respected indies in Japan. The growth of HEAT-UP is truly impressive – from running shows in a basement to drawing 1,400+ with Minoru Suzuki in the main event. Tamura, who books the company too, is so smart – mixing in his trainees with big name outsiders. Names like Minoru Tanaka, Tatsumi Fujinami, Yoshiaki Fujiwara, Hikaru Sato and Takao Omori all worked for HEAT-UP in 2016. I'm very excited to see the continual growth of HEAT-UP heading into 2017.

BASARA

Moving along to one of my personal favourite promotions, one that means so much to me personally...Isami Kodaka is my favourite wrestler currently and he had one hell of a 2016, the year he presented BASARA, his new promotion. He was a big hand in UNION and was saddened when they shut their doors in 2015. In October 2015 he made the announcement that in 2016 he would be starting a

new promotion. BASARA is owned by DDT, but operated internally by Isami Kodaka who both chooses talent and books the promotion.

In January, BASARA ran their first show at Shinjuku Face selling the place out. The show was incredible and a great introduction to what BASARA would be all about. The initial idea was to run around 16 shows over the course of 2016. That all changed when Isami & Sanshiro Takagi noticed how quick fans took to BASARA. They sold out all their planned shows so they had to continue to add dates. So many dates in fact that as of right now they are approaching 40 shows and ran a Korakuen Hall show on Christmas! Korakuen Hall is known as the temple of Japanese wrestling, just about every promotion has run there at one point. BASARA were going to block off some seats because they didn't expect to sell that many tickets, but they were wrong and sold all their first release tickets so they had to open up the seats that were originally going to be blocked off. BASARA has turned into DDT's second biggest promotion, behind DDT proper, of course, and is only going to continue to grow. All they need to do now is sign up more talent as the fans in Japan are slowly getting tired of the same match ups. Isami noticed this and is using a lot more outside talent. At the Christmas Korakuen show they used outsiders like Koji Kanemoto, Jun Kasai & Ryuichi Kawakami.

REAL JAPAN PRO-WRESTLING



Real Japan Pro Wrestling is a weird one, because they are much like Dradition or Tokyo Gurentai were they put on these incredibly interesting cards, but unlike

Dradition or Gurentai they don't make tape. You may be thinking "oh that's no big deal, we get enough puro drops as is". **YOU ARE VERY WRONG, RJPW NEEDS TO MAKE TAPE.** Daisuke Sekimoto wrestled Masakatsu Funaki in June in front of a sold out Korakuen Hall and it won't ever see the light of day. RJPW is run by none other than Tiger Mask, Satoru Sayama. They have sold out every Korakuen Show this year and drew 1,376 in Differ Ariake, a number NOAH would die for in that building. Right now, Shinjiro Otani is their heavyweight champion which is fantastic because Otani is one of the best in the world. His most certainly getting up there in age, but every performance of his is impressive – he really does care every time he steps in the squared circle.

FMW

One of the wackiest things to happen in 2016 was FMW continuing to run shows, now known as Cho Sento FMW. This version of FMW is a very watered down compared to the original, because all the lads are much older and the undercards aren't the greatest. They've held just under 20 shows this year and some of them drew incredibly well. For example, there

Korakuen Show in February drew a sold out crowd of 1,850 which is possibly the highest attendance at Korakuen in 2016. That show featured Sabu and Onita facing off in the trio's main event. They even booked an FMW vs. UWFI feud with Takayama and Funaki working exploding death matches. Quick fact: Masakatsu Funaki is the current Blast King Heavyweight champion. He defeated Onita in a singles match for that title. Now you'd be lying if you thought on January 1st 2016 that 47-year-old Masakatsu Funaki would be working multiple current blast death matches in 2016.

LAND'S END

Another promotion that started off very small – first running purely in Kanagawa -- has grown substantially. Even in November news broke that this promotion had received 100 million yen from a Chinese shipping company, meaning that they are going to continue to grow even bigger in 2017. I'm talking about none other than Lands' End. Land's End is owned and operated by Ryoji Sai who in 2016 has broken out as one of AJPW most consistent performers even challenging for the Triple Crown. Land's End has never made tape but is one of the





Mil Mascaras, 76, still flying in 2016.

more intriguing promotions of the year. Sai has been a consistent performer for Zero-1 for a long time and has most recently applied his trade in AJPW thus Land's End has a working relationship with both promotions. Here is a list of some of the crazy matches Land's End has put on this year:

Tatsuhito Takaiwa, The Great Kabuki, Masakado & Rionne Fujiwara vs. HASEGAWA, Masashi Takeda, Chikara & Kyboku Futoshi

Ryoji Sai, James Raideen & Shinjiro Otani vs. Daisuke Sekimoto, Rikiya Fudo & Yusaku Obata

MASAKADO & HO HO LUN vs. Yusaku Obata & Toshiki Iwaki

TOKYO GURENTAI

So yeah Land's End does a good mix of complete wackiness and great wrestling much like the final promotion I will be discussing today – and that's Tokyo Gurentai. Just what a beautiful thing Tokyo Gurentai is, I could probably write 10,000 words just on Tokyo Gurentai and the world that is Tokyo Gurentai. Gurentai is known far and wide as the promotion that books the weirdest most obscure matches on the planet. They bring in some insane names from foreign countries, for example this year they flew in Tommy Dreamer, Mil Mascaras, Chavo Guererro Sr., Shane Douglas, Dory Funk Jr & Super Crazy. They encapsulate everything I love about puroresu into every one of their shows. They provide comedy from Kikutaro, great wrestling with the likes of Masato Tanaka, CIMA & Maasaki Mochizuki being regulars and the freak factor of never knowing what or who they will book. SANADA four months into his New Japan gig worked a Gurentai show – like WHAT! NOSAWA cops a lot of un-warranted flack, he is harmless and provides us with amazing shows multiple times a year. Plus, he is very important to lots of promotions when it comes to

booking talent and what have you. NOSAWA also has plans to bring HULK HOGAN to Japan in 2017, which would be the most shocking ordeal I think I could ever witness.



Well That wraps it up from me, I want to thank Ryan Clingman for the opportunity. I hope all of you enjoy this 2016 yearbook. Thank you for reading! ■

TO PROVE ONE'S VALOUR

THE STORY OF ISHII AND TANAHASHI'S SECOND G1 CLASSIC

BY RYAN CLINGMAN



I was lukewarm on a significant portion of NJPW's 2016 major match catalogue. This was specifically true for the top of the card, which has seen spectacular state of the art closing sequences for years now, but has consequently lost the memorable mid-match story-telling prevalent in some of the era's most legendary matches. It is the last few minutes of an average NJPW IWGP title match that I am able to vaguely recall as some kind of extravagant and thrilling blur months later. But, it is the paint-by-numbers floor brawling and meaningless nearfalls – the rest holds and the token limb work – that are often forgotten entirely. But matches of this sort fail to engage in their entirety – like Okada vs. Marufuji in the first night of the G1, or Okada vs. Naito at

Invasion Attack – and are consequently rendered ineffective at swaying me emotionally.

Tomohiro Ishii, whether intentional or otherwise, fails to fit into this repetitive (albeit highly successful) match pattern. Ishi's broken and squat frame, underdog persona, stiff work, crowd support, and arguably the best selling in the business prevent his matches from falling into the same tired chain-wrestling, clean break, brawl on the floor, hold exchange, momentum switch, hold exchange, momentum switch, forearm battle, nearfall,...,big closing sequence set-piece, and finish formula that has served as one of the biggest faults of the modern New Japan main event match style. It is this break from blasé convention that allows Ishii to reliably serve as the most interesting stylistic match-up for many of the bigger-name New Japan roster members – such as Tanahashi, Okada, and Naito – who put on



stellar matches regularly, but are unlikely to bust out something all together novel or surprising in their well executed, albeit frequently tried, encounters with one another.

This is one of the many reasons that I find Ishii, Nakajima, Shibata, and Honma (at a time) so captivating in the context of New Japan Pro-Wrestling. And I am not alone in this view, as Alan Counihan's article dedicated to Shibata and Ishii in this very yearbook can attest.

In 2013 New Japan hosted one of my favourite tournaments of all time in its 23rd G1 Climax. What made this nine show tournament so special was neither its star-power alone nor its hefty volume of very-good-to-great matches in the style that I somewhat maligned earlier. No, what made the 2013 G1 Climax special was the intrigue and subsequent pay-off for first time encounters and baffling styles clashes. On the tournament's most outstanding card, night four in the Osaka Bodymaker Coliseum, we saw examples of just this with Tomohiro Ishii and Katsuyori Shibata putting on their first and arguably

best match in a long line of stellar outings, and Kota Ibushi battling Shinsuke Nakamura in the first in a pair of legendary encounters.

Shinsuke Nakamura and Kota Ibushi employed much of what makes the big-match New Japan style so effective – major nearfalls and intricately crafted final courter set-pieces. But whilst I can point to these sequences as effective match components – without which neither the match nor the night itself would have reached nearly the same boiling intensity – this wasn't what made the show or that match memorable.

I remember Nakamura-Ibushi and Shibata-Ishii so vividly after more than three years, not simply because they were great matches – I have seen dozens technically at or above its level in subsequent years – but instead due to a novel styles clash. It was the tangible interplay between high-flying antics and outrageous flamboyance in Nakamura-Ibushi, and the rough and tough pro-wrestling machismo of Ishii shearing up against the MMA fuelled bravado of Katsuyori Shibata, that made these matches so memorable.

An absurd interpretation of the preceding paragraphs would be that EVERY major NJPW match be worked with the aim of breaking from promotion specific conventions in mind. After all, templates are used for a reason, and not every match can be special by definition. However, few things in wrestling leave me more contented than a match between stylistically different performers, fully utilising most of the match-time in front of an engaged audience. Whilst the tried waste of a good 60% or more of a match on inconsequential build isn't particularly engaging to me as a regular viewer of NJPW, extend these percentages further still and you find the current WWE in-ring malaise – perhaps the most important contributing factor to my disinterest in the 2016 product. This is a disinterest compounded further by a mind-numbingly homogeneous in-ring style, grating commentary, and a wholly uninspired and synthetic approach to in-ring story-telling.

When I sat through hours of technically sound matches from WWE and NJPW remaining largely unmoved, I began to wonder if my months long university-driven wrestling hiatus had left me somehow numb. This was until I saw EVIL vs. Katsuhiko Nakajima on night six of the 26th G1 Climax – one of the best matches of the entire tournament.

Nakajima-EVIL was everything the somewhat underwhelming, Katsuyori Shibata vs. Nakajima match should have been on night four – a war of intensity near-palpable. EVIL played the power game with suplexes and power moves. Nakajima, the flustered NOAH import, clean-cut and baby-faced, responded with some of the most crisp and accurate striking of anyone in 2016. The no selling was sparse but expertly placed, the intensity unrelenting without falling into the trap of many a hot mid-2000s indie match – losing direction with increasing crowd and match heat.

But, for as good as Nakajima and EVIL were on night six, they were topped in stunning fashion by the second ever meeting of Tomohiro Ishii and Hiroshi Tanahashi in the context of the G1 Climax – a near perfect sequel to their first tournament encounter.

What Ishii and Tanahashi presented in just over 16 minutes on August 3rd in Kagoshima was both as visceral and narratively sincere a mat-tale as I saw in 2016. Ishii and Tanahashi offered generous rewards to fans who had followed the New Japan product since 2013 with the match's story crafted on the very basis of who Ishii and Tanahashi are as in-ring performers and wrestling personalities.

From the onset Ishii made it explicitly clear that he wasn't going to play the feisty underdog from his last G1 encounter with Tanahashi. He outsmarted Tanahashi early, implementing a dragon screw and dropkick to the knee of the former ace. He had effectively stepped into Tanahashi's world of leg-whips and extravagance, laying down the gauntlet for Tanahashi to do the same in return. And this is where the genius of the match's first half emerges, as Ishii, smaller and physically inferior to Tanahashi in most every way, outsmarted the overdog. Ishii's instigation continued as he challenged Tanahashi to drop him with his best – a standard spot. Tanahashi failed to do so. Playing off of the crowd's support for Tanahashi, who under most any set of regular circumstances would have been in control, Ishii refused to even engage in strike exchanges – shutting Hiroshi down with a short kick to the leg or a couple strong elbows.

This challenge to beat Ishii at his own game was taken up by Tanahashi. His acceptance of Ishii's gauntlet led to sequences where Tanahashi, the biggest critic of the styles of Shibata, Ishii, and friends (as a shoot), gritted his teeth, and put everything he had into bludgeoning in the exact



fashion he had so harshly criticised others for doing years earlier. This was pro-wrestling's equivalent of the hypothetical of Daniel Cormier deciding to stand and strike with Anderson Silva at UFC 200.

The stoic pride and desire to prove one's character that runs so deeply through the heart of puroresu streamed just as fiercely through this battle. This was a two sided contest, as Ishii eventually sought to execute some of Tanahashi's bigger moves as he began to lose control – the dragon suplex being a memorable example. Ishii would mostly get the upper-hand when responding to Tanahashi's admirable attempts at working his style, but would lag behind in similar fashion in donning Tanahashi's boots.

It was in this way, for as meta as it may seem, that Tanahashi and Ishii transcended the standard showcases of puro heart – simple forearm exchanges and chop battles – with one wholly more intriguing. This new battle was one for Tanahashi of attempting to show that he had just as strong a will to endure as Ishii or Shibata, regardless of how brutal the punishment became – regardless of how violent he had to be as a result. He had to show Ishii that he could play a Tomohiro better than Ishii could play an Hiroshi. For Ishii the battle was about proving Tanahashi wrong in his claim. It was about showing a former ace that the perennial underdog could beat an ace on whatever terms – that Tanahashi, no matter how superior an athlete, would never succeed in conquering Ishii's valour, his fighting spirit. ■

THE 2016 DRAGON GATE YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH ANDREW PUGH



At the start of 2015, the overall vibe surrounding Dragon Gate was that the normally vibrant company had grown stagnant. The unit situation had remained generally the same since around October 2013, with MAD BLANKEY, Millenials, Jimmyz, Team Veteran Returns and the newly minted Dia.HEARTS. There was a stale feeling that carried through to the matches towards the end of 2014 and it felt like the same units were facing each other in the same competitors constantly battling for position.

Another factor that contributed to the declining excitement of Dragon at the beginning of 2015 was the fact that the first five months were centered around elevating T-Hawk into a top line player. His Millenials brethren entered 2015 locked into a feud with the only heel unit in Dragon Gate at the time, MAD BLANKEY, and with CIMA, Gamma, K-Ness and Don Fujii joining the ranks at the end of the year after seeing the Millenials end Team Veteran Returns, the focus of the first five months was on T-Hawk.

But in life stagnation doesn't last long, and the Dragon Gate landscape began to change once more on the biggest show of the year, Kobe World 2015. Shingo Takagi brutalizing his long time rival BxB Hulk in what seemed like a "special tag team match" – where Hulk teamed with his Dia.HEARTS teammate and fellow rising star, Big R Shimizu, and Takagi teamed with freelancer Masato Tanaka – was the catalyst for his heel turn and overall, the catalyst to something even greater.

A month later, at DANGEROUS GATE 2015, Takagi dethroned his then MONTSER EXPRESS teammate Mastao Yoshino to become a three time Dream Gate Champion. He immediately lashed out on Shachihoko BOY, whom Takagi had been calling the weak link in MONTSER EXPRESS during the lead up to his Dream Gate match, and as a result, was kicked out of MONTSER EXPRESS. This chain of events led to Takagi teaming with T-Hawk to face the then Twin Gate Champions, Naruki Doi and YAMATO (known as DoiYAMA), a week later. Takagi turned on T-Hawk and revealed that he, alongside the remains of MAD BLANKEY (Doi, YAMATO, Cyber Kong, Mondai Ryu, Kotoka, and Eita – Eita would be kicked out on the 22nd of September), were starting their own unit. This unit would seek to end the "exhibition" pro wrestling that was prominent



Takagi as Dream Gate Champion in November 2015.

throughout the year. Takagi declared that "play time" was over and that this unit would bring Dragon Gate back to reality where the "weak get eaten and the strong survive." That unit became Verserk and shortly after, they were joined by Naoki Tanazaki, who turned on the Jimmyz.

The first three months of Verserk's existence was dominant to put it into words. Already, they had the Dream Gate Champion Takagi, along with the Twin Gate Champions with one half of the Big Six Pillars at the forefront. At GATE of DESTINY in November, they added the Brave Gate title to their stable with Kotoka's shocking victory over Akira Tozawa and his teammate Naoki Tanaizaki. All four retained their championships on the last show of 2015 and started 2016 as the strongest unit in Dragon Gate.

And that's where we start reviewing 2016 in Dragon Gate. It was a year that featured numerous twist and turns, debuts, surprise returns and heart touching farewells. It was a year that saw some members of the roster finally break through and have star making performances that fans had been waiting for. But throughout 2016, it seemed that the Verserk unit was



either at the heart of the main storyline drama at the time, or they were the ones pulling the strings.

As mentioned above, they came into 2016 with every single title minus the Triangle Gate Championship and given their mantra, they bullied and imposed their will on everyone that was standing in their way. In particular, Takagi's antagonist, class room bully-esque personality, set the tone for the brutality and violence that Verserk displayed in their matches. An example of their oppression was on the very first Korakuen of the year. After a light hearted Doi Darts Ten Men Tag (for those who don't know, Doi Darts is a concept created by Naruki Doi in which he brings a large dart board into the ring and then pulls kids from the audience to throw darts on the wheel. The wheel features every wrestler on the roster and whoever the darts land on usually fills two teams of five.), Takagi reinforced that "fun pro wrestling" had no place in Dragon Gate. Doi, always the instigator, poked fun at both MONTSER EXPRESS and Dia.HEARTS and suggested that both units should disband. Big R Shimizu naively agreed on behalf of Dia.HEARTS even though they didn't have any real issues with MONTSER. Takagi then egged on his former unit mate Shachihoko BOY, once again mocking him for being baggage and the weakest member on the roster.

This enraged BOY to take the mic and tell off Takagi, saying that he would prove him wrong and would help his unit survive. And with that, referee(and GM) Yagi made the match official for the next month.

By the time the February Korakuen came along, GM Yagi decided that because Verserk had manipulated both units to partake in such a high stakes match they would also be inserted into the main event, even though their team (YAMATO, Takagi, Doi, Kong) already had matches earlier in the night. And in one of the best matches of the Dragon Gate year, including an unbelievable performance by Kzy, at the end of the day, it was Dia.HEARTS, the unit led by BxB Hulk (who was on the shelf during this match) who perished and was forced to disband. With Dia.HEARTS disbanded things were looking up for Verserk. Takagi had four successful Dream Gate Championship defenses against Masaaki Mochizuki, Don Fujii, Gamma and CIMA at Final Gate 2015. DoiYAMA was only increasing their record as the longest Twin Gate Champions in company history while also having the most defenses ever with nine. And Kotoka was still the Brave Gate Champion... although not exactly a strong one, as he usually took the falls in the Verserk multi-man matches and it went with his character, which was an annoying little jerk who was an undeserving champion. The first five months of Versek couldn't have gone any better.

And that's when everything started falling apart. After his defense at FINAL GATE, Takagi was challenged by Jimmyz member, Jimmy Susumu. Susumu was a part of the M2K/Do FIXER era and has been with the company since 1999 when it was still Toryumon. He had won a Dream Gate title before (ten years ago), but he was considered an afterthought with it. The biggest indictment was his Dream Gate defense against Dragon Kid, which was placed in the semi main in favor of CIMA vs. Magnitude Kishwawa on Kobe World 2006. After losing the title, Susumu had received numerous opportunities to regain the championship over the past ten years and lost every single time. At 38 years old, Susumu knew that his window was closing and so he stepped up and challenged the ultra aggressive Takagi. Takagi, who spent the first four months of his reign going after the generation that preceded Susumu, vowed to now turn his attention to Susumu's generation, starting with Susumu himself.



Jimmy Susumu after defeating Takagi for the Dream Gate title.

On February 14th in Fukuoka, Susumu and Takagi battled for the Dream Gate Championship. Leading up to the match, Takagi made it his mission to weaken Susumu's arm – to take away his strongest weapon, the Jumbo no Kachi Lariat. And at the top, Takagi had reintroduced his Pumping Bomber Lariat as a fearsome move that could put down anyone. The match was just like their previous encounters, physical. They traded lariats, they traded suplexes and anything they could at their disapproval. But it seemed like no matter what Takagi tried Susumu just would not go down. So he grew desperate and started relying on his Verserk members to interfere, something he didn't do against the likes of Mochi or Fujii or CIMA. Towards the end of the match, YAMATO got on the apron and attempted to throw salt into the face of Susumu.

He missed.

And Susumu seized the opportunity in rapid fashion. One Jumbo no Kachi and a ten year drought was lifted. Susumu was the new Dream Gate Champion. Susumu shocked the Dragon Gate world. Even he

couldn't believe that he pulled out the victory. Immediately, however, Takagi raged. He gave Susumu backhanded compliments and complained about how he won the title. He then turned his attention to YAMATO and blamed him for losing. Takagi berated him and scolded him for not being on point. YAMATO held firm and stood his ground, reminding Takagi that he was his senior and that he should be mindful of this when addressing him. This led to Takagi and Susumu agreeing to have a rematch weeks later. On the second CHAMPION GATE match in early March but this time, if Takagi was to lose, he would be kicked out of his own unit. then told YAMATO if he's going to second him, he better not cost him the title again.

Fast forward a few weeks later and Takagi did in fact regain his title against Susumu. He didn't rely on interference or any shortcuts. He ended Susumu's miracle run decisively, proving that he was the superior wrestler. At this point, Takagi demanded that both Doi and YAMATO, who lost their Twin gate titles the match prior to Big R Shimizu and T-Hawk, shake his hand and let bygones be bygones. Doi accepted, especially after just losing his title. YAMATO hesitated but eventually accepted too. It seemed as if perhaps the tension building in Verserk was being reserved however, that didn't turn out to be the case. A few weeks later in Wakyama, Doi and YAMATO teamed with Kotoka in hopes of taking the Triangle Gate Championships from the champions Yoshino, Tozawa and T-Hawk. They lost and Doi blamed it on Kotoka, calling him baggage. This carried over into the main event, when Takagi defended his Dream Gate title against Ryo "Jimmy" Saito. Takagi once again demanded for Doi and YAMATO to accept his handshake. This time, Doi refused strictly because he couldn't fathom how a unit that calls themselves the strongest could have someone as weak as Kotoka in it. The power balance was thrown off. Takagi defended Kotoka, stating that because he was the Dream Gate Champion, Verserk had all the power. This only furthered the rift; and Doi and YAMATO left with Tanizaki while Kotoka stayed in the ring with Takagi and Monchan. A few weeks later, Cyber Kong was pulled into the rift and he sided with his long time friend, Takagi, purely because he was the Dream Gate Champion.

The month of April saw the DoiYAMA/Tanizaki side bicker and argue with the Takagi/Kong/Kotoka side with Mondai Ryu caught in the middle. This so happened to take place during the top Dragon Gate

prepares itself for their annual Survival Cage match at DEAD or ALIVE. Seeing the problems in Verserk starting to escalate, GM Yagi decided to put all the members of Verserk inside the Survival Cage. As per usual, the Survival Cage was going to be a match where there isn't a real winner, but there is one definitive loser. There would be five flags placed on each individual corner, and after ten minutes the competitors inside would be eligible to climb up and grab them. Grabbing one means they have escaped, but the last person standing would have to get their head shaved and keep it shaved for a full year. To throw in another twist, the delegate aspect that was introduced last year was brought back, only this time, the delegates would be determined via a series of five singles match that would also take place at DEAD or ALIVE. Every match would have a ten minute time limit and the winner of each of the matches were free from being involved, however the loser would also have to be tied with whoever they were being represented. And in an event of a tie, then both of the competitors would have to be delegates. In order for the competitors inside the cage to be able to escape, they had to score a pin and free their delegates. Before the match was finalized, Kong and Mondai Ryu had an impromptu match to determine which one of them would be inserted into the match and which one was free. Hysterically, Mondai pinned Kong in thirty seconds. The delegate matches were

Punch Tominaga Vs Jimmy Kanda(Takagi)
Jimmy Susumu Vs Stalker Ichikawa(YAMATO)
CIMA Vs Gamma(Doi)
Akira Tozawa Vs Mastao Yoshino(Kotoka)
Ryo "Jimmy" Saito vs Don Fujii(Tanizaki)
Kzy Vs Masaaki Mochizuki(Cyber Kong)

DEAD or ALIVE came and by the time of the main event, the situation became clear. Tominaga was Takagi's delegate, Stalker was YAMATO's, Saito was Tanizaki's, Mochi was Kong's (And in the process, turned into the gi wear, rocket punching robot Super Karate Robot Masa RX, who would respond to Kong's voice command. This actually happened.), Tozawa was Kotoka's and, in a surprise twist, both CIMA and Gamma drew in their match which meant Doi had to take on both as delegates and was now forced to score two falls in order to escape.

Despite this being a six person's match, it was really more three on three. Doi, YAMATO and Tanizaki vs. Takagi, Kotoka and Kong. And that's how the match played out for the first parts. But then something

interesting happened. As the match went on, it became clear that YAMATO was the target. The first sign came when Tanizaki, who was the first to escape the cage, spit red mist into the face of YAMATO just as he was going to escape and prevented him from also escaping. Even with that, YAMATO still had the support of Doi, who went out of his way to sometimes fling his body in front of YAMATO as a sacrifice. At one point both Kotoka and Takagi had Doi down and YAMATO had a clear breakaway to escape the cage. Torn between being safe from losing his hair (he did lose the 2011 version of this match) and saving his best friend, YAMATO chose to forego escaping in order to save Doi. Ironically, moments later the roles were reversed and Doi was the one with a clear breakaway and it was YAMATO who was being held. And Doi, who's known for his betrayals, actually decided to also return the favor and save his partner.



Yamato retrieves his flag at DEAD or ALIVE 2016.



But, this turned out to be a ruse as moments later Doi blocked Takagi's attempt to bash YAMATO's head with a chair, only to grab the chair and hit YAMATO himself! Doi and Tanizaki were in on sabotaging YAMATO from the very beginning. Doi escaped the cage, confident that it was only a matter of time before YAMATO suffered the ultimate humiliation. The match eventually came down to both Kotoka and Takagi and at one point; the remaining Verserk members entered the ring and tore down the ropes. Takagi personally entered the ring, having already escaped, and tried to push Kotoka up the cage. It looked like Verserk's scheme was going to work.....until YAMATO received some help...from the most unlikely players. Kzy, the then Open the Brave Gate Champion, Yosuke Santa Maria, and the biggest surprise of all, the returning BxB Hulk, all stormed down to the cage and with the help of the DG roster, they fought off Verserk and helped YAMATO avoid losing his hair, which meant Kotoka was the loser. This also resulted in YAMATO turning face for the first time in three years to loud cheers from the crowd.

Kotoka tried to flee from his haircut, but the entire DG roster blocked the entrance way. So, Verserk was forced to cut Kotoka's hair and eat crow. However, they still took the time to rag on YAMATO. They

confirmed to him the obvious – he was kicked out of Verserk. Doi, in particular, blamed him for losing their Twin Gate titles and stated that he wasn't needed anymore. As they left, YAMATO was standing in the ring with Kzy, Hulk and Maria. He broke down, realizing that for the last three years, he had been a jerk to both the wrestlers and the fans. He apologized to Kzy, Maria and Hulk for his behaviour – he was truly humbled by their help. He promised that he would no longer cheat to win or hurl insults at the fans. He promised to fight fair and square from there on and took it a step further and promised that he would help out the students training in the dojo. Kzy, Maria and Hulk in return promised that they would fight with YAMATO, which is why they helped him. Through and through, he was the Almighty YAMATO and together, the four would fight against Verserk. The show ended with these four raising each other's arms in the air. These four, a month later, had a name for their unit – Tribe Vanguard.

The after effects of DEAD or ALIVE led to KING OF GATE. For the first time instead of the usual single elimination format the tournament was being





divided into four blocks, and was going to be competed using Round Robin rules. YAMATO was in Block A, ironically in the same block as Takagi. A mere week after his turn, the two actually faced off in the main event, which Takagi won due to interference. Even with this loss, YAMATO dominated Block A, and thanks to Punch Tominaga sabotaging Takagi by causing a double countout in their Block match, YAMATO emerged the winner of Block A. He would then face off in the semi finals in June against the B Block winner, Akira Tozawa (we'll talk about him soon!) in which he was victorious over his fellow Big Six member. In the finals YAMATO met one of the two men responsible for ending his Twin Gate reign in March, the red hot Big R Shimizu. After twenty four long, hard minutes, YAMATO eventually triumphed, winning his first ever KING OF GATE tournament. Naturally, the win gave him the license to challenge Takagi for the Dream Gate Championship at Kobe World. Takagi vowed that he would embarrass YAMATO once and for all.

But as it turns out, it was YAMATO's time.

Before Kobe World 2016, YAMATO was a three time Dream Gate Champion. However, each of his reigns had been rather short. He was the one who ended Naruki Doi's 16 month Dream Gate reign in 2010 only to lose it four months later against Yoshino at Kobe World 2010. He then won it again in controversial fashion against (guess who) Takagi in August 2013, a month after Takagi ended CIMA's 19 month Dream Gate reign. He only held it for two months before losing it again to Yoshino. For his third reign, he defeated Ricochet at DEAD or ALIVE 2014, but lost to BxB Hulk, who two months prior left MAD BLANKEY after months of bickering and in fighting.

This time, YAMATO was the one in Hulk's shoes. He was the one who broke away from Verserk and it was he who opened the door to his new dream. And at Kobe World, after an amazing 34 minute gruelling match with Takagi, YAMATO defeated him to win the Dream Gate Championship for a fourth time, tying Takagi for the most reigns in company history.

“Akira Tozawa, to many wrestling fans, is a world class wrestler and one of the best in the world. His infectious charisma, his fighting spirit and his endearing personality have left a lasting impression on the hearts and minds of both those in Japanese and in America.”

YAMATO was, finally, at the top of the Dragon Gate world.

Verserk post World lost a lot of steam and frankly, when YAMATO left, the unit clearly had lost something. A week after his departure YAMATO was replaced by “brother” YAASHI, who in January, made his shocking return to the company eleven years after he was fired from Dragon Gate and was told to never come back again. However, it took YASSHI a while to reacquaint himself with the Dragon Gate style. And while he eventually did, his return didn’t fill the void left by YAMATO. In September, T-Hawk, who was fed up with losing in MONSTER EXPRESS and in particular with Shachihoko BOY, left MONSTER and joined Verserk, a year after the unit had formed under the pretense of preventing him from reaching the top echelon of Dragon Gate. But as T-Hawk would admit, he had seen the light and Verserk was happy to accept him. Verserk wasn’t done moving pieces around as on the October Korakuen, Naruki Doi was kicked out of the unit even though they just successfully defeated MONTSER EXPRESS – causing that unit to disband. He was deemed useless after losing two Twin Gate opportunities (one at World with YASSHI and then another at DANGEROUS GATE with Takagi). Along with that Kotoka (who was injured by Peter Kassa in July) returned during the match to actually help MONTSER EXPRESS.

He left Verserk due to them bringing in T-Hawk and Lindaman and vowed to fight against them. Doi and Kotoka’s place was soon replaced by youngster, El Lindaman, fresh off leaving OVER GENERATION in July to be with his then girlfriend Yosuke Santa Maria. Linda initially wanted to join Tribe Vanguard, but YAMATO told him that after the Summer Adventure Tag League (which took place right after World) that the fans would decide if he deserved a place. When the fan vote came, the majority voted against it and Yosuke immediately broke it off with

Linda. Burned by his former lover, the increasingly moody Linda was happy to join the heel Verserk, after feeling that the crowd had turned on him. By the end of 2016, Verserk was a completely new and fresh unit who aimed to take 2017 by storm.

Unfortunately for him and even Verserk, his reign was overshadowed by a larger story. YAMATO’s first Dream Gate defense happened at DANGEROUS GATE 2016 against Akira Tozawa. YAMATO successfully defended the title, but it was the post match that garnered all the attention. Tozawa, who had tears in his eyes during the in ring introduction, announced that after GATE of DESTINY 2016, he was leaving Dragon Gate and was heading off to America to compete for WWE. This would end his



eleven year career with the only promotion he had called home.



Tozawa and YAMATO embrace as Tozawa loses his final Dragon Gate match.

Akira Tozawa, to many wrestling fans, is a world class wrestler and one of the best in the world. His infectious charisma, his fighting spirit and his endearing personality have left a lasting impression on the hearts and minds of both those in Japanese and in America. However, he wasn't always the elite pro wrestler that you see now. In fact, as many hardcore Dragon gate fans can remember, at one point, he was considered a joke.

Tozawa made his debut in February of 2005, making him the third student to graduate from the Dragon Gate dojo behind Shingo Takagi and BxB Hulk. This means that he trained with then, as well as the likes of Kzy, Mondai Ryu, YAMATO, etc. While Takagi and Hulk were destined for big things, Tozawa was seen as merely unpolished. So much so that he was quickly sent back to the dojo for more training. He re-debuted later in the year, but he still struggled to show any progress or anything that would suggest that he would become the superstar he is today. His career reflected on this, as for the first few years he

was put in a unit named after him, Tozawa-juku – the supposed unit where boys would become men. Even then, he was still seen as the lowest rank member of the unit. It didn't help too that he was growing a reputation for being a troublemaker and generally annoying his seniors.

In 2008, he and Yuki Ono, better known as Katsuo, decided that in order to rise up the ranks, they needed to add a lot of weight to their frames. So they eat and became big fat men, or the Metabolic Brothers. They attempted turn at comedy didn't work, which led to Tozawa going on a program to lose all of the weight back. After the end of Tozawa-juku, he joined up with Takagi when he formed KAMIKAZE in early 2009 but he still didn't elevate past being the weakest member of his unit. So when he left Japan for America in May 2010, not many people knew what to expect. However, as it turned out, the excursion ended up being the best thing to ever happen to Tozawa.

The match that turned Tozawa's career around happened in Reseda, California. August 2010. Battle of Los Angeles. His opponent was Chris Hero and while Hero was the one who ended up winning, it was Tozawa's never say die attitude, his energy and intensity and his refusal to go down that changed the entire perception towards him. As he was getting elbowed and kicked to the ground, Tozawa was shredding off his past woes. With every one count, Tozawa was freeing himself from the "failure" title that was placed onto him back home. After that match everyone knew that Akira Tozawa wasn't a comedy wrestler or someone that would be at the bottom of the unit. Akira Tozawa had been unleashed.

And during his excursion, he gained a mass following and he received rave reviews. His confidence grew more and more as his performances earned the praises of many. By the time he had to come back to Japan, Akira Tozawa had proven that he could be a top line player. When he came back, the landscape had changed. CIMA and Masaaki Mochizuki were waging war against each other and were leading their respective units, Blood Warriors and Junction Three. Up until this point, Tozawa had been a fun loving, hyperactive kid. When he stepped through the DG curtains for the first time in a year in June of 2011, wearing the blue Blood Warriors t-shirt, the fun loving Tozawa was long gone; and in his place was a cocky, loud mouthed man with a chip on his shoulder. The confidence he oozed took some time for fans to

get used to. But it didn't take long for fans to realize that this Tozawa was here to stay – he wasn't going anywhere. And after wowing the fans with his newfound skills, he once again earned their support, even after kicking CIMA and rebuilding Blood Warriors in his and BxB Hulk's image, the unit that became known as MAD BLANKEY.

Luckily, Tozawa didn't remain a heel for long as he was kicked out of MAD BLANKEY in August of 2013. From that moment on Tozawa was once again a babyface and, quickly, he formed MONTSEER EXPRESS alongside Shingo Takagi, Uhaa Nation (now Apollo Crews in WWE), Mastao Yoshino and Shachihoko BOY. The unit was based off being the best of friends and sacrificing oneself to protect each other. That unit became MONSTER EXPRESS.

Tozawa was a main player of the unit throughout, even at the very end. That end came in October of 2016 when he, Big R Shimizu (who joined in March after the end of Dia.HEARTS), Shachi and Yoshino took on Verserk in an Captains Fall, Unit Disbands Match, in which the match could only end if the captain of one of the teams were pinned. In true fitting fashion, it was Takagi and Tozawa, the two co-

founders of MONSTER EXPRESS that were the captains, and it was Takagi who brutalized Tozawa and ended MONTSEER EXPRESS. With MONSTER EXPRESS now done, Tozawa continued to wrestle until GATE OF DESTINY, where in the main event, he requested to have a six man match with all of the members of the Big Six one last time and for that match to be decided via Doi Darts. Tozawa got his wish and so his final match saw him, Naruki Doi and Masato Yoshino team to take on YAMATO, Shingo Takagi and BxB Hulk. In what was a heartfelt, emotional match, YAMATO ended Tozawa's Dragon Gate career with a loss. But afterwards, every member of the DG roster got into the ring, some of them even crying, wishing Tozawa good luck on his new career. By the time the show was over, Akira Tozawa was done. Akira Tozawa was gone from Dragon Gate, possibly forever.

While he never won the Dream Gate Championship his importance to the company couldn't be overstated. His personality could light up a room and his matches could have you on the edge of your seat. His ability to connect with the fans is large part of his charisma. It's a gift that not many people possess in Dragon Gate, or in wrestling. When he was a heel in

The DG roster bid farewell to Akira Tozawa.



Blood Warriors and MAD BLANKEY his tyrannical nature drove you to the point of wishing you could punch him in the face. As a face, you couldn't help yourself rooting for him, even if the odds were against him. And one could argue, given the way his career started, the odds were always against him. But in those times, Tozawa persevered. He always persevered and he worked his way into becoming the pro wrestler he knew he could always be. Tozawa never wavered, he never quit and as a result, he became the wrestler that he is today and the wrestler who no one in Dragon Gate will ever forget.

Tozawa's departure meant that one of the Big Six was now gone. But it almost meant that there was an opportunity for someone to step up and take his place. And 2016 saw a lot of the younger roster

matches in the KING OF GATE en route to losing in the Finals to YAMATO. Dragon Gate has the luxury of currently having a slew of talented, young wrestlers who could easily be slotted into the top spots when the Big Five's era was over. Takehiro Yamaura, Kaito Ishida, El Lindaman, Yosuke Santa Maria, T-Hawk, Big R Shimizu all have bright futures and Dragon Gate is clearly not rushing their developments, instead choosing to allow them to take their lumps and grow as professional wrestlers.

But no youngster rose to superstardom as greatly as Eita did. After the Millenials disbanded in 2015, Eita initially joined up with Verserk but was kicked out the day they formed. He scrambled but found a home



Tozawa
greeting a fan
at a WWE
house show.
Photo credit
@iku56326.

members elevate themselves and show that they were ready to take that next step.

Yosuke Santa Maria who at the beginning of the year challenged for the Brave Gate at CHAMPION GATE and then won it in a great match against Kotoka. And she then had an equally great match with Mondai Ryu of all people at DEAD or ALIVE. Big R Shimizu who took the loss of his Dia.HEARTS unit in stride by joining MONTSER EXPRESS, teaming with T-Hawk, dethroning the longest reigning Twin Gate Champions and then in June, having break out

in OVER GENERATION, however, when he ended 2015, it became clear that he was floundering. Having always been projected for great things, he had a hard time breaking out as a singles wrestler and there were rumblings about his motivation and whether or not he wanted to be in Japan All of this showed in his ring work, which screamed of a young man who didn't know what he wanted his style to be and someone who, quite frankly, didn't care.



Eita and Tozawa at DANGEROUS GATE.

That changed when, before the KING OF GATE, Eita went with CIMA on a week-long trip to Malaysia. This was in early May, and by this time the company knew Tozawa was eventually leaving. So, it was up to people like Eita to step and prove themselves as top line players that everyone always projected them to be. When he came back from that week-long trip, Eita was a new man. On the May Korakuen Eita was in a match with Tozawa. The KING OF GATE tournament had just started And the two of them went on to have one of the best matches of the year. The action was non-stop, it was intense, they traded blows. Eita, in particular, was committed to the Llave style that Milano Collection AT made famous. Eita held up his end and put in the performance of his life.

The match resulted in a draw, but it was Eita that everyone was talking about. This was followed by a huge win over CIMA in the coming weeks But Eita's breakout wasn't done, as a month later, in the same building, he took on Susumu, the last Dream Gate Champion up until then. And like the Tozawa match, Eita showcased his newfound commitment to Llave, relentlessly going after Susumu's arm. Susumu battled back like always, but Eita would not be denied. He fought until he captured Susumu in his submission move, the El Numero Uno, and made Susumu tap out. It was another star making performance under his belt. Eita ended up tying

Block B with Tozawa, which set up a sudden death match. While the match was a tad bit below their Korakuen match, it still was a high fasted, high octane match that showed that Eita was improving as a singles wrestler.

Eita's biggest co-sign of support came when he was announced as the Dragon Gate representative in the Super J Cup, following in the footsteps of YAMATO, who made it to the semi finals in 2009. Eita's first round opponent was none other than Jushin Thunder Liger, the man who defeated CIMA in 2000 in the finals when CIMA was a mere 20 year old kid. That match ended up being one of the many that CIMA used to launch himself into superstar status and now here was Eita, having a chance to do exactly the same thing. When the J Cup came around, there was a lot of pressure behind Eita to continue his recent streak of great singles performances Against a legend like Liger, he had to deliver and had to prove that the faith the company had poured into him wasn't foolish. And boy, did Eita make them proud.



Eita as Open The Brave Gate Champion.

“Ben-K has that ‘it’ factor and it becomes very clear when you see him wrestle. His style of wrestling resembles a young Shingo Takagi”

In nine minutes, Eita made an immediate impression, jumping Liger with a summersault plancha to the outside. That set the tone for the entire match and Eita’s mindset throughout. He was vicious; he was aggressive. He stayed on the attack, eventually even locking Liger in his El Numero Uno. However, the legend simply had too many tricks up his sleeve and he eventually ended Eita’s chances with a Brainbuster. However, once again, it was Eita’s performance and his growth as a pro wrestler that generated the buzz.

He capitalized on this by winning his first ever singles title, the Brave Gate, at Kobe World 2016 against former Millennial member Yosuke Santa Maria. As of this writing, he has successfully defended the title four times, with most of them being solid matches and only adding to his break out year and along the way, alongside Dragon Kid, Eita also won the 2016 Summer Adventure Tag League. Even more importantly, the fans started to get behind him, something they simply didn’t do when he was in the, Millennials and directly afterwards. Now in the best shape of his life and having the best matches of his life, the sky is the limit for Eita and 2017 only promises even better things for him.

As for his former teammate T-Hawk, well he continued to struggle to break the glass ceiling. 2015 was spent on grooming him to become one of the top guys in the company and not only did the crowd reject it, but his in ring performances were also lacking. Him joining MONSTER EXPRESS was supposed to jumpstart his career, but even after a short term, but solid, run teaming with Big R this year, it just didn’t seem to get him over the top. Turning him heel and joining Verserk seemed like the only logical conclusion. After all, his initial breakout occurred in 2012 when he was chopping menace who so

happened to also be impersonating Naoki Tanazaki. It’s been almost five years since T-Hawk had displayed the aura and presence that led the company to believe that he could become the Ace one day and in 2017 all eyes will be on him. He’s quickly asserted himself as the #2 in Verserk and the company will continue to give him every chance to make the top spot his. And now with his former tag partner lapping him, perhaps 2017 will be the year that T-Hawk finally breaks out.

But even if T-Hawk doesn’t break out, the company still has a stock pile of young talent ready in the wings. This was even more apparent as five rookies debuted throughout the year. And while rookies debuting is the norm for any Puro company, there’s something special about these five that’s generating a lot of buzz. Those five being Hyuo Watanabe, Shun Watanabe, Katsumi Takashima, Yuki Yoshioka and Futa Nakamura. These five were immediately put in a

Ben-K in November.



match on the December Korakuen against Mochy, Dragon Kid, Don Fujii, Gamma and CIMA and to their surprise, the rookies stood firm and fought hard, even after getting their asses kicked. So far, three of the five have made an impression.



Dragon Kid honours Hayabusa.

On the first show after Tozawa's departure, the five rookies were brought to the ring. While Yoshioka and Takashima remained in their typical young boy spats, Nakamura and the two Watanabes reinvented themselves. Shun wore a green costume with a green mask and was now Shun Skywalker. Hyou kept his name and adopted leopard print for his tights, because Hyou means leopard in Japanese. And the only power fighter of the group, Nakamura, was dressed in gear that resembled Hirooki Goto's. He renamed himself Ben-K, a play on *benki*, which means "powerful man" in Japanese.

Hyou early on has resembled a very young CIMA from his Crazy MAX days. While he's nowhere as reckless as CIMA was to start his career, Hyou has displayed the same cocky punk attitude that CIMA did. And he does have some solid aerial skills. However, the one individual that has everyone taking notice is Ben-K. In a time where there's an increasing amount of exciting, talented prospects throughout Japan, Ben-K has quickly become one of the most

talked about from DG fans and even Puroresu fans throughout. To put it bluntly, the moment you see Ben-K, there's something about him that makes it hard to look away. His look and his presence are through the roof; one you don't see from young wrestlers. Ben-K has that "it" factor and it becomes very clear when you see him wrestle. His style of wrestling resembles a young Shingo Takagi as he uses suplexes galore. He's still green and is only getting by due to his presence, but even now he's shown signs of someone who will become a top star very soon. The company believes this too as in December Ben-K was a part of a Triangle Gate challenging team, alongside Yoshino and Kotoka, after winning a three way between himself, Shun and Hyou to earn himself a spot. And at Final Gate, it was Kotoka, not Ben-K, who took the fall for his team. Plus, Ben-K already has a pinfall on Yamamura, someone who's above him in terms of rank. Dragon Gate will eventually scale his push back just a bit, but it seems that they are all aboard the Ben-K train.



Overall, 2016 Dragon Gate's saw a lot of change in its own right. With one of the most beloved members of the roster now gone, a lot of opportunities have opened up for the younger wrestlers to step up and fill the void heading into 2017. Dragon Gate is going to be depending on the likes of El Lindaman, T-Hawk, Eita, Big R and the five rookies to progress quickly so that, when it's their time to be the top faces of the company, they'll be ready. Towards the end of the year, Dragon Gate managed to fall into a pattern of stagnation. The difference leading into 2017 is the immense amount of young talent they possess, and the reassurance that the future of Dragon Gate is in good hands. The only question now is "how quick will it be before that future becomes the present?". Whatever the answer is, 2017, will aid us greatly in finding the answer. ■



THE 2016 DDT YEAR IN REVIEW

WITH JAMIE 'O DOHERTY

There are foundations in place for DDT to strengthen its roster. With the loss of Kota Ibushi and an over-reliance on HARASHIMA that still continues, DDT needed fresh main eventers. This year was spent building up new headliners and the three that got the most focus were Konosuke Takeshita, Tetsuya Endo and Daisuke Sasaki. Meanwhile Shuji Ishikawa was brought in as the reliable choice to stick on top in the meantime. Takeshita was given the big push

becoming one of the youngest wrestlers in Japan to win his company's main championship. His KO-D Title reign began on his 21st birthday and was a good start for what will certainly be a regular ace for the company. I think his current faults are simply things that will go away as he gets older. He's a bit bland as a personality but I have no doubt that he is on track to finding something that will click once he becomes a grizzled veteran.

“Sasaki then demanded a shot at the tag team titles despite having no regular tag partner. That changed when Sasaki found himself a big pet dog who turned out to be Shuji Ishikawa in a mascot costume.”

What he gets up to before that however will be a problem if DDT continues to heavily push him. Their current fix is pairing him up with "Speedball" Mike Bailey. It is clear that DDT wants to build Bailey up to the same level Kenny Omega reached during his time with the organisation. In fact it was the same scout who originally recommended Omega to DDT that did the same for Bailey.



But if you ask me, the biggest breakout that could happen in DDT over the next few years is with Tetsuya Endo. There are similarities between Endo & Takeshita and Ibushi & Daichi Kakimoto. During the

mid 00's DDT put Ibushi together with Kakimoto as the future of the company just like Endo & Takeshita. Like Takeshita, Kakimoto was the powerhouse and Ibushi was the Endo-style risk taker. Sadly, Kakimoto's career ended with a spinal injury, so the planned generation rivalry never took off. Thankfully the modern attempt seems to be working. Endo split from Takeshita and has been added to DDT's most popular stable. Since then his focus has only been on wrestling but trust me, something is there just waiting to explode when DDT pulls the trigger.

NO MARRIAGE, NO FLIRTING, ONLY DAMNATION!

2016 will be remembered as the Year Of DAMNATION in DDT. The formation of the heel group led by Daisuke Sasaki followed by its dominance was the most prevalent story in the company this year. It got over in parallel to Los Ingobernables de Japon in New Japan. And it all began with a crush. At the start of the year Sasaki fell in love with the debuting Candice LeRae and he even proposed to her... to be his tag team partner. Soon the proposal turned to a marriage offer, but LeRae turned him down. Sasaki was crushed by the rejection and became even more devastated when news reached Japan of Candice's engagement to Johnny Gargano. Sasaki's behaviour afterwards was not healthy. It didn't help that throughout the year a high number of both DDT wrestlers and staff members were getting married, constantly reminding Sasaki of his failure. He began carrying a dog leash with him and regularly demanded to fight Gargano even though DDT never booked him. He then demanded a shot at the tag team titles despite having no regular tag partner. That changed when Sasaki found himself a big pet dog who turned out to be Shuji Ishikawa in a mascot costume.

From there Sasaki's fortunes changed for the better. He and Ishikawa won the tag titles, then Sasaki won one of the annual Right To Challenge Contracts that gave him a KO-D Title match whenever he wanted.

He successfully cashed it in at the end of April's Korakuen show, winning the championship from a tired HARASHIMA. The scorned bachelor adopted another "pet" called Mad Paulie, a new face-painted gimmick for longtime freelancer Masato Shibata.

From there DAMNATION was born. The faction was complete in July when they convinced Tetsuya Endo to jump sides from Happy Motels. Endo spent most of the year as part of a successful team with Konosuke Takeshita but he eventually moved into his partner's shadow when Takeshita beat Sasaki to become the youngest KO-D Champion ever at 21 years old. Sick of being the bridesmaid, Endo was lured over to the dark side immediately after he failed to beat Takeshita in a championship match. Since then he has been on top form and is my pick to break out in 2017.

THE BIG DAWG

In-ring the year belonged to Shuji Ishikawa. Even wearing a giant dog costume during his return to DDT in January didn't harm him as he immediately laid waste to Takeshita & Endo before his reveal. Ishikawa's singles highlights this year have been matches with Tetsuya Endo (28th February, 26th June), Soma Takao (12th June), Kazusada Higuchi (25th September) and Danshoku Dino (23rd October). His tag title matches with Sasaki against Takeshita & Endo (21st March and 24th April) were also fantastic bouts.



TEAM DREAM PRESENT

In their 100th match together as a unit, Team Dream Futures called it a day and disbanded in May. Since then the trio have all tried to find new directions for their careers. Keisuke Ishii and Soma Takao both saw themselves as future AJPW Jr. Champions. Takao was the first to win the belt at the August Sumo Hall show, but Ishii won it from him at All Japan's visit to the same building in November. Shigehiro Irie meanwhile decided he had to wrestle in America if he wanted to improve. From July to October Irie lived in the US wrestling in Illinois, Ohio and Indiana to improve his craft. He came back to Japan with a fresh energy and immediately made a statement by pinning HARASHIMA in his first match back. This all built up to a KO-D Title match between the two on Christmas Day. Sadly Irie's training did not give him enough of an edge to win the title for a second time.



He hopes to return to America for more training in 2017.

WHAT WERE THE REST UP TO?

The other branches of the DDT family all grew this year, some of them becoming big enough to run a show in Korakuen Hall. Union Pro was replaced with Pro Wrestling BASARA with Isami Kodaka taking command of the new organisation. BASARA ran a busier schedule than Union and held several tournaments throughout the year, the major one being Heaven Summit ~Itadaki~. The America loving Hiroshi Fukuda won the Heaven Summit, beating Kodaka in the final. To celebrate his success Fukuda changed his ring name to Trans-Am ★ Hiroshi. He wasn't the only one to get a makeover. Union's last major heel, FUMA, returned with an obsession for heavy metal music and a leather costume to match. He formed his own unit called IRON PRIEST to spread the word of heavy metal, annoying the rest of the BASARA roster in the process.

DNA continued working as DDT's development brand but recently announced its plans to expand. With a new management team in place, DNA will spin off further from DDT in 2017 and become more than just a training place for the company's young generation. This year featured the first annual DNA Grand Prix, a week long tournament to determine the best of the bunch. Kazusada Higuchi was unstoppable all year until the final where he lost to Mike Bailey. The prize was a one way ticket to New York but Bailey had unfinished business in Japan so he gave it to Higuchi.

Tokyo Joshi Pro kicked off the year by crowning its first TOKYO Princess Of Princess Champion in their Korakuen debut. Miyu Yamashita became the first champion and worked hard to be the brand's ace for 9 months. She was dethroned by Yuu, who debuted at the January Korakuen show and quickly surpassed the rest of the roster with her Judo ability. Meanwhile the company was almost overtaken by Poison Sawada JULIE. The retired DDT wrestler used his dark snake magic to brainwash wrestlers with the goal of remodelling Tokyo Joshi into whatever he wanted. He was ultimately stopped by Saki Akai – who was under some sort of dark action school girl gimmick – along with Tokyo Joshi's resident superheroine Hyper Misao.

Ken Ohka's baby, Ganbare☆Wrestling, had plenty of challenges and obstacles to climb over. Whether if it was Minoru Fujita trying to make Ohka's life a misery or Osamu Namiguchi constantly finding ways to confront the very existence of Ganpuro there was never a dull moment for the sleazy little spin off. Ganpuro's biggest challenge was promoting its first ever show at Korakuen Hall in October. Atsushi Onita was booked and the legend dared Ohka to retire if he couldn't sell out the show. The two collided in a Barbed Wire 8-Man Tag main event and Ohka's team came out on top to a crowd of over 1,000 fans, saving Ohka's career and earning Onita's respect.

OTHER BITS & BOBS

The shenanigans fans have come to know and expect from DDT were plentiful this year. Here is just a sampling of the bizarre goings on that happened in 2016:

Joey Ryan made the Iron Man Heavyweight Title go viral on Twitter. He brought the

championship overseas to America where the title lineage became a who's who (and even who?) of the wrestling world. The list of champions include Rey Mysterio, Scott Hall, Rhyno, Tommy Dreamer, Bad Intentions, The Young Bucks, Chris Hero, Santino Marella, X-Pac, MVP, half of the Lucha Underground roster, Spider-Man, the Beyond Wrestling fanbase, Joey Ryan's fiancé, their pet cat, Vince McMahon's star on the Hollywood Walk Of Fame and comedian Ron Funches (not in that order).

Kota Ibushi ended his dual contracts with DDT and New Japan to launch the Ibushi Wrestling Institute. What it is we still don't know.

Makoto Oishi's fascinations with idol music resulted in him fronting DDT's own idol group NwA, the New Wrestling Aidoru (Idols) with Shunma Katsumata and Mao Inoue. They released their own single "Never Give Up☆I LOVE YOU" and spent the year trying to

get a gig at the DDT FES music festival in November. They also very briefly had Dick Togo as a



member but he "graduated" from the group that same day.

“Mizuki Watase and TV personality LiLiCo fell in love and were inseparable together. Danshoku Dino thought the relationship was a sham put together by Watase to hide his true sexuality.”

Sanshiro Takagi and KENSO continued their eternal feud to the annoyance of everyone else. Their demands for a 60-minute Ironman match was accepted but only on condition that it was a dark match with most of it taking place before the fans arrived in the building. The match ended up clashing with another pre-show bout happening at the same time and finished in a 16-16 draw.

Kendo Kashin held the DDT Extreme Title and came up with complicated descriptions of what became normal match stipulations. Stuff like a “Singles match with three wrestlers fighting each other” or a “Singles Match where you are allowed to swap places with a partner standing on the ring apron”. He lost the belt to Super Sasadango Machine in a Ultimate Royal Barbed Wire PowerPoint No Power Blast PWF Rules Match where Sasadango's laptop was surrounded by barbed wire and rigged to explode if the time limit expired.

Mizuki Watase and TV personality LiLiCo fell in love and were inseparable together. Danshoku Dino thought the relationship was a sham put together by Watase to hide his true sexuality. He fought LiLiCo with Watase as the prize to prove it. Dino was proven wrong however when Watase wanted to propose to LiLiCo. This led to another problem where a good chunk of the roster also wanted to marry her and matches had to be booked to determine who could be her fiancé. That finally ended when Aja Kong invaded DDT to shame and beat up the men for treating LiLiCo's love life as a game.

Dino had a very busy year. He collected asses in the build up to fighting Akebono in Sumo Hall. The plan was to have a different person bending over every single turnbuckle with their ass exposed for Akebono to be thrown into. But Akebono had a secret plan of his own that he used to win. He wore Danshoku tights that gave him the power of using Dino's moves! Later in the year Dino became a Wrestling Mentalist, participating in creative match stipulations to cure his opponent's personal problems.

DDT debuted an 8 year old wrestler named Yuni. The child is training to become a pro wrestler and had his first match in December, taking part in a 6-Man Tag. His goal is to win the KO-D Title before he turns 10.



BASARA's wrestling lawyer Gouma Ryu brought the court inside the squared circle this year. Wrestlers

were put on trial for their crimes with Ryu and Atsushi Maruyama arguing over each other while Kyohei Wada watched on as the judge. On Christmas Day Kohei Sato was brought in charged for being part of a criminal gang. Sato was so angry over the accusation that he attacked everyone except Wada. When Sato was finished knocking people out, Wada ruled that he was innocent.

The string of marriages in the company hasn't gone unnoticed over in Tokyo Joshi. The message Azusa Takigawa has gotten from the announcements is getting married makes you stronger. So she made it her goal to find a fiancé and is collecting issues of Zexy Magazine to look up advice. Each issue of the magazine is 4 inches thick making it a perfect weapon for pro wrestling. Her story has even gotten attention outside of Japan when a Mexican website reported on it. ■





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Cubs runs the number one English language lucha news and results site in the world, the prolific luchablog at thecubsfan.com/cmll. You can follow the luchablog on Twitter [@luchablog](https://twitter.com/luchablog) as well as thecubsfan’s personal account, [@thecubsfan](https://twitter.com/thecubsfan).

DAVE MUSGRAVE

Dave hosts the ever green Wrestling Culture podcast alongside Dylan Hales on the Place to be Nation/Pro-Wrestling Only podcasting network discussing everything from the holy grails of wrestling footage to body dysmorphia, the Observer Hall of Fame, and the careers of The Shepherders. Dave also writes regularly for placetobenation.com. You can follow Dave on Twitter [@puropotsy](https://twitter.com/puropotsy).

IZZAC

Izzac is a wrestler, writer, and podcaster. He writes regularly for Wrestling with Words reviewing tons of Japanese indie wrestling, as well as presenting opinion pieces, rankings, match recommendations, and much more. He is also the co-host of the Puro in the Rough podcast on the Wrestling with Words podcasting network alongside fellow Wrestling with Words contributor and founder of the former Phoenix Plex review, Lawrence ([@lob_3](https://twitter.com/@lob_3)). You can follow Izzac on Twitter [@IzzacWrestles](https://twitter.com/@IzzacWrestles).

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Jamie runs the number one English language resource for DDT related news and results over at dramaticddt.wordpress.com. You can follow Jamie on Twitter [@JamieOD](https://twitter.com/JamieOD).

JOE GAGNE

Every week Joe recaps and reviews most of the major wrestling personality podcasts in his Wrestling Podmass column at voicesofwrestling.com. Joe also co-produces the famous Funtime Pro-Wrestling Arcade retro wrestling video game YouTube series, and hosts the Joe Versus The World podcast at joeversustheworld.com. You can follow Joe on Twitter [@JoeGagne](https://twitter.com/JoeGagne).

PAUL COOKE

Paul is the founder of crossarmbreaker.com, where he reviews and catalogues pro-wrestling matches from most every region and time period. He also runs the Orioles Observer at oriolesobserver.com and is a regular contributor to the Cubed Circle Newsletter. You can follow Paul on Twitter [@stomperspc](https://twitter.com/@stomperspc).

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Ryan is the co-editor of The Cubed Circle Newsletter, where he contributes regular editorials together with puroresu coverage as well as individual match reviews in his ‘The Mixed Bag’ column. You can follow Ryan on Twitter [@RyanClingman](https://twitter.com/@RyanClingman).

TODD MARTIN

Todd discusses pro-wrestling and MMA with Wade Keller on Wednesday’s for subscribers at pwtorch.com. Todd also writes his weekly Bottom Line column for Sherdog on Tuesdays, and presents his MMA rankings and pay-per-view event coverage for the LA Times. You can follow Todd on Twitter [@ToddMartinMMA](https://twitter.com/@ToddMartinMMA).

FRIENDS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ISSUES PAST

The Cubed Circle Yearbook was inspired almost exclusively by the fantastic DKP Annuals that Alan Counihan and Dean Knickerbocker (@dknick) published alongside many others in 2011 and 2012. We hope that we were able to do the memory of those great annuals some kind of justice here.

We would like to extend a BIG thank you to all of the contributors we had on board in year's past. Without them we wouldn't have been able to put this year's together.

BEV GARTH

Bev wrote about Yosuke Santa Maria, the state of 2014 WWE creative, the women's division, and much more in our 2014 yearbook. You can find that piece at www.cubedcirclewrestling.com. Bev is on Twitter @BevGarth.

BILL THOMPSON

Bill is a frequent writer for Wrestling with Words where he has discussions with other pundits, reviews Timothy Thatcher matches, and much more. He wrote about the year in EVOLVE in the 2015 issue and can be found on Twitter @MOTYPod.

DARYL SURAT

Daryl is a co-host of the infamous Anime World Order podcast. He writes for the Otaku USA magazine, and contributed a piece last year regarding issues of "fandom" in pro-wrestling. He also runs the Channel of Doom, which streams a new playlist of great graps every week. You can follow Daryl on Twitter, @DarylSurat.

DYLAN HALES

Dylan is a prolific voice in the wrestling community – so prolific in fact that he was even involved directly in the opener of a WWN event on Mania weekend. Dylan writes for Wrestling with Words and is the co-host of the Wrestling Culture Podcast over at placetobenation.com. You can follow Dylan on Twitter @DylanHales.

LESLIE LEE III

Leslie Lee III writes about pro-wrestling, post-punk, and politics. You can keep up with Leslie and his writings on Twitter, @leslieleeiii.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

2016 was a strange year for the newsletter, but we were helped along by a ton of great people. This listed is incomplete and in no particular order.

We would like to acknowledge friend of the newsletter, TJ Hawke (@TJHawke411 and viewsfromthehawkesnest.wordpress.com) for his support over the years and his match review resource, Views From The Hawke's Nest.

Thank you to Ryan Carse of The Tag Rope Magazine (@tagropemag and www.thetagrope.com). Groups like The Tag Rope and FSM are keeping the wonderful tradition of pro-wrestling magazines alive.

Case (@_InYourCase) aided us greatly in the hunt for Dragon Gate picture sources. He reviews and discusses Dragon Gate regularly for voicesofwrestling.com.

A gigantic thank you should be extended to Yana, who helped with the type setting of this year's issue. We aren't stumbling nearly as badly as we were before because of her.

Thank you also to TiNGLE (@WrestlingHDD), Joe and Rich from voicesofwrestling.com, Hugh Little, Sealia Bloom and Les Moore from sheetsandwich.com, Allan Blackstock, @ProjectAuuman, Keith Harris (@glasgowkjh), Loss from prowrestlingonly.com, all of our email subscribers, and everyone else who has helped share, compile, and critique the newsletter over the past four plus years.

The yearbook was compiled, type-set, and edited using primarily Free and open source software – GIMP and LibreOffice namely.

Feel free to share this yearbook wherever you so choose. This yearbook is and will remain, however, a free and community driven project.

THANK YOU FOR READING!

