

Introduction

THE HORROR OF CHRIS BENOIT'S June 2007 murder-suicide rampage is as good a reminder as any that it is high time to demystify professional wrestling. For too long, this industry has been inoculated from scandal by a banal mystique, the widespread belief that it is an enterprise whose offbeat rhythms simply cannot be mastered, and one whose players' motives lie beyond ordinary human understanding. Baloney and double baloney. Beneath the carny lingo and Mafioso code of silence rests a conventional profit-driven sector of show business, studded not only with glory-seeking performers but also with television executives, writers, technicians, chic-seeking kitsch kings, two-faced politicians. This is nothing less than the Periodic Table of the Elements of mainstream American pop culture. "Sports entertainment" is sports and entertainment, only more so.

The industry's dominant company, World Wrestling Entertainment — controlling more than ninety-five percent of the North American market and a vast majority worldwide — has grown into a multinational with more than a billion dollars in capitalization. It features an

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accompanying dark side as broad as a half-moon, hidden in plain sight. The brainchild of Vincent Kennedy McMahon, trailer-park incorrigible turned Forbes 400 squatter, WWE flowered in Connecticut, the same greenhouse that produced Phineas Taylor Barnum. The state's former governor, Lowell Weicker (once upon a time a hero of the Senate Watergate Committee), is a charter member of the WWE board of directors. In the 1990s, when McMahon was sinking under the first round of steroid and other scandals in what was then called the World Wrestling Federation, Weicker had helped rehabilitate his image with an appointment to a prominent position with the Connecticut branch of the Special Olympics.

In May 2007, a month before Benoit strangled his wife, Nancy, snapped their seven-year-old son Daniel's neck, and hanged himself, Vince McMahon delivered the commencement address at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut. SHU is the New England region's second-largest Catholic university. Vince McMahon's wife, Linda, the chief executive officer of WWE, is on the SHU board of trustees. As the university explained it, "Using self-deprecating humor to explain his choice as recipient of a Doctor of Humane Letters Degree and commencement speaker, McMahon . . . left most graduates and those in the audience with a sense of hope that anything is possible, even in the face of overwhelming obstacles." The mother of the student government president, in a sound bite no doubt crafted by the campus public relations department, called McMahon "a good choice for the school considering how he started his career and how he has parlayed it into this multi-million-dollar organization."

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In sum, ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys, you *can* tell the players without a scorecard.

And enough with the Talmudic musings about how to categorize wrestling; they are irrelevant to whether the benefits of unregulated junk spectacle trump the public-health cesspool that “sports entertainment” has turned into. In 1982 a Hollywood star, Vic Morrow, and two Vietnamese-American child actors were killed in a gruesome late-night helicopter mishap during the filming of an action sequence of *The Twilight Zone: The Movie*. Reforms of filmmaking standards and California child-labor laws quickly followed. By contrast, Nancy and Chris Benoit were approximately the ninth and tenth of the approximately twenty-one wrestlers and in-ring personalities who died before their fiftieth birthdays in the year 2007 alone. Some scores or hundreds of others fill parallel lists over the past several decades — choose your time frame and methodology. Dave Meltzer, publisher of the authoritative *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, said the list of eighty-nine deaths under the age of fifty, from 1985 to 2006, in my earlier book, *Wrestling Babylon*, was “incomplete, to be sure.” Giving the numbers the best context I have seen, Meltzer drew up a list of sixty-two young deaths in “major league” wrestling organizations from 1996 to 2007.

The profile and tabloid details of the Benoit case shed a useful light on a generation-long legacy of shame; to dismiss this — and the probability that wrestling’s drug-and-lifestyle deviances, induced from the very top, are major factors in the equation — is to make scoundrels’ arguments.

Yet here is what has changed as a result of Benoit: almost nothing. Dissecting how that came to be is the



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second mission of this book. The first mission is to compile a comprehensive and accurate history of what happened in Fayette County, Georgia.

Toward that end, I strove to distinguish this book from others about wrestling by sticking to the public record as much as possible, and by emphasizing that if that turns out to be a problem, it is a problem shared by fans and non-fans alike. For example, everyone has an opinion on the significance, or lack thereof, of the 59-to-1 ratio of testosterone to epitestosterone in Benoit's post-mortem toxicology tests. The few people who want to believe that such a finding tells us very little are far outnumbered by the many people who know that it tells us a lot; it's just that the few add more heat to the discussion than the many add light. While in other areas of life we may need fewer facts, wider-ranging intuition, and a spirit of live-and-let-live, wrestling has reached the point where it needs more facts — facts tethered to accountability — and less paralysis by analysis.

No, the butler didn't do it; Christopher Michael Benoit did. But honest scrutiny of what transpired before and after can demonstrate how WWE, as desperate and cagey as any gun or tobacco lobbyist, pulled the strings to ensure that wrestling's death pandemic would remain unaddressed. In real estate, the key is "location, location, location." In the Benoit story, the most fertile ground is "timeline, timeline, timeline." WWE's published timeline was as phony as its match results, and simultaneously far less entertaining and more illuminating.

To the question, "Was there a Benoit conspiracy?" we have a clear answer: you bet there was. It was a conspiracy between those who care too much about wrestling and those who care too little. The first group consists of





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the fans who enjoy the pageantry and the people who profit from them. The second group consists of those who can't be bothered, except possibly to blow hard on cue whenever a comment, no matter how ill-informed, is deemed fashionable.

Like everyone else, I'll take my best stab at what it all means, but even this is only the second draft of history. The most important step is simply to cut through all the taboos that make wrestling an appropriate subject to cluck about, but not to study for its off-the-charts human fallout and for its seedy but pseudo-respectable big-business DNA. I submit that anything to which millions of people devote blocks of time every week is serious. Clusters of deaths are serious.

Let's tell and retell the Chris Benoit story in the hope that it will eventually make enough of the right people care in just the right amounts.

