

The Importance of New Japan Professional Wrestling and Professional Wrestling in Japan: A Fan's Perspective

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In the world of professional wrestling, there are peak times and down times. This observation covers the whole genre as well as certain companies. Currently, in early 2018, New Japan Pro Wrestling (NJPW) is experiencing a peak time and not really showing any signs of stopping. It may be hard to tell because some believe that professional wrestling begins and ends with World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), but that is not true. NJPW has been around since 1972 and offers fans a great deal of things that are both like and unlike what the WWE offers. In this paper, I discuss some of the reasons why I, as a fan, feel NJPW deserves a wider audience. For example, The Bullet Club offers members of the English-speaking audience a way to enter the product. NJPW also has a wide array of tournaments that not only spotlight their homegrown talent, but International talent as well. They also employ some tremendous wrestlers and give them compelling stories. I discuss these reasons, as well as the history of NJPW, to provide insight into a promotion that may be less well-known to mainstream wrestling fans residing in the United States.

The History of NJPW

NJPW was founded in 1972 by Antonio Inoki. Inoki may be known by American audiences as the man who controversially fought Muhammad Ali to a draw in a boxer-versus-wrestler bout in 1976. Inoki emphasized what he called Strong Style wrestling, which features a wide array of martial arts style strikes and submission holds. Strong Style has been used to great effect by American wrestlers such as CM Punk, Daniel Bryan, and Samoa Joe to name a few. While some of the characters featured in NJPW over the years may appear outlandish, like The Great Muta, their storylines are generally more grounded. The stories are told mainly

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through the in-ring action, with some advancement also made during pre- and post-match press conferences. The action is also shot well and easy to follow. WWE has recently adopted a shaky cam style whenever strikes are made, and this can make the action difficult to follow. NJPW slowly rebuilt its brand after being acquired by Bushiroad in 2012. In 2015, NJPW launched their Internet streaming site, njpwworld.com, to allow worldwide audiences to watch live and on-demand shows, including archived shows.

The Bullet Club

NJPW routinely brought in “gaijin,” or non-Japanese, wrestlers such as Hulk Hogan, Andre the Giant, The Steiner Brothers, Vader, Stan Hansen, and most recently a returning Chris Jericho. In modern times, no bigger wrestling stable exists than the Bullet Club, comprised almost entirely of gaijin wrestlers. The stable came together in 2013 when Prince Devitt (now known as Finn Bálor in the WWE) turned heel on his Apollo 55 partner, Ryusuke Taguchi. Devitt, Karl Anderson, Tama Tonga, and Bad Luck Fale are considered the founding fathers of the Bullet Club, essentially an updated version of the WCW faction the New World Order (NWO) and the WWE faction Degeneration-X (DX). Both these factions existed in the late 1990s. The NWO came first and originally featured Scott Hall, Kevin Nash, and Hulk Hogan. This trio grew throughout the years to include “Macho Man” Randy Savage, Lex Luger, The Giant (aka Paul Wight, who later performed in WWE as The Big Show), Scott Steiner, and many others. DX was the WWE’s response to the NWO and originally featured Shawn Michaels, Hunter Hearst Helmsley, and Chyna. This group also expanded with the addition of X-Pac (aka the 1-2-3 Kid and later Syxx, a former member of the NWO) and the New Age Outlaws, “Bad Ass” Billy Gunn and “The Road Dogg” Jesse James. Bullet Club appropriated the same “Too-Sweet” hand gesture and crotch chop taunt used by both previous groups. Since their formation, the Bullet Club featured a rotating cast of members that included AJ Styles, Kenny Omega, The Young Bucks (Matt and Nick Jackson), Doc Gallows, Marty Scurll, Adam Cole, and Cody Rhodes. After Devitt left for WWE, AJ Styles maintained the status quo. That all changed when Styles left and Omega assumed leadership, at which point the group became more of a presence in popular culture.

If you are not familiar with Omega, his character is informed by references to video games. On occasion, after defeating an opponent, he will use their finisher in matches. This is an homage to the video game character Mega Man, who gained his opponents' signature weapons upon defeating them. After removing AJ Styles from the group, Omega sometimes used the Styles Clash finisher. Omega calls his own finisher the One-Winged Angel, a reference to Sephiroth from *Final Fantasy 7*. He also calls his knee-strikes the V-Trigger in homage to the Street Fighter video game series. In addition, Omega is a featured character in the *Tiger Mask W* anime.

Omega and The Young Bucks produced a YouTube series called *Being the Elite*. The trio call themselves The Elite and exist as a sub-group within Bullet Club. The Young Bucks are particularly cocky. In most episodes of *Being the Elite*, they brag about how much money they pull in from merchandise sales. On Twitter, they joke about how they are “killing the business” because some of the perceived old-guard of wrestling, such as Jim Cornette, dislike their antics. In addition to the core trio, episodes of *Being the Elite* also feature other Bullet Club members and their interactions with fans and each other. This channel has run storylines that not only affect NJPW, but also the American wrestling company Ring of Honor (ROH). They recently ran a storyline in which the departing-for-WWE Adam Cole was kicked out of the group for poisoning Nick Jackson. The story of Jackson's poisoning occurred on an episode of *Being the Elite*, but Cole was not kicked out of Bullet Club until the 2017 ROH event, *War of the Worlds*. The epilogue to this is Cole's “character” being killed off in an episode that took place before he departed ROH and NJPW for WWE's NXT.

It was also during Omega's leadership that Bullet Club merchandise found its way to Hot Topic stores across the United States. In 2017, Hot Topic inked a deal with Pro Wrestling Tees to sell NJPW merchandise worldwide (Pritchard). To my knowledge, this is the first time that Hot Topic has carried non-WWE wrestling merchandise since the Monday Night War era.¹ *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* has also reported that Bullet Club merchandise was the top-seller for Hot Topic in November 2017 (Varble). Bullet Club-related merchandise is usually the top

¹ Hot Topic did sell WCW merchandise, such as NWO t-shirts, in the 1990s, as seen on this flashback blog post by Matt: <http://dinosaurdracula.com/blog/deadsites-hot-topic-1998>.

seller on ProWrestlingTees.com, which sells shirts from many independent wrestlers and organizations.

The In-Ring Action

If the Bullet Club brings you in as a fan, please stay for the wrestling as well. NJPW's storylines are largely driven by in-ring action, making it different from the WWE, where wrestlers regularly interact backstage or cut 20-minute promos. NJPW produces tournaments every year that start, advance, or resolve their storylines. In this essay, I discuss the World Tag League tournament, Best of the Super-Juniors tournament, and finally the G1 Climax. All three tournaments follow a round robin structure with the competitors put into two blocks, Block A and Block B. There is a point system of two points for a win, one for a draw, and zero for a loss. Whoever accumulates the most points in Block A and Block B competes in the finals.

The World Tag League tournament focuses on NJPW's tag team division. It debuted in 1980 but was not always called the World Tag League. It used to be known as the Super Grade Tag League from 1991 to 1998 and then the G1 Tag League from 1999 to 2011. The tournament usually takes place in autumn, and the winner gets a shot at the tag team championship during the annual Wrestle Kingdom event held every year on January 4th. Admittedly the tag team division is not as robust as the heavyweight and junior divisions. Often, the company brings in makeshift tag teams, or teams from outside of NJPW. Former Bullet Club members and current WWE superstars Karl Anderson and Luke "Doc" Gallows won the tournament in 2013, and Anderson has won with two different partners as well.

The Best of the Super Juniors (BOSJ) began in 1988 and has traditionally served to spotlight the Junior-Heavyweight division. It usually takes place in the spring. If the winner does not already hold the Junior-Heavyweight champion, then they earn the opportunity to challenge for that title at the Dominion event in the summer. This tournament also spotlights international talent as many wrestlers are brought in from other promotions. ROH, Dragon Gate, DDT Pro-Wrestling, Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre, and Pro Wrestling NOAH have all sent representatives to compete in this prestigious tournament. Jushin "Thunder" Liger is probably the wrestler most synonymous with the BOSJ tournament, having won

three and competed in many of them since the beginning, though he retired from the tournament in 2017 due to the grueling nature of the schedule. By bowing out of future tournaments, Liger thereby made way for up-and-coming talent. Indeed, several other wrestlers want to compete in the tournament or would like to be invited back. The matches are often very fast-paced. The opening matches often last 10 to 15 minutes and showcase the best of each competitor's offense, much of which is high-flying in nature.

BOSJ sparked some mild controversy in 2016 when Will Ospreay battled Ricochet in an extremely athletic contest. Both men are known for their quick, high-flying offense, which was on full display during the encounter. Some wrestlers from the old-guard, most notably Vader, thought the match was simply an acrobatics exhibition and told no story. Others, like Steve Austin, praised it as phenomenal. In the end the match sparked much debate and many GIF-worthy moments. In 2017, Ospreay and Ricochet faced one another in a rematch that was every bit as good as their previous encounter. Even better, it expanded on the original match since each man knew what to expect from the other. It was an instance of telling a story via their prior match rather than a promo.

Before changing the name to the G1 Climax in 1991, NJPW founder Inoki held the record for most tournaments won at a total of 10. It is unlikely that anyone will break that record, but a few men have won multiple tournaments. The 2012 tournament marked the first time that the winner could go on to challenge the Heavyweight champion at *Wrestle Kingdom*. The champion could also compete in the tournament to earn the right to pick their challenger. Omega is the only non-Japanese wrestler to win the tournament since it was renamed as the G1. He won in 2016 shortly after becoming leader of the Bullet Club and making his way from the Junior division to the Heavyweight division. He would also go on to defend the contract he won before finally challenging, and ultimately losing to, champion Kazuchika Okada.

Important Japanese Wrestlers

Okada has been the face of the company since 2016. He picked up the torch at *Wrestle Kingdom 10* when he defeated his rival, Hiroshi Tanahashi. NJPW still features Tanahashi prominently, but Okada is now considered the face of the federation. Okada's character is that of an over-confident, slightly spoiled rich kid

who knows he has the backing of the company. He was initially presented as a heel, but after an emotional loss to Tanahashi at *Wrestle Kingdom 9*, the crowd started to sympathize with him. He still does slightly heelish or disrespectful things in his matches, but ultimately his skill and his finisher allow him to prevail over his opponents. The Rainmaker, a ripcord short-arm lariat, is a dominant finisher that has put down many other wrestlers. 2017 emerged as Okada's toughest but most critically acclaimed year to date. He started the year by facing Omega in an incredible six-star match, as rated by Dave Meltzer of *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*. The two have incredible chemistry, and later that same year they wrestled each other again to a 60-minute draw. Meltzer rated that match 6.75 stars. Okada and Omega faced off in another six-star match when they met in the G1 tournament. During the tournament, Okada only suffered losses against Omega and EVIL. Okada wrestled the sadistic Minoru Suzuki to a draw in another acclaimed contest that ended up earning 4.75 stars.

Okada's title defense against Katsuyori Shibata was a five-star contest and an incredibly emotional encounter. This was Shibata's first shot the Heavyweight title in quite some time. He threw everything he had into dethroning Okada but came up short. This match is also thought to be Shibata's last match as he developed health issues immediately afterward. Okada's run at the top has been compared to Ric Flair's during his prime (Dubey). It helps that Okada only defends the title periodically rather than every night, making the defenses feel special. When not defending the title, Okada often competes in tag-team matches in which he does not have to wrestle for nearly an hour. Also of note, Okada is not yet 30 years old but has already surpassed Tanahashi in total days that he has held the title. He also surpassed Shinya Hashimoto's legendary 489-day run. If Okada is in the main event, then you are guaranteed to see something special.

NJPW runs quite a few redemption storylines, but the one featuring Tetsuya Naito is one of the most compelling. In 2013, Naito won the G1 tournament and was set to face the champion, Okada, in the main event. However, NJPW got cold feet after the two demonstrated mediocre chemistry. Instead, the federation let the fans vote on whether Naito and Okada would main event or if Shinsuke Nakamura and Tanahashi would go on last for the Intercontinental title. Fans choose Nakamura and Tanahashi. This was unprecedented for NJPW and it is unlikely that the WWE would ever let their fans have this level of control with a Wrestlemania main event.

Naito temporarily left the company after coming up short against Okada, but returned to NJPW a changed man. After a brief stint in CMLL, Naito returned as the leader of Los Ingobernables de Japon. Naito became incredibly disrespectful toward NJPW at this point. He briefly captured the Heavyweight championship from Okada before dropping it back to him. During his brief reign, Naito treated the title belt like a piece of garbage, throwing it into the ring before his matches and leaving it there for staff to retrieve. He did the same thing to the Intercontinental title, which he dented by throwing it at the ring posts. Initially jeered upon his return, Naito's unorthodox behavior led to the crowd cheering for him.

In some ways, Naito's post-return behavior recalls the rise of Stone Cold Steve Austin. Naito is the opposite of what the crowd would expect of a babyface. He spits in his opponents' faces and makes bizarre demands during his championship reigns. He has been driven by the fact that he was ousted from the main event at *Wrestle Kingdom*. He would earn a bit of redemption by headlining *Wrestle Kingdom 12* with Okada. Naito fell short of winning the title from Okada, but his story simply involved headlining the event.

Conclusion

NJPW employs an amazing roster of talent, which they utilize well by holding tournaments and running shows that have a big fight feel. The Bullet Club and their antics are a great entry point for those who may find the language barrier daunting. Once you get past that you have incredible characters and in-ring action that will no doubt hold your attention.

These days it is much easier to watch NJPW thanks to their online streaming service NJPW World eliminating the need for tape trading or "knowing a guy who knows a guy." In 2017, the promotion held two summer shows in Los Angeles to crown a United States Champion. Omega won the tournament and the shows were so successful that the company plans to hold more U.S. shows in 2018. Wrestling fans can help the promotion expand even further by checking out *Being the Elite* on YouTube, as well as NJPW's own channel. The company has also started subtitled promos in English, making it much easier to follow the storylines. Those who give NJPW a chance will not be disappointed.

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