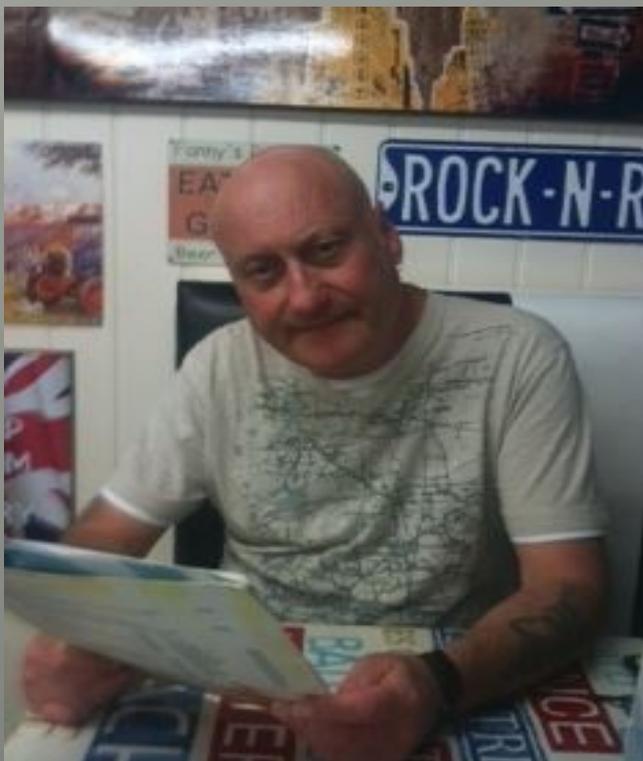




Fanpower

Without the fans there would be no stars, no wrestling, there would be no Heritage.

Chris Newman



Memories Are Made of This

“My Lord Ladies and Gentlemen” this is a written item of “Five Rounds” of several paragraphs each round. After which, hopefully, the Wrestling Heritage readers will feel entertained enough to judge themselves winners by enjoyment ... as was my sincere intention. In other words, to classic Wrestling fans ... (with a few other Sports mentioned purely in passing) ... everywhere ! ... I dedicate the following serial

So without any further delay - Seconds Out - Ding ! ... Round 1.

In 1960 as a lad from 8 years of age onwards (I still attend, these days as a steward) I was taken at regular intervals - that by the time I was 10 - became fortnightly, to the home games of my local football club Southampton. The Saints were then an aspiring top half of the table side in the old Second Division. Occasionally Dad and I might go to an away match somewhere - but the usual ritual on most “every other Saturday” was bangers n’ mash and a bash of “Grandstand” or “World Of Sport”

Dad loved his Horse Racing and would consequently flick intermittently from the only two television channels there were in the early sixties. However there were lots of other sporting goodies on offer and all in glorious black and white. BBC had Boxing:- America's "Fight Of The Week" might feature Sugar Ray Robinson for instance. Then there were the Big Rugby Union Internationals or the Rugby League complete with distinctive Commentator Eddie Waring ... ("The Talking Trilby") ... who with infectious enthusiasm would describe this then "Northern only" and also winter game so well and so humorously, that it sort of rubbed off. He even identified players covered from top to bottom in cloying mud n' filth. Different times indeed.

Oh and there was something else

Over on the other side, ITV late afternoon - and before the footy results started rolling in, something curiouser and curiouser was going on. It all looked normal enough to begin with ... ah more boxing perhaps. For there was the ring. But no, the combatants had no gloves and wore - not shorts - but trunks resembling swimmers. Hang on, they probably were swimmers. Some also wore what were described as leotards. This was a one piece costume with straps making it all look like someone dressed "out of time" about to step straight out of an old wooden, bathing machine (hut on wheels etc).

The other resemblance to boxing was the presence of a ref who would bark out a few orders to the gladiators involved or shout numbers in regimented, staccato fashion "Wunna, Two Uh" ... and maybe even get to "Three". If this magic number was reached the action would stop. Both competitors would get up off the deck and either start again after ceremonial announcement, via an MC - or finish altogether. Then one of the gloveless fighters who had previously been engaged in appearing to try and tear his opponents head off with his bare hands, would either acknowledge the applause of a packed hall or raise his arms in ultimate triumph.

To reach this adulation had taken the two fighters many a grunt and grimace - a few groans and protestations or a stubborn refusal to cry craven ... as they would of done in medieval times. In other words - give in. The technical term apparently was Submit. The action usually took place over several five minute rounds with pools of sweat mopped from fevered brows by a sometimes tatty looking hand towel. The fighter might also swill water from an old milk bottle or similar and spit it into a bucket (dreadful habit) offered by an assistant - i.e. second who usually carried a blank, neutral type of expression. He certainly didn't offer the combatant he was aiding any "expert advice" on how best to overcome the opposition.

There were holds, throws, slams, escapes and a move that looked like a punch but was actually a forearm - smashed against a torso that must have ended the bout very sore. This latter form of attack was a clearly audible smack ... as clean a sound as the crack of a whip. Opponents heads subsequently rocked back in reciprocation - a dazed look followed.

There were truly wonderful acrobatics at times. One such move would involve an athletic leap, feet first. The soles of the exponents boots (again these resembled those of a boxer) would connect somewhere on a surprised opponent - who appeared to have walked straight into the onslaught. Consequently he would usually go down like a sack of spuds.

This was all great stuff. You WANTED to keep right on watching (Ding !! End Of Round 1*).

Ding! Ding! Round 2

I didn't know who the wrestlers were at first but that didn't take too many weeks to get to know and the "TV Times" magazine was always there to guide you a little, listing the expected bill for a one hours show, weights of fighters, towns of origin etc. The Wrestlers (for this new sporting television craze was known as Professional "all in" Wrestling ... later referred to as freestyle) came in all shapes and sizes. Some were very big men in outsize trunks and bellies to match ... but boy were they mean.

Some though were lean and mean at the same time. One of those (also a heavyweight) had a face like a bulldog chewing a wasp and dark greased back hair. A favoured move of his was to let his "Freddie Truman" (the onetime legendary England pace bowler) styled slicked hair, dangle into the face of his opponent. Step forward Steve Logan.

Another who sometimes joined forces with Logan in dual action known as "tag team" had raven hair pointed in the middle of the temple after the fashion of some of the thirties/forties vampire's films. He could only have also been a wrestling ring villain. Step forward the great Mick McManus the middleweight wrestler the crowds literally loved to hate.

Then there was Mick's deadly London rival, Arsenal supporting Jackie Pallo. Pallo was another fighter the crowds flocked to, in order to vent their hatred. But Jack' was so wonderfully arrogant with it. Candy striped trunks (probably in Arsenal's red n' white) and a great shock of wirey, curly hair with a ribbon tied at the back (just like the great sixties balladeer and rhythm and blues singer P.J. Proby).

Jackie also had this cocky, neck wiggling strut, which had otherwise harmless old ladies brandishing anything from a broom to a fearsome hat pin to get at him. They didn't call Jackie "Mr TV" for nothing. He was sensational. At his peak Jackie was one of wrestling's biggest ever stars. I reckon to have actually ever met either Mick or Jackie "out of the spotlight" would have been or must have been, quite something. Not me though unfortunately.

Then there were the great technicians. Usually lighter weights - but by no means always. One of the lighter variety was called "Royal" whose wrestling father was called "Hessel" a one time famous northern heavyweight. Yet Bert Royal's blonde kid brother and tag partner (both of them heroes not villains) called himself Faulkner. This the real family surname. Confused? So what, it really doesn't matter. They were great - all in an evenings wrestling. And the names? Well ... that's showbiz.

Another wrestler a lightweight, was called Kidd. George Kidd from Dundee. He oozed class and could bring off escapes that even Houdini would have been proud of. Pound for pound he might well have been wrestling's all time best - from a technical point of view - just about anywhere.

Johnny Kwango was another wrestler somewhere around the middle bracket in weight. Black skinned of African descent and from the London area wrestling scene as far as I recall. He possessed an ominous slanting forehead which it wasn't a good idea to get to

know personally. Not if you were in the opposite corner that is. But Johnny could "B Goode". Very good indeed.

Kwango wasn't also without a touch of humour and in addition there were also some genuinely comedic wrestlers. Les Kellett was the prime example. Granite hard but knowing exactly how to create not only a good wrestling show - but one that was liberally sprinkled with great hilarity. Kellett had a real gift for it. In fact pure, slapstick, brilliance would soon develop if Les Kellett was in the ring with that wonderful character actor, Brian Glover, who wrestled as Leon Arras. They, both Kellett and Glover were both top notch Northern grapplers.

Another one time humorous crowd pleaser was a fellow who the "Wrestling Heritage" editors pointed me towards ; his name - Romeo Joe Critchley. You may well have had your chips if you faced this particular wrestler. But this would probably have been across a counter rather than a wrestling ring. He apparently owned a chipper. I dare say he didn't train on them though. Judging by his bio pic he looked in decent shape and would have been, I'm sure, a top class draw for Wrestling fans.

Billy "Tornado" Torontos, was also very funny and another wrestler by the name of Kevin Conneally had that lovely Irish humour about him. Alternatively, other fans cracked up laughing whilst watching Gary "Catweazle" Cooper in action.

Some wrestlers hid their identity behind a head mask worn much like a balaclava - the old style winter woolly headgear that sat over the head after the fashion of medieval chainmail or a Tudor Executioners hood. Only this wrestling mask was of a far more innocent cloth or possibly a non shiney soft leather. The masks were full in the front. Normally - with openings for eyes, mouth - or nose.

"Zebra Kid" - 3 hundred pounds of Maximum Horse Power !!!

You would look very suspect these days parading around in one of those particular disguises. Anywhere, other than in a wrestling ring that is. These days however the masks are very fancy. All glitz and glam. They just don't have the same forbidding effect. Myself I have no interest at all in the current American grappling scene anyway. I'm obviously getting old.

These masked British wrestling anti-heroes from my particular hey-day were mostly villains but not always. Crowds loved the mystery and thirsted for an unmasking - should these wrestlers ever be defeated. Alternatively fans waited patiently for promoters to announce long awaited grudge matches. The punters packed the various types of halls or enjoyed their own personal wrestling arena simply because they had a television set ensconced somewhere in the house. Come Saturday afternoon at whatever the witching hour - the telly would be tuned to the dulcet tones of wrestling Commentator Kent Walton. His smokey, whispered, tones, had such reverence you may have been forgiven for thinking that snooker's own legendary commentator - Ted Lowe had swapped channels and made a huge leap of faith and gone over to the wrestling. Well it could have happened. Why not? It was bloomin' hard work for Ted, describing every snooker move with the various coloured balls to "black and white only" telly watchers.

However joking aside, it must be said, Kent, a born in Egypt, ex serviceman with a Canadian lilt to his accent and former radio disc jockey ("Cool for Cats" etc) was special. A "king size" commentating talent, that would occasionally be caught on camera, drawing on

a “king size” fag. If he described an intricate or clever wrestling move in hushed tones, his reverie would sometimes be broken by a more than “king size” wrestler crashing through the ropes on to his commentary position. Kent’s table was obviously a target. They all worked so well as a team, that great entertainment was always guaranteed. Although it did depend on which wrestlers you liked.

Not for me the Big Daddy’s or Giant Haystacks - gawd rest their souls. For me it was the types of wrestlers and wrestling I have mentioned earlier. Each to his own.

I’ll also say this though, you really wouldn’t have wanted a Shirley Crabtree (Big Daddy) or Big Luke (Giant Haystacks) landing down on or even near you - that’s for sure. Wonder if the late great Kent Walton ever got danger money? (Ding ! End Of Round 2*).
*Break! ... but we wrestle on with the story again soon

Ding! Ding! Round 3

And so it was the shadows of British Wrestling’s past. They had a long run (late fifties to late eighties) in the days when television pulled the punters strings indoors via the square, convex magic eye, of those times, right there in your own gaff. Or alternatively down town or waterfront either in local hall, cinema, theatre, converted swimming baths, seaside pier etc etc. The protagonists themselves became household names some of them. Stars in their own right but mostly not rich. The wrestling was well - a different kind of sporting entertainment altogether.

Mum and Dad would sometimes take me to variety shows at Southampton or nearby Portsmouth when staying with an aunt during School hols. For the age of “Variety” was still not quite dead. So I always looked upon the wrestling even as a lad ... as a piece of theatrical sporting entertainment that was sort of out there on the edge. A kind of backstreet, almost sleazy, type of theatre, where private, physical battles were mixed, matched and acted out with swagger, panache, skill, speed and sometimes sheer brute force ... but never ignorance.

What television did was to allow us all to peer almost voyeuristically into a twilight world that somehow - although it took - like many good things – a while to catch on as a television show - became a national way of life. For its cult followers having been drawn in, began to crowd around television sets up and down the country on Saturdays and late Wednesday evenings. As a consequence of this, the punters “kerchinged” money into the coffers of the promoters and various local pavilions, for the live shows. These were plentiful back then. They went on throughout the week - all over Britain.

Some wrestlers also acted. What better “Panto” villain than someone like Jackie Pallo for instance?

Bomber Pat Roach was also for many years a part of the wonderfully written “Auf Wiedersehen Pet” TV series. Brian Glover aka Leon Arras I’ve already mentioned. He was great in both the movie “Kes” and the first ever episode of the brilliant BBC TV Comedy show Porridge.

“How about this wrestling though”?

This was something I once said to Dad early on in my interest ... or words to that effect. "Well son" he said "I used to go and see it at the old Southampton "Coliseum". This a now long gone venue in Southampton's Portland Terrace area.

Dad said he used to watch a very good promising wrestler at the Coliseum by the name of "Young Reynolds". I only wish I could remember other grapplers he may have told me of from those days during the 87 years my old Pa was alive. The "Coliseum Hall" wrestling took place in the thirties in what must have been a fascinating venue of great character. Until it met - or so I'm told - a particularly dirty fighter - whose method of combat was Blitzkreig. His name I need not tell you was Adolph Hitler. Bombs were a particular finishing move and Southampton, at this time a beautiful city (then town) and great port, was also the spiritual home, of "The Spitfire". It had its inaugural flight right here and was itself based on a previous sporting entertainment champion the "Schneider Trophy" sea plane. Southampton was one of many great towns and cities all over England to suffer badly from World War 2. Our neighbours and historical rivals Portsmouth (Pompey) also had a very bad time of it.

During the sixties and seventies I used to catch Dad sometimes still having a crafty blimp at the wrestling on World Of Sport. Like many of his and my own generation, he was captivated by George Kidd. So were George's opponents for that matter.

I myself became wrestling daft for a period of time and watched religiously every other "non football home game" Saturday.

The FA Cup Final days televised wrestling specials were just that special. Particularly those Pallo v McManus grudge clashes. The two legends created more heat than a sunspot.

The wrestling provided great contrast and ideal build up for what in those days was far and away the football match of the season.

Sadly British Wrestling has gone as a mainstream TV event ... and would be vastly changed in actual wrestling style if ever it did return. Equally sadly, the FA Cup football has also vastly changed. De-valued and lacking that same magic that traditionally, one time, on Final day, started right from about 11.30 in the morning. This was usually from a deserted yet strangely haunting Wembley dressing room. Perhaps someone can remind me from what various venues the cup final day wrestling came from? Particularly, the Mick and Jackie affairs or the Royal Brothers v McManus & Logan.

(Ding! ... End Of Round 3*)

Ding! Ding! Round 4

So there I was, in the early to mid sixties ... on for me ... an every other Saturday afternoon alternating between the 2 TV channels. Mum & Dads would be set on one Station - with Dad usually calling the shots when returning from a Saturday morning overtime shift. He was always amicable of course my Dad, provided he got his horse racing fix and the FA Cup Final itself if "that" was the day in question.

Grandad would enjoy the wrestling anyway on his own set. I'd therefore grab a basin full of both if I possibly could. Mum would sometimes be working part time at Marks and Sparks on a Saturday but always entered into the spirit of things in one way or another. Maybe

fetch home some of those delicious “St Michaels” toffee mint humbugs for later, bless her, after catching her bus home.

My weekly boys paper at this time was “The Tiger”. Y’ know, the one with Roy Of The Rovers fronting the comic. With wrestling by now becoming so popular on television, The Tiger introduced its very own comic strip Wrestler - Johnny Cougar. Sometimes he was referred to as “The Fighting Seminole” being as he was a tribal Red Indian from the Everglades. In one adventure left cliffhanging over several issues - and after he had established himself on the Wrestling circuit with a decent manager n’ stuff he contested the British Heavyweight title at the old Wembley Stadium. The famous “Twin Towers” as you walked up towards the famous old venue being nicely drawn by the comic’s artist.

Having got there himself, Cougar (“The Man With The Iron Grip”) eventually overcame the reigning champ. This was a wrestler known as The “Spiderman” who had arms which might have stretched a good way along the ropes had he extended them to any degree.

To be perfectly honest the storylines and artwork were always excellent in any of those old “Fleetway Editions Magazines”. A publishing house, that went on to last for many years.

Even better, “Tiger” for quite awhile had a weekly wrestling feature “Meet The Mat Men” penned by a top Wrestling writer of the day “Charles Mascall”. The item included photos and pen picture profiles of the stars.

Dad carried on keeping Mum (although in reality they kept each other). One Summer holiday night however, Dad and I eagerly strolled to a hall in Ryde, Isle Of Wight, to see Dr Death v Judo Al Hayes with some other holiday making chums. Jonny Cortez was wrestling too and some extraordinary “Fighting Midgets”. A highly memorable night was had by all in a standing room only audience.

About two or three years later Dad and I also made some tentative plans to go to Southampton Guildhall for the Royal Brothers v Kwango & Caulder, bill topping, tag match. My school mate also planned to go with his own Dad and we thought we might meet up in the balcony which always afforded a good view at the Guildhall without paying top wack. But it was Dad who was wacked. He came home after having had a tiring day at work. He’d been sheet metal working some aircraft part which always had to be totally accurate of course. I understood and let Dad rest, feeling tired myself to be quite honest. It had been a warm or muggy day if my memory serves me well.

My pal though told me about the fight later and how good it was. Well ... I did ask. Can’t quite remember the final outcome of what was sure to have been a class excursion for wrestlers and fans alike - but one draw coming up is my fancy. Then one day Dad finally broke the news ... that which he had had obviously been keeping “Mum” about for a long time ... (Ding ! End Of Round 4). Don’t leave your seats just yet for

Ding! Ding! Round 5

He was a wise old head my Dad. However the news he brought me at around age 13 or 14 was just like finding out Santa wasn’t real when I was 21 (only kidding honest).

Dad happened to say one day “well actually nipper” the wrestling, though really clever, isn’t quite as it seems. I drifted away from it eventually after that. The sixties weren’t even done yet, but I felt I had been.

Occasionally I was wooed back by Kellet's antics because Grandad was roaring with laughter in his arm chair which brought me in from the other room, where maybe the football latest was being spoken of on the other telly or the radio. Also as the years went on, those wonderful old wrestling posters continued to be displayed around So'ton on the Billboards. There was a set of hoardings such as this, opposite our local pub, listing the usual theatre shows, cinema, fairground visits and various local events, including the Wrestling. Names such as "Rollerball Rocco" or "The Horrific Masked Mummy" would seemingly beckon you.

I actually drummed for a C/W band one time between sessions in a wrestling ring at the old and now sadly defunct Southampton Show.

Ricky Starr was on top form that day. His opponent, the yet formidable "Tarantula" made Starr look like a Ballet dancer. Hang on, he was one wasn't he?

Sometimes even then, Dad, or myself, would still visit our local Guildhall where maybe Miss Mitzi Mueller, Bomber Pat Roach, Kendo Nagasaki ... or maybe Dave Rocky Taylor, Danny Boy Collins or Steve Grey etc would still turn it on for the ardent and still hungry punters. It was quite easy really. Suspend a little belief and enter into the truly romantic world of British Professional Wrestling while it still had something special to offer in the late eighties early nineties.

The wrestling game was once nicely summed up I reckon, by none other than Mick McManus, who was once quoted as saying that people are funny. Funny in that they'll believe whatever they want to believe. Dead right Mick.

I also myself think, this is true in any walk of life. Call it the fickle facet of human nature. It was a somewhat strange, almost shadowy phenomenon, that materialised into something much more, was the great days of British Wrestling ... a period thing and a wonderful snap-shot of it's time.

The wrestling though was deservedly loved. The British scene had its very own unique style for many years. There was something for everyone and at affordable prices. It was ideal for fans of all ages. Indeed, families loved it.

The quality was very high from many wrestlers who were often actually semi pro but with other business interests. Unless of course, they happened to be Mick or Jackie. For although they themselves were full-time for Mick worked the office too apparently, match making they in turn, had other things going.

We are indeed fortunate grapple fans (using if I may the old Walton terminology) that although many of those great wrestlers and refs, MC's, promoters etc, active during the great days, have gone to that great quarter inch thick canvas in the sky ... "Wrestling Heritage" a credit to its webmasters and contributors, keeps the flag flying. The flag of a once great piece of British Sporting Cult History.

(Ding Ding Ding Ding ! ! End Of Contest).