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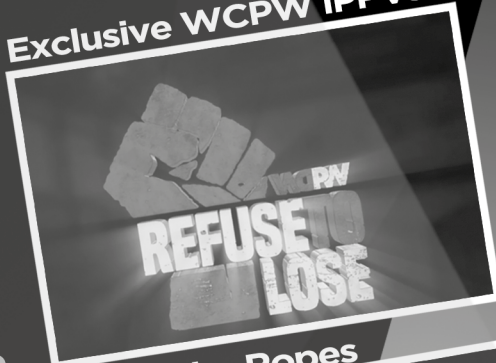
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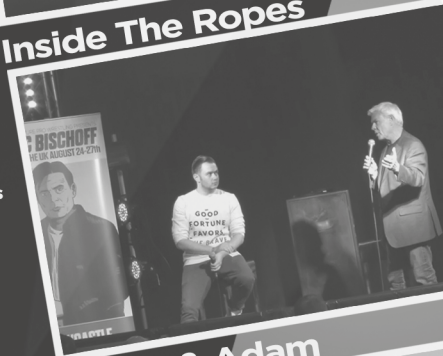
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THE RAW REVIEW

Words: Michael Hamlett

A show-closing standoff between The Undertaker, Brock Lesnar and Bill Goldberg concluded a passable Royal Rumble go-home edition of Raw, but as the cameras faded out on the behemoths as a tease for Sunday, it was a stark reminder that WrestleMania season will always favour stars over stories. The three didn't even utter a word to one another, with WWE letting their big-money visual do the talking six days before the Battle Royal. All-too-literally representing how real stars can do more in three seconds than others can in three hours, the Red Brand's final push to Rumble gave the minutes that mattered to the real main eventers, and left the regular crop of scrubs to play at being superstars.

Which appropriately brings discussion around to Roman Reigns and Kevin Owens. Opening Raw with

another dreary tête-à-tête, the two drowned in their own verbiage as usual, save for some interruptions from the typically brilliant Chris Jericho ("I got a prediction for you, you're a stupid idiot!"). Setting up a US Title rematch with 'Y2J' for later in the show, Roman did some 'shootin' cowboy', inferring that Owens would never be 'The Guy', which may foreshadow the inevitable vexation WWE were bound to feel with 'KO' as their Universal Champion following another viewership slump in the winter months.

Of all the permutations mooted for the Royal Rumble and the Road to WrestleMania, the most common prevailing thought is that Reigns will ascend back to the summit on Sunday, presumably leaving the eventual 'Best Friends' payoff with a consolation US Title programme. And whilst there are indeed arguments to be had over the probable demotion of Owens,

what they neglect to consider is the weight of the title in the eventual conflict. Jericho's delusion around their Universal Title co-ownership was the acorn of an eventual collapse between the two, so a belated babyface turn for him to defend a secondary title is maybe not the oak tree he envisaged growing. Relations remain strained between the two, but after Jericho and Reigns went to a non-finish when Roman outwitted both goons yet again, it appeared WWE have decided a loss of the Universal Title is their one true breaking point. And while Roman does look a shoo-in for another spell as top dog, it feels as though precisely zero of the original problems with his prior runs have been addressed. His promo content and delivery remains consistently woeful, and he will continue to be surpassed in terms of support by any of his peers on either side of the divide.

Floundering in his own unique way, Seth Rollins lost his own Royal Rumble spot this week thanks to defeat against Sami Zayn in a match Stephanie McMahon booked through her sock puppet Mick Foley. Suffering the dreaded theme music distraction at the conclusion of a fabulous TV match, Rollins fell to a Zayn roll-up as Triple H's light and sound show took over the Raw stage. Whilst something identical was expected for Rollins' eventual Rumble elimination, this more cynical crushing of the 'Architect's dream was a crueller move by The Authority, and has actually reheated Seth's lukewarm quest for redemption ahead of his WrestleMania confrontation with 'The Game'.

Eradicating the memory of the abysmal poetry section of her promo last week, Bayley was back on message this week in the understated setting of a sit-down interview

with Corey Graves. Succinctly neatening up the last loose ends of a storyline WWE have actually handled pretty well, she trotted out the usual 'childhood dream' stuff and pledged to take Charlotte's Women's Title in San Antonio. Flair responded in kind later on, firmly putting the challenger in her place and promising to replicate her father's 1992 Rumble heroics with her own success on Sunday. Also in the Women's division, Nia Jax and Sasha Banks had their best scrap so far ahead of their match on the Rumble kickoff show. 'The Boss' will face her biggest test dragging something watchable from her extremely limited opponent, but Bayley and Asuka have shown what can be achieved with the right story, so here's hoping Banks' knee injury can be an emotional crutch big enough for both to lean on.

Elsewhere, Neville and Rich Swann briefly brawled in the final charge to their Rumble clash following Swann's victory over Noam Dar, whilst more shenanigans abounded in a match between Cesaro and Luke Gallows to promote Sunday's battle between their respective sides. The Club will get their fair fight in a 'two referees' match that only sounds exciting in a Gorilla Monsoon wet dream, and with the Tag Titles already relegated to the pre-show at the first event of 2017, the shadow of the New Day's historic championship reign looms larger by the week.

Speaking of possibly the most over act to not serve a single purpose anymore, Kofi,

Big E and Xavier drummed up Rumble bluster for the outsiders with Enzo Amore, Big Cass, Rusev, Jinder Mahal and Titus O'Neil. With some passable WWE comedy around The New Day's bug-eyed incredulity at the constant interruptions and Rusev's consideration of 'Handsome Rusev' as a new name in the vein of 'Big Cass', it almost felt like an attitude-era segment, as the bulk of the cast got great reactions for their schtick, despite the universal certainty that nothing of significance was ever going to occur. The climax of all this was a thrown-together eight man tag including Braun Strowman, who waited his turn for five minutes then convincingly disposed of Enzo in short order.

Kept separate from the real stars in the main event, it felt a bit of a demotion for Strowman, but his post-match face-off with fellow Rumble entrant The Big Show advertised a likely confrontation between the two that will probably afford Braun one of his standout moments in the match itself.

Of all the permutations mooted for the Royal Rumble and WrestleMania, the most common thought is that Reigns will ascend back to the summit on Sunday

THE SMACKDOWN REVIEW

Words: Jamie Kennedy

Since the brand split, it's safe to say that SmackDown Live has been the more concise show. It's all up to personal opinion which show is better, although Raw often feels like the writers are struggling to fill three hours. That theme continued this week, the blue brand delivered a much better level of hype building towards the Royal Rumble.

As the show began, GM Daniel Bryan could be seen trying to enjoy an apple. Bursting in, The Miz and Maryse demanded better working conditions, claiming they didn't even have a private dressing room. This all led to Bryan trying to placate Miz by giving him a rematch against Dean Ambrose for the Intercontinental Title. There was just one catch, the bout would be a Lumberjack Match. That encounter was the show's main event, but it wasn't the best match on the show. By far the most interesting aspect came when The Miz mimicked/mockered Daniel Bryan, using many of his moves and mannerisms. In the end, they didn't get the job done, Ambrose won with a Dirty Deeds DDT after all the Lumberjacks ran in to brawl.

Importantly, Baron Corbin looked the best of the Lumberjacks here. Similarly, he also excelled on guest commentary during a throwaway Battle Royal held to secure a slot in the 30-man Royal Rumble. Mojo Rawley was the winner, lastly eliminating Tyler Breeze to progress. On announce duties, Corbin kept things short and simple, claiming he would win his first ever Rumble.

If Ambrose vs. Miz and the aforementioned Battle Royal came across as placeholders killing time before storylines move on post-Rumble, other segments on the show fared better. The strongest match on SmackDown this week involved Randy Orton and Luke Harper, and there was some crucial storyline development in there too. Driven along by the ongoing issues between Wyatt Family members, Orton vs. Harper was a fine bout that also set the scene for more. Dropping Luke with an RKO, Randy picked up the win and then watched as Bray Wyatt smashed Harper with his Sister Abigail move.

There's still a chance Orton will turn against Wyatt at some point and the pair will resume their feud, yet the opportunity also exists to bring Erick Rowan back into the fold, realign him with Harper and pit both teams against one another. At the very least, WWE have options, the benefit of such a multi-layered story.

Another good rivalry that motored along without much fuss was Natalya vs. Nikki Bella. Just as Neville has been on Raw, Natalya has been reinvigorated by her recent heel turn. As a babyface, she was floundering, but as a villain the Canadian feels like she has purpose.

Natalya's scheduled match with Naomi didn't end up taking place, Bella attacked her enemy backstage. This followed a complete reverse earlier in the day, a pre-taped skit showed Natalya ramming Nikki's head into a WWE production truck emblazoned with the face of John Cena. Sending out an open challenge, Naomi was answered by Alexa Bliss. The reigning SmackDown Women's Champ said Naomi wasn't worth her time though, retreating to the back.

Speaking of Alexa, she had the main event spotlight during last week's show in a Steel Cage Match opposite Becky Lynch. Mickie James returned during that segment, and the comeback queen delivered a sterling in-ring promo this week. Interviewed by Renee Young, James explained why she

had decided to side with Bliss and attack Lynch. Pointing out that Becky and others have disrespected her generation by crowing about a female revolution, Mickie also said that Alexa was the only one on the entire roster to show her any respect. From there, things got heated when Lynch marched to the ring for a fight. Bliss interfered on Mickie's behalf, before the returning veteran ended things by saying Becky should learn from Alexa and always be one step ahead.

Another who has turned heel recently, Dolph Ziggler made short work of Kalisto in less than a minute. Nailing the masked man with a sweet Superkick, Dolph then pinned his foe and went to grab a steel chair for more post-match punishment. Rising from his position behind the announce desk,

JBL tried to talk Ziggler out of things. This distracted Dolph just enough to allow an ambush by Apollo Crews. Fighting off Ziggler, Crews saved his friend Kalisto from more pain. It remains to be seen what's next for a heel Dolph, but this was largely inoffensive.

The same can be said for Carmella's (admittedly bizarre) union with James Ellsworth. This week, the gorgeous female took her odd-looking chum clothes shopping, a

situation that created some typical WWE-style comedy. Still, as cheesy as it was, Ellsworth always plays his character to the hilt and pair have some chemistry.

Finally, AJ Styles called out John Cena for a little chit chat around halfway through the show. Even though this wasn't in the main event slot, it must be considered the most important part of this week's SmackDown. After all, Cena and Styles collide for the WWE Title at Royal Rumble, a match people should be excited for given their history on pay-per-view. Disgusted by a Rumble poster pushing Cena to the forefront, as well as John's appearance on The Today Show during which the hosts called Styles a "guy from Atlanta", AJ was on fire here. That kind of passion only brings out the best in Cena, he works best when his promos are dipped in reality.

Both made good points. AJ claiming that Cena was a bad wrestler and John himself saying Styles was only champion because he had let him be. Vitaly, WWE held back just enough to prevent this from going overboard. Not peeling the curtain back too far, the back-and-forth barbs still felt natural. Instead of ruining the feud, these touches actually helped the Rumble title showdown. Win or lose, AJ Styles deserves to stay in the headline mix on SmackDown. His 2016 was amazing, and 2017 will be the same if WWE management don't shunt him down the card during a busy WrestleMania season.

Disgusted by a Rumble poster pushing Cena to the forefront, as well as John's appearance on The Today Show where the hosts called Styles a "guy from Atlanta", AJ was on fire here...

THIS WEEK IN WRESTLING HISTORY

Words: Michael Sidgwick

JANUARY 29, 1996

As if to confirm the Berenstein Bears alternate universe conspiracy, Konnan defeated the One Man Gang for the WCW United States Title.

JANUARY 30, 2005

At the Royal Rumble event, Vince McMahon tore both of his quadricep muscles after both John Cena and Batista crashed out of the match, unscheduled, at the same time. Marching out to rearrange the finish, McMahon suffered the dual injuries when the fury of his own momentum caused him to slam his thighs against the metal frame of the ring. Perhaps the post-traumatic stress of the ordeal might be why we are today reminded, constantly, that it is the hardest part of it. Though the agony forced him to bark orders, sat on his a*s, it did not preclude him from thinking on his feet. The match was restarted, and Batista threw Cena over the top. As the next twelve years demonstrated, Cena was never banished to the doghouse.

FEBRUARY 1, 2000

WCW taped the February 2 edition of Thunder, the site of one of wrestling's funniest ever botches. Veteran Diamond Dallas Page was tasked with carrying Emory "The Machine" Hale through his debut match, but the boss was a lost cause. A massively-muscled giant, The Machine's first contributions were inauspicious. Throwing Page into the corner following a collar and elbow tie-up, he looked almost like the destroyer he was promoted as. That aura was soon drained. Perched on the top rope, he called for an aerial attack of some sort. We never did learn what that would be; Page scrambled to the opposite end of the ring, which should have caused Machine to crotch himself on the turnbuckle he stood on. Instead, he launched himself three feet across the ring, straddled himself across the top rope, and let out a scream that was paradoxically blood-curdling and hilarious.

FEBRUARY 2, 2010

Vince McMahon announced the cancellation of WWE's ill-fated ECW revival. Addressing the audience, McMahon thanked "all the technicians, cameramen, directors, producers, everyone, and certainly all the Superstars who made ECW the success that it truly was." It was, categorically, not a success. Ratings had dwindled to a third of the number the show attracted on its debut episode, and the show was unrecognisable from the outlaw league from which, by the end, only its initials were borrowed. The show was headlined by Christian's disqualification win over Zack Ryder - a match which contained two wrestlers and a finish that were never found in the bingo hall.

FEBRUARY 3, 1989

The Mega Powers exploded in a killer angle - one of the best Vince McMahon ever produced. Booked in the halcyon days when Vince McMahon thought more than 24 hours ahead, the alliance, which stretched back two years, was forged with the eventual break-up in mind. And what a break up it was: hinged on Savage's real-life sense of jealousy, tensions boiled over when MacGuffin Miss Elizabeth was decimated at the close of their match opposite the Twin Towers. An enraged Savage, having slapped Hogan, accused him of having "jealous eyes" and "lust for Elizabeth" in the backstage medical area - before cracking him in the face with his WWF Championship and flinging Elizabeth halfway across the room and into oblivion.

WRESTLER OF THE WEEK

KATSUYORI SHIBATA

Words: Jack G. King

On Saturday, RevPro's High Stakes event culminated in a fight. Katsuyori Shibata and Matt Riddle kicked, slapped, wrenched, and generally hurt one another over the British Heavyweight Championship - and after a breathless encounter, the NJPW man was able to retain. Absorbing a world of punishment, Shibata kicked out of his own Penalty Kick finisher, clamped on a rear naked choke, and forced the challenger to tap out.

The card also featured Zack Sabre Jr. vs. Marty Scurll, a 40-minute technical masterclass between two men who know each other inside-out. It even saw the triumphant return of Pete Dunne to the British indies, fresh off his star-making performance in the WWE UK Championship Tournament.

And yet, most agree that Shibata and Riddle put on the match of the night. That's pretty astonishing.

On the other hand, it could simply be seen as the latest brilliant bout in the fascinating career of Katsuyori Shibata. A 15-year veteran of the business, he was anointed one of NJPW's 'new Three Musketeers' alongside Hiroshi Tanahashi and Shinsuke Nakamura (a pair who fulfilled their potential in spades, of course). Unlike his peers, Shibata left the company during tough times, unsuccessfully pursuing an MMA career in the late 2000s.

Returning to New Japan in 2012, he has never been able to fully shake that stigma of betrayal. While his fellow 'Musketeers' have enjoyed years of populari-

ty and multiple world title reigns, Shibata hasn't ascended further than the upper-midcard. Most ironically, the youngster who rose to fill the hole left by his departure is now taking over the wrestling world.

Shibata has always wrestled with a rebellious chip on his shoulder, but over the last five years he's become one of the stiffest, most visceral in-ring performers in the world. The clash with Riddle was a perfect example of that - two legitimate fighters exchanging brutal strikes and painful holds at breakneck speed.

Immense credit must also be given to the good-natured American. A promising UFC prospect, Riddle was released after twice testing positive for marijuana, and decided to instead become a pro wrestler. The progress he's displayed in just two years is nothing short of staggering, and he could well become the biggest breakout star of 2017.

Ultimately, though, this has been Shibata's week - mainly for his excellent title defence, but also for the momentum he's rapidly building. A rematch with Sabre Jr., the man he defeated for the British Heavyweight Championship, was teased at the end of the show; he'll also defend the title against Will Ospreay in Osaka next month. Both of these bouts could easily be Match of the Year candidates.

2017 may just be the year Shibata finally breaks into NJPW's top tier, fighting to reclaim the spot he surrendered to Kazuchika Okada a decade ago. Equally, it could simply be another year of anger, frustration, and unfulfilled vengeance. As long as he continues to wrestle on this level, I'm perfectly fine with either.

SHARP SHOOTING

THE RESURRECTION OF THE ROYAL RUMBLE

It's sacrilegious - so whisper it - but the Royal Rumble, since 2013, has had all the pageantry of a regicide. Careers have been killed more than they have been made - just ask Boo-tista - but this year promises more...

Words: Michael Sidgwick

In 2016, barely a week went by without the death of a major cultural institution. David Bowie, Prince, George Michael, Alan Rickman, Carrie Fisher - the world of popular music and film was almost literally plagued. Ironically, it was an uncharacteristically quiet year for wrestler deaths. And yet, the bell tolled on the Royal Rumble match.

The death of the Rumble was not a surprise. Its condition had been terminal for years. Moribund since 2013 through a spate of winners as predictable as they were unwelcome, the January Classic, once the most anticipated date on the wrestling calendar, was anticipated with dread in the weeks prior to January 24. As if itself dreading the fan backlash that had become synonymous with the failed Roman Reigns push, WWE literally stipulated that there was no need to pine for a deviation from the

script. The one versus all marketing ploy guaranteed one winner: Triple H, who would (and did) win the match in order to set up Reigns' Dallas coronation. Later that year, the cardiac monitor beeped with a sign of life - the introduction of the Universal Championship. If nothing else, it broadened the scope. Even if both red and blue brands telegraphed those in WrestleMania Season championship contention, there would at least be two prospective winners.

That isn't the case. For the first time in years - perhaps ever - the outcome is nigh-on impossible to predict. Even the star-studded 1992 field acted as a MacGuffin for the "not fair to Flair!" narrative through line. Most observers, perhaps through sheer optimism, can't let themselves believe that Braun Strowman's flattering arc has been plotted to result in a Universal Title bout - a Strowman Vs.

Reigns match is a punchline to the most cynical of Vince McMahon-hates-his-fanbase jokes - but the Royal Rumble is the event at which hopes go to die. Just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean Vince isn't after your threatened Network cancellation.

On the January 9 RAW, Strowman watched with interest the Undertaker's declaration of entering the Rumble match. Was this a smokescreen or telegraph? Those in the know have noted that a match might be on the cards. It's one few wish to see - but then, nobody wanted to see Triple H Vs. Roman Reigns. A match between Undertaker and Finn Bálor has also been mooted, but the Demon has not yet been cleared. WWE rushed Edge back prematurely, in 2010, so there's that, but would WWE make a big song and dance about 'Taker's return, only to have him eliminated in unassuming style? That very

same tease and fate befell Daniel Bryan in 2015, so it's not without precedent.

Goldberg Vs. Brock Lesnar II has been nailed on since Goldberg Vs. Brock Lesnar I, so expect some form of double or nefarious elimination ruling both men out of the Universal Title picture. That is a spot custom-built for an enterprising heel to facilitate - someone like The Miz could crow for years about how he eliminated them both on the same night - but it's part-timer season. WWE rarely allows its full time roster to flourish until the spring, by which time they've already been stunted. On Monday's edition of RAW, WWE channelled the spirit of Daniel Bryan's positioning Sami Zayn in the sentimental favourite role. The Underdog From The Underground seems poised to enter a stature-enhancing iron man performance, having

stolen Seth Rollins' spot - but his min-arc adds yet another interesting wrinkle to proceedings.

Randy Orton is high in the betting odds, but the man seems destined for a date with Bray Wyatt in Orlando. Chris Jericho and Kevin Owens are also fated for a divorce - but will the Universal or United States Title cause a headache in the settlement? Dean Ambrose and The Miz are outside bets - but one gets the impression that their featured storyline will get relegated to a multi-man ladder match sub-plot, come April. Elsewhere, the top-tier title picture is similarly obscured. The WWE Championship match has been rendered equally unpredictable by Vince McMahon's decision to abandon the heavily-rumoured John Cena Vs. Undertaker dream match. Many expect Samoa Joe to appear as a surprise entrant in the Rumble match itself - and what a statement of intent it would be, if he won it - but his rumoured match opposite Cena also creates scope for interference in his record-tying title chase. It is a tried, tested and maligned Rumble trope, but the prospect of their first major match would equalise for such a tainted finish.

But then, a tainted finish surely beckons for the Charlotte Vs. Bayley RAW Women's Title match, which has a faint odour of inconvenience about it. Bayley factors into the draft plans of the 'Mania title scene, but Charlotte doesn't lose the big one. Victory on Sunday would unravel the division's strongest narrative thread. There's also WWE's rule of +1 to consider. A first-time pay-per-view match between two top stars exists only to promote the second, and WWE invariably promotes that by creating controversy around the first. If Bayley wins cleanly, she will have created a rule-proving exception.

Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean Vince isn't after your threatened Network cancellation

The undercard is as strong as the Rumble field itself. The Neville Vs. Rich Swann Cruiserweight Title match has been promoted expertly, for the benefit of the few who watch 205 Live. It promises to kickstart the greatest Rumble card in years, and of course, it poses more questions than answers. WWE have gone all-in on the Neville heel turn - but will Swann suffer the same, marginalised fate as TJ Perkins so soon after supplanting him? As counterproductive as that might seem, there is only one match from the 205 Live crew that is remotely 'Mania-worthy - and that is top heel Neville Vs. top babyface Jack Gallagher. For four years, there was little to look forward to beyond Kofi Kingston's trademark elimination escape, and the guessing game of which relic WWE would exhume for a cheap laugh. Royal Rumble 2017, conversely, poses so many unanswerable questions. But, since it has become synonymous with inscrutable idiocy, the subversion is almost impossibly refreshing.





DEVELOPMENTAL DISORDER

Triple H understands better than most how tough it is to remain on top in wrestling, but as his beloved NXT wearily limps into TakeOver: San Antonio, can he find the formula to return the brand to its former glory?

Words: Michael Hamflett

As the crown jewel in the company's supershow output since the launch of the WWE Network, the NXT: TakeOver moniker has become the industry standard for quality and consistency. But that reputation may suffer a knock this weekend, as the San Antonio card looks on paper to be one of the weakest ever. Only the headline clash between Shinsuke Nakamura and Bobby Roode appears capable of matching the lofty standards set by two years-worth of electric broadcasts, and even then, the build-up for that has failed to inspire.

Emblematic of the brand's current malaise, the mediocre line-up highlights the enormous gulf in talent left by the long-awaited promotions of some of its top stars. With the weight of expectation now becoming a lumbering burden rather than an exciting challenge, it may be time for WWE to re-establish NXT as the minor league it was designed to be, rather than the super-indie it became.

It happened organically enough. Main roster spots were at a premium for a while, with NXT having an overwhelmingly stronger group of superstars regularly outperforming those on Raw and Smackdown. Whilst

that was a nice problem to have, the reality was that Charlotte, Kevin Owens et al were far too strong to leave behind in Full Sail. However, with very few in today's NXT fitting that bill, the timing seems perfect to eradicate the promise of call-ups almost entirely, and give below-average talents like Liv Morgan and The Drifter ample time to mould a fanbase and carve out a genuine niche of their own beyond 'jobber-to-the-stars'.

Furthermore, the brand's old model of only juggling one or two bonafide stars in each division was already on borrowed time, but when Finn Balor, Bayley and American Alpha got their main roster spots last summer, it aggressively highlighted just how light each league was. Since those call-ups, there has been nowhere near the quality of performer available to step in and fill their shoes. NXT's eighteen month golden era from mid-2014 through to 2015 happened not just because of those at the summit of the brand. With the Full Sail feeder two years into it's lifespan by then, the cream of the talent had indeed risen to the top, but they were supported by an exciting second string that were able to pad out the TV and TakeOver shows until an opportunity to shine came their own way.

But with the immediacy of NXT's crisis, what are some

possible solutions for the problems the show has made for itself?

The NXT title suffered its first significant devaluation in late-2016, traded needlessly between Nakamura and Samoa Joe in order to spike ticket sales for flagging Australia and Japan tours. But with Joe now likely to be joining the main roster, 'The King Of Strong Style' is left a poorer champion for the rapid-fire switches, and should probably just drop the belt at the earliest possible point to signal his own elevation. San Antonio could offer an out, with Bobby Roode looking an excellent candidate for next leader of the brand. As a credible titleholder, an extended run with the belt could furnish months of defences against admittedly weaker opponents until the right person is in place to unseat the 'Glorious' one. Though less spectacular than a Samoa Joe, Finn Balor or Shinsuke Nakamura, Roode would adequately represent the scaled-back NXT as it began building a fresh new crop of main roster hopefuls.

Elsewhere, The Revival can stake a claim to being the best team in the entire industry, but now find themselves frozen out of anything significant following their definitive feud-ender against #DIY, who will have to work out of their skin to replicate a shred of the Dash and Dawson magic with The Authors of Pain. Beyond that, only a combination from middling troublemakers Sanity offers any sort of alternative, which still falls some distance short of the standards set by last year's choice cuts. Despite rumours to the contrary, it seems only fair to elevate Gargano, Ciampa and The Revival, and regrettably go all in on The Authors of Pain. The Ascension were a hugely over act in NXT, so it could be just the shove the Authors need to find the spark they've so far badly lacked.

The Women's division is where the worst of the damage has been done. Relying heavily on Bayley before her call-up, Asuka became a scorched earth champion, and the TakeOver Fatal Four-Way will either see 'The Empress of Tomorrow' drop the title without taking a pin, or smash through three ill-equipped competitors instead of just one. It's harder to see how this gets fixed with so few experienced hands working regularly with the newest girls to help them move forward. That said, the

Four Horsewomen were once in a similar position. As unrealistic as it seems now, it's a duty as a fan to show patience with the Peyton Royce's and Aliya's of the world, and with Ember Moon still on the ascendency, a second golden generation may not be as far away as everybody assumes.

A battered and bruised victim of its own success, the hope of a rapidly improved overall product seems redundant under current restrictions. WWE would be best served to look at this downward trend as an opportunity to re-educate their audience, reminding viewers that this is still the training school first and the hottest product in the world second. If 2016 was a banner year for Vince McMahon's old credo that 'Anything Can Happen in WWE',

As unrealistic as it seems now, it's a duty as a fan to show patience with the Peyton Royce's and Aliya's of the world, and with Ember Moon still on the ascendency, a second golden generation may not be as far away as everybody assumes

maybe 2017's NXT should to see to it that nothing really happens, instead taking time and care to grow a 'new' roster completely from the ground up.

Amidst heavy clouds, cracks of light still shine through, with the three champions still prominent figureheads of their respective divisions and star-in-the-making Tye Dillinger seemingly ready to own the main roster or the Orlando brand depending on where bosses think he fits best. But WWE owe it to their own talent to remind viewers exactly the purpose of the show they're watching, or risk irreversibly damaging the mythical reputation of the three yellow letters. TakeOver: San Antonio may give some clues as to which direction they intend to go.

Words: Jack G. King

This weekend's Universal Championship match will see Kevin Owens take on Roman Reigns with a particularly unique stipulation. Chris Jericho – the ever-meddling 'best friend' of the champ – will be suspended above the ring in a shark cage, ostensibly to prevent him from interfering in the bout. At first glance it might seem a convoluted, Russo-esque quirk; a slightly more presentable cousin of the derided 'on a pole' match type. Wouldn't it be more practical to simply ban Y2J from ringside, perhaps under threat of removing his Royal Rumble spot? The fact that WWE have recently released a playset featuring the exact set-up of the match may have something to do with it...

However, dig a little deeper, and it becomes apparent that the stipulation is due a lot more respect, particularly in the eyes of traditionalists. Its roots can be traced back to the era of the territories, where meddling heel managers would be strung up to even the odds. Interestingly – despite pro wrestling being the very embodiment of the saying 'rules are meant to be broken' – the shark cage often proved an effective measure. The stipulation was a satisfying one for fans, who delighted in seeing irritating loudmouths such as Jim Cornette and JJ Dillon suspended in such an undignified manner. A babyface win usually followed. Although characteristic of NWA promotions in Memphis or Atlanta, the shark cage made a bold leap north to WWF in the late 80s. It even cropped up on numerous occasions in the Attitude Era, imprisoning figures as diverse as Paul Bearer and Chyna (although the latter was able to conquer her steel prison, forcing the bars apart and jumping down to interfere on Triple H's behalf).

Despite being a naturally restrictive stipulation, the best inhabitants have been able to add their own charm to the structure. Paul Heyman still yelped instructions at his charge (one Steve Austin) at Clash of the Champions XX, while Jimmy Hart briefly became a lovesick teenager as he was hoisted away from the Honky Tonk Man in Madison Square Garden. The king of shark cage improvisation, however, must be the fittingly regal figure of Jerry Lawler.

Subjected to the cage treatment during a 1995 match between Bret Hart and Isaac Yankem (an early gimmick of Glenn Jacobs'), Lawler worked himself into a vertigo-induced frenzy, begging Vince McMahon to get him down. He then picked a small scab on the inside of his nose, causing blood to spatter onto the canvas far below. The nature of the ploy was so subtle, even Vince assumed that King was genuinely afraid of heights – a fallacy Lawler was all too keen to play along with, given the company ban on intentionally drawing blood. This incident was the first time blood had been seen on WWF programming for over two years, and acted as a catalyst for the eventual reversal of their stance – thereby giving the shark cage match another significant tie to the history of the business.

Clearly the stipulation is not only more traditional than many newer fans may realise, but more versatile as well (given the right personnel). Despite the unfortunate tie-in with WWE's playset release, Owens vs. Reigns should find itself elevated beyond cheap plug status thanks to the sheer force of Chris Jericho's personality.

Interestingly, this isn't Y2J's first interaction with a shark cage over the course of his career. One of his first feuds under Vince and co. saw the brash upstart tussle with Ken Shamrock – or, more accurately, avoid a tussle with the world's most dangerous man. Jericho locked himself inside the structure, an innovative move which infuriated Shamrock to the point of leaving WWF a short while later (or to resume his MMA career; we're not sure which).

Sunday's title match will see the shark cage reach a whole new audience of newer fans, but those who follow NXT will know that it was rolled out for a trial run at the last TakeOver special. In Toronto a couple of months back, we saw the stipulation in the final of the Dusty Rhodes Tag Team Classic between TM61 and the Authors of Pain. In a very fitting nod to the history of the structure, old school heel manager Paul Ellering was the man in the cage – a position he most famously occupied 13 years prior,

Owens vs. Reigns should find itself elevated beyond cheap plug status thanks to the sheer force of Chris Jericho's personality

during 'The Last Battle of Atlanta' between Tommy Rich and Buzz Sawyer.

Ellering found a way to circumnavigate the restrictions of the stipulation, dropping a hidden chain to his charges with the referee's back turned. Although the weapon didn't directly factor into the finish of the match (and actually ended up being spilled dangerously into the crowd), the Authors were able to win. Would it therefore make sense to predict a Roman Reigns victory come the Royal Rumble? Modern fans have now seen an instance of the cage failing; perhaps its main roster return will see it benefit the babyface.

Having been initially sceptical of the stipulation, I'll admit that I'm now looking forward to Owens vs. Reigns. The TakeOver: Toronto match was a good one, and a man as entertaining as Jericho can surely thrive in such a situation. My ultimate wish, though, is for Y2J to somehow incorporate the shark cage into the Royal Rumble match. Maybe he could stay up there while being announced as the number one entrant, or lock himself in it at ringside (perhaps an unwise move with old foe Goldberg hanging around, especially after that glass-shattering Elimination Chamber spot).

Ultimately I don't think shark cage matches should become too commonplace, given their obvious restrictions. However, as long as they're used sparingly, they'll surely find a place as a charming throwback to a bygone era. Jericho is the closest thing to a loudmouth territories manager in today's WWE; he just happens to be an in-ring competitor as well. Logic dictates that he'll do the stipulation justice.

THE SHARK CAGE

With Kevin Owens vs. Roman Reigns on the horizon, we take an affectionate look at the history and relevance of the seldom-seen shark cage stipulation...



NETWORK WATCH

Words: Benjamin A. Richardson

Wrestling is famous for its road stories: tales of highway hijinks have long been the bedrock of shoot interviews, offering those on the outside the most tantalising of glimpses into the exciting and often frankly unbelievable lifestyle of a pro-wrestler. What fans wouldn't give to be a fly on the rear-view mirror during these protracted car journeys.

So you'd think that capturing these adventures on film and condensing them for consumption would be the perfect concept for the Network, a platform often starved for actually entertaining original content. Unfortunately, **WWE Ride Along: Dallas Detour** is more like a sedate Sunday drive to the garden centre with your grandma than the rip-roaring road trips of a hallowed, bygone age. Of course, the whole romp is manufactured - we're not going to see Braun Strow-

man hanging out the window and trying to open car doors, à la Rick Steiner - and with the passengers acutely aware of the camera trained on them, the action can never shift beyond first gear.

Perhaps certain travellers lend themselves to entertaining antics, but Daniel Bryan isn't one of them. Forced into an SUV with James Ellsworth, the former 'Yes' man proves to be the ultimate negative Nigel, immediately complaining about the 4x4's carbon emissions, before pulling out a box of hankies and snottng all over the uber-jobber's shiny new dashboard. It's one thing to 'go green', but this takes it too far.

Bryan really is a blanket wetter than the sea, instantly calling his wife Brie the second the car enters the freeway to let her know he's safe. Poor Bella can't even utter a single word without being first reminded that she's on a TV show ("so watch your mouth!") after which Bryan pedantically nit-picks her pronunciation of 'lozenge', as if she cares one jot. It's all so sedate, you can practically see the moss growing.

There's finally a bit of tension added

to proceedings when it seems Bryan is about to piss himself thanks to one of his borderline-OCD 'road rules' which dictates the car must not pull over until it needs gas. A desperate Ellsworth tries to bribe his companion into taking a pit stop with the enticement of a beer, but it's no use; the American Killjoy is teetotal. He won't even pause to restock on tissues, but is happy to whinge about their depletion. Bryan does touch upon the out-of-body experience he used to feel when entering the ring, but that's about as close as things come to the 'totally off their tits' road stories of the past. Ric Flair'd be rolling in his grave, if he was dead.

To break up the pedestrian pace, we're also riding along with former SmackDown tag-team champions Heath Slater and Rhyno, in what can generously be described as 'the party car'. It's thrill-a-minute as they drive over a small cone. Will the capers ever cease? Later, the pair stop in a service station and inspect some granite tiles, neither deigning to make the obvious Rock/ Stone Cold jokes. Rhyno soon grows tired of the mounting frivolity, and decides to school the ignorant Slater on US Presidential history like a donnish uncle. The 'cool' cap is

There's finally a bit of tension added to proceedings when it seems Bryan is about to piss himself, thanks to his 'road rules' which dictate the car must not pull over until it needs gas...

off, and the sweater-vests back on. As with Bryan, the former ECW champion isn't exactly the ideal candidate for this format: he's a 41 year old part-time politician whose real name is 'Terry'. You half expect him to tune into Radio 4 and ask his impudent pseudo-nephew to pipe down at any moment.

To totally dispel the flimsy illusion that we're cruising along with 'the boys', Ride Along contains plenty of subtle touches which remind us this is unequivocally WWE-scripted. Daniel Bryan mentioning the word "Russia" strikes the company's culturally-insensitive knee with a hammer, causing Cossack music to reflexively pipe in. Earlier on, the clearly bored Ellsworth reminisces on his days riding with 'Adam Ugly' in a segment designed to deride independent wrestling as cheap, hokey fare. The message is simple: support those 'other' promotions and this is what you get. Unlike our champions, those pure-breds of the WWE system, AJ Styles and Kevin Owens.

The tedium is briefly interrupted by the sat-nav for some added flavour, but she soon loses interest. You begin to apply all those 'tiredness can kill: take a break' signs to this show, when Daniel

Bryan unexpectedly shatters the coma-inducing torpor like a slap on a bowling green. In an atypical outburst, the world's toughest vegan suddenly turns stridently sexist, lambasting not just his wife but all women for being preoccupied with pointless nonsense. When it seems like the programme is about to sluggishly roll to a standstill, a proverbial deer runs onto the road. It's not good, but it is interesting.

WWE should know better than anyone: car-crash TV sells.

The sense of injustice following Jimmy Snuka's non-conviction for the wrongful death of Nancy Argentino - a case for which he was never legally exonerated - should have been enough to guide WWE's moral compass when it came to acknowledging his death. For a company usually so hyper-sensitive when it comes to negative press affecting their image, the most understated of on-screen obituaries seemed the sensible route. After all, the organisation scrubbed their most celebrated legend Hulk Hogan from the record books in the wake of privately exchanged racist remarks; how could they give the full-blown tribute treatment to a near-certain murderer?

WWE's eventual eulogy was so effusive in lionising Jimmy Snuka that it could almost have passed for parody, were it not so utterly distasteful. A super-slick and super-sentimental video package glorified the deceased in a manner usually reserved for industry icons, not probable killers. Understandably, the company's tactless decision was met with widespread disapproval, held up as yet another example of their distressingly consistent indelicacy.

You'd think somebody, somewhere, in Titan Towers must have got the message. Apparently not: quite aside from quietly removing the tribute from further broadcasts of Raw, WWE made the staggering decision to upload it to the Network as the exordium to a new **Jimmy Snuka: The Superfly** collection. Worse still, the content was heavily promoted, with subscribers invited via e-mail to "celebrate the life of Jimmy Snuka." Just not the part where he escaped justice for fatally injuring his girlfriend. It's almost as if by not going whole hog on the subject, WWE risk tacitly admitting complicity in the Argentino death. After all, were they aware of the facts, why would they have continued promoting 'Superfly' for years after?



WWE VS THE UK INDEPENDENT SCENE

With WWE aggressively expanding into the UK, the scene has rarely had so many major moving parts at one time. For fans it's fascinating, but for promoters and wrestlers, things are about to get complicated...

Words: Jimmy Richards

Professional wrestling in the United Kingdom has never been in such a state of flux. In the past three months, significant changes across the landscape have turned the scene into a battleground, a political minefield that some promotions and wrestlers are struggling to navigate. It started with ITV's long-awaited relaunch of World of Sport, the former Saturday afternoon wrestling show that had not been on the airwaves since Greg Dyke canned it from the schedule in 1987, broadly stereotyping the audience as, "the old English working class sitting around the telly, staring blankly." ITV offered its WoS participants good money by UK standards to be involved, in addition to exclusivity contracts which prevented them from working on television anywhere else. Before the two-hour special was even filmed, wild figures claiming a potential viewing audience of five million people were thrown around. It was a potential game changer. Vince McMahon was staggered when he heard those numbers. His instruction to his staff was clear, concise: He instructed them to, "Kill it!"

There were other players in the UK wrestling industry that WWE felt they could no longer ignore either. Insane Championship Wrestling, a renegade group based

in Glasgow, Scotland with an extensive cult following, had been setting the scene on fire for years. ICW announced in 2015 that they would be holding their 2016 supershow – Fear and Loathing IX – at Glasgow's 13,000 capacity SSE Hydro. In April 2016, WWE announced their first ever Raw and SmackDown tapings at the venue – to be held two weeks before the ICW show – in what was clearly an intentional attempt to hurt the group's draw (They still ended up pulling a crowd in excess of 6,000).

Also making waves were PROGRESS, based in London, who built their foundations on showcasing the finest British wrestlers and promoting their brand as "punk rock wrestling". Down the road was Rev:Pro, whose modus operandi was quite the opposite. As well as utilising the best British talent, they also flew in big names from across the world – they were the super-show/fantasy match promotion. In the middle of 2016, What Culture Pro Wrestling (WCPW), the offshoot promotion of WhatCulture.com's YouTube channel, launched, and instantly became a major player thanks to its unparalleled reach and almost immediate foray into weekly live television (on YouTube) and pay-per-view. Streaming service FloSlam got in on the act, signing British promotions IPW:UK and Lucha Forever to deals for live streamed shows on their website.

Evidently, McMahon felt that WWE's hold on the UK scene was slipping. While they were undoubtedly still the market leader – their bi-annual tours routinely draw tens of thousands of fans – there was a definite uprising taking place underneath. WWE had every reason to be concerned, especially about ITV. Flagship show Monday Night Raw only generates around 50,000 viewers on Sky Sports 5 each week. The ITV show, if the numbers were true, would be pulling one-hundred times that. Losing control of his second biggest market outside of the United States was a risk McMahon felt he could not afford to take. Talent scout William Regal and McMahon's son-in-law Paul "Triple H" Levesque, the head of WWE Developmental, were tasked with leading the response, formulating a plan to put the ball back in WWE's court: they would create their own UK promotion.

While WWE denied it, the formation of the WWE United Kingdom Championship and the announcement of a tournament to crown the first champion – revealed at a press conference in December – was a hastily arranged response to ITV (Levesque has since claimed that while not influenced by World of Sport, WWE did strategically bring the tournament forward because of it). WWE offered several British independent wrestlers year-long contracts that paid just shy of \$20,000 per annum (\$10,000 less than the starting salary at NXT) to be involved, looking to trump ITV to talent before World of Sport was greenlit as a permanent series. Those offered deals were not contacted until late November, with the contracts not sent out until 9/12, less than one week before the announcement of the tournament.

In an interview held at the press conference, Regal, when quizzed as to what restrictions the deals would impose on the signed talent in terms of working for other UK promotions, stated: "There's zero restriction on anyone working anywhere except for the companies that won't let these fellows work for them. They're free agents, just as long as when we need them for certain dates – we're gonna give them plenty of notice – we're gonna possibly need you for this. This is not the big bad wolf coming in and trying to take away anything from anybody." He later clarified, "With certain things [there is] probably conflict of interest - because other places' contracts are no different from us, but I think that's only one or two things. So no, go out and work and do whatever you want to do."

A precedent had already been set: When WWE signed Samoa Joe, he was given a unique contract that allowed him to continue working independent dates while part

of the NXT roster. Within a matter of weeks, WWE changed their minds and signed Joe to a permanent deal that removed him from the indies and made him exclusive WWE property. Those paying attention to WWE business practices over the years – and this goes way back to the territory days – fully expected the statements to be rendered moot within a matter of weeks.

It was actually only days before WWE went against Regal's proclamations and began wielding their newfound power over the UK scene. WCPW were the first victims of the WWE contracts, with regulars Joseph Conners, Tyler Bate, Trent Seven, and Pete Dunne all prevented from appearing on the group's YouTube shows, iPPV events, and paid on demand service What Culture Extra. They were still permitted to work in dark matches, though seeing as WCPW's entire business model revolves around filming its shows, it rendered the quartet effectively useless to them. The four were pulled from all future dates effective immediately, starting with the 5/1 live YouTube broadcast of KirbyMania (Conners, however, was given special dispensation from the company to work the event and finish up his storyline with Joe Hendry).

Other promotions began to suffer shortly afterwards. On 19/1, IPW:UK released the following statement: "Unfortunately, in the early hours of this morning we learnt that due to contractual obligations with the WWE, certain wrestlers will be unable to appear on our FloSlam live broadcast this Sunday, namely in this instance, Pete Dunne and Joseph Conners." Lucha Forever were hit similarly, with they too forced to remove Dunne from their 17/4 debut show because of their FloSlam deal. The following day saw further withdrawals. The Working a Resthold podcast had to cancel Dunne, Seven, and Mark Andrews from a 28/1 live podcast, citing, "WWE contractual obligations," as the reason why.

Elsewhere, on 14/1, video game advertorial vehicle 5 Star Wrestling (which will soon be rebranded Dominant Wrestling Championship) announced that their 28/1 show from Dundee, Scotland featuring a host of imported stars, would be broadcast live on UK digital channel Spike TV, which is owned by terrestrial station Channel 5. After thirty years of wrestling struggling to secure mainstream television, two came along within the same month. However, Spike does not have anything like the reach and built-in viewership of ITV (it's top rated shows each week pull around 200,000 viewers), so how much penetration it will have remains to be seen.

and in October 1998, he signed an eight year deal with WWE, reporting to their Memphis developmental territory to work on converting his extensive amateur attributes into an act fit for sports entertainment.

Outside of a one-off appearance in a jingoistic Sunday Night Heat segment with Tiger Ali Singh, Angle would debut proper at November 1999's Survivor Series, following intentionally heavy-handed vignettes that proclaimed him 'the most celebrated real athlete in WWE history'. A self-proclaimed role model, the smarmy 'Three I's' (Intensity, Integrity & Intelligence) saw him instantly talking down to crowds. Though a grinning 'American Hero' may have once been a lead babyface with his own bus, the business had irreversibly changed, and a sanctimonious Gold Medallist was perfect fodder as a heel in an industry lead by anti-heroes 'Stone Cold' Steve Austin and The Rock. Angle played his role to perfection. Frustrating the audience by working an amateur style in the early portions of his first match with Shawn Stasiak, Kurt paused mid-match to angrily chastise the bored crowd, exclaiming that 'You do not boo an Olympic Gold Medallist'. It was an inspired character decision, as the boos of indifference turned to boos of anger from being told off by a condescending Olympian.

Winning the Intercontinental and European Titles in February 2000, Kurt began a prize-laden rookie year many commentators consider the best in the history of the industry. Crowned King of the Ring in June, Angle showed remarkable aptitude for someone so new to the business. He layered his character further in a gripping love triangle storyline with Triple H and Stephanie McMahon-Helmsley. Despite a disappointing payoff to the the romance plot at September's Unforgiven Pay-Per-View, Kurt would defeat The Rock a month later to win his first ever WWE Title, only eleven months after his debut. Angle had been a revelation, ascending lightyears beyond expectations and rapidly amassing a body of work to rival any superstar on the roster.

Dropping the title in a sensational rematch against The Rock at February's No Way Out, Angle continued working main events, including a legendary pro-

gramme with Steve Austin in the summer of 2001. Eventually on opposite sides of the WWE/Alliance storyline, the two would first clash in a war over Vince McMahon's affections, crafting some of the finest comedy WWE has ever produced. Each week, Angle and Austin would engage in an increasingly daft turf war backstage, with 'Stone Cold' becoming increasingly more paranoid whilst Kurt played his buffoon sidekick.

Comedy had been a key ingredient in Kurt's success getting over as a heel, but as the foil in his 'Dumb and Dumber' relationship with Austin, Angle showed his incredible versatility as a performer. Able to mesh the jokes with his intense in-ring persona, Kurt had become one of the most valuable commodities to company, and was rewarded with several more World Title reigns as a fiercely reliable all-rounder atop the promotion.

Unfortunately, Angle's in-ring dedication had a price, and moving into 2003, he would risk paralysis working a WrestleMania WWE Title main event with Brock Lesnar. Just about surviving the contest, Angle took time off to heal, but elected to undergo a non-invasive neck surgery in order to reduce his recovery time from a year to three months. Angle seemed superhuman, but would later reveal spiralling drug and alcohol problems that would stick with him for over a decade as he continued to go full throttle in every match he worked.

Angle's unravelling physical and mental health lead to a surprising 2006 separation from WWE. The announcement just weeks later that he'd signed with TNA subsequently sent shockwaves through the industry, and raised ethical questions about a company that would enable the continued suffering of one of it's performers. That said, Angle admitted how the lighter workload adding years to his career, with TNA's gentler

Angle's dedication had a price, and moving into 2003, he would risk paralysis working a WrestleMania main event with Brock Lesnar

Despite the innumerable obstacles the Olympic Gold Medallist has encountered, Wrestlemania weekend will vindicate the inhuman dedication Kurt has always had for his second life

taping schedule at least affording Kurt a slightly improved recovery time.

Spending nearly a decade with the scattergun Orlando outfit, Kurt would build a second career as the huge fish in a tiny pond. Continuing to work at the very highest level, his star aura contributed to the muddled TNA ascensions of AJ Styles, Bobby Roode, James Storm, and most famously, Samoa Joe. Alongside a blistering series of matches to mark Kurt's arrival with the brand, the two would headline one of the highest drawing TNA Pay-Per-Views ever, as Angle put 'The Samoan Submission Machine' over clean as a sheet in their steel cage World Title main event at Lockdown 2008.

The introduction of Kurt's real-life wife Karen into storylines underscored a challenging time in his personal life, as the two would eventually divorce for real in 2008, shortly before Karen began a relationship with TNA co-founder Jeff Jarrett. Despite this, Jarrett and Angle would work together multiple times, normally in crowd-pleasing brawls that appeared to completely refresh 'Double J' as an in-ring performer.

Though still the most consistent professional wrestler in North America, Angle would struggle to shake the demons that had plagued much of his career. A raft of scrapes with police between 2007 and 2013 had many fans fearing the eventual worst for Kurt, but a rehab-

ilitation stint after yet another driving charge seemed to stick, and the Olympian now professes to have been clean and sober for three years.

Following his TNA departure in 2016, Angle even had his first ever run on the independent circuit, working notably for Revolution Pro Wrestling and What Culture Pro Wrestling, where he will wrestle his final ever date in the United Kingdom on February 12th's True Destiny card in Milton Keynes. Beyond his Hall of Fame induction, it will be interesting to see if Kurt remains a presence on WWE television. Though unlikely to be cleared to work a full time schedule, Angle may be capable of a showpiece match at the occasional supershow, and could still be relied on to bring his unique blend of credibility and comedy to a speaking role, possibly as a mouthpiece or even a General Manager.

Despite the innumerable obstacles the Olympic Gold Medallist has encountered, WrestleMania weekend will vindicate the inhuman dedication Kurt had for his second life post-1996. Wrestling Observer scribe Dave Meltzer named him 'Wrestler of the Decade' in 2010, highlighting his unprecedented consistency and substantial gifts far beyond many to ever lace boots. Regardless of how things pan out now, fans can rejoice that 'The Wrestling Machine' is personally and professionally exactly where he deserves to be. It's true, it's damn true.

NEWS

A fortnight removed from his Hall Of Fame induction announcement, Kurt Angle is still dominating headlines - his removal from a prior commitment has set tongues wagging. Over in Japan, as one streaming service grows in popularity, the seed for another is planted...

/WWE

In an attempt to boost the active subscriber count to over two million, WWE is once again giving away the Network to lapsed subscribers over WrestleMania season. It makes a degree of sense – WWE's retention rate on the Network is poor. Since launch they have lost as many subscribers as they have gained, though many of those may have been international sign ups claiming to be American who then cancelled when the service was launched in their respective country. Incredibly, WWE are offering three months for free – which will incorporate Royal Rumble, Fast Lane, Elimination Chamber, and WrestleMania. These free trials have worked well in the past, albeit with diminishing returns each time the company tries it. Throwing away four pay-per-views for nothing seems illogical, but WWE is thinking of Wall Street. They feel the numbers must significantly top last year's to show growth, even if it does mean fudging the figures by including free sign ups alongside those who have paid. The hope is that the majority will not cancel after 'Mania, though as noted the Network drop off rate is historically terrible, so that is blind logic at best.

www.whatculture.com/wwe

In the same interview, Triple H discussed WWE's failure to secure **Zack Sabre Jr.** to a deal, noting that it was not the right timing. Nor, it turns out, was it the right deal. Having already turned down a full-time contract with WWE following the Cruiserweight Classic, Sabre was then offered one of the \$20,000 UK deals – significantly lower than the contract he had already rejected. Sabre, understandably, refused again.

The fluttering of eyelashes in the direction of **Kenny Omega** continues. In an interview this past week, **Triple H** praised Omega's talent and noted in no uncertain terms that he is interested in bringing him to WWE. New Japan officials remain in the dark about Omega's next move, though they are said to not be worried and expect him back for the New Japan Cup. Neither party has publicly commented, and historically when there is radio silence from two sides it tends to mean that the talent has jumped ship. Many still expect Omega to appear at the Royal Rumble, but that simply cannot happen. Omega is still under contract to New Japan, and he is already announced for a show in Santiago, Chile that date for Wrestling Superstar.

In injury news: **Darren Young's** is a serious one – he will miss six months of ring action. It may have been the best thing that could have happened to him. Young's career was meandering, he was surely one of the names on the potential chopping block, but because WWE is always fearful of negative PR, they are unlikely to release him while on the shelf. **Tajiri** suffered a knee injury at the recent NXT tapings and is still not cleared to return. There is no word on when he is expected to be back in action. **Enzo Amore** is back from his knee injury and has returned to working house shows. **Hideo Itami**, whose WWE career has been so badly derailed by injuries over the years – the most recent being to his neck – is also cleared to return. **Vince McMahon** recently underwent surgery for a second procedure on a torn quad he suffered in September. He is currently getting around on crutches.

In the same interview, Hunter also discussed WWE's continuing foray into the United Kingdom (see the feature elsewhere in this issue), talking about the possibility of a major pay-per-view taking place in the country. He noted that while doing that was a goal, it was a "massive undertaking". It is one they have managed more than once in the past – WWE used to run bi-annual UK exclusive live pay-per-view events in the country between 1999 and 2003. The two night WWE UK Championship Tournament was also, effectively, a major pay-per-view event. So they ability to do it is there. Now more than ever the time difference issues mean nothing, and the gate WWE would draw in the UK for a major pay-per-view is guaranteed to be far higher than what they would do for the same show in the States. Hunter's comments seem to be the answer of a politician, designed to throw people off the scent. In fact, we would be shocked if WWE did not run a major Network event in the UK this year.

/WWE

Beth Phoenix is the latest name floating around for inclusion in the 2017 Hall of Fame. WWE inducts a female competitor each year, and Phoenix – who is on good terms with WWE – is a logical choice based on WWE's criteria for inclusion. WWE has also begun hinting at possible dream matches for confirmed 2017 HoF inductee **Kurt Angle** should he return to the ring, with **Rusev** one of the names mentioned. Rusev has no obvious opponent for WrestleMania, and Angle would be a logical option – if **Vince McMahon** will let him wrestle. Angle was recently pulled from commentary duties at 5 Star Wrestling's live TV broadcast on 28/1, the same night as the Royal Rumble, so there is a chance he will be in the Rumble match. Angle, when discussing who he would want to induct him into the Hall stated that **Steve Austin** was the obvious choice, so that is probably the direction they will go, if Austin agrees.

AJ Styles was the victim of a robbery during the 16/1 live event in Jonesboro, Arkansas. During his main event three-way with John Cena and Baron Corbin, a thief stole a black bag belonging to Styles containing \$8,000 (\$7,000 of which was in Japanese yen), as well as an iPhone, some Beats headphones, a small screen TV, an Xbox 360, and six video games. It is the second time in four months that the Convocation Center has seen performers robbed, with fifteen of Toledo University of Toledo football team reporting missing items during a game in September.

Goldberg is confirmed for the Fastlane pay-per-view, where it is expected that he will wrestle in the main event. Obviously no opponent has been named yet, but Roman Reigns and Braun Strowman seem the likely choices.

Chris Jericho has signed a contract extension that will see him with the company at least through WrestleMania. His current heel persona has been such a success that this comes as no surprise. This run is the longest sustained spell Jericho has spent as an active performer in several years.

Behind the scenes, rumour has it that **Brian James** (formerly **Road Dogg**) has been promoted to the position of head writer on SmackDown ahead of Ryan Ward.

Asuka at NXT TakeOver: Toronto. While she would have seriously strengthened things in Orlando, she will still be a welcome addition to a fairly thin women's roster on the blue brand.

In ratings news: Without any competition from football, Raw on 16/1 drew **3.26 million viewers**, way up from the previous week's episode which featured **The Undertaker** and **Shawn Michaels**. The show started strong with 3.52 million, dropping off to 3.07 by the third hour. Once again, this is strong evidence that three hours is far too long. SmackDown Live on 17/1 headlined by **Becky Lynch** vs. **Alexa Bliss** in a steel cage match pulled in 2.65 million viewers, up 100,000 from the previous week. So much for SmackDown beating Raw in the ratings a few weeks back. They have been well behind in the weeks since. Total Divas on 11/1 did 584,000 viewers, and an almost identical number the following week. The show is in trouble – the ratings are the lowest they have ever been. The UK Tournament was a success on the WWE Network – both nights were the most watched programme on the service the week they aired. The shows beat NXT's regular weekly broadcast (which was in 4th place) and 205 Live, which was down in 8th, below historic pay-per-views and Ride Along. That does not bode well for the cruiser-weight show.

Shawn Michaels claimed in an interview with ESPN that neither Vince McMahon nor Triple H have ever approached him about returning to the ring since his 2010 retirement. Take that with a pinch of salt. Michaels has been asked on more than one occasion to make a return, and each time he has declined the offer, adamant that his classic bout with The Undertaker will remain his last.

As expected, Mickie James returned to WWE in a full-time capacity on the 17/1 SmackDown Live. James was offered a contract following her strong showing against

WWE Home Video will be releasing a **Seth Rollins** DVD/Blu-ray in May currently titled Building The Architect. It will contain a feature-length documentary and a select matches from his WWE career (and probably some from elsewhere). A four-disc set titled Best of the 2000's will be released in April. It will be fascinating to see the stark differences between the red hot product of 2000 and the limp output of 2010 contrasted side by side. In an effort to boost flagging sales, WWE Home Video is grouping together the yet-to-happen 2017 editions of Elimination Chamber and Fastlane as one "double feature" release. That's sure to irritate collectors who want everything uniform. A documentary covering the post-WrestleMania edition of Raw will first air on the Network before receiving a physical release with additional scenes.

WWE look to have their Road to Wrestlemania plans almost in order, and the expected participants in next month's Elimination Chamber main event are...

*AJ Styles
John Cena
The Miz
Dolph Ziggler
Baron Corbin
Dean Ambrose.*

Chris Jericho, Big Cass, Baron Corbin, Big Show, Cesaro, and Sheamus. Seth Rollins lost his spot to Zayn on Raw. As noted last week, Samoa Joe is expected to be in the match. **Tye Dillinger** appearing at #10 seems like a given. Kane is almost guaranteed to be involved too. WWE recently pulled some of its UK talent from an event taking place on the same day as the Rumble, leading to speculation that they would be in San Antonio either as part of TakeOver or the Rumble. We would not be surprised to see **Tyler Bate** in the match.

/UK

WCPW announced a unique **Pro Wrestling World Cup** tournament featuring sixty-four competitors to be held at locations across the world. There will be seven separate eight-man national qualifiers featuring wrestlers from **England, Scotland, Japan, USA, Mexico, Germany, and Canada**, plus a Rest of the World qualifying bracket. Two will advance from the eight-man tournaments to a multi-day finals to be held in the UK over the summer. The first qualifier (England) will take place on March 21 from Nottingham's Harvey Hadden Sports Village. The names of the competitors will be revealed in coming weeks. WCPW has also added **Moose** to the Loaded tapings in Edinburgh on 29/1.

To clarify, **5 Star Wrestling's** live event on 28/1 is airing on Spike TV, not on UK terrestrial station Channel 5. The confusion comes because Viacom International owns both stations (as well as several others including Nickelodeon, VH1, and Comedy Central). Should 5 Star be a roaring success then there is a possibility that Channel 5 will pick up the show, but it would need to do significant numbers well beyond Spike's current top rated shows.

Four new matches have been added to the Royal Rumble: **Charlotte Flair vs. Bayley** for the Raw Women's Title, and **Becky Lynch, Naomi, and Nikki Bella vs. Alexa Bliss, Mickie James, and Natalya** in a 6-woman tag on the main show, and **Cesaro & Sheamus vs. Karl Anderson & Luke Gallows** for the Raw tag belts and **Sasha Banks vs. Nia Jax**, both on the pre-show. So far 19 superstars have declared themselves as appearing in the show's titular match. They are: **The Undertaker, Goldberg, Brock Lesnar, Dean Ambrose, The Miz, Sami Zayn, Dolph Ziggler, Big E, Xavier Woods, Kofi Kingston, Braun Strowman, Rusev, Bray Wyatt, Randy Orton, Mojo Rawley, Luke Harper,**

Rev:Pro presented High Stakes from a sold out York Hall in London on 21/1. **Zack Sabre Jr.** defeated **Marty Scurll** in a 40-minute cracker. British Heavyweight Champion **Katsuyori Shibata** retained against **Matt Riddle** in a contender for match of the year. **Trent Sevon, Pete Dunne, and Martin Stone (Danny Burch** in WWE) all wrestled on the card.

/NXT

In notable happenings from the 18/1 episode of NXT: **Nikki Cross** squashed **Kennedy Lewis**; a backstage segment set up a match for the future between **No Way Jose** and **Kona Reeves**; **Roderick Strong** debuted a new entrance theme before pinning **Steve**

Cutler following the Sick Kick; **Tye Dillinger** addressed his future, only to be interrupted by **Eric Young** and **SanitY** demanding that he join them. Dillinger refused, so **Killian Dain** (still billed as Damo) attacked him and took the

open fourth spot in the group; **TM61** upset **The Revival** when **Nick Miller** rolled up **Scott Dawson** for the win. The Revival attacked TM61 after the match, doing an injury angle with Shane Thorne; the main event segment was a contract signing between NXT Champion **Shinsuke Nakamura** and **Bobby Roode**.

Steve Corino joined the Performance Centre as a coach this past week. He is the latest in a recent spate of ex-pros who have never worked for WWE as wrestlers to have signed on to train future talent. Corino's peak was probably in 2000 when he won the ECW Championship in the company's dying days, with his name rarely coming up in the mainstream since. He did have try outs with WWE in 2007, but they felt his act was too old school to work. Corino's hiring is an unusual choice – stylistically he is nothing like what is expected from NXT performers, nor does he have any experience wrestling “WWE style”.

The rumoured **Andre Cien Almas vs. Roderick Strong** match at TakeOver: San Antonio is now confirmed. **TM61 vs. The Revival** seems likely after the angle on this week's show. There is a possibility of **Kassius Ohno** and **Aleister Black** performing on the card. A UK Championship defence is not off the cards either. **Pete Dunne** would be the likely challenger if that happens.

Kimberly Frankele, the former **Kimber Lee**, has been working recent house shows under her real name. She is expected to be given her official NXT name shortly.

There will be an awards show airing on the Network prior to the **TakeOver: San Antonio** event on 28/1. It is the NXT equivalent of the Slammys, though hopefully without the silliness.

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In contract news, there is nothing new to report on **Drew Galloway**, who is said to be considering various options. WWE wants **Matt Hardy** and **Jeff Hardy**, but the schedule may be a factor in the duo turning them down. Matt is very happy with the level of creative control afforded to him by Impact, and the freedom he has to manage his own schedule with outside bookings. Chances are both will re-sign with the company, but as of yet, they have not.

A few minor changes occurred in recent storylines, with **Aron Rex** finally allowed to show his personality in a Liberace-type gimmick alongside **Rockstar Spud**. Elsewhere, **The American Wolves** split up when **Davey Richards** turned on **Eddie Edwards**, costing him in a title match with **Lashley**.

Impact on 12/1 did **277,000** views. The following week on 19/1 showed an improvement, up to **310,000**. Neither should be considered good.

Anthem is forging ahead with getting rid of the TNA initials, and from now on the group will simply be known as Impact. While undoubtedly a positive move due to the stigma TNA had, Impact is similarly tarnished after years of being the name of the groups TV show. It also causes some confusion over the name of the show. These are merely cosmetic problems, however. Impact needs to change far more than its name to rebuild its reputation after years of mismanagement.

Correction from last week: it was **Josh Barnett** who debuted on the TV tapings, not John. That was a misprint.

/JAPAN

New Japan World, the company's online streaming service, generated a sharp increase in subscriber numbers on the strength of **Wrestle Kingdom XI**. The company now boasts approximately 60,000 new memberships, a good 15,000 of which are international. **President Takaaki Kidani** has confirmed that over half of the latest sign-ups have come from abroad, which augers well for the summer foray onto American soil but hinges, precariously, on the retention of **Kenny Omega**. The league has also experienced an upsurge in domestic popularity. For the first time this millennium, its TV provider, TV-Asahi, afforded New Japan a two-and-a-half hour slot to show a truncated version of **Wrestle Kingdom XI**.

The whacky **DDT**, which promotes a sex doll as a prominent performer, launched its own streaming service on January 22. For \$7.91, you too can watch **Kota Ibushi** and **Kenny Omega** wage war in the lake of a camping ground.

Kidani also suggested that plans are afoot to create a subsidiary territory based in the U.S., which is the next logical step following the G1 Climax special preview events in July. It's an astute move, if in fact the wheels are in motion; the New Japan headliners are a not inconsiderable draw when the league cross promotes with Ring Of Honor, but those matches are naturally politicised and borderline inconsequential in the wider scheme of things. **Kazuchika Okada vs. Dalton Castle** at Death Before Dishonor XIV, a decent if curious pairing on paper, could not have been more predictable. The vast majority of match outcomes are rather too easy to predict in what amount to little more than exhibitions – something of a novelty in and of themselves. The prospect of watching the top guys wage war amongst themselves in bouts much more likely to be canonised, however, is a more appealing one. Record numbers tuned into **Wrestle Kingdom XI** because it mattered. It was a big deal. Evidently, this has not been lost on Kidani.

The company's **Fantastica Mania** shows, predicated mostly on the junior scene, have continued apace. On 22/1, **Hiromu Takahashi** gained the upper hand over imminent IWGP Junior Heavyweight Title challenger **Dragon Lee** by retaliating to his 5/1 attack, felling and unmasking him in the aftermath of a tag bout which also involved **BUSHI** and **Titan**. Their singles match takes place at **The New Beginning** on 11/2.

On the same night, Zero1 ran an event on which the legendary **Atsushi Onita** won a Bakuha Royal Rumble Match after the signature explosives detonated in the proximity of the unfortunate **TARU**. Onita will probably still be blowing himself up in 2027.

Kenny Omega recently revealed that his ‘Cleaner’ persona was, before he tweaked it, based loosely on **Steve Austin's** Ringmaster gimmick in the WWE. The idea was to position Omega as a strong and silent destroyer, one with an array of mouthpieces speaking on his behalf. Mercifully, for his career, he followed Austin's footsteps by abandoning it the first chance that came his way.

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/TNA

One positive step was the presence of **Jeff Jarrett** and **Dutch Mantel** at the recent tapings in consultant roles. Both are expected to be given positions of power as Anthem rejigs the pieces behind the scenes. What that means for Jarrett's own promotion **Global Force Wrestling** – which he has been struggling to get off the ground for two years – awaits to be seen. Another blast from the past, **Don West**, has also returned to the company. The former commentator is working in the merchandise department. There are no plans for him to return to the announce booth.

RESULTS

WWE

20.01.17

Binghamton, New York, USA

The Golden Truth, The Big Show & Sin Cara def. The Shining Stars, Titus O'Neil & Jinder Mahal; Braun Strowman def. Sami Zayn; Rich Swann def. Neville and TJ Perkins; Sasha Banks, Bayley & Alicia Fox def. Charlotte Flair, Dana Brooke & Nia Jax; Cesaro & Sheamus def. The New Day, Luke Gallows & Karl Anderson and Enzo & Cass; Seth Rollins def. Rusev; Roman Reigns def. Kevin Owens.

21.01.17

Indiana, Pennsylvania, USA

Big Cass def. Rusev; The Big Show, Sin Cara & The Golden Truth def. Curtis Axel, Titus O'Neil & The Shining Stars; Rich Swann def. Neville and TJ Perkins; Braun Strowman def. Sami Zayn; Sheamus & Cesaro def. The New Day and Luke Gallows & Karl Anderson; Bayley, Sasha Banks & Alicia Fox def. Charlotte Flair, Dana Brooke & Nia Jax; Seth Rollins def. Chris Jericho via DQ; Seth Rollins & Roman Reigns def. Chris Jericho & Kevin Owens

22.01.17

Fort Wayne, Indiana, USA

Heath Slater & Rhyno def. Breezango; Baron Corbin def. Kalisto; Kalisto def. Curt Hawkins; Jack Swagger & Mojo Rawley def. The Vaudevillains; American Alpha def. The Ascension and Bray Wyatt & Luke Harper; Becky Lynch & Naomi def. Alexa Bliss & Carmella; The Miz def. Apollo Crews; Dean Ambrose def. AJ Styles

NXT

19.01.17

Orlando, Florida, USA

Jack Gallagher def. Tony Nese; Lana def. Kimberly Frankele; Steve Cutler def. Adrian Jaoude; Angelo Dawkins & Montez Ford def. Riddick Moss & Tino Sabbatelli; Roderick Strong def. Elias Samson; Billie Kay & Peyton Royce def. Aliyah & Liv Morgan; Aleister Black def. Patrick Clark; #DIY & Shinsuke Nakamura def. The Authors of Pain & Wesley Blake.

20.01.17

Jacksonville, Florida, USA

Ember Moon and Aliyah co-won a battle royal; Aleister Black def. Wesley Blake; Steve Cutler def. Cezar Bononi; Oney Lorcan def. Kona Reeves; Alexander Wolfe & Killian Dain def. Montez Ford & Angelo Dawkins; Roderick Strong def. Patrick Clark; Ember Moon def. Aliyah; Shinsuke Nakamura & Heavy Machinery def. Elias Samson & The Revival

21.01.17

Fort Pierce, Florida, USA

Aleister Black def. Patrick Clark; Mandy Rose def. Heidi Lovelace; Brennan Williams def. Kishan Raftar; The Revival def. Angelo Dawkins & Montez Ford, Heavy Machinery and Alexander Wolf & Killian Dain; Elias Samson def. Oney Lorcan; Daria Berenato def. Macey Estrella; #DIY & Tye Dillinger def. The Authors of Pain & Wesley Blake

NJPW

21.01.17

Tokyo, Japan

Gedo, Jedo, Epestho & Raziel def. Blue Panther Jr., Henare, Jushin Liger & Tiger Mask; Stuka Jr. def. OKUMURA; Kazuchika Okada, Will Ospreay & El Barbaro Cavenario def. El Soberano Jr., KUSHIDA & Rysuke Taguchi; BUSHI, EVIL, Hiromu Takahashi, SANADA & Tetsuya Naito def. David Finlay, Dragon Lee, Hiroshi Tanahashi, Juice Robinson & Titan; Euforia & Ultimo Guerrero def. Mistico & Volador Jr.; Rush def. Atlantis; Maximo Sexy def. Hechicero

RPW

21.01.17

London, England

Josh Bodom def. Ryan Smile; Charlie Sterling & Joel Redman def. War Machine; YOSHIHASHI def. Pete Dunne; Zack Sabre Jr. def. Marty Scurll; Trent Seven def. Trevor Lee; Jay White def. Martin Stone; Katsuyori Shibata def. Matt Riddle.

IPW:UK

22.01.17

Rochester, Kent

Tom Dawkins def. Pete Dunne; Chris Brookes & Kid Lykos def. El Ligerio & Martin Kirby; Matt Riddle def. Ryan Smile; The London Riots def. War Machine; Cuban Heat def. Jack Sexsmith; Marty Scurll def. John Morrison; Amazon def. Ruby Summers; Adam Maxted, Jimmy Havoc, Zack Sabre Jr. & Tennessee Honey def. Cieran Donnelly, Sammy Smooth, Danny Duggan & Scott Star

UPCOMING DATES

JANUARY 28TH

4FW - Live! (Thatcham Catholic Hall, Thatcham)

5* WRESTLING - Dominant Wrestling (Dundee Ice Arena, Dundee)

HOPE - Road to The Empire (Buckingham Park Community Centre, Aylesbury)

HOUSE OF PAIN - January Weekender Show Two (St. Ann With Emmanuel Church, Nottingham)

PRESTON CITY WRESTLING ACADEMY/IPW:UK - Academy Wars (PCW Academy, Preston)

PROGRESS/WESTSIDE XTREME WRESTLING (The Garage, London)

PRO EVOLUTION WRESTLING (Merchant's Academy Sports Centre, Bristol)

REVOLUTION PRO WRESTLING - Contenders: Revolution Rumble (Mountbatten Centre, Portsmouth)

SOUTH EAST WRESTLING - Light The Fuse (Hawkinge Community Centre, Hawkinge)

TARGET WRESTLING - LIVE (The Solway Hall Whitehaven, Whitehaven)

JANUARY 29TH

4FW - LIVE! (Somerset Hall, Portishead)

HOPE - EMPIRE (Jurys Inn, Milton Keynes)

HOPE - (Walkabout, Derby)

HOUSE OF PAIN - January Weekender Show Three (Calverton Working Men's Club, Nottingham)

INSANE CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING - Awards 2016 + Hall of Fame (The Garage, Glasgow)

PROGRESS WRESTLING - Chapter 43: Tropic Thunderbastard (Electric Ballroom, London)

TARGET WRESTLING - Live (Lockerbie Town Hall)

WHAT CULTURE PRO WRESTLING - Loaded (Meadowbank Sports Centre, Edinburgh)

FEBRUARY 2ND

WORLD WIDE WRESTLING LEAGUE (Jubilee Centre, Berwick-upon-Tweed)

HOPE - Evolution 45: Papers And Poetry About Estrella (Forest Town Welfare, Mansfield)

KAMIKAZE PRO (Underground III - The Empire, Coventry)

PRESTON CITY WRESTLING (Club Domain, Blackpool)

WORLD WIDE WRESTLING LEAGUE - Showdown (Todmorden Town Hall, Todmorden)

WRESTLEFORCE - Live Wrestling (Smallgains, Canvey)



I always knew that I would come back, I just didn't know when. This is my real home, and even though I was gone longer than when I started, this is where I made my name”

Kurt Steven Angle
January 17th, 2017

