

- » Defining the elements of professional wrestling
- » Appreciating the themes that draw a pro wrestling audience
- » Seeing the whole array of people behind a pro wrestling event

## Chapter **1**

# The Lowdown on Professional Wrestling

**A**lthough humans have wrestled for thousands of years, what you'd recognize as "professional wrestling" began in the early 19th century and evolved into what you see today. Fans around the world can be fanatical about what goes on both inside and outside the ring.

This chapter serves as an entry point to this book and explains what professional wrestling is — what it is, what's real, what's not, who's involved, and more. This chapter also explores why professional wrestling has been and continues to be so popular with its vocal fans all over the world.

## Understanding What Professional Wrestling Is at Its Core

Professional wrestling is an athletic theatrical art form. It has existed in the United States for around 200 years and worldwide for at least that long — and for all we know, some form of it has existed as long as human beings have walked the Earth.

# Looking at what defines pro wrestling

Professional wrestling has many dimensions to what makes it what it is. The following bullets help paint a picture of the sport:

- » **It's not real, but it's not fake.** Someone decides who wins and loses and the wrestlers work together to put on a physical performance. But the wrestling ring isn't a trampoline, the falls are real, and wrestlers sometimes get hurt, and even killed.
- » **It's not legitimate competition, although legitimate competition exists.** Pro wrestling has been *worked*, meaning it's not been a legitimate competition of skill, pretty much since the sport's early days. Wrestlers aren't all paid equally, and a more successful wrestler does make more money. Therefore, wrestlers compete in different ways to become bigger stars, whether it be through their physique, their talking ability, their charisma, and so on.
- » **It's not choreographed, except when it is.** There's no one way to perform a professional wrestling match. Some wrestlers plan out a match move-for-move, start to finish. Other wrestlers improvise the entire match. Often, a match is a mix of improv and choreography.
- » **It's one of the most fascinating art forms to ever have existed on the planet.** Professional wrestling is a pseudo-sport that's also a form of improvisational entertainment. With the death of Roller Derby (an old sport that was very much like professional wrestling with pre-planned winners and losers, although modern-day Roller Derby is legitimate), no other form of sports or entertainment on Earth is exactly like it.

Most chapters in this book look at the history of professional wrestling in the United States, as well as other countries, during different eras. In the 1800s, what historians can confirm suggests that matches were often legitimate. And around the 1920s, they morphed into the purely theatrical professional wrestling known today.



REMEMBER

Although far more legitimate matches happened in the 19th century than in the 20th, for reasons we examine in Chapter 4, the reality is that professional wrestling always had a worked element to it likely from day one. And contrary to popular belief, newspapers in the early 1800s didn't shy away from the fact that many wrestling matches weren't on the level.

# Respecting the physical work

Pro wrestling isn't a legitimate athletic contest in the same way that amateur wrestling is. But although pro wrestlers predetermine matches and their results, the physical aspects of the match itself are very real.



TIP

Consider a bodyslam, a very basic pro wrestling move that everyone has heard of. You lift your opponent up and slam them onto their back on the mat. This sounds like taxing physical work:



TIP

- » Lifting another human being, turning them upside-down, and then holding them aloft for a moment requires a lot of physical strength and coordination.
- » And even if you can bodyslam an unwilling opponent, that effort burns a lot of energy that you need to continue wrestling for another 15 to 20 minutes (on average).

For these reasons, pro wrestlers finesse their bodyslams, working together to make them easier on them both. The slammer and the *slamnee* (we made that word up) work together on the lift:

1. **The slammer grabs the slamnee.**
2. **The slamnee goes up (adds to the slammer's momentum so it takes less effort for them to lift the slamnee).**

The slamnee jumps a little, pushes off the slammer's body a little, whatever can help make the lift easier. Think of two people working together to do a lift in cheerleading.

3. **The slamnee comes down.**

The fall is real and the impact is real.

4. **The slamnee tries to do a *flat back bump*.**

Like a fall in martial arts, the slamnee attempts to spread out the impact of the *bump* (the fall) by landing flat and dispersing their weight over a large area. A good flat back bump, if done properly, shouldn't hurt at all.

If they don't succeed, they can get injured for real.



WARNING

Injuries, both minor and major, happen on pretty much every show on any given day all over the world. Wrestlers are taught how to fall. And although some wrestlers claim that every *bump* (fall) feels like getting into a minor car wreck, as a former wrestler, co-author Bryan Alvarez can tell you that this claim just isn't true. The vast majority of bumps that a wrestler takes are perfectly comfortable. However, any bump can also go wrong, and the damage caused by a career of bumps takes its toll over the years. Wrestlers have broken their backs and their

necks, they have ended up paralyzed, and some have died. Most end up in pain in their later years from the chronic physical stress of a life in professional wrestling.

## What's real

Many aspects of professional wrestling are completely real:



REMEMBER

- » **Physicality:** The physical aspects of professional wrestling are definitely real, even if the moves and results are predetermined (think of a professional dancer who knows their moves before the show starts — they still have to execute those moves and accept the effects to their body — with the main difference that dancers don't fall on purpose).
- » **Tools:** The props for a pro wrestling match — items such as steel chairs, tables, and thumbtacks — are all real (although a few types of tools are *gimmicked* (fake); we talk about all the bits and pieces in Chapter 3).
- » **Blood:** More often than not, you see real blood, which the wrestler often draws themselves with a razor blade (see Chapter 3), although very occasionally a wrestler might use a Halloween-style blood capsule.
- » **The ring:** Despite what you might have heard, the ring doesn't bounce like a trampoline; it's a very firm (some might say unforgiving) surface. Check out Chapter 3 for more about what makes up a pro wrestling ring.

Suffice it to say, to call pro wrestling as a whole fake does the art form and the participants a great disservice.

## What's fake

You can call pro wrestling fake to the extent that, before the match begins, both wrestlers know who's going to win and how, a decision made by the person in charge of the show. It's not a legitimate contest of abilities. Sometimes a *shoot* occurs (when the staged performance turns into a legitimate competition), which we talk about in Chapter 4 and elsewhere. But those situations happen so infrequently nowadays that you probably won't actually see one happen.

We discuss how wrestlers put matches together in Chapter 2. But the degree of planning varies:

- » Completely choreographed from start to finish
- » Completely improvised from start to finish
- » Half choreographed and half improvised, or any mix of the two

The same variation occurs in those bombastic interviews (called *promos*). Sometimes a writer scripts the whole thing and the wrestler memorizes that script. Sometimes the wrestler gets a live mic and improvises an unplanned soliloquy. Sometimes, the promo is a mix of both scripted points and improvisation.



REMEMBER

When it comes to pro wrestling, both in the ring and out, you don't have a one-size-fits-all pattern or approach. But, in virtually every case, you know that you're watching a performance.

## EXAMINING AMATEUR WRESTLING'S CONNECTION TO PRO WRESTLING

Amateur wrestling is a legitimate sport that pits two individuals against each other in a bona fide sporting contest. Schools and colleges all over the world have wrestling programs, and it has been an Olympic sport dating back to the original Olympic Games in Ancient Greece. Realistically, other than running, it's probably the oldest sport on Earth.

In the United States, professional wrestling actually predates amateur wrestling. In fact, if you or a family member happens to be an amateur wrestler, the sport in its modern form dates back to the turn of the century and is the legacy of a man named Frank A. Gotch, who was, in fact, one of the greatest professional wrestlers of all time. (Chapter 4 discusses Gotch and his contributions in greater detail.)

In the past, and to a smaller extent today, some amateur wrestlers looked down on professional wrestling because it was fake. Nowadays, with the inner workings of pro wrestling more out in the open than ever before, many amateur wrestlers respect the hard work, dedication, and physical skills necessary to become a pro wrestler. Some of the biggest stars in pro wrestling history came from the Olympic and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) ranks of amateur wrestlers, including Kurt Angle (1996 Olympic Gold Medalist, multi-time NCAA Division I All-American), Brock Lesnar (multi-time NCAA All-American), Dan Gable (1972 Olympic Gold Medalist and multi-time NCAA National Champion), Danny Hodge (1956 Olympic Silver Medalist, multi-time NCAA Champion, and the man the amateur wrestling Hodge Trophy was named after), Verne Gagne (multi-time NCAA Champion and 1948 Olympic alternate), Jack Brisco (two-time NCAA All-American and a Division I Champion), Bob Backlund (NCAA Division II Champion), and "Mad Dog" Vachon (1948 Olympian).

# Figuring Out Pro Wrestling's Popularity

Because pro wrestling is predetermined, the people who put pro wrestling shows together can write stories that make you really like certain wrestlers and really dislike others, and then they can give you a reason to want to see them fight. At its core, that's all it is. And although pro wrestling worldwide always has its ups and downs and its times of great success and times of failure, we can't imagine any period where humans wouldn't be interested in the core concepts behind professional wrestling.

Pro wrestling as a form of entertainment offers the audience just what they want:



TIP

- » **Having an escape, and a way to relax and unwind:** Pro wrestling is like most other sports or forms of entertainment. After a hard day of work, you can sit back, watch it, and follow along with what's happening. Pro wrestling fans are just as passionate as any other group of fanatics.
- » **Becoming invested:** Because of its predetermined nature, and the fact that it runs before a live audience weekly without any sort of off-season, the people in charge can control wins and losses, and storylines, to better satisfy their audience. Sure, your favorite wrestler can't always win every match, but when the time is right, unlike with any other sporting event, the fan favorite can win the championship at a time when it means the most to their fans.
- » **Controlling the action:** Because wrestling airs weekly to a live audience, in some ways the fans can dictate the course of action, unlike with sports, film, or other entertainment choices. On many occasions, pro wrestlers whom the promoters at first didn't push hard to stardom ended up becoming gigantic superstars because the audience demanded it.

World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) head Vince McMahon considered Daniel Bryan, one of the most talented wrestlers of the 2000s, too small and "plain-looking" (he was called "Goat Face" on TV) to become a tippy-top star. But the fans demanded it and refused to relent, until McMahon finally gave Bryan the big *WrestleMania* main event win that the fans wanted to see.

## Getting vicarious thrills and satisfaction

Pro wrestling allows fans to live vicariously through the performers. The audience might see a wrestler as surrogate for their personal situation. Or they may feel that the wrestler represents the best parts of their culture.

## Sticking it to the man

The wrestler “Stone Cold” Steve Austin became the biggest pro wrestling star of the 1990s through his feud with Vince McMahon. At its core, the storyline was simple:

- » **The regular guy:** Austin, in his jean shorts and T-shirt, portrayed the beer-drinking common man.
- » **The slick schemer:** McMahon portrayed, well, himself as the evil owner of the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) and Austin’s boss.



TIP

After a hard day’s work at a job that perhaps they hated (or maybe they liked the job but hated their boss), fans could turn on the TV and watch, almost on a weekly basis, Austin beating up McMahon, getting some sense of satisfaction by watching him triumph.

It was like a *Looney Tunes* Wile E. Coyote cartoon. Every week, the evil boss McMahon (as Wile E. Coyote) would come up with some diabolical plan to screw Austin; and although some of these plans would succeed briefly, in the end, Austin (the Roadrunner) would overcome the odds and leave the boss lying flat on his back on the mat. Even though it happened virtually every single week, fans couldn’t get enough of it, and millions tuned in for years. (Flip to Chapter 6 for more about Austin.)

## Taking pride in your country’s people

The biggest star in the history of Japanese pro wrestling, Rikidōzan, rose to fame in the aftermath of Japan’s defeat in World War II (and the rise of television in that country). Rikidōzan came to represent Japan (which was ironic because he was secretly part Korean, a fact that was hidden from the public at the time). Promoters flew in big, tough American (and sometimes Canadian) wrestlers to lose to him.



REMEMBER

His victories over white wrestlers became such a massive symbolic part of Japanese cultural history that millions and millions of fans bought televisions for the first time in the mid-1950s and early 1960s just to watch his matches. To this day, Japanese and Korean elementary school textbooks relate the story of Rikidōzan.

## Appreciating the drama

Ultimately, pro wrestling is popular because of human nature. You can always find an audience when two people are fighting to settle their differences, particularly two people that the observer knows something about.

If you go to a basketball game and a fight breaks out, you stop watching the game to watch the fight. If you're at the movies and two people in front of you get into a disagreement, then one of them hits the other with a box of popcorn and a brawl erupts, you stop watching the movie to watch the brawl. And if you go to a family reunion where a fight breaks out between Gramma Gladys and Uncle Terry, you're going to watch that fight even more intently because of all you know about the relationship between the two.

## Recognizing Who's Involved in Professional Wrestling

A lot of different people make up a professional wrestling match. From the competitors in the ring, to the promoters and the announcers, to the behind-the-scenes personnel, a lot of moving parts work together. These sections walk you through some of them.

### Considering the competitors

Professional wrestlers are the heart and soul of professional wrestling. They're the "competitors" who square off to determine who's the best. They represent humanity in all its facets — big, small, male, female, and everything in between, from cultures all over the world. You can read about different wrestlers in every chapter of this book.

### Refereeing the matches

The referee is the hidden participant in the match (or at least, they're supposed to be; you should never notice a great referee). In storyline, they officiate the action and enforce the rules. In real life, they communicate with backstage during the matches, they relay information from one wrestler to another, and they often even work to put the ring together and take it down after the show. We discuss them more in Chapter 3.

### Hearing the announcers

*Announcers*, who often broadcast the event on TV or radio, are the voice of the action. And some of them have become bona-fide legends to fans who grew up listening to and watching them over the decades. Chapter 12 discusses what makes a great announcer and identifies some of the greatest announcers of all time.

## WHAT ABOUT WARDROBE AND MAKEUP?

Only the biggest professional wrestling organizations employ full-time makeup and wardrobe specialists. For the most part, wrestlers do their own makeup, and they either make themselves or have someone else make their ring gear and costumes. Much of what a wrestler needs, from trunks and tights to boots, can be ordered from companies on the internet.

*Ring announcers* are different; they're the people who introduce the wrestlers to the crowd before the matches begin. Chapter 12 looks at them in greater detail.

## Focusing on managers

Pro wrestling managers are actually on-screen characters who supposedly manage the affairs of their wrestlers. They do everything from create characters to generate *heat* (get the audience angry and create tension in the ring). Refer to Chapter 12 for more information about managers.

