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Congress needs to get involved ... now

By Mark Kriegel

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A couple of years ago, baseball players were brought before Congress, where their implausibly comic denials of steroid use resulted in a much tougher major league drug policy.

Retired football players went to Washington last week. Recounting careers that left them crippled and concussed will make it easier for them to collect the disability payments they deserve.

Now it's time for wrestlers to testify on Capitol Hill.

After Chris Benoit killed his wife, his son and himself, pro wrestling became big news. It will make news again when the toxicology reports are released. Then the Benoit story and the issue it raised — the horrifically high incidence of premature death among wrestlers — will recede. After all, it's just wrestling. Unlike baseball, no records have been sullied. And unlike football, there's no point spread to consider. Bookies don't take action on scripted shows.

Still, the body count is worth noting. Being a professional wrestler, writes Irvin Muchnick, "looks as hazardous as a military billet in Fallujah." Muchnick, the author of *Wrestling Babylon*, has compiled a roster — "staggeringly incomplete," by his own admission — of 89 wrestlers who, between 1985 and 2006, died before the age of 50. He does not include four deaths — among them Owen Hart's famously fatal plunge during an ill-fated stunt in Kansas City — that "defy category." I'd say wrestlers dying young is a category in itself and add the four. Then there are at least five who have died so far this year: Bam Bam Bigelow, from an overdose of drugs including cocaine and anti-anxiety pills; Mike Alfonso, (aka Mike Awesome), who hung himself; Sherri Martel, (aka Sensational Sherri) who died of unnatural causes, possibly an overdose; Benoit; and his wife Nancy, a valet once known as Fallen Angel.

By my count, that's at least 98 dead wrestlers.

The leading cause of these deaths is heart attack or heart failure. Then there are fatalities

that stem from ruined livers and kidneys. Other wrestlers overdose on painkillers. Still others die of injuries suffered while making a fake sport look real.

Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Entertainment was able to weather a huge steroids scandal in the 1990s. Its new Talent Wellness Program, which includes "aggressive" drug testing and cardiovascular monitoring, is available on the WWE website. Just drop the cursor down to the bottom left, past all those scantily clad hotties, and click on "Corporate." There you can also find the WWE stock price and a series of press releases decrying the "sensationalistic" coverage of the Benoit tragedy. These include a detailed timeline and a piece arguing, very convincingly, that despite prescription steroids found at the crime scene, the murder-suicide wasn't a case of 'roid rage.

This all proves, beyond any reasonable doubt, that Vince McMahon is more politically adept and a better crisis manager than Bud Selig. But given those 98 or so fatalities, it won't dissuade many from the notion that wrestlers take drugs to get big, to get up, to calm down and to ease the pain.

And what of all those wrestlers who didn't die, both active and retired? You think football players have it bad? Even a lousy players association, like the NFL's, offers vastly more protection than wrestlers have ever had.

Wrestlers are independent contractors. They are responsible for their own medical coverage. Though Vince McMahon's organization is a publicly traded \$1.1 billion corporation, wrestlers have no pensions. The WWE — not the only employer of wrestlers, of course, but by far the biggest — pays for the costs of "injuries sustained by talent while performing in the ring." The company, according to a statement received last night, also pays "for costs associated with injury treatment and will also continue to provide base pay during the time of injury and recovery."

Still, as far as a wrestler's long-term health goes, the policy leaves something to be desired. According to WWE spokesman Gary Davis: "There is no company disability coverage for retired performers. They either obtained insurance to cover their retirement needs or are eligible for government programs."

Maybe that's adequate if you type for a living, but not if you spent the prime of your life jumping off turnbuckles. Consider the injuries Mick Foley (Mankind) advertised on the jacket of his 1999 bestseller, *Have a Nice Day*: eight concussions, a twice-broken nose, broken jaw, dislocated left shoulder, fractured left shoulder, broken left thumb, five broken ribs, bruised kidney, broken toe, torn meniscus, torn abdominal, broken right wrist, bone chips in the elbow, two herniated discs, second-degree burns on the right arm and shoulder, a separated right shoulder, broken cheekbone, four missing front teeth, two-thirds of an ear ripped off (worse than Evander Holyfield) and more than 325 stitches.

Unlike so many of his contemporaries, a huge star like Foley can afford coverage and retirement. The other wrestlers, however, need some representation.

Wrestling's most famous would-be organizer was Jesse Ventura. As he recalled in his autobiography: "There's no pension, no health benefits. And the moment you're not making that draw, the promoters couldn't care less about you. You're a piece of meat. I knew guys that (sic) had worked hard for twenty years or more and still retired with nothing. Wrestling operated under some of the most unfair working conditions in the country. I don't know how they got away with it for so many years."

In 1987, on the eve of Wrestlemania II, Ventura implored his fellow wrestlers: "If we all stick together and simply tell Vince we're refusing to wrestle unless we're allowed to unionize, what are they gonna be able to do? And if the other unions back us up, who's gonna turn the lights on in the building?" Vince had millions invested in Wrestlemania II. We had him.

"But nobody wanted to be the one to risk it."

Twenty years later, not too much has changed. The business got bigger, and so did the wrestlers. But they remain independent contractors. Too many die young. Perhaps Jesse Ventura, now the former governor of Minnesota, could go to Congress and address his fellow politicians. Maybe he could explain why wrestlers will risk their lives before their jobs.