

Emotions Are Running High: Psychological Approaches to the Study of Professional Wrestling

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Why would a psychologist be interested in academic approaches to studying professional wrestling? Involvement in fictional, imagined worlds—oral and written stories, drama, film, theatre—seems to be a human universal. What does a psychological perspective on the mind entail for our understanding of such fiction? It offers explanations for how the world around us has shaped our bodies, minds, and behavior, and how culture emerges out of human nature. Over human history, we have faced three main types of problems: survival, mating, and social living. From movie plot lines to theatre performances, from pornography to comedy routines, popular culture focuses on the ways in which people (successfully or not) deal with these problems in our modern worlds. These storylines draw in their audiences because they tap into the psychological mechanisms that we have for managing these problems in our own lives. Many professional wrestling storylines have a strong focus on problems in the mating and social living domains including competition, cooperation, and status striving.

Psychological approaches have long been used in the fields of literary theory and art, going back to Freud as well as the current interest in Darwinian literary studies, which focuses on evidence that our evolved history influences the topics of texts (Carroll 120). One can study romance novels, for example, and see evidence of women's mating strategies (Salmon and Symons 61); analyze folk tales from around the world and how they reflect sex differences in mate preferences; and see how human emotions influence our enjoyment of horror films (Clasen 222). In the end, this psychological approach is all about the important "why" questions. Why do people spend so much time on imaginary or fictional worlds? Why do particular genres (like professional wrestling) rise and fall? How much of a wrestling brand or its storyline success, for example, is due to its appeal to universal aspects of human nature, and how much is due to other factors, including the individual differences that make some fans prefer certain wrestlers and storylines or even promotions, such as Extreme Championship

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Wrestling (ECW)? Using psychological theories, we may be able to arrive at a more satisfying and comprehensive understanding of why stars, storylines, and companies rise and fall.

Most fictional tales are representations of our social world. They are full of the natural patterns and concerns of life, and the rewards and dangers of the behavioral choices people can make. In many cases, those choices will be condoned or condemned, which is the morality-play aspect of stories, including those in professional wrestling. For the audience, they are a source of information about choices and their consequences. Products of popular culture focus on how social behavior plays out among individuals pursuing specific goals. Their success or failure is the plotline of any movie or the WWE.

To some, professional wrestling might seem an odd example of the psychology of storytelling. It is an unusual mix of athletics, drama, and comedy, played out by a largely testosterone-fueled cast in front of an audience of often rowdy fans. With its scripted outcomes, it is not entertainment in the traditional sports sense, but rather entertainment in the tradition of theatre and film, whether one sits in the audience at a live event or experiences it on television in the comfort and privacy of their home. It consists of a cast of characters both good and evil (and everything in between) with a wide range of storylines that can be as simple as the conflict over who is the best man to the strange male-male social group and family dynamics seen in many WWE arcs. Some popular culture theorists have suggested it is masculine melodrama, focusing on either the morality play of good versus evil or a masculine backlash against the politically correct (Barthes 23; Jenkins III 33). Certainly, morality and moral choices are important aspects of dealing with social living. Others have argued for attention to be paid to the significant percentage of female fans and whether they react (or are attracted to) differently than their male fellow fans to certain storylines and wrestlers (Salmon and Clerc 168).

Professional wrestling is a subject ripe for a psychological approach, and this is the perfect time to engage in such examination. The rise of professional wrestling that began in the 1980s has resulted in hours and hours of footage of live and televised events that document the full range of storylines from start to finish, along with their characters and audience reactions. In addition, the widespread use of the Internet among fans, whether through blogs, Tumblr, etc. provides detailed insight into fan response. The ubiquitous themes of professional wrestling are those at the heart of most human stories, including competition

between males for status and resources, mate choice, justice, cheater detection, and male coalitions, as well as solidarity and rivalry among kin. Wrestling provides us with the same cast of characters as Shakespeare—the hero, the villain, the love interest, and the comedic foil—and like Shakespeare’s characters, they experience suffering and sacrifice as well as trust and betrayal. In this essay, I will focus on the psychologically relevant themes of male status competition and cooperation, morality, sibling cooperation and rivalry, as well as sex differences in audience response. The popularity of these themes in wrestling highlight how successful storylines reflect basic human concerns around mating and navigating our social world.

Competition for Status

Much attention has been paid by psychologists, among others, to the importance of competition between males. In most species, males make a smaller parental investment than females and females tend to be more particular in choosing a mate because of their greater reproductive costs. This has been well documented in the majority of mammalian species including humans (Buss 103; Trivers 58). As a result, men’s reproductive success historically has been largely the result of their ability to compete for mating opportunities, either by winning fights with other males, clashing for status or resources, or by exhibiting traits, like facial symmetry (an indicator of good genetic quality) or generosity, that females find attractive (Little, DeBruine, and Jones 198; Miller 327). Successful men have, over time, produced more offspring. This procreation shapes traits that foster success, such as the greater degree of risk taking in the pursuit of status exhibited by men in comparison to women, including physical altercations and participation in extreme sports (Buss and Schmitt, 225; Daly and Wilson 255).

One can view professional wrestling as an athletic soap opera in which male-male competition plays out in front of a male and female audience in which everyone is interested not only in who wins but how he gets there. Of particular interest is how someone rises from the ranks to become the world champion. The typical paths include strength, skill, and the willingness to take risks. Treachery and betrayal, however, are not uncommon tactics. One wrestler who has exemplified several of these pathways to the world championship and its associated status is Ric Flair.

In professional wrestling, historically, the world championship has been the pinnacle of status achievement. In the 1980s and 1990s, this was exemplified by sixteen-time world champion Ric Flair with his multiple titles and lavish lifestyle cues including expensive suits, Rolexes, limousines, and a never-ending supply of beautiful women. Whether he was the hero or the villain, he was the epitome of success.¹ As he himself constantly reminded us, “To be the man, you have to beat the man.” For the most part, the man to beat has always been the world champion. However, in the last 20 years some wrestlers have achieved status that transcends the world title, making them a constant target for wrestlers lower on the totem pole.

One of the biggest stars the WWE has produced is Stone Cold Steve Austin. For many years, Austin 3:16 shirts were seen everywhere, worn by athletes and celebrities as well as wrestling fans. Austin’s most famous storyline was the power struggle between him and Vince McMahon (the real life and onscreen owner of the WWE). Austin was the first of a new generation of wrestlers: a rule breaker who was overwhelmingly cheered by the fans. His conflict with Vince reflected the tension between the common man and corporate power. Vince tried to get Austin to do what he wanted but instead Austin didn’t listen, beat up his boss, and gave him the finger. Austin also sprayed Vince with beer from a Budweiser truck and filled his Corvette with cement.² Austin struck a chord with the WWE’s largely working-class audience. He cut a dominant figure, with this status obtained through strength, resilience and a willingness to break the rules, though breaking them openly rather than in a sneaky way.

In many ways, Austin epitomizes the ultimate male competitor, an alpha male. He was a huge success, the man to beat, independent (one of his t-shirts reads DTA, Don’t Trust Anyone), and did things on his own terms. Even though he held the world title several times, his status and popularity came more from his attitude and unwillingness to give up, even when faced with insurmountable odds. He was the kind of man male fans would want to be and female fans might want

¹ For DVD footage of Ric Flair’s career, see *WWE: Nature Boy Ric Flair: The Definitive Collection*, Warner Brothers, 2012.

² Recommended for coverage of Austin’s storylines and matches in the WWE is *Stone Cold Steve Austin: The Bottom Line on the Most Popular Superstar of All Time*, Warner Brothers, 2013.

to have. In an unusual plot twist, Austin's reputation was cemented by a loss, not a victory. He faced Bret Hart in a no-disqualification submission match at *WrestleMania 13*³ which resulted in a "double turn." After a long, fairly even match, Austin was caught in Hart's finishing hold, and he passed out from pain and blood loss. The victory was awarded to Bret Hart but it was Austin who received tremendous applause. Austin's never-surrender warrior attitude was embraced by fans both male and female. His merchandise was among the best-selling of all time for the WWE and they even released a baby doll women's tee-shirt to satisfy his female fans as well, beginning a trend of marketing more targeted merchandise to female fans. This match was highly significant as both performers cemented character turns, Austin into the rough around the edges hero and Hart, the former Canadian righteous babyface, into the anti-American heel.

Sibling Love and Hate

While many great rivalries have been fought over championship belts, other types of conflicts also have captured the audience's attention and emotions. Some of the most intense have involved family conflicts. Phrases like "band of brothers" call to mind a unity of focus, one at odds with the strife and fratricide in accounts of figures such as Cain and Abel or Romulus and Remus. Siblings have a vested interest genetically in each other's welfare, but they also grow up as each other's main competitors for parental time, affection, and other resources (Daly, Salmon, and Wilson 227; Salmon and Hehman 123). Their competition may be overt or subtle and at times they may also band together against outsiders. But sibling relationships have always been a focus of human interest, and their stories are as common in professional wrestling as in other theatrical genres.

There have been many sibling rivalries in wrestling, but few are as fantastical as that between the Undertaker and his younger brother Kane (not his real-life brother, but his wrestling storyline or "kayfabe" brother).⁴ The Undertaker started

³ See the DVD, *WrestleMania XIII*, WWE, 2013.

⁴ For DVD coverage of the relationship between the Undertaker and Kane see *Undertaker: This is My Yard*, WWF Entertainment, 2001 and *Brothers of Destruction*, Warner Brothers, 2014.

his career during a time when the gimmick was all important. His skin was pale, his clothes were dark, he frequented graveyards, and his manager was named Paul Bearer. He even engaged in matches that ended with his opponent dumped into a casket. After a turn as a fan favorite without his manager, Bearer returned with a surprise opponent for the Undertaker. It was his younger brother Kane, whom he had assumed was dead in the fire that had also killed their parents. It should be noted that Undertaker had a more elaborate backstory than most WWE characters. Kane wore a mask and did not speak due to burns sustained in the fire. Kane blamed Undertaker for the fire and his injuries and a series of vicious matches ensued. Of course, there is a fine line between love and hate, and eventually Kane and his brother joined forces to become the Brothers of Destruction.

A more classic storyline of sibling ring rivalry took place between Bret Hart and his younger brother Owen.⁵ Unlike Undertaker and Kane, these two were brothers in real life and in the ring, part of the Canadian Hart wrestling dynasty. Owen was the classic younger brother, resenting being in the shadow of his highly successful older brother and wanting to be acknowledged as better. He verbally taunted Bret until they finally met in the ring. Owen cheated his way to victory in a match that highlighted the athletic abilities of both. But their conflict was always about who was the better wrestler, with Owen, the whiny younger brother, constantly trying to prove himself. Later, their rivalry resolved under pressure from an external threat. During Bret's feud with Shawn Michaels and Degeneration-X (aka DX), Bret sought help from Owen and Owen's tag-team partner, real-life brother-in-law Davey Boy Smith. They joined forces in an emotional reunion, reforming the Hart Foundation along with Jim "The Anvil" Neidhart (another real-life Hart brother-in-law). During their rivalry, Bret was the hero and Owen the villain, and the fans' allegiance tended toward the elder brother. By their reunion, both brothers were considered villains and routinely faced jeers from American fans though they still received cheers in their native Canada. But the rhetoric of their alliance strongly suggests family solidarity.

⁵ Some of the best coverage of Bret and Owen Hart can be seen in *WWE: Bret "Hitman" Hart - The Best There Is, The Best There Was, The Best There Ever Will Be*, Warner Brothers, 2011, and *WWE: Owen – Hart of Gold*, Warner Brothers, 2015.

Daddy's Little Boy

Unlike siblings, father and son are not typically direct competitors for women or status. But power struggles can occur between father and son over the allocation of resources. More commonly, we see father-son solidarity such as when a father comes to the ring to help his son, like Dusty Rhodes coming to the aid of his son Dustin or Cowboy Bob Orton assisting his son Randy in cheating his way to victory. Father-son relationships in professional wrestling are usually between real-life father-son pairs, contributing to the believability of the emotional performance.

But one of the most famous father-son pairs in wrestling has a history of alliance mixed with periods in which the son rebels against the father's authority, even facing him in the ring. Father Vince McMahon and his son Shane met in a street fight at *WrestleMania 17*.⁶ Shane, a fan-favorite at the time, emerged victorious. Most of the storylines that brought them into conflict involved other family members, including Vince cheating on his wife Linda, Shane's mother. Vince was also complicit in the storyline kidnapping of daughter Stephanie, Shane's sister. Shane further feuded with his sister's boyfriend Test, believing him unworthy of their family. This male proprietary interest in the sexuality of female kin is seen in other literary genres as well as reported in the anthropological and psychological literature (Perilloux, Fleishman, and Buss 227).

The Psychology of Morality

The evolution of moral reasoning and moral emotions is a topic that has fascinated philosophers and psychologists alike. Research has suggested that we are designed to be good at recognizing when someone has cheated or violated a social rule (Krebs 131). In fact, we often take pleasure in, and at times go to great lengths to see, individuals punished for their "wrongs." As attuned creatures, humans take vicarious pleasure when moral melodrama recurs in our entertainment. A majority of people believe prosocial behaviors should be

⁶ *WWF: WrestleMania X* (Seven, WWF Home Video, 2001).

rewarded and antisocial ones punished. However, whether an act is good or bad depends a lot on perspective and personal allegiance.

Wrestling is often described as a morality play: good guys versus bad guys. Typically, the only times two good guys or two bad guys fight is when one is aiming to switch sides. And we want our good guys to win. Today, however, the clean-cut morality and divide between the baby faces and heels of the 1980s and earlier has given way to blurrier lines. Once the heroes were clean-cut all-Americans, like 1980s Hulk Hogan. By contrast, the villains were nasty, egotistical, foreign, or all three; like Baron von Raschke or the Iron Sheik. Good guys were distinguishable from bad guys, but what makes someone a hero or a villain has changed somewhat since the 1990s and early 2000s. Rule breaking is not what determines good versus bad, but rather what a character stands for or represents—whether it be the power and seeming indestructibility of the Undertaker, the independence (“I stand alone and trust no one”) of Stone Cold, or the in-your-face prankster attitude of DX.

The WWE has made good use of in-group/out-group psychology to create support for certain wrestlers and storylines. Evidence suggests that humans, especially men, make “us versus them” categorizations and develop a strong attachment to their group as well as being quick to discriminate against out-groups (Atran 1537; Fiske 127). Such a psychology was likely shaped by a long history of frequent intergroup conflict over resources (Buss 301). Professional wrestling takes advantage of this aspect of psychology to build a strong fan base for various wrestlers and groups of wrestlers. Hispanic wrestlers like Rey Mysterio and the late Eddie Guerro experienced huge followings among the Latino community (Eddie referring to himself as Latino Heat). The incredible popularity of DX was largely due to young fans (many older fans were appalled) who felt a sense of solidarity with the group’s sexual innuendo and lack of respect for authority. Many Generation X fans, who grew up watching the wholesome Hulk Hogan era of the 80s, were also intrigued by increasingly adult and morally-ambiguous themes. The DX versus Hart Foundation storyline was highly entertaining partially because it didn’t play out in a standard wrestling way. While most WWE events are held in arenas throughout the United States, some take place in Canada and other countries. During the Hart Foundation-DX feud, the members of DX were the fan favorites from a storyline perspective and the fans strongly supported them in the U.S. However, in Canada, the support was almost one hundred percent behind the local in-group, the Hart Foundation, led by

Canadian hero Bret Hart. Several televised events from this time period highlighted this tribal Canadian/American conflict including one where Shawn Michaels stuck the Canadian flag up his nose⁷ and the *Survivor Series 1997*⁸ which occurred in Montreal where the fans overwhelmingly displayed signs derogating DX (the American fan favorites) and praising the Harts.

Over time, the storylines themselves haven't changed much in a basic sense. The good guy loses through cheating and later rises to a victory more emotionally powerful because of the odds against him and the pleasure (retribution) we feel when the bad guy (the member of the out-group) gets what he deserves. Yet the reality is that they both cheat, and audiences cheer when their guy cheats and jeer when the other guy does.

Because he is our guy, and that is what really matters.

The Art of Betrayal

When it comes down to it, whether a wrestler upholds the “rules” or breaks them does not have a lot to do with being the one the fans cheer. We make excuses for “our” wrestlers; it is okay when they break the rules because they do it for the right reasons—or at least that is an audience attribution. Nevertheless, there is one sure-fire way to turn cheers to boos: have one tag-team member turn on his partner. From an evolutionary perspective, this makes perfect sense. Tag-team partners are portrayed as friends and allies and trustworthiness is one of the most important characteristics to look for in any cooperative relationship (Barclay 217). If an individual's self-interests are not aligned, a significant chance exists that a beneficial relationship may turn out to be costly in the end. As a result, tag-team betrayals turn the betrayer from beloved favorite to hated villain almost instantly.

It has been done effectively many times. Particularly well-done betrayals include when Hulk Hogan joined the NWO and when X-Pac turned on Kane. X-Pac's betrayal occurred at the tail end of a long storyline that had taken Kane from an isolated mostly heel character to a sympathetic fan favorite. The core of the story was X-Pac's befriending of this scarred non-verbal monster figure and

⁷ A clip of this incident can be found online at <https://imgur.com/gA86bH7>

⁸ For coverage of this Survivor Series see *Hitman Hart: Wrestling with Shadows*, J-Films, 1998.

the bond of friendship that formed between them only to be later broken, turning X-Pac into a heel and elevating Kane to serious face.⁹

More than twenty years ago, perhaps the most stunning heel turn ever came from Hulk Hogan at WCW's *Bash at the Beach 1996*. Since the 1980s, Hogan had been professional wrestling's most famous good guy and one of its biggest money-making draws. By 1996, however, he was aging and his gimmick ("Say your prayers, eat your vitamins...") was not working with the now more mature Generation X fans. Brilliantly, Hogan ditched the superhero kitsch, becoming a Machiavellian cowardly villain that the fans loved to hate. In the main event of WCW's the pay-per-view,¹⁰ Scott Hall and Kevin Nash—who had recently left the then-WWF¹¹ for WCW with an invasion storyline, calling themselves the Outsiders—showed up a man short for their six-man tag team main event versus the hero team of Lex Luger, Sting, and Randy "Macho Man" Savage. The Outsiders claimed their partner was in the arena, but the match started without him. Hall and Nash proceeded to beat down their opponents; Luger was carried off on a stretcher, leaving Sting and Savage in need of assistance. Everything appeared to be in Hall and Nash's favor when all of a sudden, clad in his traditional bright red and yellow, Hogan arrived to save the day. Except he didn't; Hall and Nash bailed out of the ring, but Hogan stunned the crowd when he gave his old friend Savage the leg drop. The live audience went crazy, throwing full cups of soda and trash into the ring while Hogan, Hall, and Nash mocked the fans. The NWO was born as Hogan not only betrayed his old friend but the fans as well. In his own words: "You fans can stick it, brother."

⁹ The relationship between Kane and X-pac played out on *Monday Night Raw* and various WWF pay-per-views between 1999 and 2000.

¹⁰ Footage from Hogan's appearance through the heel turn can be found at <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x4jqhim>

¹¹ WWF, the World Wrestling Federation, was the earlier incarnation of what is now known as WWE, World Wrestling Entertainment. The name change occurred in 2002, largely due to a dispute with World Wildlife Fund over the use of "WWF."

For the Benefit of Those with Flash Photography

While professional wrestling is often viewed as soap opera for men, there are a substantial number of female fans. The WWE estimates that approximately 35% of its viewing audience is female.¹² Just a quick search of the Internet reveals that girls and women take an active, often exuberantly salacious, interest in professional wrestling. Women have always been a vocal part of the professional wrestling audience, particularly regarding their interest in the display of male bodies. Today's female fans have new ways to express and communicate their pleasure online. Not only do they post photos and blog about the storylines, but they also write fan fiction about their favorite wrestlers, as can be seen in the over 6500 professional wrestling stories on *Archive of Our Own* (*archiveofourown.org*) or the over 5600 posted on *FanFiction.net*.

Some might wonder if there are any differences between male and female wrestling fans in terms of favorite wrestlers or favorite storylines. In fact, great storylines tend to appeal to both male and female audiences. The working man conflict between Stone Cold and Vince McMahon, the brotherly conflict between Undertaker and Kane, whenever best friends, and typically tag-team partners, turn on each other, all these scenarios produce emotional reactions in fans. Even the cute and humorous storyline involving the unlikely alliance between The Rock and Mankind (termed "the Rock and Sock connection," due to Mankind's tendency to stick a sock puppet in his opponents' mouths) appealed strongly to men and women alike. Good stories are good stories; they capture the audience's attention and emotions. The problems of social relationships, how the same ones can involve both cooperation and conflict, have been problems men and women have had to solve over our history as a species from tribal communities to modern city-states.

Yet male and female fans can have wildly different views on individual wrestlers. This should not be surprising if men are more drawn to the male-male competition per se and women to the mate choice appeal of the men doing the competing. For example, WWE wrestler Brock Lesnar has a strong male following largely due to his obvious strength and power. The majority of signs at

¹² <http://indeedwrestling.blogspot.com/2014/07/wwe-viewer-demographics.html>.

televised events when he has been active for the WWE have been held by men. You could imagine him beating almost any opponent. However, he has a much smaller female following due to a lack of interesting ring personality/backstory and relatively poor microphone skills (which are a good avenue for conveying information about personality and attitudes, features always ranked as important to women's mate preferences).¹³ A performer that captured a huge male and female following was The Rock. In this case, it was a combination of athletic ability, incredible mic skills, sarcastic sense of humor, and attractiveness that made him the people's champion. His skills and personality have transcended the business, making him one of the top mainstream media stars of today.

For a long time, people failed to pay much attention to female wrestling fans. Yet, the WWE recognized that women made up a significant portion of their audience and now markets merchandise specifically to their female audience. An examination of this merchandise reveals a series of men with traits that would not surprise anyone with an evolutionary perspective on mate choice. First, the men that female wrestling fans really go for tend to be facially attractive with features that indicate high testosterone exposure during puberty, as well as having fit strong bodies.¹⁴ The Rock is a good example of this as he is tall, physically strong, and possesses facial symmetry indicative of good genetic quality. Female fans do not necessarily favor the largest wrestlers (like the Big Show) or the most muscular, but rather ones that are powerful and also cardiovascularly fit looking (The Rock, Shawn Michaels, John Cena, Randy Orton). Personality, as demonstrated through interviews and relationships with other wrestlers, also has an impact. Displays of friendship and solidarity, such as one wrestler coming to the rescue of another, are seen very favorably and often elevate a performer's status among female fans as seen in the frequent appearance of certain wrestlers—such as Seth Rollins and Dean Ambrose or Shawn Michaels and Triple H—in fan

¹³ Many female fans have websites for their favorite wrestlers and discuss their attributes on discussion boards and in blogs as on sites like HowTheyPlay.com. See also the sites on the now mostly defunct “Ladies Love Wrestling Too” Webring or The Daily Hotness, or “Girls Love Wrestling Too” on Pinterest. The now defunct Men in Pink and Black site was well known for its Bakery section where they had pictures of the guys they thought were highly attractive.

¹⁴ For a review of features women find attractive in a mate see Gildersleeve, Haselton, and Fales.

fiction as well as the frequency by which the WWE markets female specific merchandise on their website. A guy who wins all his matches, especially if he has a bland personality, may have a male following, but most female fans won't care much about him or his matches. On the other hand, a guy who loses all his matches will not have any fans, but a guy who struggles at times yet wins in the end gives the women more information to judge him on. Does he have drive and determination, the commitment to see things through? Does he show signs of attachment to others? These traits (physical prowess, good genes, status, agreeable personality) all make a man a good choice as a romantic or sex partner (Buss 106).

At first glance, the Undertaker might appear to be an unlikely choice for a female fan favorite, in that he is quite aggressively masculine in appearance, closer to seven feet tall than six and covered with tattoos. His scary and powerful presence has always been a huge draw to male fans. Yet, he is also tremendously popular with female fans who have romantic online fantasies about him (Clerc and Salmon 177). In several ways, he is the tall, dark, and mysterious dangerous hero seen in Gothic romance. The ultimate protector with his intimidating size and strength, his almost predatory sexual appeal has been most obvious during his "Lord of Darkness" periods as opposed to his American Badass biker run. Many of his promos presented him not only as powerful but sensitive, tormented by tragedies in his past. Like many romance heroes, the initial impression is the dark and dangerous "cad," but later comes glimpses of the "dad" type, a more sensitive caring male. In the 1990s, he referred to his fans as the "creatures of the night," many of which were young women often dressed in the goth style. But promoters walk a fine line in appealing to female fans in a way that will not turn off male fans.

This was never a problem with the Undertaker because of his size and aggressive masculinity but for smaller, more conventionally attractive wrestlers, like Shawn Michaels (the "Heartbreak Kid," the "Boy Toy," as well as the "Showstopper"), there is always a danger that being too attractive to women will drive male fans away. This did indeed happen during many if not most periods of Michaels' career, although his commitment to his in-ring performance always brought respect from a portion of the male audience even as his playing to the female fans brought jeers. But overall, Michaels' strongest, most loyal fans were his female ones. His good looks and athleticism provided an excellent indicator of good genetic quality while his social personality (he often teamed up with friends,

a group known as the Kliq, as regular or irregular tag team partners) suggested the reliability required for paternal investment. His behind-the-scenes, real-life loyalty and attachment to his friends (which in the age of the Internet became quite well known) also endeared him to female fans.

Conclusion

In the media, professional wrestling has often been viewed negatively, as a source of childhood violence. In academia, it has typically been examined through a variety of perspectives including gender roles, race, morality and class. Most often, however, it has not been taken seriously as a topic of scholarly discourse.

Yet like most forms of popular culture, professional wrestling reflects our basic human interests and desires. It is a microcosm of human nature, an athletic soap opera in which competition between powerful males plays out not only for a male audience but for a female one as well. We see issues of justice, family dynamics, sexual appeal and mate choice all enacted within the framework of sports entertainment. The success of this industry is testament not to human fondness for violence—even if it is “performed” violence—but to how well the relationships and conflicts between these wrestlers tap into our essential human nature, arousing our attention and emotions.

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