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INTRODUCTION

RING THE BELL

My editor, Michael Holmes, is to blame. He said he thought I could write something special simply by recalling what I have learned about professional wrestling from interacting with astute and insatiable personalities — people like Sam Muchnick, Bruiser Brody, Dave Meltzer, Terry Funk, and, yes, even Vince McMahon.

He told me to think of the countless characters I'd met and all the experiences I'd had while working in this multi-faceted business. Prodding me (and feeding my ego), Michael mentioned the roles in which he believed I'd excelled: announcing, booking, and promoting.

Flattery works.

He reminded me of the detailed conversations we've had about wrestling's intricacies, and told me, "You can write a terrific book with all of this."

It was nice of Michael to show confidence in my writing — and in the lessons that I've hopefully absorbed after more than a few years dealing with wrestling at every level. After penning *Wrestling at the Chase*, and then *Brody* with Barbara Goodish, I was tossing around various ideas for other projects.

Michael's suggestion probably made more sense than a murder mystery set in the world of pro wrestling (although that idea is still alive, in my mind anyway, so please don't laugh). At least the prep work for this one would be familiar territory.

But then Michael upped the stakes considerably by pointing out that pro wrestling was much, much more than it appears to be on the surface. Dig deep, he challenged. For every snob that snickers,

there is someone with a doctorate who prizes wrestling's garish fun. For every bitter former employee who vilifies the industry, there is another past participant who prizes the uncommon experience. The audience for wrestling is as diverse as society itself. And incredible amounts of money are generated by it — not to mention countless hours of tv.

No matter what the so-called experts say, one heck of a lot of people like wrestling.

Business to its owners, career to its practitioners, and practically religion to some of its followers, the sport seems to demand that someone explore how it all operates, how it all fits together. There is plenty wrong with wrestling — like most anything else — but there's quite a bit that's right, too. Why does it work? How? Michael wanted me to write about that — to get to the heart of the business.

The best way to learn wrestling, Sam Muchnick believed, is by osmosis. He was probably correct. There are so many little tricks to the trade, countless necessary details, and the critical components known as psychology and politics. By keeping eyes, ears, and especially the mind open, by thinking about it the hard way, allowing opinions, experiences, and ideas to soak in and blend with new and personal observations, everything starts to make some sense.

It's like the great Lou Thesz once told me, "You travel down this road long enough, and you start to figure out how it works." Well, at least a little in my case.

The notion Michael had was the seed that grew into the book you now hold in your hand. Let's hope nobody turns it into a foreign object to hurl at either author or editor.

My hope is that what follows will feel like a conversation with an old friend — so let's sit down together and relax and see how it all really works.

CHAPTER ONE

IS IT REAL?

“Is it real?”

When it comes to professional wrestling, everyone thinks they know the answer — but the question is not that simple. Still, it’s what the bright, pretty, maybe thirtyish woman asked me at a recent book-signing, so I had to come up with some kind of answer.

It went like this. Perhaps two-dozen fans were in front of me, wanting to discuss *Brody: The Triumph and Tragedy of Wrestling’s Rebel*. It was in St. Louis, where professional wrestling has always enjoyed a special relationship with both the public and the media, and I was being treated like some sort of big deal. Why? Because I had been the protégé of beloved local promoter Sam Muchnick, the master who taught me the ins and outs of this incredible business; spent more than a decade on tv as the host of *Wrestling at the Chase*; worked nearly ten years with Vince McMahon and the World Wrestling Federation; and wrote a book called *Wrestling at the Chase* that renewed interest in this crazy industry, both in St. Louis and across the country.

The marketing for *Brody* provided me with the opportunity to visit bookstores, do signings, and take part in discussions. The people gathered around me that particular evening ranged in age from 12 to probably 75. There was an engineer, a teacher, some junior high students with their parents, a card dealer from a local casino, a retired hardware store owner, and a nurse — and everyone had a story. I’d listen to questions, tell the appropriate tale, and ask for their thoughts. It was, simply, fun.

When the subject of today’s wrestling came up, most of the

people around me said they didn't watch, or didn't like it. Somebody compared John Cena to David Von Erich. ("They're both so hot!" one middle-aged woman laughed.) Somebody else asked how Ric Flair had managed to compete for so long. From there, the questions flew at me, fast and furious: What would have happened if Bruiser Brody and Hulk Hogan had battled? Is it steroids that make Batista look *that* big? Was Triple H as tough as Harley Race or Dick the Bruiser? Is Vince McMahon anything like Sam Muchnick was? Was Trevor Murdoch really from St. Louis?

Trevor Murdoch?

And they said they didn't follow today's wrestling. . . .

It all reminded me of visiting the Press Club with Sam years ago. A distinguished attorney began chatting about wrestling. Of course, he wouldn't admit that he was a fan. "My son loves to watch your show," he said. "I was really surprised that Bulldog Bob Brown gave Jack Brisco such a tough match last week."

Sam nudged me and whispered, "Closet fan."

The eager group in front of me wasn't closeted at all. Their connection to what they used to love and never missed was just more intense — and to some extent romanticized. Though they didn't want to admit it, they found something to enjoy in today's wrestling as well. The thread connecting everything was there, and it was strong.

Now, in my experience, there are always a couple folks who hang around the fringes at a wrestling book event. I get a kick out of reading their reaction to different names or memorable events. Generally, this type is a bit shy about revealing that they have an interest in something as controversial as the mat game. But there they are — eyes sharp, observant, giving little smiles now and then.

That pretty much describes the attentive but quiet lady who eventually asked the *big* question. I made eye contact, smiled, and asked her, "Are you even old enough to remember Bruiser Brody? It was almost 20 years ago."

The woman laughed and said, "Oh, I remember all the people you've talked about. I'd watch with my dad. Those are great memories."

Some of the others brought up memories of trying figure-four leglocks on their kid brothers, or getting something resembling brainbusters from their older sisters. One remembered going to old Kiel Auditorium and getting autographs, including mine, when he was an eighth grader. I shook my head and denied being that old.

But I still hadn't answered her question: "Is it real?"

"That depends which answer you want," I began. "Because it's almost *too* real on a lot of levels. Is it predetermined who wins? Yes. Are the wrestlers trying to maim one another? No — at least not normally. Is it entertainment? Sure; but what isn't? Is it a demanding business, where people can get rich or go broke? Most definitely: those of us who have been on the inside, as wrestlers or promoters or announcers, can earn a living — or lose one."

I was on a roll. "Is it a show? Absolutely. Do wrestlers get hurt, or worse? Unfortunately, too often. Are lives changed, for better or worse? Yes. Does it have the respect it deserves from the media and parts of the public? No, not even close to what it deserves.

"The term is a 'work.' Professional wrestling is a work — just a work. I guess that means it resides in some never-never land between real and not real. But now, here's *my* question for *you*." Everyone became quiet. "If it's just a work, why does wrestling hook us? Why are we here tonight? If it's just a work, why do we care?"

Maybe, I suggested, just maybe, wrestling is more real than it seems.

About one month earlier, Barbara Goodish had come from her home in Florida to join me for the St. Louis launch of *Brody*. Barbara, of course, was the wife of Frank Goodish, better known to the public at large as either Bruiser Brody or King Kong Brody. Brody was a controversial figure, unique within the business, totally independent and a rebel in all senses of the word when it came to dealing with promoters. He was also, more importantly, a tremendous drawing card, both in North America and Japan. That meant he could afford to be a rebel — because he made money. He was also my friend. Tragically, he was murdered in Puerto Rico in 1988.

Today, he's become something of a mythical figure, his growing legend shrouded in mystery.

Barbara has always been a very private person. Writing *Brody* was not easy for her, but she was a natural storyteller. Promoting the book in public, however, worried her. My wife, Pat, assured her she'd do great. And Barbara *was* a gem in St. Louis. At the St. Louis Wrestling Hall of Fame, where we signed and met readers, a couple hundred people turned out. Barbara was amazed.

"They were so polite and kind," she said later. "They were so knowledgeable. They knew so much about Frank. I couldn't believe when they asked if he really knew The Undertaker when he was just starting out."

The next night, Barbara and I made an appearance at an independent wrestling card Herb Simmons was promoting in tiny East Carondelet, Illinois. Herb was a great friend to both Brody and me. After the Muchnick era ended, when I was working for Vince McMahon in the World Wrestling Federation, Brody and I presented numerous independent shows, and Simmons was often our licensed promoter.

World Wrestling Entertainment (today's incarnation of the WWF) dominates the scene, but comes to an area only once or twice a year, so there is a hunger for small wrestling cards like the ones Simmons presents. Tying in the appearance of Brody's widow and the former *Wrestling at the Chase* announcer, Herb's program drew a jam-packed, enthusiastic crowd to the small hall. There were lots of familiar faces — people who'd been coming to events since they were teenagers, plus lots of new fans who were too young to have ever seen Brody perform.

Included on the bill were a few grapplers, most of them semi-retired, who might well have made it to the big time had it not been for the fact that opportunity was drying up in the late 1980s. But working for Herb, Brody, and me, they had been stars in their own realm.

Barbara was enchanted meeting Ron Plummer (Ron Powers), Joe Zakibe (The Assassin), Roger Bailey (colorful manager Big Daddy), and Rob Phillips. She had heard Frank talk about and

praise these youngsters “back in the day,” and she’d listened to both Frank and me lament the fact that none of them were getting the chance to move up the ladder. It was melancholy and moving to talk with them after many years. Mickey Garagiola, my former tv sidekick, stopped by to say hello and reminisce about how much he’d liked Brody.

In the dressing room, we worked out a little angle to spice up the evening. Barbara, Mickey, and I would be introduced along with the local favorites. All of us would be at ringside watching the main event, which involved 350-pound Jim Hoffarth, who was wearing a mask and dubbed “The Big Texan.” Tired of the praise heaped on the favorites, Big Texan would grab the microphone, call everyone old, then dump Powers out of his chair, take the chair to the ring, and use it as a weapon on his opponent.

This, naturally, would enrage Powers, who was known as Brody’s protégé, and so he would charge to the ring, while others tried to restrain him. We’d need to get a chair to Powers so he could whack Big Texan, laying the groundwork for a later “come out of retirement” bout between the two of them and sending everyone home happy. Ideas were bouncing around with no pressure; there was plenty of laughing. It was fun to be back in action, even at the grassroots level. Barbara was just taking it all in.

Finally Ron said, “Why not have Barbara give me the chair? After all, she was Frank’s wife and the people here tonight know it.”

We all looked at her. Barbara’s eyes got as big as saucers.

“Me?”

Everyone nodded.

“If you want me to, I’ll try. I just hope I don’t mess it up.”

Big Daddy told her he would lead her to the right place at the right time.

When the moment came, Ron went berserk, fought through the restraint of Assassin and Phillips, and jumped into the ring. The audience was on their feet, screaming.

And suddenly, there was Barbara Goodish hoisting a chair and sliding it into the ring for Powers. Whack! Right on the head of Big Texan, who fell like a chopped-down tree. The fans blew the roof

off the place. They actually began chanting, “Bro-dy! Bro-dy! Bro-dy!” as Powers embraced Barbara.

So simple, so effective.

And yes, it was just a work — one that hooked everybody.

The next morning, as I drove Barbara to the airport, we rehashed the evening’s events. Barbara said she had never been around the dressing room and certainly had never been involved in booking a finish or working an angle. She had seen some of her husband’s matches and had heard his stories, but that was different. She found what was going on, the energy in coming up with ideas, fascinating.

“You know, Frank would come home sometimes and his head would just be gashed, simply horrible slashes where he had bladed to bleed for some match,” Barbara recalled. “I’d be shocked and ask him why he did it. What would make him do something so dangerous? Frank would say, ‘You had to be there. You had to be in the moment. You had to feel it.’ And Larry, I understand now. You lose yourself in the moment. The crowd, the wrestlers, the excitement. I finally understand what Frank meant.”

Losing yourself in the moment, entertaining two hundred or twenty thousand — it’s all the same.

Was it real?

Who cares?