

Is professional wrestling getting a Raw deal?

By Deanna Symoski
staff writer

You're going along, minding your own business when suddenly a group of militant cult members kidnap you and throw you in the trunk of a car. Pretty upsetting, but not half as bad as realizing that this same shady group had kidnapped your sister and has proceeded to string her up in a sacrificial offering.

Or maybe this buff chick that you've sort of had a thing for one day decides to punch you in the crotch and hook up with your arch nemesis. You can't believe she would stab you in the back like that, so you talk a little trash. But, wait! The evil new guy inadvertently shoots your girl in the face with a fire ball and she returns to your loving arms.

Sound like the plots to this summer's biggest blockbusters? No, it's just professional wrestling at its absolute best.

In the past month or so, pro wrestling has been just about everywhere. The hype for WrestleMania XV (The World Wrestling Federation's grandest event) spilled over into mainstream media this year, exposing the pseudo-sport to everyone from housewives to the corporate elite. Thanks to four commemorative covers by TV Guide recently, WrestleMania and pro

wrestling as a whole had the opportunity to reach an audience of 35 million viewers. As a result, the WWF's largest pay-per-view event never counted numbers nearly as high. So it seems ignoring pop culture's newest (or oldest) phenomenon is like overlooking the rattlesnake bite on your leg -- you just can't do it.

But what exactly is the wonder that is professional wrestling? Surely, it's more than intricate plot lines, half naked women and guys built like super heroes. Well, not that's pretty much it, except that it's all showcased in weekly episodes that really could rival this summer's film releases. With extravagant pyrotechnic backdrops and riot-inciting entrance themes, pro wrestling has managed to incorporate the extreme of everything executives will allow on television. "The WWF is a soap, it's an action adventure, it's a live action cartoon, and it's part talk show," WWF owner Vince McMahon recently told Entertainment Weekly. "A hybrid of everything successful on TV, all rolled into one."

And it's fake! I know that for a few of you die-hard believers out there this is like hearing that there is no Santa Claus, but surprisingly, most of you already know this and you still don't care. So what's the appeal? "Pro wrestling is year round and you

don't see athletes going on strike," writes Jim Varsallone of The Miami Herald. "Wrestlers are good to fans, posing for pictures and signing autographs."

Kristen Baldwin and Mike Flaherty, writers for *Entertainment Weekly* agree: "For sports fans alienated by the humongous egos (and salaries) of pro athletes ... wrestling's let-us-entertain-you commitment is refreshing. For viewers, it flies in the face of network's repeat-ridden, copycat-strewn landscape." No reruns here! Every week WWF's Raw and WCW's (World Championship Wrestling) Monday Nitro and Thursday Night Thunder are new, exciting and aiming to please.

But for some critics of this sports entertainment (the ones who don't know their roles), potshots at this phenomenon are a dime a dozen.

Recently, on ABC's news magazine 20/20, professional wrestling was held responsible for the dangerous (and may I say incredibly stupid) attempts by kids to replicate the moves they see on TV. Teenage boys were staging actual matches in their backyards in rings they made themselves and videotaping themselves bludgeoning, cutting and diving off of roofs on top of each other. Some went so far as to use barb wire to initiate bleeding. Monday Night Raw now comes with a disclaimer in the beginning, much

like The Jerry Springer Show and totes with it a rating of TV-14, L. V.

In another expose by ESPN (ABC's sister station since both are owned by Disney), the "sport" is once again under fire for alleged use of steroids and explicit material. Though Vince McMahon was interviewed in the report, the WWF website maintains that much of the interview ended up "on the cutting room floor."

So what's with the witch hunt? Remember something called Monday Night Football? No? Well, neither does anyone else. But it seems that in the days before Raw and Nitro dominated Monday nights, there was a different type of sport controlling the competition. This one, too, featured mammoth men and flagrant brutality, but it was an accepted part of American tradition. Thanks to the combined appeal of the alternative, however, the previous champ of Monday nights is losing viewers fast.

According to the WWF's color commentator, Jerry "The King" Lawler, Monday Night Football saw its worst season last year, while Raw saw its best. Though such an accusation is only hearsay, it is clear that ABC is not happy about its new competition. Jay Andronaco, Manager of Marketing and Communications for the Federation, boasts that Monday night's Raw is the

number one show among males 14-35. A more unbiased take admits that WCW and WWF share the highest ratings on cable TV.

Varsallone, the *Miami Herald* writer, interprets Disney's campaign as an obvious play for football ratings, citing the ESPN expose as a desperate attempt to bash wrestling and save Monday nights for ABC. He paraphrased the report by saying the theme was basically this: "Stop watching wrestling and turn on football."

And it certainly doesn't help that even football players are getting into the act. Lawrence Taylor (LT) was himself a wrestler in WrestleMania XI's Main Event, where he wrestled Bam Bam Bigelow. Two of wrestling's biggest names were once themselves actual football players: Dwayne Johnson, better known as "The Rock," was defensive lineman for a Canadian football league and Bill Goldberg played nose tackle for Atlanta Falcons. Football players are also attending live shows, but who can blame them? Professional wrestling's no-holds-barred publicity campaigns are enough to suck anybody into the ring.

No longer the taboo it once was, pro wrestling is wrangling up some pretty sophisticated viewers -- and numbers. According to *EW*, the USA Network reported "a 156 percent

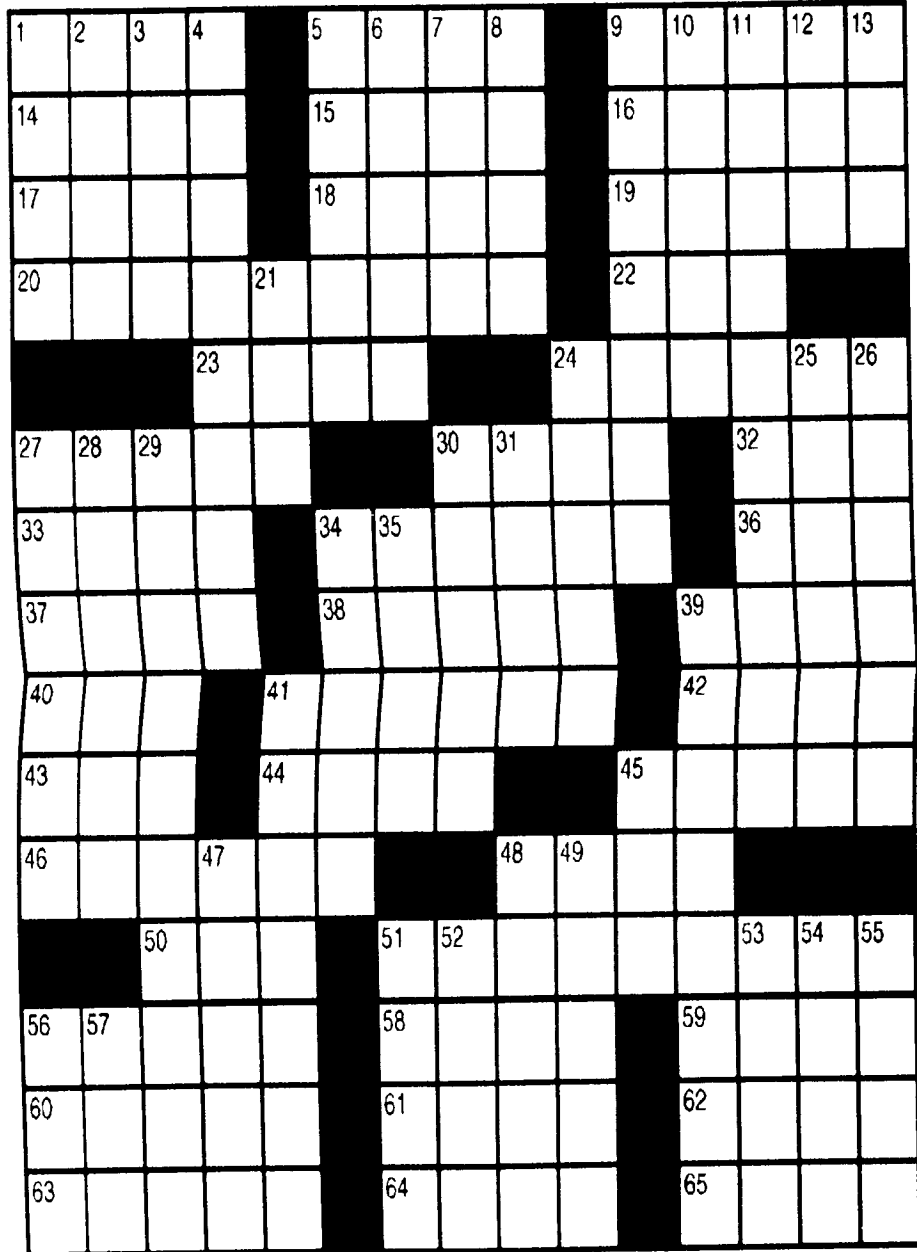
increase in ratings among viewers with four or more years of college, while ratings among households with incomes of \$50,000 or more are up 111 percent." To watch wrestling?

Apparently it has to do with the target demographic. "They've aimed it at an older crowd," MIT Comparative Media Studies professor Henry Jenkins told *EW*. "They've created a morally ambiguous universe, with antiheroes and sympathetic villains. It's appealing to a *Pulp Fiction* crowd."

It's also appealing to females. It used to be that this rough and tumble play was a guy thing, but the number of female viewers has also grown considerably. I know girls who actually get together on their own to watch a good Monday night brawl ... and they're not watching football, either.

Despite controversy, professional wrestling continues to be a force to be reckoned with. And it only keeps expanding. Restaurants, casinos and record labels are being launched as we speak. This is not to mention the magazine covers, guest appearances and product endorsements wrestlers are signing on for. Like boy bands and Cindy Crawford, this, too, is an icon of pop culture with its own ups and downs, but after decades of resilience, professional wrestling has proven that it can't be counted out.

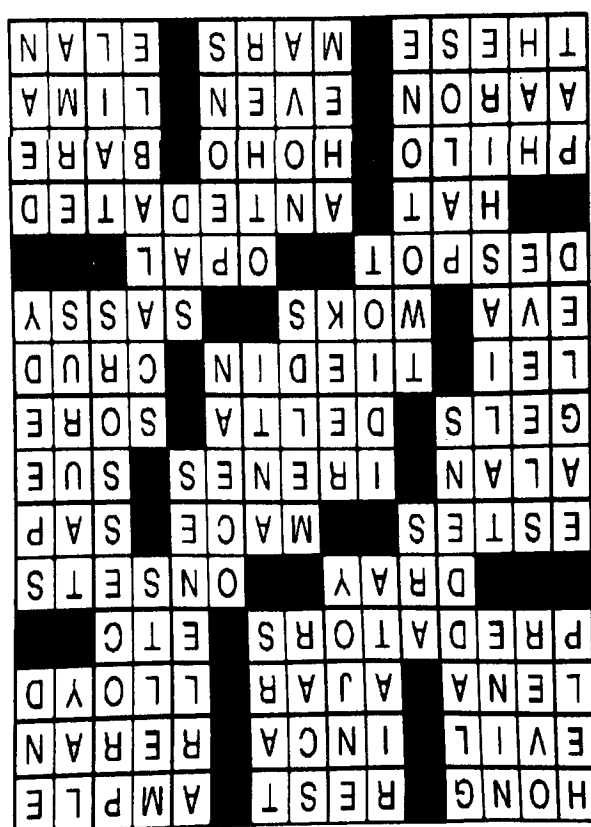
- ACROSS
- 1 Kong
 - 5 Take five
 - 9 More than enough
 - 14 Depravity
 - 15 Machu Picchu resident
 - 16 Played again
 - 17 Musical Home
 - 18 Open some
 - 19 Harold of "Safety Last"
 - 20 Victimizers
 - 22 List-ending abbr.
 - 23 Sturdy cart
 - 24 Beginnings
 - 27 Park, CO
 - 30 Nutmeg spice
 - 32 Gullible person
 - 33 Arkin or King
 - 34 Ryan and Worth
 - 36 Take to court
 - 37 Styling products
 - 38 Greek letter
 - 39 Tender spot
 - 40 Luau garland
 - 41 Connected
 - 42 Caked deposit
 - 43 Vaudeville's Tanguay
 - 44 Oriental fryers
 - 45 Impudent
 - 46 Tyrant
 - 48 Fiery gem
 - 50 Stetson or fedora
 - 51 Preceded in time
 - 56 Fictional detective Vance
 - 58 Jolly laugh
 - 59 Expose
 - 60 Home-run king
 - 61 Level
 - 62 Capital of Peru
 - 63 "We hold truths to be . . ."
 - 64 Roman god of war
 - 65 Dash



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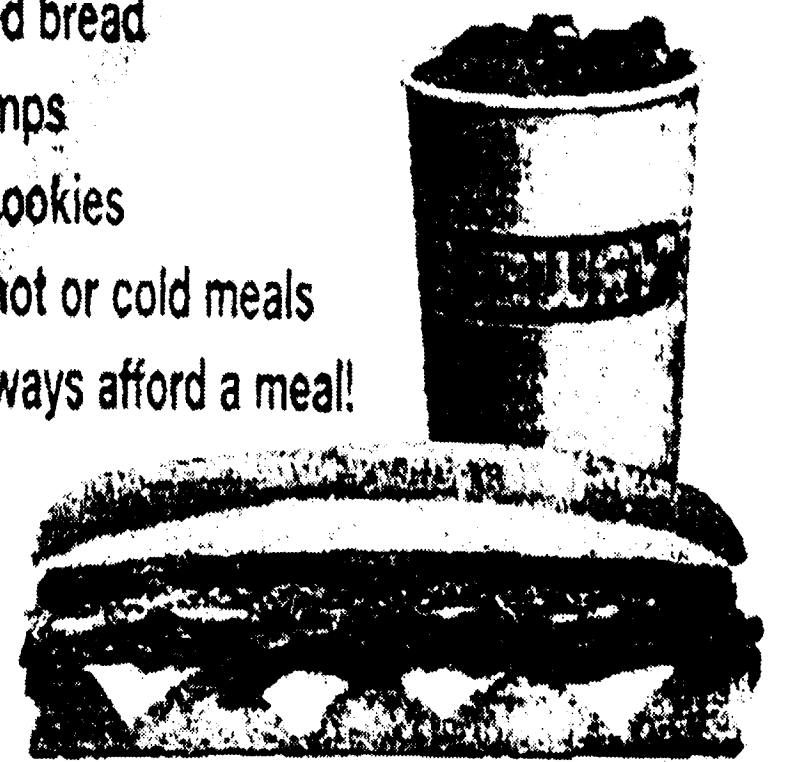
- 5 Rodeo rope
- 6 Relish
- 7 Cicatrix
- 8 Old sailors
- 9 Dahl and Francis
- 10 Thaws
- 11 Computers
- 12 Spread over a surface
- 13 Call off
- 21 gratia artis
- 24 Marine expanse
- 25 Zodiac sign
- 26 Rapid
- 27 Scored two under par
- 28 Record holder
- 29 "Rocky" co-star
- 30 Card-game displays



- 31 Against: pref.
- 34 Simpleton
- 35 Stink
- 39 Climbable
- 41 Car color combo
- 45 Depressed
- 47 Hills, IL
- 48 One not mentioned
- 49 Unskilled laborers
- 51 Hey!
- 52 Celestial explosion
- 53 Follow
- 54 Columnist Bombeck
- 55 College bigwig
- 56 Light touch
- 57 Doubter's exclamation

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