

Smack Down - Gay Style
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American football, whose ritual ass patting once famously caused it to be likened to a "homosexual ballet," has nothing on the "sport" of professional wrestling.

Every week, those with cable can tune into shows like Monday Night Raw, ECW and Smack Down (all the progeny of WWE; World Wrestling Entertainment). There, one feasts upon a visual smorgasbord of muscular, sweaty, physically aggressive males pitted against each other in the ring - seeking to dominate through a series of maneuvers which require physical intimacy. After pinning his opponent to the mat and holding him down for a sustained period, a victor is declared. Nothing gay about that, right? Well, at least nothing "gay" in the good, clean, sexy and fun sense of the word.

The truth is, despite its endless supply of sweaty flesh and packages packed into too-tight briefs, professional wrestling has failed to catch on with the gays. Blame its macho bluster and its long tradition of gay-baiting and homophobia for preventing this form of staged physical contact from earning a place in the annals of gay camp appeal. But all of that may be changing, thanks to the recent creation of an all-gay wrestling federation. First though, a breezy overview of professional wrestling and homosexuality (for more extensive information, visit your local library!)

Who was Gorgeous George?

Bear in mind, from this point onward, that Edge reached out to the WWE for comments on everything from the homophobic signs and chants of its fans to the inherently gay characteristics of the sport itself. Edge was assured several times from an amiable WWE press representative that we'd hear back from them in plenty of time for this story's deadline. We're still waiting and, thankfully, not holding our breath.

For the skinny on grappling's gay mystique from the 1950s through the dawn of the gay rights movement, Edge turned to a wrestling fan who, despite not having a website or a book to plug. Instead, he's a passionate consumer of the genre, a part-time tranny and an all-around insightful guy: my friend and platonic Monday night Raw wrestling date, Nicky Pickles.

Long considered the father of wrestling flamboyance, "Gorgeous George" became a sensation through televised bouts in the 1950s - upon adopting the persona of a long-haired pretty boy. He achieved great fame and success in an era when most of his fellow grapplers were hairy gorillas stomping, sweating and flopping around the ring; beefy, yes; but hardly the stuff of gay eroticism.

Nicky Pickles observes: "Prior to his change into the long-haired, preening, hyper-effeminate heel character, he had been married in an in-ring ceremony. This accounts for the lack of remarks on what may have been perceived as gayness. Instead, his vanity, egomania, slight build and long hair made him seem merely effeminate." George also pioneered the use of entering the ring via music, lights, fanfare and verbal sparring with the audience. His feminine character and his villainous persona became enmeshed, cultivating a love/hate relationship between the flamboyant wrestler and the fans who, despite booing him, loved the show he was putting on..

Gays as villains

Flash forward, now, to the post-Stonewall era - when wrestling's hushed implications of homosexual content were more openly discussed and acknowledged (often by those on the front lines of the gay lib movement). As Pickles tells the tale, "Who knows when some queer first thought there may be something suspect about oiled, shaved men in tiny trunks touching each other for 10 minutes. But by the late 70s, and definitely during the 'Hulk Hogan' era, many gays (and homophobes) saw something less than straightly masculine about the sport. Gays were maybe ribbing Mr. Machos: 'you see how GAY that looks? And you make fun of US for getting physical!'" Pickles speculates that wrestling's sudden popularity had something to do with the fact that suddenly, there were a lot more physically proportionate, well-groomed wrestlers; pretty boys who were photogenic and graceful and therefore vulnerable to accusations of latent, blatant or secret homosexuality.

It's also interesting to note that from the era of Gorgeous George to our present day, virtually any character displaying the slightest whiff of gay behavior has been a villain (or "heel") instead of a good guy (or "babyface"). This allows wrestling to have their cake (gay content and characters) and eat it too (demonizing and demeaning those displaying queer characteristics). It doesn't take a Dr. Freud to see what's happening in the mind of fans; a factor Pickles dubs the "Homosexual Mirror." Pickles: "Fans identify with the wrestlers. They live vicariously through them. The masculine aspects of competition, aggression and sport are subverted by 'homosexual infiltration.' There's the possibility that while someone's in a wrestling hold, they're getting off on it. This makes male fans very nervous. Interestingly, it's usually women, gays and intellectuals that make that connection."

While man-on-man eroticism is just plain gross from the fan perspective, lesbianism is much more common and, surprise, more accepted. Pickles: "We all know that seeing two chicks go at it is hot. When Mickie James was 'stalking' Trish Stratus, because she was a heel, she was booed. When she held her down and kissed her though, the audience erupted in cheers - even after she just cheated to win. Can you picture the same thing happening if John Cena planted one on the Big Show?" Not familiar with the names dropped by Pickles in the above citation? Google John Cena; he's hot (and being groomed to become the next wrestling-to-movie star find, in the tradition of Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson).

What's So Gay About Wrestling; Today!

Well, if you Googled "John Cena" and have any sensation left in either of your hands, continue scrolling downward for a brief history of gay baiting during wrestling's recent years.

Billie and Chuck were a wrestling partner team - and the only out, gay characters every created and sanctioned by the WWE (back in 2002, when the WWE was still known as the WWF - before the World Wildlife Fund sued and forced them to change their name). Billie and Chuck would hug each other and occasionally grab each other's asses, and that was the only suggestion that they MAY have been "together" - until a disastrous gay wedding story arc that left the audience visibly disgusted. But before that, Pickles recalls, a wrestler named Rico "would scare the heel out of the ring by making a kissy face at him. The audience would laugh."

"Vito was popular for a very short time with his drag thing by putting the hem of his dress over the other wrestler's face. There was also a wrestler of humungous girth names Rikishi, who had a move called the "Stinkyface" - where he'd mash opponents against the ropes and press his ass into their face." Pickles also points out that WWE head honcho Vince McMahon recently had a "Kiss My Ass Club" routine where he'd "humiliate wrestlers who'd fallen out of his favor by compelling them to kiss his bare, pants-and-underwear-down ass to keep their

job." Strung together, these routines form an undeniable pattern in which pro wrestling, at least as practiced by the WWE, cultivates an air of homophobia to both deflect its inherent homoerotic content and provoke an easy, reliable reaction from its fans.

Rise of a New Wrestling Federation

In a quiet and unassuming corner of Pennsylvania, a revolution in the world of professional wrestling is taking place - with the recent launch of PPW - Pride Pro Wrestling. PPW bills itself as "The first true organization dedicated to providing the LGBT community with the best in professional wrestling action." Packed with LGBT-affirming storylines and actual out/gay talent, PPW wrestlers compete in the ring to "prove who is the greatest LGBT grappler in the world."

With their first public event having taken place this past March (and the next one scheduled for July 31 at Club XS in York, Pennsylvania), PPW aims to take wrestling into the final frontier of acknowledged and celebrated homosexual talent, storylines and fans.

Thomas W. Neiss, PPW's producer, says the idea came to him when he was searching for a new entrepreneurial project. He and his boyfriend noticed there were gay rodeos, but no gay wrestling events. Thus, the PPW was born.

Neiss, who has been in the business for twelve years, wrestles under the name "Eddie Valentine." He was trained at the Hazleton, PA Wild Samoans wrestling school, then "moved on to Pennsylvania Championship Wrestling, then the East Coast Wrestling Association and Combat Zone Wrestling" and currently works with World Professional Wrestling.

As for what's out there in the mainstream, Neiss calls the work of the WWE chain "incredibly negative. They have no positive gay characters or storylines." What gay content there is, he says, is "thrown out there to get a negative reaction from the fans. That's their intention, that's what they want." Neiss speculates, though, that if they created some positive gay characters, "They would be surprised to see what kind of reaction they get from fans; but their attitude is very archaic. They don't think a positive gay character or storyline is what their fans want."

Asked whether it's fair to criticize professional wrestling's treatment of gay subject matter when everything in that genre is deliberately over the top, Neiss says "Every time you see homosexual themes, it's always negative. If they had overblown gay positive characters, I could see that argument carrying water; but gay is equated with femininity and weakness and always portrayed in a negative way."

Neiss, then, has taken it upon himself to pack his PPW roster with highly skilled wrestlers whose gay-positive personas fight for LGBT rights and empowerment. One match pitted Eddie Valentine (the gay avenger/defender) against virulently anti-gay Christians. Neiss says that, true to wrestling's tradition of David vs. Goliath, hero vs. villain storylines, LGBTs can live vicariously through such matchups. Recalling public demonstrations by Bible-thumping homophobes, Neiss reasons "Everybody wants to beat the shit out of those people. That's not going to happen in real life, but they can come to the show and experience something they'd never do."

Over the next decade, Neiss hopes to expand PPW nationally, then internationally - with the added goal of establishing a presence on national television. There, his stable of out, gay wrestlers will provide a true alternative to the homophobic swill being dished out every week by the WWE. Until then, though, your best bet for having a gay-positive wrestling experience is to go to sleep and dream of that cute John Cena pinning you to the mat and making you submit to his desires until the alarm clock rings.