

# Total Package

## 'We're like live soap opera cartoon characters'

Former Penn State football player body slams his way to success in professional wrestling

By MICHAEL PALM  
Collegian Sports Writer

Sometimes the shouts are at/for Lex, like when he smirks at a downed opponent in the wrestling ring. Other times, they're for Larry, like in an airport when an old teammate sees a familiar face.

For Lex Luger/Larry Pfohl, the identity crisis is nothing he's unaccustomed to — it's been happening for 10 years. Since 1986, Pfohl has wrestled professionally under the name Lex Luger, whether it be in Atlanta, Japan or in the Baltimore Arena.

In 1976, there was an identity crisis, but it didn't come from a wrestling career. Rather, it came from being in a strange place — State College. As an 18-year-old freshman at Penn State, Larry Pfohl felt uncomfortable. With most of the other football recruits hailing from Pennsylvania, New Jersey or Ohio, Pfohl felt somewhat ostracized.

"It was me," he says now. "It wasn't them."

Besides that ostracized feeling, the coaches wanted Pfohl to change his position. Growing up in Orchard Park, N.Y., in the shadow of Rich Stadium, Pfohl idolized the Buffalo Bills — especially their offensive line. When the Penn State coaches thought he should move to linebacker or defensive end, he resisted.

Pfohl wouldn't do it. So he transferred to the University of Miami, where he was promised he could stay on as an offensive lineman. He got his wish, but for only one year. For what he called "off-the-field incidents," he was suspended from the team by Miami coach Lou Saban.

"He was really a live wire," Saban said.

Ah, the impetuosity of youth. "I was into having a good time, hanging out with the guys," he

### Personality Profile

**NAME:**  
Lex Luger

**AGE:** 37

**WHAT HE DOES:** A professional wrestler for WCW

**AT PENN STATE:** 1976/1977 school year

**WHY HE LEFT:** A member of the football team, he left because Penn State wanted to make him a linebacker when he wanted to play on the offensive line.

**FOOTBALL CAREER:** Stops in CFL (Montreal), USFL (Tampa Bay and Memphis) and NFL (Green Bay)

**FIRST MATCH:** Beat Koko Samoa in 1986

**FIRST TITLE:** Three weeks after he started wrestling



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— Lex Luger  
professional wrestler

says. "I didn't apply myself at all in school. I didn't take advantage of the educational opportunity."

Pfohl had some regrets at first, some he still holds to this day. Those were put aside when he signed with the Montreal Alouettes of the Canadian Football League.

In the late 1970s, football players could leave after any year of college. Pfohl left after his sophomore year.

"And God, that was like, if I didn't make it, that was it," he said. "I couldn't go back to college because I had signed a pro contract and taken money."

He made it in the CFL for three years. He then moved on to the Green Bay Packers of the National Football League

for two seasons. The short-lived United States Football League was next, including stops with the Tampa Bay Bandits and the Memphis Showboats.

"I was tired of thinking, God, am I going to make the team this year?" he said. "You know, I was proud of what I accomplished in football, but I always felt like I was in training camp, thinking, 'Ooh, who'd they draft? Ooh, am I going to make the team this year?'"

Seeking some stability in his life, he walked into the offices of Championship Wrestling Florida. To him, it would be a steady job. Why not take advantage of his athleticism and his physique? He saw no reason not to.

Pfohl just needed one thing — a new name. He knew that his name didn't exactly roll off people's tongues. Of German descent and with the "Magnum, P.I." television series very popular, Luger, a German automatic revolver company, popped into his head. Simplicity was essential.

"I didn't want a name that was too hard to pronounce," he said.

Putting together the persona, the character, the image was next for the newly dubbed Lex Luger. "You're like a soap opera character," he explained. A one-dimensional personality will not take anybody far in pro wrestling, so being multi-faceted is vital.

Interviewing, getting the crowd riled or pumped up — and wrestling — all play a part in the success or failure of a career. Some wrestlers have had to reinvent themselves over and over — not Luger. Throughout his 10 years in the business, though changing from a fan favorite to the "bad boy," Luger has maintained his identity — at least what he had when he became Luger.

"Sometimes I think I lost my identity," Luger said with a laugh. "I lost Larry somewhere."

But it was through sports as a child that he found himself. In grade school, he blew away everybody in the 50-yard dash. Friends came easier.

"I was a real shy kid, so for me, sports were an outlet that helped me," he said. "That was a very good feeling because I was a very introverted kid and for me, that was a groundbreaker."

Not that his parents particularly enjoyed what he was doing. They would have preferred he stick to something with a future. They thought that sports would lead to a dead end.

"My mom's supported me in whatever I did," he said. "My dad was a reluctant follower, even of my football career."

"I don't have any problems with that. I don't have any scars from that."

Although there were no mental scars, physical ones surely came from his athletic career. He had

lettered twice in football and track, and three times in basketball for Orchard Park High School.

That led to his arrival at Penn State. He said Penn State had the best testing of athletic ability at the time. All the analysis led the coaching staff to believe Pfohl would be best suited as a defensive end or linebacker. He balked. It was a rash decision.

"I was like, I know what's better for me," he said. "I was very unhappy."

It was a time of few bright spots in his life. Yet one shone brighter than all. He met his future wife, Peggy, at Penn State. From nearby Unionville, she graduated in three years and the two married shortly after. Married for 16 years, the couple has a 10-year-old son, Brian, and a 5-year-old daughter, Lauren.

His transfer to Miami and subsequent suspension from the Hurricanes, followed by his trip through the football community, seems like it could have been the life of someone questioning why things happened in a certain way. But he doesn't do that.

"My mom says I always land in a bed of you-know-what and I come out smelling like a rose," he said.

It has worked out for Luger. He says he hasn't squandered his money, as he has made wise investments, including two health clubs with fellow wrestler Sting. Contracts run from enough to barely survive up to the millions of dollars. He could leave the business if he wanted to.

"I think Lex is doing now what makes him happy," said Shawn Michaels, a wrestler who competed in the WWF at the same time as Luger. "He got into this as a business venture, as a means to make money after football. That's fine."

If he were in it for the money alone, he would be gone. But he's having too much fun right now. After he left the World Wrestling Federation in 1995, he felt like he was dreaming. In the WWF, he was on the road for about 300 days a year, promoting patriotism after he body-slammed Yokozuna, a wrestler degrading America.

Luger didn't feel comfortable in the role. He said he's proud of his country, but doesn't like wearing it on his sleeve.

"I did what I could with what they wanted me to be," he said. "I liked being the role model, but in the ring I also liked being Lex Luger."

"I feel back in character now. I've enjoyed being the bad boy a little more because there's more creativity and more fun. It's easier to get the crowd to hate you."

His role in the WWF, though, left little time for bonding with his two young kids.

Now that he's in World Championship Wrestling, he only works 100 to 120 days a year. WCW relies more heavily on television than its traveling show.

"I'm waiting for someone to pinch me and wake me up," he said, his grin spreading.

The reason for his smile is his family. Outside the ring, he says he's just "an ordinary guy." With his family, he rents movies, just doing what he calls regular stuff, nothing out of "The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous."

"I like them to have a normal family life," he said. "They don't look at me as a TV guy. It's just Dad."

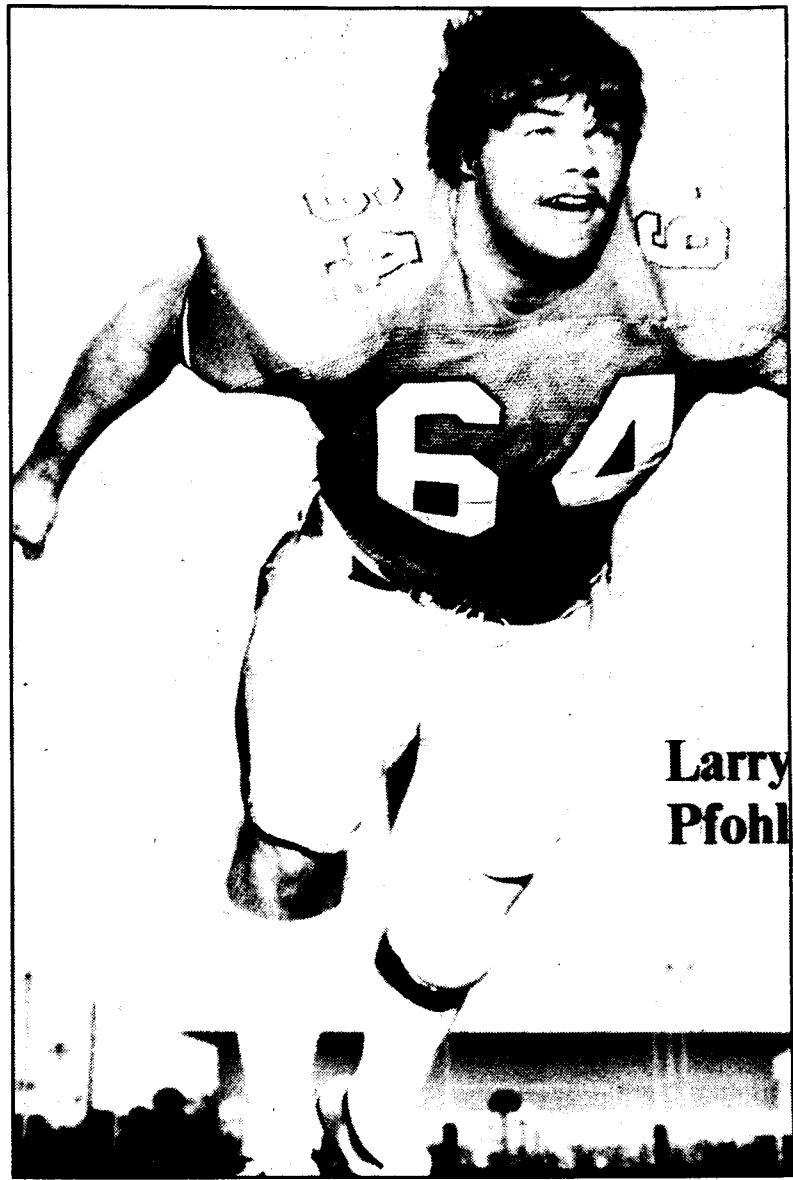
As much as he tries to lead that normal life, his celebrity status just won't let him. Little things, like going to the grocery store and dining out, become a nuisance, mainly to his family. He is used to the attention, while his loved ones aren't.

He can separate his personal and business life. Some can't. He acts differently out of the ring than he does inside. Outside, his eyes are wide open, he smiles. It's quite different from his other side, where he scowls, poses and generally looks with disgust at his opponents.

"People can say what they want about what we do, about how much is entertainment and how much is for real, but we're sports entertainers," he said. "I don't make any pretenses about that."

A lot of the wrestlers today admit that wrestling isn't exactly as real as it sometimes looks, but they won't go as far as divulging how everything is done.

"I don't get mad when people ask me about it, but at the same time, I



Larry Pfohl

Courtesy of Green Bay Packers

Larry Pfohl struts his stuff while with the Miami Hurricanes. He transferred there from Penn State after his freshman year.

do protect it," he said. "I feel there's a professional code of ethics that we have amongst the wrestlers. We don't just blatantly talk about how we accomplish what we do out there. I think it would spoil the entertainment aspect for a lot of people if we did."

Especially for the younger crowd, which makes up a large percentage of the audience.

"We do have a kid audience watching us and I try to keep that in mind," he said. "I try to keep some wrestling aspects in what I do, not just brawl with tables and chairs."

Luger said it takes a lot of work to become a professional wrestler. Risk is definitely part of the job outline. Ruptured disks in his back, knees blown out and the smaller injuries, like sprains, bruises and contusions are not out of the ordinary.

He also almost lost his right arm in a motorcycle accident. Seven screws are in his elbow now, holding it together. He even used it to his advantage in the ring, knocking out opponents with the steel plate implanted in his arm.

"You have to be careful out there. Guys get hurt, seriously, all the time," he said. "You just don't hear about it. There's a lot of injuries. It's definitely not a desk job."

But it's one he would give up for no other. He tried a job in the real

world and didn't find it to his liking.

"I never had a real job. I did one time," he said. "I worked at McDonald's for two weeks in high school. I didn't like it very much. I never had a real job. I'm proud of that."

When his wrestling career ends, which he isn't anticipating soon — "as long as I'm healthy, as long as I'm enjoying it" — he would like to get involved in the health and fitness field.

He's gotten his foot in the door with a sports council sponsored by HealthSouth, a group of 12 of the nation's top orthopedic surgeons. Members of the council include Bo Jackson, Michael Jordan, Roger Clemens, Troy Aikman and Kyle Petty. And Luger.

"I walked in and was like, 'Omigod, what am I doing here?'" he asked. "What's a professional wrestler doing at this thing?"

"Kyle said, 'I'm here to drive the car' and I said, 'I'm here for security for the real athletes.'"

He makes light of the situation, but he remains serious about helping people when he's done with wrestling. Even if it's Penn State football coach Joe Paterno.

"Tell him someday, if he ever needs a strength coach, tell him I'm a candidate," Luger says. "I'll send him my resumé."

The only question is, which name would appear there?



Collegian Photo/Michael L. Palmieri

Lex Luger bounces off the ropes at the Baltimore Arena in a match against Johnny B. Badd. Luger went to Penn State as Larry Pfohl.



Collegian Photo/Michael L. Palmieri

Lex Luger catches his breath during his match in the Baltimore Arena.