

**Professional Wrestling:
From Sport to Sports Entertainment**

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Abstract

PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING:
FROM SPORTS TO SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT

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A history of professional wrestling detailing its beginnings as sporting competition and tracing its development from carnival sideshow attraction to popular mass entertainment with a special attention to development in more recent highly rated television programs.

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GLOSSARY

- Angle.** A scripted event or series of events that begins or continues a storyline.
- Babyface.** The hero of the storyline. The wrestler that fans are supposed to cheer for. Also abbreviated as *face*.
- Booker.** An individual who organizes matches on a card, determines the outcomes, and controls the creative direction of storylines and *angles*.
- Buyrate.** The rating signifying the number of orders for a pay-per-view event.
- Card.** A schedule of matches to be contested during a wrestling event.
- Draw.** A wrestler that fans will pay to see.
- ECW.** Extreme Championship Wrestling, a promotion known for its violent matches and loyal fanbase.
- Face.** Short term for *babyface*.
- Feud.** A scripted series of matches and confrontations between two or more performers.
- Finishing move.** A wrestling hold or move that, when performed by one wrestler, is perceived to be very powerful and will result in the other wrestler submitting or being pinned within seconds.
- Foreign object.** An illegal weapon or object such as a chair used during the course of a match, usually by the *heel*.
- Gate.** The total amount of money paid in by the audience for a wrestling *card*.
- Gimmick.** The character created by or for a performer to play in front of the audience.
- Heel.** The antagonist of the story line. The heel is the wrestler that fans are supposed to jeer.
- Hooker.** A performer with legitimate wrestling and submission skills and a reputation as a tough individual.

House.	The number of fans in attendance at an event.
House show.	A <i>card</i> that is not taped for or aired on live television.
Money match.	A match most fans in attendance or viewing on television paid or will pay to see.
Plant.	A person paid by or invited by a <i>promotion</i> to pretend to be a fan in the audience and get involved in an <i>angle</i> .
Promo.	An interview or monologue performed by a wrestler.
Promoter.	The head(s) of a wrestling <i>promotion</i> who oversee all operations of the <i>promotion</i> .
Promotion.	A wrestling company or organization.
Run-in.	When a wrestler not officially involved in a match interferes.
Scripted.	Pre-planned.
Stable.	Slang term for a group or faction of wrestlers.
Territory.	The geographical area in which a <i>promotion</i> holds wrestling cards and airs its television shows. Also can serve as slang for the term <i>promotion</i> .
Turn.	The process of changing a <i>babyface</i> into a <i>heel</i> , or vice-versa.
Work.	Any event that is pre-planned.

“Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, children of all ages,” began a tattooed man clad in baggy black pants and a black t-shirt, “D-Generation X proudly brings to you its WWF TAG team CHAMPIONS of the WOOOOOOOORLD: the Road Dogg Jesse James, Bad Ass Billy Gunn... the NEW... AGE... OUTLAWS!” As the Road Dogg tossed the microphone over to his partner, the grandfather of a young boy sat with his grandchild, the elder’s television tuned to the World Wrestling Federation’s Monday night cable program, *WWF Monday Night Raw*. The older man had been excited to have his young kin over for the evening, and when the child had asked if they could watch wrestling together, long-dormant memories of his younger days as a wrestling fan came flooding back. During the course of the *Raw* show, he fondly recalled the classic match he witnessed in the 1950s between Gorgeous George and Lou Thesz, a contest rife with pure athleticism and showmanship. He recalled the pre-match activities where the Gorgeous One kissed a local dancer, only to be shown up by Thesz, who graciously took the lady in his arms, dipped her gingerly, and gave her a deep kiss that made the lovely lady swoon. However, after the one-upmanship contest concluded, the match was a knock-down, drag-out battle that lasted nearly thirty minutes, each wrestler displaying incredible athletic ability. The gray-haired senior logically concluded, “Surely 50 years later the wrestling has gotten much better.”

Meanwhile on *Raw*, Bad Ass Billy Gunn, the words “Mr. Ass” emblazoned on his wrestling trunks, raised the microphone to his lips before bellowing, “And if you’re not down with that, we’ve got two words for ya...” The boy inched closer to the TV, anticipating the words that would come next. In unison, the youngster, along with the 15,000 fans in attendance at the arena that evening, chanted with Bad Ass Billy Gunn as he

shouted, "SUCK IT!" Less than two minutes later the New Age Outlaws were celebrating a victory, sweat barely present on the Road Dogg's brow. The grandfather, taken aback by what he has just witnessed, said to himself, "I remember when Lou Thesz and Gorgeous George at least made wrestling *look* like a sport. What happened?"

Professional wrestling as we know it today has its roots as early as sixteenth century England. This was the first known period where wrestling was used as entertainment for the public. The matches of this era took place amongst the acrobatics, clown routines, and comedy sideshows of circuses across the nation (Greenberg 12). Wrestling spread across Europe, and it was German and Irish immigrants who brought wrestling over to the American colonies. America's first wrestling hotbed developed in Vermont during the early 1700s, where the "collar and elbow" style of wrestling was the norm. Collar and elbow style wrestling involved the participants locking up by placing one hand on their opponents collar while grabbing their elbow with their other hand. The match would begin with the combatants in this position (Albano and Sugar 14). However, it was not until the post-Civil War period in the United States that this type of wrestling became associated with the carnival circuit and resulted in wrestling becoming entertainment for the masses (Greenberg 13).

Lou Thesz, a legendary professional wrestler whose career spanned seven decades, wrote in his autobiography *Hooker: An Authentic Wrestler's Adventures Inside the Bizarre World of Professional Wrestling* about the American wrestling-carnival connection:

"Professional wrestling was the exclusive domain of showmen and con-artists, people who were more interested in dollars than true sport. Impresarios like P.T. Barnum used wrestlers in their shows, having them wrestle exhibitions for the customers." (11)

“Captain Lou” Albano and Bert Sugar, authors of *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Professional Wrestling*, wrote of these carnival shows:

“...[W]restlers with colorful costumes, equally colorful nicknames, and fictionalized biographies would wrestle each other or accept challenges from all local comers. The carney At-Shows (short for Athletic Show) featured wrestlers engaging in exhibition matches or challenging all comers from the audience in time-limit contests for money.” (14)

For the most part these were fair contests with the well-trained wrestler emerging victorious and the carney, the man running the show, pocketing the loot. Occasionally, however, one of the local challengers would pose a legitimate threat to the established wrestler. It was in these instances that the customers would be witness to actions not out of place on wrestling shows of today: the carney or another wrestler might take a weapon to the talented local or, more likely, the wrestler in jeopardy would “hook” his opponent, applying an illegal and crippling hold, sometimes breaking the competitor's arm or leg in the process. In other instances, the gifted local was actually a “plant”—someone employed by the carnival operator who pretended to be a local—that would go on to defeat the wrestler in a fixed match (Greenberg 13). Using such tactics ensured that the carnival would end up richer at the end of the day.

While the carnivals were touring the United States, legitimate Greco-Roman style wrestling matches still took place on a regular basis. These matches, however, were not very exciting. Being legitimate competitions, oftentimes the wrestlers would lock each other into holds and then not move for minutes at a time. Competitor William Muldoon, at the time a New York City police officer and later known as the “father of American wrestling,” had a colorful appearance and claimed to be a champion grappler, but his

matches would not be able to hold a statue's attention (Greenberg 14). Two of his high profile matches, against Professor William Miller and Clarence Whistler, went to nine hours, 35 minutes and seven hours, respectively. Audience cries of "I want my dollar back!" and "Get up and do something already!" were not uncommon (Albano and Sugar 16). Yet by 1900, the only sport more popular than professional wrestling in American society was baseball. Wrestling as a sport received extensive coverage in American print media, highlighting its performers and matches that, in turn, introduced the sport to a wider audience (Thesz 12).

It was "The Peerless" Frank Gotch who benefited most from the major coverage newspapers and sporting magazines gave wrestling. Gotch "was to wrestling what John L. Sullivan was to boxing: its first universally recognized major attraction" (Albano and Sugar 59). "It is no stretch to say that Gotch was one of the most famous people in America during the early part of the century" (Thesz 39). Being the first American to claim the world's undisputed heavyweight championship certainly did not hurt his status, either. Ironically, it would be Gotch who would be responsible for the first decline in mass popularity for the sport.

In 1908, Gotch took on George "The Russian Lion" Hackenschmidt at the Dexter Park Pavilion in Chicago, Illinois, in wrestling's first ever "match of the century." The match would end in controversy after Hackenschmidt quit, claiming that Gotch, whose reputation among wrestlers was that of an unfair competitor, soaked his body in oil and used several illegal moves, namely headbutts and closed fists (Greenberg 15). Three years later Gotch and Hackenschmidt would again wrestle in Chicago, this time at the new

Comiskey Park, with Gotch taking two straight falls in the two-out-of-three fall contest. The news media would soon report that Gotch did not compete in a fair contest—again. During training for his rematch with Gotch, Hackenschmidt agreed to train with another wrestler named Ad Santell. What the Russian Lion did not know was Santell had been paid \$5,000 by Gotch to purposely injure Hackenschmidt during their training sessions (Albano and Sugar 61). When Hackenschmidt attempted to postpone the match due to a knee injury suffered during training, Gotch convinced him to go on with the contest, stating that he would lose one fall to Hackenschmidt if he kept the injury to himself. In the end Gotch would double-cross Hackenschmidt and take the match in two straight falls. The news media did not take kindly to the revelation of the behind-the-scenes manipulations and by the middle of the decade had stopped covering wrestling as a sport altogether (Greenberg 15). The resulting fallout was a swift decline in popularity and attendance at wrestling events by the general public. After Gotch retired in 1914, only one man effectively carried wrestling's mantle into the 1920s. That man was Ed "Strangler" Lewis.

Lou Thesz states that, "Ed Lewis rescued professional wrestling at a time when wrestling was floundering[.] ... Without him there might not have been professional wrestling in this country after 1920" (42). After the Gotch-Hackenschmidt debacle, only shows in the midwestern United States continued to draw audiences to the matches. Seeing the declining popularity of their sport, Ed Lewis and his manager Billy Sandow decided they had to come up with some new tactics to keep their existing fanbase and bring in new fans. Lewis and Sandow are often credited with setting time limits in

matches, inventing new holds, and coming up with the idea to conclude matches with one wrestler applying a “finishing move.” But these ideas were largely those of one man, Joe “Toots” Mondt, who was the third man in the Lewis-Sandow partnership. Mondt also realized the potential behind taking a group of wrestlers on the road and staging a packaged wrestling show in the vein of the popular vaudeville shows of the era (Thesz 45). The “Gold Dust Trio,” as Lewis, Sandow, and Mondt became known as, began to promote their shows in earnest. Lewis, for his part and with his popularity, realized that purposely losing a match once in a while would be good for business, as people would pay to see a rematch. Eventually Lewis became as famous as future sports icons Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey, even out-earning them in their respective careers, pulling in \$16 million in his lifetime (Thesz 42). By 1925, wrestling was back in the public spotlight and business as a whole was improving, especially for the Gold Dust Trio. But Billy Sandow had another idea to make business even better, one that would begin to blur the line between sports and, as professional wrestling is known as today, sports entertainment.

Wayne “Big” Munn was a popular star football player for the Nebraska Cornhuskers during the early 1920s. Sandow saw the potential for Munn in wrestling and set about making a star out of him. Sandow convinced Lewis to drop his world heavyweight title to Munn and on January 8, 1925, Munn defeated “Strangler” Lewis in the middle of the ring, capturing the coveted title belt. With Munn’s limited wrestling ability at the time, it is no surprise that the match was a complete work, but most fans were none the wiser and a new star was born. Soon promoters across the country were trying to create their own Wayne Munn, recruiting sports stars of all types, perhaps the most notable

being the Chicago Bears' Bronko Nagurski, who left football permanently for the wrestling ring, citing, "the money is better" (Greenberg 19). The Lewis-Munn title match also marked another milestone in wrestling history—it was the beginning of wrestling being showcased as a performance rather than a sport (Albano and Sugar 63).

The boom brought on by the innovations of the Gold Dust Trio did not last long, as the United States limped into the Great Depression. Americans were finding more important things to spend their few extra dollars on, and tickets to the wrestling matches were not one of them (Greenberg 18). Promoters were forced to experiment with new ideas to get people—anyone—to attend their shows. The early '30s saw the first "gimmick" matches in wrestling—tag-team matches, mud wrestling, brass knuckle matches, chain matches, and steel cage matches, to name a few. This period also saw the advent of wrestlers as "characters"—not just wrestlers with fictional backgrounds and lavish outfits, but wrestlers who stand for a cause, who have a reason (honorable or not) to want to wrestle their opponent, who play a "part" on a stage. Defining the wrestlers' motivations led to the first matches involving *babyfaces*, the good guys, versus *heels*, the bad guys. The purpose behind each of these innovations to the wrestling product was to provide more entertainment for the audience, enticing them to come back for more, ideally with a friend or two in tow.

Women's wrestling found a niche in this era as well. "Woman versus woman matches actually sold tickets, surprising promoters. Soon... promoters were putting out calls for any and all women to wrestle" (Albano and Sugar 85). Women's wrestling would become a staple of wrestling shows everywhere until the latter half of the 1990s, when

matches then served little more than an excuse for the participants to strip each other to their underwear (Albano and Sugar 90). Even though latter day women's featured more "model" type performers than "wrestlers," women's wrestling did have its fair share of athletic and competitive stars during the later part of the century. However, modern-era women wrestlers such as the '80s starlet Wendi Richter and the '90s muscular and vicious Chyna most likely would not have achieved the popularity they did if it were not for groundbreaking women's competitors Mildred Burke in the 1930s and the Fabulous Moolah in the 1950s. Both women set the standard of excellence by holding the women's world championship for multiple decades. Burke, in addition to wrestling women, was known to regularly compete with men, often emerging victorious, solidifying her status as one of the toughest and most popular women to ever compete. Though women's matches usually made up one-tenth of any given wrestling card (this remains the case in today's wrestling environment), Burke and other women wrestlers of her era are credited with helping keep wrestling in the public eye during the Depression years (Albano and Sugar 83).

Despite the Great Depression and the overall decline in business, the 1930s were not without their share of wrestling stars. While Mildred Burke was undoubtedly the most famous female figure in wrestling, the most popular male star of the decade was the "Golden Greek" Jim Londos. Londos appealed to the Depression-era audiences due to his "wrestling plasterer" character: a hard working man fighting for his earnings, a role that mirrored the real lives of the majority of fans that paid to see him. Like "Strangler" Lewis in his era, Londos is credited as the man who saved wrestling during the Great Depression

(Greenberg 19-20). Later on in the decade, the Ed Lewis-trained Lou Thesz made his debut and quickly moved up the ranks in the Midwest. In 1937, at the impressive young age of 21, Thesz won the first of six world heavyweight championships in St. Louis, Missouri, beating Everett Marshall in two out of three falls. With his young age and good looks, Thesz quickly became a star in the wrestling world. Thesz, aware of the direction that his sport was heading, stated about his first championship win, "So what if the match wasn't 100% competitive wrestling—we'd given the fans exactly what they had come to see and that's what professional wrestling at its best was all about" (75).

Coupled with the Great Depression, the outbreak of World War II meant that the wrestling business would continue to struggle. But by the mid-1940s and the tail end of the war, professional wrestling was due for another surge in popularity. The wrestling business did not have to wait long. One technological invention and the rise of one incredible performer would change the face of wrestling forever, bringing professional wrestling to new heights in popularity heretofore unheard of (Thesz 95).

Television in the late 1940s was still a relatively unexplored medium and networks struggled to find programming to fill the airwaves (Greenberg 23). Professional wrestling would soon fill that void. The production of a wrestling television show proved to be inexpensive, easy to produce, and self-contained. Any given wrestling show had action, comedy, drama, and easily understood plotlines and characters. All one needed to create a show was an announcer, a camera, and a ring (Thesz 101). Wrestling TV shows were a television executive's dream show, and wrestling promoters loved the exposure television afforded them, using the medium to advertise upcoming matches in their territories. By

1951 in Los Angeles, California, wrestling aired every Monday through Friday in prime time as well as on Saturday afternoons. Even the wrestlers' Sunday morning workout routines were shown (Greenberg 23). Television would alter how everything in professional wrestling was done, from how promoters operated to the wrestlers' in-ring work. Many feel that professional wrestling would not exist today without television (Thesz 101).

The changes brought on by the invention of television were not instantaneous, however, states Thesz. "For once the promoters were slow to pick up on what they had... The ignorance of TV's potential was most glaring in the area of promotional spots" (101). Unlike today's boisterous interviews and monologues, promos by wrestlers were limited to standing next to the announcer saying, "Hello, I am happy to be here," and, "Thank you." No advancing of storylines or character development took place. "He was only there to fill time; he established himself in the ring with his sweat, not at ringside with his spit" (Thesz 101). The entertainment aspect of professional wrestling had not quite taken over the sport, but that would soon change.

Only one man's name is synonymous with wrestling's infant years on television. This man appeared on the air so often that he was given the nickname of "Mr. Television" and was frequently mentioned by variety show host Bob Hope during his monologues. But it was not wrestling ability that made George Wagner's wrestling character a household name; it was his uncanny ability to be a showman (Albano and Sugar 67-68). Wrestling fans and the general public came to know this influential performer as Gorgeous George.

In the years following World War II the American public's attitude could be considered carefree. The celebrities of the period mirrored this attitude and Gorgeous George more than exemplified this spirit (Albano and Sugar 68). The first wrestler ever to be accompanied to the ring by a female valet and enter the ring to music, George played the part of an effeminate narcissist to a "t":

“[George] would walk slowly down the aisle, stopping every now and then to tell a fan that he or she was ‘beneath contempt.’ Then he would haughtily enter the ring, the valet holding the ropes just far enough apart so that George wouldn't have to bend too far, and he'd wipe his dainty white shoes on the red carpet before walking around so that the crowd could gaze upon his locks and looks, which brought on a round of booing.” (Albano and Sugar 26)

No one in wrestling history could command a crowd like Gorgeous George. The public came out in droves to see the Gorgeous One's antics and his eventual comeuppance. Some fans took his act so seriously that George was attacked on several occasions (Greenberg 26). At the height of his popularity, Gorgeous George's matches were shown on over 50 different cities' television stations, and he could command one-third of the profits of any show he wrestled on (Greenberg 26-27). Promoters, always quick to copy what was successful, began searching in earnest for the next Gorgeous George.

With the popularity of professional wrestling at its highest point ever as a result of television exposure and Gorgeous George's rise to fame, the door was wide open for new and up-and-coming wrestlers (Albano and Sugar 171). Television allowed promoters to expand their territories and the success of the Gorgeous George character gave wrestlers a blueprint for success. It is no coincidence that there was a swift rise in “gimmick

performers,” or wrestlers who had little to no athletic prowess in the ring but had some type of talent or ability to make the crowd “ooh” and “aah.” According to Thesz:

“[Gimmick performers] were so seriously limited as a performer that they diminished the importance of wrestling moves. They, along with the promoters who hyped them, are responsible for the ridiculous comic-book characterizations that constitute what is professional wrestling today.” (117)

Thesz takes care to not imply that there were no good wrestlers during this era. He later admits that pure wrestlers like Verne Gagne, Dr. Bill Miller, and Mike DiBiase as well as “performance” wrestlers such as Buddy Rogers, Johnny Valentine, and “Killer” Kowalski, who “put everything into making their performances credible,” contributed to the success that wrestling held during the early and mid-1950s (Thesz 126). Another reason for wrestling’s sustained popularity was the formation of the National Wrestling Alliance. Prior to 1950 promoters operated individually within their established territories, only occasionally partnering with one or two other promoters to put on big shows. More often than not, though, promoters were looking over their shoulders making sure that rivals were not stealing talent or holding shows outside of their respective territories. “It was a crazy, compassionless, cutthroat business, and a promoter really had to stay on his toes to survive” (Thesz 106).

The National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) was borne out of the desire of a small number of promoters to bring structure to the business side of professional wrestling across the entire United States. What initially started out in 1948 as a small alliance consisting of five midwestern promoters grew to a global partnership of 38 promotions by 1956. The NWA had control over nearly every wrestler in North America and the NWA world

heavyweight title was defended as far away as New Zealand and Japan (Thesz 106). The alliance allowed participating members to share wrestling talent and cross-promote with other members of the group, and fans were treated to dream matches and appearances by high-profile wrestling stars they would not have seen otherwise. Everyone involved with wrestling—promoters, wrestlers, and fans—was a winner.

As the 1960s came around, the aforementioned gimmick performers in professional wrestling began to outnumber the pure wrestlers remaining in the business. One wrestler was able to become the biggest star of the era and, “he did it without a lick of wrestling ability but an aptitude as a performer” (Thesz 117). Antonino Rocca, wrestling barefoot to show off his size 13 feet, regularly impressed crowds with a vast arsenal of high-flying acrobatic maneuvers: mid-air splits, leaps from the top rope, and his signature move, the Argentine backbreaker. In his thirteen years as a professional wrestler, Rocca “would remake the sport” (Albano and Sugar 72). Pure wrestlers such as Lou Thesz would be forced to adopt the performance moves Rocca made popular just to keep their matches exciting and popular with fans (Thesz 96). Rocca, it is said, sold more TV sets than anyone else, save Milton Berle, during his heyday (Sugar and Napolitano 184).

While Rocca was amazing fans in arenas and on televisions across the country, two sets of promoters were working to build their own super-promotions. The first, based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was run by wrestler Verne Gagne after purchasing or assuming control over several midwestern area promotions in the latter half of the 1950s. Gagne would win his promotion’s championship shortly thereafter and, after claiming that the National Wrestling Alliance would not grant him a title shot, announced that his promotion

was severing ties with the NWA and christened his group the American Wrestling Association (Thesz 176). The other group of promoters, led by Toots Mondt and Vincent James McMahon and based in New York City, had been running highly successful shows in the northeast United States in the early 1960s. The NWA champion at the time, Buddy Rogers, was based out of the New York promotion, no doubt contributing to their success in the region. So much did Rogers mean to the promotion that Mondt and McMahon began to withhold Rogers from other NWA promotions so he could wrestle more shows for their group. When Lou Thesz defeated Rogers for the title in early 1963, Mondt and McMahon refused to acknowledge the switch. They announced they were withdrawing from the NWA and began to call their promotion the World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF), naming Buddy Rogers their world heavyweight champion (Thesz 176). For the next 20 years there were three major wrestling organizations each recognizing their own world champion. Add to that several smaller independent territories across the United States and there existed plenty of opportunities for wrestlers and fans alike to keep most of the promotions alive for the better part of the 1960s and 70s (Greenberg 43). Lou Thesz states, "Wrestling was thriving throughout the country during the 1960s and 1970s, in many cases even surpassing the big gates we'd drawn in the so-called 'Golden Age'" (205).

While remaining relatively popular between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, professional wrestling itself changed very little. Gimmick performers were now the norm, and this era gave rise to stars who became popular as a result of their characters' appeal and appearance, including Andre the Giant, a 7'2", 400 lb. tender hearted mountain of a man; Gorilla Monsoon, a hairy, savage beast; and Superstar Billy Graham, a tie-dyed shirt

masking his incredible physique. The NWA, AWA, and WWF coexisted peacefully, even exchanging talent with one another to give fans fresh match ups and dream confrontations. Each promotion, while not on national network television, had its own popular television shows that aired in its region. But overall the product each promotion produced was similar in nature and did not expand on the innovations and changes that occurred during the late 40s and 50s. Wrestling was once again due for an upheaval, but even professional wrestling experts were mostly taken by surprise with the rise to dominance of Vincent Kennedy McMahon and the World Wrestling Federation in the 1980s.

When Vincent K. McMahon purchased his father Vincent J. McMahon's promotion—the now Wide-less World Wrestling Federation—in 1983, no one could have predicted what kind of impact the younger McMahon would have on the sport of professional wrestling. Within ten years the face of wrestling would be changed almost beyond recognition and the credit—or blame—lies solely on the innovative mind of Vince McMahon. From the very beginning of his tenure as owner, McMahon had ideas of bucking the precedents set by promoters before him and expanding his wrestling empire across the continent regardless of any territorial boundaries (Greenberg 45). McMahon, however, did not just want to promote wrestling cards in rival territories, he wanted to utilize television in rival markets to air his company's programming and sign away his competition's top talent.

One of the first items on McMahon's agenda was to alter how the WWF television shows were presented on television. Still important to the success of a promotion,

television shows featuring wrestling had not changed very much since the heyday of television wrestling in the 1950s. McMahon began to pattern his TV product after other sports programming, adding production techniques such as slow motion and instant replay. WWF wrestlers began to cut interviews tailored to a specific city to promote an upcoming card, spots that would air between matches on the regular show (Greenberg 46-47). McMahon also embraced the newly developed cable television technology, producing a program entitled *All-American Wrestling* for the USA cable network that guaranteed nationwide exposure for the WWF (Greenberg 48).

The WWF also began to offer high-paying contracts to its competing promotions' top stars. One by one these wrestlers would jump to the WWF roster, and the rival promoters would suddenly be without their highest drawing performers. Only after signing one or two of another promotion's wrestlers would McMahon resort to the old-fashioned route of taking over a territory. Using the wrestlers the WWF had just acquired, McMahon would start promoting arena shows within his adversary's territorial boundaries (Greenberg 48). McMahon also purchased television time in the region, always opposite the programming of the promotion he was trying to overcome, to insure a WWF presence in the area when the WWF was touring its show elsewhere (Greenberg 48). Eventually the smaller promotions folded or were forced to sell to McMahon, who would then use their vacated television slot to air WWF programming.

For all of Vince McMahon's dedication, hard work, and ruthless business practices, McMahon did not have the big star wrestler that he needed to truly succeed on a national level. The WWF needed someone who could be a crossover celebrity, much like Gorgeous

George had been back in the 1940s and 50s. No one in the WWF's growing stable of performers was deemed capable of performing and succeeding at that level. When McMahon finally spotted the man he believed capable of bringing the WWF to new heights, he did what he had been doing for some time now, he lured the wrestler to the WWF promising big paydays and national prestige.

Hulk Hogan was the American Wrestling Association's top drawing wrestler, riding a wave of popularity no other wrestler had experienced in several years. Hogan first made a name for himself in Japan, where he was so popular that he recorded an album of rock songs, and dolls and comics featuring his likeness were gobbled up by fans. Upon his return to the United States, Hogan went to the AWA with hopes of making it big in his home country. Although a gimmick performer in every sense of the word—he portrayed the All-American superhero whose convictions and strength helped him rise above adversity—Hulk Hogan captivated AWA audiences and his popularity began to rocket upward. Hogan was even given the role of Thunderlips in the film *Rocky III*. But Verne Gagne's AWA billed itself as a wrestling organization built around traditional wrestlers, and Hogan could only advance so far in such a promotion, as the promoters would never put the gimmick star Hogan in the role of wrestling champion. Given these circumstances, Hogan was still able to become the top attraction in all of professional wrestling and, when Vince McMahon came calling with offers of cash and the top spot in his expanding WWF promotion, Hogan accepted and left the AWA. Keith Elliot Greenberg wrote in *Pro Wrestling: From Carnivals to Cable TV*:

“The days of promoting men who viewed themselves as pure wrestlers were over. The movement that Vincent K. McMahon would later dub ‘sports-entertainment’ was beginning” (52-53).

Now with wrestling’s biggest star in his stable of performers as well as many other “name” wrestlers, the WWF set course for a promoting blitz. WWF programming was brought into well-established AWA and NWA territories (Thesz 207). Hulk Hogan, one month after his 1984 arrival in the WWF, defeated the Iranian-born villain The Iron Sheik for the WWF world heavyweight championship. “Hulkamania,” the Hogan craze that originated in Japan, was about to run wild on wrestling fans all over the nation, and the old territorial system in wrestling was all but given a death sentence (Greenberg 53). When McMahon set out to become the leading promotion in the country in 1983 about twenty regional territories still operated; by 1988 five remained and only one could be considered viable competition (Thesz 207).

McMahon also had another idea to bring new fans into the world of professional wrestling. Never in wrestling history had there been an event billed as an extravaganza the whole world was watching. There had been numerous high-profile matches and countless “supercards” over the years, but never had any of these events achieved worldwide availability. 1985’s *WrestleMania* changed that fact forever (Albano and Sugar 181). Thanks to the WWF’s convenient headquarters location in the media capital of the world, New York City, and also the WWF’s growing television presence throughout the country, McMahon was able to convince the world that wrestling was “in” (Thesz 206). Hot celebrities of the time such as singer Cyndi Lauper and actor Mr. T. were brought into the WWF to bolster its profile. Vince McMahon appeared on TV claiming that, “if people

wanted to see Mr. T. wrestle, they can watch *WrestleMania* on March 31” (Greenberg 54). After building a card featuring celebrity managers, referees, and timekeepers, all of the WWF’s top wrestlers, and a main event featuring Hulk Hogan teaming with Mr. T., the WWF advertised to the world that *WrestleMania* could be seen on closed-circuit television at theaters and arenas or on pay-per-view, a new feature in cable television. Questions arose as to whether the WWF could bring in significant revenue via pay-per-view broadcasts, but those inquiries were swiftly answered as orders for the show poured in. The WWF would go on to become a leader in the pay-per-view market, with *WrestleMania* becoming an annual event (Greenberg 55).

Meanwhile, the National Wrestling Alliance and other promotions did not sit idly by while the WWF attempted to go national, and several efforts were made to thwart McMahon’s rise to prominence. In 1986, several promoters took the concept of *WrestleMania* and decided to have a supercard of their own in New Orleans, Louisiana’s Superdome. Eight different wrestling organizations worked with event organizer and fellow promoter Jim Crockett Jr. to set up a massive tag-team tournament involving 50 different wrestlers (Greenberg 60). Behind the scenes, however, the promoters were not getting along, prompting McMahon to joke that once the group agreed to put him out of business, they could not agree on what to order for lunch (Greenberg 59). Crockett eventually tired of the squabbling and took it upon himself to attempt to oust McMahon.

Crockett began to promote shows in his allies’ territories and purchased two others. With Crockett’s actions, the NWA, of which Crockett was the president, was effectively dissolved. Crockett, keeping the NWA name for his promotion to capitalize on its rich

history, catered his product to the traditional wrestling fan. His promotions champion was a talented and believable performer named Ric Flair, and his wrestling cards featured more actual wrestling than entertainment. Crockett cited the WWF as more of a cartoon show than a wrestling promotion (Greenberg 60).

In essence the WWF had indeed become a live-action cartoon show, its main focus being on Hulk Hogan and his Herculean feats, which included body slamming the recently-turned heel and previously indestructible Andre the Giant. Hogan, according to Thesz, “symbolizes better than anyone the culmination of what began in the late 1940s: the ascendancy of character performers, and the demise of wrestling’s credibility” (206). Hogan, being portrayed as a larger-than-life cartoon character, bred other character wrestlers in the WWF who fit more on a Saturday morning children’s show than a professional wrestling show. These performers included the Honky Tonk Man, an Elvis Presley impersonator complete with sideburns and jumpsuit; the Ultimate Warrior, a face-painted muscle-bound figure hailing from “parts unknown” gained his power from an unknown life force; and Ax and Smash, a leather and spike wearing tag-team calling themselves Demolition. Few of these wrestlers had amateur ability or knew more than a few wrestling holds—most of their offense in a match consisted of punching, kicking, and performance holds such as the sleeper hold, abdominal stretch, and the bear hug. Yet characters such as these were ripe for marketing and McMahon easily ventured into merchandising by licensing his characters for products such as action figures, sticker books, and t-shirts. There were even oddball products such as WWF Ice Cream Bars and,

not ironically, a WWF-produced Saturday morning cartoon show called *Hulk Hogan's Rock 'n Wrestling*.

Professional wrestling was not just about wrestling anymore, and Jim Crockett Jr., who had continued to promote traditional style wrestling, could not draw the audiences needed to survive in the WWF-dominated wrestling market. Crockett would, in 1988, sell his NWA wrestling promotion outright to Atlanta-based media mogul Ted Turner, who did little with the company initially. For the next few years, the WWF found itself the only major wrestling company in the United States. It was at this time that McMahon took it upon himself to announce to the world the not-so-well-kept secret that wrestling was “fake.”

Since the early days of professional wrestling, promotions had been at the mercy of individual state athletic commissions who would sanction the wrestling card, ensure that the show followed the rules and policies they had established, and make sure that they were getting their fair share of the gate receipts. In an attempt to avoid the overly zealous New Jersey State Athletic Commission, who had taken notice of the recent success of the WWF, McMahon announced in front of the media that professional wrestling was not legitimate athletic competition. Instead, McMahon acknowledged that professional wrestling was a form of entertainment and that the contests were pre-determined, coining the term “sports entertainment” as a synonym for professional wrestling in the process. McMahon justly and successfully contended that the WWF should no longer be subject to the regulations set forth by various state athletic commissions (Thesz 209). If there were any remaining questions as to the legitimacy of the in-ring contests, they had been

succinctly answered. Since the media likened McMahon's pronouncement of wrestling's true identity to calling the kettle black, the WWF was able to forge ahead with business as usual.

The World Wrestling Federation entered the '90s facing no direct competition yet the promotion found itself becoming creatively stagnant (Parrish). Hulk Hogan had held the WWF championship for five of the previous six years, buy rates for the previous year's *WrestleMania* show were down compared to the two *WrestleManias* before it, and attendance numbers at WWF shows across the United States were beginning to decline. In April, 1990, at *WrestleMania VI*, McMahon had Hogan lose the championship title to the Ultimate Warrior with the hope that the Warrior would become the same type of star that Hogan had become and carry the promotion well into the 1990s (Greenberg 90). But the Warrior did not possess the showmanship that Hogan had a talent for, and he was not hailed a crossover celebrity like Hogan was, and by 1991's *WrestleMania VII* Hogan had the title belt around his waist again (Greenberg 91).

1991 also saw the WWF begin to have trouble with the law. Federal authorities charged Dr. George Zahorian with selling illegal anabolic steroids to WWF wrestlers who would then use the substance to bulk up and maintain their large physiques, a trait Vince McMahon preferred his performers to possess. Zahorian was later convicted and sentenced to prison, but investigators continued to pursue his connection with the World Wrestling Federation. In late 1993 Vince McMahon was charged by federal authorities with conspiring to distribute anabolic steroids to his performers. McMahon faced eight years in jail, a \$500,000 fine, and the seizure of the \$9 million Stamford, Connecticut, WWF

headquarters were he to be convicted. Add to this the controversy arising after two WWF ring boys, who would aid in assembling the wrestling ring at WWF events, charged that WWF employees had sexually molested them, and Vince McMahon and the WWF were in dire straits (Greenberg 91-94).

The WWF wrestling product as a whole suffered as a result of the behind the scenes distractions and the increasingly frequent absences of McMahon, the creative leader. Ric Flair, the multi-time NWA heavyweight champion and stalwart figure of that group in the 1980s, had joined the WWF in late 1991. Since the rise of Hulk Hogan, wrestling fans had dreamt of a Flair-Hogan match up, pitting two organizations' top stars against each other. With Flair now a WWF employee, fans were clamoring for a match. But with Vince McMahon preoccupied, the storyline and match were seemingly thrown together. Little promotion was done for this historic meeting, and the match itself was a huge letdown for long-time fans after it ended not in a decisive pinfall but in a count-out victory for Flair. The WWF had squandered a sure fire "money match" and Flair would leave the company within one year (Greenberg 94-95).

WWF characters also began to push the limits of fans' ability to suspend disbelief. Audiences were witness to new characters such as Isaac Yankem, D.D.S., an evil dentist with bad teeth; Irwin R. Schyster, or I.R.S., a man out to make sure you were paid up on your taxes; and, in what was supposed to be Vince McMahon's retort to critics that the WWF was a circus, Doink the Clown, complete with full clown make-up and big, green hair. Countless other gimmick wrestlers of this ilk populated the WWF roster, and the fans started tuning out WWF programming. By the time McMahon was acquitted in June, 1994,

the WWF was seen on 100 fewer television stations than it had been just three years prior—a 33% drop (Greenberg 95).

Meanwhile, a new threat to the World Wrestling Federation was looming. After the sale by Jim Crockett Jr. of his NWA promotion to Atlanta-based media magnate Ted Turner in 1988, Turner had the promotion's name changed to World Championship Wrestling (WCW) and began airing WCW television programs on the self-proclaimed cable "SuperStation" TBS (Greenberg 98). Turner had noticed that NWA wrestling programming previously aired on his stations had drawn strong ratings and felt that, with his financial backing, he could build strong competition for Vince McMahon's WWF (Thesz 208). Turner knew he could not be involved in the promotion's day-to-day operations, so he sought to hire someone with a vision for the future of professional wrestling to head his company. His choice was Eric Bischoff, the man who would have the greatest influence on the resurgence of professional wrestling in the latter half of the 1990s.

Bischoff had an immediate effect on WCW. One of his first orders of business was to lure Hulk Hogan away from the WWF, which he did successfully in 1994. Signing Hogan, the man long considered to be the symbol of the WWF, was a major coup for WCW and instantly made WCW a major player in the wrestling business. Within six months, WCW also lured WWF-mainstay Randy "Macho Man" Savage to its ranks. By the end of 1994, WCW's goal was to convince wrestling fans that anyone who had had anything to do with the success of the WWF during its heyday no longer had any desire to be there (Greenberg 99-100). Bischoff had one other ace up his sleeve, one that targeted

WWF programming, and on September 4, 1995, he would play his hand. Little did anyone know that Bischoff's idea would be the spark for the explosion that was about to occur in professional wrestling.

Since January of 1993, the World Wrestling Federation had been running a weekly Monday night wrestling show entitled *WWF Monday Night Raw* on the USA cable network. This show was the program on which most WWF storylines of the era were moved forward. *Raw* was a "must see" program for wrestling fans as it showcased the top talent of the federation each week. Even though a majority of the weekly Monday night programs were taped in advance, *Raw* was produced in such a way as to bring a "live" element to the show for those viewing at home. Filmed entirely at New York City's intimate Manhattan Center, *Monday Night Raw's* subtitle was "Uncooked. Uncut. Uncensored." This slogan was chosen specifically to promote the "anything can happen" mentality that coincides with a live wrestling show. For two years *Raw* aired without any opposing competition, garnering respectable ratings for a cable broadcast considering the recent downturn in business and the behind the scenes scandals plaguing the World Wrestling Federation at the time.

From the moment he took over WCW, Eric Bischoff knew that in order to compete with the WWF, WCW must offer an alternative to wrestling fans and that there was no other way to accomplish this than air a WCW show directly opposite that of WWF's *Monday Night Raw*. Wrestling insiders felt that offering two shows at the same time would result in fans getting frustrated at having to continuously switch channels and react by tuning out altogether (Greenberg 100). Bischoff ignored these concerns and on

September 4, 1995, World Championship Wrestling aired the first ever *WCW Monday Nitro* on Turner's TNT cable network. Airing live from the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, the first *Nitro* featured WCW's biggest names—Hulk Hogan, Ric Flair, and Sting—and included the surprise appearance of Lex Luger. Luger had been in the WWF for the previous two years and, after showing up in street clothes, he proceeded to lambaste the WWF on national television. Luger then challenged Hogan to a championship match on the following week's *Nitro*. The first shot in what would become known in wrestling's fan circles as the Monday Night Wars had been fired.

Nitro differed from *Raw* in that the WCW show aired live every week from a different city in the United States. With the majority of *Monday Night Raw* shows being taped a few weeks in advance of their airdates, *Nitro*, thanks to wrestling newsletters and insider communication, had the advantage of knowing what the WWF would air. WCW would then counter-program *Nitro* to feature certain matches and segments at strategic points during the broadcast to lure viewers away from *Raw* and to keep already tuned-in viewers from switching channels. On several occasions Eric Bischoff, who served as one of *Nitro*'s on-air announcers, would reveal the results for that night's episode of *Raw* at the beginning of the program. The strategy behind the move, the ethics of which were angrily questioned by many, predicted that fans would stay exclusively tuned to *Nitro* since they already knew what was going to transpire on *Raw*. What infuriated many more was the appearance on the December 12 *Nitro* of current WWF Women's Champion Alundra Blayze, who promptly placed her championship title in a garbage can, signifying that the WWF title was worthless. These tactics were considered ruthless by longtime wrestling

fans and journalists, but Bischoff was sending a message to the World Wrestling Federation: WCW meant business in its quest to become the number one wrestling company in the nation (Greenberg 100-101).

For the first six months that *WCW Monday Nitro* was on the air, the WCW and WWF Monday night programs often alternated Monday night ratings victories (Nurse). This was considered a positive sign for the fledgling WCW program and for the company in general that had been widely considered an underdog, and soon more and more WWF stars were signed to the company. This time, however, WCW would not promote the new arrivals as WWF stars that no longer wanted affiliation with their former company. In an idea that would send the popularity of World Championship Wrestling skyrocketing, Eric Bischoff suggested that two of his new signees portray wrestlers not associated with WCW in any way. Instead these wrestlers were told to act as if they were still affiliated with Vince McMahon's WWF.

On the May 26, 1996, *WCW Monday Nitro*, which was debuting its new two hour format, a match between "The Mauler" Mike Enos and Steve Doll was interrupted by the appearance of WWF wrestler Razor Ramon, whose real name was Scott Hall. Hall entered the ring, took a microphone, and, using the fake Latino accent employed by the Ramon character, proceeded to verbally bash WCW and threaten, "We're taking over!" One week later, Hall would appear again promising a "big surprise" for the following week's *Nitro*. Hall's surprise was WWF wrestler Diesel, real name Kevin Nash, who had recently held the WWF world championship for close to one year. Nash appeared with Hall at the close of the June 10th *Nitro* in the announcer's booth to badger Eric Bischoff. Bischoff,

perpetuating the illusion that Hall and Nash were not affiliated with WCW, did not acknowledge the pair by any name and, appearing to fear for his life, told the twosome that he would give them a match at that weekend's pay-per-view. When Bischoff failed to deliver at the event as promised, Nash gave Bischoff his finishing move—a power bomb—off the elevated announcer's stage. These tactics, meant to incite the audience's anger and wrath, actually garnered cheers from the WCW fans in attendance. An angle such as this “hostile takeover” of WCW had never been done in professional wrestling, and fans were eating the storyline up while bucking the trend of always cheering for the babyfaces.

As a result of Bischoff's ideas, *WCW Monday Nitro* would be the ratings victor on Monday nights for the better part of the next two years, including an 83-week span of consecutive ratings victories in head-to-head competition with *Monday Night Raw* (Nurse). Wrestling fans had shown the WWF that their product was conventional and stale. WCW's hot takeover storyline was a fresh idea, it was shocking, it was unpredictable, and it would change the way wrestling storylines were booked for the rest of the millennium.

Some credit for the new wave of fan attitudes becoming apparent with the “hostile takeover” angle, including the cheering of heels Hall and Nash, must be attributed to the influence of the Philadelphia-based Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) promotion. Started in 1992, ECW featured salacious angles, high-flying stunt-based matches, and copious amounts of blood—things that would never air on WWF or WCW programming at the time. The company developed a rabidly loyal and, more importantly, vocal fanbase. If

an ECW performer did not perform up to the audience's expectations, the fans would be sure to let that wrestler know their feelings. Chants of "You suck!" or "You fucked up!" were not uncommon occurrences after an uninteresting promo or botched move. These seemingly vulgar displays by the audience were wholeheartedly embraced and encouraged by ECW wrestlers and promoters. ECW even went so far as to encourage its fans to bring homemade signs and, for a short while, weapons like frying pans and chairs for its performers to utilize during outside-the-ring brawls. The more an ECW wrestler became violent or showcased aerial maneuvers never seen before, the more the fans cheered for that performer, whether or not he was a babyface or a heel. As a result of the ECW fans' responses to their work, the wrestlers were willing to do almost anything to impress and thrill the crowd (Greenberg 105). In turn, fans became more likely to support an *entertaining* performer, not only one who was portrayed as a babyface. ECW's fans' attitudes quickly spread to the other major promotions' shows. This was clearly evident on *Nitro*. Hall and Nash's actions were supposed to be reprehensible and elicit massive rounds of boos, but both the way the angle was presented and the skill in which the involved characters played their parts proved to be incredibly entertaining to the audience, resulting in the heel performers being cheered.

The change in fan attitudes can also be attributed to the demographics of the wrestling fan base itself. The professional wrestling fan of the 1990s was younger and had grown up in the "MTV world of instant gratification" (Albano and Sugar 230). An "in your face" attitude now permeated pop culture where consumers and advertisers started catering incessantly to the youth-oriented market. For professional wrestling fans,

“[T]he old questions of “real” or “fake” no longer mattered. The performance was everything. With Star Wars laser shows, smoke machines, and theme music marking all of the wrestlers’ entrances, you’ve got an overall event that the new young audiences not only could identify with, but could really get into.” (Albano and Sugar 230-1)

And fans were really getting into WCW’s hostile takeover saga. By July’s WCW pay-per-view offering *Bash at the Beach*, interest in the storyline had swelled and mystery surrounded who was going to be the next man to join Hall and Nash. The main event for the show was a six-man tag team match pitting top WCW stars Sting, Lex Luger, and Randy “Macho Man” Savage against Scott Hall, Kevin Nash, and a mystery partner. In the weeks leading up to the July 7th show, WCW television centered on the idea that anyone with WWF ties was suspect. Of course, the WWF was never mentioned by name for fear of a misrepresentation lawsuit, but the implications were made strong enough to be obvious. When the match began, Hall and Nash, now being referred to as the Outsiders, fought the match without their third partner. After Lex Luger was “knocked out” during the match, many immediately suspected he would return later in the bout to aid the Outsiders. Instead, Hulk Hogan made his way to the ring, presumably to take Luger’s spot on the WCW team. Fans, not expecting Hogan to appear at the show, were cheering wildly as Hogan entered the ring, staring down the Outsiders with the steeliest of glares, prompting Hall and Nash to retreat to ringside. Then, in perhaps the most shocking heel-turn in wrestling history, Hulk Hogan, the all-American good guy, the man who encouraged everyone to, “train, say your prayers, and eat your vitamins,” dropped his signature leg drop across the prone Macho Man’s neck. Hogan had “turned his back” on World Championship Wrestling and joined the hostile takeover. Hogan, Hall, and Nash

raised each other's arms in triumph as Hogan declared the three of them to be the "New World Order" and that all of his fans could "stick it!"

The next few weeks of WCW television programming featured the New World Order (NWO) continuing their mission to take over WCW using any means necessary. The group portrayed themselves as a lawless gang of thugs refusing to follow any protocol set on WCW television. The NWO were shown interfering in matches, beating up WCW wrestlers backstage, and, after Hogan became the WCW world heavyweight champion, spray-painting the WCW title belt with the initials of the NWO. Meanwhile, *WCW Monday Nitro* ratings continued to rise. Fans were intrigued by the NWO angle, and one would be hard pressed to walk down a busy street anywhere in the United States without seeing an individual sporting a t-shirt bearing the NWO logo. The anti-authority faction appealed to the new generation of wrestling fans to the point that the heel group was cheered more often than not for their antics (Greenberg 101).

Soon the NWO was all over WCW television. For the year following *Bash at the Beach*, the main focus of WCW storylines was WCW wrestlers' attempts to stop the destruction perpetrated by the NWO. Wrestlers who otherwise hated each other were compelled to join forces to thwart the group. In storyline twists, some WCW wrestlers "defected" to the increasingly powerful NWO, and Dennis Rodman, the eccentric professional basketball player, joined the NWO, even missing a Chicago Bulls practice session to take part in a segment on WCW television (Greenberg 101). With WCW ratings at an all-time high for the company, WCW used its newfound viewership to attempt to build new stars to bank on in the future. The promotion could not have been more

successful than they were with fresh star Bill Goldberg, whose natural intensity and incredible physique appealed to fans both old and new.

Goldberg debuted on the September 22, 1997 edition of *Monday Nitro* to little fanfare. Dressed only in plain black trunks and boots, many thought that the muscular but unknown Goldberg did not stand a chance against his opponent, the burly Hugh Morrus. To the shock and surprise of the arena audience and viewers at home, Goldberg upset the veteran in short order. The next several weeks of programming saw Goldberg dispatch other established ring veterans in similar fashion. WCW promoted Goldberg as an unstoppable monster, and fans soon took notice. WCW claimed that Goldberg had an impressive 74-match undefeated streak (his total was actually 43 matches) going into his United States championship match against Raven on April 20, 1998. Fans in the arena raised signs in the air that said "75-0" and "Raven's Next!", a play on Goldberg's catchphrase of "Who's Next?" Goldberg unsurprisingly emerged victorious and his popularity surged. By summer of that same year, Goldberg was riding a wave of popularity that would not break.

WCW began advertising a *Monday Nitro* to take place in their home city of Atlanta, Georgia, at the Georgia Dome on July 6th. The show drew an incredible 41,412 paid fans, most of whom had attended to see Goldberg take on Hulk Hogan for the world championship. The storyline going into the epic encounter had Goldberg being faced with the stipulation of defeating Hogan's fellow NWO member Scott Hall early in the show in order to get the match with Hogan in the main event. Fans were rabid when Goldberg convincingly upended Hall. But the reaction was explosive when Goldberg overcame

interference from a multitude of NWO members and pinned Hogan in the center of the ring to close out the show. The composite rating for this huge *Monday Nitro* was an astounding 4.8, meaning nearly 4.6 million viewers were tuned in, but it would be one of the last times that *WCW Monday Nitro* would outdraw *WWF Monday Night Raw* in the ratings (Nurse). The WWF had regrouped and was on its way to dominating wrestling once again.

After WCW introduced Scott Hall and Kevin Nash on *Monday Nitro*, WWF's flagship show *Monday Night Raw* suffered. By the end of 1996 *Raw* was drawing ratings in low 2.0's, the lowest ratings for the show since *Nitro* debuted. The hyped "return" of Razor Ramon and Diesel, the characters originated by Scott Hall and Kevin Nash, was a misleading letdown, as different wrestlers were brought in to portray those roles. Parodies of WCW stars including "The Huckster," the "Nacho Man," and "Billionaire Ted" were given television time; and even more cartoonish wrestlers like Duke "The Dumpster" Droese and Bastion Booger populated the roster. The WWF was at its lowest point creatively and it seemed that every move the promotion made was out of desperation. Fans and critics, terms not necessarily mutually exclusive, were quick to point to the McMahon steroid trial and other legal woes as the reason the WWF product had been suffering, but the trial had been concluded for over two years and the WWF was still in creative decline. The fact was that the WWF was still promoting its product as though it was 1986, not 1996, and fans were consistently booing the wrestlers the WWF was trying to push as faces. McMahon needed to find a way to connect with wrestling fans once again, and the answer came in the form of a foul-mouthed Texas redneck.

On June 23rd, 1996, wrestler Steve Austin emerged victorious in the WWF's annual King of the Ring pay-per-view tournament. After defeating the born-again Christian Jake "The Snake" Roberts for the crown, Austin was interviewed at ringside. What Austin said would change the WWF's direction completely and lead it back into contention with WCW:

"[Jake Roberts], you talk about your Psalms, talk about your dreams, talk about John 3:16, well Austin 3:16 says I just whooped your ass! ...And that's the bottom line because Stone Cold said so!" (Hatter X)

The next night on *Raw*, "Austin 3:16" signs populated the arena. Austin was a heel, but the fans began to cheer for him. Austin portrayed a hell raiser—a man with no cares in the world, especially for authority, and one who used foul language frequently. WWF wrestler The Rock described Austin as, "Mr. Antiauthority... say anything... gutter mouth... flip the middle finger whenever I feel like it!" (The Rock 236). Fans took to him almost instantly. "Austin 3:16" t-shirts became hot sellers and fans would chant along whenever Stone Cold would utter the "bottom line" catchphrase, even after he told those same fans to "shut up!" It was Austin's independent attitude and, ironically, his effort not to be liked that fans identified with (Greenberg 112). The harder Austin tried to get fans to boo his character, the more the audience would cheer him on. Austin was even booked in a long-term feud with Bret Hart, a longtime babyface in the WWF, but instead of booing Austin, fans turned on Hart, whose good-guy image was not connecting with them anymore.

The WWF had no choice but to push Austin as a face. The fan response to Austin was a wake up call to the WWF creative staff, and they soon began to introduce new,

edgier storylines to their audience. By the end of 1997, fans had started to see the new direction the company was going in. This was most notable in an angle involving Austin and injured wrestler Brian Pillman. Pillman was being interviewed at his home when Austin, who had been sidelined by injuries caused by Pillman earlier in the year, could be heard attempting to break in to Pillman's house. Pillman pulled a gun on Austin only for *Raw* to go off the air as Pillman fired shots off-camera. The audience was left to contemplate Austin's fate until the next week's edition of *Raw* (Austin managed to avoid the deadly bullets).

1997 also saw the introduction of Vince McMahon as an on-air character. McMahon had been a commentator on the various WWF television programs dating back to the 1970s, but he had never been acknowledged as the owner of the promotion. During the year, however, several storylines had the wrestlers referring to his position in the company or pleading with Vince to intervene in their affairs. McMahon portrayed himself as humble and fair, but that would change dramatically by year's end.

It was during the November 9, 1997, *Survivor Series* pay-per-view in Montreal, Canada, that fans first glimpsed the real Vince McMahon. The main event pitted World Wrestling Federation Champion Bret Hart against challenger Shawn Michaels. Even though he was WWF Champion going into the pay-per-view, Hart would be leaving the company for WCW within the next month; McMahon could no longer afford to pay Hart's large salary. With the pay-per-view taking place in Montreal, Hart, who had been portrayed as a Canadian national hero for the better part of one year, was adamant about not losing the title in his home country. McMahon and Hart discussed the finish of the

match on several occasions, agreeing to end the bout with a double-disqualification only hours before the contest was to take place. In the discussions between McMahon and Hart, McMahon never once suggested that Hart lose the match (Meltzer This Day). But McMahon, fearing Hart would not agree to drop the title prior to his departure to WCW, and with the Alundra Blayze incident no doubt in the back of his mind, double-crossed Hart. When Michaels held Hart in a submission move, McMahon ordered the referee to signal for the bell and announce that Michaels was the winner by submission, even though Hart clearly did not give up.

McMahon parlayed the massively negative fan reaction to the incident into the creation of the "Mr. McMahon" character. Mr. McMahon, in stark contrast to his previous onscreen persona, was the despicable boss who always got what he wanted, did not care for his employees, and squashed the hopes and dreams of his wrestlers with one ruthless decision after another. Only one WWF superstar was portrayed as bold enough to confront the WWF owner—Stone Cold Steve Austin (Greenberg 109). McMahon used Austin's growing popularity to make the Mr. McMahon character a bigger heel, which in turn made Austin a bigger babyface. Mr. McMahon's mission was to make Austin's life in the WWF a living hell. Stone Cold's response was pure defiance, refusing to do anything his boss asked of him, saluting McMahon with middle fingers and giving the WWF owner his signature move, the "Stone Cold Stunner" (Greenberg 112).

Stone Cold Steve Austin, Mr. McMahon, and other over-the-top controversial characters the World Wrestling Federation was developing at the time were part of the movement the WWF called "Attitude." The success of *WCW Monday Nitro* illustrated to

McMahon and the WWF creative staff that they needed to improve the on-air quality of the WWF product if they wanted to compete with *Nitro*. “Attitude” was the WWF’s attempt to reach out to the new breed of fans borne out of the success of ECW and of WCW’s NWO angle. In addition to the ongoing McMahon-Austin storyline, other WWF angles created with “Attitude” in mind included the formation of D-Generation X, four performers who would tell other wrestlers to “Suck it!” and generally be mischievous in and out of the ring, and the evolution of the racism-tinged group the Nation of Domination, “a highly militant faction... perceived by fans to be almost like the Black Panthers in terms of ideology” (The Rock 222).

The competition *Nitro* had provided *Raw* and the resulting change in creative direction increased the creative quality of WWF programming (Albano and Sugar 34). By the middle of 1998, *Nitro* and *Raw* were running neck-and-neck in the ratings race. *Nitro*’s 83-week streak of head-to-head ratings victories had ended on April 13 when a lackluster *WCW Monday Nitro* succumbed to a curiosity piquing *Monday Night Raw*. *Raw*’s main storyline that evening was built around the developing Austin-McMahon feud, and a main event of Stone Cold Steve Austin vs. Vince McMahon was advertised as the show progressed. That match, incidentally, never actually took place even though both combatants were in the ring; the WWF instead deliberately choosing to save the money match for a later date on pay-per-view.

Another reason for *Raw*’s resurgence in the Monday Night Wars was a change in the actual production of the television program. With the new “Attitude” came a more in-your-face approach to the *Raw* show. *Raw* was given a slightly different name, *Raw is*

War, and the program now aired live every week to combat the advantage *Nitro* held when *Raw* was taped. A heavy metal song became the show's theme, replacing a generic 1980's rock style tune. Use of dramatic camera cuts and angles became more prominent and each of the segments of the program was shortened. The show's content increasingly included shocking and questionable material, including its wrestlers using stronger, more explicit language during their interviews and in their matches, more violent confrontations in and out of the ring, and scantily clad women serving no other purpose on the program than to be ogled at. This approach to the WWF's flagship program became known as "Crash TV". The Crash TV style of production mixed the short attention span segments with shocking storylines and action, maximizing excitement. *Raw is War* became less of an actual wrestling show and more of a testosterone-fueled soap opera.

Crash TV was largely the brainchild of WWF writer Vince Russo, who had begun to submit ideas for angles in 1997. Russo showed that he had a flair for writing controversial yet logical and complex television. By the end of 1997 Russo had written storylines for The Nation of Domination, who had a memorable feud with the Hart Foundation that included racial overtones, as well as interviews and skits involving the D-Generation X group. D-X leader Shawn Michaels' antics in these segments included picking his nose with a Canadian flag, baring his posterior to live audiences, and playing strip poker with his cohorts. While Michaels may have done these actions on his own, it was Russo who was scripting the scenarios behind Michaels' on-air activities.

With Russo at the helm of the creative direction entering 1998 and the rising *Raw* ratings, the WWF saw that their new "Attitude" and Crash TV approach to *Raw is War*

was clicking with wrestling fans. *WrestleMania XIV* was only a few weeks away and the WWF wanted to find a way to capitalize on the rising viewership of its Monday night program leading up to the biggest pay-per-view show of the year. Vince McMahon began to look for someone he could bring into the company to raise the profile of *Raw* and the upcoming *WrestleMania* card. McMahon found his man in boxer Mike Tyson. Tyson, known more for his bizarre behavior and violent personality than his boxing skills, fit the new direction of the WWF in spades, and all the WWF had to do was give Tyson something to do on the *WrestleMania* show. The main event of *WrestleMania XIV* was scheduled to be Stone Cold Steve Austin taking on Shawn Michaels for Michaels' WWF championship. On the *Raw* shows leading up to *WrestleMania*, McMahon announced that Tyson was to be a "special guest enforcer" for the main event title match. Tyson appeared on two separate *Raw* episodes prior to the pay-per-view, one time getting into a brawl with a trash talking Steve Austin and the other instance being named a member of Shawn Michaels' D-X group, an angle meant to stack the odds against the challenger. In each case national media outlets from ESPN to NBC covered the storyline developments for the *WrestleMania* main event on their news and sports programs, ensuring that a wider audience was aware of the upcoming pay-per-view. The hype paid off for the WWF as *WrestleMania XIV* drew the largest buyrate for the annual show in over five years (Wrestling Information Archive).

The momentum continued for the WWF following *WrestleMania*, and the Federation and Russo continued to push the envelope. Stone Cold Steve Austin and D-Generation X, now led by Hunter Hearst Helmsley, were doing most of the pushing on

WWF television. D-Generation X had some of the more memorable angles of the period that included showing the faction urinating on a rival group's motorcycles, creating a disturbance outside an arena that was hosting a *WCW Monday Nitro*, and invading CNN (and WCW) headquarters in Atlanta. Much like Austin's anti-hero character did, D-X's antics warmed fans up to the outlaw group. On the night Goldberg was winning the WCW heavyweight championship, D-X was performing a dead-on parody of the Nation of Domination, an in-ring farce that became one of the most memorable segments of the group's history. Soon D-X was beginning to rival Austin in popularity. D-Generation X t-shirts were hot items at merchandise stands and their signature gesture, the "crotch chop"—crossing the arms at the wrists to form an 'X' and repeatedly performing a chop motion in the groin area—was even beginning to be used by athletes in professional sports. Other racy storylines included wrestler Marc Mero's abuse and humiliation of his valet Sable who, in defiance, would often strip to barely-there bikinis; and the introduction of a wrestler named Val Venis who claimed to be a porn star, complete with introductory vignettes that left little to the imagination and interviews filled with double entendres.

The momentum did not continue for WCW, however, after Goldberg's championship victory. With the WWF and WCW Monday night programming now running neck and neck in the ratings, the focus of WCW became reclaiming the lead in the Monday Night Wars. Over the next year and a half WCW tried several different strategies to overtake *Raw is War*, but these attempts would prove futile against the now "hot" WWF. Efforts included reforming and rehashing the original NWO angle not once but twice, bringing in hot Hollywood and sports celebrities like rapper Master P, comedian Jay Leno,

and basketball star Karl Malone to participate in *Nitro* segments and wrestle at pay-per-views, and luring away the WWF writers who were being credited for the recent resurgence of the company, including Vince Russo. But during their rise to prominence in the wrestling world, WCW had been and was still being poorly managed.

In order to lure big name talent like Hulk Hogan and Bill Goldberg to sign with the company, Eric Bischoff had given several of his star performers contracts that guaranteed a specific amount of money—a first in the wrestling business. Wrestlers up until this time made money based on the paid attendance, their perceived popularity, the number of matches they wrestled, and the type of card they wrestled on (e.g. a pay-per-view promised a bigger payday than a house show). With wrestling a business based on public appeal, wrestlers had a difficult time predicting the amount of income they could count on.

Bischoff's guaranteed contracts ensured financial stability for WCW performers. Bischoff also structured some of his wrestler's contracts so that they limited their appearances and gave the wrestler creative control over the direction of their characters. Several of the wrestlers served on the WCW booking committee at one point or another. These contractual and backstage concessions by Bischoff and WCW to its performers essentially allowed the WCW inmates to run the asylum. On several instances angles would have to be written and re-written at the last minute because one wrestler did not want to lose or even participate in a proposed storyline. Bill Goldberg was known to have entirely nixed a proposed feud with the burgeoning and popular Chris Jericho because he felt Jericho was too small to credibly compete with him (Benner). Wrestlers serving on the booking committee would often suggest storylines for their friends in the locker room, usually

meaning an angle involving another wrestler would have to be cut from television programming. There was a perceived "glass ceiling" in WCW at this time, where many wrestlers could only reach the middle tier of performers—the top-tier performers would not allow themselves to be replaced in the hierarchy.

The backstage politics and mismanagement occurring in WCW, coupled with a string of bad luck involving injuries to its big name stars, including Goldberg and Bret Hart, meant that WCW was not operating at its full capability. The WCW television programs, which now included a two-hour Thursday night program on TBS called *WCW Thunder*, began to suffer in quality and fans began to either turn to the WWF or turn off wrestling altogether. At the beginning of 1999, *WCW Monday Nitro* was consistently losing to *Raw is War* and ratings were stagnating, hovering just under the 5.0 mark, still a respectable number (Nurse). By the end of the year, however, weekly ratings were slightly above 3.0, Eric Bischoff had been fired and replaced with a Turner executive with no prior wrestling management experience, and most notably, the Vince Russo-led storylines written by the WCW creative team were not clicking with fans. When Russo was hired, many felt that his creative ability would be WCW's savior. But WCW's mismanagement and its wrestler's constant politicking contributed to Russo's inability to write the same type of compelling and controversial stories that brought the WWF back into prominence. WCW entered 2000 the losers of the Monday Night Wars and were struggling to survive creatively and financially.

As the WWF progressed through 1999, the company found itself at the top of the wrestling world once again. *WWF Raw is War* was consistently the number one rated

program on cable television, media across the nation were noting the popularity of professional wrestling in news programs, magazines, and newspapers, WWF arena shows—both televised and house shows—were selling out across the nation, and a Federation-produced music CD featuring wrestlers' entrance themes made the top ten on the Billboard chart. The initials "WWF" were frequently in the top five search requests on the Internet search engine Lycos (Albano and Sugar 240). Several WWF wrestlers made cameo appearances in movies and television shows. And former WWF wrestler and then-recently elected Governor of Minnesota Jesse Ventura, whose election some attribute to his history in wrestling, made a special guest appearance on a *Raw is War* program and the *SummerSlam* pay-per-view.

With the extreme notoriety of WWF wrestling at this time, largely due to the WWF's transformation into the "Attitude" mindset, it is no surprise that there were several groups who criticized the WWF's direction and their overall product. Some felt that the WWF was sending its audience negative images and messages to its mostly younger audience. Indiana University released findings of a study it conducted during the previous year on the content of 50 episodes of *Raw is War*. Commissioned by the television news program *Inside Edition*, the study sought to identify the amounts of vulgarity, sex, and violence occurring on *Raw*. Among the items cited within the program were over 600 uses of items as weapons, more than 125 instances of simulated sexual activity, and nearly 160 uses of the middle finger (Albano and Sugar 113). Mick Foley, who played the characters of Mankind, Dude Love, and Cactus Jack in the WWF, in his New York Times best selling book *Foley is Good* took the study to task and refuted many of its findings. Foley would

conclude that, “the Indiana University study was accepted as hard fact by a media either too apathetic or too reckless to seek the truth” (Foley 416). The WWF also drew strong criticism from the Parents Television Council (PTC) who, upon viewing the new Thursday night WWF offering on the UPN network, *WWF SmackDown!*, immediately put the show in its list of programs as part of a campaign to “Clean Up TV, Now!” and named it “the sleaziest show on broadcast TV” (Foley 418). The PTC would go on to claim that the Florida murder of six-year-old Tiffany Eunick committed by teenager Lionel Tate and three other similar murders were a result of the perpetrators “imitating wrestling moves they’ve seen on TV shows like *World Wrestling Federation SmackDown!*” (Foley 452). The WWF would take the PTC to court over this and other claims made by the organization, and the PTC would later be forced to publicly retract any and all claims it made regarding the Lionel Tate-wrestling connection, among other concessions. The PTC’s lobbying during its campaign, however, did result in the WWF toning down its on-air product to appease concerned advertisers and avoid any more negative press.

But perhaps the most controversial WWF-related incident that occurred during the year was the death of wrestler Owen Hart. On May 23, during the pay-per-view *Over the Edge* in Kansas City, Missouri, Hart was waiting in the rafters of the arena to be lowered to the ring by a harness. The purpose of the stunt was to satirize Hart's Blue Blazer character's superhero abilities by intentionally creating a poorly constructed illusion that the Blue Blazer could fly. At some point prior to being lowered the latch connecting Hart's harness to the rope prematurely released and Owen plummeted 90 feet to the ring below, hitting his head on a ring turnbuckle before landing inside the ring. Fans in the arena

initially thought the accident was part of the show as Harts's body reacted as if it were a dummy. Viewers at home were spared seeing the fall as the program was airing a pre-taped Hart interview at the moment the fall occurred. WWF commentator Jim Ross was forced to announce to the viewers that Owen Hart had perished in an accident, as Hart was pronounced dead on his way to a local hospital. Ross, in perhaps the most fitting description of how the wrestling business operated and was perceived in the late 1990's, made sure to emphasize to the viewing audience, "This is not part of the entertainment portion of the show. This is as real as real can get" (Meltzer 1).

The show went on, however, in part to avoid the complications involved with canceling a pay-per-view event and, as several WWF wrestlers and officials would state later on, because Owen would have wanted the show to continue. The WWF unsurprisingly came under extreme fire for their decision to finish the pay-per-view. Arguments could have been made on both sides of the issue, "but the case for continuing the show after Owen Hart's death is weak" (Meltzer 2). Critics were quick to point to the WWF's new direction as the reason for Hart's death. They contended that if the WWF had not accustomed its fanbase to wild antics and dangerous stunts, the accident would never have occurred. Hart's sister Ellen commented, "Frankly wrestling was getting so far out and my poor brother, Owen, was a sacrifice for the ratings. That's how I look at it" (Greenberg 94).

These controversies did not hurt the WWF's popularity, however, and the company continued to be successful. *WWF Raw is War* scored its highest composite rating ever on May 10th with an 8.1 rating, but it should be noted that *WCW Monday Nitro* was pre-

empted that evening. The highest rated segment in *Raw*'s history occurred later that year on September 27 for an interview segment involving the hugely popular character The Rock as well as Mankind, drawing an eye-opening 8.4 mark, even with *Nitro* airing opposite *Raw* (Nurse). The fact that the highest rated segment in cable wrestling history was a 30-minute-long skit involving no actual wrestling was not lost on many of the wrestling purists. The segment and resulting rating signified that the entertainment aspect of professional wrestling as sports entertainment was now the focus of wrestling promotions as they moved into the 21st century.

WCW hobbled into the new millennium with little momentum going for the company. In February, 2000, four WCW wrestlers, all of whom were respected by die-hard wrestling fans, quit the company on the same day and signed with the WWF where they felt they would get a better opportunity to succeed. One month later, Eric Bischoff was brought back to the company to attempt to reverse the downward spiral the promotion was in. The WCW storylines at the time were so haphazardly booked that once Bischoff took over, instead of trying to let current angles play out on television, he decided to wipe the slate clean. Bischoff, along with Vince Russo, now an on-air character on WCW programming as well, announced on *Nitro* that after a two-week hiatus, *Nitro* would return featuring brand new storylines and angles. Never before in wrestling history had a promotion publicly announced that they were starting over. The move was nothing short of an admittance of failure, and was clearly indicative of how far World Championship Wrestling had fallen in the span of two years.

One of the major criticisms of WCW's programming of the previous five years was the promotion and its established veterans' reluctance to push the skilled younger wrestlers to the forefront of the company. Bischoff and Russo attempted to reverse that trend with the "new" *WCW Monday Nitro*. On the first *Nitro* after Bischoff's announcement, a major angle took place wherein all of the younger generation of wrestlers in WCW were christened the "New Blood." Their purpose: to take out the "Millionaire's Club," the aging veterans of WCW who, once they achieved fame, fortune and success in the business, refused to pass the torch to their eventual successors. Fans were intrigued and excited about the potential of the storyline, which would involve nearly everyone on the WCW roster. Feuds were developed between Hulk Hogan and rising star Billy Kidman as well as WCW mainstay Sting and newcomer Vampiro.

But any positive strides made in the first two weeks of the New Blood vs. The Millionaire's Club were quickly reversed when Russo booked comic actor David Arquette to win the WCW World Heavyweight Championship on the April 26th edition of *WCW Thunder*. The move was made in part to promote the recently released film *Ready to Rumble*, which starred Arquette and featured WCW wrestlers prominently in its script. The backlash by fans was intense. Many wrestling devotees lamented the fact that a title with history that could be traced back to wrestling legends like "Strangler" Lewis, Lou Thesz, and Ric Flair would now forever be associated with the scrawny actor. Although Arquette would relinquish the title only a few days later, WCW would have a hard time rebounding from the stigma of the title change, and by the end of August the New Blood vs. the Millionaire's Club storyline had been all but scrapped. WCW television began to

resemble the aimless programming offered prior to Eric Bischoff's return, the promotion seeming to throw random angles and matches together to see what, if anything, would stick. This booking style would continue well into 2001 and by March of that year *Nitro* ratings had hit an all-time low of 2.1 (Nurse).

Meanwhile, on the financial side of WCW, Time-Warner, who had assumed ownership of WCW when Ted Turner's Turner Broadcasting Systems merged with the media conglomerate, projected an \$80-million loss for WCW in 2000. With Time-Warner's impending merger with America Online set for the end of the year, the company began to seek out options to cut its losses and began to entertain offers from anyone interested in buying the promotion. Leading the pack was Eric Bischoff, who was representing a New York-based sports and media company named Fusient Media Ventures. Time-Warner and Fusient would agree in principle to a deal in January, 2001, with the understanding that *WCW Monday Nitro* and *WCW Thunder* would continue to air on the Turner cable networks. However, Fusient's purchase of WCW would fall through in March when Jamie Kellner, the new chief executive of the Turner cable networks, decided to pull wrestling from Turner's television lineup altogether. The March 26, 2001, *WCW Monday Nitro* would be the last WCW wrestling program to air on Turner Broadcasting Systems networks. The reasoning behind the decision was not due to the lower ratings WCW had been garnering—compared with other cable programming, WCW shows on TNT and TBS were still bringing in adequate numbers. The explanation for the cancellation of *Nitro* and *Thunder* was that Kellner wanted to take both TNT and TBS in a new direction and hoped, "to expand the network's appeal to a more upscale, broader

audience and concluded that wrestling did not fit with that image” (Slam! Pro Wrestling). Time-Warner did not have to wait long for another party to present an offer. This time the deal would be completed quickly, and the wrestling world was in for a significant shake-up.

As WCW struggled to survive, the WWF cruised through much of 2000 and looked to have its most successful year ever. *WrestleMania 2000*, held on April 2nd, drew 18,742 paid fans and brought in 875,000 pay-per-view orders, making it one of the best selling pay-per-view events in history (Albano and Sugar 225). *Raw is War* continued to dominate the national cable ratings, usually landing in the top spot even after *Raw* switched networks, moving from longtime WWF cable home USA to the re-branded TNN in September. The move to “The New TNN” was made possible when the WWF and media giant Viacom agreed on a deal to distribute and cross-promote Federation television shows on its networks, which included cable stations TNN and MTV, and broadcast network CBS (Marino-Nachison).

The WWF also had a legitimate crossover star on its roster in the form of The Rock. The Rock’s rise to wrestling stardom was in part due to the absence of Steve Austin, who had sustained a serious neck injury keeping him out of wrestling for almost the entirety of 2000. But The Rock also deserves his own credit for his ascendance to prominence in the WWF. Much like Austin, The Rock had been a heel, but his natural charisma and his often humorous and outlandish promos drew wrestling fans to him. The WWF was forced to turn The Rock into a babyface in 1999, and by 2000 he was the most popular performer in wrestling. He also had the right look and ability for mainstream

entertainment, and soon The Rock was all over national television. Just prior to *WrestleMania 2000*, Rock hosted NBC's *Saturday Night Live*, which would receive excellent reviews and bring in that show's highest rating for the season. He made appearances in the popular TV shows *Star Trek: Voyager* and *That 70's Show*. He also filmed scenes that would appear in 2001's *The Mummy Returns*, playing the role of the Scorpion King and giving an acclaimed performance that resulted in movie scripts regularly pouring in (Internet Movie Database).

But for all of the success The Rock and the WWF in general achieved in the year 2000, it must be noted that by the end of the year ratings for *Raw is War* were beginning to drop. Whereas *Raw* had been drawing scores in the mid-6s at the onset of the year, by December, and just after Steve Austin had returned from his injury, the ratings were dipping into the high-4s (Nurse). Much of the year's main storylines centered on the dysfunctional McMahon family, which included Vince, his wife Linda, and their two twenty-something children, Shane and Stephanie. All four were not considered wrestlers, yet viewers found the family embroiled in various feuds, consuming air-time that could be used to showcase other wrestlers. The year concluded with an angle where Linda suffered a nervous breakdown and was admitted to a mental hospital after Vince requested a divorce. The overexposure of the made-for-a-soap-opera McMahon clan on WWF television could in part explain why wrestling was beginning to fade from the public spotlight and interest from casual fans was starting to wane. With WCW programming turning off viewers in droves and the "Attitude" era seemingly entering its twilight, it appeared that the wrestling boom of the last three years was nearing its end. However,

professional wrestling had one more surprise in store for the wrestling community, and it would be up to the WWF to play its cards right if the company was going to reverse its declining ratings and regain the public spotlight.

When the Fusient Media Ventures/Time Warner agreement to purchase WCW fell through, it was the WWF who made a strong bid to purchase the ailing company. With the cancellation of *Nitro* on TNT and *Thunder* on TBS, the value of the company dropped significantly, its main asset becoming its enormous tape library dating back to the 1970s (Slam! Pro Wrestling). A purchase agreement was swift, and on Friday, March 23, 2001, the deal was announced to the general public. Linda McMahon, who was actually the WWF Chief Executive Officer and not in a mental institution as WWF programming depicted, said about the purchase, "This is a smart business decision and a good investment for us... We're grabbing it because it is simply that kind of opportunity" (Bachman). The WWF announced that they intended to keep several WCW wrestlers and that they were planning on creating an inter-promotional storyline for the near future, whetting the appetites of fans who had long dreamed of seeing WCW stars mix it up with the WWF's big names. The inter-promotional storyline, however, would commence much sooner than most people thought.

The final *Nitro* was still set to air on the Monday following the big announcement of the WWF's acquisition of WCW. The wrestling world greatly anticipated what, if anything, the WWF would do with the show that was regularly topping *Raw* in the ratings just four years prior. As *Nitro* opened from Orlando, Florida, WCW fans were faced with the surreal fact that Vince McMahon now appeared on their screen from backstage at the

Raw show in Cleveland, Ohio. McMahon informed the surprised *Nitro* audience that he had indeed agreed to purchase WCW, and that he would have a big announcement at the end of the program. After a show that featured WCW wrestler Booker T. winning the WCW championship, sporadic promos by Vince McMahon at the *Raw* taping, and a nostalgic match between Sting and Ric Flair, cameras showed McMahon making his way to the ring in Cleveland. At this time, TNT's television feed was simulcast with TNN's feed, and viewers on both networks were treated to the same footage. In what was a historical, yet unbelievable, moment for many wrestling fans across the nation, both the WCW and WWF logos were shown at the bottom of the screen as McMahon proudly strutted around the ring. After verbally denigrating some WCW wrestlers, Mr. McMahon stated that once the name "McMahon" was signed on the contract, giving him full ownership of the company, he would be shelving WCW permanently and fans would never see any WCW wrestlers on television again. Just as Mr. McMahon finished, Shane McMahon's entrance music played and Vince looked toward the *Raw* entrance ramp expecting to see his son emerge from the locker room. Shane McMahon did appear on the ramp, but it was not at the *Raw* show, it was at the *Nitro* set. The younger McMahon made his way to the WCW ring and informed his father that a McMahon had indeed signed a contract to become owner of WCW, but the name on the dotted line was not Vince's, it was Shane's (Gerweck.net). This scenario was a complete work, but it would be the basis on which all WWF storylines would revolve around for the next six months.

The WWF had plans to keep WCW as a wholly separate promotion, complete with its own television show that would most likely air during the two-hour block that the WWF

secured on TNN for Saturday night. Plans were made on how to introduce the “new” WCW to wrestling fans, and WWF brass felt that the WCW brand needed to establish an identity on WWF television first before giving the company its own time slot on late night TV. On the May 28th Memorial Day edition of *Raw is War*, which coincidentally marked the five-year anniversary of Scott Hall’s first appearance on *Nitro*, WCW wrestler Lance Storm interfered in a Perry Saturn and Terri versus Steve Blackman and Trish Stratus mixed tag-team match. Storm’s run-in was enhanced by the new WCW logo flashing on the large television screen above the *Raw* entrance ramp, signifying that the WCW “invasion” of the WWF was beginning. The following week’s *Raw* featured WCW wrestler Hugh Morrus repeating Storm’s actions. And at the June pay-per-view *King of the Ring*, WCW United States and World Heavyweight Champion Booker T. interfered in the main event “triple-threat” match between a newly-heel Steve Austin, Chris Jericho, and Chris Benoit by tossing Austin through the announcers' table. In each instance of WCW wrestlers appearing on WWF programming, the WCW as a whole was being positioned as the babyface in the invasion of the WWF, in part because the WWF wanted to make sure that fans would have an interest in tuning in to a WCW-brand television program.

After initial positive responses to the WCW performers, many WWF fans, accustomed to years of being told that WCW product was vastly inferior, began to reject the WWF-presented WCW. This reaction was no less evident than the reception the live *Raw* crowd gave the first WCW match aired on WWF television. The main event for the July 2nd *Raw is War* was Booker T. vs. Buff Bagwell for the WCW championship, and the WWF went out of its way to make WCW seem like the organization was indeed a separate

entity—the ring banners were changed to show the WCW logo, the arena lights were darkened to give *Raw* viewers the feeling that they were watching an old WCW-produced television show, and the color commentators were switched from the *Raw* team of Jim Ross and Paul Heyman to longtime WCW performers Arn Anderson and Scott Hudson. Ideally, the WWF hoped the match and the presentation surrounding it would give fans a slight taste of the excitement and showmanship they could expect from the WWF-owned WCW. Fans undeniably got a taste, and they spit it right back out. The match was a dud, Booker and Bagwell not able to get any excitement out of the crowd other than a “boring” chant, and the overall presentation did not result in what the WWF was hoping for. To make matters worse, when the heel team of Steve Austin and Kurt Angle interfered to cause a no-contest to the match, a move that was meant to incite the fans’ anger at the heels for ruining WCW’s shining moment, the audience roundly cheered the duo for ending the spectacle (Marek).

The WWF was forced to change its strategy. Plans for an individual WCW television show were put on hold for the time being, and the “WCW invasion” storyline had to be substantially rewritten. On the following week’s *Raw*, former Extreme Championship Wrestling stars Rob Van Dam and Tommy Dreamer ran in on a match to assault WWF wrestlers Chris Jericho and Kane during their contest with WCW’s Lance Storm and Mike Awesome. Backstage, several WWF wrestlers were shown running to the ring, on their way to stop the carnage. Astute fans noted that all of the wrestlers who arrived to “save” Jericho and Kane, as well as the other non-WWF performers in the ring, had all been wrestlers for Extreme Championship Wrestling in the past. Not-so-perceptive

fans watched in amazement as the entire group of ECW alumni turned and faced the two WWF stars before unleashing a brutal attack. Paul Heyman, who had been the owner of ECW before the promotion was forced to fold earlier in the year and was now doing color commentary on *Raw*, threw his headset down and entered the ring, high-fiving his former employees. Heyman told the crowd that ECW was back and that the invasion had just been taken, "to the Extreme" (WWF Action).

ECW throwing their name into the invasion angle was not the only major development that night on *Raw*. The main event was to be the ten ECW defectees taking on a 10-man team consisting of five WCW and five WWF wrestlers. This time everyone watching was shocked when the five WCW wrestlers turned on the WWF stars, joining the ECW performers in laying down a merciless fifteen on five beating to the WWF crew. The surprises did not stop there, as Shane McMahon announced to the wrestling world the person responsible for the return of ECW, the new owner of the promotion, Stephanie McMahon. Like Shane's "purchase" of WCW, Stephanie's ownership of ECW was only fictional, and the angle served to add intrigue to the WWF's second attempt at the invasion storyline. WCW and ECW were now called "The Alliance," and their goal was to get rid of the WWF altogether. The Alliance was portrayed as heels to the babyface WWF, which WWF fans were more comfortable accepting.

As autumn approached, interest in the storyline faded once again, even after having Steve Austin betray the WWF and join the Alliance, and other attempts to keep fans tuned in only resulted in short-term ratings jumps. By the middle of October, *Raw's* ratings were at the level they had been at just prior to the original WCW invasion angle with Lance

Storm (Nurse). At the November pay-per-view, *Survivor Series*, the WWF ended the storyline by having the 5-man WWF team upend the 5-man Alliance team in a "Winner Take All Elimination Match." The WWF team's victory meant that the WCW/ECW Alliance was "out of business" and that the WWF was once again the number one wrestling promotion in the country. But the WWF was disappointed with the lack of fan interest and ratings the short-lived invasion garnered, and the company had no one to blame but themselves.

From the beginning of the invasion storyline, the way WCW (and later, ECW and the Alliance) was portrayed on WWF television prevented fans from suspending disbelief that the WWF was truly being invaded. When Scott Hall interfered on *Nitro* in 1996, he came in with no fanfare and the WCW announcers played the situation out as if it were not supposed to be occurring. The same occurred with Kevin Nash's debut, and WCW was able to later portray the NWO as unaffiliated with the promotion for some time. In contrast, WCW as an invading force was acknowledged regularly and even given its own segments on WWF television, removing any sense to the viewer that WCW was an outlaw organization, let alone an invading one, on WWF television. Also, the wrestlers that the WWF chose to utilize in the "new" WCW were not the name stars that wrestling fans came to associate with World Championship Wrestling. The only "big name" holdovers from Turner's WCW were Booker T. and Diamond Dallas Page, who, while popular in their own right, did not have the name recognition or historical significance that former WCW talent such as Goldberg, Hulk Hogan, and Sting would have had in the storyline. To many fans, the lack of WCW's signature stars in the WWF version of WCW removed any credibility

WCW might have as a true threat to the WWF. Add to that the involvement of the McMahon children as storyline owners of the “invading” promotions, wrestling fans were never given a reason to believe that the WWF was in danger. With suspense and intrigue lacking in angles and storylines, it is difficult for fans to get caught up in the tale, and the WCW invasion was a prime example. The WWF, a company not known to be humble, was forced to admit that the promotion had failed. Linda McMahon, in a November conference call to WWF investors, used a football metaphor to describe the Federation's disappointment with the Invasion storyline, stating that the WWF had fumbled the ball, but would regroup, punt, and try again later (Scaia Nov 01).

The wheels of change were set in motion the very next night after the *Survivor Series* pay-per-view. Ric Flair, a man many felt should have been a part of the WCW invasion from the beginning, appeared on *Raw* proclaiming that he had purchased Shane and Stephanie McMahon's quarters of interest in the WWF. Flair was now 50% owner of the WWF, with Vince McMahon owning the other 50%. Flair and McMahon would have storyline squabbles over the next four months, a bloody brawl between the two at the January pay-per-view being most notable. As a result of their constant inability to work together on WWF television, Linda McMahon announced that the WWF would be undergoing a “brand extension,” holding a draft on *Raw* to split up the WWF roster into two groups. One group of performers would exclusively wrestle for the *Raw* brand of the WWF under the “ownership” of Ric Flair. The other set would wrestle under the *SmackDown!* banner owned by Vince McMahon. What this meant for viewers of WWF programming was that in order to see a particular wrestler they would have to tune in to

that performer's respective brand's television programs. For the WWF, this would allow the company to showcase more talent weekly, run two house shows per night (instead of one) in different cities over the weekend, and open the possibility in the future of airing brand-specific pay-per-views. The business plan the WWF had expected to realize with the failed WCW invasion was now in place. Their hope now was that the company had not alienated too many viewers in the process of achieving that plan.

The WWF faced a setback in May when the company was forced to change its name as a result of a legal dispute with the World Wildlife Fund stemming from a 1994 agreement between the two parties over international use of the initials "WWF." The Fund contended that the World Wrestling Federation had not abided by the 1994 accord by registering the *wwf.com* Internet domain name and using "WWF" as the symbol for its presence on the New York Stock Exchange, both instances occurring after 1994. The WWF chose to emphasize their transformation into a sports entertainment company by renaming themselves World Wrestling Entertainment (Morrissey). An advertising campaign, reminiscent of the company's early "Attitude" era promotional spots, urged fans to "Get the 'F' Out!" of the now-WWE. Though many did not care for the new moniker, fans were quick to adjust to the new name—within two months, the Internet search engine Lycos noted that queries for the term "WWE" outnumbered the old "WWF," with 59% of the searches entered under the new name (Schadt).

On television, however, initial reaction to the brand extension and name change saw the ratings for all WWE programming decrease. The downward trend continued over the summer and well into the fall, as fans struggled to maintain interest in the product

(Scaia 2002 YIR). The WWE, proving the adage that “anything can happen in professional wrestling,” attempted to attract old fans by hiring the man who almost put them out of business, Eric Bischoff, and cast him in the role of *Raw* “General Manager.” The company also attempted a return to the shocking television angles synonymous with Crash TV, re-hiring Vince Russo for a short time and featuring programming with questionable taste. In one segment, *Raw* World Champion Triple H was shown mocking his rival Kane, who had been accused of accidentally killing his high school girlfriend and then committing necrophilia with the body. The heel Triple H was shown pretending to have intercourse with a dummy in a casket, pulling her “brains” out while remarking in sarcastic awe, “I did it! I’ve screwed your brains out!” (Powell). The effect the return to Crash TV had on programming was not the one the WWE had desired—fans were more turned off than excited by what they saw. Fans who frequented Internet wrestling news sites and message boards repeatedly noted that segments such as the one featuring Triple H were the kind of wrestling programming that made them embarrassed to be a wrestling fan. At the conclusion of 2002, ratings for *Raw* were nearing the 3.0 mark for the first time since 1997 (Nurse). The “Attitude” era, and the popularity associated with it, had now passed.

In August, 2002, a new wrestling promotion emerged resurrecting the historical NWA name. NWA-Total Nonstop Action (TNA) debuted on pay-per-view featuring several former WWE and WCW performers and a slew of up-and-coming wrestling talent. It marked the first time since WCW’s demise that a wrestling promotion attempted to bring its product to a nationwide audience, but TNA faced an uphill battle immediately. After

several attempts to secure a cable television deal failed, the promotion settled on airing weekly two-hour pay-per-view shows at a rate of \$9.95 per show. TNA's main selling point to fans was that in one month, the total cost for eight hours of unedited and unpredictable TNA programming would be \$39.80, just under five dollars more than the three-hour monthly pay-per-view that the WWE offered. The TNA show featured a mixture of old-style wrestling harkening back to the heritage of the NWA with the newer and faster paced style of wrestling, in essence the total non-stop action, that fans were accustomed to seeing on recent wrestling broadcasts. The company promoted its product as an alternative to the programming of the WWE, claiming that the promotion finally gave wrestling fans a quality option to turn to. Time will tell for the upstart promotion whether or not its approach to business and its programming will have lasting life in an increasingly decreasing sports entertainment market.

As professional wrestling enters 2003, questions abound as to the direction of the sports entertainment industry. With professional wrestling once again out of the spotlight of popular culture, will history repeat itself and find the business of sports entertainment rising like a phoenix to new and unheard-of heights? If so, who or what will be the agent of change? Will it be a new and exciting performer a la Gorgeous George? Or will it be a fresh and incredible storyline such as the NWO? Or maybe it will be innovations in the presentation of wrestling programming like Crash TV. Who will be the Ed Lewis or Jim Londos of this generation, carrying wrestling on his or her shoulders through the transition period? Will the WWE be able to survive the lean times and emerge the "worldwide leader in sports entertainment" once again, or will NWA-TNA or some other emerging

promotion lay claim as the top promotion in the world? On the other hand, if wrestling is not able to replicate its previous ascendancy to the throne of popular culture, what will be the downfall? Will the WWE, lacking the strong competition of a *WCW Monday Nitro*, have a difficult time writing the creative and interesting television that the opposition brought out in the company? Will another controversy in the sports entertainment industry—another death, or perhaps a new PTC-like uproar—actually force professional wrestling off television airwaves for good, essentially sounding a death knell for wrestling? These questions will be answered in time, but one thing is for sure: regardless of where professional wrestling finds itself in the future, sports entertainment will have changed, and somewhere a grandfather, watching wrestling with his grandchild, will be thinking to himself, “I remember when Bad Ass Billy Gunn told people to ‘Suck it!’ What happened?”

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