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Irish Whips and German Suplexes: Professional Wrestling and the American Immigrant and Minority Experience

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Irish Whips and German Suplexes:
Professional Wrestling and the American Immigrant and Minority Experience

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

by

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Abstract

Trends within sports and popular entertainment have long been regarded as great indicators of larger transitions in the social, political, and economic landscape of the United States. Repeatedly mined and often used for context, sports have become intrinsically linked to the broader discussions of people, their beliefs, ideals, and actions occurring in the historiography of American culture. However, one sport has regularly been passed over in these examinations. I argue that the modern day entertainment monolith of professional wrestling serves as one of the most important indicators of socioeconomic change in the history of the U.S., and that it plays an integral role in the experience of second-wave European immigrants and American ethnic minorities, the professionalization and commodification of sporting culture occurring in the Progressive Era, and the development of a new, diverse American popular culture emerging in the early to mid-twentieth century. I chart the history of the business, including the advent of the sport as a carnival sideshow, its relegation to lowbrow entertainment, its intersections with middle-class European immigrants, the influences of vaudeville and theater, the implementation of capitalist machinery, the professionalization and monetization of the industry, the importance of television and an increasingly unified American culture of leisure and entertainment, and the sport's treatment of ethnic minorities as a reflection of societal norms and civil progress. Through this complex narrative, I conclude that professional wrestling, both as a sport and vehicle for entertainment, serves as a perfect reflection of the injustices and capitalist influences experienced by second-wave European immigrants and ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans, and should no longer be regarded as a fabricated soap opera unworthy of a second look but rather as an important tool for charting the socioeconomic transitions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Dedication

For my parents, and their unconditional support. For my friends, and their persistent guidance.

For Virgil Runnels, Jr, Richard Fliehr, and Steven Williams, and their incessant inspiration.

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Introduction

There is perhaps nothing more quintessentially American than profiting off the emotions and ideological sentiments of others. Intense feelings of nationalism and loyalty to one's personal beliefs have long been the fodder of salesmen and con artists the country over, and in the latter half of the nineteenth century, in the wake of the American Civil War, these showmen and wordsmiths turned their attention to an increasingly important and prominent new portion of the American population: immigrants. Hailing predominantly from Europe, along with equally impressive numbers arriving from Asia and South America, this notable second wave of immigrants poured into the United States throughout the better part of the nineteenth century, and as they became a larger and larger part of the greater American framework, so too did their respective cultural and ideological belief structures. Often stereotyped and maligned by so-called "native" Americans, nineteenth century European immigrants would experience the rigors and difficulties of adapting to an "authentically American" way of life while maintaining a sense of pride in their cultural heritage. In doing so, their own cultural beliefs and ethnic traditions would come to influence another fixture, and in many ways obsession, of American society: sport.

Just as the ethnic and cultural makeup of the United States was experiencing dynamic alterations in the nineteenth century, so too did the world of sport and athletic competition. Americans were readily embracing the intensely competitive and fiercely loyal sporting culture of the modern era, as baseball, football, and other individual sporting events were steadily rising in popularity. Chief among American interests, however, were combat sports and the art of engaging in pugilistic endeavors. Much time and effort has been put into the research and study of boxing, creating a broad and sweeping historiographical narrative rife with examinations of the social ramifications of various bouts and brawls. Boxing still manages to captivate American

audiences today on several levels, with the outrageous antics of boxers like Mike Tyson, particularly the outcome of his infamous match with Evander Holyfield, worming their way into the larger subconscious of American popular culture. However, despite the vast number of books and articles centered on the industry, boxing was not the only combat sport to be thrust into the forefront of the American entertainment subconscious. Standing side by side with the sweet science was an equally popular, if not decidedly different, form of athletic grappling that also took place in a “squared circle.” This sport would come to be known as professional wrestling.

Wrestling had existed in one form or another in virtually every society and civilization on Earth since the beginning of recorded history, and as the United States became home to a great many new and diverse ethnic groups throughout the nineteenth century, wrestling as a sport and as a business became a cornerstone of the new American popular culture.¹ Professional wrestling as it exists today is often described as “sports entertainment,” an amalgamation of real athletic competition and soap opera theatrics that has become “tarnished” by its predetermined nature and stereotypical lowbrow appeal. Both of these points will be discussed and potentially refuted in the course of this thesis. However, it is important to begin by focusing on the origins of the sport prior to its transition into the entertainment monolith it is known as the world over today. In looking at the world of professional wrestling in conjunction with the second wave of European immigration to the United States as seen in the latter half of the nineteenth century, this thesis will examine the role of professional wrestling as a form of middle and working-class entertainment and a purely American capitalist venture both born out of and wholly influenced by the new American immigrant and ethnic minority experience. Additionally, this examination will look at wrestling through its intersection with a number of themes, including the evolution,

¹ Michael B. Poliakoff, “Wrestling, Freestyle” In *Encyclopedia of World Sport: From Ancient Times to the Present*, Vol 3, eds. David Levinson and Karen Christensen (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Inc., 1996), 1189-1193.

professionalization, and commodification of sport in the United States of the Progressive Era and beyond, the emergence of capitalism as a defining and transformative force, and the juxtaposition of entertainment and athletics in an emerging, wholly American popular culture.

Discussion

In documenting the nineteenth century European immigrant experience, it is important to note that, although migrants emerged from virtually every corner of the European continent seeking new lives in the New World, several nations and states stand out as being overwhelming contributors to the larger wave of immigration activity as a whole. In their collection of investigative essays, titled *The Immigrant Experience in America*, Frank J. Coppa and Thomas J. Curran chronicle the influx of European immigrants in the nineteenth century, focusing mostly on immigration ranging between 1830 and 1890, highlighting their points of origin and the underlying causes for their exodus and subsequent relocation on the American continent. As Germany underwent a number of radical changes in the mid-nineteenth century including shifts in authority and power and concerns over blight and a potential ensuing famine, many Germans began to look to the Americas for a potential escape and fresh start. Word had spread amongst family members and local village kinship networks of the overall “newness” and untapped potential of the United States, creating an image in the minds of many Germans of a new country free from internal divisions and mindless quarrels looking to embrace them with open arms.² However, as an increasing number of Germans emigrated from their relatively chaotic homeland, they would unfortunately be met with unanticipated hostility, born out of scorn for the select few Germans who had previously arrived in the New World in the late eighteenth century. Overwhelmingly negative stereotypes concerning Germans were developed and propagated by so-called “native” Americans, who seemed chiefly concerned with the religious practices and social customs of their new neighbors. Germans were often maligned for their Catholicism and

² Frank J. Coppa and Thomas J. Curran, “From the Rhine to the Mississippi: The German Emigration to the United States.” In *The Immigrant Experience in America*, ed. Frank J. Coppa and Thomas J. Curran (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 50.

alcohol consumption, and would soon be characterized as “stolid beer drinkers, heavy of girth and dull of mind,” who were also simultaneously Protestant violators of the Sabbath, subservient Catholics, and outright atheists.³ These negative perceptions of German immigrants would persist throughout the nineteenth century, tainting immigrant experience in America and paving the way for prejudice toward countless other incoming ethnic groups.

In many ways, the experience of the nineteenth century German immigrant directly mirrored that of the masses emerging from Ireland. Scorned by political unrest, continual mistreatment, and a notable lack of food, many Irish men and women sought refuge from their poor tidings and rough luck in the veritable promised land of the United States. However, just as those who ventured over the Atlantic from Germany came to understand, the welcoming party experienced by many Irish immigrants would not readily be described as warm. In bringing their culture to the United States, the Irish brought with them poverty, politics, alcohol, and Catholicism, all of which were almost immediately rejected by Protestant native-born Americans. The Irish were quickly stereotyped as “zealous Catholics”, loyal to the pope and the bottle more than their newfound home. Additionally, having experienced political and cultural oppression at the hands of the English for centuries, the Irish made no qualms about their political affiliations and the enthusiasm with which they pursued their goals, further driving a stake between them and their American neighbors that wanted nothing more than the total and systematic rejection of the new immigrant population.⁴ These sentiments would leave the Irish immigrant community isolated, and although a select few would see success in the unbridled

³ Coppa and Curran, “From the Rhine to the Mississippi,” 54-56.

⁴ Thomas J. Curran, “From “Paddy” to the Presidency: The Irish in America,” In *The Immigrant Experience in America*, ed. Frank J. Coppa and Thomas J. Curran (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 98-104.

capitalistic society of nineteenth century America, the negative stereotypes associated with their group would remain in effect well into the next century.

Falling into the pattern established above, Italian immigrants experienced similar mistreatment and prejudice upon arriving in the United States, but their time in America would be further tarnished by a number of interrelated factors, stemming largely from economic concerns and limitations. The influx of Italians into the United States could be characterized as a slow trickle up to the 1890s, as although emigration from the nation state was potentially desirable, it was often seen as not feasible for the average Italian citizen.⁵ However, as Italian shipping companies and manufacturers tapped into the American market for finished goods and required larger and larger labor forces, the perennial myth of a plentiful, welcoming America would become more and more prevalent throughout the region, infecting the mindset of both Northern and Southern Italians. With lofty aspirations and strong cultural traditions in tow, droves of Italians emigrated to the United States in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and almost immediately Italian immigrants were deemed a problem. Unlike the Germans and Scandinavians that preceded them, Italians lacked the economic resources to make their way to the country's interior, and were often relegated to occupying and working within the major cities and ports of the Northeast. Huddled together and incapable of moving, overcrowding among the Italian immigrant populations soon became a noticeable issue, creating harshly negative stereotypes about their cleanliness and poverty that would ultimately become self-fulfilling, in many ways, as native born American authority figures sought to isolate and reject them by any means, creating further issues with ghetto-like living situations rife with illness and

⁵ Frank J. Coppa, "Those Who Followed Columbus: The Italian Migration to the United States of America," In *The Immigrant Experience in America*, ed. Frank J. Coppa and Thomas J. Curran (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 127-128.

malnourishment.⁶ This relegation to the fringes of American society and occlusion from the developing American social consciousness led to the establishment of strong, close-knit Italian immigrant communities and kinship networks, which in turn aided in the creation of powerful connections to their native homeland.

It was at the height of the second immigration movement, between the 1890s and 1920s, that the United States experienced what has come to be called the “Progressive Era.” Immigrants and native-born Americans alike, as a result of a newly industrialized, more efficient society, were actively seeking a sense of personal independence, chiefly through the realm of leisure activities and recreation.⁷ With this in mind, Germans, Irish, Italians, and a multitude of other distinct ethnic groups, including Scandinavians, Eastern Europeans, Asians, and Latinos, all contributed to this unique paradigm shift taking place in the new United States, and would each participate in the development of a new American popular culture centered around an increased focus on leisure and entertainment. In terms of their contributions to the world of sport, each individual ethnic group brought with them their own interpretations of the art of wrestling and combat sport that would influence the development of both American professional wrestling and the separate but equally prominent world of boxing. Wrestling as a sporting event had existed in almost every culture in one form or fashion for centuries, and in the grand American tradition of appropriation and embellishment, American professional wrestling served as an amalgamation of the experiences and traditions of every immigrant group serving as active participants in the sport.

Historian David Shoemaker refers to wrestling as a “bastard art form from the start,” employing combat tactics and grappling styles from every corner of the nation and, in essence,

⁶ Coppa, “Those Who Followed Columbus,” 129-131.

⁷ Steven L. Piott, *Daily Life in the Progressive Era* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 63.

the world, as the audiences became largely comprised of immigrant populations each adding something new to the performance.⁸ Often referred to as “freestyle wrestling,” American professional wrestling stemmed largely from the English “catch” or “catch as catch can” style of wrestling that combined traditional mat wrestling with other modified styles of grappling, holds, and throws all aimed at pinning one’s opponent to the ground for a set amount of time. English “Lancashire style” wrestling involved two opponents standing chest to chest, with their arms locked behind the body of their opponent, attempting to secure a pin or fall from this position or on the ground, if need be. The Irish “collar and elbow” style similarly started in a standing position, with the two wrestlers gripping each other’s necks and forearms before grappling to the ground. These two forms of grappling, combined with the popular, more traditional Greco-Roman wrestling seen in athletic competitions throughout Europe in the nineteenth century, were brought to the United States by English, Irish, and Northern European immigrants, and served as the foundation for the freestyle wrestling performed by American professional wrestlers.⁹

With a uniquely American style of grappling firmly in place, professional wrestling as both an industry and as a form of entertainment entrenched in American popular culture quickly rose to prominence. Although often seen as hokey and far from a serious affair today, professional wrestling in the late nineteenth century was just as prominent as boxing, if not more so depending on the region and demographic makeup, throughout the United States. Originally seen as a pure athletic contest between two real grapplers, the sport was frequently covered by prominent magazines and newspapers in the same breath as boxing. However, wrestling’s major flaw was quickly discovered and would lead to a temporary lapse in interest among America’s

⁸ David Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), Kindle Location 144.

⁹ Poliakoff, “Wrestling, Freestyle,” 1189-1193.

increasingly rabid sports fan base. Although wrestling was seen as a serious sporting affair, it was very rarely entertaining. Wrestling and boxing often shared promoters, venues, audiences, and occasionally even athletes and stars, as historian Marcus Griffin points out. In 1887, famed mat wrestler William Muldoon engaged in a mixed competition with notorious boxer John L. Sullivan, besting him after two falls.¹⁰ However, for all that it shared with boxing, wrestling was a rather dull affair, with matches lasting multiple hours with little to no discernible action taking place, as the two competitors grappled on the ground, often rarely moving. This made the intense, immersive experience of boxing more interesting to the average fan, and led to a decades-long waffling on the part of audience support and engagement between the two.¹¹

In his early examination into the world of professional wrestling, *Hooker*, former champion Lou Thesz, now synonymous with the early days of the sport, draws on his own personal experiences and understandings of the business and makes mention of the aforementioned tedious events. Thesz remarks that even as late as the first decade of the twentieth century, authentic, amateur wrestling matches were “deadly dull events,” with one match in particular lasting eleven hours before the first fall was even accomplished.¹² It is this reason, Thesz and Shoemaker argue, that wrestling as a business, sport, and form of entertainment had to change.

The earliest purveyors of wrestling as an athletic contest and as a means of entertainment were traveling roadshows, circuses, and carnivals, owned and operated by the greatest showmen and con artists of the day. Wrestling was the domain of carnies, barnstormers, and impresarios like P.T. Barnum, all more focused on making a buck than displaying a true athletic competition.

¹⁰ Marcus Griffin, *Fall Guys: The Barnum of Bounce* (Chicago: The Reilly and Lee Co., 1937), Kindle Location 168-221.

¹¹ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 168.

¹² Lou Thesz, *Hooker* (Gallatin: Crowbar Press, 2011), Kindle Location 600.

This mindset led to the addition of theatricality and showmanship to the sport, and the evolution of the business to include cooperation between performers in an effort to make the show seem more real to the average customer, paving the way for the “sports entertainment” that graces American television screens today.¹³ Carnies and barnstormers, aware of the waning popularity of the sport in comparison to boxing, began to implement new, technically illegal maneuvers, called “hooks,” designed to make the competitions more engaging in addition to providing performers with easy ways to cripple opponents in the days of live audience interaction and open challenges accompanied with side bets. These hooks, combined with an increased emphasis on pitting supposed heroes against manufactured villains, created a new industry predicated upon the mobility afforded by traveling carnivals and circuses.¹⁴ This mobility, however, proved to be important in another chief manner, as the transient nature of the sport and its promotional vehicle played into the mindset of the European immigrant of the nineteenth century, further connecting the world of professional wrestling with the immigrant experience.

The immigrant experience was directly linked to the nineteenth century advent and explosion of capitalism. Historian John Bodnar deftly demonstrates the ties between nineteenth century European immigrants and the concepts of transiency, nationalism, and entrepreneurship. Bodnar argues against the idea of isolated, preindustrial village communities existing as the archetype for peasant living in nineteenth century Europe, claiming instead that in-moving, emigration, and economic migration were essential and common practices amongst the middle and lower class prior to emigration to the United States. As important as family structures were to the continued survival of the individual, Bodnar argues that subsistence and economic success

¹³ Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 622.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, Kindle Location 642-666.

were dependent upon transience, industrial and agricultural flexibility, and internal migration.¹⁵ This dependence on transience and mobility is further espoused by Thomas Archdeacon, who claims that not only was internal migration from rural to urban communities commonplace in nineteenth century Europe, it was essential for the economic success and industrialization of many large cities.¹⁶ This reliance on transiency and mobility for economic resources was largely ingrained in many European immigrant populations, making its way to the United States as an extension of various ethnic and cultural heritages, and in many ways laid the foundations for the acceptance and continued support of the traveling roadshows and, by extension, professional wrestling, by nineteenth century European immigrant populations.

The reconfiguration of immigrants as active participants in the new world economy also helps to further bridge the gap between the ever-increasing immigrant population of the late nineteenth century and the rising popularity of professional wrestling as sports entertainment. Bodnar paints European immigrants as being intimately aware of their surroundings and the economic system in which they had become agents, arguing that American capitalism was not the new concept previous historians have claimed it to be, but rather something that many Europeans would be wholly familiar with stemming from their nations of origin. This led to many immigrants taking acute advantage of the system and becoming entrepreneurs in their own rights, using what they knew from home and adapting it to American audiences, in much the same way that the carnies, barnstormers, and impresarios of professional wrestling promotions created their own shows.¹⁷

¹⁵ John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 43.

¹⁶ Thomas J. Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 32-35.

¹⁷ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, xx.

Another aspect of the business of professional wrestling, both during the latter half of the nineteenth century and continuing well into the modern era, is an intense division of characters, performers, and, by extension, the audience, along roughly defined ethnic, cultural, and national lines. Wrestling as performance art, especially in the early days of the sport, called on ethnic and national barriers to promote enthusiasm for fights and entice crowds to become more engaged with the action on display. In this way, rising nationalism and pride in one's ethnic heritage often seen in European immigrant communities in the mid-to-late nineteenth century directly informed the further development and implementation of outlandish characters and gimmicks that would come to characterize the next wave of professional wrestling in the United States.

A lineage of specifically which socioeconomic classes made their way to the United States in the nineteenth century can be traced, demonstrating that although the commonly accepted idea of the poor and huddle masses has become a staple of American folklore, more often than not it was the middle and lower classes of Europeans, not the impoverished and destitute, that made the journey across the Atlantic. The trip to the American continent required a small, but not insignificant, monetary investment, one that the poorest of the poor would never be able to afford. Bodnar characterizes those that left Great Britain, Germany, Sweden, and other European nations as those that were squarely placed in the middle class, although more often on the lower end of that spectrum, fearing the onset of poverty and willing to risk their remaining economic resources on a chance at a fresh start in the New World.¹⁸

This characterization of European immigrants as middle-class individuals aids in the construction of another important aspect of Bodnar's argument in terms of how it applies to the advent and development of wrestling. By examining European immigrants as products of the

¹⁸ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 13-17.

middle class, Bodnar's ideas of nationalism take on significantly more importance. For Bodnar, nationalism as a concept emerged from the industrialization of European nations throughout the nineteenth century, in that by reducing regional variation and increasing production for the state, the rising middle class was capable of creating a false sense of national unity predicated upon supposed peasant traditions and cultural heritage.¹⁹ The adoption and proliferation of middle and lower class values as a product of a rising sense of nationalism and native pride emigrated along with those that sought new lives in the United States. There, among the close-knit immigrant communities taking root in the Northeast and the Midwest, nationalism and cultural pride became cornerstones of how these societies functioned on a daily basis, informing many decisions made in terms of economics, politics, and social reform. These ideas worked in conjunction with the traditions and ideologies espoused by community leaders, influencing aspects of popular culture as a direct result. The immigrant experience of the nineteenth century, in more ways than one, would lead to the creation of the sports entertainment of the twentieth century, and many of its most revered stars and giants of the industry.

Two such names that have since become synonymous with the earliest days of the sport are Frank Gotch and George Hackenschmidt. Each a champion in their own right and serving as the epitome of what wrestling could be in their respective eras and locations, Gotch and Hackenschmidt, in terms of their respective styles, attitudes, and countries of origin, would come to represent much more in the grander scheme of the transition experienced by wrestling in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. When the two combatants squared off in the ring in Chicago's Dexter Park in 1908, in a physically and emotionally draining match lasting well over two hours, the veritable giants of the sport would not only be fighting a contest that would alter

¹⁹Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 44-47.

the course of professional wrestling in America, but also come to exemplify the rising prominence of capitalism, the proliferation of a sense of newfound American nationalism predicated upon commercialism and monetization, and the role these two concepts had in the definition of the American immigrant and ethnic minority experience in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In a sense, the long, arduous, but ultimately successful match would characterize the experience of many European immigrants and ethnic minorities up through the 1920s.

Just as the world of professional wrestling was about to undergo a massive transformation and come one step closer to embodying the mega industry that it is today, so too was the life and socioeconomic experience of many American immigrants and ethnic minorities. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, this second wave of European immigrants would contend with a number of new forces and developing ideological systems that would serve as both potential foils to the progress they had achieved and as a wealth of new opportunities for upward mobility. The fracturing of established ethnic communities, paired with the simultaneous attempts to retain a sense of ethnic identity and cultural heritage, would compound with the emergence and mainstream implementation of capitalism to aid in the development of a newly defined middle and working class for European immigrants. Bodnar's argument for a reexamination of the second wave of European immigration through the lens of capitalism proves incredibly useful in analyzing these trends in their relation to the world of wrestling, as many of the foundational claims upon which he rests his argument prove true in both realms. Members of the newly formed middle and working classes, whose inclusion and membership was predicated upon not only their acceptance of new socioeconomic opportunities but also their class status as described in their pre-capitalist homelands, found themselves faced with a difficult

balancing act in their aspirations for upward social mobility. Tasked with toeing the line between fully embracing the new, fabricated American national identity and maintaining a strong grip on their cultural heritage and ethnicity, many immigrants managed to find success in the execution of both, leading to profits as a result of their ability to bridge the gap between the two forces.²⁰ This malleability proved to be incredibly fortuitous for those grapplers, managers, and organizers who entered the wrestling world in the late nineteenth century and spearheaded its transition into a new era of sports entertainment.

These aforementioned individuals, both wrestling related and not, were, as a result of their ethnic and national flexibility, business acumen, and transient nature, capable of removing themselves from the situation to catch a glimpse of the bigger picture at play. Many immigrant businessmen and entrepreneurs managed to largely separate themselves from their ethnic communities and kinship networks, while maintaining a tangential connection to their heritage and cultural upbringings, in an effort to profit from both in the establishment of new business ventures aimed directly at the emerging immigrant working and middle classes.²¹ Further, as members of the ethnic groups and active participants in the emerging capitalist economy, these entrepreneurs were able to use their intimate knowledge of the diverse class structure of their own immigrant communities to their advantage, capitalizing on the sentiments and spending habits of the various class distinctions predicated upon old world cultural heritage and social standing.²² It is important to note, as well, that the economic stratification and class divisions found in American immigrant communities at the time, although related to a number of different factors, could largely be tied to geographic location and mobility. Bodnar demonstrates the

²⁰ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 138-142.

²¹ Ibid, 117.

²² Ibid, 118.

variation in the degrees of economic success witnessed by different European immigrant communities, illustrating that Germans settling in the sparsely populated Midwest were capable of selling their skills and abilities more easily than the Irish who remained in the densely populated cities of the East Coast.²³ Those who were more readily capable of remaining mobile and following new and different opportunities were more likely to see success in their lifetime.

With this in mind, a clear parallel can be made to the impresarios and territorial managers who began to consolidate power in the world of wrestling in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Wrestling of the period has been demonstrated to be a business built upon transiency and adaptability. In maintaining its transient nature through the implementation and proliferation of traveling roadshows organized by ambitious, risk-taking individuals, wrestling exists as a prime example of the capitalist immigrant experiments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In moving from town to town, offering new and exciting attractions and athletic competitions in villages and cities of every size and demeanor, wrestling promoters were perfectly positioned to create a large, diverse audience largely devoid of socioeconomic stratification, catering to working class and middle class ethnic and minority communities alike on a vast geographic scale. The business of wrestling, in many ways, was one tailor made for the new, capitalist economy taking root in immigrant America.

Just as American immigrant communities began to fully comprehend and take hold of the middle-class capitalist revolution happening around them, the world of sport and sporting culture in the United States was experiencing a similar revolution of its own. According to historian Mike Huggins, the world of sport was being changed drastically by the onset of capitalism and middle class sentiment and ideology. Although his examination of the period primarily concerns

²³ Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 169-182.

itself with the sweeping changes witnessed in horse racing in nineteenth century England, the same principles apply to the world of professional wrestling in the United States. There is a common conception concerning most professional sports among casual observers that, since the popularization of sporting culture in the United States beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century and continuing up through the modern era, most sports industries, although aimed at entertaining working and middle-class individuals and families, are inherently controlled by a small group of wealthy elites. This upper echelon of the socioeconomic scale purportedly controlled every aspect of professional athletic competitions, and although that may hold truer today, Huggins and other historians like him argue that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this was simply not the case. It is undeniable that sports and sporting culture were radically transformed by the increased involvement of capitalism and the resultant professionalization and commercialization of the industries. However, at the time, these changes were not brought about primarily through the patronage and support of wealthy benefactors, but rather through the brute force and ambition of a number of revolutionary individuals firmly entrenched in the rising middle class.²⁴

Huggins' example of certain middle-class individuals rife with ambition and determination to take advantage of the new economic opportunities rising to meet them on a daily basis in the world of horse racing is easily transferable to the world of immigrants, ethnic minorities, and professional wrestling in the United States. The managers and owners of the horse racing industry were keenly aware of the increasing dependence on capitalism taking over the Western world, new opportunities for social mobility within the world of sport, and the

²⁴ Mike Huggins, "A Tranquil Transformation: Middle-class Racing Revolutionaries in Nineteenth Century England," in *Reformers, Sport, Modernizers: Middle-Class Revolutionaries*, ed. J. A. Mangan (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 35-54.

established transiency and socioeconomic status of their sport's general audience, using all of this knowledge to transform the sport as they saw fit to maximize profit potentials and audience size.²⁵ This is a direct parallel to the work being conducted by the regional promoters and managers of professional wrestling in America in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Many of the individuals involved in the industry were kindred spirits, existing as showman and entrepreneurs of the rising immigrant middle class, following the same path of recognizing socioeconomic patterns within their own immigrant communities. They used their knowledge and drive to consolidate and monetize the sport in the midst of a capitalist revolution through the creation of territory systems and centralized offices of power, as will be explained shortly, and by playing on the transient nature of their largely immigrant constituency through the proliferation of traveling roadshows and diverse matches aimed at enticing those toeing the line between supporting their distinct ethnic heritage and the new national identity. Although it has failed to receive the attention that many other sporting events have in the historical discourse, professional wrestling was staunchly ingrained in the larger middle-class sports revolution of the early twentieth century.

Although touched on in a number of works, this revolution in the world of sport, one in which professional wrestling was undoubtedly an active participant, serves as a central theme for historian S. W. Pope's work. In his examination of the period, Pope argues that the world of sport and athletic competition in America underwent a massive transition in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth, becoming increasingly commercialized, monetized, and "professionalized."²⁶ As has been seen with the rising influence

²⁵ Huggins, "A Tranquil Transformation," 55-56.

²⁶ S. W. Pope, *Patriotic Games: Sporting Traditions in the American Imagination, 1876-1926* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3-18.

of capitalism and middle class values in addition to the implementation of new business practices, this commercialization had a profound impact on wrestling, as well, and will continue to do so as we will see into the 1920s. Further, Pope roots his argument for this revolution in several themes directly related to the rising immigrant middle class that has up to this point been intrinsically linked and vital to the continued success of the sport of wrestling.

The first theme that lies at the root of the turn of the century sporting revolution is the gradual, but unimpeded, development of a new sense of American nationalism. As the country left behind the rigors of Congressional Reconstruction and the torment of the mid-nineteenth century, a new national identity was being formulated in every corner of the Union. More importantly for the argument at hand, however, is the assertion that this national identity was being molded and firmed through the lenses of sport and athletic competition. In the new United States of the Progressive Era, industrialization and commodification had set the pace for productivity and progress, creating a new, more productive, more commercialized, and more efficient society outside the walls of the factory. With less time being spent in labor, more time could be allocated to leisure and recreation.²⁷ Sport had become a shared American passion responsible for unifying and homogenizing the diverse populace of the era. This unification and proliferation of a new sporting identity, however, was being developed at the expense of the various ethnic minority and immigrant communities making themselves known in the larger American sociopolitical subconscious, with blatant attempts at pandering to immigrant ideals and empathizing with the plight of ethnic communities, while simultaneously excising those groups deemed as unsavory or cast into otherness, becoming the chief means of drumming up support for this fabricated sense of American cultural unity.²⁸ There is perhaps no better arena for the

²⁷ Piott, *Daily Life in the Progressive Era*, 48.

²⁸ Pope, *Patriotic Games*, 10.

implementation of all of these varying elements, including the manipulation of socioeconomic standing and ethnic and cultural heritage through targeted advertising and entrepreneurship, than that of professional wrestling.

The Progressive Era saw the first rapid surge in popularity of amusement parks, as they were the perfect confluence of America's newfound interest in leisure and recreation and its increasing reliance on and acceptance of intrinsically capitalist values rooted on the monetization and commodification of all aspects of society.²⁹ Professional wrestling was undoubtedly a part of this wave of carnival interest, sharing a common ancestor with the amusement parks of the period in the traveling roadshows of decades prior. The carnie nature of the attraction, combined with its largely middle and working-class immigrant audience, places wrestling squarely in the center of the sporting and recreation revolution of the period, cementing its position in the larger American popular culture of the early twentieth century.

It is important to note that the sporting revolution and the fostering of a new national identity likely could not have occurred without the concurrent development and organization of a national print media. In addition to word of mouth and the savvy business practices of middle class entrepreneurs, newspapers served as vital vessels of information regarding the dissemination of a new sporting culture in early twentieth century America. Perhaps even more importantly, the popularity and ease of access associated with newspapers as a national commodity and source of entertainment and information allowed the new nationalist sporting culture to span across class lines, becoming a topic of discussion among middle and working class individual alike.³⁰ In this sense, newspaper coverage of local and national athletic competitions aided in the development of a new monolithic American sporting culture, unaware

²⁹ Piott, *Daily Life in the Progressive Era*, 105.

³⁰ Pope, *Patriotic Games*, 7-8.

of previously long held class distinctions and socioeconomic stereotypes. This amalgamation of classes and appeal to the sporting interests of native-born Americans and immigrant communities is immediately evident in any examination of early periodical coverage of professional wrestling. While the sport has been seen as a largely lowbrow form of entertainment, most mainstream coverage of the industry came from more “sophisticated” or highbrow publications, such as *Collier’s* or *The New Yorker*. The coverage provided by such publications, beginning in the 1920s and reaching its zenith in the late 1930s, lends credence to the idea of a new monolithic sporting culture largely devoid of class distinctions emerging in the early twentieth century, with wrestling sitting in the center of the nationwide phenomenon.

Yet another central facet of Pope’s argument that dovetails neatly into the larger discourse surrounding wrestling and the sports culture revolution of the early twentieth century comes in the form of the conflict between professionalism and amateurism. As sports took on a greater role in the defining of a newly unified national identity, one concern with its proliferation surrounded the role it would take going forward as a business. Sports and athletics at large in America had become increasingly commercialized throughout the Progressive Era, as evidenced by the explosion of monetized spectator sports since the 1890s.³¹ Pope spends a great deal of time discussing the various arguments and opinions of Americans in the 1910s and 1920s concerning the monetization of athletics, both at a professional and collegiate level, with many Americans, at least early on, siding with keeping sports relegated to an amateur system largely devoid of corporate interests.³² However, as capitalism became a more prominent force in the development of the socioeconomic and political landscape of the United States in the first two decades of the twentieth century, professionalization became a more viable option in the minds

³¹ Piott, *Daily Life in the Progressive Era*, 91.

³² Pope, *Patriotic Games*, 16-18.

of many. This battle between two ideologies, one chiefly concerned with maintaining the pure athleticism and competition of many individual sports, and the other advocating for the monetization of the industry to increase audience participation and engagement while maximizing profits, is perfectly epitomized in professional wrestling. The industry was experiencing the same transition in the era in question, and was being pulled in multiple directions concerning the future of the sport by those who wished to maintain a sense of legitimacy and those who sought to turn the sport into a more accessible, and profitable, means of entertainment. These ideas, in time, would be put head to head in a single competition, and would come to represent the dichotomy of the sport that continues to define it in the modern era.

It is an unfortunate side effect of these efforts to create a new national identity that, concurrent with the rising streak of nationalism and the revolution in American sporting culture, racism and nativism would experience new highs between 1890 and 1910. Nativism, defined as an intense opposition to an internal minority based on said minority's real or fabricated connections to foreign, or "un-American" interests, was rampant, and despite attempts to appeal to a unified national consciousness through the incorporation of multiple ethnic and cultural heritages amongst America's immigrant groups, prejudice and ethnic vilification pervaded popular culture throughout the early twentieth century, often pitting members of the first and second waves of immigration against one another in terms of what they were supposedly capable of contributing to American society.³³ Although nativist ideals most often permeated society through individual ideologies and cultural beliefs, they were also made known in an official capacity through the Dillingham Commission, an exhaustive report on immigrants issued by the United States Congress in 1907. The reports claimed to provide evidence that the newest wave of

³³ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860 to 1925* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), 4.

immigrants to the U.S. were, on the whole, dirty, illiterate, shiftless, and unsavory, especially when viewed in comparison to those who arrived earlier, who were characterized as hardworking, wholesome individuals. It should be noted that the overwhelming majority of those immigrants classified as being members of the second wave stemmed from Eastern and Southern Europe, as opposed to the more “American” members of the first wave hailing from Northern and Western Europe, further conflating Anglican whiteness with desirability.³⁴ The propagation and acceptance of racial and ethnic prejudice in defense of native ideals would prove to be a central tenet of the entertainment provided by wrestling competitions, and in many ways, as will be seen in later discussions, set a precedent for the embarrassing frequency with which bigotry has been seen and used in the industry of sports entertainment well into the twenty first century.

It is with all of this in mind that April 3, 1908 takes on a special precedence, in many ways becoming a landmark day in the history of American professional wrestling. At the Dexter Park Pavilion in the south side of the city of Chicago, two giants of the industry squared off in the first of two famed grappling matches that, when examined through the lens of a greater historical discourse, become overwhelmingly important moments in American sports chronology. When “The Humboldt Horror” Frank Gotch and “The Russian Lion” George Hackenschmidt came face to face in the middle of the squared circle, audiences expected to be treated to an athletic competition unlike anything they had ever seen. The resultant two hours of minimal movement and boredom may not have lived up to the hype, but the match and its successor have since served as a vital turning point in the trajectory of the business of professional wrestling. Further, the match serves as a living, breathing example of the social, cultural, and economic turmoil facing many American immigrant communities at the time in the

³⁴ James Stuart Olson, *The Ethnic Dimension in American History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 210-214.

way that the conversation surrounding the competitors and their tactics paralleled that occurring in the nativist news media on a daily basis.

Frank Gotch was arguably one of the first superstars in the history of American sport. Born to German-Austrian parents in Humboldt, Iowa in 1878, Gotch in many ways was both a precursor to and product of a developing wrestling scene taking hold of the Midwest.³⁵ His German ancestry instilled in him, and other children of immigrants, an athletic competitiveness that continues to influence the popularity of collegiate wrestling throughout the region.³⁶ Some reports claim that in June of 1899, a young Gotch accepted a challenge to wrestle a furniture salesman from a neighboring town at a race track. It was only after the roughly two-hour match that Gotch was made aware of the true identity of his opponent, Dan McLeod, the American Heavyweight Champion of wrestling.³⁷ Whether this tale holds true or not, it cements a narrative of tenacity, skill, and showmanship that would come to define Gotch's short but palpable life. Having been bit by the wrestling bug, and with the guidance and tutelage of famed wrestler Farmer Burns, Gotch quickly achieved overwhelming success in the industry, becoming a nationwide sensation on the scale of John L. Sullivan in the boxing world. Although his name is not as recognizable today as Sullivan's, predominantly as a result of the negative connotations since attributed to the sport of wrestling, Gotch was such a prominent figure in the first decade of the twentieth century that upon his death in 1917, at the unfortunate age of 39, news of his passing made the front page of many of the nation's most popular publications.³⁸ Gotch's popularity drew national attention to the sport, elevating it to a status previously unheard of in the context of sporting culture and American entertainment. However, it would be his personal

³⁵ Griffin, *Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce*, Kindle Location 199.

³⁶ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 168.

³⁷ Ibid, Kindle Location 168.

³⁸ Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 1290.

style, his motivations, and the tactics he employed to achieve such success that would ultimately change the business of wrestling forever.

Throughout his career and amongst his numerous title defenses during his tenure as the “peerless champion,” Gotch gained a reputation for utilizing underhanded tactics and strategies aimed at ensuring that he remained in the top spot at all costs. Although considered one of the greatest mat wrestlers of all time, and despite the multitude of clean matches and title defenses he engaged in, Gotch’s suspect strategies would, according to Griffin, lead to the ultimate downfall of wrestling in the public eye.³⁹ It was known at the time that he would routinely gouge eyes, pull hair, and break bones to gain leverage on his opponents and secure a victory, and if those appealing tactics failed to do the job, having the referee in his back pocket usually did the trick.⁴⁰ For as vicious as this description is, it fails to give credence to the role played by Gotch’s ego in his rise to the top. Gotch was often described as a man of short temper and considerable narcissism, regularly believing himself to be on the same level of national prominence and importance as a United States Senator.⁴¹ His ego and his desire to maintain his championship, combined with his dirty wrestling, in many ways laid the foundations for the work done by modern day heels, or villains, in the world of sports entertainment. Gotch’s proliferation of such tactics, combined with his audience’s acceptance of said mannerisms, paved the way for the transition into modern wrestling, and help highlight the character that he was emulating in the context of the changing American cultural landscape.

With Gotch firmly entrenched in the American zeitgeist as the undisputed champion and immigrant ideal, his opponent in the famed 1908 match would come to represent something else

³⁹ Griffin, *Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce*, Kindle Location 199.

⁴⁰ Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 1269.

⁴¹ Griffin, *Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce*, Kindle Location 244.

entirely. George Hackenschmidt, also known as “The Russian Lion,” was a famed European wrestling champion that had managed to best competitor after competition across the continent. Born to parents of Russian and Estonian heritage, Hackenschmidt prided himself on his body and physical prowess, and considered himself to be the perfect combat athlete. In the same vein as Gotch, Hackenschmidt was a showman in and out of the ring, but his personal sense of honor and sportsmanship prevented him from ever demeaning himself or the sport he represented with underhanded tactics or suspect maneuvers, instead relying on raw physical strength and intensive training to maintain his position at the top of the ladder. In many ways, Gotch and Hackenschmidt were equal competitors, each superb grapplers in peak physical condition with a strong respect for their sport and their profession, and each serving to not only partake in contests of strength and endurance, but to also provide entertainment to their adoring fans the world over. However, the small differences in their characters would do more to separate them than their similarities would to join them, and would come to play a large role in the development of not only their matches, but professional wrestling as a whole, through the implementation of moralistic characters, performances, new styles of wrestling, increased commodification and monetization through the lens of capitalism, and how performers interacted with and represented their own ethnic communities.

Wrestling matches at the time generally consisted of two competitors engaging in a bout of two out of three falls, wherein a wrestler would attempt to throw his opponent to the mat and pin him after a period of grappling for a dominant position. However, when Gotch and Hackenschmidt faced each other for the first time in 1908, what was scheduled to be a normal match quickly became a dull affair, dragging on for nearly two hours before the first fall could be counted. Further, this fall was not a complete pin, as Hackenschmidt simply left the ring after the

bout of grappling, retired to his dressing room, and failed to return to the ring, thus forfeiting the match to Gotch entirely.⁴² According to American press reports from the event, Hackenschmidt lauded the efforts of Gotch, claiming him to be the best competitor he had faced in a wrestling ring. However, two days later, several newspapers in London had a completely different account of the story, in which Hackenschmidt claimed that Gotch had resorted to a number of dirty tactics, brutalizing him and injuring him repeatedly throughout the course of their two hour contest.⁴³ According to Hackenschmidt's camp, Gotch resorted to punching, kneeling, biting, and gouging his opponent's eyes throughout the match, in addition to applying copious amounts of oil to his body to the point that Hackenschmidt could never securely grip the man, much less inflict any damage or strain.⁴⁴

An article in *The Chicago Tribune* recounting the results of the match the following day perhaps best summarizes every part of the match and how it related to the larger paradigm shifts in wrestling which it has come to define. Titled, "Gotch Wins World Wrestling's Championship By Making "Russian Lion" Quit," the article very quickly crafts a narrative of American superiority, and the full page of coverage the match received illustrates the level of precedence and cultural significance attributed to the sport and its competitors at the time.⁴⁵ The article serves to bolster the establishment of heroes and villains in the match, highlighting the "good vs. evil" constructs that have since become staples of the business of storytelling in professional wrestling. Gotch's suspicious strategies are routinely referred to with distaste, while Hackenschmidt is frequently referred to as a man of honor and class, as "his courage oozed"

⁴² Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 192.

⁴³ Ibid, Kindle Location 192.

⁴⁴ Griffin, *Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce*, Kindle Locations 312-366.

⁴⁵ George Siler, "Gotch Wins World Wrestling's Championship By Making "Russian Lion" Quit," *The Chicago Tribune*, Saturday, April 4, 1908.

under duress from Gotch's repeated blows and twists.⁴⁶ Gotch, the clear hero by nativist American standards, employs villainous tactics, while the foreign invader, the obvious villain at the time, is a man of honor and respect. This dichotomous, paradoxical characterization of the two competitors is a perfect analog for the state of many modern wrestling stars, specifically the likes of Hulk Hogan and John Cena. Additionally, the article makes mention of Hackenschmidt's inability to keep up with the new style employed by Gotch, the enormous purses each man was reported to take home from the fight in addition to their standard salaries, and the diverse audience, with "people who didn't belong there" occupying seats ranging from \$3 to \$10 in admission fees.⁴⁷

A separate article from three years prior to the match echoed these sentiments, highlighting that Hackenschmidt, a proud Russian, was estimated to have a net worth of \$100,000, a dream for any European immigrant, that wrestling was gaining in popularity due to its celebration of pugilism and virility, two aspects closely associated with the Progressive Era interest in physical health and recreation that in turn led to the professionalization of sport, and that the events were popular due to their accessibility, with seats available as low as \$1, leading to an incredibly diverse immigrant and native born audience comprised of all manner of socioeconomic classes and statuses.⁴⁸ These instances, separately, illustrate the slow advent of a new, more entertaining style of wrestling, the beginning of the commodification and monetization of the sport, and the socioeconomic solidarity and unification that was quickly coming to characterize the active audience of professional wrestling. Together, they symbolize the change that was soon to turn the sport on its head.

⁴⁶ Siler, "Gotch Wins World Wrestling's Championship."

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ "Wrestling To the Fore Once More," *The Minneapolis Journal*, December 3, 1905.

When the two men met again in 1911, the story was not much different. Three weeks prior to the September 4th match, Hackenschmidt notified the promoters that he had broken his knee and the match would have to be called off. Instead, a gentleman's agreement was made between the Russian Lion and Gotch, wherein Gotch agreed to allow Hackenschmidt to secure one fall at the least. This seemingly simple matter likely settled over a handshake, however innocuous, can be seen as the precursor to an element of wrestling that would become common practice in the years to come: fixing. Other elements commonly seen in professional wrestling became apparent in the lead up to this revered rematch, including pre-match promos, written by the performers themselves, featured in another article in the *The Chicago Tribune* the day before. Both men praised themselves and their competition, but the language of the promos themselves lay the groundwork for the type of content regularly seen in pre-taped vignettes and match recaps seen in the current product.⁴⁹ The article, spread over the full length of two pages in a Sunday edition of the paper, painted the fight as one of Homeric proportions, making it out to be a modern-day version of the conflict between Ajax and Ulysses, adding to the theatricality of the sport that would become one of its central tenets in the following decades. Additionally, the article played up the international flavor of the bout, highlighting Hackenschmidt's European endeavors in the hopes of drawing a more immigrant-heavy crowd, further tying the event to the history of the immigrant experience of the era.⁵⁰

However, when the day came, as Hackenschmidt limped into the ring, tights covering his plaster cast, Gotch quickly made work of him, throwing him for two falls in what seemed like record time.⁵¹ Regardless of the dismal outcome and the abhorrent reaction from the fans, the

⁴⁹ H. E. K., "Big Mat To Go Like Ajax Vs. Ulysses," *The Chicago Tribune*, Sunday, September 3, 1911.

⁵⁰ H. E. K., "Ajax Vs. Ulysses."

⁵¹ Griffin, *Fall Guys*, Kindle Locations 1564-1610.

match garnered a live crowd of 30,000 people, earning a total gate of over \$100,000, making it the largest live crowd to attend a sporting event in American history at the time.⁵² Wrestling had become mainstream. In doing so, however, it had also become a lowbrow form of entertainment as a result of the suspect outcomes of both matches. More importantly, these two matches signal a change in professional wrestling that would define the future of the business while simultaneously serving as prime examples of the changes occurring in the sociopolitical and economic landscape of immigrant America in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Gotch, a widely embraced and well-regarded champion of German-American descent, used underhanded tactics and showmanship above all else to secure victory and maintain dominance in a sport that was experiencing rapid change at the hands of capitalism and nativist sentiment. Hackenschmidt, a foreign invader hailing from a portion of Europe deemed unsavory and undesirable by the United States Congress, fell at the hands of a commensurate opponent by means of his reliance on tradition and pure athleticism, serving as a bested foil for the new American ideal. In this manner, Gotch serves as a representative for the American-born second generation of the first wave of European immigration, readily adapting to his surroundings and embracing the rise of capitalism in an attempt to eek out a spot among the rising immigrant middle class. Hackenschmidt, his clear opponent, embodies the more recent wave of immigration from the Eastern and Southern reaches of Europe, cast down and disrespected in both official and unofficial capacities by native-born Americans and those members of Gotch's generation who had already secured a place, regardless of socioeconomic status, in the American social landscape. In the context of American immigration and professional wrestling, Gotch's tainted victories represent significant change facing the industry and America's immigrant communities.

⁵² Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 192.

For the various ethnic groups taking part in the transition, opportunities for economic and social mobility were making themselves known to those with the drive and ambition necessary to embrace the advent of the capitalist machine. For the world of wrestling, a shift away from the amateurism of pure athletic competition toward the professional, organized nature of a more entertaining product predicated upon hooks and character-driven storylines was taking root across the nation. The narrative surrounding Frank Gotch and George Hackenschmidt epitomized the dawn of a new era of wrestling that has extended into the modern era. More importantly, it served as real, vivid example of the forces and dynamics that characterized the American immigrant experience of the early twentieth century.

Much has been made up to this point about both the advent of and increasingly favorable opinions shared about capitalism in the United States in the early twentieth century. In the context of sport and entertainment, there is perhaps no better decade that characterizes this transition than the 1920s. The second decade of the twentieth century saw American capitalism take root as a viable economic system going forward, and paved the way for nationwide revolutions in the realms of leisure and recreation. More importantly, it would further change the nature of professional wrestling, centralizing, commodifying it, and essentially transforming it into a prototype of the entertainment giant that it is today. This massive change was put in motion by a select few who, in addition to seeing the potential for profit in the industry if handled correctly, astutely recognized the interplay of racial, ethnic, and class dynamics in their audience, taking advantage of this very situation to build their new wrestling empire.

In the latter half of the 1910s, wrestling as a business was flopping. The national news media had begun to lambast the sport, highlighting the “fake” nature of the industry over the athletic competition and genuine entertainment it provided. This blacklisting was taking place

primarily in the larger sports territories of the country, specifically the East Coast, leaving the sport to anguish in the relative poverty of the Midwest. There, its primarily immigrant fan base continued to provide support for the sport, seeing it as both an extension of their new national heritage and a carryover from their international ethnic origins.⁵³ However, wrestling quickly rose to a newfound prominence in the 1920s and 1930s, becoming the preferred combat sport and one of the most popular forms of large-scale entertainment in general, drawing crowds numbering in the thousands largely comprised of middle and working class immigrants and ethnic minorities.⁵⁴ This shift in attention, according to *The New Yorker*, one of the more highbrow national publications that was covering wrestling at the time, was due primarily to the decline of boxing as America's preferred squared circle show. Boxing was, in the 1920s, experiencing a drought of talent, which led to a decrease in quality throughout the sport that ultimately caused its ravenous immigrant and native-born audience to seek entertainment elsewhere. Thanks to the innovation provided by a few enterprising individuals, wrestling quickly swooped in to capitalize on the exodus.⁵⁵

The charge to transform the world of wrestling would be led by three men, each handling a different portion of the business, implementing new ideas and tactics that would fundamentally alter the way the sport was played. The 1920s saw an increased national focus on sporting culture, leading to a golden age for sports and the advent of the first American sports superstars, including the likes of Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey. However, another name not often mentioned in this group of national sensations was Ed "Strangler" Lewis, a wrestling phenom that would go on to earn more than \$16 million in his career, more than any of the other names

⁵³ Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 1356.

⁵⁴ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Locations 334-357.

⁵⁵ Morris Markey, "A Reporter At Large: Catch As Catch Can," *New Yorker*, April 18, 1931, 37-44.

on the list, and become the first piece in this triple threat aimed at changing the world of wrestling for good.⁵⁶ Lewis was born Robert Friedrich to German immigrants in 1890. Growing up in Wisconsin, he took part in the wrestling tradition of his Midwest German-American community, becoming adept at the sport and eventually garnering enough skill and support to begin performing professionally at the age of 15. A supreme grappler, he took his name from his hero and former 1800s wrestling icon Evan Lewis, who frequently used a stranglehold in his performances on the carnival circuit.⁵⁷ Ed Lewis' proficiency in the ring made him a household name and the leading wrestling attraction nationwide, even become one of the first participants in a true cultural crossover in the world of sport, as he performed against the aforementioned Jack Dempsey in a famous mixed match that was heavily scrutinized by the press. The fight was advertised as a landmark event, but many journalists and sports columnists with any knowledge in the realms of either squared circle quickly recognized it as a cash grab, cementing it as not only one of the earliest instances of a popular sports culture crossover, but also an indication of the more heavily-staged, predetermined matches that would aid in the commodification and commercialization of the wrestling industry.⁵⁸ However, it would not be until Lewis formed a partnership with Billy Sandow that he would come to be known as a titan of the industry.

If Lewis was seen as being tasked with handling the wrestling aspects of the operation, Sandow was most assuredly in charge of the money. Stuck in the Midwest where wrestling was still popular, Lewis and Sandow, someone later described as one of the greatest showmen in the business and most assuredly the greatest wrestling manager of the era, quickly recognized the

⁵⁶ Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 1290.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, Kindle Location 1334.

⁵⁸ Frank G. Menke, "Don't Get Excited Over Talk of Mixed Match," *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, January 25, 1923.

potential for change and resulting profits.⁵⁹ They sought to use the existing middle and working class immigrant fan base to their benefit, capitalizing on their sentiments and preferences for entertainment to develop a completely new style of wrestling show aimed at both engaging current audiences and enticing new ones in the hopes of expanding to new territories outside the confines of the center of the country.⁶⁰ Lewis, in particular, was no stranger to primarily immigrant audiences, having previously wrestled against the likes of Polish phenom Stanislaus Zbyszko in a match to benefit the Irish Relief Fund.⁶¹ However, the incredibly lucrative nature of their plan would not become known until the introduction of Joseph “Toots” Mondt and his bold ideas for changing the nature of the show. Mondt was a perfectly capable wrestler in his own right, hailing from Colorado with some alleging that he was a superior grappler to Lewis, but his real talent came in his business acumen and showmanship. According to many, Mondt was a born con artist who had a keen eye for business opportunities, later being hailed as a promoter and manager to keep an eye on, for he was destined to be the man behind the next great world champion.⁶² He would use these gifts to make Lewis and Sandow successful on a scale previously unheard of in the world of wrestling.⁶³ Mondt entered the picture having done extensive research on combat sports outside of the United States. Mondt acquire extensive knowledge on forms of wrestling and pugilism practiced in every corner of Europe, ultimately convincing his partners that an amalgamation of Greco-Roman style wrestling, catch as catch can wrestling, boxing, and nineteenth century lumber camp fighting, a combination which he branded to his compatriots as “Slam Bang Western Style Wrestling,” was their ticket to

⁵⁹ Sid Keener, “Sid Keener’s Column,” *The St. Louis Star and Times*, April 15, 1937.

⁶⁰ Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 1356.

⁶¹ “Lewis To Meet Zbyszko: Champion Wrestler To Defend Title In Bout To Benefit Irish,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 1921.

⁶² Paul Menton, “Keep An Eye On Toots Mondt,” *The Evening Sun*, April 4, 1935.

⁶³ Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 1378.

success.⁶⁴ Mondt argued that this new combination of styles would be attractive to both immigrant audiences and native-born onlookers, solving the issue of combining the two fan bases established by Lewis and Sandow and further implicating wrestling with the evolving immigrant experience in twentieth century America.

The new style of wrestling suggested by Mondt would be comprised of new gimmicks and hooks aimed at doing away with the dull, tedious affairs of previous matches and giving the entertainment element of wrestling a much-needed boost. Mondt suggested the implementation of time limits that would exponentially decrease the length of matches, keeping the audience engaged and allowing for more tension and story to be injected into the matches. Further, new holds, moves, and acrobatics would be added to the matches, adding flair and panache to the performances that was sorely missed in the traditional style.⁶⁵ Aware of the previous success and massive crowds witnessed by landmark wrestling events like the Gotch and Hackenschmidt matches of the early 1910s, these new moves were grander and flashier in every way, and were designed to be visible to fans sitting as far as thirty rows from ringside.⁶⁶

Perhaps the biggest change implemented by Mondt, however, was influenced by his research of the popular culture and entertainment of the period. Vaudeville was still popular at the tail end of the Progressive Era, mainly due to its universal appeal in the as a result of the multiple acts geared towards all manner of audiences comprising each show, and similar acts were sweeping the nation during the 1920s, occupying theater houses and traveling roadshows alike.⁶⁷ Mondt recognized the potential in this model, and convinced Sandow and Lewis to turn wrestling into a vaudeville-style act, transforming it into a packaged show capable of moving in

⁶⁴ Griffin, *Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce*, Kindle Location 471.

⁶⁵ Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 1356-1378.

⁶⁶ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 287.

⁶⁷ Piott, *Daily Life in the Progressive Era*, 99.

an established circuit, engaging viewers in new ways in a timely, recursive manner. The show would be consolidated and compressed into a package experience, complete with outlandish entertainment and true athletic competition characterized by a consistent stable of performers that would experience minor roster changes periodically to keep things fresh while establishing a grounded working environment with strong professional relationships.⁶⁸ The “stable” concept afforded wrestlers under their employment the luxury of regular pay dates and professional relationships with fellow performers that created a more comfortable working environment, leading to higher quality staged matches and better storylines and performances.⁶⁹ The promise of consistent cash and a stable work environment enticed many wrestlers to join the new system under the trio’s leadership, causing Sandow to begin working overtime to sign performers to contracts in the hopes of building the largest stable of workers possible.⁷⁰ With a stable workforce and proven business model in position, the now infamous “Gold Dust Trio” took the wrestling world by storm, quickly asserting dominance over their East Coast counterparts.

The changes did not stop here, however. Although business was good and profits were high, there was always room for improvement, and the Gold Dust Trio sought to increase profit margins and expand their territorial reach while maintaining control of the narrative at every level. As the comfort level between performers grew and their ability to work in more complex matches became apparent, it fell to Mondt to develop new match styles, systems of progression, and match choreography all designed to keep their product entertaining and believable. Mondt worked in tandem with Lewis to write new scripts, complete with full match outlines, move sets, and finishes that simultaneously provided their rabid fan base with new forms of wrestling

⁶⁸ Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 1378.

⁶⁹ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 278.

⁷⁰ Griffin, *Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce*, Kindle Location 471.

entertainment and worked to make every performer on the payroll seem like an icon of the industry in their own right. Although Lewis would be the consistent champion of the Gold Dust Trio's business, the undercard working below him put on incredible shows night after night with the help of Mondt's choreography, propelling many small-time workers into minor stardom.⁷¹ By allocating portions of the spotlight to performers outside the championship circuit, the Trio was able to make their own stars, on their own terms, and through the work of their own narratives, creating local sensations overnight that, in turn, drew big money in every territory they visited.

This system, wherein the Trio tackled problems by inventing new solutions or simply changing the rules of the game, proved fruitful in other endeavors, as well. Although Mondt and Lewis had become more than adept at scripting matches and creating new angles and finishes for their bouts, it was becoming more and more apparent that the key to both drawing in new viewers and retaining standbys was building matches up to a shocking and entertaining, but ultimately believable, conclusion. Without a sense of resolution or the promise of one in the future, audiences were more likely to take their money and interest elsewhere. This unfortunate realization became most readily apparent in the case of their persistent champion, Ed Lewis. As a member of the Trio and as the best performer on the payroll, the intent was to keep Lewis as the de facto champion and poster child for the company for the foreseeable future. However, Mondt and Sandow very quickly came to understand that a champion that never lost, or stood a chance of losing, was a boring prospect for audiences, especially those looking to be surprised and conned into returning the next night. This potential loss of profits led to the idea of Lewis trading wins and losses with other in-house wrestlers who could be seen as real competitors for the championship. These title defenses would allow Lewis and company to retain control of their

⁷¹ Griffin, *Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce*, Kindle Location 528-552.

championship while building up the legitimacy of the sport, the title, and its defenders in the minds of the casual viewer. Furthermore, the idea of trading victories and sparking feuds and rivalries allowed for the creation of new, long form storytelling in wrestling, predicated upon personal vendettas, questions of sportsmanship, and superior fighting ability. These new narratives could be carried out over the course of weeks and months, rather than being expended in the timeframe of a single match on any given night, increasing the longevity and potential for expansion in the sport as a whole, lending to its place in a more industrialized, commodified society.⁷²

The expansion initiatives undertaken by the Gold Dust Trio were never completely removed from their unfortunate, and now unsavory, carnival origins, however. The methods used to promote secrecy, fabricate legitimacy, and develop characters and storylines all carried with them a trace of the carnie nature of the sport. Just as the championship sector of the business was altered to maintain a sense of sincerity and legitimate competition in the eyes of the fans, so too was the language used by performers and bookers changed to keep the shroud of secrecy intact. A new lexicon was developed by Mondt and his comrades that made use of long-held carnie terminology and “pig Latin” in order to ensure that the choreography and finishes of matches would not be intercepted and spoiled through the wire service used at the time. By coding and encrypting the language used to describe match setups, essentially all opportunities for sabotage were foiled, and the myth of the sport’s legitimacy lived on in the minds of the fans.⁷³ Examples of the terms that were developed at the time and shortly thereafter include various names for the type of exhibitions performed, the performers themselves, the secret nature of the act, and the various crowd reactions that determined the quality and overall success of a match. A “shoot”

⁷² Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 310.

⁷³ Griffin, *Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce*, Kindle Location 505.

meant the fight in the ring was real and not scripted, and could describe interviews that were out of character, as well. A “work” was the opposite, a match that was scripted and planned ahead of time. In the same vein of equals and opposites, a “heel” was a villainous character, while a “babyface” or “face” was a stereotypical hero. “Kayfabe” refers to the act of wrestling itself, serving as a term that essentially implies staying in character and never breaking the act on display. A “pop” was a positive crowd reaction, and “heat” was a negative crowd reaction that was ultimately beneficial for the development of a heel’s character.⁷⁴ By establishing a vernacular used almost exclusively within the confines of the business, Mondt and his partners had aided in the further professionalization of the sport. Other sports at the time were similarly adopting words and phrases that only made sense in the context of the game being played as a part of their commodification and consolidation processes, lending credence to the idea that wrestling, with its new insider linguistics, was just as much a part of the wave of professional sports as baseball or football.

Another rather unfortunate aspect of the business changes administered by the Trio that was influenced by the off-colored carnie nature of the sport came in the makeup of the narratives and programs on display. Sandow had built up a large roster of performers, all different in size, shape, and skill level. In attempting to create a more engaging product, he took to prescribing his wrestlers with various cultural and ethnic identities, nationalities, and professions, in the hopes of appealing to his diverse audience. Sandow routinely paired representatives of different nations, cultures, and ethnic groups in an attempt to stir up the sentiments of nationalism taking America by storm in the 1920s, playing to the rivalries and disputes shared by the various cultures and ethnicities that made up his largely immigrant fan base to generate a stronger reaction and sense

⁷⁴ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 336-362.

of engagement that would eventually translate to money at the box office. The professions aspect of the character changes was less potentially damning, aimed more at generating a fun and lively atmosphere populated by colorful characters that could back up their comedic personas in the ring. The professions of these characters were often tangentially linked to the real lives of the performers behind them. These additions ultimately served to create a new era in the production of wrestling, and ushered in “the birth of wrestling doctors, plumbers, milkmen, plasterers, painters, violinists, tuba players, bridge players, cowboys, steer ropers, sailors, millionaire ranchers, civil engineers, interior decorators, opera singers, farmers, bearded exiled Russian priests, Hindus, ministers, negro witch doctors, and chemists.”⁷⁵ The use of characters and storylines based on cultural stereotypes and nationalist sentiment is an aspect of wrestling that has seen ups and downs, rising most apparently in the 1980s and early 2000s, while the use of professions as defining character traits has persisted well into the modern era with little loss of traction. The longevity of both insinuates that these attempts at entertainment by parody and proxy, regardless of racial and cultural appropriation or insensitivity, is entwined with the nature of the business itself, forever linking professional wrestling and the American immigrant and minority experience.

This examination of the capitalist innovations overwhelming and forever altering professional wrestling in the 1920s is essential in understanding the connections between the sport and those who followed it. However, when viewed in a larger, national context, these changes and their impact on the immigrant and minority communities taking part in the action become even more substantial, serving as a piece of a much larger phenomenon. Pope’s *Patriotic Games* seeks to examine the development of America’s sporting culture with the rise of

⁷⁵ Griffin, *Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce*, Kindle Location 575.

capitalism and professionalization experienced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Wrestling, neither professional nor amateur, is never mentioned in this discussion. This omission is most likely a result of the scripted nature of the sport, the lowbrow reputation it has received since its popularization, and the lack of research conducted on it in an historical context. Its lack of use, however, is detrimental to the work as a whole, as Pope's arguments concerning other sports and the sporting culture as a whole are perhaps nowhere more apparent and relevant than the hotly contested and ever-changing arena of the squared circle.

In the 1920s, baseball as a sport and as a business entity underwent countless massive transformations. These changes were primarily relegated to the worlds of professionalization, incorporation, consolidation, and monetization. Pope argues that these changes, and the sport of baseball as a whole, can largely be viewed through two lenses. The first, the lens of linear records, is chiefly concerned with the organizational structures, business, technology, economic, and labor history of the sport. The second, the cyclical record, examines the repetitive, and often generational, emotional relationships between the sport and its fans, residing in the intellectual and cultural history surrounding the business.⁷⁶ Both lenses can be easily applied to the world of professional wrestling, as has been done throughout the course of this argument, and when related to a sport that extends beyond the world of pure athletic competition and into the realms of entertainment, popular culture, and cultural representation, the lenses become even more focused and relevant to the established historiography. The lenses of analysis proposed draw clear connections between America's pastime and America's guilty pleasure, and paint a picture wherein professional wrestling, even more so than baseball, gives an accurate reflection of the

⁷⁶ Pope, *Patriotic Games*, 59.

paradigm shifts and socioeconomic factors influencing the lives of millions of American immigrants and minority communities in the 1920s.

The increasing recognition of capitalism as a viable economic system for an expanding and ever-changing United States caused America's sporting culture to expand in kind. Virtually every sport or leisure activity that held any form of cultural relevance or significance came to question the nature of its position, wavering between holding true to their amateur, independent origins and taking hold of the economic opportunities and relative security afforded by professionalization and organization. The development of sports-oriented corporate structuring, new business strategies, capitalist ideals, and professional organization and handling influenced the directions taken by the likes of football, baseball, racing, boxing, and, as evidenced prior, wrestling.⁷⁷ Wrestling was very clearly part of a larger tide of change taking root in American sports. However, wrestling, despite the insistent prominence and importance of baseball, separates itself from the crowd and defines the movement through its inherent connections to the rising middle-class and working-class of immigrants that were turning out in droves to witness said professionalization.

The comparisons between wrestling and baseball, although not addressed in the historiography up to this point, are in no way limited, and apply to a number of different facets of the changing socioeconomic landscape of 1920s America. The increasingly professionalized world of baseball in the early twentieth century has often been described as a unifying force for immigrants and minority groups in the United States. Its position as "America's pastime" is largely rooted in its seemingly universal appeal and the fortunate timing of its surge in popularity, establishing itself as a cornerstone of American popular culture and heritage at a time

⁷⁷ Pope, *Patriotic Games*, 68.

when those attributes were still being actively defined. However, given the information presented so far, the same could be said for professional wrestling. Its rise to prominence, universal appeal, and ability to unify groups of people are all identical to that of baseball, and the inherently cartoonish, larger than life nature of the business adds to its significance in American popular culture in several instances. Baseball has become the quintessential American sport in the time since its professionalization, but when viewed in a broader historical context, there are far too many similarities between baseball and professional wrestling to ignore the latter's place as a force for significant change in the history of American popular culture.

As baseball surged in popularity in the 1920s, it would become intrinsically linked to a new vision for America's future, strongly rooted in the nationalist, capitalist sentiments of the period. Professionalized but ultimately accessible, this new ideological viewpoint defining the fate of baseball as an industry and a product of America's sporting culture asserted that it was an indigenous American tradition, pure to the origins of the United States in every way while also reflecting the more desirable traits of the nation in a succinct format.⁷⁸ The crowds flocking to games on a weekly basis were comprised of every social class imaginable, and as a result were seen as being devoid of class distinctions. The managers and team owners were often hailed as ideals of the American capitalist vision, taking charge of their economic opportunities to rise to national prominence and notoriety. In theory, the game was open to all comers, although racism and prejudice would play a role in hampering these expectations. Also, many of the players who became household names started from nothing, embodying the American ideal of pulling oneself up by their bootstraps.⁷⁹ These qualities that have been repeatedly applied almost exclusively to baseball, turning it into the catch-all of socioeconomic revolution in American sports history, can

⁷⁸ Pope, *Patriotic Games*, 72.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 72-73.

be easily applied to professional wrestling. Wrestling audiences, although predominantly middle and working class, were home to the most destitute and the wealthiest of American citizens, attracting all who sought entertainment in the realm of combat sports and earning the attention of several highbrow national publications. Territorial managers and owners, like the Gold Dust Trio, served as examples of what a strong work ethic, determination, and business savvy could achieve among an aspiring immigrant population. Wrestling incorporated individuals from every walk of life, and readily incorporated their cultures into the performance, although not always in the most flattering of ways. And finally, during the 1920s and earlier, the idea of a legacy wrestler was unheard of, with virtually every competitor that became a star beginning in the doldrums of anonymity, rising through the ranks of the business by skill and will alone. If baseball was to be seen as a great unifier of American society in the 1920s, professional wrestling was that and more even before the decade began.

Wrestling's role as a personification of the unified American spirit extended beyond any competition with the top spot held by baseball, however. In many ways, wrestling was indicative of the revolution taking hold of America's sporting and popular culture as a whole. As the twentieth century ushered in a new era of cultural expression, questions about what it meant to be American were beginning to be answered in unexpected ways. Amazingly, sports were defining the culture around them, rather than the inverse system that had been so commonplace beforehand. American citizenship, it seemed, was being redefined as a lifestyle of leisure and sport, predicated upon an appeal for universal acceptance and class solidarity.⁸⁰ This appeal for a classless American nationalism extended beyond the realms of native-born U.S. citizens, taking root in immigrant communities across the nation. Even "wholly American" social events, like

⁸⁰ Pope, *Patriotic Games*, 118.

Fourth of July celebrations and Thanksgiving gatherings, which were increasingly tied to sporting events and emphases on recreation, were being determined by American immigrants, who had taken to co-opting the celebratory events by means of infusing the underlying nationalist sentiments surrounding the parties with their own cultural traditions and social beliefs.⁸¹ Much like the world of wrestling, ideas of what it meant to be a proud American were being actively redefined by immigrants and minority communities amidst the cultural revolutions of the 1920s.

It should be noted that this sporting culture could likely not have achieved the level of notoriety that it did without American involvement in World War I. As weary but victorious American soldiers returned home from the battlefield, they brought with them a certain set of ideals and ethics that influenced the popular culture around them on the home front. The influence of the American war effort on the resurgent popularity of boxing has been well researched and analyzed, but the same has not been done for similar combat sports, like wrestling. The aforementioned surge in popularity and acceptance for professional wrestling in the 1920s came partially as a byproduct of the acceptance of pugilism in American culture following the conflict. Virtues such as a rugged, combative individualism and a strong concern for national defense and the defense of that which is dear by any means had been readily instilled in America's youth overseas, but those same ideals had also been imparted upon the general public by the popular media of the time, including native-born and immigrant Americans.⁸² These more aggressive ideas concerning American nationalism, combined with a general acceptance of violence and fighting in American entertainment, played an instrumental part in the acceptance of wrestling as a part of America's new sporting culture.

⁸¹ Ibid, 118.

⁸² Pope, *Patriotic Games*, 154.

The final element that contributed to the development of this sporting culture came in the form of capitalism and an ever-increasing American reliance on the values it espoused. The rise of capitalism in the 1910s and 1920s, combined with America's involvement in The Great War, led to the creation of a powerful new American nation-state. This state would, in theory, be celebrated as a modern example of how a nation could serve as a benefactor and protector of its citizens, regardless of class, religion, or race.⁸³ In many ways, the sports that rose to prominence at the time, including baseball and professional wrestling, exemplified the ideals and values that were implicit in this image of a considerate but determined American populace. Values like a strong sense of individualism, a consistent and unwavering work ethic, a reliance on and undying support of democracy as a system, and a commitment to class conciliation all served as foundational building blocks for organized sports, whether or not they were explicitly displayed.⁸⁴ All of these values, specifically those directly dealing with socioeconomic status and mobility, appealed to American immigrant and minority communities on a fundamental level. Class conciliation and the promise of inclusion preyed upon a rising nationalist sentiment among American immigrants that was itself predicated upon ideas of cultural mixing, blending distinct ethnic heritages with a larger cultural zeitgeist rooted in American traditionalism.⁸⁵ The highly scripted nature of professional wrestling, complete with cultural stereotypes and fabricated sensations of nationalism and ethnic pride, proved to be fertile ground for the fostering of a new American cultural identity for many immigrants and ethnic minorities, all occurring as a byproduct of the sporting revolution of the 1920s.

⁸³ Pope, *Patriotic Games*, 160.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 160.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 160.

In essence, professional wrestling exists as perhaps the greatest example of the ways in which sports and society coexisted and worked to alter the ways in which their constituents interacted on a daily basis in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In a period rife with revolutions centered around the realms of music, art, and social mobility, sports changed, as well, becoming a unifying force for an American populace facing an as yet undetermined future. Games became professionalized. Recreation was monetized. Leisure became an integral aspect of citizenship and American cultural expression. Although baseball has been heavily touted as the de facto example of these forces working in conjunction to impact the lives of all manner of Americans at the time, the cartoonish and wildly popular world of wrestling does so more effectively and more spectacularly, in spite of its apparent historical blacklisting. Through the work of enterprising individuals like the Gold Dust Trio, wrestling became inherently attached to the rise of capitalism. This connection, and its implications for a predominantly immigrant and minority audience, were taken full advantage of, with the implementation of culturally-driven storylines and characters that have become a staple of the sport even well into the modern era. Wrestling's universal appeal created a rabid fan base largely devoid of class distinctions, exemplifying one of the core aspects of American nationalism that was so alluring to immigrants and minorities across the country. By recognizing trends and becoming intrinsically linked to both the fans and the popular media they were being influenced by, wrestling serves as both an impetus for and the result of the massive social transformations taking place in the 1920s that ultimately led to the creation of a new American sporting culture. Like baseball, it proved to middle and working class Americans that their values were still relevant to the rest of the nation, and that social solidarity and respectability could be achieved by immigrants and minorities

through the realms of popular culture and sport.⁸⁶ Professional wrestling, more so than any other sport of the early twentieth century, personified the American immigrant and minority experience.

Up to this point, this exercise has largely examined the interplay between professional wrestling and the American immigrant experience, with frequent allusions to further interplay with the American ethnic or racial minority experience, as well. The overall experience shared by various racial and ethnic minorities in the United States has been remarkably similar, with prejudice, persecution, and steadfast resilience in the face of persistent adversity lying at the core of the situation. In the course of this discussion, the history of professional wrestling's use of and impact on multiple racial and ethnic minority communities will be examined. However, as a result of the amount of historical research devoted to the topic, the primary focus will be placed on the clear parallels that can be drawn between the sport and the experience of African Americans since the early twentieth century. The role of black athletes in the development of American sporting and popular culture has been dissected and expanded upon for decades, but their involvement in the world of professional wrestling, like most in-depth examinations of the business and its historiographical significance, have been left by the wayside. Upon further review, it becomes clear that black athletes were instrumental in the advancement of the sport, and experienced the same routine persecution and dichotomous social interactions inside the squared circle that they did on the baseball diamond or at the lunch counter.

Although African Americans would become involved with the business of professional wrestling in a significant manner as early as the 1940s, with rarities occurring well before that like Viro Small of Vermont, also known as "Black Sam," receiving regional attention for his

⁸⁶ Pope, *Patriotic Games*, 73.

wrestling abilities in the 1880s, the business itself experienced highs, lows, and monumental shifts in tone and content between the hardline segregation of the 1920s and the proliferation of black wrestlers seen in the 1970s and 1980s.⁸⁷ In order to better understand the impact black wrestlers had on the industry, it becomes important to fully explore the environments in which they were working and to provide context for the social and cultural ramifications of their inclusion. As wrestling left the decade of jazz and high society behind, it began to enter a new era wherein the dichotomous stigma surrounding the fixed nature of the sport rose to prominence. The foundations laid by the Gold Dust Trio created a stable, and fairly expansive, market for wrestling as entertainment for audiences of all shapes and sizes. Despite an increased reliance on outlandish characters based on ethnic stereotypes and various professions, the predetermined nature of matches and the inner workings of the business were still heavily guarded secrets, as believability and a sense of legitimacy in the athletic competitions were desired above all. Furthermore, the consolidation of power undertaken by Mondt and company throughout the 1920s caused other wrestling promotions to take notice of this new business strategy, creating a series of close-knit territorial offices, often working under or in conjunction with the Gold Dust Trio, that quickly took hold of the Northeast United States.

Among these territory managers and promoters sat a man by the name of Jack Pfeffer. A wrestler himself in a previous life, Pfeffer sought a seat at the table, and tried to worm his way up the ring ropes as quickly as possible. However, Pfeffer's time as a deal maker and backstage persona would come to a swift and unfortunate end, as his superiors quickly grew tired of his presence and laid him off, ousting Pfeffer from the wrestling business in the Northeast. Unfulfilled and full of spite, Pfeffer did what countless other scorned former employees have

⁸⁷ "Viro Small," *The National Police-Gazette*, June 3, 1882.

done and will continue to do: he set out to destroy his former bosses. Utilizing a journalist contact Pfeffer had known from his time in the business, he quickly set about participating in a series of interviews that would be published in *The Daily Mail* from 1933 to 1934 in which he exposed every secret of professional wrestling he could, highlighting the incredibly fixed nature of the sport, the inner dealings and workings of the business as it operated backstage, and dragging the names of his former employers through the thickest mud he could find.⁸⁸ The articles received national attention, and as a result of the scandalous and underhanded subject matter, many audiences felt betrayed, cheated, and taken advantage of, causing public interest in wrestling to wane for a period. The business was thrown under the bus and was ridiculed for its apparently lowbrow audience and crude sensibilities, advertised as an industry where sharks and predators could make money off the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum while combing Europe for talent to add to their sideshow attraction.⁸⁹ The showmanship of the sport instituted by some of the greatest minds in the business to boost profits and increase audience participation had seemingly backfired.

In addition to losing fan support, the empire established by the dons of the business in the Northeast began to crumble under the weight of audience backlash, cementing the majority of the 1930s as a period of downtime for the squared circle. It would not be until 1938 when the man that caused the downturn and demise of the wrestling industry, Jack Pfeffer, reinserted himself into the equation in the hopes of turning the business around. Pfeffer had become famous for being the man that exposed the scripted, carnie nature of wrestling to the world and seemingly leading to the destruction of the very business he had so desperately wanted to be a part of. Now, as the decade came to a close, Pfeffer once again stepped in and managed to take

⁸⁸ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 430.

⁸⁹ "Society Likes Wrestling," *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 19, 1931.

control of the very empire he had demolished, and managed to regain a sense of success and fortune by refusing to shy away from the scripted nature of the performance. Pfeffer instead highlighted the falsehoods of the sport, making matches and characters even more outlandish and larger than life, ultimately leaning into the fix to increase the entertainment value of his product.⁹⁰

Wrestling was on the mend, but it now existed in a vague, gray area of live entertainment that would come to define it and its relationship with the fan base well into the modern era. Although the working-class members of the audience stuck with it through the periodic lows of the early twentieth century, the nature of the business and its recent exposure left many of its fans in a state of limbo, with support often wavering and lacking conviction one way or another. It would remain a product of the middle and upper-class immigrant populations of the U.S. and would continue to contribute to the professionalization of sport and the development of a unified American popular culture, but it would experience a slight hiccup in this period. The problem was that many of the middle and upper-class fans of wrestling, as a byproduct of the exposing articles and the increasing reliance on theatricality and deception employed by wrestling promoters at the time, began to lose their appreciation for the pure athletic competitions they had come to know in years prior. This is a reasonable reaction to the downtime of the 1930s, but the problem was compounded by the fact that, in the absence of appreciation for the sport as athletic event, the same middle and upper-class patrons had failed to garner an appreciation for the sport as performance art.⁹¹ Wrestling, as it exists today, generally floats somewhere between boxing match, soap opera, genuine drama, and comedy act. This is the nature of the business, and it is now often overwhelmingly accepted by its fans, as it has multiple forms of entertainment

⁹⁰ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 430-453.

⁹¹ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 453.

wrapped up in one package that is appealing to different people and different age groups for different reasons. However, at the time of the transition occurring in the 1930s, many audience members had not yet managed to see it as such, and it would not be until many more changes took place throughout the next five decades that this revelation would take hold.

If the 1930s can be seen as the start of a downward trend for professional wrestling, the following decade could easily be characterized as the de facto end of said trend, and the beginning of new opportunities for expansion in the world of the squared circle. The 1940s uptick in interest can largely be attributed to two distinct patterns or series of events: the continued consolidation and professionalization of major league athletics, and the proliferation of easily accessible mass media that directly contributed to the development of a new American popular culture. Beginning with the sport itself, wrestling was still an active participant in the ongoing sporting cultural revolution taking America by storm. As mentioned previously, American athletics had undergone significant change, both in terms of content and attitude, since the final decades of the nineteenth century and culminating in the 1920s. Sports superstars rose to prominence, capitalism reared its head in the wake of a wave of professionalization and monetization of athletic ability, and the American public, including its immigrant and ethnic minority communities, had become ravenous for all things leisure and recreation.

Professionalization and consolidation efforts continued well into the 1940s, with sports like baseball and football reaching heights of popularity previously unheard of, and it was around this period that wrestling took yet another note from its compatriot in combat sports.

To maintain a uniform sense of decorum and legitimacy, boxing in the United States had been under the jurisdiction of a committee of rule makers, the National Boxing Association, for a number of years. By consolidating the power structure of boxing and limiting rule making and

championship titles to one governing body, boxing had been able to maintain a sense of integrity and control unseen in other sports of the time. With this in mind, a number of enterprising individuals in the vein of the Gold Dust Trio convened in the early 1940s to establish the National Wrestling Association, an offshoot of its boxing brethren that aimed to unify championships, keep real records of wins and losses, promote and manage multiple territories, and create an air of legitimacy surrounding their otherwise fictional performance art productions.⁹² Although established with the best of intentions as could be construed through the lens of capitalism, the organization failed to meet its goals in a timely manner. A unified champion was selected in Lou Thesz, but with a complete lack of structure and oversight, territorial managers very quickly reverted to their prior methods of promoting matches, having the title bandied about between top stars in their regions before putting it back on Thesz. Additionally, no records were kept of these various exchanges, leaving the state of the Association as a qualified governing body in question.⁹³

With the National Wrestling Association failing to meet expectations and left floundering by the wayside, the various dons and impresarios of the wrestling world sought to challenge this authority and change the rule set to fit their vision for the future of wrestling. In 1948, the National Wrestling Alliance was formed as a direct counter to the previous organization, aiming to make right the wrongs imposed by the former committee leaders and foster a new sense of cooperation amongst the heads of the wrestling industry. This new form of leadership was built on much stronger foundations than its predecessor, incorporating the ideas and suggestions of the territorial managers that already had control over their given regions and were familiar with how business worked best in different corners of the nation. The new NWA would be established on

⁹² Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 504.

⁹³ Ibid, 504.

the basis of open communication, creating an environment wherein stars and top performers would be shared between territories while maintaining employment and championships wherever they were sent, long-term storylines and individual programs would be setup collaboratively between regions with impacts and ramifications affecting each territory involved, championships would be maintained across territory lines and would be recognized and administered by the NWA itself, and territory managers would keep their positions on top, maintaining a sense of autonomy in their creative and business decisions while ultimately serving as overseers and enforcers for the rule sets and larger cross-promotional events conducted by the NWA elite.⁹⁴ Although still carnie in nature and influenced by a number of external factors, the business of wrestling was becoming smaller while its profits and overall economic potential was increasing exponentially.

The second portion of the equation surrounding the resurgence of professional wrestling lies in the proliferation of a new American popular culture espoused by an ever-expanding mass media, and the greatest proponent of this paradigm shift came in the form of a single invention: the television. Beginning in the 1940s, the magic of television quickly captured both the attention and imagination of Americans across the country, presenting them with a new, exciting means of entertainment that was easily accessible and constantly evolving to fit their personal needs. It would be during this period, wherein the earliest glimpse at the economic and entertainment potentials of television would be recognized, that the inseparable nature of the relationship between television and professional wrestling would form. Television was absolutely essential to the prolonged expansion and success of wrestling as an entertainment product. At the advent of America's obsession with the technological marvel, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, television

⁹⁴ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 504.

was seen as a novelty, a true product of American innovation that would contribute to the development of a new popular culture as millions of Americans flocked to purchase sets for their homes or stopped in the streets, basking in the soft glow of the black and white screens behind department store windows.⁹⁵

From the outset, wrestling was seen as a standby for television content, becoming one of the first athletic competitions to gain a foothold in the market largely due to the ease and convenience with which wrestling matches were broadcast. In most situations, all that was required to put a match on screens across the region was a camera fixed on a twenty by twenty ring and a single announcer who was competent enough to say a few lines per bout.⁹⁶ These fairly minimal stipulations made wrestling on television economically viable, especially for the multitude of small broadcast networks that were popping up throughout the nation in the early 1950s. Additionally, wrestling as a product and as a form of entertainment was seemingly tailor made for the early years of television. It was self-contained, easily understood by a wide variety of people regardless of language or cultural predisposition, lacked the complications and intricacies associated with other forms of performance art, and presented a show with all of the necessary components for a successful television program, including action, melodrama, theatricality, colorful characters, and larger than life personalities.⁹⁷ The various tools and methods used to change wrestling into a more entertaining live production in the 1920s and 1930s, including adding moves capable of being seen from the thirtieth row, proved to be instrumental in the success of adapting wrestling to the television screen.

⁹⁵ Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 2486.

⁹⁶ Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 2486-2509.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, Kindle Location 2509.

The aforementioned ease of access and convenience of production related to wrestling became crucial factors going forward in its relationship with television and the eventual rise of a number of wrestling monoliths. As television and wrestling simultaneously grew in popularity across the nation, two primary television networks rose to prominence in the late 1940s. NBC had been in the radio business for decades prior to their transition to the small screen, and simply took their existing products and morphed them to fit their new platform and image. The DuMont Network, on the other hand, was a small outfit with no existing history of providing entertainment and news in any format, and was struggling to find content to fill their airwaves. Eager and anxious to try anything and everything, DuMont would eventually go on to pioneer the soap opera, establish the format for sitcoms, and be the original home of Jackie Gleason.⁹⁸ More importantly, however, the DuMont Network would be the first television company to take a chance on wrestling. It would pay off in droves. Wrestling proved to be so popular, in fact, that by the early 1950s, wrestling shows airing on Thursday and Saturday nights occupied two of the top ten slots in their programming schedule.⁹⁹ Wrestling was good for television, and, as it would soon be discovered, television was good for wrestling.

This discovery was not immediately apparent, however, to the vast majority of wrestling promoters working in the early days of television. Most failed to recognize the potential importance of the new medium in the promotion of their product, treating it as ancillary or an afterthought rather than devoting any significant amount of time and energy into polishing their television presence. Television was a utility to be tamed, understood, and taken advantage of, but the overwhelming majority of those in power saw it as an inconvenience or a passing fad. In choosing to air matches in their entirety with few surprises, promoters and managers had failed

⁹⁸ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 550-573.

⁹⁹ Ibid, Kindle Location 550-573.

to uphold a central tenet of their business: never give everything away for free.¹⁰⁰ One man, however, recognized the folly in this business strategy, and sought to change the ways in which television was used to serve the wrestling industry. His revelation would come to change the way that wrestling operated on the small screen at the time, and would pave the way for his son to later revolutionize the industry as a whole.

Vincent J. McMahon, more commonly known as “Vince, Sr.” in relation to his more well known son, had entered the wrestling business in the 1950s. Transitioning from the world of boxing, McMahon had a knack for the business as it was and easily transferred his knowledge from one squared circle to another. After establishing Capitol Wrestling at the beginning of the decade, McMahon began airing his local production on television in 1956, and saw an opportunity to carve out a place for himself amongst his competition by harnessing the power of the new entertainment medium.¹⁰¹ Most promoters at the time failed to recognize that television was best utilized as a promotional tool rather than a delivery mechanism. By giving away matches for free on television, there was no incentive for even the most avid fan to go out to a live show. Rather, if treated as a commercial service with advertising rather than actual content taking center stage, the potential for increases in ticket sales became limitless.¹⁰² By recognizing this strategy’s viability, McMahon managed to set himself apart from the other managers and promoters working out of the Northeast United States. Shortly after he began airing his program on television with a heavy promotional aspect advertising upcoming live events, Capitol Wrestling experienced a boom in ticket sales, and word of mouth about the entertaining quality of the product only furthered this newfound popularity.¹⁰³ McMahon’s mastery of television in

¹⁰⁰ Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 2513-2518.

¹⁰¹ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 573.

¹⁰² Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 2513.

¹⁰³ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 573.

the 1950s allowed him to leave his competitors in the dust, and secured his position at the top of the mountain for the next two decades.

Having dominated the airwaves, he very quickly used his power to orchestrate a paradigm shift among the wrestling dons of the East Coast, taking control of a number of territories in the process. McMahon's enterprise became so large and so profitable that he no longer needed the help of the National Wrestling Alliance, and left the organization for good, changing the name of his company along the way.¹⁰⁴ The World Wide Wrestling Federation, more commonly known as the WWF, would serve as a direct precursor to modern mainstream wrestling, and it would be McMahon's son, Vincent Kennedy McMahon, known by most as "Vince," that would lead the business into global entertainment dominance in the following decades. As Vince cemented his legacy through the rebranding of the company as the World Wrestling Federation, or WWF, and the poaching of major talent from rival territories, it would be television's connection to the American public that would allow him to see the levels of success he did. The decision to begin airing live wrestling on a weekly basis, the expansion of the product between multiple stations including the USA Network and TBS, the increased emphasis on the televised product and the stars of the new era, and the eventual war between wrestling companies for air wave and ratings domination, all demonstrate that, even forty years removed, television was instrumental to the prolonged success and accessibility of professional wrestling.¹⁰⁵

As the United States entered the second half of the twentieth century, professional wrestling began to once again lean into its carnival roots. The implementation of colorful characters and exciting gimmicks was not a new phenomenon, as has been seen up to this point.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, Kindle Location 573-663.

¹⁰⁵ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 663.

However, with a stable foothold in the world of television, combined with an increased consolidation of power among the top brass and a strong grip on how talent was used and perceived by the audience, the characters and gimmicks introduced between the 1950s and the 1970s would set a precedent for what was deemed acceptable entertainment in the world of wrestling well into the twenty-first century. Beginning with the lighter side of the equation, the first true characters in wrestling emerged in the 1950s. The reliance on strongmen and pugilists of the previous decades was still prominent, but in the late 1940s, a single wrestler invented an entire archetype and would inspire the careers of countless wrestlers beginning their careers after his tenure. Born to fairly humble origins, George Wagner had been trained in wrestling and sought to make a name for himself in the industry.¹⁰⁶ His wrestling style was admittedly bland, and he lacked any form of visual interest or character, leaving him stranded in the seas of indifference, ambivalence, and mediocrity. After some consideration of his position and some clever thinking, however, George Wagner would go on to become a household name across the nation. All it took was some hair dye and an invigoration of smarminess.

“Gorgeous George” was everything George Wagner could never be. Doing away with the vanilla appearance of his early years, Gorgeous George was a man of taste and talent, who exuded confidence and pretension from every pore. Adorned with lavish robes and ring gear that was all custom made, George made his way to the ring with bleach blonde hair, done up in regal curls, carrying flowers, and moving in time to the tune of “Pomp and Circumstance,” becoming one of the first in-ring performers to make use of entrance music.¹⁰⁷ Frequently accompanied to the ring by a female valet, George flaunted his excellence and the beauty of his companion to his opponent while often throwing insults to the crowd and scoffing at their attempted jabs to his ego

¹⁰⁶ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 703.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, Kindle Location 703.

with an upturned nose. His pompous antics would soon transition into a cowardly move set in the ring, wherein he would use underhanded tactics to get the better of his opponent and secure the pin, generally to a raucous chorus of boos. Gorgeous George, in both his actions and his mannerisms, invented the arrogant heel archetype, a character still used prominently in wrestling today.¹⁰⁸ His new persona made him an overnight sensation that was in demand across the nation. His true success, however, came from the fame and notoriety he would receive after his television debut on November 11th, 1947.

In those early days of television, Gorgeous George became an instant attraction, with people stopping outside department stores to watch his outrageous performances and relish in the ridiculousness of his villainy inside the ring.¹⁰⁹ He even attracted the attention of well known media personalities of the day, with the likes of Bob Hope featuring George on his national radio broadcast and subsequently making frequent allusions to the grandeur and nefarious nature of his act.¹¹⁰ His numerous television appearances, in-ring performances, guest spots, radio segments, and published interviews made George arguably the first true crossover entertainment superstar.¹¹¹ With his fingers in so many pies, George lived a full life that made him unimaginably wealthy, cementing his legacy in the public imagination as one of the greatest sports stars of the twentieth century. Although perhaps not as well known today as during the height of his reign, George's popularity blazed a trail for numerous athletes and entertainers that followed in his wake, making crossover potential and multi-industry branding an essential component of fame and stardom in the modern era, as George was not merely a wrestling

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, Kindle Location 703.

¹⁰⁹ Thesz, *Hooker*, Kindle Location 2486.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, Kindle Location 2486.

¹¹¹ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 725.

phenomenon, he was a *television* phenomenon.¹¹² More importantly, it set a precedent for the implementation of private and public spheres of life in America's sporting culture. After all, George Wagner was a nobody, saddled with the apparent burden of normalcy, while Gorgeous George was one of the most popular, and most wealthy, entertainers of the 1950s.

Another product of the transformation of the wrestling industry occurring at the height of Gorgeous George's popularity was an increasing emphasis placed on the world of women's wrestling. Women's wrestling, or "lady wrestling" as it was officially known at the time, was a strange, unfortunate business that in many ways existed as the sideshow to the sideshow. Women were frequently put into the ring to sell their physiques to the wandering eyes of male audience members, serving as a feminine, erotic, sexualized foil to the violent hyper-masculinity of their male counterparts.¹¹³ Female wrestlers were routinely demeaned and demoralized by talent managers, treated more as sex objects rather than professional athletes. It was common practice that, on any given night, female wrestlers would receive mid-card billing for the night's attractions, and would be paid in the lowest ranges acceptable, but then be thrown into the main event of the event when the male performers failed to generate enough heat with the crowd.¹¹⁴ This way of handling women in the wrestling industry continued for decades, and it should be noted that in some cases, as will be examined shortly, female talent managers were just as guilty as their male compatriots. In many ways, women's wrestling, despite the inherent sexism and prejudice, operated in much the same way as men's wrestling, experiencing highs and lows between decades, determined by internal and external factors, all the while maintaining a dichotomy of individual successes and group failures.

¹¹² Ibid, Kindle Location 725.

¹¹³ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 752-838.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, Kindle Location 752-838.

One woman in particular has become somewhat synonymous with women's wrestling, for better or worse, and in a way is a perfect representation of this dichotomous nature in practice. Lillian Ellison didn't begin her career in wrestling as an athlete, or even a performer. Originally serving as a valet, or eye candy via the official title of ringside manager, Ellison regularly accompanied a few wrestlers to the ring and stayed at ringside for the duration of the match, celebrating their achievements or providing support in the event of their defeat. When she was paired with a young black wrestler, Ellison received the name "Slave Girl Moolah," meant to promote intrigue and add an air of mystery to the origins of both her and her compatriot. The taboo, foreign nature of the act was compounded by Moolah's kissing of her partner's cheek, a glimpse of implied miscegenation that frequently put small conservative crowds into a tizzy.¹¹⁵ Moolah, although receiving strong reactions from every crowd she appeared before, sought a more prominent position. She was eventually trained under Billy Wolfe, the unofficial talent manager and gate keeper for all of women's wrestling, and began performing around the country in the expanding world of "lady wrestling." Wolfe was notorious for his mistreatment of female talent, operating with a plethora of discriminatory and sexist tendencies that left the women under his command searching for better opportunities, even though his stable was likely their best option for maintaining employment in the industry.¹¹⁶ Unfulfilled with her role, Moolah began to look elsewhere for a future in the wrestling business, and in the mid-1950s she left the chauvinism and workplace harassment of Wolfe behind, signing a contract with Vince McMahon, Sr. wherein she would become one of his top female performers in the WWF. She was allowed to keep her ring name, for the sake of continuity and name recognition, but a new modifier would be added to her persona. On September 18th, 1956, she competed in a thirteen

¹¹⁵ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 752-838.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, Kindle Location 752-838.

woman battle royal match, and emerged victorious. She was now a top star, and Vince, Sr. thought her new position warranted an added sense of flair and flash. He suggested that anyone who competed in a match of that size and came out on top should be considered fabulous. The now “Fabulous” Moolah said they could change her name as long as her checks were regular and never bounced.¹¹⁷

Moolah would retain her position at the top for the next 28 years, never officially losing her women’s championship title on the record, despite multiple title changes to promote interest in the sport. During her tenure with the industry, Moolah came to represent the business as a whole, using her knowledge and power to gain leverage and work the system at every available opportunity. Moolah proved to be a sound businesswoman, as she successfully owned and operated her own training company and women’s wrestling federation for decades, producing a number of stars in the industry well into the modern era of professional wrestling. However, it would appear that, in addition to learning from the business savvy of her employers, she also picked up some of the talent management techniques of her former handler, Billy Wolfe. Recently, a number of women have come forward against Moolah, with allegations of mistreatment, fraud, and forced prostitution, claiming that while under Moolah’s employ, they were routinely subjected to poor working conditions, overbearing rules and stringent contracts, mismanagement of payments, and frequently being forced to engage in sexual activities with male wrestlers and talent managers or else risk losing their job and being barred from the industry.¹¹⁸ Moolah’s reign as the queen of women’s wrestling, it appears, was built on unstable foundations.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, Kindle Location 752-838.

¹¹⁸ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 752-838.

None of these heinous crimes prevented Moolah from progressing in the industry, however. In 1983, Moolah was approached by Vince McMahon, Jr. about joining the WWF in a headlining capacity.¹¹⁹ Moolah would work heel, serving as a foil to the hip, young, popular face of women's wrestling in the WWF, Wendi Richter. Their feud was cleverly based in "reality," piggybacking on the then-recent celebrity endorsements of music superstar Cyndi Lauper and her fictional manager, wrestler-turned-actor "Captain" Lou Albano. Lauper supported Richter, and Albano, playing the disgruntled terminated employee, allied with Moolah. Their feud lasted for a few months, culminating on July 23rd, 1984, at "The Brawl to End It All," an event that lives on as an anomaly in WWF history, as it featured a women's match in the main event slot.¹²⁰ Moolah's role in the affair made it a success, and Richter came out on top, retaining the WWF Women's Championship for several months after the match. It would be one year later that, following a series of backstage disagreements, Moolah would make her return to the WWF.

Richter was in the midst of renegotiating her contract with the company, and when her number came in higher than what McMahon was prepared to pay, he opted to let her go, and attempt to take the title off her as quickly as possible. For this purpose, he approached Moolah, and their plan was set in motion. Richter was set to fight a masked competitor, known as the Spider Woman, and when her opponent came to the ring, it became apparent rather quickly that Moolah was under the mask. A true twist in wrestling that has no predetermined nature and is not made aware to all parties involved is rare, and often not done for the best of reasons. In this case, it was a ploy designed to strip Richter of her title before she could take it with her and potentially sully the name of the WWF. A furious Richter attempted to better her older opponent, but the veteran Moolah quickly submitted her, and with a fast three count from the referee, the Spider

¹¹⁹ Ibid, Kindle Location 752-838.

¹²⁰ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 752-838.

Woman was declared the winner, and the title was taken away from Richter without her knowledge or consent.¹²¹ Disgruntled and disappointed, Richter left the WWF, never to return, while her opponent collected her paycheck and continued to work with the company well into the 1990s and early 2000s.

This anecdote serves a number of purposes in the larger historiography surrounding professional wrestling. It succinctly demonstrates the ways in which wrestling and American popular culture were intrinsically linked from the 1940s onward, with celebrity appearances becoming more and more frequent as time wore on. It provides insight into the cutthroat, sometimes nefarious nature of the business, supremely concerned with the capitalist opportunities to be had rather than the wellbeing of the performers that make daily operations run smoothly. Most importantly, however, it provides a glimpse into the strange, unfortunate world of women's wrestling. The role of female wrestlers has since improved tremendously, with more recent pushes for men and women to be on an equal playing field taking center stage in the culture of professional wrestling. However, the life of the Lillian Ellison, regardless of how "fabulous" it might have been, is a clear example of the ways in which wrestling intersects with the experiences of underrepresented, and often oppressed, communities, including women in the entertainment industry.

The steadfast relationship between professional wrestling and the underrepresented groups of American society would continue to be a defining aspect of the business well into the 1970s and 1980s. Despite riding high on a wave of domination, the WWF's success up to this point seemingly was not enough for Vince McMahon. By 1985, McMahon's stranglehold on televised wrestling was undeniable, and had instituted a symbiotic relationship in which

¹²¹ Ibid, Kindle Location 752-838.

television networks gained support and attention from wrestling fans while McMahon and the WWF reaped the profits from the increased interest in the sport's live offerings. In an April wrestling-focused issue of *Sports Illustrated*, a landmark public legitimization of the sport, it was noted that professional wrestling accounted for four of the top ten most watched programs on national cable television, two of which were produced by McMahon, beating out college basketball, hockey, tennis, and college football in terms of ratings.¹²² In Memphis, the numbers were even better, with wrestling taking the third spot on the podium of cable television viewership, trailing behind only *Dallas* and *Dynasty*.¹²³ With these numbers in mind, it becomes easy to understand why infamous villain Big John Studd claimed in the same article that television, in this instance referring to both TV tapings and a wrestler's ability to produce a quality match or storyline promo segment, was more important than the in-ring product.¹²⁴

Wrestling's reliance on television had more impact on the business than simply inflating McMahon's ego, however. It would eventually come to influence the content of the product itself, in addition to the manner in which it interacted with its audiences. The confluence of wrestling and popular culture has already been noted in this examination, but the true fusion of the two would not come to fruition in the public mindset until the dawn of the "rock and wrestling" era of the 1980s. This new period of wrestling history began at the latter end of the previous decade, with the outcome of one match determining the direction of the product for the next fifteen years. On April 30th, 1977, a notorious heel by the name of "Superstar" Billy Graham defeated the long-reigning champion, Bruno Samartino, for the World Heavyweight Championship. Clearly inspired by the persona and antics of the famous Gorgeous George,

¹²² Bruce Newman, "Who's Kidding Who?," *Sports Illustrated*, April 29, 1985, 31.

¹²³ Newman, "Who's Kidding Who?," 31.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 70.

Graham was a monster of a man, tanned to the point of appearing orange, complimented by a bodybuilder's physique and a bleached blonde mullet that would eventually move south to a large handlebar mustache and soul patch in his later career. Graham was the diametric opposite of Samartino, the strong Italian role model who had been a champion of both his community and the wrestling world for decades. Graham's victory, barely worth mentioning in the annals of wrestling record books, takes on a special precedence not in terms of his reign as champion, but rather in terms of what it meant for the landscape of the industry going forward. In defeating Samartino, the cartoon visage of Graham's villainous character instantly became popular. Ridiculousness was profitable, and being a heel was cool.¹²⁵

This mentality defined the "rock and wrestling" era of the business, and would be compounded by the implementation of McMahon's greatest acquisition, Hulk Hogan. A celebrity that has since transcended the world of backdrops and body bumps, Hogan's character had it all: a magnanimous personality, co-opting the sweat, bronzer, and lingo of California surfer culture; an espousal of stereotypically wholesome American values, reminding kids to "say their prayers and take their vitamins;" a dominating physical presence complete with flashy reds and yellows, highlighting his raw strength; and a superhero-like character that was idolized by children and adults alike, despite frequently using heelish tactics to secure his quick victories. All this initiated the wave of "Hulkamania" that swept the nation in the early and mid-1980s.¹²⁶ The Hulkster's popularization of colorful characters, predicated upon the character development work done by the Gold Dust Trio and their followers in the territory era, combined with a youthful, rock and roll personality made wrestling a popular culture sensation in the decade of big hair and loud music. Celebrity appearances, like those of the aforementioned Cyndi Lauper,

¹²⁵ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1534.

¹²⁶ Ibid, Kindle Location 1556-1562.

the creation of more kid-friendly merchandise and products, like “Hulk Hogan’s Rock n’ Wrestling” cartoon which featured numerous WWF wrestlers implicated in standard cartoon plot lines, and the expansion of wrestling onto the national stage with the proliferation of pay-per-view events, including the greatest live wrestling show in history, WrestleMania, all served to cast a cultural spotlight on the wild world of wrestling.¹²⁷ Business for wrestling promoters in the 1980s was good. However, business for Vince McMahon in the 1980s was better. Although everyone benefited from the increased national attention given to the sport, it was McMahon who gained the most, largely due to one key difference in his business model. Like his father before him, McMahon recognized the potential for profit by embracing something his competition was hesitant to accept. For Vince, Sr. it was television. For Vince, Jr. it was ridiculousness.

In a 1985 article from *Sports Illustrated*, noted wrestling journalist and chronicler Dave Meltzer notes that the key to McMahon’s success in the mid-1980s came from his highlighting the ridiculous nature of his product, rather than billing it as a legitimate athletic competition like his competitors in the South and Midwest insisted upon.¹²⁸ The secrecy surrounding the backstage planning of wrestling had long been heavily guarded by industry professionals, and although McMahon was not actively alerting his audiences to the predetermined nature of his business, he was not going out of his way to remove all sense of intentional silliness or comedy. He was producing a piece of entertainment for live crowds and television, and treated the business as such, resulting in the eventual adoption of the term “sports entertainment” by McMahon’s WWF. Television ratings for his show were through the roof, although they had been good for the past decade, so this development was not particularly extraordinary. What was

¹²⁷ Ibid, Kindle Location 1602.

¹²⁸ Newman, “Who’s Kidding Who?” 68.

important about the ratings, though, was the platform it gave McMahon to speak out about his success. With more eyes than ever centered on his cavalcade of chaos and choke slams, McMahon began to boast about his domination of the airwaves more and more frequently, which in turn caused an even greater number of would-be fans and news outlets to take notice of the empire being built in front of them.¹²⁹ Suddenly, the larger sports world became clued into a phenomenon that wrestling fans and promoters had already been well aware of for decades. Headlines began to make note of WWF shows selling out Madison Square Garden on a monthly basis, even though this had already been happening for the previous twenty years.¹³⁰ The increased attention concerning wrestling's popularity was a welcome change to the public conception of the sport, but it also caused some to question the makeup of the audience, and the supposed transformations occurring therein.

Those in the old school of wrestling felt that McMahon's incessant overselling of the business was causing their key demographic to change, and that this transition was both unnecessary and unwelcome. Many claimed that the standard "knuckle-dragging" fan base that had made wrestling so popular, the middle and lower class Americans born of immigrant and minority stock, were being ousted in a fantastical coup, replaced overnight with a more highbrow crowd that prompted front row appearances from celebrities like Andy Warhol and Joe Piscopo.¹³¹ However, according to those more in tune with the sport and its audience, like Meltzer, this apparent booting of the longstanding fan group was simply not as prominent a change as some made it out to be. According to Meltzer, the supposed influx of celebrity viewers was an isolated incident, relegated to the popular arts culture of New York and similar large, East

¹²⁹ Ibid, 68.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 68.

¹³¹ Newman, "Who's Kidding Who?," 70.

Coast cities. Outside the confines of these small areas, the rest of the country was experiencing wrestling the same way it had for the majority of the previous century, with audiences primarily composed of middle and lower-class immigrant families and racial and ethnic minority communities.¹³²

If anything, the only true difference that existed in regard to the demographics of the audience lied in how WWF performers under direction from McMahon used their diverse fan base to elicit crowd reactions. At this point in time, wrestlers and other on-screen personalities frequently made use of ethnic stereotyping in their performances to generate heat with the crowd. The most common manifestations of this process came in the form of race-baiting and the use of xenophobic and homophobic slurs peppered into both mid-match bouts of shouting and ringside promos, especially by noted heel characters like “Rowdy” Roddy Piper and “Mr. Wonderful” Paul Orndorff.¹³³ The use of offensive language was unfortunately commonplace in wrestling at the time, and was particularly heinous in the carnie, over-the-top world of the WWF. “That's not anything new to wrestling,” Meltzer claimed in 1985. “But the WWF exploits racism more than any promotion I've ever seen. They exploit ethnic stereotypes, and by doing so they trivialize racism. Everybody buys it and thinks it's chic to laugh at somebody who calls blacks 'boy.’”¹³⁴ As clearly stated here, race and ethnic heritage in wrestling were simply parts of the game, tools utilized by promoters to elicit reactions from the crowd, further storylines, and develop characters. Similar to the experience of many immigrants and racial minorities in the outside world, race in wrestling simultaneously existed as both an intrinsic part of the business, often

¹³² Ibid, 70.

¹³³ Newman, “Who’s Kidding Who?,” 70.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 70.

used to the advantage of promoters and wrestlers alike, and as a foil to social progress, being treated as a nonissue at best and a vaudeville attraction at worst.

Race in wrestling was largely the same as race in boxing for the majority of the twentieth century, in that, at least in the United States, both sports espoused the same mentality towards othered groups: the foreigner was bad.¹³⁵ This outlook is evident in the characterization of Frank Gotch and George Hackenschmidt exhibited during their two aforementioned matches. In the span of those contests, Gotch was clearly painted as the All-American hero, repelling a natural villain, the foreign invader Hackenschmidt, from sacred American soil, while Hackenschmidt represented an unsavory stock of European immigrants who were alien and untrustworthy to wholesome American citizens. Furthering the stereotype, Hackenschmidt was made out to be reliant on mystic foreign tactics that were unknown to native-born Americans, despite the fact that, in reality, Gotch was the only one using underhanded strategies to secure the victory.¹³⁶ The popularization of these images in the wrestling ring, combined with a rising nationalist sentiment and an increasing American aversion to immigrant and minority cultures, led to the adoption of a number of simple characterizations in the territorial era of the sport. In short time, the tropes of the “Ethnic Hero” and the “Evil Foreigner” were commonplace in the world of wrestling and, as has been shown with the Gold Dust Trio and the carnival origins of the sport, ethnicities were quickly adapted for use as calling cards for individual wrestlers, with performers and promoters alike using various ethnic attributes to pander to the largely ethnic and immigrant audiences paying to see wrestling all along the major hubs of the East Coast.¹³⁷ Additionally, it should be noted that throughout the twentieth century, ethnicity, whether used as a pro or con for a

¹³⁵ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1736.

¹³⁶ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1736.

¹³⁷ Ibid, Kindle Location 1736.

wrestler's character, were not required to be rooted in authenticity. Although genuine ethnic superstars did exist, with the likes of Bruno Samartino, Antonino Rocca, and Jack Londos all holding championships for significant amounts of time, this was not considered normal by promoters, and their reigns often coincided with periods wherein socioeconomic power or superiority was held by their respective ethnic communities. Instead, ethnic heritage was frequently falsified among performers, with a wrestler being billed as Irish one night, only to be referred to as Greek the next.¹³⁸ Ethnicity, like so many aspects of wrestling, was malleable to point of permutation.

Manipulation of ethnicity and country of origin did not end with simply falsifying information on the match card. Promoters and managers, particularly those with little moral compunction regarding the characterization of their performers, frequently highlighted the physical traits of wrestlers on their rosters in an attempt to add to the ethnic angle of their performance.¹³⁹ Carnie promoters like the aforementioned Jack Pfeffer made use of physical ailments or abnormalities in creating otherworldly monsters inside the ring. One noteworthy example is "The French Angel," a wrestler of French origin with a humpback who, despite being one of the warmest, friendliest individuals in the business at the time, was made out to be a fairytale monster by way of his silhouette. Even if his country of origin was not repeated in his billing, his mannerisms and actions in the ring, compounded by his physical appearance, were more than enough to convince American audiences that an ogre of this sort could only come from the medieval dungeons of the Paris catacombs.¹⁴⁰ Other physical characteristics were regularly attributed to the foreign invader archetypes, drawing a clear parallel between the social

¹³⁸ Ibid, Kindle Location 1736.

¹³⁹ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1736-1752.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, Kindle Location 1752.

persecution faced by American immigrants and ethnic minorities influenced by nationalist, xenophobic propaganda rooted in American exceptionalism, and that experienced by professional wrestlers and their fans.

When it came to creating an evil foreigner, two key aspects were considered in the character development process: distance and topicality. Especially for American wrestling audiences, the more distant and unknown a wrestler's country of origin, the more a promoter could exploit in determining the role they would play.¹⁴¹ Thus, wrestlers of Asian descent were regularly cast into the most inexplicable, mysterious, and generally offensive roles available. Most Asian wrestlers, regardless of nationality, were portrayed as martial artists, complete with move sets and costumes ripped from the worst film examples of the kung fu genre. Others were cast as Mongolian Neanderthals, savages from a forgotten realm who brutalized their opponents in the ring. In some cases, being of Asian descent was not a necessity to take on an offensive Asian stereotype as a character, as evidenced by Gorilla Monsoon, a white wrestler who was a monster of a man in stature and strength, being billed as a Manchurian cannibal, a terrifying, deadly foe to all those who dared oppose him.¹⁴² Another group that was marginalized and typecast from the early stages of wrestling's mainstream popularity were the Pacific Islanders. Samoans, Tongans, Fijians, and Hawaiians were regularly cast as uneducated savages, paraded to the ring in loin cloths of leaves and twigs. A WWF favorite in the 1970s and 1980s, Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka of Fijian descent, frequently touted that he became popular in Hawaii when he "paddled over" the Pacific Ocean in a canoe.¹⁴³ Samoans in particular, who have a long, close-knit family history with the WWF in particular, have received the brunt of the prejudice, with

¹⁴¹ Ibid, Kindle Location 1752.

¹⁴² Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1752.

¹⁴³ Newman, "Who's Kidding Who?," 34.

myths about the hardness of their skulls preventing them from being injured in headbutts continuing to be perpetrated today, although generally with a subtle tongue in cheek in modern productions.

When blatantly racist stereotypes failed to elicit a proper response from the crowd, topical heroes and villains were created in the hopes of appealing to a more contemporary audience. This was arguably never more apparent than in the later stages of the Cold War, when wholly American and undeniably foreign characters were popularized both in the ring and on the mic. It has been shown that, throughout the span of the Cold War, one of the most important contributions to the swaying of public opinion regarding the USSR and its allies was the mass media of the time. Everything from the nightly news to cartoons, and every blockbuster film in between, played a part in establishing the ground rules for how Americans were meant to feel about the ongoing conflicts, both real and imagined. Communism had undoubtedly been cast as an evil, corrupting force in American cinema up to three decades before Joseph McCarthy ever uttered the phrase “Red Scare,” and these sentiments had only been expanded upon and further cemented in the minds of American moviegoers in the decades following. America’s capitalist democracy was divine-inspiration, a light for all mankind to bask in, while the cold, antiquated, lurking menace behind the “Iron Curtain” was a source of constant paranoia and concern. This tension and unease was extended to those in the Middle East and Asia that had seemingly “partnered” with the sleeping giant, however loosely.¹⁴⁴

With this in mind, it becomes easy to see how characters like Hulk Hogan, Randy “Macho Man” Savage, Lex Luger, and Dusty Rhodes very clearly exhibited this sense of American national pride in their costumes, ringside promos, and mannerisms, while a number of

¹⁴⁴ Tony Shaw, *Hollywood’s Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 2-5.

characters that were more explicitly implicated in the global conflict also made their presence known in the 1980s and 1990s. Nikolai Volkoff, a wrestler of Russian descent, perfectly portrayed the omnipresent ghost of the Soviet threat, serving as a real-world representation of the dangers of a Russian invasion on American soil. Inside the squared circle, Volkoff wore the red and yellow of the motherland, and came to the ring accompanied by a rousing rendition of the Soviet Union national anthem blaring over the loudspeakers of stadiums and venue halls in the heart of the USA. Volkoff was also a master of maintaining kayfabe, the aforementioned wrestling concept of staying in character at all times to keep up the illusion of the business. In airports, hotels, and on public transportation, Volkoff religiously pronounced the virtues and superiority of Mother Russia, claiming that the quality of service he received in America would never be tolerated in the USSR.¹⁴⁵ Volkoff's persistence made him out to be true villain for the majority of American wrestling audiences, serving as a tangible example of the Cold War come to fruition for many in the stands and at home, preying upon the fears of the encroaching threat of Communism in a very real, if admittedly silly, manner.

Another representation of the foreign threat to democracy came in the form of the Iron Sheik. Iranian in origin, the Sheik existed as one of many Middle Eastern heels to make their presence known in the WWF. The Sheik's athletic prowess was, in many ways, unmatched by his competitors, having lived a previous life as a Greco-Roman wrestler who competed for Iran in the 1968 Olympics and as a bodyguard for the Shah. However, despite his impressive physique and athletic skill, the Sheik was presented more as a comedic villain who often relied on underhanded tactics to secure his victories, unlike his Russian counterpart, demonstrating the less than serious attention often given to the clearly inferior threat in the Middle East. In the

¹⁴⁵ Newman, "Who's Kidding Who?," 35.

WWF, the Sheik was made into a mouthpiece for the Ayatollah, espousing the nobility and righteousness of his homeland while parading around the ring in a traditional head scarf and pointed boots.¹⁴⁶ Despite his admittedly over-the-top performances, the Sheik proved to be a frequent and worthy adversary for the red-blooded American icon Hulk Hogan, and both he and his dreaded finishing move, the Camel Clutch, have become fan favorites today in both wrestling and American popular culture as a whole.

Outside of Hogan himself, the Sheik's most noteworthy opponent was a symbol of American military strength throughout the Cold War, and a perfect representation of the ways in which ethnic foreign villains were frequently cast against white male authority figures in the world of wrestling storytelling. Sergeant Slaughter, billed as a former United States Marine Corps Drill Instructor, carried the tried and true spirit of the red, white, and blue to the ring in every appearance. Sporting a drill instructor's hat, aviator sunglasses, and camouflage fatigues, Slaughter was a picture perfect example of the Sheik and Volkoff's opposition, and frequently barked orders to his followers while claiming that the only lady in his life was "Liberty."¹⁴⁷ This saccharin, ham-fisted proponent of American morals and values proved to be a multimedia sensation, becoming an official character in the G.I. Joe cartoon, comic book series, and toy line, and in many ways encapsulates the levels of success that could be seen by a white wrestler with the proper backstage push and character that bordered on the ridiculous. Although Volkoff and the Sheik were arguably more entertaining entities, their relegation to the mid-card and the role of the evil foreigner, cast against the less talented but more socially acceptable Sgt. Slaughter, presents a clear parallel to the socioeconomic experience of immigrants and ethnic minorities in the United States. The parallels do not end with these examples, however, as the experiences of

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 35.

¹⁴⁷ Newman, "Who's Kidding Who?," 38.

wrestlers and audience members continue to be intertwined when examining perhaps the single most marginalized group of performers in the industry: African Americans.

African Americans had been a significant part of the wrestling machine since the 1940s, with a wrestler by the name of Ras Samara having won the “World Negro Heavyweight Championship” in Iowa in the latter half of the decade, but in cases like this their influence was generally seen as minimal, with any and all black championship titles being considered unofficial, relegated to honorific status.¹⁴⁸ Like women competing in “lady’s wrestling,” African Americans were regarded as the sideshow to the sideshow, and would not see prominent roles in professional wrestling until the wave of integration overtaking professional sports in America in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴⁹ As in so many other areas of its operation, wrestling followed the lead of boxing in its journey into integration, although the transition was far from immediate. Progress was undeniably slow, hampered by convictions on the part of the wrestling promoters about hosting interracial matches, particularly in areas of the country where racial violence was prominent. Boxing moved more efficiently, ready to capitalize on a new audience, while wrestling lagged behind, serving as the last white bastion of combat sports.¹⁵⁰ As tensions eased and tempers cooled, black wrestlers were gradually included in wrestling rosters and match cards, but until the 1960s, their performances were incredibly limited.

At the time, black wrestlers were only allowed to wrestle other black performers, primarily out of fear for the emotions and potential backlash that an interracial match would cause in a hostile audience.¹⁵¹ Although these concerns seem outlandish, the fear of retaliation or revolt were warranted, as evidenced by one particular boxing match five decades prior. When the

¹⁴⁸ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1750.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, Kindle Location 1750.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, Kindle Location 1750.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, Kindle Location 1750.

flamboyant Jack Johnson, a prominent new African American boxer entered the ring against Jim Jeffries, a respected white champion, the air crackled with electricity and tension. Johnson represented the hopes and dreams of an entire community, with African Americans across the nation hoping to see a black man finally beat a white man in a fair athletic competition. When Johnson secured the victory over his opponent, a shockwave was sent across the United States, signaling the start of a new era for African Americans in sport. Black communities in every city were beyond elated, and celebrated Johnson's landmark accomplishment as a triumph for the race itself. The fans of his competitor, however, were none too pleased. Jeffries' white followers were outraged, and sparked racial violence across the country. Rioting and continued threats of uprising and disruption plagued the nation, all because of a title change.¹⁵² Fear of a similar situation would remain persistent in the minds of many wrestling promoters well into the 1950s and 1960s. Concerns over a potentially aggressive fan base, a loss of profits, and a decrease in general interest in the sport all kept wrestling well within the confines of segregation, but that was all about to change.

As the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s came into full swing, wrestling promoters began to recognize the genuine desire for wrestling entertainment exhibited by African American audiences. Black fans were readily willing to pay for wrestling shows, and this development prodded the capitalist tendencies of many promoters, leading to integrated match cards and new, interracial shows specifically catered to mixed audiences.¹⁵³ The inherent problem with this newfound business strategy lied in the fact that, by and large, crowds at athletic competitions and entertainment venues, including those hosting wrestling, were still

¹⁵² William C. Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 14.

¹⁵³ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1750.

generally segregated. Interestingly, it would be the popularity of the sport itself that would aid in the remedying of this unfortunate prejudice. Demands for accessible wrestling shows, in some cases, were strong enough to lead to the integration of previously segregated stadiums and venues, as seen in Memphis in the early 1960s.

Sputnik Monroe, a prominent white performer in the Memphis wrestling territory, was a frequent wanderer of Beale Street, wherein he mingled, drank, and partied with Memphis' resident African American community. Popular among his fellow Memphians, Monroe became troubled over the fact that, although members of the African American community were fans of his craft, they couldn't properly watch him perform, as Ellis Auditorium, the venue where Monroe wrestled most regularly, was closed to people of color. Seeking to change the situation, Monroe leveraged his own popularity with the owners of the stadium, and managed to convince them that it was in their best interest to integrate the arena, or else he would find another place to practice his art. The scheme worked, and through the joint effort of Monroe and his followers, Ellis Auditorium became open to the black residents of Memphis, an astonishing feat in the heavily segregated South.¹⁵⁴ The slow train of progress in the realm of social reform allowed for African Americans to continue to carve out a place for themselves in the squared circle. Integrated venues and match cards allowed for major victories to occur in the name of acceptance or, at the very least, tolerance, like the match between "The Ebony Giant" Dory Dixon and "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers at Madison Square Garden in 1956, the first time a black performer headlined a match card.¹⁵⁵ However, the inclusion of African Americans in the wrestling business also posed new problems concerning representation. Chief among these newfound concerns was that of character.

¹⁵⁴ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1776.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, Kindle Location 1750.

Issues of character or perceived attitudes and affiliations had been a standby of African Americans in the entertainment industry since their induction into the business. Black performers frequently dealt with the stress of choosing who they were going to be on stage, and whether that person would be a champion of racial uplift, a caricature meant to enthrall white audiences while giving them socioeconomic mobility, or both. These concerns had been carried over into the world of sport, as well, evidenced by the intense scrutiny and pressure placed upon ball players and fighters to play the nice guy in the face of relentless persecution and bigotry. In terms of combat sports, the battle for representation was never better argued than in the landmark contest between boxers Floyd Patterson and Charles “Sonny” Liston. Leading up to the fight, Patterson had been repeatedly painted as the clear hero of the competition. Characterized as a “good black,” Patterson had an accessible success story, being brought out of the grips of poverty by a white benefactor and exhibiting an air of sophistication through politeness and well-mannered sensibilities. In essence, Patterson had been deemed a shining beacon of prosperity for the black race.¹⁵⁶ Liston, on the other hand, was the diametric opposite.

An illiterate former convict with connections to organized crime, Liston fit the role of villain almost too well. Bold and brash in his mannerisms and actions, coupled with a significant lack of general respectability, Liston landed on the other end of the symbolic spectrum, fitting the stereotype of the “bad nigger” to a tee. In essence, when compared to his competitor, Liston represented every negative aspect of the black community that had been prescribed to African Americans since the time of slavery.¹⁵⁷ With these two opposing characters established in the mindset of the viewing public, the fight between the two in 1956, in many ways, came to represent the complexities and nuances of the Civil Rights Movement of the same decade.

¹⁵⁶ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 16-17.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 16-17.

Although the notoriety and attention given to the fight could be seen as a triumph for black athletes and, by extension, the black community in terms of representation, the fight called into question what form of representation would be beneficial to the cause overall. As African American culture had an increasingly wider spotlight placed upon it in the American subconscious, the question of what message they were sending to the world was quickly raised. In the fight between Patterson and Liston, two stereotypes were at war. The contest muddied the debate over what generic characterization would be more desirable, and what would be more readily accepted by the white community.¹⁵⁸ Patterson was the golden boy, the shining light that whites embraced due to a perceived sense of sophistication. Liston was the rogue, the uncontrollable savage who was better left in a state of otherness rather than risk ingratiating his ilk into civilized society. This desperate struggle for representation and acceptance in the face of adversity would come to define the experience of many African American wrestlers, extending well into the modern era.

With the issue of character being placed squarely at the center of the African American wrestling experience, a number of black wrestlers took it upon themselves to change the direction of the discourse and offer new positive representations of their community, albeit often at the expense of gross racial stereotypes, in order to create new avenues for success for later generations. The prime example of this course correction came in the early 1950s in a man by the name of Bobo Brazil. Born Houston Harris, Brazil began his wrestling career in 1951 in the city of Detroit, where he went by the slightly altered name of Bubu Brazil, the South American Giant. Although admittedly silly in nature, the name and the character were deemed more acceptable in the Detroit territory than a normal, 6' 6" black man from Little Rock, Arkansas,

¹⁵⁸ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 16-17.

and Brazil was more than willing to adopt the ridiculous namesake should it lead to potential upward mobility in the business.¹⁵⁹ With a catchy name and character in place, it wasn't long before Brazil was touring the country, and drawing a hot crowd everywhere he went. Brazil was a national sensation in every sense of the word, gaining nationwide popularity seemingly overnight, with some papers considering him to be the "official negro champion" and "unofficial leading contender for the world title."¹⁶⁰ Brazil's earliest glimpses of fame and prosperity signaled potential change for the role of African Americans in the world of wrestling, but his real success would come from his increasingly impressive roster of opponents.

Brazil began his career like most black wrestlers, in that the match cards he participated in were often segregated, leaving him to fight only other black performers.¹⁶¹ Although he was still very popular in these exhibitions and earned more than enough to make a living, Brazil's popularity warranted more exciting matchups and bouts of a higher profile. Before long, Brazil began wrestling the biggest names in the sport at the time, the majority of which were white. He fought household names like Ric Flair and Dick the Bruiser. He became the first person to defeat The Sheik in Detroit's Big Time Wrestling promotion, winning their championship title in the process. His popularity in Michigan and the northern Midwest was undeniable, with local papers going so far as to refer to him as a hometown hero, printing his real name and asserting no racial bias in their praise of his performances and abilities.¹⁶² He was so popular that he was even placed in a singles match against the cultural phenomenon Andre the Giant, who he wrestled to a draw, an outcome that was virtually unheard of at the time when Andre was involved.¹⁶³ During

¹⁵⁹ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1776.

¹⁶⁰ "Bobo Brazil To Wrestle At Tucson Sports Center," *Tucson Daily Citizen*, October 6, 1954.

¹⁶¹ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1776.

¹⁶² "Sports Eye-Lites," *The News-Palladium*, September 30, 1955.

¹⁶³ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1776.

his time at the top, it should be noted that Brazil impacted how African American wrestlers would be perceived for years, and not always in the best way. It is an unfortunate side effect of his tenure that Brazil was largely responsible for the popularization of the myth that African Americans had thick, impenetrable skulls, as his head butt finishing maneuver became a staple of black wrestlers' repertoires years after his departure from the business.¹⁶⁴ However, the espousal of this gross racial stereotype would not be the greatest detriment to the history of African Americans in the sport that would be seen in Brazil's career. That incident would come much later, in 1962.

On October 18th of that year, Brazil, now a household name, competed in a match against "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers. Brazil had become accustomed to fighting the biggest and best wrestlers in the country, having become a part of that upper echelon himself, but this match was different. This match was for the NWA Heavyweight Championship. After a grueling contest, against all odds, Brazil emerged victorious.¹⁶⁵ The landmark victory had seemingly ushered in a new era for African Americans in wrestling, but the celebration would be both abridged and bittersweet. It was made known that the match and the finish had been orchestrated by a local wrestling promoter eager to drum up interest in and support for a coming multi-match program, but his vision had been executed without the consent of the NWA. The match was deemed unsanctioned, and the governing bodies within the NWA quickly set up a rematch for the title to be conducted on October 30th. The belt was quickly put back on Rogers, and Brazil's incredibly brief championship reign was scrubbed from the record books, although many still consider it to be the first world title to be held by an African American.¹⁶⁶ The disrespect and lack of

¹⁶⁴ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1776.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, Kindle Location 1776.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, Kindle Location 1776.

consideration shown towards Brazil in this instance is deplorable, and has long been seen as a dark mark on the history of social progress in professional wrestling. However, when viewed in the context of the history of black athletes, the incident, in addition to being unforgivable, serves as an indication of the connections between wrestling and the African American experience as a whole.

Although not exclusive to the African American experience, the “Jockey Syndrome” is a phenomenon commonly seen in American sports culture that has, since its inception, been used predominantly to maintain control over back bodies in athletics. The syndrome, often complicated and underhanded in nature and practice, can most easily be defined as the changing of the rules of a game or process by an authority figure to exclude a specific group of participants in the hopes of preventing that group from experiencing success in the field.¹⁶⁷ Historically, the term stems from the treatment of African American horse jockeys in the nineteenth century. Black jockeys had come to dominate the sport of horse racing, a traditionally white affair, and in doing so had gained a sizable amount of notoriety, fame, and fortune. Fearing exclusion from a field that they felt they had ownership of, white authorities took note of this period of success, and immediately changed the rules of horse racing to prevent African Americans from seeing any further prosperity, crippling their opportunities in the field despite having elevated it to the national pastime it had become.¹⁶⁸

The implementation of this system, wherein the rules of the game would change when the competition increased, most often to facilitate a racist outcome designed to maintain a white power structure, unfortunately came to be commonplace in a number of sports throughout American history. Whether it was baseball, boxing, or cycling, it affected everyone in every

¹⁶⁷ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 67-69.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 67-69.

field, with the likes of Isaac Murphy, Moses Fleetwood Walker, Major Taylor, and even Jack Johnson all falling victim to the prejudice and bigotry of the Jockey Syndrome.¹⁶⁹ With this in mind, it makes sense that the “Jackie Robinson of professional wrestling,” a black man that witnessed unparalleled success in a sport devoid of any meaningful African American influence, would similarly succumb to a rigged system determined to maintain a power structure that was, if not explicitly white in nature, was most assuredly not black. In having his title reign scrubbed from the already shoddy record books, Bobo Brazil was a textbook victim of the Jockey Syndrome, rearing its ugly head again as late as the 1960s. His mark on the history of the sport was covered up and declared unofficial, denying the African American community the pride and legitimacy that comes with a world championship, regardless of the fixed nature of the sport. The carnal element of wrestling, combined with a white governing body, saw a paradigm shift occurring in real time, and immediately changed the system itself to prevent further damage. Although wrestling is a world of cartoon characters and children’s entertainment, the ramifications of its racial prejudice are no different than any other “real” sport in America, especially in terms of its treatment of African Americans.

Despite this mistreatment, Brazil’s time in the sport and the success he witnessed paved the way for further integration of match cards and a greater reliance on African American talent, generally stemming from the 1960s. The process of integration and acceptance or, in many cases, tolerance, was slow to be sure. However, it was gradual and consistent, by the end of the decade black performers had become a central tenet of the sport and had become fan favorites in many territories across the nation.¹⁷⁰ An unforeseen result of this integration, however, was the creation of what could best be described as a false racial utopia in the world of professional

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 67-69.

¹⁷⁰ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1802.

wrestling. White audiences, whether influenced by the Civil Rights Movement taking place around them or, more likely, simply becoming sympathetic to the plight of highly factionalized characters, began to cheer for African American performers, especially when faced with some form of prejudice or adversity in the ring.¹⁷¹ Even predominantly conservative audiences in Southern territories found themselves in support of the black athletes putting their bodies on the line in the squared circle, convinced that the relative isolation of the events and the private nature of the crowd made it more acceptable to be in favor of even simulated racial progress or equality, as it would never translate to their daily lives outside of the arena.¹⁷²

Promoters and managers took notice of this rather interesting and alarming trend, and very quickly retooled their business to fit these newfound needs of their patrons, as they had done so many times before. Storylines and programs were altered to portray black wrestlers being oppressed by racist white bully heels, who were booed incessantly for their fabricated efforts. Crowds across the country, regardless of political affiliation or social leaning, were actively cheering for African American hero characters for the first time in wrestling history.¹⁷³ This instance of progress though, however welcome, demonstrates another way in which the experience of black wrestlers was intrinsically, if not always explicably, tied to that of African Americans in other sports.

In the 1960s, the American South was having trouble with their feelings about sports. The ravenous sports fans of the region were conflicted, dealing with a dichotomy in regards to their afflictions concerning African American athletes.¹⁷⁴ In essence, sports-crazed Southerners were struggling with the internal war being waged between their persistent revulsion towards African

¹⁷¹ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1802.

¹⁷² Ibid, Kindle Location 1802.

¹⁷³ Ibid, Kindle Location 1802.

¹⁷⁴ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 132.

Americans, particularly young black men, and their increasingly inescapable admiration and need for black athletes.¹⁷⁵ Sports like college football and basketball were suffering and wavering, coming close to stagnation, making the integration of black athletes more acceptable to white audiences, but the fear of exclusion, yet again, caused concern among sports patrons. This fear of acceptance but recognition of the need for talent perfectly encapsulates the feelings exhibited toward African American wrestlers making their presence known in the same period. To savvy promoters and talent managers, African American wrestlers represented an as-yet untapped resource pool, but along with this assertion came the aforementioned constant concern regarding how these athletes would be accepted by potentially hostile white audiences. The fear of reprisal and revolt led to the slow integration of black athletes into the sport, but the popularity of Bobo Brazil and others, combined with the genuine empathy or reluctant toleration of black talent by white audiences, opened the floodgates for African Americans in wrestling. As has been demonstrated, wrestling existed as a portion of the larger American sports culture, and was subject to the same transitions and subjugation experienced by the African American population as a whole.

Concerns surrounding image, representation, communal uplift, and personal prosperity in the face of progress would come to define and plague the experience of many African American performers, and would often contribute to their placement in the larger cultural landscape of the wrestling world. Some wrestlers very quickly recognized the predicament they found themselves in, and were often capable of using the dichotomous nature of the sport to their advantage. One example of this complicated phenomenon was an African American performer by the name of Ernie Ladd. Given the nickname of “Big Cat” during his tenure, Ladd was an oddity in the

¹⁷⁵ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 132.

squared circle, as wrestling was not his primary means of income. A professional football player signed to the San Diego Chargers, Ladd used wrestling as a secondary job, moonlighting in the offseason to make some extra cash while staying in playing shape year-round.¹⁷⁶ Ladd became incredibly popular among middle and working class wrestling fans, appealing to their ravenous sports sensibilities and their blue-collar values, as he was equal parts professional sports sensation and common man working for a dollar. However, Ladd became indicative of the other, rather unfortunate aspects of the business, whenever his in-ring character was concerned.

Although working as a proud, honest-working black man, Ladd frequently made use of racial epithets and euphemisms in his work, often at the expense of other black performers and several Native American wrestlers. Most infamously, Ladd on more than one occasion referred to wrestler Rocky Johnson, father of Hollywood and one-time wrestling megastar Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, as a race traitor, calling him “Uncle Tom Johnson.”¹⁷⁷ Ladd was a natural heel, as noted in the press, due to his size and natural strength carried over from the gridiron.¹⁷⁸

However, in many ways, Ladd is a perfect example of the difficult position faced by African American athletes in the wrestling business. Often relegated to a racially contentious role, while experiencing success without the help of said role, African Americans were witness to morally challenging situations on a daily basis. Ladd’s use of uncouth language, however, would pale in comparison to the offenses experienced by others in the profession.

The reliance on evil foreigner and unsavory immigrant acts in wrestling that has been previously explored had strangely, up until the 1970s and 1980s, infrequently explored these themes with wrestlers of African descent. However, in the span of these two decades, the

¹⁷⁶ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1802.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, Kindle Location 1802.

¹⁷⁸ “Ernie Ladd A Villain, This Time In The Ring,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 2, 1969.

aforementioned integration of increasingly cartoonish characters and over-the-top performances made room for the absurd and outlandish at the table, and the “dark recesses” of Africa became prime territory rife with myriad character inspirations and backstories. This sudden reversion to anti-black racism yielded several characters who would have been considered questionable and unnecessary in the 1940s, much less the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁷⁹ Abdullah the Butcher, a character often referred to as “the Sudanese sadist,” was depicted as a monster of a man, hailing from the African continent, whose thirst for blood could only be satiated by acts of violence in the ring, often resulting in bloody canvas mats and tainted titles. This blatantly offensive character, however, was not the most prominent offender of the period. Kamala, the “Ugandan Giant,” was a large man who made his way slowly to the ring, night after night, wearing nothing but a loin cloth and “ceremonial” necklaces. Covered in tribal war paint from head to toe, carrying a spear and shield, and slapping his own stomach while being accompanied to the ring by his handler, Kim Chee, Kamala was seen as a savage through and through, and was frequently touted as being a cannibal who yearned for the flesh of his enemies.¹⁸⁰ Of course, none of these characteristics were indicative of the man under the makeup, but that didn’t matter to an audience thirsty for foreign invaders to be defeated by homegrown heroes. Racist caricatures, like Abdullah and Kamala, have become important, if not shameful, aspects of the lexicon of wrestling history. For wrestling fans, they serve as reminders of the abysmal state of the sport under the carnie influence of previous show runners, often seen as embarrassing detriments to the product that exist solely in the memories of a colorful piece of childhood entertainment. But for historians and those concerned with the racial politics of the sport, they are indicative of wrestling’s place in the sports culture of America, and the larger trends occurring therein.

¹⁷⁹ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1802.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, Kindle Location 1802.

According to some scholars, twentieth century American sports culture and racial politics can essentially be summed up as a struggle for control over a steadily increasing supply of black athletic muscle.¹⁸¹ This idea can be traced back to the beginning of the century, wherein enterprising individuals, like Rube Foster, wholeheartedly recognized this trend and sought to use their influence to provide African Americans with the tools necessary for their transition into a more prominent public spotlight. Foster, in particular, understood that black bodies were the greatest commodity in American sports history, and sought to avoid the establishment or further strengthening of a white power structure through his creation of the National Negro League with baseball.¹⁸² The most interesting and pertinent aspect of this situation for a discussion of race in wrestling comes from the extension of the argument claiming that many African Americans were wholly aware of this struggle, and were often complicit in the maintenance of a white authority.

This argument, on the surface, sounds malicious and problematic, but according to scholars like Rhoden, what this viewpoint actually argues is that black athletes were knowledgeable on the ins and outs of the white American sports complex, and frequently took on demeaning roles and lower positions within the industry to secure a foothold for their community. By ensuring steady payment in an uncertain socioeconomic landscape while simultaneously beginning the process of integration, however it could be done, African American athletes were providing the black community with a sense of uplift and hope for the future, wherein equality in sports and other professions could become a reality through the slow, but gradual, process of blending.¹⁸³ Although sports like baseball and football have often been the focus of these examinations, the evidence provided so far very clearly indicates that wrestling

¹⁸¹ Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 105.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 105.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 105.

was just as integral a component in this argument as any other professional sports enterprise. For the vast majority of the twentieth century, black wrestlers, like Brazil, Ladd, Abdullah, and Kamala, frequently took on racist, offensive characters to secure payment, make a name for themselves, use their platform to speak up for their communities, and build toward a sense of meaningful inclusion for African Americans in the future. The groundwork done by the likes of Brazil made the careers of later African American performers possible, including Ron Simmons who, in 1992, won the WCW World Heavyweight Championship and retained the title for over five months, becoming the first officially recognized black champion in wrestling history.¹⁸⁴ Nothing in wrestling lasts forever, however, as it should be noted that Simmons, a landmark champion, would later be repackaged as a militant black nationalist villain who was frequently foiled by a group of white comedy wrestlers.¹⁸⁵ Progress in wrestling is hard fought, and often quickly rescinded.

The argument for complicity in the name of eventual progress can be seen perhaps most prominently in the careers of wrestlers like Booker T. A performer that began his career in a tag team called “The Ebony Experience,” Booker and his brother, Stevie Ray, eventually made their way to the Ted Turner-owned WCW, where they would be transformed and given a new tag team gimmick, under the name “Harlem Heat.” The team would now come to the ring dressed in prison garb and shackles, accompanied by their “manager,” Colonel Rob Parker, a Mark Twain villain complete with a plantation owner all-white suit and cigar who claimed to have won the brothers in a card game.¹⁸⁶ After a number of trial runs at non-televised live shows, the gimmick was deemed “potentially offensive,” and was dropped altogether, allowing Booker and Stevie to

¹⁸⁴ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1802.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, Kindle Location 1881.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, Kindle Location 1881.

present their version of Harlem Heat that involved modern hip hop sensibilities coupled with stellar wrestling ability. The team became a massive hit, and Booker T would eventually go on to be a world champion multiple times in both WCW and WWF/WWE, proving that the concept of progress through gradual inclusion was possible and, in some cases, viable. The offensive casting of African American performers as criminals, thugs, hip hop personalities, sex workers, or “shuck and jive” acts has persisted well into the twenty first century, and continues to be a blight on the history of professional wrestling and its cultural impact. More importantly, however, this situation is representative of a larger trend in entertainment and the African American and minority experience, wherein entire communities are consistently cast into a state of otherness and forced to pull themselves out of the caricature against the wishes of a dominant white power structure. Wrestling and the African American experience clearly had more in common than previously thought.

One final intersection of note between the African American experience, the ever-changing American sports culture, and the experience of black wrestlers comes in the discourse surrounding style. Flagrant stereotyping and overt racism were, as seen above, commonplace in defining the characters and storylines of African American performers. However, racism taunts and heelish bigotry were often compounded by the already ridiculous nature of the sport itself. As Shoemaker puts it, when it came to African Americans in wrestling, simplifying a character to their race was generally not nearly as offensive as when misguided promoters attempted to imbue said characters with the idiosyncrasies associated with their race in American popular culture.¹⁸⁷ Whether this presented itself in the form of the “Million Dollar Man” Ted DiBiase’s manservant and veritable slave, Virgil, the repackaging of George Gray’s character from the One

¹⁸⁷ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1852.

Man Gang, a terrifying Hell's Angel, into Akeem the African Dream, a white African who wore a dashiki and spoke with a jive affectation, or the constant misuse of Charles Wright as either Papa Shango, a voodoo witch doctor, or The Godfather, a streetwise pimp paraded to the ring with a selection of prostitutes, wrestling promotions across the country frequently made use of what was considered African American culture in horribly offensive, racist manners that often did more of a disservice to the performers than simply packaging them as a black man in a wrestling ring.¹⁸⁸ It is a testament to African American wrestlers that they were able to gain a following and popularity despite these admittedly large handicaps, and no performer made better use of his character than Sylvester Ritter.

A college football player who was purportedly drafted by the Green Bay Packers, Ritter recovered from a sidelining injury and took up wrestling as a new career. After drifting from one territory to another, Ritter eventually settled in Mid-South Wrestling, a territorial promotion covering Oklahoma, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi. It was here, under the management of promoter Bill Watts, that Ritter would take on his now famous persona, the Junkyard Dog. Born from the Jim Croce song, "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown," and a limited knowledge of *Sanford and Son*, Watts gave Ritter a dog collar, chain, and a shopping cart full of junk. For most people, this role would have been an instant death sentence, but through determination and cunning, Ritter managed to turn the problematic gimmick into a national sensation.¹⁸⁹ Dancing to the ring to the tune of Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust," JYD quickly gained popularity, and in being a black man in the South, was soon fighting a bevy of race-baiting white heel characters. The brilliance of JYD was in his ability to portray the sympathetic hero character. Ritter, painfully aware of the implications of his character, refused to rely on his ghetto affectations as the end-all

¹⁸⁸ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1852.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, Kindle Location 1930.

be-all of his in-ring persona. By adding a human element to his performances, and adopting a never-say-die attitude, Ritter managed to sway predominantly white audiences into cheering him on *because* he was black.¹⁹⁰ Additionally, although he frequently made use of dancing and singing in his act, what many would see today as an example of a modern-day minstrel show complete with shucking and jiving, Ritter made it clear that this was not an extension of his racialized character, but rather an act of spontaneity and fun meant to garner the praise of children, who he regularly invited into the ring after this matches.¹⁹¹

Ritter's performances, now often seen as relying on racial stereotypes, were far more nuanced than this oversimplified explanation and, according to Rhoden, could be viewed as a perfect example of a byproduct of the integration of professional sports in the mid-twentieth century: the introduction of style. Sports up until the 1950s and 1960s had, in many ways, become a dull affair, devoid of any sort of entertainment or fun. Rhoden argues that the integration of professional athletic competitions, and the introduction of black talent, led to a new, flashy style of play, particularly in sports like baseball and boxing, that equated to a much more entertaining product on the whole.¹⁹² Players like Willie Mays made the arena a place of enjoyment and entertainment for all manner of audiences, and drew in new fans in droves. In adding a sense of fun and elation to his performances, particularly in his pandering to children and white audiences on the fence about African American performers, Ritter perfectly encapsulates the spirit of this movement. No other performer of his period was putting in the work to appeal to all audiences like Ritter, and, in equal fashion, no other performer was experiencing the career highs that he was. Although never a champion due to a dominant white

¹⁹⁰ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1930.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, Kindle Location 1979.

¹⁹² Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, 148-150.

power structure being firmly in place in the WWF of the 1980s, JYD was the most popular performer of his day behind Hulk Hogan, the most prominent name to ever be associated with the sport.¹⁹³ Ritter's ability to recognize the admittedly offensive hand he'd been dealt, infuse his character with a sense of style and panache not previously seen in a wrestling ring, and capitalize on every opportunity to attract a new fan base devoid of color lines, cements his legacy as one of the most successful wrestlers to ever lace up a pair of boots. More importantly, however, in demonstrating his ability to persist in the face of adversity and prejudice dealt by a prevailing white authority, his work provides a clear, tangible link between the experience of African Americans outside the squared circle and the business of professional wrestling as a whole.

Wrestling is multitudes. If there is one thing that can be gleaned from this lengthy discussion of the business of back bumps, brawls, and betrayals, it is that professional wrestling, as an entity, is a complicated beast. Equal parts genuine athletic competition and grand vaudeville production, wrestling, or "sports entertainment" as it is known today, is capable of being nuanced, subtle, bold, loud, blatantly obvious, deceptively disingenuous, comedic, and deadly serious, all at the same time. Although not purely American in origin, it has proven to be a cornerstone of American popular culture, infecting every level of the entertainment media and sports world in some form or fashion for decades. Charismatic characters like Dusty Rhodes, "Macho Man" Randy Savage, The Rock, and Daniel Bryan are remembered or thought of with warmest regards, and this sentiment is often extended to even the most vile of villains, like Ric Flair, "Million Dollar Man" Ted DiBiase, The Iron Sheik, and Rowdy Roddy Piper. The cartoonish nature of the sport, the larger than life characters, the outlandish storylines, and the raw power and athleticism often appeal to fans and non-fans alike for different reasons, and have

¹⁹³ Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle*, Kindle Location 1917.

proven to be an unshakable guilty pleasure for some, or a lifelong open obsession for others. However, as has been shown in the course of this examination, the entertainment monolith of the WWE and other large wrestling corporations have a long, sordid history in this country, and would not be the powerhouses they are today without the influence of two primary sects of the population of the United States: immigrants and minorities.

Wrestling, like so many staples of American culture today, was brought to this nation on the backs of European migrants seeking a better life in a young, promising country. Influenced by the pugilist traditions integral to their cultural heritage, American immigrants were the first audience and promoters of the sport, and defined how the business would operate in the century that followed their arrival on American soil. From the earliest days of the business, the socioeconomic factors that impacted immigrant life on a daily basis impacted the outcome of wrestling matches as well, with the tenacity and entrepreneurship of a rising immigrant middle class molding and shaping the ins and outs of the industry. Promoters were keen to capitalize on their new fan base, which was not, as commonly believed, solely made up of the poor and working class. Members of every class, calling, and profession came out in droves to watch the performers, attracted by the sport's tangible links to their own countries of origin. Business-savvy wrestlers and managers, like the Gold Dust Trio, transformed the sport forever with the implementation of new rules and policies, building on the carnie origins of the sport and honing in on the transient nature of their viewers. Ethnic heroes and foreign villains became staples of the sport, doubling down on public sentiment concerning first and second wave American immigrants and the propaganda surrounding their proliferation. At every turn, the first half century of the sport's presence in the United States was defined by the American immigrant and ethnic minority experience. Immigrants were both watching and running the show, and by

extension imparted their own trials, tribulations, triumphs, and experiences into the fabric of the production itself. However, as has been shown, those of European origin were not the only ones influencing the development of the sport.

Racial minorities, primarily African Americans, were just as impacted by the wrestling world as German, Italian, and Irish Americans. Black performers were regularly persecuted and prejudiced both in and out of the ring, particularly prior to the rapid transitions occurring in the mid-twentieth century. Early black superstars like Bobo Brazil toed the line, managing to carve out a name and fortune for themselves while subversively seeking to change longstanding opinions about African American athletes. As the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s swept the country, business inside the squared circle was changed, as well, with a new wave of African American performers making their presence known and fighting for integrated match cards and audiences. Black wrestlers fought tooth and nail for the opportunity to prove themselves, taking advantage of the popular culture of their respective decades and using that to influence the development of their generally racist and offensive characters. Some were capable of altering their trajectory and determining the outcome of their time in the ring, while others were relegated to lesser, comedic roles, steeped in traditions of bigotry and minstrelsy. These unfortunate athletes, however, often managed to work towards bettering their situation, hoping that by their sacrifice the door would be open for black performers to experience meaningful inclusion and equality in the future. The history of African Americans in wrestling is one of heartache, racial prejudice, white authority, and momentary victories in a long string of stolen opportunities. In this way, the world of wrestling directly parallels the African American experience outside the ring, and continues to do so in the twenty-first century.

Although this examination fails to mention the experience of Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans, all of which are often fascinating, alarming, and disheartening, it should be noted that, if given time to speak on the matter, similar trends would be seen in every facet of their inclusion in the business of wrestling. The carnie world of wrestling, full of drop kicks and power slams, clowns and dentists, corporate authorities and anti-establishment rebels, owes its existence to the experiences and work of American immigrants and minorities. Imparted upon the business throughout the twentieth century, these experiences have influenced and formed the very foundations of the entertainment superpower that graces American television screens twice a week, every week of the year. The legacy of immigrants and minorities in wrestling is long and complex, much like the love affair many fans have with the sport. Characterized by the same peaks and valleys witnessed by similar outlets, like boxing and baseball, it becomes a wonder as to why professional wrestling has been thrown to the wayside in terms of historical research. The colorful characters and soap opera theatrics have shunned the sport to a corner wherein it receives no attention from scholars, seemingly deemed unworthy of further research. However, as has been clearly demonstrated in the course of this discussion, the history of professional wrestling is a rich tapestry, comprised of all the socioeconomic nuances and cultural ramifications that historians find so fascinating in the study of the sweet science, wrestling's sister sport. If anything, the fictional storytelling and cultural cross-pollination occurring inside the squared circle on a weekly basis manages to keep wrestling perhaps more current than most other sports, as is reflected in accounts of the business dating back to the late nineteenth century. Wrestling is, undoubtedly, fake. The matches are staged. The outcomes are predetermined. The feuds are outlined and rehearsed. The insults are workshopped, and the maneuvers made safe. However, the experiences of those involved, both immigrant and ethnic minority alike, the

socioeconomic factors at play in its execution, its inherently capitalistic influences, and its contributions to the historiography of American sports culture are all genuine. Wrestling is, and always will be, a dichotomous entity, for as much as it appears to be a work, under the surface, it's almost always a shoot.

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