



Fanpower

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

Alan Smith

I cannot come close to claiming to be the most knowledgeable person on this site, nor the most erudite, nor the most devoted. If I possess any small claim to uniqueness, it's that my path to becoming a fan of British "Classic era" wrestling is possibly the most winding and tortuous of any of us. Just how someone living in Brisbane, Australia in the 21st century comes to know so much trivia about wrestlers that flourished more than three decades ago, and on the other side of the world at that, contains more twists and turns than George Kidd and Les Kellett simultaneously applying leg locks to each other in a darkened room!

I will not say that I never saw British wrestling in its heyday. In fact, my five year old self would frequently be found glued to my parents' tiny rented black and white set on a Saturday afternoon, between the half time football results and the full time wrap up. My favourite at the time was Mick McManus, though such was my naivety that I really didn't comprehend that he was a "heel". As far as I was concerned (and like many fans coming new to any sport) he was on TV a lot, and he usually seemed to win, and that was enough. I dimly remember other luminaries from the time, such as the Royal Brothers, Steve Logan (of course), Mick McMichael (I genuinely speculated if he'd adopted his name just to annoy Mick McManus), Jackie Pallo (his striped trunks looked so much more dramatic in monochrome), the Hell's Angels and "Fantomas", a French visitor who dressed in a full length black outfit with the bones of a skeleton rendered on the outside, who for a time even rivalled McManus in my affections!

After the Saturday telecast was over, I would retire to my bedroom and, using my bed as the ring, would indulge in bouts of my own, billing myself as "Invincible Alan Smith, Lightweight champion of the Universe", and at this svenue, with my pillow as the opponent, I enjoyed an unbeaten run of victories. Sometimes I'd fight in tag matches with Mick McManus as my partner, but this version was soon dropped, since it involved too much standing around whilst my imaginary partner was in the ring!

My mother (who had had some interest in the sport a few years before) whetted my appetite with names of other grapplers, in particular the legendary Billy Two Rivers. "He's

a much better wrestler than McManus,” she told me, gravely. “He could beat him easily. In fact, he has beaten him!”

A few years later, when she told me that the sport was faked “You win this week, I’ll win next week,” was how she put it, I refused to believe her. But after that, no matter how much I tried to deny it, I could see she was telling the truth. Just why was it, I wondered, that a best of three falls match was always decided 2 – 1? That a wrestler could cheat in full view of the cameras, and yet only be disqualified if he was up against a top-liner? That you could throw an opponent against the ropes and flip him over your head on the rebound— a move that defies the laws of real life physics (I knew – I’d tried it with my pillow!)

Other children might cite the discovery that Santa Claus isn’t real as the end of the innocence of childhood. For me, it was the revelation that Pallo, McManus, Logan and the rest were following carefully prepared scripts. Occasionally, wrestling would come up for discussion in schools, where I displayed an innocence of which, looking back, I am somewhat disconcerted. I knew myself that it was all faked, but naively thought that no-one else knew. I’d pronounce the fact that it was fake with an air of knowing sophistication, to receive sympathetically incredulous looks from my schoolmates!

We now shift forwards a decade, to Brisbane Australia, where as part of the Assisted Passage scheme, my parents and I were now living. Much as I love the country today, my first years here were marred by homesickness and angst – but an unlikely saviour was to come to my rescue.

Occasionally, during the incessant runs of advertisements that plague Australian commercial TV (often more time was given to ads than the programs) I’d occasionally see shoutingly hyped exhortations to get myself along to Brisbane’s Festival Hall for a wrestling card I, apparently, mustn’t miss! I vaguely noticed the strange kind of conditions of matches – what on earth was a “cage match?” a “lumberjack match”, why must the “loser leave town?”, what was the “brass knuckle championship?” With vague memories of my wrestling fanaticism from years before, I began asking around. Alas, wrestling was a minority sport even then, and few of my schoolmates could enlighten me – save that one helpful chap suggested I tune in to Channel Nine at midday on a Sunday, where I might see something to my advantage.

And as soon as I did so, I was hooked like an addict to his drug.

The program in question was “World Championship Wrestling,” a long term stalwart of Aussie TV, at this time in its declining years. Unlike the British version of televised grappling, the show was not simply a broadcasting of matches from a live venue. Instead, it was a promotional show taking place in the TV studio itself, where the top grapplers of the time would be put up against other regulars that always seemed to lose (I have since learned the somewhat unflattering term is “jobbers”), and, after the star man had won, they would be interviewed. This gave them a chance to whip up hype against whoever they were to meet in the monthly live events.

The first match I ever saw was between Tex McKenzie, a lanky American, and Sonny Dalton, a stocky hometown jobber. I was disconcerted not to hear the weight division at which the match was made, not to see seconds standing at the corners of the ring, and that there was no breaking the match up into five minute rounds... and that once McKenzie gained what I thought would be the first fall, the match was over! This format, based (like

so much in Australia) on the American model had the advantage that in a single hour show one could sometimes see up to five matches, plus huge swathes of interviews, and still fit in the thousand of ads (oops! “Important messages”) that mar every show on Australian commercial TV!

Aussie wrestling also introduced me to an American idea more or less unknown in Britain – the “narrative.” In Britain, a wrestler might occasionally jump into the ring to challenge another, or appear on a non-wrestling chat show and badmouth a future opponent, but storylines –with tag partners falling out and meeting each other in single grudge matches, competitors interfering in each other's bouts, foreign objects, managers “managing” other wrestlers, and the other falderal of the American model was all new to me.

When I enthusiastically trumpeted my new enthusiasm at school, and was given the time-honoured put-down familiar to all grapple fans (“You idiot – it's all faked, you know”) I replied with what I still feel is the perfect counter today. That the action in a TV drama, a novel, a movie, a play is not really happening either. You must, as J R R Tolkien put it, “Willingly suspend disbelief” to gain the maximum enjoyment from it. Sure, Killer Karl Cox didn't really steal Brute Bernard's chains, forcing him to take him on in the ring to get them back, the defeated party in a “loser leaves town” match only did so because his contract was up anyway, and Mario Milano didn't really go on strike until he was given a title shot! But then, neither did James Bond really fight all those villains, nor did Prince Hal really make that stirring speech before Agincourt, or Oliver Twist get taught pickpocketing by Fagin and the Artful Dodger!

Yes, the American style was fun all right – but that “willing suspension” became harder and harder as the years went on, as “story arcs” were repeated over and over, and a wrestler would lose a title at one venue, only to defend it (and lose again) the next night, in another state! At some deep subconscious level, I craved news of the old style British wrestling, with its more sophisticated kayfabe (not that I knew the word then), its intricate holds, its chance for lighter men to shine in their own weight divisions instead of being squashed by men twice their weight! I wondered what my old friends Mick, Vic, Bert and Steve were doing these days.

Had this tale been taking place today, instead of the early seventies, it would have been an easily solved problem. A few seconds clicking of a mouse, and it would all have been before me. Alas, in the primitive early seventies, this solution was not to hand. Once, for a few months, an American mag ran Evan R Treharne's column called “British Mat News” and it says something about my craving that I'd buy the mag just for this single article. Such names as Honey Boy Zimba, Shirley Crabtree, Johnny War Eagle, Tibor Scazaks, Lee Sharron, Alan Colbeck and Kendo Nagasaki became members of my pantheon of greats, though I could never see them wrestle, even on TV, and could only base my admiration on Treharne's brief descriptions of the matches.

And then, alas, even these diversions were no more. Channel Nine pulled the wrestling show, Treharne's column no longer appeared in the American journal, and the squared circle faded, temporarily, out of my life. A brief family visit back to England in 1979 coincided with the televised bout between “Big Daddy” and “Mighty John Quinn”, which revived my interest a little, but with nothing to feed it, my enthusiasm couldn't last.

Cynics might say that even if I had lived in England at the time, my love of British wrestling might have been on the wane anyway. About this time, as most readers here would know, the old model was giving place to the new, which translated as a kind of hybridism

between the British and American models. There were still weight divisions, seconds, and public warnings, but matches were now hyped to the max, with entrance music as the competitors made their way to the ring, hysterical interviews, and some matches (Yes, I do mean Big Daddy's) conducted in the stylised American manner with the baddies charging at Shirley and bouncing off his enormous belly!

In fact I really don't feel that this need necessarily have been the demise of the British model. A careful mixing of the traditional and transatlantic styles could, I feel, have worked. Keep the championships for different weight levels, the basic adherence to the rules, the breaks between rounds and the clever holds, but add in some razzamatazz, for the younger audience. Why should Haystacks or St Clair not do an occasional interview outside the ring, or even have a scuffle in the dressing rooms, if it worked up interest? Could there not have been a twenty minute "Mat News" show, featuring highlights and interviews?

The problem was, as I see it in hindsight, is one of execution. Bringing some "narrative" on the US model was fine. Basing the entire sport around Big Daddy was very much a case of putting all the narrative eggs in one basket.

As all here know, most of Daddy's activity was in tag matches. Shirley and some tiny nondescript against two seventeen stoners. The match would begin with the lighter blue-eye driving the evil opponents to distraction with his clever moves, only to be injured by some wicked subterfuge. Then Daddy would jump in, the baddies would charge at him and bounce off his chest, and to the cries of "Easy, easy" the mismatched goodies would win by a knockout. Entertaining enough to see once or twice, but how many times can one get truly involved in a the same story repeated twice a week? I later learned that in subsequent years, things deteriorated even further, with "Disco ladder matches", handicap events with both the Royals losing to Haystacks, Kendo hypnotising Brookside (!), and cheating being so blatant and stylised that "Suspension of disbelief" was no longer possible.

To this day, I wonder how things might have been if the late '70s British scriptwriters had possessed a bit more imagination. Imagine a feud between Les Kellett and Bobby Barnes. Steve Gray coming under the spell of Gorgeous George Gillette and turning heel. An eight man knockout tag, with Daddy, StClair, Tibor and Veidor taking on Quinn, Haystacks, Kendo and Mr Yasa Fuji. Johnny War Eagle putting up his feathers against Mr X's mask. Daddy against Quinn, with the ring surrounded by other wrestlers to prevent Quinn doing a bunk. The Royals falling out, and meeting each other in a grudge event (and later having a tearful reunion, when Bert jumps into save Vic being trashed by Lee Sharron and Kendo)... instead, all we had was Big Daddy, thumping into opponents with his belly, month in, month out. Unlike many here, I don't join in the universal hatred of the Crabtrees – Shirley was a guy who did his best to entertain the punters, and Brian had to work with what he had – but I do still look back on those years as a chance missed.

Anyway, moving on, we come to another revival of the game for me, this time in the mid eighties. The WWF's "Rock and Roll Wrestling" was leading the revival of the sport, and now Hulk Hogan, Randy "Macho Man" Savage, Rick Steamboat and "The Honky Tonk" man were now taking the place of my old heroes. Along, of course, with many old friends now wrestling in the US... Chris Adams, "Exotic" Adrian Street, Steve Regal, and of course the British Bulldogs, Davey Boy and Dynamite... all of whom seemed to have doubled in weight while crossing the Atlantic, showing what a subtle mix of steroids and "creative economy of truth" by ring announcers might achieve. Meanwhile, back in Britain, the

moribund sport died one night, in the person of Mal “King Kong” Kirk, as a result of a well-documented and tragic ring accident. Big Daddy, to his credit, blamed himself (though evidence shows overwhelmingly it was not his fault) and retired, and with its main figurehead gone, the sport was soon no more. Me, I vaguely mourned it in passing, in much the same way you'd tip your hat on hearing of the death of a friend you hadn't seen for many years, though I do remember being revolted by an American plan to bring Daddy to America and bill him under the name “Killer Shirley”... a tasteless idea that, thankfully, never came to fruition!

But, as at Ragnarok in the Norse legends, when the ice giants killed the gods at the last battle – it was not the end! The internet is a wonderful thing, uniting friends from all over the world, saving democracy in totalitarian regimes, spreading knowledge and world brotherhood, and... for me, giving me the chance to revive old interests that, even in their heyday, I could never keep up with in my Australian exile. My friend Google soon found me plenty of information on Spedeworth Stock Car Racing, Southern League Football, TV shows of the seventies, and, of course, British wrestling from four decades ago.

And when Youtube came into its own, I was ecstatic. Apart from now having seen every episode of “Blakes 7”, most of the Spedeworth Hot Rod World Championships, and every episode of “From a Bird's Eye View” (A sitcom from the seventies, starring Millicent Martin – much recommended). I have now seen more matches between classic-era Brit wrestlers than I ever saw when I lived there! So now, I can talk fairly knowledgeably about the relative styles of Steve Gray and Johnny Saint, the famous Preston / McManus upset, Kendo's unmasking (all of them) and just why Wayne Bridges was a worthy champion. Truly, we live in wonderful times –especially (and ironically) those afflicted with overwhelming nostalgia!