

**WWE: Wrestling, Wellness & Entertainment –  
An Analysis of Work and Health in Professional Wrestling**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **WWE: WRESTLING, WELLNESS & ENTERTAINMENT – AN ANALYSIS OF WORK AND HEALTH IN PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING**

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Within the past fifteen years, a significant number of professional wrestlers have died before age 45, with the most publicized case being the Chris Benoit double murder suicide of 2007. A significant lack of academic research has been conducted on the nature of work in professional wrestling and on the impact of such work on the physical and mental health of wrestlers.

Interviews with 10 currently active professional wrestlers were conducted between November 2012 and February 2013 to learn about work in wrestling, specifically how they view their own work in regard to their overall health and lifestyle. Using a standpoint perspective, this study explores the working life and health of professional wrestlers in the United States through the experiences of professional wrestlers working in the industry.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Professional wrestling is a popular cultural phenomenon enjoyed by millions of fans throughout the world. As a spectacle combining elements of both theatre and sport, professional wrestling has sustained a high level of popularity in many parts of the world for decades, most notably in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Japan, France, and the United Kingdom (Glenday 2013). The backbone of this industry is comprised of the professional wrestlers themselves, men and women who dedicate their lives to the craft of professional wrestling, travelling the world from town to town, and throwing their bodies around wrestling rings in order to compete for the audience's entertainment dollar.

In the United States, the professional wrestling industry experienced a boom period during the 1980s with the rise of the World Wrestling Federation (WWF), now branded as World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), and with the mass appeal of Hulk Hogan and *Hulkamania*. This was followed by another boom of mainstream popularity during the late 1990s, with the rise of popular culture icons 'Stone Cold' Steve Austin and Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson. However, many of the professional wrestlers who earned their living working during these periods are no longer alive. Within the past fifteen years, over seventy professional wrestlers who had worked for mainstream wrestling promotions, namely WWE and World Championship Wrestling (WCW), died before the age of fifty. A significant number of these deaths have been attributed to poor health, drug use, and/or suicide. The most extreme case of death in the professional wrestling industry is the Benoit tragedy of June 2007, when WWE wrestler Chris Benoit murdered his wife and son before committing suicide (Schiavone 2007; Walton and Williams 2011). Due to these unfortunate tragedies, the professional wrestling

industry is now under tremendous pressure to implement changes in order to better address health and safety concerns for its performers.

Professional wrestling is a highly precarious form of work, with WWE holding a global monopoly and great influence over the entire industry. In North America, WWE is regarded by many as the only place where a professional wrestler can make a lucrative full-time living, with all other professional wrestlers outside WWE having to earn their living by working in professional wrestling's independent scene, by working tours overseas, or by holding other types of jobs outside of wrestling. Professional wrestling is a highly competitive industry that has never had a union presence, and has never guaranteed workplace benefits, such as medical insurance or pensions, to its performers. Professional wrestlers who seek to earn their living full time in wrestling must endure a heavy travel schedule, which usually entails immense physical and mental stress and is often compounded by the stress of wrestling on a nightly basis (Sharp 2005; Smith 2009). A number of the professional wrestlers who died prematurely were known drug users, particularly steroid users (Schivone 2007). In response, WWE now has strict wellness and drug testing policies for its performers and, as a result, many professional wrestlers are now under pressure to achieve impressive looking physiques and cope with the pain of wrestling without the use of steroids or other illegal substances. Moreover, new research on the subject of head injuries and concussions for athletes is providing important information on the long-term effects of contact sports, which has led to growing concerns about these incidents in the professional wrestling industry (Maich 2007; Martin 2012; WWE 2011.)

The main objective of this thesis is to explore how the nature of work in the professional wrestling industry affects the physical and mental health of its performers. This study seeks to develop a broad understanding of the working conditions of current professional wrestlers by

exploring how professional wrestlers earn their living within the industry, the structure of the industry, and issues of work and health within the industry. It also seeks to uncover how professional wrestlers view their job in light of changes that the industry is undergoing with regard to work and health, and to find out about the changes they would like to see introduced in order to improve the working conditions in their profession.

The primary research questions that guide this study are:

1. How does the nature and organization of work in professional wrestling affect the physical and mental health of its performers?
  - a. What is the work of a professional wrestler?
  - b. What do performers in the professional wrestling industry identify as risks to their physical and mental health?
2. What strategies do professional wrestlers devise to cope with the physical and mental stresses associated with their jobs?
3. How have recent changes in the industry had an impact on the job and/or health of professional wrestlers?
4. What changes could be implemented to improve the working conditions of professional wrestlers?

I call upon different bodies of literature to help answer these research questions and develop my analysis. I feel that such an approach is necessary because professional wrestling is a multifaceted sport that draws upon various elements of sport, theatre and work. It is therefore appropriate to use different bodies of literature to better understand the nature and organization of work, and health issues in professional wrestling. I examine the art form of professional wrestling in North America through the works of Guy Debord, a Marxist theorist, and Roland Barthes, a semiotician. I focus on the work involved in the performance of professional wrestling and the social dynamics between wrestlers and their audiences. I also discuss gender issues in wrestling, taking into consideration societal ideals of masculinity and bodies in professional wrestling, and gender performance in current presentations of professional wrestling. I use a Marxist lens to explore how the wrestling industry is part and parcel of



capitalism in terms of both the structure of the industry and the relations between owners and wrestlers. Literature on work that adopts a critical perspective on precarious work and job stress, two issues that are central to this thesis, informs my analysis of the realities of professional wrestlers.

For this thesis, I interviewed ten professional wrestlers living and working in various regions of the United States. I asked them questions about their experiences in professional wrestling, and how they view their work and their health as professional wrestlers. At the time of the interviews, which occurred between November 2012 and February 2013, all of the participants worked on the independent scene in the United States and Canada, with some regularly working additional tours overseas. Half of the participants had former experience working with WWE. All of the participants earned the bulk of their income working in the professional wrestling business, and were heavily involved within the industry. Thus, all of the participants were well informed about issues pertaining to work and health in professional wrestling. They willingly shared their knowledge and experiences working in the industry, and offered their opinions on how to change the wrestling industry in order to help improve the working lives of professional wrestlers. This thesis adopts a standpoint perspective in that the viewpoints of wrestlers, a marginalized group in society, are considered fundamental to understanding their everyday realities. I explore the realities of professional wrestlers who are trying to make a living in this industry, from their own perspective, examining the issues that they face in terms of their work and health, and how they cope with such issues. In developing my analysis of the everyday experiences of professional wrestlers, I also take into consideration my own positionality and consider power relations in research.

This thesis contributes to the broadening of academic studies pertaining to the art and sport of professional wrestling. The research fills a significant gap in the literature because very few academic studies address issues of work in professional wrestling, especially with a focus on the relationship between work and health within the industry. As Smith (2008a) notes, due to professional wrestling's oscillation between theatre and sport, "the entertainment manages to escape wider scrutiny in terms of health and safety" (p. 133). While this study provides a qualitative analysis of issues pertaining to work and health in professional wrestling, the analysis will also be useful to understand other forms of sports and entertainment that involve the use of violence, namely hockey, American football, and mixed martial arts, because workers within these industries are also facing similar issues. This study can therefore help to understand and theorize health issues and other social issues relating to sport and entertainment industries today.

### **Thesis Structure**

Chapter I introduces the main focus of this study, which is the relationship between work and health in professional wrestling. It also presented the research questions and briefly touched upon the literature that will guide the analysis. Finally, it highlights the gap in the current academic literature on professional wrestling and the contributions of this study.

Chapter II provides a review of the literature that guides the analysis of professional wrestling. This chapter first discusses professional wrestling as a performance art and spectacle in contemporary society. I use the work of Guy Debord and Roland Barthes to examine the oscillation between art and sport in professional wrestling, and the social dynamics that occur between the performers and their audience. I then explore gender in professional wrestling, with

a focus on professional wrestling as a masculine domain of gender performance. Following this discussion, I apply a Marxist perspective to professional wrestling, focusing on how capitalism is deep-seated in the industry, especially in terms of the relationship between wrestlers and promoters. Finally, this chapter calls upon literature on the sociology of work, with a particular focus on issues of precariousness, job stress, demand-control models, and autonomy, which I examine as they apply to work and health in professional wrestling.

Chapter III details the current structure of the professional wrestling industry in the United States. The chapter begins with a description of how WWE has monopolized the industry, and now influences the working lives of wrestlers at all levels of professional wrestling. It then explores various issues that professional wrestlers face working in this industry, with a focus on both the nature of the work itself and health and safety concerns.

Chapter IV outlines the methodological approach of this thesis. It first speaks to the relevance of using a standpoint perspective for qualitative research on professional wrestling, and highlights issues of reflexivity and positionality. The chapter also discusses the participant recruitment process, the limitations of the study, and the ethical issues concerning a study of this nature.

Chapter V provides a detailed analysis of the findings flowing from the interviews with the research participants, examining how participants view their work, their health and wellness, and their livelihoods in the professional wrestling industry. This chapter is organized thematically, and discusses participants' experiences of and viewpoints on training, wrestling identity, injuries, pain, in-ring risks, physiques, drugs, workplace politics, career choices, and deaths in the professional wrestling industry.

Chapter VI concludes the thesis, offering general thoughts on the findings of this study on the relationship between the work and health of professional wrestlers. It also highlights the limitations of the study and provides suggestions for future research on issues pertaining to the professional wrestling industry.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

In order to provide a better understanding of work and health issues pertaining to professional wrestlers, this chapter will use different bodies of literature, an approach that lends itself well to such a multifaceted subject matter. Indeed, professional wrestling is art and sport, athletics and theatre, graceful and brutal, entertainment and business. This chapter will be organized into four sections. The first section will discuss professional wrestling as a performance art and a spectacle in contemporary society. The section will be grounded in the work of Guy Debord, a Marxist theorist, and Roland Barthes, a semiotician, and will analyze the spectacle of professional wrestling and how professional wrestlers work to create meaningful social experiences for their audiences. The second section will explore ideas of gender in professional wrestling, with a focus on professional wrestling as a masculine domain of gender performance. The third section will provide a Marxist analysis of the business of professional wrestling. This section will demonstrate how the spectacle of professional wrestling, while often conceived of by audiences as a rebellious and anti-authoritarian form of entertainment, is a business that has traditionally been operated on the basis of a proletariat-bourgeoisie relationship between wrestlers and promoters, and ultimately functions to reinforce capitalist ethics upon its audiences. Finally, the fourth section will discuss literature on work and health issues, with a particular focus on precarious work, job stress, and Karasek's (1990) high demand-low control model.

### **Professional Wrestling: Spectacle and Performance**

The sport and art of professional wrestling can be conceived of as a modern day spectacle. Guy Debord (1967), in his work *The Society of the Spectacle*, conceives of the

spectacle as a social relationship, “between people that is mediated by images” (p. 4). This conception of the spectacle can be specifically applied to analyze spectator-events, such as sporting events, concerts, and conventions, and, in the case of this study, professional wrestling (Trier 2007). A definition of spectacle that is best suited to the case of professional wrestling is one coined by Wood and Skeggs (2008) who see the spectacle as something, “which in contemporary societies we are encouraged to view in large numbers and in viewing participate in an act of representative significance” (p. 181). A distinctive feature of the modern spectacle is its oscillation between reality and unreality. Debord notes that the spectacle is at the core of society’s unreality. In the spectacle, a series of images are used in place of reality. These images are given a sense of meaning and importance, enabling spectators to perceive these images as reality (Debord 1967).

The paramount example of a modern spectacle that oscillates between reality and unreality is the sport of professional wrestling. Professional wrestling is a theatrical and melodramatic interpretation of modern sports and physical competition. Predetermined, choreographed wrestling matches are showcased as athletic contests between two or more opponents (Barthes [1957] 2005; Beekman 2006; Schiavone 2007). Smith (2009) describes professional wrestling as a, “physical theatre in which participants act out a fight in front of paying spectators. The duel relies on the framework of the sport—for example, there is always a ring, a referee, a declared winner to each match, and the singing of the national anthem” (p. 5). Professional wrestling simultaneously presents an athletic contest and a melodrama. Wrestlers are both athletes and characters. Typically, opposing wrestlers are engaged in a morality play, a battle between good and evil (Barthes [1957] 2005; Putterman 1995).

In the United States, the outcomes of professional wrestling matches have been predetermined or ‘worked’ since the World War I era (Beekman 2006). However, for decades, many people believed these contests to be legitimate, as wrestling promoters presented wrestling matches as legitimate sporting events, sometimes even placing wrestling matches on live boxing shows. Historically, individuals involved in the professional wrestling business have gone to great lengths in order to protect the business, and to convince the wrestling fan that the contests are not predetermined, but genuine, ‘real’ contests. In spite of this, in 1989, the World Wrestling Federation (2006) (WWF, currently WWE – World Wrestling Entertainment) publically admitted to the New Jersey State Athletic Commission that its wrestling contests were in fact not genuine, but predetermined. Although it has become common knowledge that professional wrestling is not a ‘sport,’ in the sense that the wrestling contests are not legitimate, the modern wrestling fan is not at all bothered by the deceptive elements. Since the late 1980s, WWE has not branded its product as sport, but specifically as ‘Sports Entertainment’. Roland Barthes ([1957] 2005) theorizes about this fluctuation between the real and the unreal in the spectacle of professional wrestling, noting that, “the public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not... what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees” (p. 23).

Those who are involved in the professional wrestling industry have coined the term ‘kayfabe’ to describe the unreality that occurs in professional wrestling. Kayfabe refers to the practice of keeping the business of wrestling secretive, and not revealing the deceptive components to the general public (Beekman 2006). Kayfabe also refers to the practice of wrestlers staying in character in settings that are nowhere near a wrestling ring (Calhoun 2008). Traditionally, babyface (good guy) wrestlers would dress in separate dressing rooms from heel

(bad buy) wrestlers. Babyfaces would travel on the road in cars separately from heels, and there would be no socializing in public between members of the two groups in order to keep the illusion of wrestling as real in the eyes of the public (Hart 2007). The practice of kayfabe or ‘kayfabling’ used by wrestlers made it especially hard for those trying to enter the wrestling business because wrestlers would not openly discuss with outsiders how the business operated, and those new to the wrestling business were met with much hazing. Even wrestlers who are now considered all-time greats were kayfabled by others when entering the wrestling business. For example, Ric Flair became involved in wrestling through his friendship with Greg Gagne, whose father, Verne, promoted and wrestled for the American Wrestling Association (AWA). Flair went through rigorous physical training to become a wrestler with veteran Verne Gagne in the early 1970s, and was not ‘smarted up’ to the business – that is, told that the matches were predetermined – until he was paid to wrestle his very first match (Feinstein 2013). Hulk Hogan was heavily hazed upon entering wrestling, as he had his leg broken by his trainer on his first day of training, and returned to training after his leg had healed in order to prove that he was tough enough to be a part of the wrestling business (Brody 2009). Nowadays, the wrestling business is not as secretive, and anyone wishing to become a wrestler can use an Internet search engine to look up wrestling training schools (De Garis 2005; Smith 2009).

Generally speaking, wrestlers have not heavily ‘kayfabled’ in public for the past ten years, and the wrestling business has been pretty open to the public about the predetermined nature of the matches. However, as recently as fifteen to twenty years ago, wrestlers would actively kayfabe outside the wrestling arena. For instance, during the early 1990s, wrestlers such as Hulk Hogan and ‘Macho Man’ Randy Savage made regular appearances on such television programs as *The Aresnio Hall Show* dressed in their full ring attire to discuss their



ambitions for winning championships and their strategies for defeating upcoming opponents (Hart 2007). Through the practice of kayfabe, wrestlers are able to situate their ‘unreal,’ fantastical wrestling characters within real life settings, even if settings such as a talk show are produced settings. In this way, the unreal spectacle of professional wrestling intersects with the real world of modern society.

Atkinson (2002) describes the spectacle of professional wrestling as ‘mimetic,’ because presentations of professional wrestling mimic ‘war-like’ competition, and also mimic the conventions used by ‘real’ sports. Although professional wrestling is a theatrical spectacle, it mimics the styles of sports such as amateur wrestling and boxing in its presentation. Professional wrestling matches are contested in sports arenas, and matches have referees, rules and time limits (2002). Announcers are used during broadcasts in order to present professional wrestling to audiences in the framework of legitimate sports. Professional wrestling programs are broadcasted on sports networks, such as *The Score* in Canada. Therefore, by aligning itself with the aesthetics of genuine sports, professional wrestling becomes a mock sport in the realm of professional sports and athletics (Atkinson 2002; Hunt 2005).

Professional wrestlers, while pitted against one another in the squared circle, use the canvas of a wrestling match to tell a story to an audience. De Garis (2005) describes the plot of professional wrestling matches as ‘rudimentary,’ consisting of two (or more) wrestlers in combat with one another competing for victory. In a fashion similar to boxing or mixed martial arts (for example, UFC – Ultimate Fighting Championship), a wrestling promotion strives to build anticipation for a match between two (or more) opponents that the public will hopefully pay to attend in order to see who wins. The contestants in a wrestling match typically represent two opposing ends of a moral spectrum, pitting good against evil. As mentioned above, the hero

or ‘good guy’ is referred to as the ‘babyface’ or ‘face,’ and the villain or ‘bad guy’ is referred to as the ‘heel.’ Wrestlers will often wrestle and act in a manner that accentuates their heel or babyface personas. A heel will often taunt the audience in order to generate hatred, contempt or ‘heat’, and will adopt underhanded tactics such as cheating, using a weapon behind the referee’s back, or using help from others in order to win matches. A babyface typically adheres to wrestling’s rulebook, and tries to win matches through hard work, determination, and outwrestling the opponent. A babyface will often suffer throughout a match at the hands of the heel in order to garner sympathy from the audience until making a comeback (Barthes [1957] 2005; De Garis 2005; Hart 2007). The ability to convey a story to the audience in a way that is understandable and easy to follow is an important component in engaging the audience. As Barthes (2005) writes on wrestlers conveying their suffering in the ring, “everyone must not only see that the man suffers, but also and above all understand *why* he suffers” (p. 26).

Stark reality may seep into the seemingly rehearsed world of wrestling through the use of ‘shoots.’ Mazer (1998) defines a ‘shoot’ as, “an unplanned or illegitimate excursion into the real; ‘the plan is forsaken, an accident occurs, or a genuine conflict erupts with the violence spilling over from display to actuality’” (p. 123). A shoot may occur if a wrestler accidentally, or intentionally, ‘stiffs’ an opponent by actually striking an opponent in a real and hard fashion. A wrestler may feel the need to shoot on their opponent, and may justify shooting on someone if they believe that person is not well liked by a group of other wrestlers, or comes off as ‘big-headed’ to others (Foley 2010; Hart 2007; Smith 2008a; Smith 2008b). Additionally, a shoot may occur during interview segments of wrestling shows if a wrestler says something to the audience that is reality based, and diverges from the script (Mazer 2005). For instance, during a broadcast of *WWF Raw* in 1997, Shawn Michaels made a comment to the audience about Bret

Hart having some, “sunny days” (Hart 2007, p. 414). This comment was a reference to Bret Hart having an alleged affair with WWF personality ‘Sunny’ Tammy Lynn Sytch. While Hart may not have been pleased with Michaels’ derogatory comment, such comments often excite loyal wrestling fans by incorporating real life drama into the contrived, melodramatic nature of professional wrestling (Mazer 2005).

While a wrestler may shoot on another if he or she feels that it may be necessary, for the most part, professional wrestlers cooperate in order to properly perform their matches and tell a story to the audience. Wrestlers must be able to have a great deal of trust in one another because the moves that they perform in the ring require a great deal of athleticism and skill, and not being comfortable in trusting another wrestler can result in injury. In working together, wrestlers attempt to make the action happening in the ring look as convincingly real as possible without actually hurting one another (Smith 2008; 2009). Professional wrestlers engaged in a match cooperate with one another in order to ‘work’ the audience. In other words, they attempt to manipulate the audience in order to induce certain reactions (De Garis 2005, p. 200). For instance, a heel may rake the babyface’s eyes behind the referee’s back in order to build the drama in the match and elicit a ‘boo’ from the audience. Conversely, a babyface may hit a heel with a devastating move and cover him for a two-count, generating excitement and building suspense for an audience that surely thought that such a move would have ended in a three-count and a victory for the babyface. Thus, a competent professional wrestler should be both athletically and dramatically skilled in order to perform a series of wrestling moves throughout an entire match without tiring, and in order to ruse the audience into becoming immersed with the story of a wrestling match. As Hunt (2005) notes, although the vast majority of fans understand the predetermined nature of professional wrestling, competent wrestlers have the

ability to draw audiences into reveling in their own deception and suspending their disbelief, celebrating the moments where they are excited by the illusion and ‘marking-out.’ He suggests that an audience’s chant of “Holy shit!” for exciting moments of a wrestling match can somewhat translate into a chant of “You made us believe!” (p. 123).

While wrestlers strive to work together in order to create an entertaining experience for audiences, it must not be forgotten that professional wrestling is still a sport that is very demanding on its athletes. Although wrestlers may try their best to be safe when working, they cannot avoid the wear and tear on their bodies that accumulates throughout their careers, and injury at some point in one’s career is almost entirely unavoidable. Smith (2008a) points to research that highlights that sports endorse a “culture of risk” in which injuries are normalized (p. 130). Furthermore, research on male athletes in sports finds that such athletes believe that they are solely responsible for their own health and wellness, and they tend to link the pain involved with training and performance in sports to masculine identity (Foley 2010; Smith 2008a; McDowell 2009). According to Smith (2008a), professional wrestlers view pain as simply being ‘part of the business,’ and accept pain as just another aspect of their work. He notes that pain in wrestling brings a sense of authenticity to the violence that is showcased in the ring, and those who demonstrate that they can withstand pain tend to command dominance and a sense of respect from others. Wrestlers who agonize over pain, or whine about their physical pains to others, are often met with disdain from veteran wrestlers (Smith 2008a; Smith 2009).

Despite the fact that respectable professional wrestlers are skilled in working with one another to create performances in the ring, and must possess the ability to endure certain amounts of pain in the process, the most successful professional wrestlers have charisma and an

ability to connect with their audience through their individual personalities, as well as the ability to evoke emotions of love, hate, and excitement from audiences during their matches (De Garis 2005; Smith 2008). Indeed, professional wrestling is one of the few sports where the success of the performers depends on the collective reactions of a live audience. Levi (1997) describes professional wrestling as a “social drama,” arguing that the spectacle is, “a collaboration between the wrestlers and the spectators” (p. 58). Vince McMahon, chairman of WWE, changed the presentation of televised professional wrestling during the 1980s by placing a heavy emphasis upon crowd participation. This focus on the audience is quite evident when viewing an episode of *Monday Night Raw*: the house lights are shining upon the crowd, fans are waving handmade signs in the air, and the audience is chanting and cheering in unison (Beekman 2006). Cheers, boos, and demands from a wrestling crowd also have the ability to dictate wrestling storylines and character development. For instance, ‘Stone Cold’ Steve Austin was initially presented to audiences as a heel. However, wrestling fans were attuned to his charisma and wrestling ability, and would passionately cheer him on during matches regardless of his heel or babyface allegiance that he would incorporate into his persona for different matches. Consequently, Austin became one of the most successful wrestlers of all time, if not *the* most successful wrestler of all time (Kleinberg and Nudelman 2005; Hart 2007).

The case of Steve Austin, a foul-mouthed, surly redneck, also demonstrates that an important part of being a successful professional wrestler is the ability to become and portray a successful character. Schwartz (1973) contends that people are drawn to sporting spectacles, such as professional wrestling, due to their innate desire for hero worship. Becoming a ‘superstar’ athlete in any sport requires years of discipline, practice, and training. Since many individuals never attain such supremacy in their own occupations, they tend to attach their own

aspirations to the successes of athletes who have excelled in their respective field. Consequently, the athlete “becomes a symbol of perfection” within society (Schwartz 1973). Individuals come to identify with athletes, and other celebrities or public figures, by seeking similarities between the identity of the athlete and their own personal identity. A person may identify with their favourite sports hero through a shared ethnic or national identity. For example, in 1938, Joe Louis became a national hero in the United States by defeating German boxer Max Schmeling (1973). Moreover, people who associate themselves with certain personality characteristics or qualities may identify with and worship athletes who they see as sharing some of these characteristics or qualities. Schwartz (1973) notes that during his career, Muhammad Ali presented himself as a rebel in the world of boxing. Thus, boxing fans who saw themselves as rebellious also identified with Ali (Schwartz 1973).

The spectacle of professional wrestling possesses a distinct ability to create ‘larger than life’ sports heroes due to its contrived nature, dramatic elements, and emphasis on flamboyant characters. Hulk Hogan is presented as an All-American Hero. Bret Hart often carried a Canadian flag to his matches, and is arguably regarded by Canadian wrestling fans as the Wayne Gretzky of wrestling (Hart 2007; Jenkins 2005b). Currently, angst-filled wrestling fans who see themselves as rebels may identify with WWE wrestler CM Punk, an anti-authority figure covered head to toe with tattoos. Punk even makes his entrance to the ring to the song “Cult of Personality” by Living Colour, which features sound clips from Malcolm X (Living Colour 1988; Troianello 2011). Thus, individuals are attracted to the allure of sports heroes, and the spectacle of professional wrestling is ripe with a diverse assortment of flamboyant characters ready to be embraced by passionate wrestling fans seeking to create their own personal identity through others.

## **Gender in Wrestling**

Professional wrestling has traditionally pandered to a male viewing audience. Young men are attracted to violence in television programming because they accept spectacles of violence, such as professional wrestling, as being part of their main domain, and embrace violence as a means to distinguish themselves from the female domain in order to strengthen their sense of masculinity (Cantor; 1998; Souilliere 2006). Certainly, professional wrestling, as a popular television program, live event spectacle, and pop cultural phenomenon, plays a part in reinforcing hegemonic attitudes regarding gender amongst its viewing audience. Nathan (2009), in drawing upon the work of Judith Butler, argues that sporting spectacles are the epitome of gender performance, and that athletes in violent sports such as professional wrestlers, mixed martial artists, and boxers become powerful representations of ideal male behaviour and “symbolic expressions or magnifications of ideal masculinity” (p. 35).

The spectacle of professional wrestling, with its showcase of powerful bodies in competition with one another, encompasses certain ideals with regard to body image. Specifically, in WWE, there is a certain pressure for wrestlers to attain a body-builder type physique. Traditionally, individuals with lean, muscular bodies are the most featured in WWE main event matches and storylines (Beekman 2006; Souilliere 2006; Souilliere and Blair 2006; Schiavone 2007). By focusing upon muscular bodies, professional wrestling reinforces cultural pressures regarding what ‘real’ men should look like (Souilliere and Blair 2006). Thus, for individuals who engage in viewing wrestling, or for those who want to work in wrestling, the presentation of the typical ideal body-builder type body may cause them to internalize certain attitudes towards body image, and create a sense of dissatisfaction with their own body, a reality

that affects both males and females (Hopper 2007; Souillere and Blair 2006). Conversely, the viewing of and participation in sports such as professional wrestling, and the internalization of ideals concerning gender and body image may create positive behaviours, such as increased physical activity and healthy eating habits (2006).

In addition to dominant sociocultural ideals concerning body image, professional wrestling also showcases sociocultural attitudes towards gender dynamics through the use of its dramatic elements. Souillere (2006) describes WWE programming as, “a particular narrative of hegemonic masculinity, in which bullying, intimidation, humiliation, and sexual violence are all intertwined into an acceptable template for male behavior” (p. 3). The spectacle of professional wrestling often tends to feature male superiority and dominance, with emphasis upon strength, power, and aggression (Hopper 2007). In conventional wrestling storylines, men are called upon to ‘prove’ their masculinity by confronting and fighting other wrestlers (Souillere 2006). This is captured in one of wrestling’s most well-known catchphrases, a line spouted by Ric Flair, “To be the man, you gotta beat the man!” (Beekman 2006). While Souillere (2006, p. 9) insists that professional wrestling promotes the idea that men should be aggressive, violent, strong, and dominant, he also notes that professional wrestling may also encourage more positive attitudes concerning male behaviour, such as taking responsibility for one’s actions, gracefully accepting defeat, and succeeding through winning.

In American wrestling especially, women have traditionally been marginalized and have been met with sexism. For instance, wrestling legend Lou Thesz, who held the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) Heavyweight Championship for over 10 years and had a career that spanned five decades, refused to be placed on a wrestling card if that card featured women or ‘midgets’ (Thesz and Bauman 2001). While there have been some token wrestling promotions



in North America that showcased women's wrestling, such as Gorgeous Ladies Of Wrestling (GLOW) and Shimmer, wrestling cards are typically male dominated, with usually only one women's match per show, and it is highly rare that a women's match is featured as a main event on any wrestling card in North America. Women in professional wrestling, aside from being a woman wrestler, or a 'Diva' – the term used in WWE – are often relegated to being valets or managers for wrestlers, ring-girls, or dancers in between matches. Women performers in wrestling are typically paid much less than men, even if their performances may merit a higher payday. For example, in recent years on Spike TV's *Total Non-Stop Action (TNA) Impact! Wrestling*, women's matches were the highest rated segments on the program. Still, the female performers were paid much less than their male counterparts, with many women having to take additional jobs outside of wrestling, even though they were wrestling on television on a weekly basis (Oliver 2013). Wrestling storylines, which typically involve themes of dominance, competition, and aggression, often present women in a negative light. For instance, Jenkins (2005, p. 337) describes the presentation of women in WWE during 2001 as a "male-dominant, sadistic sex fantasy" that included men asserting physical power over women in certain storylines, women often being shown as scantily clad sex objects on camera, and women calling one another 'fat' during interviews.

Much of the academic literature on presentations of gender in professional wrestling, especially presentations of gender in the dramatic and story-telling aspects of wrestling, describe wrestling storylines on television as being over-sexualized, overly aggressive, sadistic, and solely concerned with 'shock-value.' This literature is focused on presentations of wrestling from the late 1990s to about the early-mid 2000s, a period in mainstream wrestling that was dominated by the 'Monday Night Wars' between WWF and WCW and the 'Attitude Era' of

WWF. This was a time when other popular shows on television were ones such as *Jerry Springer* and *South Park*, and the wrestling industry, especially WWE (then WWF), felt the need to make its television product more adult oriented with a focus on sex and violence in order to attract a larger viewing audience (Beekman 2006; Foley 2010). Today, WWE brands itself as family entertainment, and solely produces PG (parental guidance) rated content for its television broadcasts. Professional wrestling has traditionally appealed to children, even during times when wrestling was at its raunchiest, and WWE currently gears a significant portion of its television content and marketing towards children. WWE places much of the focus of its product on its top star, John Cena, and markets most of his merchandise to children, with a noteworthy example being Cena featured on boxes of the sugary breakfast cereal Fruity Pebbles (Lukovitz 2013). It is often noted on WWE television segments that Cena holds the record for granting the most wishes for the Make-A-Wish Foundation. WWE also funds and promotes an anti-bullying campaign called *Be A Star*, where WWE produces public service announcements featuring its wrestlers and other celebrities with the aim of preventing bullying amongst school age children. Additionally, WWE has a Saturday morning television program tailored for children entitled *Saturday Morning Slam*, featuring segments from wrestlers who come off as more cartoonish than usual, and matches that are more 'fun' than violent (Warrell 2012). Even outside of WWE, certain independent promotions in the United States and Canada focus upon making their products family friendly. For instance, Pennsylvania-based independent promotion *Chikara* presents a family friendly, comic book inspired spectacle of wrestling filled with an array of colourful masked characters that appeal to younger audiences. Thus, while certain forms of wrestling have histories of raunchy entertainment, and much of wrestling is still violent with storylines focusing upon male dominance and aggression, one should not confine

the examination of gender in the performance of wrestling to specific historical periods because the performance of wrestling changes, and what is true of one period may not be true of next.

### **Professional Wrestling as a Capitalistic Pursuit**

A loyal audience of male viewers has traditionally supported the professional wrestling industry, particularly WWE, and its broadcasts are typically structured to attract this audience. Still, WWE is heavily invested in marketing to children, and also concerns itself with building a stronger female audience. By broadening its appeal to a variety of audiences, professional wrestling has become a very successful moneymaking enterprise. For instance, WWE promotes an annual event called *Wrestlemania*, which is widely regarded as the equivalent of the NFL Super Bowl for WWE. *Wrestlemania* is a significant income generator for both WWE and the city that hosts the event each year. Ticket sales for *Wrestlemania XVIII* on April 1, 2012 in Miami, Florida, totaled a gross of over \$6.3 million, in addition to 1,217,000 buys for the event on pay-per-view, and generated over \$100 million for the economy in the city of Miami (Caldwell 2013; Dilbert 2012; Raymond 2011). From this example alone, one can certainly make the case that professional wrestling is a successful product of capitalist society, and that it promotes consumerism and participation in a capitalist society.

However, in spite of its capitalist functions, some individuals contend that professional wrestling has roots within anti-capitalist ideals, and that it challenges dominant, hegemonic capitalistic ideals. De Garis (2005) contends that the culture within professional wrestling is rooted in anti-capitalist and Marxist beliefs. A Marxist analysis can be used to examine labour relations between wrestlers and promoters. In the language of wrestling, wrestlers will often refer to one another as “workers.” The term “work” in professional wrestling comprises various

meanings. “Work” may refer to laboring, cooperation between wrestlers, or a description of something as fake or deceitful, such as the elements of professional wrestling matches that are predetermined and thus a ‘work’ to the audience. De Garis (2005, p.99) contends that this language reinforces wrestling’s blue-collar roots, noting that the relationship between promoters and wrestlers is essentially a bourgeoisie-proletariat relationship, with wrestlers selling their labour power and their bodies to wrestling promoters in order to make a living.

Likewise, Levi (1997, p. 60) insists that fans of wrestling identify with wrestlers as labourers who sacrifice their health and safety, essentially their bodies, for a paycheck, and that this identification with wrestlers comprises part of professional wrestling’s appeal to working class audiences. Levi (1997) further identifies anti-capitalist sentiments in the performance of professional wrestling, which are not necessarily evident in presentations of wrestling produced by WWE, but are evident in performances of wrestling conducted in smaller, more intimate venues. Such performances take place at independent wrestling promotions, and carry a very DIY (Do-It-Yourself) spirit. An example of such spirit occurred in the mid 1990s, when Philadelphia-based Eastern Championship Wrestling transformed and rebranded itself as Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW), presenting an ultraviolent, “hardcore “ style of wrestling to a niche, but growing, audience. A cult following of die-hard fans developed for ECW, as every month, a couple of hundred fans would pack into a bingo hall in south Philadelphia to watch a misfit bunch of wrestlers who did not fit the typical mold of WWE wrestlers, engaging in violent, intensely competitive wrestling matches in rebellion against mainstream wrestling. Loyal fans regarded ECW as a rebellious, counter-culture form of wrestling, and the live audience would participate in the spectacle of ECW with great vigor. Wrestlers who would leave ECW in order to further their careers in WWE, at the time WWF, or

in World Championship Wrestling (WCW) were considered “sell-outs” by their fans, and would be met with loud ‘boos’ chants of “You sold out!” from fans as they wrestled their final matches for the promotion (Beekman 2006; Kleinberg and Nudelman 2005).

While certain forms and aspects of wrestling can be seen as rooted in anti-capitalist attitudes, it must also not be forgotten that wrestling is a business. Wrestlers wrestle to make money, and wrestling promoters promote wrestling to make money. While ECW was considered by its fans, and presented, as rebellious and anti-authority in spirit, Paul Hayman, the promoter of ECW, was also on WWE’s payroll during ECW’s run, and ECW along with its video library were eventually purchased by WWE in 2001 (Beekman 2006; Kleinberg and Nudelman 2005). Today, anyone can purchase an ECW DVD at Wal-Mart, or watch ECW matches on Netflix. WWE understands that many wrestling fans view the spectacle of professional wrestling as rebellious and, thus, it promotes wrestlers who are portrayed as rebellious, anti-authority figures in order to capitalize upon the identification of fans with the wrestlers (Deeter-Schemlitz and Sojka 2004). For instance, arguably the biggest money-making storyline of all time in professional wrestling was the feud between ‘Stone Cold’ Steve Austin and Vince McMahon’s Mr. McMahon character, a story of a blue-collar, working-class hero rising up against his evil and corrupt boss Mr. McMahon and his cronies in order to win and keep his WWF Championship (Beekman 2006; Jenkins 2005).

Professional wrestling, as a spectacle, is a reflection of broader society, which, in the United States, is a capitalist society. Debord (1967) conceives of modern society as “fundamentally spectaclist,” arguing that spectacles are a reflection of, “the ruling economic order.” Stewart (1987, p. 185) contends that modern sporting spectacles are entirely tailored for

economic production, and that such spectacles are dominated by a monopoly of commercial and corporate interests. Modern spectacles are focused upon a societal obsession with commodities (Debord 1967). “Commodity fetishism” is ultra-present in professional wrestling, especially mainstream professional wrestling, and specifically in WWE (Debord 1967; Deeter-Schemlitz and Sojka 2004). WWE has managed to create an entire product subculture surrounding its spectacle (Deeter-Schemlitz and Sojka 2004). WWE fans have the choice to consume the spectacle of professional wrestling in various ways: attending live events, purchasing event pay-per-views, watching television programs, buying WWE DVDs, wearing clothes branded with their favourite wrestlers, playing wrestling video games, collecting wrestling action figures, and reading wrestling books and magazines (Deeter-Schemlitz and Sojka 2004).

In addition to the consumption of professional wrestling as a consumer product, it can also be said that professional wrestling, as a sport and an art form, reinforces larger cultural ideals surrounding capitalist production. Debord (1967) describes modern spectacles as, “a total justification for the conditions and the goals of the existing system.” Fans of wrestling, many of whom are very loyal, may internalize messages presented by its spectacle, which influences their everyday behaviour (Debord 1967; Rahily 2005). Rahily (2005) discusses the influence that spectacles involving violence may have over those who participate in and consume the spectacle. In utilizing the work of Foucault, Rahily contends that spectacles of violence in modern society help to create a, “docile, law-abiding populace” (p. 217). Professional wrestlers, as athletes, also help in promoting the dominant ideals of capitalist industrial economics by presenting spectators with images of “sportsman like values.” The “sportsman” ethic gives value to strong, fit, muscular bodies, physical dominance, virility, discipline, and obedience to

authority figures such as coaches and referees. The adoption of such values is most useful in capitalist societies, where the expectation is one of obedience and subservience by workers to employers (Rahily 2005; Stewart 1987). Thus, while the spectacle in professional wrestling may have elements of anti-capitalist attitudes, it can also be said that the spectacle itself works to reinforce the dominant values and attitudes of a capitalist society.

### **Precarious Work, Job Stress and Demand-Control**

Professional wrestling is a moneymaking enterprise, and is supported by the hard work of its performers who often face a great deal of stress in their work. Much of the literature on the relationship between work and health identifies job stress as a key factor that affects the health of employed individuals. Brock and Buckley (2012) identify job stress as occurring, “when the demands that are being placed upon a person tax or exceed available resources as appraised by the individual involved” (p. 1). An individual may encounter job stress through aspects of the job itself, such as an over-demanding or difficult workload, or through ‘social or organizational’ contexts, such as interpersonal conflicts between workers or poor communication networks in a workplace (Noblet and LaMontagne 2006). In their recent study, Brock and Buckley (2012) note that most Americans claim to be under more stress now than was the case a decade ago, and identify work as being the main stressor in their life. This is troublesome because job stress may result in a number of possible physical and mental health problems (Brock and Buckley 2012; Krahn, Lowe, and Hughes 2007).

In addition to stress that may result from the demands of the job, stress may also arise because of the precarious nature of work as well as employment strain. This is particularly true for professional wrestling, where full time jobs are not common and are available only to a few

individuals (De Garis 2005). Precarious work is typically associated with instability, lack of protection, and social and economic vulnerability (Scott-Marshall 2009). Employment strain results when workers face great levels of uncertainty regarding their employment, and is also a consequence of individuals having to make greater efforts to ‘find and keep employment’ (Clarke et al. 2007). Indeed, those working in jobs of a precarious nature, and those who encounter employment strain, face great worries involving their employment. These individuals are often confronted by worries regarding job layoffs, living expenses and medical bills; they usually encounter difficulties and constraints with long-term financial and life planning (Krahn et al. 2007). Moreover, workers without job security also tend to display a low commitment to their jobs, low morale and low job motivation, and are less likely to assure quality in their work and derive a sense of satisfaction or meaning from their work (Jackson 2010; Sparks, Faragher, and Cooper 2001).

Since most professional wrestlers in North America are either paid by appearance, or have short-term contracts with promotions, one can consider professional wrestlers to fall under the category of contract workers. A study by Lewchuk et al. (2013) found that contract work is a precarious way to earn a living. Contract workers are self-employed, and companies will often use such workers to avoid having to provide any of the benefits that are typically associated with more secure employment relationships. Although contract workers may have many clients, “they may be dependent on a single client for all of their work, receiving direction on how to perform that work just as an employee would” (Lewchuk et al. 2013, p. 39). Contract workers as a group are less likely to unionize, are more likely to face irregular income, and run a higher risk of not getting paid for their work. Additionally, contract workers are more likely to lack benefits such as a, ‘drug or vision plan, dental coverage, life insurance or a pension’ (p. 39-41).



This is true for the professional wrestling industry, which has never been unionized and, more often than not, wrestlers are responsible for their own medical bills (Jackson 2010; Schiavone 2007).

Lack of access to benefits for contract workers and precarious workers more generally creates hardships. Indeed, as Jackson (2010) notes, the stress and anxiety associated with precarious work is compounded when workers do not receive benefits. What is more, little or no benefits and instability in income often result in precarious workers finding it difficult to make long-term plans for their futures (Lewchuk et al. 2011). This is especially true for younger people engaged in precarious work. For instance, young people with precarious jobs are less likely to marry and gain access to some of the benefits that come with marriage, such as companionship and the sharing of house costs. Making such commitments is becoming more difficult for young people due to the increase in job insecurity and income instability (Lewchuk et al. 2013). Similarly, a study by Glavin (2013) reveals that the uncertainty associated with precarious work diminishes the likelihood of one engaging in long-term actions such as starting a family or purchasing a house.

A study by Roderick (2006) that examines professional soccer players finds that the working lives of these athletes are inherently precarious, and that uncertainty is a key feature of their work. The same can be said for professional wrestling, and other forms of sports and entertainment. Indeed, in professional wrestling, just as in soccer, workers face a number of insecurities, such as a highly competitive labour market, a surplus of talent, a limited number of jobs, the possibility of injury, and the idea that one's marketability as an athlete will decrease as they age. These athletes lack long-term security, and often work with short-term contracts. The possibility of losing one's job and having to put forth an effort to network and find another job

is a constant fear that athletes in sports face (Roderick 2006). Furthermore, wrestlers who are not signed to a more secure, exclusive long-term contract with a single promotion, such as WWE, typically work for various promotions in North America and overseas. Wrestlers thus shift from workplace to workplace on a regular basis, with the added stress of having to routinely adapt to new environments and establish new relationships with promoters, wrestlers, and others. Wrestlers need to constantly try to build relationships with promoters as a means of finding continued work, which is particularly demanding and stressful (Roderick 2006; Smith 2009; Turner 1969).

Professional wrestlers find themselves engaged in precarious work, and having to constantly shift from one promotion or workplace to another can potentially undermine their ability to build social support networks in their workplace. Precarious types of work lack the stronger social support networks that one may find in more secure and stable workplaces. The lack of social support at work adds to the stress of working life, and can result in adverse health effects (Jackson 2010; Lewchuk et al. 2011). The lack of a workplace social support network can be even more detrimental for groups of workers such as wrestlers or other athletes or entertainers in precarious positions. The wrestling locker room is often described as a very ‘cut-throat’ environment, as professional wrestlers are in an individualistic job with a very high level of competition amongst performers (De Garis 2005; Kleinberg and Nudelman 2005). In his study of professional soccer players, Roderick (2006) found that some have difficulty trying to establish social support networks in their workplaces, as there is a very high level of competition amongst team members and a prevailing sense of job insecurity. Moreover, due to the uncertainty of work and travel schedules, those in precarious fields of work such as

professional wrestling also find it difficult to create and sustain friendship networks outside of work (Lewchuk et al. 2011).

Much of the research regarding job stress associates such stress with the level of job control and autonomy that one possesses. This is illustrated by Robert Karasek's (1990) demand-control model. According to this model, those who experience high levels of stress in their job tend to face high demands with limited authority and opportunities for decision-making, and low levels of support from supervisors and colleagues (Noblet and LaMontagne 2006). Conversely, those who work in jobs where they have greater control over their work and are able to exercise more decision-making are often seen to be more motivated. When individuals have more control over their work environment, they are more likely to view their job as rewarding (Sparks et al. 2001). Thus, as Krahn et al. (2007) state: "If psychological demands on a worker are high, but she or he can do something about it, stress is less likely to result. If demands are high and control is low, stress and the health problems... are more likely the outcome" (p. 450). Moreover, workers who face a great amount of job stress stemming from a lack of control in their work may eventually experience burnout – stress to the point where they can no longer 'cope with their job' (Krahn et al. 2007). Glavin (2013) asserts that having a high level of personal control at work is a strong indicator of good physical and mental health. A person working with a high level of control and self-direction is likely to experience feelings of mastery and self-efficacy (pp. 115-116).

As previously stated, those who experience job stress may also experience a variety of physical and mental health problems. Lewchuk et al. (2013) note that those with secure jobs and financial security are more likely to have less negative health outcomes that are associated with their work, and are more likely to experience positive health outcomes such as increased

feelings of self-worth and higher self-esteem. Constant stress in a work environment can disturb one's equilibrium and lead to various health problems (Brock and Buckley 2012). Individuals who work in jobs with low control, work overload, and/or poor supervisory support, and experience high stress levels may develop fatigue, insomnia, muscular aches and pains, ulcers, hypertension, heart disease, irritability, low self-esteem, immune deficiency, depression, anxiety, and other various mental health problems (Krahn et al. 2007; Lu 1999; Noblet and LaMontagne 2006). Backwith and Munn-Giddings (2003) estimate that each year in the United Kingdom, approximately three in ten workers experience mental health problems, and that this number is likely to increase in the future. According to more recent data for Canada, one in five Canadians experience mental health or addiction problems, and during any given week, around 500,000 individuals are not able to work due to mental health or addiction problems (CAMH 2012). Individuals who experience adverse health effects from stressful work environments are more likely to engage in drug and alcohol use as a coping mechanism. They may also experience difficulties in their family life and personal life because they are more likely to carry their problems from work into these realms, which negatively affects their work-life balance (Krahn et al. 2007; Morrison and MacKinnon 2008; Lu 1999).

In terms of managing one's work-life balance as a professional wrestler, the distinction between working life and life away from work may be difficult to make. Some wrestlers become consumed with wrestling, and their daily life can become permeated with wrestling. Smith (2009) draws upon the work of Goffman in describing wrestling as a 'total institution,' where wrestling shapes the daily rituals of professional wrestlers. As professional wrestlers become further absorbed in their work, their daily routines increasingly focus upon wrestling related tasks such as going to the gym, practicing, dieting, and studying video tapes of

professional wrestling. Roderick (2006) also found a similar immersion into work for professional soccer players, noting that as such professional athletes become public figures, their identity becomes inextricably tied to their work, and they rarely leave their work at the workplace (p. 259).

In addition to health problems that may arise due to the types of job stress discussed above, one must not overlook the stress that wrestlers place on their bodies as a regular part of their work. As stated earlier in this chapter, professional wrestling is a form of highly skilled, bodily labour that results in the wear and tear of the bodies of its performers, and suffering some form of injury from wrestling is almost guaranteed. Injuries are normalized amongst wrestlers, and pain is accepted as part of the job (Smith 2008a). A professional wrestler in a study conducted by Smith (2009) explains the acceptance of pain, “If any wrestler tells you they feel fine, they’re lying... No one falls down on purpose except pro wrestlers. And so, it’s something you need to train your body to react to” (p. 54). As evidenced by this quote, professional wrestlers train in order to ‘harden’ their bodies to pain and become accustomed to falling down and taking bumps on a regular basis, just as professional boxers train in order to become accustomed to taking punches on a regular basis (Smith 2009; Wacquant 1992).

Fear of injury can thus become an added stress in the daily lives of professional wrestlers. In his study on the working lives of athletes playing for professional soccer clubs, Roderick (2006) notes that athletes often become stressed over the possibility of injuries because they depend on their bodies to secure a livelihood. As is the case in wrestling, one’s value as a soccer player can drastically fall if one suffers a long-term injury. It can be argued that an athlete’s body is a commodity, and that the value of this commodity decreases when an injury is suffered, because an athlete may be less likely to find gainful employment in a sport

when it is known that there is a history of injuries. Roderick (2006) also found that when soccer players endure injuries, they feel pressure to continue to play and suffer through the pain. The pressure to play while injured is largely attributed to the fierce level of competition, and the large pool of talent looking for work in the sport. Players feel that it is necessary to stay active and visible in order to demonstrate their value in spite of injuries. They are also aware that if they take time off due to an injury, someone is likely to take their job. The same can be said for professional wrestlers, who will often work while injured in order to demonstrate their value as a performer, and will often refuse to take time off to heal due to the fear and likely possibility that another wrestler will take their position (Kleinberg and Nudelman 2005).

As can be ascertained from the literature, job stress is linked to high-demand low-control work, results from worries pertaining to precarious work and employment strain, and leads to a number of different physical and mental health problems. Those who work in professional wrestling not only face the physical stresses of wrestling and travelling for a living, but also the stresses that are associated with finding, securing, and negotiating work on an ongoing basis, which will be further explored in Chapter 5 of this thesis. Before discussing these research findings, Chapter 3 will examine the current context of work and health in the professional wrestling industry. This will then be followed by a presentation, in Chapter 4, of the methodology and methods that were adopted to carry out study.

### **CHAPTER III: CONTEXT**

This chapter examines the current state of the professional wrestling industry in North America, and explores prevalent work and health issues pertaining to professional wrestlers. Professional wrestling is a very unique niche in the sports and entertainment industry, and workers in professional wrestling face certain issues that are very specific to their field. While some of the issues in sports such as American football, hockey, and mixed martial arts may be similar to issues facing professional wrestlers, there are nonetheless aspects of work in the professional wrestling industry that are sufficiently different and worthy of further exploration. Many of the themes discussed in this chapter will be revisited in Chapter V of this thesis; the goal here is to provide background on these themes to better contextualize the findings of this research.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the history of professional wrestling in North America from the 1980s to the present, highlighting the immense influence that WWE has had over workers in the industry. The chapter will then focus on the contractual nature of work in the professional wrestling industry, followed by a discussion of medical insurance in an industry based on highly skilled physical labour. The chapter will then pay attention to drug use in professional wrestling, followed by a discussion of WWE's stance on drug use amongst its performers, and the workplace wellness policy that WWE put in place for its performers. The chapter will shift to a discussion of bleeding and hepatitis in wrestling, and head injuries, two health-related issues that have only garnered serious attention in the professional wrestling industry in recent years due to new research that has influenced the culture of wrestling in North America. This will be followed by an exploration of travelling in wrestling, and the stresses that arise for professional wrestlers who must endure constant travel in order to earn a living. The

final section of the chapter will address the topic of unionization in the professional wrestling industry, focusing on the reasons why professional wrestlers have never unionized, a collective action that would provide better benefits and job security for workers in the industry.

### **The Professional Wrestling Landscape in the United States and Canada 1980–Present**

The 1980s and 1990s were marked by an economic transition towards globalization and massive corporate restructuring. During this period, many organizations underwent mergers and acquisitions and increased multinational operations, leading to greater competitiveness on a global scale. These transformations led to an overall restructuring of employment relations, resulting in increased job and income insecurity for workers around the world (Scott-Marshall 2009; Sparks et al. 2001). These shifts are apparent when looking at the case of the professional wrestling industry from the 1980s and onward.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the professional wrestling industry in the United States and Canada operated under a territorial system. Promoters would run their separate wrestling organizations in different geographic regions, and would only promote wrestling within their distinct regions. During this period, Vince McMahon Sr. operated the World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF) in New York City and the surrounding area in the Northeast United States. Verne Gagne operated the American Wrestling Alliance (AWA) in Minnesota and the surrounding states in the American Mid-West, and Fritz Von Erich operated World Class Championship Wrestling out of Dallas. In addition, a number of promoters operated in different regions of North America under the banner of the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA); for example, Jim Crocket's NWA promotions that operated mainly out of North Carolina and South Carolina, and expanded into Georgia and other regions of the United States towards the end of



the decade. Generally speaking, under the territorial system, promoters would tour their own stable of wrestlers on wrestling cards throughout the different cities within their territory, and would not promote their wrestling shows in the territories of other promoters (Beekman 2006; Sharp 2005). This regional system of promoting professional wrestling was somewhat advantageous to the wrestlers themselves, as they could prolong their careers by working in different territories. For instance, if a wrestler spent a number of years working in one territory and became stale to audiences in that region, he or she could move to another territory and become a 'fresh face' to a different audience and continue to earn a living. Moreover, if a wrestler had a dispute with management in one territory, he or she had the option of moving to a different territory and working for a different promoter (Beekman 2006).

This territorial-based system of promoting wrestling in North America – a system in which wrestlers had the opportunity to earn a living by working for different promoters in different territories throughout their careers – changed in 1979 when Vince McMahon Jr. purchased the New York based World Wide Wrestling Federation from his father, Vince McMahon Sr. Vince McMahon Jr. shortened the name of the organization to the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) and sought to expand his organization by breaking traditional codes of promoting wrestling in North America on a territorial level, and instead promoting it on a national level and into the territories of other wrestling promoters (Pratten 2003). McMahon sought to squash his national competition by purchasing various wrestling territories throughout North America, by signing wrestlers from rival promotions, and by negotiating cable television broadcasting deals throughout various markets in the United States. By 1983, McMahon signed over two dozen wrestlers from Verne Gagne's AWA promotion to WWF contracts, and then signed a cable television deal with the USA Network. The most noteworthy

wrestler that McMahon signed from the AWA promotion was Hulk Hogan, who had become a mainstream celebrity by appearing in the 1982 blockbuster film *Rocky III* (Beekman 2006).

In 1985, McMahon invested heavily in an all-new wrestling spectacle titled *Wrestlemania*, a closed-circuit television event broadcast from Madison Square Garden featuring a series of wrestling matches involving WWF wrestlers. This event also showcased celebrities such as Cyndi Lauper, Muhammad Ali, and Ray Charles. The spectacle included a main-event featuring Mr. T. teaming with his *Rocky III* costar and WWF Champion Hulk Hogan to wrestle Roddy Piper and Paul Orndorff. *Wrestlemania* was touted as a commercial success, grossing over \$4 million for the single event, and went on to become a high grossing annual pay-per-view event for the company (Beekman 2006; Patten 2003). After the success of the first *Wrestlemania*, it became clear that the WWF was the premier wrestling promotion in the United States. With the WWF achieving national success, promotions still running under the territorial system floundered and many went bankrupt. However, in 1988, Jim Crockett sold his NWA organization, Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling, which was being promoted under the new name of World Championship Wrestling (WCW), to Ted Turner, founder of Turner Broadcasting Systems (TBS) and Cable News Network (CNN). Now under new ownership with solid financial backing, WCW was broadcast by Turner on his TBS Superstation network and became a direct competitor to the WWF (Beekman 2006).

Clearly, by the early 1990s, the wrestling landscape had changed dramatically. Ten years prior, wrestlers had the opportunity to earn a decent living by working in the wrestling industry for different territories throughout North America, but this was no longer possible in the 1990s with the destruction of the territorial system. Through national promotion and the rise of cable television, only two companies provided wrestlers with the opportunity to earn a decent

living in the United States: WWF and WCW. WWF and WCW continued to be rivals throughout the 1990s. This rivalry peaked during the “Monday Night Wars” in the mid-to-late 1990s, a period when WWF and WCW both experienced record high television ratings and popularity by broadcasting their Monday night television programs, *WWF Monday Night Raw* and *WCW Monday Nitro*, in the same timeslot on their respective networks. Yet, by the end of 1999, the WWF was consistently beating WCW in television ratings. WCW lost most of its viewing audience, and was also losing millions of dollars financially due to mismanagement. In 2001, this wrestling rivalry came to an end, as the WWF purchased WCW for only a few million dollars, and signed a select number of WCW wrestlers to new WWF contracts (Beekman 2006; Reynolds and Alvarez 2004; Patten 2003).

Since then, the WWF, now rebranded as World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), has been the only major professional wrestling promotion in North America, and now possesses a global dominance over the entire professional wrestling industry. WWE is a highly profitable organization, worth an estimated \$1.2 billion and operating in 145 countries (Hernandez and Brustein 2010). A promotional juggernaut, WWE earns income through various revenue streams: television, pay-per-view, film, home video, advertising, websites, books, video games, toys, clothing, and various other merchandise (Deeter-Schemlitz and Sojka 2004; Smith 2009). That WWE would have another rival promotion in the near future is nearly impossible, because the financial cost of competing against this organization would be gigantic. It is estimated that the cost of starting a brand new wrestling company that could properly compete against WWE would exceed \$100 million (Sharp 2006). Today in North America, there are few organizations that provide wrestlers with the opportunity to earn a decent full-time living beyond WWE. Total-Nonstop Action Wrestling (TNA Wrestling), founded in 2002 by former WWE and

WCW star Jeff Jarrett, is currently the ‘number two’ professional wrestling promotion in the United States, and tours its shows and tapes its television broadcasts for Spike TV on the road. However, TNA Wrestling is a distant competitor to WWE. Possessing a far smaller fan base and fewer revenue streams, TNA Wrestling has undergone periods of financial difficulty since its foundation in 2002 (Sharp 2006).

Beyond working for professional wrestling juggernaut WWE, or its much smaller competitor TNA, current professional wrestlers seek to earn their living working for independent wrestling promotions. Smith (2009) describes “the indies” as a, “loose-knit association of low-budget, community-based entertainment [which] lacks affiliation with the WWE and consists of pro wrestling schools, websites, and regional promotions” (p. 6). Independent wrestling promotions generally host their shows at small venues that are local to where the promotion operates, such as bingo halls, high school gymnasiums, flea markets, and armories. Shows at smaller, intimate venues such as these are where many new professional wrestlers seek employment to gain experience and build their reputation so that they could eventually work in front of larger crowds for bigger promotions (Monday 2012; Smith 2009). It is very difficult to gage the exact number of such independent promotions in North America, as independent wrestling is such a low budget business that sees promotions opening up and closing down on a regular basis. Professional wrestling journalist Dave Meltzer estimates that, in the United States, there are anywhere from 1,000 to 1,500 active professional wrestlers and between 150 to 200 promotions (2009).

While there are approximately 150 to 200 small independent wrestling promotions in the United States, where wrestlers work in front of small audiences in order to hone their craft, there also exists a very small handful of independent wrestling promotions in the United States

with cult followings that represent a higher tier of independent wrestling. Ring of Honor (ROH), Dragon Gate USA (DGUSA), Evolve, Combat Zone Wrestling (CZW), Chikara, and Pro Wrestling Guerilla (PWG) are regarded as the top tier independent wrestling promotions in the United States. These higher tier independent promotions typically generate revenue through live event ticket sales, sales of Internet pay-per-view streams for live events, DVD sales, and merchandise sold at live events or through their websites. Unlike smaller independent promotions that generally run in one city or region, these promotions will sometimes promote and tour their shows in different markets throughout the United States and Canada. However, while these promotions are regarded as the top tier of the independents and have significant fan followings, they are still very small when compared to the grandiose spectacle of wrestling presented by WWE, and can only afford to run a small number of shows each year. For instance, CZW promoted 16 shows in 2012, whereas ROH promoted 20 shows (Combat Zone Wrestling 2013; Ring of Honor 2013). Live attendance at these promotions varies, but generally consists of a couple of hundred fans. For a reference point, the May 4, 2013 Ring of Honor show in Toronto, Ontario, drew an estimated 1100 fans, and their February 8, 2014 show in San Antonio, Texas drew an estimated 800 fans (Martin 2014; Murphy 2013).

This handful of top tier independent promotions features popular independent wrestlers, who are considered by wrestling fans to be the stars of independent wrestling. It is the goal of many independent wrestlers to be booked on one of the top tier independent promotions because this is a significant way for wrestlers to build their name and popularity within the professional wrestling industry, and thus earn more money and increase the likelihood of one day working for WWE. Within recent years, a number of wrestlers who have been featured performers in top tier independent promotions have signed contracts with WWE. Especially within the past two

years, WWE has had success featuring a number of wrestlers on their shows who had previously been regarded by fans as independent wrestling stars, such as CM Punk and Daniel Bryan who are now the top babyfaces in WWE. This has resulted in WWE looking for more future talent from top tier independent promotions (Middleton 2013). Thus, while there are only a handful of top tier independent promotions, their role in the professional wrestling business is important, because these promotions provide greater exposure for professional wrestlers seeking to further their careers.

While the professional wrestling landscape in North America is dominated by WWE, with a handful of much smaller top tier independent promotions to support it, some professional wrestlers based in the United States and Canada also aim to work tours for wrestling promotions based in other countries overseas, particularly Japan, Australia, England, and Germany (Jericho 2007; Hart 2008). Traditionally, a number of professional wrestlers based out of the United States and Canada have gained experience in wrestling by working in Mexico. Today, many Canadian and American professional wrestlers continue to work regularly in Mexico, with the top promotions being Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre (CMLL) and Asistencia Asoria y Administracion (AAA). However, within recent years, drug cartel violence in Mexico has been hurting the country's professional wrestling business, and some professional wrestlers are hesitant to travel to Mexico to work, and are sometimes advised by promoters not to travel to Mexico when the climate is too dangerous (Bauer 2013).

### **Independent Contractors**

Professional wrestlers working for major wrestling promotions, namely World Wrestling Entertainment and TNA Wrestling, are hired as independent contractors. However, many feel

that the classification of such wrestlers as independent contractors is a gross misclassification. Independent contractors in some industries outside of professional wrestling possess a certain level of autonomy over their work, as they have the ability to choose where they work, when they work, for whom they work, and for how much money they are prepared to work.

Professional wrestlers, specifically WWE wrestlers, do not possess this level of autonomy, and instead sacrifice a great degree in order to work for WWE (Sharp 2006). For instance, although WWE wrestlers are independent contractors, they do not enjoy the freedom of earning extra income by making appearances for other wrestling promotions, as they must obtain the approval of WWE to do so. Moreover, with WWE wrestlers working a typical 200 or more dates per year in addition to heavy travel schedules, they generally have no time to seek other work outside of WWE. Likewise, if a WWE wrestler is booked on a WWE show, he or she must appear on that show or be fined, suspended, or fired (Schiavone 2007).

Professional wrestlers who work for WWE as independent contractors also lose control of their individual wrestling characters and personas to WWE. Control over one's character is important to how a professional wrestler earns a living, because professional wrestling is a spectacle based upon both the athleticism of the wrestlers and their theatrical ability to portray themselves as their own individual 'larger than life,' colourful wrestling personalities. Different characters such as 'Stone Cold' Steve Austin and The Undertaker attract their own wrestling fans, who pay money to watch their favourite wrestlers perform under their individual personas (Barthes 2005; Jenkins 2005). When wrestlers work for WWE as independent contractors, the organization owns their wrestling character, the rights to the character's likeness, and the merchandising and licensing rights over the character (Schiavone 2007; Sharp 2006).

Furthermore, WWE has complete control over the direction and design of a wrestler's character

and personality. WWE wrestlers are under the direction of Vince McMahon and the WWE team of creative writers who have final say over wrestling storylines; they tell wrestlers how to portray their characters, how to wrestle, who to wrestle, and on what position of the wrestling card they wrestle. When wrestlers' contract expires with or is terminated by WWE, they lose the ability to portray the wrestling character that they had portrayed in WWE, and cannot wrestle under the same name or character likeness in other wrestling promotions (Sharp 2006).

WWE hires its professional wrestlers as independent contractors in spite of having near complete control over their schedules, pay, and wrestling characters. Yet, what is most glaring about the misclassification of WWE wrestlers as independent contractors, is the fact that WWE classifies its workers as independent contractors in order to avoid paying certain taxes, health insurance, workers' compensation, unemployment insurance, retirement pensions, paid leave, and other benefits to which workers holding more secure employment are typically entitled. Since professional wrestling is an industry where the injury rate is relatively high, not paying medial insurance or retirement benefits to wrestlers saves WWE millions of dollars per year (Schiavone 2007; Sharp 2006). In 2008, three former WWE wrestlers filed a lawsuit against the organization in order to challenge the classification of WWE wrestlers as independent contractors, but the case was thrown out of court (Mujanović 2011).

In most cases, independent wrestlers do not work under contracts. Professional wrestlers on the independent scene generally work on the basis of verbal agreements between the wrestler and the promoter, and are paid on a per appearance basis (Smith 2008). Larger independent promotions with regional television deals or Internet pay-per-view broadcasting deals, namely Ring of Honor, Dragon Gate USA, and Evolve, sign contracts with their core roster of performers. While under such contracts, these wrestlers are free to work for other independent



groups, but cannot make appearances for other larger, rival independent promotions. For instance, a Ring of Honor contracted wrestler cannot appear on a Dragon Gate USA pay-per-view. Wrestlers on the independent scene generally have a high level of autonomy over where they work and make appearances, and will often increase their income by selling their own merchandise at shows (Highspots 2013).

### **Medical Insurance**

Professional wrestlers, who are workers in an industry with no union presence and virtually no full-time employment, are responsible for their own medical expenses. Professional wrestlers who work as independent contractors for WWE are required to have health insurance, but the organization does not pay for such insurance. As independent contractors, these professional wrestlers are contractually obligated to be responsible for their own health insurance. Still, WWE, under its Talent Wellness Program, does offer workshops to its wrestlers on the topic of health insurance, and will also provide them with referrals to health insurance providers. Furthermore, since these wrestlers are hired by WWE as independent contractors, they can claim health insurance as a business expense on their income tax. While WWE wrestlers are responsible for paying for their own health insurance, WWE does pay the expenses for any in-ring injuries and any rehabilitation services associated with such injuries (Essany 2011; Schiavone 2007; WWE 2011).

Professional wrestlers who work for independent promotions are entirely responsible for their own medical expenses. Generally speaking, independent promoters assume no responsibility for the wrestlers who work their shows, and wrestlers must pay their own medical expenses if injured while working for independent groups (Kotarba 2001; Smith 2008). If an

independent wrestler is hurt while performing for an independent group, it can become a great financial loss for the wrestler, because paydays are generally very small sums of money, and hospital bills can be quite large depending on the injury (Smith 2009). While most independent wrestlers work without health insurance, some secure health insurance coverage through other jobs, or through their spouse (Kotarba 2001; Smith 2009).

### **Wrestling and Drug Use**

The drugs most commonly associated with the professional wrestling business are bodybuilding drugs, specifically steroids. Indeed, professional wrestling has a long history of showcasing performers with ‘larger than life,’ muscular physiques. This is especially true when looking at the top stars throughout the history of WWE (Beekman 2006; Souillere 2006; Souillere and Blair 2006; Schiavone 2007). Thus, professional wrestlers feel a great pressure to achieve and maintain muscular bodies, and this pressure may lead them to engage in anabolic steroid use in order to enhance their physiques. Steroid use in professional wrestling was so prevalent during the 1980s that, in the early 1990s, the U.S. Department of Justice investigated the WWF and Vince McMahon for steroid distribution (Sharp 2006). Bret Hart (2007), who wrestled for the WWF during the 1980s, notes that during that era, “the WWF was a muscleman meat factory” (p. 225). According to Schiavone (2007), of 66 mainstream professional wrestlers who died between 1997 and 2007, 37 were known steroid users at various points in their lives, and another 25 had engaged in steroid use at different points in their careers. The death of WWE wrestler Eddie Guerrero in 2005 revealed that he suffered from undiagnosed arteriosclerotic cardiovascular disease, and that his heart had been enlarged from years of anabolic steroid use (Sharp 2006). With regard to Chris Benoit, Mick Foley (2010) notes that

the wrestler may not have gotten his break in WWE had it not been for his impressive physique made possible by anabolic steroids, and states that, “Apparently Chris was so psychologically dependent on maintaining his look that he didn’t cycle off steroids even when recuperating from neck surgery” (p. 215).

Today, WWE performs drug tests on its performers for anabolic steroid use. However, as recently as a few years ago, it was believed that many WWE wrestlers used growth hormones in order to enhance their physiques (Schiafone 2007). While professional wrestlers who are fixated on maintaining muscular bodies and resort to drug use in order to achieve these physiques may develop physical health problems, as evidenced by Guerrero’s death, they are also at risk of developing a number of mental health problems, such as body image disorders, eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression (Soulliere and Blair 2006).

While some, especially mainstream media following the Benoit tragedy, have pointed to steroids as the drug that is most rampant and dangerous within the professional wrestling industry, many professional wrestlers argue that the abuse of pain medication is the most dangerous drug problem (Walton and Williams 2011). A number of wrestlers cope with pain and injuries through the use of pain medications and some have developed addictions to such medication (Schiafone 2007; Foley 2010). The late Chris Candido spoke on this subject during a radio interview before he passed away in 2005, stating, “We take pain medication; we get hurt more, we take more... guys we’ve lost the past couple years, you get hooked on it... And I did too” (quoted in Kleinberg and Nudelman 2005, p. 236). Several wrestlers have spent time in rehabilitation facilities in order to get treatment for the abuse of pain medication, and many continue to abuse pain medications. A significant number of deaths in the professional wrestling industry have been attributed to the abuse of pain medications, such as that of Eddie Guerrero in

2005 and Rick Rude in 1999 (Hart 2007; Schiavone 2007). Former WWE wrestler Mick Foley (2010) notes, “There are certainly times when pain medicine can be of great use in a pro wrestler’s life, but the abuse of such medicine is a good way to ruin a career... and cut short a life” (p. 222).

Whereas drug use that is typically associated with professional wrestling, such as steroids and pain killers, could be viewed as work related, with steroids being used to achieve a desirable wrestling body, and painkillers being used to cope with pain and injuries, recreational drug use is also typically associated with wrestling. Recreational drugs are used by wrestlers to cope with stress, thrill seek, or bond with other wrestlers. Stories of wrestlers partying and engaging in recreational drug use, as told by notable wrestlers in autobiographies and media interviews, often include instances of heavy alcohol consumption in addition to the use of recreational drugs such as marijuana and cocaine, the recreational use of painkillers, or the use of other prescription drugs such as somas, a muscle relaxant that is commonly associated with recreational drug use by wrestlers (Hart 2008; Foley 2010; Kleinberg and Nudelman 2005; Schiavone 2007; Smith 2008b).

### **WWE Wellness Policy**

Following the death of Eddie Guerrero in 2005, WWE implemented a new wellness program for its performers (Schiavone 2007). WWE now regularly tests its performers for steroid use, prescription drug abuse, and illegal drug use. It also now provides routine health monitoring of its performers, such as cardiovascular health testing, as well as concussion monitoring. As a means of enforcing the policy amongst its performers, WWE fines and suspends wrestlers who test positive for banned substances and violate the wellness policy, and

fires wrestlers after their third violation of the policy. In addition to this wellness program, WWE offers sponsored rehabilitation services for anyone who has ever performed for the organization and suffers from drug and/or alcohol addictions (Beekman 2006; Brody 2009; Foley 2010; Schiavone 2007; Sharp 2006). However, it does not sponsor rehabilitation services for former performers who suffer from mental health conditions. In 2008, former WWE wrestler Chris Kanyon sought assistance from the WWE wellness program for help with depression, but the organization refused to offer its services. Two years later, in 2010, Kanyon committed suicide (Hernandez and Brustein 2010).

### **Bleeding and Hepatitis**

It is not uncommon for one to see blood during a professional wrestling match. Sometimes, professional wrestlers will purposefully incorporate the use of blood into their matches in order to build ‘heat’ or drama during a wrestling match. Blood in wrestling, also known as ‘juice’ or ‘colour,’ may be induced from someone ‘hardway,’ meaning that blood is induced through legitimate cuts by punches, strikes, or other physical contact. However, bleeding in wrestling, for the most part, is done purposely through ‘blading,’ where wrestlers cut themselves with a razor, generally across the top of their forehead. Razor blades are typically hidden in wrestlers’ wrist-tape or mouth, or are hidden by referees and passed to wrestlers during the match in order to allow them to discretely cut themselves or cut an opponent (Beekman 2006; Mazer 2005; Smith 2008).

Amongst workers in the professional wrestling industry, there is a known phrase, “red equals green,” which means that bleeding brings a sense of realism to a wrestling match, builds sympathy for a babyface, and helps further a storyline feud between two wrestlers to ensure that

fans will be willing to pay money to watch live shows (Bauer et al. 2013 b.). Blood is also seen as bringing a sense of realism to the spectacle of professional wrestling, and helps fans suspend their disbelief while watching. Hunt (2005) contends that bleeding during wrestling matches, alongside using weapons to strike opponents and falling from high places, enables professional wrestling to include a semblance of reality within its unreal spectacle. Hence, blood is, “the most vivid sign... [that] the game has passed from simulation to actuality” (Hunt 2005: 121).

While blood has been a tool that professional wrestlers have used in their art form for generations, recently, they have become more cautious about the use of blood in wrestling. This stems from some professional wrestlers admitting that they have tested positive for diseases such as Hepatitis B and C, and maintaining that such diseases are contracted through wrestlers bleeding on one another. Canadian professional wrestler Devon Nicholson claims to have contracted Hepatitis C from a match with Abdullah the Butcher, a veteran professional wrestler who is notorious for bleeding in his matches. Nicholson also claims that being diagnosed with Hepatitis C prevented him from obtaining a job offered to him by WWE, as the offer was rescinded (Nicholson 2011). British professional wrestler Nigel McGuinness contracted Hepatitis B, which he revealed in 2012, and retired from wrestling shortly thereafter. McGuinness subsequently produced a documentary that covers his retirement tour, *The Last of McGuinness*, and, in the documentary, he urges professional wrestlers to put an end to the practice of purposely blading themselves in their matches in order to stop the spread of diseases such as Hepatitis (McGuinness 2012).

Currently, WWE screens all of its active performers for Hepatitis, and requires medical exams for all new performers seeking a contract with the organization. WWE also prohibits the use of blood during matches, and fines wrestlers for purposely bleeding during matches. There

have been many instances within the past several years where matches have been stopped mid-way to allow the ringside medical team to patch up wrestlers with accidental cuts before the match is allowed to continue (Waring 2010).

Although, WWE screens its performers for diseases such as Hepatitis, professional wrestling's independent scene generally has no regulations on screening performers for such diseases. Thus, independent wrestlers are left to trust one another's word, and use their discretion when deciding to use blood during matches. While it is still common to see blood on certain independent shows, there are a growing number of independent wrestlers who refuse to bleed in their matches. Prominent independent professional wrestler Kevin Steen describes his experience bleeding in a match he had with Colt Cabana, highlighting conversations he had with Nigel McGuinness pertaining to the risks of blood in matches:

It was literally to shock people... he would get colour and I would lick his blood off his fucking forehead, because it was Colt I didn't mind, I didn't care, cause it's Colt. And Nigel said, 'Well, would you have felt comfortable doing that with me?' And I said, 'Yeah, probably, cause you're my friend.' 'Yeah, well, if you had done that with me at a certain time you would have gotten sick.' And I was like, holy shit, you know, that's true. And that's what made it for me where I'm never going to do that again. Actually, I can't say that, maybe I will, but if I do I will choose where I do it a lot wiser and I'll be smarter about it... but there's another reason why I don't want to do it, because it's fucking stupid... it's dumb, it's fucking dangerous, and it's kind of crazy to people that live a normal life, so why do it? And I want to support Nigel in what he's trying to do, because I believe in it... guys should be more safe about it, get vaccinated, get tested (Highspots 2013).

## **Head Injuries**

Within the past five years, research into head and brain injuries, especially within the realm of athletics, has grown significantly. Following the Benoit tragedy of 2007, head injuries have become a major concern for professional wrestlers. Such injuries occur for a number of reasons. Concussions may result from in-ring accidents, botched wrestling moves, stiff blows to

the head from kicks and clotheslines, unprotected chair-shots to the head, or by wrestling using an overly intense or reckless in-ring style.

A number of wrestlers, such as Bret ‘Hitman’ Hart and Christopher Nowinski, have had their wrestling careers cut short due to serious concussions (Foley 2010; Hart 2007). Hart’s career-ending head injury came as the result of a stiff kick to the head by Bill Goldberg during their *WCW Starrcade* pay-per-view match in December of 1999. Hart dealt with bouts of depression in the months following the incident, and suffered a stroke in 2002 after hitting his head falling off of his bicycle (Hart 2007). Chris Nowinski, a former WWE wrestler and Harvard graduate, experienced several concussions that forced him into retirement at the young age of 24. Following his retirement, Nowinski founded the Sports Legacy Institute, a non-profit organization that researches head injuries and brain trauma amongst athletes (Martin 2012).

Research indicates that head injuries are likely a key part of the Benoit tragedy. Benoit had suffered numerous concussions throughout his career, and was highly regarded by the professional wrestling community for his physically intense, hard-hitting style, and his impressive repertoire of wrestling maneuvers, which included the German Suplex and the Flying Head-butt, that force contact to the head upon their execution (Johnson et al. 2007). Following Benoit’s death, Nowinski convinced Benoit’s father to have his son’s brain donated to be studied at the Sports Legacy Institute. Dr. Bennet Omalu determined that Benoit’s brain had been significantly damaged by a number of concussions, and that it resembled the brain of an 85-year-old man with advanced stages of Alzheimer’s disease (Maich 2007; Walton and Williams 2011).

A study of the Benoit case, as well as of a number of former professional football players who had committed suicide, showed that all of these athletes experienced repetitive



concussions throughout their careers and that their brains had been significantly damaged. It was found that these athletes suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a condition that can lead to memory loss, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's syndrome, dementia, and depression (Khurana and Kaye 2012). CTE has become a growing concern amongst not only professional wrestlers, but also amongst athletes such as football players, hockey players, mixed martial artists, and athletes from other 'hard-hitting,' contact sports. Starting in 2011, more than 4,500 former National Football League (NFL) players and their families filed lawsuits against the NFL, because these former football players are now dealing with neurological issues (Martin 2012; Mihoces 2013). On August 29, 2013, the NFL reached a settlement with the plaintiffs that cost the organization \$756 million. Though most of the money was put toward compensating athletes who suffer neurological ailments, \$75 million was contributed to medical examinations for retired players, and \$10 million was earmarked for medical research in this area (Dale 2013).

Although head injuries, and specifically CTE, are a growing concern in professional wrestling, as well as in other professional sports, recent advances have been made in research on CTE in living athletes. A study by researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, utilized brain scans in order to detect CTE in five living retired NFL football players. Prior to this, CTE could only be detected posthumously. This discovery will allow researchers to make advancements in treatments for CTE for those who live with this condition. What is more, being able to detect CTE will allow athletes to take further precautions to ensure their safety, and provide them with information to help them make the decision to retire in order to prevent further head traumas (Fainaru and Fainaru-Wada 2013; Small et al. 2013).

WWE has also begun to take the issue of head injuries very seriously. On May 16, 2013, it was announced that WWE would donate \$1.2 million over three years to researchers at Boston University's Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy. This funding is being used to conduct research into developing treatments for CTE (Mihoces 2013). WWE has also indicated that it has put in place a number of mandates in order to further protect and prevent its performers from suffering concussions. WWE does not allow its performers to strike one another to the head with steel chairs, and fines or suspends performers who go against this policy. In 2011, at *Wrestlemania XXVII*, WWE wrestlers Triple H (Paul Levesque) and The Undertaker (Mark Calloway) were both fined an undisclosed amount for using a chair to the head in their match (Cervantes 2011; World Wrestling Entertainment 2011). Moreover, WWE claims that it is actively working with its performers to change training and certain wrestling maneuvers and techniques in order to further prevent blows to the head. According to WWE, amongst its 150 active performers, 25 concussions were suffered in 2011, whereas only 11 concussions were suffered in 2012 (Mihoces 2013).

## **Travel**

Professional wrestlers who seek to work full time within the industry must endure a heavy travel schedule. During the 1980s, it was common for wrestlers to be working for over 300 days a year. Many wrestlers travelled the entire continental United States while making additional tours overseas, with different time zones affecting sleeping patterns and taking a toll on their well being. In order to cope with the stresses of such heavy travel and work schedule, wrestlers used drugs, both uppers and downers (Sharp 2006). On a broadcast of *Wrestling*

*Observer Live*, retired professional wrestler Harley Race describes the work and travel schedule that he endured when he wrestled as NWA World Champion during the 1970s and 1980s:

I wrestled one hour to a draw in Tokyo Japan on Friday night. I left there and wrestled Jack Briscoe in St. Louis, Missouri on Friday night with the time change coming back, and the day change, one hour. Left St. Louis the following morning and wrestled Carlos Colon for an hour in San Juan, Puerto Rico. That, my friend, is asking a world of any one human being... then I had a tour to Australia (Meltzer 2000).

Today, WWE wrestlers spend close to 200 days of the year travelling and wrestling, with more overseas tours than was the case during the 1980s. While WWE pays for the airfare of its wrestlers, the latter must absorb the expenses for rental cars, hotel accommodations, meals, and other incidentals while travelling (Schiavone 2007; Sharp 2006). Road expenses can be quite exorbitant for professional wrestlers, as a significant portion of their travelling time is spent driving. Depending on distances between cities, WWE wrestlers are expected to drive to and from events that are deemed drivable by management in order to reduce airfare costs. It is sometimes possible for lower card WWE wrestlers to suffer a financial loss when working a show due to travel expenses, because the bonus for working the show may not be enough to cover such expenses (Bauer et al. 2013a; Schiavone 2007). In order to save money and ease the difficulty of a heavy road schedule, wrestlers will often carpool and share hotel rooms (Dunn 2012). In recent years, a few top performers for WWE purchased their own tour buses and hired their own drivers in order to further ease the burden of travelling for work. In a recent documentary, top WWE performer CM Punk describes his experiences travelling and his decision to purchase a tour bus:

It literally goes against every fiber of my being, but it's a lifesaver and a career extender. Because the way I came up, you jammed as many people in a car as you could, you drove across hell and creation for a hotdog and a handshake... you slept on floors, you slept at rest stops, you slept in cars on top of other people. So, to have this [tour bus], this is a very lavish, almost unnecessary, extravagant way

to travel. It's an investment in my future. It's an investment in my knees and my elbows, and my sanity, really (Dunn 2012).

In this quote, CM Punk also refers to his days starting out on the independent wrestling scene, describing his time spent driving in a car full of wrestlers over long distances for a “hotdog and a handshake” (Dunn 2012). This phrase describes the very low, if any, remuneration that independent wrestlers starting out their careers received for working on shows, as well as the time and effort spent travelling by wrestlers eager to work on such shows. It is often the case that low to mid-level independent wrestlers endure a financial loss when working independent shows because the low payday does not provide enough money to cover the costs associated with travelling to the event, which can include transportation, lodging, meals, and other expenses (Smith 2009). However, many independent wrestlers starting out in professional wrestling feel that it is necessary to endure the costs of travelling in order to gain experience by working as many shows as possible, to gain in-ring experience by working in front of as many different crowds in as many different locations as possible, and to build their name and value as a wrestler by being featured in as many places as possible (Dunn 2012; Santamaria 2009; Smith 2009).

With the majority of their days spent travelling, it is difficult for professional wrestlers to sustain friendships outside of work and establish a domestic life, which affects relationships with their families (Sharp 2006). This stress on family life has an overall effect on job stress because one of the better coping mechanisms when facing job stress is positive social support outside of work from family and friends. Studies reveal that workers without positive support from networks of family and friends have added stress in their working life (Krahn et al. 2007; Lewchuk et al. 2007, 2011). Furthermore, the physical stress associated with sitting in cars for many hours at a time and driving long distances, or sitting in airplanes for many hours,

compounds the physical stress endured by professional wrestlers during their in-ring performances. Also, it can be difficult for professional wrestlers, as athletes, to maintain their specific diets on the road. Because a good amount of travelling occurs at night following performances, food choices for wrestlers are often limited to fast food restaurants (Caprio 2005; Dunn 2011).

While the heavy travel required by professional wrestlers can be stressful both mentally and physically, causing burnout for some, there are a number of professional wrestlers who genuinely enjoy the travel schedule. Some view the travel associated with wrestling as a means of getting paid to see the world and to enjoy the time spent in different cities, states, provinces, and countries. Moreover, while travelling, many wrestlers find ways to entertain one another, and enjoy the camaraderie that develops (Caprio 2005; Hart 2007; Jericho 2007).

### **Unionism vs. Individualism**

Within the professional wrestling industry, some believe that a union would be beneficial for professional wrestlers. Professional wrestlers have never been unionized, and a union would help wrestlers gain better control over their jobs and working conditions (Holcombe and Gwartney 2010; Johnson 2007; Krahn et al. 2007). A union would potentially enable wrestlers to obtain work benefits, such as affordable health insurance, workers' compensation, and retirement pensions. It would also provide them with the ability to voice concerns over working conditions, such as travel schedules, as well as with an opportunity to schedule time off from work in order to heal from injuries (Sharp 2006; Sonneveld 2012). Darren Aronofsky, director of the Academy Award winning motion picture *The Wrestler*, who

immersed himself within the world of wrestling for the making of his film, expressed his stance on a union in professional wrestling in an interview:

The problem starts with the fact that [pro-wrestlers are] not organized and they're not unionized. That's the main problem. I mean, there's really no reason why these guys are not in SAG. They're as much screen actors as stuntmen... They're in front of a camera performing and doing stunts, and they should have that protection... Why doesn't SAG help get these guys organized? They're on TV performing. Or, if they're not even on TV, the ring is a theater. So they're not just screen actors, they're theater actors. They're performers. They should have insurance and they should have health insurance and they should be protected (Mujanović 2011).

Some believe that the lack of unionization within the wrestling industry can be attributed to professional wrestlers being too individualistic and competitive, and argue that they will never band together to form a union. In 1987, Jesse Ventura, former wrestler and governor of Minnesota, attempted to rally wrestlers to form a union when working for the WWF. However, Hulk Hogan, the company's top star at the time, was aware that Ventura was talking about unionization, and reported the names of the wrestlers who were attempting to unionize to Vince McMahon. The latter not fire Ventura, but fired Jim Brunzel, another wrestler who was also supporting the idea of a union for WWF wrestlers (Schiavone 2007). This case illustrates the individualism in professional wrestling. Since there is fierce competition for wrestlers to improve their position within a wrestling promotion, and promoters may see wrestlers as replaceable, there will always be wrestlers willing to foil unionization plans (Schiavone 2007; Sharp 2006). Sharp (2006) effectively explains the individualism amongst professional wrestlers:

This inherent distrust among wrestlers makes it difficult to unionize because, even when the wrestlers work well together, everyone is aware that the lower card wrestlers want to wrestle in the main event and that the main event wrestlers want to protect their main event position. This jealousy leads to division, which complicates any labor movement toward unionization (p. 30).

Thus, while a union in professional wrestling would likely ensure greater job security and make health insurance affordable, and would also result in a number of other benefits for professional wrestlers as a whole, the individualistic nature of professional wrestlers and the desire of top wrestlers to keep their spot in WWE make it unlikely that wrestlers will soon organize collectively to form a union.

## **Conclusion**

Professional wrestlers face a number of stressors in their work that have an effect on their long-term health, and there are limited resources available to help improve their situation. Professional wrestlers place a number of physical stresses upon their body, both with risks taken in the ring and through extensive travel. Wrestlers also endure long-term negative health outcomes, as shown by recent research pertaining to CTE in athletes with head injuries. Long-term health outcomes may also be the reality for wrestlers who chose to use drugs as a coping mechanism for pain, or who use steroids in order to enhance their physiques. Furthermore, in an industry that is inextricably associated with wear and tear on the bodies of performers, professional wrestlers are unfortunately not guaranteed medical insurance. They also do not have access to various types of benefits that some workers in a more secure employment relationship often enjoy. Lastly, because professional wrestlers are generally very individualistic and highly competitive, they have never banded together in order to better their working conditions. The issues discussed in this chapter are those that professional wrestlers face as they seek to earn a living in the industry, and they will be revisited and further analyzed in Chapter V

of this thesis, taking into consideration the data gathered during interviews with the participants in this study.



## CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The main objective of this study is to examine how professional wrestlers view their work in the professional wrestling industry and the impact of their work on their health and well-being. In order to accomplish this task, this study calls upon the standpoint perspective of research methods. Standpoint methodologies, most notably standpoint feminism, place an emphasis on examining power dynamics in research, and on the experiences and perspectives of those whose realities are being studied (Harding 2002). However, the standpoint perspective that I use for this study is not standpoint feminism. The majority of my participants in this study are not women, and it would be unwise for this study to claim standpoint feminism as its methodological perspective, for I could not properly analyze the experience of being a woman in the professional wrestling industry. Being aware of one's positionality is a key component to a standpoint perspective, as the latter emphasizes the need for researchers to locate themselves in the research instead of attempting to make assumptions that they are neutral (Harding, 2004, p. 74). I will discuss my positionality in the next section of this chapter.

A standpoint perspective seeks to understand the subject's position in society, and their relationships with others in their worlds. A standpoint perspective helps this research to critically examine the, "economic, social, psychological, and cultural" elements of the professional wrestling industry, and allows for a better understanding of the power dynamics that occur between the various actors in the professional wrestling industry (Harding 2002: p. 74). Thus, this research seeks to understand how wrestlers view their own lived reality and the control they have over their lives, as well as how they are situated in particular power relationships. The study takes into account how professional wrestlers, as individuals, view themselves and their work within the industry, and their relationships to their peers, the

promoters they work for, and other individuals in their lives in relation to their work.

Fundamental to a standpoint perspective is the understanding that research participants have a richer knowledge of the subject matter than the researcher, because they have lived the experiences that the researcher is attempting to understand (England 1994).

Semi-structured interviews with professional wrestlers regarding their experiences working in the professional wrestling business are the main tool of data collection for this project. Hermanowicz (2002) notes that semi-structured interviews allow for an “intimate understanding of people in their social worlds” (p. 480). According to Hermanowicz, the conversational nature of such interviews allows participants to feel more comfortable during the interview process, and encourages participants to be open and candid in their responses. For my study, the semi-structured style of the interviews enabled the interviewing process to be sufficiently flexible to allow each participant to share their knowledge and insights in the world of wrestling. I made an effort to reduce my overall voice and influence during the interviews, and instead tried to allow and encourage the wrestlers to share as much of their life and experiences as possible. As is the case for standpoint research, the aim was to understand the “other,” that is, to understand the participants through the sharing of their knowledge and experiences (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2004).

### **Reflexivity and Positionality**

When incorporating a standpoint perspective into one’s research, it is important to be reflexive and understand how one is situated in relation to the research, because one’s own perspectives, beliefs, and assumptions play a role in how one goes about developing the research design and questions, interviewing participants, and analyzing the data (Hesse-Biber &

Leavy 2004). This research project is rooted in my deep interest in professional wrestling that I have had since I was a young child. I am comfortable sharing that, on my first day of school as a kindergartener, I sported a bright-yellow Hulk Hogan backpack to the classroom. As a graduate student, I have a much more adult-looking backpack, but my fascination with, and desire to know more about, professional wrestling have not died in the least. I have watched professional wrestling on television and have gone to see live matches my whole life, but during my teenage years and into my years as an undergraduate student, I found a deeper fascination with the professional wrestling industry. I would seek discussions about professional wrestling on the internet, both in newsletters and through podcasts, which at the time were not known as ‘wrestling podcasts,’ but simply as ‘audio wrestling.’ I would watch wrestling documentaries and read wrestling autobiographies to gain a better knowledge of those who worked in the industry that so fascinated me, and to understand more fully how the industry works. As I was taking university courses in sociology, anthropology, and political science, I would find myself applying the concepts and tools of analysis that I would learn in these courses to issues in the professional wrestling industry. For a long time, I have been aware of the backstage politics, the physical toll on the wrestlers, and the deaths in professional wrestling. The impact of the Benoit tragedy brought much mainstream attention and scrutiny to the world of professional wrestling, and during my third year of undergraduate studies, when this tragedy occurred, I realized that I constantly applied the concepts and analytical points that I learned in my studies to issues in professional wrestling. Knowing that I very much wanted to continue my studies after completing my undergraduate degree, I decided that it would be most interesting to study professional wrestling for my graduate program. Upon searching journal databases, and concluding that there was a glaring lack of sociological examination of professional wrestling, I

put forth my best efforts to study an industry for which I have held such a deep interest and that was becoming a growing social issue.

As noted through this journey that I have shared, I have a deep commitment to this project, and have a very genuine interest in exploring work and health issues in professional wrestling. It should also be noted that I am not a wrestler and I am not involved in the wrestling industry, but I am simply a wrestling fan seeking to study the sport and share my research with both the academic and wrestling community. And so, I wanted the data collected from my interviews to be as genuine as possible. From a standpoint perspective, it is important to acknowledge each participant as a research subject and not a research object, valuing each participant as a person willing to share their knowledge (England 1994). In conducting the interviews, it was my goal to allow each wrestler to share his or her unique story and perspectives, while doing my best to keep my own personal biases, opinions, and preconceived notions about the professional wrestling business to a minimum. Although my position as a fan of professional wrestling ultimately allowed me to build a certain level of rapport with each of the participants, I was aware that I could potentially come off to these wrestlers as just a ‘mark’ to them, a fan hoping to talk to wrestlers in order to write a paper for a course. Typically in research, there is a power dynamic between the researcher and the participant where the researcher holds power over the participant, with the researcher viewed as a knowledgeable and capable actor seeking to gain information from the participant. A standpoint perspective in research seeks to break down such power dynamics, and rather build a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the participant and a sharing of knowledge and ideas (Harding 2004; Hesse-Biber & Levy 2004). However, I was not concerned necessarily with my power as a researcher in this study. Rather, I was concerned with my position as a wrestling fan, worrying

that this may overshadow my position as a researcher, and that participants may not take this study seriously. Still, by acknowledging that I did have power as researcher, I was able to overcome feelings of nervousness, doing my best to deal with each wrestler in a professional manner, making it evident that I was serious about this research and that their participation would help fill an important gap on a research topic that has been understudied. I believe that this approach to conducting interviews helped me in balancing my role as a researcher with some power and my role as a wrestling fan, and in building rapport with participants.

### **Participant Interviews**

A total of 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted for this study. All participants are professional wrestlers currently working within the industry. Participants for this study were sought through the Internet. I compiled a list of professional wrestlers' e-mail addresses from their individual Twitter and Facebook pages. These e-mail addresses are the ones that wrestlers typically use in order to arrange bookings for shows. I then sent individual e-mails to potential participants with a script inviting them to take part in this project. A letter addressed to each potential participant that provided further details about the project, as well as contact information for my advisor and me was attached to e-mails. Interested participants contacted me via e-mail or telephone, and we arranged interview times that each participant deemed to be most convenient. Through this process, I contacted a total of 60 professional wrestlers, both American and Canadian, and was able to successfully arrange interviews with 10 American wrestlers. All 60 of the professional wrestlers that I contacted were at the time working in the professional wrestling industry, and had a significant amount of experience working for top-tier independent wrestling promotions in the United States and/or had experience working for WWE. I did not intend to exclude Canadian professional wrestlers from this study, as I e-mailed

a significant number of both Canadian and American wrestlers, but I was only able to successfully arrange interviews with American wrestlers. It should be noted that, generally speaking, it is the goal of most Canadian professional wrestlers to be working in the United States. The United States is home to WWE and is the top-tier independent promoter in North America, and many successful Canadian professional wrestlers aim to work in the United States in order to gain more visibility in the industry, and eventually earn more money than they would if they stayed in Canada.

All interviews were conducted over the telephone, as participants are American professional wrestlers living in different parts of the United States, and conducting interviews via telephone was the most practical approach. Prior to each interview, the participant was e-mailed an electronic copy of the consent form, and all participants agreed to have their telephone conversation recorded. While eight of the participants were recruited through direct e-mail, as discussed above, snowball sampling resulted in two additional participants. Two of the wrestlers who were interviewed indicated that they greatly enjoyed the interview process and were willing to recommend other professional wrestlers who may be interested in participating in this project. All interviewees were willing to be interviewed without compensation. They all expressed interest in the project, and noted that they were fascinated with the idea of a graduate sociology student writing on professional wrestling. Only one participant received remuneration for participating, as I agreed to order him a pizza when he joked in his initial e-mail response to me that he would conduct the interview in exchange for a pizza. It was evident that he was willing to participate either way, but he was very thankful and happy to be receiving a pizza following his interview.

Each interview began with a description of the nature of the project and a review of the consent form (Appendix B). After the participant orally consented to be interviewed, the interview began. I asked questions based on an interview guide (Appendix C) that I had prepared to ensure that the main themes were discussed. The research guide for this project was created during the proposal writing stage, and submitted to the Research Ethics Board for approval. The interview guide consisted mainly of open-ended questions that I developed based upon issues in wrestling that I had uncovered from the existing literature and discussions in the media. The interview guide begins with opening questions, is then divided into sections on health, work, and policy, and ends with concluding questions, which are open ended and leaves an opportunity for participants to discuss topics that they maybe felt were not covered during the interview.

Questions dealt with issues of work and health that were raised in some of the academic literature, such as R. Tyson Smith's work on how wrestler's deal with pain, and DeGaris' work on wrestling psychology (DeGaris 2005; Smith 2008a; Smith 2009). For instance, in his piece, "The 'Logic' of Professional Wrestling", DeGaris states that he observes an overuse of hardcore style wrestling in current professional wrestling, mostly by younger performers who have less experience (DeGaris 2005). In order to explore this reality in today's industry, I built on this idea, asking about how wrestlers feel about hardcore style in relation to injuries and risk taking. Smith's work, specifically his work on how wrestlers manage pain, inspired me to ask wrestlers about how they cope with physical pain in their life, allowing me to get a richer understanding of this aspect of their work (Smith 2008a).

I also asked questions to participants based upon more recent issues I had heard wrestlers discuss in media interviews, such as the new studies on head injuries in sports that

have been discussed by Christopher Nowinski on National Public Radio, and issues of unionism that arose in various media discussions following the release of the movie *The Wrestler* (Martin 2012; Sonneveld 2012). Furthermore, I found inspiration in creating questions for my interview guide from autobiographies written by accomplished wrestlers. For example, in Bret Hart's autobiography, he discusses the presence of bodybuilder physiques in the wrestling industry during his time in the WWF, his experiences taking steroids, and the pressure there was during that time to obtain a bodybuilder type physique. Such discussions by wrestlers informed my questions about physiques in wrestling. Similarly, Mick Foley's latest book, *Countdown to Lockdown*, includes an entire chapter on the hardships of working in professional wrestling, which covers Benoit's death and the many struggles that wrestlers face with life on the road. I sought to explore these topics with my research participants who are all currently involved in wrestling and have experiences dealing with such issues. Additional open ended questions were included in order to further explore each participant's unique experience in the wrestling business, and to help uncover any issues in wrestling that I may have previously been unaware of.

I started each interview with a new interview schedule sheet in front of me and wrote very brief notes directly on the schedule in order to ensure that all the main themes were covered, and participants were prompted on different questions as necessary. Once all sections of the interview schedule were covered, participants were offered an opportunity to ask questions, and speak about topics on which they wanted to elaborate or felt were not covered by the interview schedule and needed discussion. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, with most lasting approximately 50 minutes.



My background as a life-long fan of professional wrestling was useful when interviewing participants. For instance, I had seen several of the participants wrestle live before, and was familiar with the work of most of them. During the interviews, I was able to recall certain matches, or certain aspects of different participants' career, and was able to use this information in order to prompt participants and explore various topics with them. I was even able to watch interviews and matches of each of the participants on YouTube prior to my interviews, which allowed me to better familiarize myself with their work; this was especially helpful for those interviewees with whom I was not as familiar. During one interview, the participant was discussing the topic of 'hardcore' style wrestling, and gave a brief opinion on it. I was able to ask for further elaboration, noting that I had just seen a 'hardcore' style match of his. The interviewee then spoke about that specific match, and talked in more detail about the 'hardcore' style of wrestling, its role in wrestling and its long-term health effects. Moreover, I was able to fully understand wrestling argot and wrestling terminology being used by participants during the interviews. For example, when wrestlers spoke of 'marks', I knew this meant fans, that 'heel' meant bad guy, that 'spot' was used to refer to a specific sequence of moves during a match, that 'jobber' refers to a wrestler who constantly loses. A researcher not as familiar with such terms would most likely have to interrupt participants whenever such terminology was used, thereby possibly disrupting the natural flow of the interviews. Furthermore, not having to interrupt participants to constantly ask them questions about jargon most likely made them feel more comfortable during the interview, and allowed them to engage in a conversation about their experiences with someone who was fairly familiar with the wrestling world. This allowed me to gain more knowledge and develop a deeper understanding

of the life of each wrestler. It also provided me with the tools to develop a better analysis for this study.

Overall, I would deem all of the interviews a success, as I was able to gain rich, in-depth data from each participant. While all interviews went fairly smoothly, and there was a natural flow to the discussion, some rough spots were encountered during the course of a few interviews. For example, during a few of the interviews, phone connections were lost and I had to immediately reconnect with participants and try to get the interview back to a good pace. In one specific case, the participant seemed a bit hesitant to answer questions about his history with drug use. I felt that I could probe on this topic because I had heard him publicly discuss his history with drug use on a recently recorded podcast, and therefore believed that he would feel quite comfortable discussing the topic during our interview. When I sensed some discomfort in his voice, I was able to move to another topic, and he did eventually speak in a general sense about drug use in wrestling. In another case, the participant was interrupted in the middle of the interview by what seemed to be one of his friends, who attempted to get close to the phone, shouting inaudible gibberish for a few moments until the participant successfully shooed him away, and we were then able to continue the interview as if nothing had happened.

### **Participant Profiles**

Nine men and one woman participated in this study. At the time of the interview, all participants were active professional wrestlers, with two participants being promoters of independent wrestling promotions as well as wrestlers. Most participants (n=6) were between 24 and 29 years of age. The average years of experience wrestling professionally was 9.8 years, with the least experienced participant having five years, and the most experienced participant

having 17 years. Within the year prior to the interviews, all participants had wrestled for top-tier independent wrestling promotions in the United States. Five of the participants had previous experience working for WWE. At least half of the participants acknowledged that they had experience working outside of North America as well, with three specifically mentioning that they had spent a significant amount of time working in Japan. The following table provides detailed information on the participants in this research.

**Table 1**  
**Participant Profiles**

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Years in Pro Wrestling</i>	<i>Residence (by U.S. Region)</i>	<i>WWE Experience</i>
Cory	late-20s	14	Midwest	Yes
Trevor	late-20s	13	West Coast	Yes
Jamie	mid-20s	6	Midwest	No
Sam	mid-30s	10	Northeast	Yes
Richard	late-20s	10	Midwest	No
Phil	late-20s	7	Northeast	No
Julian	mid-30s	17	West Coast	Yes
Randall	late-20s	10	Northeast	Yes
Lucy	early-20s	5	Mid South	No
Ray	mid-20s	6	Midwest	No

### **Live Wrestling Events**

In addition to semi-structured interviews, I attended and observed several live professional wrestling events in both the United States and Canada. Between March 2012 and August 2013, I attended 11 different independent wrestling shows and one WWE pay-per-view event. I attended all events with one or two friends, and only as a spectator. However, in one instance, I was personally invited by an independent wrestling promoter in the northeastern United States to conduct fieldwork at a live event. I was thus able to observe the production team set up the event and see various wrestlers working out in the ring before the start of the

show, and watch their matches. I was able to type brief notes on my cell phone throughout the event, and write more complete field notes in my hotel room later that night.

I felt that it was important to attend these live events in order to add rigor to this study. Professional wrestling is a performance art. De Garis (1999) advocates a sensuous approach to studying professional wrestling, noting that taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of wrestling events allows for researchers to develop a more complete understanding of this art form. Smith (2008) also advocates that qualitative research into professional wrestling should incorporate an observation and interaction with, “wrestlers in their places,” and that this brings a sense of authenticity to the research (p. 4). By attending these live events, and viewing the events and wrestling surroundings with the eyes of both a fan and a researcher, I was able to critically observe wrestlers at work, noting how they would walk to the ring, wrestle their matches, interact with fans, and sell their merchandise during intermissions. For the event to which I was personally invited, I was able to see how wrestlers entered the venue and shook hands to greet the other wrestlers, how wrestlers rehearsed their matches in the ring before the event, how the promoter gave a pep-talk to his crew of performers before the start of the show, how the wrestlers set up their merchandise tables, and how members of the press attempted to get brief interviews with wrestlers for their websites. I was also able to witness the overall business that occurs backstage during a show. I had never had the privilege of being invited to attend a wrestling event, and I feel that having access to an event in such a way allowed me to gain an even deeper understanding of top-tier independent wrestling, providing a greater sense of authenticity in my analysis. Furthermore, I travelled several hours from Guelph to the event by car, as it was being held in a city in the northeastern United States with a deep wrestling history. The experience of being in a geographical area with a long history of wrestling, and through

which so many wrestlers have passed during their careers, gave me a better sense of the importance of this place for wrestlers and for the wrestling industry more generally.

## **Coding**

Each interview conducted for this project was recorded using the built-in microphone on a laptop computer in order to create an audio file with audio software. Recorded interviews were then transcribed with word processing software. All interview participants were assigned pseudonyms and all identifying information was removed. Transcripts were then coded with NVivo 9 software.

The main headings used for coding are: Work in wrestling, Health, and policy, which were the main themes of the interview schedule. Under each heading, specific subheadings were identified, as follows:

- Work in wrestling
  - o Labour
  - o Training
  - o Travel
  - o Culture
  - o Longevity
  - o Money
- Health
  - o Physiques
  - o Injuries
  - o Risks
  - o Drugs
  - o Death
- Policy
  - o Wellness policy
  - o Unions
  - o Changes to industry
  - o Structure

## **Limitations**

Some difficulties were encountered over the course of the research process. Finding wrestlers willing to participate in interviews was very challenging. The majority of those who were invited to participate via e-mail expressed no interest in the project. Some individuals would reply by e-mail and express interest in doing an interview, but would not reply to any follow-up e-mails thereafter, and interviews could not therefore be arranged. I acknowledge that attempting to recruit participants via e-mail may have not been the most optimal recruitment strategy for this project because it is easy for people to disregard e-mails. In addition, this process may not be the most engaging method of recruitment. If I were to conduct similar research in the future, I would make more use of snowball sampling in recruiting participants, and also provide an incentive for participation, such as remuneration.

The sample itself is male dominated, as I was only able to arrange an interview with one woman wrestler. While wrestling itself is a male dominated industry, the inclusion of more women would have allowed for greater insights from women working in the industry, thereby providing a more complete view of work and health in the professional wrestling industry.

Moreover, although all of the participants seemed to be quite honest during their interviews, I was still leery about certain responses. There was some concern that participants may have been trying to please me in answering questions during the interviews, providing me with responses that would perhaps impress me, rather than providing me with entirely honest responses about their experiences. As wrestling is a 'work,' I was cautious about participants attempting to 'kayfabe' me by lying during interviews. One concern was that participants might over-fabricate stories. This concern was simply based upon media interviews that I had previously listened to where wrestlers would fabricate certain details in order to make their

stories more exciting and impressive. For instance, each time I have listened to an interview where Hulk Hogan recalls his memory of body slamming Andre the Giant at *Wrestlemania III*, Andre's height increases by few inches and his weight increases by several pounds with each telling of the same story. While little lies like this may seem insignificant, such as making Andre seem bigger than he was in order to make Hogan's feat more impressive, I was still concerned with the reputation that some wrestlers have for blatantly lying during interviews, and that this may become a factor in my interviews as well. Certain wrestlers in media interviews and autobiographies portray other people in the wrestling business as notable liars. Jim Cornette, former wrestling manager and booker in various wrestling promotions, is noted for referring to Paul Heyman, founder of ECW and current WWE on-air personality, as the type of person who would, "rather climb a tree and tell a lie than stay on the ground and tell the truth" (Oliver 2010). In a 2013 interview with *Kayfabe Commentaries*, Tammy Sytch, who worked for WWE as 'Sunny' during the 1990s, admits that she had lied during every single one of her previous shoot interview videos, and that she had prided herself on lying so convincingly during the interviews (Oliver 2013). Still, I am of the opinion that the participants in this study were fairly forthright during their interviews and did not feel it necessary to 'kayfabe' me. I made sure to emphasize during the start of each interview that interviews were confidential, and participants did not shy away from any question and discussed various topics openly, and even with brutal honesty at certain points.

## **Ethics**

One ethical concern that I anticipated related to the issue of deaths in the professional wrestling industry. As noted in Chapter 3, a significant number of professional wrestlers have

died at a young age, and it was reasonable to assume that many, if not most, of my participants may have been close friends with some of those who died in recent years. I was worried that discussing wrestlers who had died may evoke feelings of sadness or anger for the participants, and that they may be emotionally upset at some point during the interview. Due to this, I tried to be sensitive, and had decided not to press the issue of discussing deaths in wrestling if a participant seemed distressed when I brought up the subject. Luckily, I did not run into this situation because the participants felt at ease during the interviews, and the topic of deaths in wrestling was not discussed extensively.

Another ethical concern pertained to the issue of drug use in wrestling, and the possibility that a participant would disclose illegal activities, particularly steroid use as a performance enhancer. However, this did not prove to be an issue, as none of the participants disclosed to me that they had taken steroids in the past, and none shared any information with me that would indicate that they were currently involved in drug use. If any of the participants made use of illegal drugs, perhaps they decided to not share this information because I had indicated in the consent form that I might be required to report any illegal activity. The Research Ethics Board was aware that steroid use was one of the topics that I would be discussing with participants.

Furthermore, I was weary that some of the participants would share a controversial opinion or sensitive information during the course of the interview that may offend another person in the professional wrestling industry. Since professional wrestling can be a very political business in terms of finding and keeping work, an indiscretion could potentially cost someone a job. In order to minimize this risk, I assured participants that the interview was confidential, and that their name would not be divulged and I would make every effort to avoid



including any identifying information. I used pseudonyms in order to protect their identities, and also changed the names of places and of persons mentioned when I felt that this information could potentially compromise confidentiality. All participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and of their right to request a transcript of their interview.

## **Research Questions**

As indicated in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the main research questions that guided this project are as follows:

1. How does the nature and organization of work in professional wrestling affect the physical and mental health of its performers?
  - a. What is the work of a professional wrestler?
  - b. What do performers in the professional wrestling industry identify as risks to their physical and mental health?
2. What strategies do professional wrestlers devise to cope with the physical and mental health risks associated with their jobs?
3. How have recent changes in the industry had an impact on the job and/or health of professional wrestlers?
4. What changes could be implemented to improve the working conditions of professional wrestlers?

The detailed discussion of the findings of this study presented in the next two chapters will attempt to address these research questions.

## CHAPTER V: FINDINGS

This chapter discusses the findings of my research and is organized thematically, as follows: inspiration to become professional wrestlers, the training experience, non-wrestlers and not-real wrestlers, travelling for work, work injuries, working while hurt or injured, dealing with daily pain, medical insurance, hardcore style and high-risk maneuvers, head injuries, the importance of physiques, WWE Wellness Policy, politics in wrestling, unionism, longevity of wrestlers' careers, income, and deaths in the wrestling industry. The chapter is built on the participants' experiences in working as professional wrestlers, and on their candid thoughts about their work and their life in the wrestling business. It provides as authentic and rich description of the data as possible while trying to minimize repetition, as the participants shared similar opinions on the various aspects of their work, and identified similar issues pertaining to health and work in the professional wrestling industry.

### **Inspiration to Become Professional Wrestlers**

The bulk of those interviewed for this study have similar experiences of inspiration to become professional wrestlers. All of the participants seemed to develop an initial interest in the sport through watching wrestling on television as children. A number of participants mention experiences watching wrestling on television with their family and friends as children, and then developing further interest in wrestling into their teenage years, with most deciding that they wanted to become professional wrestlers in their teens. Ray describes how he became a wrestler:

My grandmother got me into it. She was big into the WWF. She loved Hulk Hogan, so that kind of got me into it. As I got older, wrestling got more popular. The height in popularity in wrestling was when I was in middle school and high school. It was kind of something that I never could really get

away from, and I always thought at some point I'm going to grow out of it, but I just became more obsessed with it, and I started lifting weights when I was about 16... [At] 17-18 I realized I wanted to be in wrestling and I realized I wanted to be a wrestler, and the weight lifting kind of helped me out.

A number of participants indicate that the athleticism involved in professional wrestling was key in their decision to become involved in the sport. Most of the participants had played sports during their teenage years, and were attracted to the physicality of professional wrestling. Lucy, the only female participant in this study, explains her attraction to the physicality of the sport:

I always wanted to play football and hockey. While growing up, there were not a lot of female sports that were contact sports. Then, I saw Chyna and Lita in WWE and I figured, 'Oh my gosh! These girls can actually wrestle and they're wrestling guys too! That's exactly what I want to do!' It required a lot of discipline, which I also like that as well. So, growing up, I've always been so interested in the active lifestyle and the challenges and the obstacles of the sport.

Two participants had earned scholarships to play college football, but had their careers cut short due to injuries. With no future in professional football, they both saw professional wrestling as a means to earn a living by using their athletic talents. Julian describes his decision to get into professional wrestling following the end of his football career, "It was an avenue for me to get back into doing some more athletic things. You kind of fall in love with it – I came to really appreciate it much later in life than most of my contemporaries."

### **The Training Experience**

All of the participants in this study trained at different wrestling schools. Except for one, the participants sought training at a wrestling school relatively close to where they were living at the time; one participant trained at a school that was two hours driving distance from his home. Most of the participants found schools through internet searches or through word of mouth by speaking to others in the professional wrestling business. Today, it is much easier to

seek out wrestling schools as most have an internet presence, and anyone wishing to train to become a professional wrestler can use the internet to search for schools in their area. Trevor speaks about his experience in looking for a training school before breaking into professional wrestling:

At the time, in 1998, everything was way, way different. The internet was barely a thing. People were still searching stuff on AOL... there wasn't a lot of message boards or chat rooms or things like that where you could find information, and wrestling schools weren't really a big thing.

Sam describes a similar situation when he was attempting to enter wrestling, "I didn't know about wrestling schools or places to get trained. It was something that was kept very secret back in the day. Nowadays it's a lot different. You can Google it and find it." Here, Sam refers to wrestling schools and training as something that was kept 'secret.' Before the advent of the internet and before wrestling schools advertised, professional wrestlers put forth a greater effort to protect those in the wrestling business, as well as the secrets of the wrestling craft. When someone wanted to train to become a professional wrestler, it was expected that an established professional wrestler would make a referral to help them enter the profession. Sam describes breaking into wrestling in this 'old school' way by going to wrestling shows to meet and talk with wrestlers, "I kind of broke in a weird way. I broke in kind of like an old school way where guys were like, 'Hey, we like you, you're a big kid and we're going to show you how to do this.'"

Several of the participants speak about the gruelling physical nature of their training, and note that their initial training placed an emphasis upon cardiovascular training, as well as bumping (falling safely) and becoming accustomed to the physical impact upon the body that is a key aspect of wrestling. Ray describes his experience in training, "Right from the get-go it was a lot of bumping and hurting your own body. Over time your body gets used to it, and

fortunately, I never really got beat up badly except for one time.” Typically, wrestling trainers put their trainees through ‘blow-up’ drills involving high intensity cardiovascular training, as it is commonly believed that wrestlers who become out of breath or tire during a match are at a higher risk of hurting themselves or their opponents. Lucy describes her experience in training, “It felt like boot camp in a way, but I’ve been playing sports through high school and college, so the conditioning was something I was used to in way.”

All of the participants stress that it is highly important to find a reputable training school when seeking professional wrestling training. In his study, Smith (2009) notes that a number of wrestling schools are ‘shady,’ opening and shutting down quickly, with trainers looking to scam people out of their money. Richard explains, “Finding a credible school is the number one thing. I mean, these schools aren’t cheap, but you get what you pay for. If you train with someone and give them 10 bucks to train you, chances are you’re getting 10 bucks worth of training.”

Participants note that credible schools are ones with a good reputation that are run by veteran wrestlers who have made a successful living in the professional wrestling business, and who have trained notable wrestlers who have gone on to also make a successful living in wrestling. According to Randall, “A lot of places just take your money. Go to a reputable place, somewhere where people have been there and have made it that will give you the education you need, physically and mentally.”

When speaking about the aspects of the professional wrestling industry that need to be changed, a number of the participants indicate that they would like to see a better standard for wrestling schools, or some sort of accreditation process for wrestling schools and wrestling training. Sam describes this desire for change:

I’d really like there to be some sort of training, like, me and Jacob [another wrestler/trainer] used to talk about this all the time. How like, you know, you

go to school, and you get a degree. Like right now we're doing this interview, you're trying to get a piece of paper that says you're educated in something and says I know this shit, I'm valid, I'm 'this.' There are plenty of guys that say I've trained them and I don't know who they are. I've never met them in my life. I've had guys send me their resumes, said they trained with me, and I'm like, 'I don't even know you dude. I know you're lying to me.' I wish there would be things like that, that would be great. I do wish that the government would step in and do certain things, or that also certain governments would allow us to do what we do. Like, there are athletic commissions out there, and realistically all they want is their money, they don't care about anything else. They don't care about the benefits. They act like they do, but they don't.

Jamie also speaks of the need for an accreditation process for wrestling schools:

I wish there were more credibility with a lot of schools. There are a lot of random schools with these guys that don't know what they're doing. They train all these kids and they let them go wrestle, and these guys don't know how to wrestle and they'll go to a show and they won't get used so they create their own show, and they need wrestlers so they'll get these students. They'll train these guys and these students will leave and go to a show and they're untrained. It's just a cycle and it doesn't end and we need to cut the cycle.

The existence of 'shady' wrestling schools and professional wrestlers not receiving proper training is problematic not only for wrestlers seeking experience and for the safety of wrestlers in the ring, but also for the business of independent wrestling as a whole. Some of the participants note that untrained or poorly trained individuals wrestling on independent shows ruin the experience of independent wrestling for the audience. Richard states:

If someone is going to finally give indy wrestling a chance and they go see it, and it's guys rolling around in blue jeans and a t-shirt that aren't wrestlers who probably weren't properly trained, they're going to associate that with all indy wrestling and there's a good chance that they'll never come back to a show.

### **Non-Wrestlers and Not Real Wrestlers**

In addition to the issue of poorly trained wrestlers, most participants in this study also raise concerns about non-wrestlers working in professional wrestling. Participants identify

certain types of individuals in the wrestling business that they feel should not be working in wrestling, especially on the independent circuit. Indeed, participants contend that groups of individuals working independent shows with no proper wrestling training or education pose a problem for those who seek to earn a living in the professional wrestling business. Trevor mentions that part of this problem may relate to professional wrestling not being regulated by a governing body when compared to other sports:

Less and less people care about learning things and learning on an authentic level, and it's more about copying what you see. A lot of guys get away with it because there are really no rules in what we do, and nobody's really regulating anything... I mean, a doctor can't just look up how to perform heart surgery on YouTube and say, 'Nah, I got this, I saw a 45 minute video of another guy doing it.' I've always liked to think that for success in wrestling.

In his interview, Sam also illustrates this point when discussing the presence of individuals working on independent shows 'pretending' to be wrestlers:

Realistically, anybody that's listening to this conversation, including you or your professor, can go out right now, get on the internet, got to Highspots.com, you can buy a ring, you can buy wrestling boots, you can buy apparel, you can rent sound, you can get everything you need and you can go out and book a show and play wrestler. There's too many of them out there nowadays and that's how the landscape of professional wrestling is, and it's really hurt the business.

Alongside non-wrestlers who 'play wrestler' by starting their own independent shows or who try to get booked onto shows without proper training is yet another group of individuals deemed as 'non-wrestlers' by some of those interviewed for this study. This group is made up of 'wrestlers' who are willing to work shows for free as long as they are included on independent wrestling cards and get to play wrestler for the weekend. Some participants feel that this group of people cheapens the overall quality of independent wrestling as a whole, both for the audience and for the wrestlers trying to earn a living by working independent shows.

Richard eloquently discusses the different categories of wrestlers involved with independent wrestling:

There are three kinds of indy wrestlers in my opinion. There's the beer league softball pro wrestler that's perfectly content working in wrestling for once a month at his hometown shows so his friends and family can see him wrestle, there's the indy wrestlers who travel and make money and that are hustling all the time to make money and get shows, and then there's indy wrestlers who travel around all the time, but they're willing to do it for no money, and that's what's ultimately going to hurt the people that are trying to make money. If you're in a carload of five guys and you garner a certain wage, but this promotion can go get five guys who would just come for free, chances are as an indy company, they're going to take the guys that will come for free, which ultimately hurts us.

When asked to further discuss this issue, Richard elaborates:

I think it's just a situation where they have the means to. Like, they have real jobs that afford them the money to where if they lose a couple hundred dollars on gas it doesn't really hurt them. And sometimes they just weren't told that that's not the way to do it. If you're going somewhere for free, chances are you're hurting someone who tries to do this for a living. They don't know any better and they have the means. If I wanted to be one of those guys, I don't have the finances to drive somewhere for no money. I wouldn't get there and I wouldn't get home.

Some wrestlers may be willing to perform for free if they are guaranteed a high billing on the card. While this is most certainly not the case for higher tier independent promotions nor for mainstream promotions where top stars are generally paid the most money, Lucy identifies this as a problem for wrestlers hoping to earn a payday and build their name on the independent circuit, "There's a lot of people now that are just, 'I'll work for free if I can main event.' I wish people would actually earn their spots rather than, 'I'll pay my own way there if you can put me on the show. That's not the way to go.'"

Another group of individuals who may be deemed non-wrestlers within the professional wrestling industry are those who enter into professional wrestling to gain experience that would be useful for another career path or to make money quickly when they find themselves in



between jobs in fields other than wrestling. For instance, one may enter into wrestling with the goal to parlay that experience into a career in acting or modeling. Some wrestlers feel that individuals who follow this path are taking opportunities away from ‘real’ wrestlers who show true dedication to their sport. Ray discusses this group of non-wrestlers when speaking of past hires for WWE:

They sign like ex-football players, or reality TV show stars, that they sign to be wrestlers and that’s not really in their heart. And when those guys end up being released, what do they do? They go back to other stuff because they’re not wrestlers by nature. I think it’s kind of sad that, you know, guys that actually dedicate their lives to wrestling don’t get the opportunity to shine. I think right now that’s one of the things that hurts wrestling the most. I guess that goes back to the fact that that’s where realism is lost in wrestling.

Sam arrives at a similar conclusion when comparing wrestlers who truly have a passion for wrestling to those who simply use wrestling with the hope of getting into other types of work:

There’s a lot of guys that get into it because they want to use it, or a lot of girls nowadays, they step into it to get the big payday by doing modeling and magazines, you know, something along those lines and they kind of stumble into it. They like it because it’s exciting and entertaining, but it’s not something they want to do. That’s why women’s wrestling is not very good, because most girls are, you know, to sell women’s wrestling you have attractive beautiful women, because nowadays that’s a big sell. Sex sells, but realistically, just because you’re good looking and you’re hot, doesn’t mean you’re going to be a good worker.

Thus, it is apparent that the participants have a clear sense of what makes a wrestler a real wrestler. It seems that *real* wrestlers, as a group of individuals who wrestle in order to make a living, take the wrestling business seriously, show great dedication to learning their craft and are respectful of the traditions of the sport. They also express disdain for those who use wrestling in order to make a quick payday without putting in the effort to truly learn the craft, or who disrespect working wrestlers by ‘playing wrestler’ on the weekends and working for free.

## **Travelling for Work**

Travelling is a necessity when working in the world of professional wrestling. Anyone hoping to work as a full time performer for WWE will spend likely well over 200 days per year travelling. As well, wrestlers who expect to earn a living on the independent scene become accustomed to travelling throughout the year as they try to get booked on shows wherever they can. Richard acknowledges, “If you’re not willing to travel and go out there and make a good experience, there’s a good chance you’re not going to go very far. You have to be willing to travel.”

When asked about some of the more challenging components of their work, many wrestlers state that the heavy travel schedule involved in wrestling is one of the more mentally challenging aspects of the job. Phil notes, “Being on the road non-stop and away from home. It definitely takes its toll on you. It takes a lot of mental toughness to get through that.” According to Jamie, independent wrestlers who have commitments to other work sometimes find balancing their job commitments difficult because travelling is such a necessary part of being a wrestler:

Sometimes you got to work a real job in order to support yourself, because sometimes the indy scene just doesn’t support you financially all too well... Sometimes that can be really stressful, because there could be a good opportunity somewhere, say in New York... but you can’t make it because you got to make your real job because you got to be able to keep your lights on.

Another stressful component of travelling is sitting in cars for several hours, or having to endure long airplane flights, which is made even more difficult for those who suffer back or neck aches from the wear and tear of the actual wrestling. Richard explains, “Not only are you in an athletic event that takes a toll on your body, you’re also sitting in a vehicle most of the time crammed in with other people for anywhere between 9 and 15 hours, [that’s] our average trip.” Julian, in speaking about coping with pain while travelling, notes, “If I do a 4 day stretch and

couple of plane rides in between there, and you're on a lack of sleep because you're travelling all the time, you really don't get to recuperate until you get home."

Travelling can be especially stressful for wrestlers with families, because a heavy travel schedule can put a strain on wrestlers who are trying to balance their work-family relationships.

Julian states:

As someone who's got a young family and children that can be difficult at times. I remember when I first started wrestling; just being able to travel was a huge draw and very exciting. I was really apt to get in a car and drive 12 hours for little or no money, and that was paying your dues, quote unquote. And now it takes quite a bit for me to get the motor running... It's harder the older I get.

According to Jamie, "Some guys are depressed because wrestling can mess up your family and your relationships." Likewise, Richard notes, "I've traveled on holidays, I've missed peoples' birthdays, I've missed tons of family outings. [Travelling is] the hardest part, especially if you're married."

Although the heavy travel involved in wrestling can put a strain on family relationships, wrestlers do seem to develop strong personal relationships with those with whom they travel, and this often acts as a coping mechanism for those struggling to balance their work-life relationships. While Richard mentions that travel is one of the major stresses he faces in his work in professional wrestling, he also states, "Luckily enough for me I get to mostly travel with the people I like every weekend, that's the most fun part for me." Similarly, while Julian notes that one of his least favorite parts of wrestling is spending time away from his family, he eloquently explains that one of his favourite aspects of wrestling is the camaraderie he experiences when working and travelling:

I got some relationships that go back now nearly 20 years, which is crazy to think about. And people that you really fall into caring for deeply, you're tied to these people and their successes and failures because you're on the plane

with them, you're in the car with them, you're in the locker room with them, you're at the hotel with them, you're in the ring obviously with them, you're at the bar with them. You get to know people on very intimate level, because these are the kind of people that do this all the time, and you know, someone like me who works a full time schedule where I'm wrestling 2 or 3 or 4 times a week, combined with travel time, a lot of times I end up spending more time with wrestlers during the week than my own family.

Travelling can also be one of the more rewarding dimensions of working as a professional wrestler. Although time spent on the road can be long and grueling, travelling to new cities and finding new experiences is often not taken for granted. Jamie explains that he feels very fortunate and finds it very fulfilling to be wrestling and travelling for a living:

The people that I've met, the car trips that I've been on, the life goals that I've gotten to accomplish because of it. As a kid, all I did was sit in my room and watch TV, and I always dreamed about going to Philly to eat a Philly Cheesesteak, going to New York, going to Chicago, I always dreamed about things like that, and without wrestling I wouldn't be able to do that, you know? This past Sunday I completed one of my bucket lists of life, one of my tasks, I got to eat a Philly Cheesesteak, from Philly! To me, that means a lot to me. Some people are like, 'You can just get that from Subway in Texas.' No! I don't want that, I want the real thing! You know, driving in the car with my friends just looking at the city and New York at night, and being able to see things I've never seen, or you're right in the heart of Chicago walking, you know, walking the streets of Chicago at night, it's beautiful. It's such a beautiful city, you know?

## **Work Injuries**

As with any other sport that emphasizes physicality, injuries are common in professional wrestling. Indeed, injuries are viewed as a part of the business, and many wrestlers expect to be injured at some point in their careers. As Sam notes, "Injuries are a part of the business. Sometimes things just happen." Likewise, Randall explains, "We're in a contact sport. It's physical. You can really hit each other. Shit's going to happen, that's just how it goes."

All participants had experienced injuries in wrestling at some point in their career, with the most common being injuries to the knees and ankles, back injuries, and concussions. The

number of injuries, as well as the severity of injuries, varied from participant to participant.

Jamie, for instance, who experienced a grade 1 sprain in his foot, explains, “That’s probably the worst one I had. I had to go to the hospital for that one and everything. Other than that, I’ve never experienced anything too bad.” Lucy notes, “I’ve never had anything too serious. I’ve had little stuff like a lumbar sprain. I’m recovering from a knee injury, but I think that’s just from wear and tear. I’ve never broken anything or cracked anything.” Julian, who has been wrestling for 17 years, mentions that while he has suffered some injuries, he would not describe any as very serious:

I’ve actually been pretty lucky. I tore everything in my left shoulder except for my rotator cuff... and had surgery to reconstruct that. I still have some lingering effects from that now... I’ve had run of the mill injuries, the stiff necks, your back goes out, and bum knees, that type of thing, but nothing catastrophic.

While some participants have only experienced a few minor injuries in their wrestling careers, others report a long list of injuries. Trevor, for example, notes that he has had countless injuries throughout his career, “You name it, I’ve had it.” Randall, who has been wrestling for 12 years, explains:

I’ve had broken bones. I’ve torn muscles. I’ve had sprains... a broken fibula in my foot. I’ve broken a couple fingers, torn meniscus in both knees, sciatic problem in my lower back. Yeah, just lots of cuts, bumps and bruises along the way. Elbow drained a few times. Torn pecs, three times partially, two in my right side once in my left. It’s kind of tallied up over the years.

### **Working While Hurt or Injured**

Every participant in this study shared experiences of wrestling with some form of physical injury. Wrestling while injured comes across as fairly common for participants. Trevor notes that he had been actively wrestling with a high ankle sprain for the two months prior to his interview, “It’s getting a little better now. I often wrestle with injuries... Both my ankles, it’s

almost like there's nothing there. The amount of times I've sprained them and stuff." Sam admits that he has been actively wrestling with a torn bicep for the past six months, "I took a double stomp on it and my bicep is high. If you look at it, there's actually bleeding in by bicep... you can see in my arm where I've actually hit people." Randall explains that he believes that, for wrestlers, there is a difference between being hurt and being injured, and that one should be able to work while hurt:

My foot was broke, I couldn't walk on it, so I'm injured. There was nothing I could do about it. I had to sit out, do the whole rehab process thing, get back into the swing of things. And when you're hurt, like where I broke my pinky, I still taped it up and went out, if that makes sense. You got to use your judgment.

Professional wrestlers, who earn their living with their bodies, must use their best judgment as to when they should work and when they should avoid work while injured. Ray explains a situation where he had a series of matches coming up and wrestled despite having an injured foot:

I couldn't walk. I couldn't run. When I would try to plant my foot in the ring it would just go out on me. So I had these matches for like a month where I couldn't be whipped off the ropes, I basically worked the match in a way where I would never have to run or do anything at any point of the match, and if I did one top rope spot I'd save it for the end of the match because I knew that in that spot my ankle would go out on me, but I'd be okay. So you just work around it the best you can and hope you don't get hurt or injured. In any other profession you just sit out, but you don't get time off in wrestling.

Participants note that wrestlers, when hurt or injured, take certain precautions when working to ensure that they do not worsen an injury. They also make an effort to not further injure an opponent who might already be suffering from an injury. Cory explains, "It's one of the first questions you sort of ask somebody before you start working... any injuries, anything I need to look out for?" He continues, "I just had a match with someone not too long ago and he was hurt, and I was like, 'You don't have to take one single bump.'" Julian also emphasizes the

need to be mindful of the health of his coworkers when wrestling, and to be careful not to worsen any of his own injuries or the injuries of others, and prides himself on being a safe worker. He states, “I consider myself one of the safer guys that are out there competing... we have control over what we’re going to do when we’re in there, so you have to take that into consideration.”

There are reasons why wrestlers work in spite of an injury. Some participants feel that it is their duty to deliver a quality performance to wrestling fans who pay to watch a match. Lucy, for example, speaks about working despite having a hurt knee for two weeks while on a tour of Japan, “I would just push through the pain and do whatever I could to get through it... I’m not going to put in a lazy match just because I don’t feel good, [the fans] don’t deserve that.” Jamie talks about wrestling a series of matches in a one night tournament with a hurt knee that he describes as “the worst type of pain ever,” but made the decision to keep wrestling in spite of the injury:

I felt pressure because I didn’t want to let anyone down. I didn’t want to let the company down. I didn’t want to let the fans down. I felt like I had to fight through this in order to give these people what they came to see. They came to see a wrestling show and I wanted to give them that. I didn’t want to sell them short. People paid their money to see me go all out and do what I do. Some people call it stupid, but I cared that much about wrestling and the people that paid that money.

Randall expresses the same feeling about working while hurt, and explains, “Whether there’s one person or an arena full of people who paid for tickets to see me, I have an obligation to make sure they leave feeling it was worth it. That’s my job as a performer.”

It is also apparent that a wrestler may feel pressure to wrestle with an injury due to the competitive and individualistic nature of the sport. Wrestlers may work while injured in order to not lose their ‘spot.’ Losing one’s ‘spot’ refers to when a wrestler takes time off to recover from

an injury, and another wrestler steps in and essentially takes the job. Julian explains:

Wrestling, being an independent contractor driven workforce, it's very much dog eat dog, and there's always been a sense of 'don't work, don't eat.' There's always somebody who's willing to take your spot, and I think any promoter who would tell you otherwise is flat lying. There is no job security necessarily unless you are someone like a John Cena, or a CM Punk, or The Rock in this day and age. There are very limited opportunities and spots for guys and just a litany of wrestlers all over the place; any one of them willing to do whatever it takes to get a taste of that limelight.

Ray agrees that the fear of 'losing your spot' is the main reason why wrestlers feel the need to wrestle while injured, "They're afraid to lose their position... things are always moving, always changing... if you get injured and you're gone for 3 months, someone else can be taking your spot." Ray even illustrates his point by highlighting such an incident in WWE that occurred only a few months prior to his interview. He talked about the autumn of 2012, when WWE wrestler Ryback had been moved into main events when WWE's top babyface, John Cena, took time off to heal from an injury, "Not to say that he's taking Cena's main event spot away, but basically one month of Cena being hurt gave Ryback the opportunity that he wouldn't have had otherwise."

For many, the wrestling business is their only source of income, and they therefore must work even if injured because they have no other source of income to support themselves. Cory states, "If you don't work you don't get paid. So it's like, what are you going to do? Are you going to sit out or are you going to get paid? If you're living paycheck to paycheck, that's not really an option." Phil also expresses this sentiment about the pressure to keep working while hurt or injured, explaining, "When you have a grueling schedule and you keep going, and it's the only way you make a living, you kind of got to put it out of your mind at times." Although many wrestlers rely solely on wrestling for their income, others, especially independent wrestlers, hold a second job in order to support themselves, which makes wrestling injuries an



even bigger concern. Ray makes interesting comments about how working while injured not only affects one's wrestling job, but also jobs outside of wrestling:

I'm always worried about breaking something, or just hurting something to the point where it's going to affect me in real life... A lot of guys have real jobs that they have to go back to. They have to think, 'Well if I break my leg, how is that going to affect me at my actual job?' Not only are you losing wrestling money now, but you're losing your sole income during the week or whatever. And some of these guys, they're not single like myself and live alone, they have families, and they have mortgages to pay, and bills to pay. It's rough. It's always my biggest concern. Any injury that's going to affect my real life, that's what I'm worried about.

During the interviews, it became evident that working while injured is a measure of what makes one 'tough,' and that working in spite of an injury is a source of pride for certain wrestlers. Cory notes:

Jake Roberts said this on his WWE DVD... a true professional is someone who can perform beyond expectations in any mental or physical state. And it's sort of true. That's our job. No matter what's wrong with you, mentally or physically, you go out there and perform better than expected.

### **Dealing with Daily Pain**

Given that wrestling is very demanding physically, and injuries and wear and tear to the body are a key part of the work experience, professional wrestlers must often cope with physical pain in their day-to-day lives. As with the case of injuries, the level of pain experienced on a day-to-day basis also varies from person to person. Cory notes, "I'm in pain every day. It's not unbearable pain. I can't be the judge of somebody else's pain, but I've done a lot of things, taken a lot of bumps... I've done some stupid things, but I'm pretty good all things considered."

Randall, in describing his day-to-day experience with physical pain, explains:

Well, I can't say every single day, but a lot of the days. It just depends on the week or how it went or stuff like that. Like today, I was out, and I wasn't really sitting down, and my friend asked me if I was alright. I said, 'It's just my back.' My back was a mess because I was standing for so long, and it just

tightens up, and I sit down and it's starting to move, and crack, and stretch. It's just that you don't really think about it.

Trevor comments that, after so many years wrestling, he has become accustomed to day-to-day pain, "You kind of forget about it after a while... I just get used to it and keep going and I kind of forget. I guess I never slow down long enough to realize I don't really feel well at all."

While pain may affect professional wrestlers while they are in the ring, thereby having an impact on their performance, day-to-day pain may also affect their everyday activities, making it difficult for them to perform simple physical tasks. Lucy describes her experiences, saying, "It hurts getting out of bed. It hurts when I've been sitting down for like an hour to get up. It hurts getting up. If it's cold outside, it hurts to walk. So, it's really starting to wear down my body." Similarly, Sam notes:

If I don't wake up in pain, something's wrong with me. I don't really know what it's like not to be hurting from professional wrestling... I don't stand up straight anymore because my back hurts 24/7. Going to the gym isn't that bad, but if I'm walking, say I'm going to walk around the neighbourhood today or something, my upper back is like, 'Oh my god!'

Certainly, although the level of pain that professional wrestlers experience varies from day to day and from person to person, they all must cope with some pain on a daily basis throughout their careers. Thus, there are different coping mechanisms that wrestlers use in order to deal with physical pain. As was discussed in Chapter 3, there are several known cases of professional wrestlers using medications to cope with the pain from wrestling. The use of pain medications may lead to substance abuse and to addiction. Some participants outright refuse to take medications to cope with their pain. Sam, who explains that the pain he experiences from wrestling affects simple daily activities, is clear that he refuses to take pain medications, "I handle it how I handle it... I don't like taking pills. I don't even like taking Tylenol. It freaks me out." Like Sam, Lucy, who also speaks of experiencing a certain level of discomfort in her

day-to-day life stemming from wear and tear on her body, states that she refuses to take medications to cope with her pain:

I have a high tolerance of pain, and I don't feel comfortable taking medicine like pills or anything. So I just push through it. I wear a brace when I wrestle. If it is really painful, I'll put an icepack on wherever is painful, I'll take a hot bath, an Epsom salt bath, but I have a high tolerance of pain so I just push through it.

In order to lessen pain, and also to prevent injuries while working, wrestlers will often place an emphasis on being physically fit. They believe that wrestlers who are in top physical shape are less likely to become injured while working. As Cory states, "You see more guys nowadays stretching and trying to take care of their bodies in a healthy way than you do with painkillers for the most part." Likewise, Phil comments on the importance of physical fitness:

I'm a big fan of working out. I exercise a lot. I stretch a lot. I'm not huge into yoga, but I do yoga twice a week, which I think is phenomenal. The more flexible you are, the better you feel and the less likely you are to get hurt.

## **Medical Insurance**

As noted in the literature, many independent professional wrestlers in the United States do not have the means to afford proper medical care, and many work without medical insurance. While independent contractors for WWE are required to have medical insurance to perform, independent wrestlers often work without medical insurance, with independent wrestling promoters assuming no responsibility for any injuries experienced by wrestlers performing on their shows, leaving these wrestlers having to pay for their own medical expenses (Kotarba 2001; Smith 2008; WWE 2011). Thus, many professional wrestlers may not be able to afford proper medical care to treat the pains and injuries that they experience as part of their work.

Julian explains that he is grateful for the fact that he is covered by his wife's medical insurance that she receives through her work. Still, he identifies the lack of health insurance for wrestlers as a problem in the wrestling industry:

I'm lucky in the sense that my wife has great coverage through her job so I'm covered, but so many of my contemporaries don't have coverage, and it's not because they don't want it, they simply can't afford it. I think that's something that's obviously very different between the States and Canada. We don't have the luxury, I guess you could say, of having a state offered health care, and it's a problem in the industry, where there are so many guys at risk not making a lot of money.

While some independent wrestlers, like Julian, are covered by health insurance, others simply cannot afford it. As Cory explains, "Wrestlers are first of all poor, generally speaking. A lot of them don't have health insurance, so it takes quite a bit to actually see a doctor about anything." Richard notes that at one point in his career as an independent wrestler, he tore the tendons in his ankle, yet was unable to see a doctor to have the injury treated because he was not covered by health insurance. He claims that the injury still bothers him to this day, "Not having health insurance, I wasn't able to get the required surgery. So, it still acts up from time to time." Phil is currently wrestling with an injured knee that he says needs anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) reconstruction. He holds no employment other than wrestling on independent shows, and has no way of affording this procedure:

I don't have any ACL left in my right knee. I've been told by 2 different orthopedic doctors over the course of four years that I need ACL reconstruction... currently, I'm unemployed outside of wrestling, unfortunately, so I don't have health insurance. Without health insurance, there's no way I'm getting my knee reconstructed. And to boot, when I did have a job and they told me to get it done, I was told that I'd be out of my day job for 6 months... I was making okay money, but not enough to get out of work for 6 months to heal my knee up. It's tough. I'm a believer in that if you have insurance, and you got money and you got a good job, please, by all means get fixed up. Right now, I'm in the mindset that I'm just going to deal with it.

For some participants in this study, the biggest change that they would like to see in the professional wrestling industry as a whole would be for wrestlers to be offered some sort of health insurance coverage. Phil, who is currently dealing with a knee injury that he cannot afford to repair, notes that, while it may be financially unrealistic for smaller independent groups to offer medical coverage to their wrestlers, he would definitely like to see larger wrestling companies provide medical coverage to their performers. He states, “I’ve been without health insurance for about a year now since I lost my job. That sucks, to have that hanging over you, especially if you get hurt, or busted open. Insurance for wrestlers is by far the biggest thing.” Randall also shares this sentiment:

They’re doing this physical sport without insurance, where if they get hurt it’s going to cost them an arm and a leg sometimes to go to the doctor. That’s the biggest thing. I wish they would evolve wrestling. I wish there was some type of health insurance out there, because we go out there and it’s not like we actually punch each other. I think that sucks and it’s horrible. I think because of people not being able to afford it. I know I worked for years without getting it and I look back and say, ‘Jeez, the things I did and to not have health insurance? That’s insane.’ But you don’t think about it because you’re healthy, you’re young, you feel good, success is starting to happen so you just go, you know? But, if you sit down and think about it, there’s a good chance something can happen.

### **Hardcore Style and High-Risk Maneuvers**

Wrestlers who regularly work using very hard, physical, stiff in-ring styles are more likely to be injured and have greater problems with their health later in life. As noted in the literature, Chris Benoit’s style of wrestling was a very physical, stiff style of wrestling, and it is believed that the numerous concussions and brain injuries that he suffered during his career were in part due to this style and may have played a part in his death (Foley 2010; Small et al. 2013; Walton and Williams 2011). Professional wrestlers place greater physical stress on their bodies by regularly performing high-risk maneuvers during their matches. High-risk maneuvers

are wrestling moves that put wrestlers at greater risk of injury, such as jumping from the top turnbuckle, diving to the outside of the ring, powerbombs to the ring apron, or wrestling moves such as piledrivers that place wrestlers in a compromising position that makes them more vulnerable to head or neck injuries. Moreover, wrestlers place themselves at greater risk of injury by working ‘hardcore.’ ‘Hardcore wrestling’ is a style of wrestling that involves the use of weapons such as steel chairs, tables, and ladders, and in more extreme cases can also include weapons such as barbed wire, thumb tacks, staple guns, light tubes, broken glass, and even fire. This ultraviolent form of wrestling rose to popularity in American wrestling during the mid-to-late 1990s, with promotions such as Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) showcasing hardcore wrestling as a main attraction. Mick Foley, one of the biggest wrestling stars of the late 1990s boom period in WWE, helped popularize the hardcore wrestling style in America, working for ECW before moving to WWF in 1996 and influencing the popularity of hardcore wrestling in the mainstream wrestling scene into the 2000s. One of the most iconic images from WWE’s history is of Foley falling from a 20-foot high steel cage and crashing onto an announce table outside the ring (Foley 2010).

De Garis (2005) notes that younger wrestlers are often more apt to take physical risks during their matches, such as performing high-risk maneuvers or placing hardcore spots into their matches, in order to stand out from other wrestlers and in an attempt to become popular with their audience. During his interview, Cory indicates that this was his mentality, and explains that he was indeed willing to take bigger risks in the ring when he was younger:

In my younger years it was a thing I did more, now I’m much less apt to do those sorts of things. I don’t want to be in pain. I want to be comfortable. Isn’t that what life’s about? Being comfortable? Having a comfortable bed and laying down? I just want to feel good. I’ve done some stupid and taken some dumb bumps. It’s scary, but sometimes they’re calculated risks that I took in situations that I thought would pay off in my career. I think at times they did. It’s scary,

but the thing is you have to commit to it, that's the biggest thing. Whatever you do, don't do something you're not comfortable with, but whatever you do you commit to it or you end up hurting somebody, yourself or somebody else.

Thus, taking greater physical risks by performing high-risk maneuvers or performing by adopting a hardcore style, is often done by younger or more inexperienced wrestlers with the intention to become popular or 'get over' with audiences. Cory explains:

You got to something to get over, right? What do you do? When you're younger, you're like a rubber ball or something. I don't know man, when you're young it seems like these things aren't as dangerous. I did some stupid things and didn't get hurt doing them, and I look back and think, 'Man, if I did that now I'd be so fucked up.' I've talked to younger kids about it and I can't tell kids not to do that, I can't say, 'Hey, don't do this,' but you should think about it. It should be calculated, you should understand the risks involved, and the rewards involved. Don't do it with nobody at a place where nobody is going to see it. If you're going to do something make it count. Risk-reward.

Despite their acknowledgement of the importance of 'risk-reward' regarding the use of high risk moves and hardcore spots in wrestling matches, many of the participants note that these maneuvers should only be done in certain circumstances. According to Richard, there are some more experienced 'high-risk wrestlers' who understand their wrestling characters and know when and where to integrate maneuvers in their matches in order to optimize their overall effect, as he explains, "If you're a high-risk wrestler, but you know where to place your high-risk stuff, you're going to last longer than a guy who maybe doesn't do the same thing as you, but he doesn't know where to put it and he gets hurt." Some participants also stress that they are only comfortable performing high-risk moves if they know that a specific move can be performed safely, and if they feel comfortable and safe with the person with whom they are working. As Smith (2008a; 2009) notes, wrestlers tend to work in a safe environment if they trust one another and work in full cooperation during their matches. Lucy describes a hardcore match that she recently worked with a male wrestler named Hank, whom she trusted. The match

was a culmination of their feud in the promotion for which she was working at the time. She states:

I don't do that very often. I only did it with Hank because I trust him with my life. He's a very safe worker, and the only reason why I ever did anything like that is because Hank is someone where if I were to jump off a building, I could trust him to catch me. He would do whatever he could to make sure that I was okay, so I felt comfortable doing all that stuff with him. For an example, in our Tables, Ladders, and Chairs match he got a concussion protecting me on a move. So, he's great.

Within the wrestling business, many individuals argue that hardcore matches should rarely take place, not only because they are stressful on the body, but also because performing such matches regularly makes the spectacle of violence less special to the audience. Thus, many believe that these spectacles of violence should be saved for special events, such as the culmination of a feud between wrestlers, or for a 'big event' type atmosphere. During his interview, Sam talks about a steel cage match coming up that will involve the use of more extreme weapons such as barbed wire and glass, and confides that he plans to take a bump from the top of the cage to the floor outside the ring. While Sam notes that, "It's not something I'd recommend to people [Laughs]... Going off the top of that cage or getting hit with a chair, it's not fun," he also shares that he feels comfortable taking such risks for this event as it is the culmination of a feud between him and another wrestler, and that this specific event is expected to be the biggest money making event of the year for his promotion. He explains, "It's one of those things that the story has built up to this point for the match, and for this type of match you have to do what you have to do." Randall also feels that higher risk situations in wrestling should be saved for special events, where taking high risks will resonate the most with the audience, and where the payday for the wrestler will be substantial:

I think a lot of people do it for no reason. They do it because their icon Mick Foley did it, they do it because their icon Terry Funk did it, but they don't



understand and realize that it worked for them, but there's also the character. Cactus Jack [Mick Foley] did a lot of that type of stuff in Japan, the death matches, because that was the style and what they did over there. They don't just go have an independent show randomly, and say 'Oh, we're going to have a tables, ladders, and chairs match for the EFIW heavyweight title.' There's no build up, there's no reason why, there's no circumstance, they're just doing it because it's a car crash and people can be entertained they think. That's retarded to me. In my opinion, if you have television, and they are at a certain national TV level, and there's a reason why a match is going to pack the place out, and there's a good pay off involved as well, that's worth it to put your body at risk.

Some participants in this study blatantly state that they feel uncomfortable participating in hardcore style matches, because they view hardcore wrestling as too much of a risk and as an unnecessary part of professional wrestling. Julian believes that individuals who rely on a hardcore style for their professional wrestling matches are, "being extremely short sighted," noting that, "If you work a dedicated style where you're doing that kind of thing every night, you're putting yourself at a much higher degree of difficulty when it comes to remaining safe." Phil does not work any hardcore style matches. He refuses to take chair shots from other wrestlers, or to be put through tables, and believes that refusing to participate in such activities has kept him safe from certain injuries. With reference to hardcore spots in wrestling matches, he states, "I don't think they're a necessary aspect of pro wrestling, and I think not doing it for me has prevented real serious injuries as far as my head and back go."

Some wrestlers are of the opinion that certain performers risk their health and use hardcore spots during their matches as a shortcut to connecting with their audience. As Richard states, "Getting hit in the head unprotected by a steel chair probably isn't a good idea for your long-term health... that stuff's not necessary. There are ways to get over your story without having to get hit in the head." Some wrestlers who rely on hardcore wrestling may not know how to properly tell a compelling story to the audience through wrestling alone, and simply may not know how to 'work' as more seasoned wrestlers would. Phil notes that, "It's more of an art

form to get a reaction out of a crowd taking a punch that doesn't hit you look like it hurts, rather than taking three chair shots to the head and then getting put through a table.” On the topic of wrestlers who adopt a hardcore style in order to ‘get over’ with their audience, Randall explains:

They can't work, they can't wrestle, and they don't know how to do things traditionally to get a reaction, so they want to take a light tube and just blast it over the head so people go, ‘*Ooh*’ and ‘*Ahh*,’ but I can pull my pants down and get the same reaction if that makes sense.

Similarly, Ray comments that younger wrestlers who have less experience working will often incorporate a higher number of high-risk spots into their matches as an easy way to ‘get over’ with the audience, a strategy that he views as unnecessary and unsafe:

That's what some of the younger guys do. They don't understand psychology; they don't understand that you don't have to do all 30 moves you know in one match. Save stuff for later, save stuff for when you need more. And that just goes back to training properly and looking after yourself. I wish some guys would calm down and realize you're going to have a million more matches, and you can save that double moonsault for later.

Thus, hardcore wrestling is a very polarizing topic for professional wrestlers. Some are of the belief that hardcore wrestling and high-risk spots have their place in the business. These methods are seen as acceptable when carried out as safely as possible and at the right time, aid wrestlers in telling a story during their matches, and help wrestling companies sell tickets to audiences willing to pay to see such a spectacle. On the other hand, some feel that hardcore wrestling and a reliance on high-risk spots during matches are ultimately unsafe for wrestlers, and are often used as a cheap way of getting over with an audience, or by wrestlers who were not trained properly and do not know how to work. Still, some accept hardcore wrestling as a part of the wrestling business, viewing it as just another style in the art form of professional wrestling. On the point of wrestlers who are considered to be ‘hardcore’ or ‘high-risk’ wrestlers, Jamie says, “I don't look down on them. If that's their style, if that's what they feel comfortable

doing, then do it.” Likewise, Trevor, although he has some reservations about the safety of hardcore wrestling, notes that he ultimately appreciates the style and that it contributes to the art form of wrestling as a whole:

Talking on a microphone, swinging a chair, throwing big suplexes, or simply just brawling are things for us to paint with as artists... all those things are really just brushes to paint on the same canvas. People ask me all the time, just from an artistic standpoint, ‘Do you have more or less respect for guys that wrestle with barbed wire, or guys that do a whole lot of talking but they don’t know how to do hammerlocks?’ I think that all of it is incredible because it’s really our ability as artists to create something.

### **Head Injuries**

Fortunately, only a few of the participants in this study speak of having suffered one or more concussions during their careers in wrestling. Ray experienced two separate concussions during his wrestling career, and candidly describes the one suffered during a wrestling match in 2007:

I was suplexed and powerbombed on my head multiple times to the point where I was unconscious and asleep for a couple of hours. I was taken to the hospital by one of the other wrestlers and it was discovered that after I had 2 seizures that I had bleeding on the brain. Luckily, my brain stopped bleeding, and if it wasn’t for my brain stopping the bleeding on its own, they would have had to cut my skull open and put a sponge on my brain. Doctors told me that if I hadn’t been taken to the hospital, and I would have just gone to sleep, I would have died in my sleep. It was pretty serious. Naturally, what would have been the smart thing to do? Probably stop wrestling. But I took 2 months off and I was back at it... Luckily, I don’t have any headaches or anything like that, but who knows what could happen in time, with all the sports medicine research and stuff like that. Concussions are a thing and they’re nothing to fool around with, but I think that I’m feeling okay. I’m pretty articulate talking on the phone [Laughs].

When discussing the various health issues they worry about with regard to wrestling, several participants indicate that suffering a serious head injury frightens them the most. Lucy notes that although she has never personally suffered a concussion, the possibility of suffering one

“scares the hell out of” her, and that this fear has worsened since seeing her friend Hank experience the effects of a concussion following one of their hardcore matches. She explains that she must block out her emotions and the fear of suffering a head injury during her matches, because being fearful or hesitant while wrestling may lead to an injury to herself or her opponent. She explains, “If you don’t trust your opponent to throw you or something, someone’s going to end up hurt... it scares me, but I have to block it or I can really hurt myself, or worse, hurt my opponent.” Trevor, who has suffered “two or three” concussions during his career, claims that he worries about the condition of his brain, as well as the brain of his contemporaries, and speculates about the quality of life that he may have in his later years after retiring from wrestling:

The study of concussions is so new that people don’t really know much about it. I was worried about even exercising with a concussion, let alone boarding a plane or wrestling... every time we take impact, because our generation is still young, for all we know we could be giving ourselves minor concussions on a daily basis, and then someday we’ll be the generation that’s full of dementia and stuff like that when we get older.

All of the participants seem to have some awareness of the recent research on concussions and head injuries in sports. Sam sees concussions in wrestling as, “no different than any other sport.” He explains that he views concussions as being simply a part of the wrestling business, noting that professional wrestlers should understand the risks involved with the sport. He contends that professional wrestlers should assume responsibility for their own choices in terms of how they go about their work in the ring, “If you’re going to let some dude blast you in the head, or you’re going to get dropped on your head, you’re going to get a concussion. That’s your choice.”

Some participants believe that the in-ring style of professional wrestling has changed over the past five or so years due to a new awareness amongst professional wrestlers of the

dangers that concussions can present for their long-term health. For instance, Phil points out that the general in-ring style of wrestlers in WWE has been toned down when compared to the late 1990s when it was more common to see wrestlers on television every week blasting one another in the head with steel chairs, “I think it’s been toned down a great deal, and I think it’s head injuries and there’s been a lot of outside circumstance, it’s definitely due to the Chris Benoit murders.” Phil also discusses the general influence of WWE on the professional wrestling industry. He explains that if WWE is not presenting wrestlers hitting one another over the head with steel chairs on a regular basis, the independent wrestlers hoping one day to be contracted with WWE are less likely to engage in such activities, “I think everything trickles down from the top... I think it affects wrestling as a whole. I think anytime you change something at the top, it’s going to affect everything going down.” Cory also acknowledges that the overall style of mainstream wrestling has changed over the past few years, and even notes that audiences now feel uncomfortable watching a wrestler swing a chair at someone’s head:

Things really have changed a lot. You watch back in the old Attitude Era (Late 1990s WWE) and guys are just swinging chairs at one another... Now it’s almost uncomfortable or funny looking when that happens. It’s out of place, so there’s definitely concern with that.

Hence, while professional wrestlers understand that they place themselves at risk of a head injury anytime they enter the ring, the participants in this study note that wrestlers are aware, more than ever, of the long term effects of head injuries such as concussions, and are therefore more likely to take necessary precautions in their work in order to minimize risks and protect their health. Moreover, professional wrestlers in today’s industry are more likely to alter their in-ring styles and avoid dangerous spots in matches, such as direct steel chair shots to the head, in order protect their health over the long term.

## The Importance of Physiques

Professional wrestling, a sport where most athletes perform half naked, is a spectacle that places a great emphasis on bodies. The academic literature demonstrates that, in the recent past, the vast majority of main performers for WWE have been wrestlers with body-builder type physiques, whereas its current roster of wrestlers is largely dominated by individuals with lean, muscular bodies (Beekman 2006; Souillere 2006; Souillere and Blair 2006; Schiavone 2007). All the wrestlers interviewed for this project felt that it was very important to have a good physique in wrestling, and most correlated having a good physique with making money. Jamie notes, "When a guy comes through the curtain, and he has a great physique, people think this guy looks great and you want to watch him." He goes on to explain, "You just want to be in the best shape possible, because people pay money to see you, and if you're not in the best shape possible, a lot of people say why would they pay to see you?" Sam, who believes that having a good physique is essential to being a wrestler and adds a sense of realism to the spectacle, comments that, "you have to look the part." He also explains that having a muscular body is a key part of getting wrestling fans to buy into the spectacle itself:

If there's a guy going to the *Incredible Hulk* movie, and when he turned into the Incredible Hulk you saw this little, puny, skinny guy, you're going to go, 'That's bullshit!' And people get turned off by that. We're suspending disbelief. We're trying to give people the illusion that what we do is real.

Some participants feel that having an impressive-looking physique is more important than in-ring talent or personality in terms of making money, especially in WWE. According to Ray:

Wrestling is a very cosmetic sport. Even on the indies, too. If you're wanting to go to WWE or TNA you better have a good physique, because I've seen guys personally that have been in the wrestling business less than a year, don't know how to wrestle a lick in the ring, they can't talk, but they get signed based on their physiques. So, you know, it's entertainment. They're

looking for people who fit the mould of a wrestler, who have abs, or are big, 6'4, 275 pound guys. I think physically, that's what the bigger promotions look for. I think there's a lot of pressure to be a bigger guy, be in shape for professional wrestling because that's what people want.

Lucy describes the pressure that wrestlers feel to have a certain cosmetic look to be successful in the industry:

There's tonnes of pressure! Unless you have an incredible gimmick, that's really the only thing that can get you signed to any major company, at least on TV, because they want that. As a male, they want that chiselled GI Joe look, or they want the Barbie look. There's tonnes of pressure to have the long flowing hair, or the six pack, or the crazy biceps, or, you know, the little waist. Tonnes of pressure. I think worse than high school even, or worse than modeling.

Some participants note that they have observed recent changes within the professional wrestling industry in terms of body image. While they still acknowledge that it is important to be in shape for wrestling, they remark that more wrestlers who work for WWE nowadays tend to look like athletes rather than bodybuilders. Randall states, "It's important to look like an athlete, but you don't need to look like a bodybuilder is how I would put it." According to Richard, "Even with WWE, you can see they're hiring guys that are more built like athletes than built like bodybuilders." Richard uses the example of CM Punk, WWE Champion at the time of his interview, "10 or 15 years ago, someone like CM Punk would have never have gotten hired with WWE, he wasn't big enough, and he certainly wouldn't be the top guy. Nowadays, that's changed." Cory also points to the example of CM Punk when talking about physiques in relation to success in the wrestling industry:

People like guys who look like superheroes and action figures. That's cool. It's cool to look like that. That being said, you know, especially WWE, they're hiring guys that don't look like that anymore. I mean, look, CM Punk's the champion, a guy who's a poster child for being drug free and steroid free. I know Punk works hard, he diets hard, he works out, but he's got the body he's got. You look at things like UFC, those guys look like athletes, they don't look necessarily like bodybuilders anymore. I think that's

sort of trickled into wrestling as well. Vince [McMahon] of course has always been a fan of bodybuilding and big guys and everything, so that won't change, nor probably shouldn't, but certainly it's less than it was by a long shot. By a long, *lonnnng* shot.

While Sam acknowledges the importance of having an athletic build to look the part of a professional wrestler, he also points out that wrestlers come in many shapes and sizes. He therefore does not view having a good physique as the most important component of being successful in professional wrestling, but highlights instead the necessity of being a good worker and original character:

Size and shape realistically mean nothing. 'Stone Cold' Steve Austin, he's 5'11. He's not that big, and he's one of the biggest draws in the history of this business. Hulk Hogan was a giant. Jeff Hardy is a normal looking guy. CM Punk isn't actually that big of a guy. He's really not in shape at all if you look at him. He looks normal. You can tell he works out a little bit. You know what I'm saying? To be in this business you have to be somewhat athletic, but you can also look at guys like King Kong Bundy, Big Show, and Andre the Giant. These are fat, big guys. You can be fat, you can be slim – you can be anything in this business. Heck, there are guys in this business with one leg. They are successful. I mean, it's just once you become a worker, once you realize you start focusing and making money.

Although wrestlers come in different shapes and sizes, and while many of the wrestlers who appear on television nowadays look more like athletes than body builders, interviewees indicate that a great pressure still exists for wrestlers to maintain a cosmetic look, and that many struggle with their own personal body image issues. Lucy explains, "Even though there's different looks on TV now, everybody in wrestling at least at one time in their life has sat down and said, 'I need to do something about my body, because it's not good enough.'"

### **WWE Wellness Policy**

In 2005, WWE implemented its Talent Wellness Program shortly following the death of Eddie Guerrero (Schiavone 2007). This wellness program provides health monitoring for WWE



wrestlers, and also tests wrestlers for what the organization deems as banned substances, which includes illegal drugs such as anabolic steroids. When asked their opinion about the overall effectiveness of the Talent Wellness Program, most of the participants presented a favourable assessment. Randall notes, “I think it’s great. I think it’s needed because of all the things that have happened in the past. We need it moving forward to prevent things like that from happening.” According to several of the participants, the enforcement of this policy acts as a deterrent for wrestlers to not abuse drugs such as steroids or pain medications. Phil explains, “I think it’s a great deterrent for people to use steroids and hard drugs, which I don’t think that people should be using anyway.” According to Cory, the Wellness Program has an overall influence over steroid use not only for WWE wrestlers, but for independent wrestlers as well:

It’s like, what would the point of me being on steroids be? There’d be no point. So, if the WWE could see me and be like, ‘Oh, we like the way you look, come work for us,’ then I’d have to get off steroids and I’d shrink. So there’s no point for most guys.

Trevor, however, presents a different perspective on the deterrent effects of the WWE policy. He highlights the contradictions for wrestlers, explaining that WWE still looks for wrestlers with large, muscular physiques, while the Wellness Program makes it more difficult for wrestlers to build such a physique in order to hopefully work for WWE:

They still want guys to look the part and be as big, or fast, or as strong, or as lean, or whatever. Or as tall, stuff you can’t even change. Everywhere, they still want that. So, in a lot of ways it’s really more stressful, because they don’t want you doing drugs, whereas before they were just like, ‘Do it, just get it done.’ They didn’t say to go do drugs, but they didn’t tell you to not to. They were just like, ‘Give us the results, we don’t care how you do it.’ Now, they’re like, ‘Don’t do anything wrong, but please give us the results.’ And it’s like, okay, I don’t really know how to do that, not that I want to be on steroids anyways. It’s a lot more stressful. I guess in a way it’s good because they force you to do everything the right way, and if you don’t cut it, then you simply don’t cut it.

Although most participants are in favour of some sort of wellness policy and health monitoring in WWE, they seem to be split on the legitimacy of the Talent Wellness Program itself. Some perceive the policy as totally legitimate. Cory explains, “My understanding of it is that it’s all legit, and it’s all on the up and up. I mean, from what I’ve seen it’s clearly worked. There’s been a huge cut in steroid and drug use.” Trevor adds:

Unless there’s some kind of extremely covert, inside, screwy stuff going on, it’s about as good as it can get. It’s pretty iron clad... I know a lot of people there, a lot of friends that I have work there, and I’ve never met anyone that didn’t say it wasn’t legit. I mean, guys aren’t cheating the system, they can’t cheat the system.

Others questioned the legitimacy of the WWE Talent Wellness Program. Julian notes, “We’re talking about a private industry controlled ostensibly by one family. The understanding that I have is that if guys need to get away with something they can, if that makes sense.” Some believe that the Wellness Program may have loopholes given the physiques of some of the wrestlers that WWE showcases on its television programs. Ray explains, “I see some guys on TV and I have to question at this point how strict it is, because I’ve heard there’s probably some loopholes. For example, if they test for certain steroids, they might not necessarily test for others.” Sam also shares this opinion, and suspects that wrestlers held in highest esteem by WWE and wrestlers with a better political standing within the company may not face any consequences if caught testing positive for banned substances. He notes:

I think it’s a bunch of bullshit. I know a lot of guys, a lot of guys in WWE, and let me tell you something, you point blank know that Ryback’s on steroids. And I know he is, trust me. I like the guy, but you point blank know it. There are guys who will never get tested because that’s not how this system works. WWE has a system. You know what I’m saying? If you’re a star and you’re making Vince McMahon money, trust me... Randy [Orton] also already got fucked for smoking weed. They’ve fired guys for getting a haircut, or getting a tattoo, something you can’t even see. They fuck guys for that. There’s guys doing drugs, but Randy Orton’s a big star. It’s very political. I think it’s a great idea, but it’s really just saying we’re doing this.

We're doing the right thing, when realistically behind closed doors they can pick and choose what they want to do.

## **Politics in Wrestling**

For many participants in this study, the political dimension of the professional wrestling business is very mentally challenging. Politics in wrestling, or what many observers of wrestling refer to as 'backstage politics,' involves wrestlers using their power to better position themselves within the business in order to further their careers or the careers of others. The political actions of wrestlers take various forms, but mainly consist of bullying, lying, or conspiring with others in order for one wrestler to gain an advantage over others (Brody 2009; Sharp 2006).

Phil explains, "A lot of people get into politics. They pretty much just go into work and trash talk people they don't like or people they feel threatened by and you got to be very mentally tough to deal with that." Both Ray and Richard compare politics in a wrestling environment to high school gossip or bullying. In Ray's comparison, he states:

There's guys who weren't really good to begin with and instead of trying to work or to get better, they just bash people, whether privately at a show, or anonymously on a message board. It's kind of high school crap. All you can do is just try to ignore it.

Similarly, Richard comments:

There are certain places that have no politics. You go in, you do your job, you get paid, you go home, and then there are a lot of places that are just like high school. A lot of times, wrestling, it feels like you've graduated high school and now you're right back into high school. It's a way that some of the politics is, with people talking behind your back, or trying to backstab you or whatever. It's really silly. I try not to get involved in those things.

Participants made it apparent that politics exist at all levels of wrestling, from the bottom of the independent scene to the top of WWE. Wrestlers may become too focused on the politics

due to the competitive nature of the wrestling business. In today's wrestling landscape, there are a limited number of positions that allow wrestlers to make a substantial amount of money, and certain wrestlers do not hesitate to engage in actions that are detrimental to others in order to secure one of these positions. Randall explains the game of politics that he endured while working for WWE, stating that wrestlers need to "be over prepared in every aspect of the game. That's not easy... Someone told me that you have to like the taste of shit in this business because you're going to get fed it time and time again." Trevor also notes the competitive and individualistic nature of professional wrestlers when he says, "Nobody trusts anybody. Everybody is built on a house of cards." He further explains:

Everybody is so secretive about where they're going, and how much they make, stuff like that. It's as if the only reason is because they feel as if they can get a little bit more if they can screw the other guy because nobody knows what anyone is getting.

Trevor acknowledges the existence of politics in wrestling and how stressful politics can be, but attempts to avoid this dimension, and focuses instead on performing to the best of his ability. Ray also tries to ignore the political aspect of wrestling, and argues that wrestlers should, "Try to realize that you have to be above that and that's what I try to do." Richard, who both wrestles and promotes, notes that as a promoter, he prefers to avoid doing business with other wrestlers or promotions that are too consumed with politics. He explains, "We used to do business with a lot of places here, and do to politics is why we stopped. I try to separate myself from a lot of that. I don't think it's as bad as some people say, but it's definitely there." Trevor, who makes it clear that he tries to avoid politics in wrestling, humorously notes:

I just want to go to work and do my job well and do well and come home and be done with it. That's how I am, that's how a lot of guys are. For the most part, everybody's playing this game of who's fake better, and it's like, what does it matter? [Laughs].

## **Unionism**

Labour unions are prevalent in many sports and entertainment industries. Individuals working as actors in the entertainment industry in Canada are represented by ACTRA, The Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists. Major league sports such as the National Football League and the National Hockey League have players associations, the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA) and National Hockey League Players Association (NHLPA), which are labour organizations that represent the interests of athletes working in these sports. Yet, professional wrestlers, even those working for a ‘major league’ organization such as WWE, have never been unionized and have no form of labour organization representing their collective interests.

Several of those interviewed for this project are in favour of having a union for professional wrestlers, especially if unionization means better business relations between wrestlers and promoters, as well as benefits and health insurance for wrestlers. Trevor, for example, believes that a union would make wrestling promoters more accountable in their dealings with wrestlers. When speaking of promoters, he notes, “The reason why 95 percent of them are poor businessmen is because nobody is forcing them to be good businessmen...the business problems would stop the more that wrestlers are together.” Phil also indicates that he would be in favour of a union in professional wrestling, stating, “Even if not a union, if there was just a company that would step up and pay for benefits for the wrestlers... I don’t know why it hasn’t taken. I think it’s very unfair to the guys that put their bodies on the line for you.”

Some of the participants argued that a union could become a reality if the stars in the professional wrestling business made such a demand. In referring to the popularity of mainstream professional wrestling in the 1980s, Julian notes that, “When Hulk Hogan really

took off and was mainstream and everywhere... he could have single-handedly changed the entire industry by demanding healthcare for the guys. And he didn't, and a lot hasn't changed." Cory expresses a similar opinion, but also mentions wrestlers in WWE's developmental system in Orlando, Florida willing to work with no union or benefits:

If John Cena, CM Punk and all them got together and were like, 'Yo, we're going to unionize,' we'd be in a good spot. But I don't know, then you got a bunch of guys down in Florida that are like, fuck it, I'll be WWE champion, no union required. So, it's hard.

While some participants indicate that they are in favour of a union in professional wrestling, nearly all claim that a union will never be possible, especially because professional wrestlers are a highly competitive group with an inherent distrust of one another; this would thwart any possibility of unionization. On the possibility of unionization, Ray explains:

I don't think it'll even happen. Reason being, for every 10 guys who gather together and said we're going to walk out if you don't give us benefits, there'd be 20 more guys lined up ready to take their spot who wouldn't care about the insurance or anything like that, who just want to be on WWE television... wrestling is cutthroat. One guy steps down, another guy takes his place. No one is irreplaceable in wrestling. And that's just how it is.

Jamie also describes professional wrestling as a 'cutthroat' business, noting that, "People will do whatever it takes to make a quick buck more than the next guy... Guys will shoot you in broad daylight if they had to. It sucks." Likewise, Cory expresses the idea that wrestlers are replaceable, stating, "There's always somebody ready to take your spot... I can go and somebody else will come in, and that's always how it is." Sam believes that the creation of a union needs the full cooperation of all wrestlers, explaining, "in order to have a union, there's got to be one single clique, and that's it. They got to control the entire U.S., and that's it, and that's never going to happen."

On the subject of unionization in professional wrestling, some of the participants make it very clear that the relationship between professional wrestlers and promoters is exploitative by nature, and that this is one reason for the lack of unionization or benefits for wrestlers. Sam bluntly states, “Professional wrestlers are nothing but a bunch of whores. Bookers are pimps, you’re a whore. That’s how it works.” He explains that most promoters do not want to be held accountable to wrestlers by any unions or governing bodies, saying, “People in professional wrestling... most people are not the cleanest, squeaky-clean guys. They don’t want to be busted by the government because they haven’t paid taxes or some bullshit like that. They don’t want to be governed.” Lucy stresses that promoters would not even book any wrestlers if they had to pay compensation for injuries sustained by wrestlers while working, and explains:

They don’t care about you. They just want to use you to make money. You’re a product. Why would they care about you? Especially if it’s self-employment where, you know, they pay you under the table. Why would they offer to pay, say you broke your finger, why would they offer to pay for that? Why would they pay money for that when they can keep it for themselves? Promoters are shady. A lot of people in the business are shady.

Interviewees also note that while WWE may be able to afford to pay benefits to its wrestlers, that unionization and benefits for wrestlers outside of WWE would be difficult to coordinate. Unionization for professional wrestlers as a whole would be a difficult process, as many wrestlers work for several different promotions throughout the world. Furthermore, most, if not all, independent promotions would not be able to afford paying out benefits such as health insurance to their performers. Julian explains that Ring of Honor afforded health care to its performers before the company was bought out by Sinclair Broadcasting, and states, “It simply wasn’t economically feasible... It was astronomical... the boys were left to carry on with policies themselves, of course at their own expense... out of 30, I think 4 continued with the coverage.”

## **Longevity of Wrestlers' Careers**

The length of time spent working as a professional wrestler varies from person to person. A person may leave wrestling for various reasons. An injury may cut one's career short. One may become burnt out and decide to pursue other interests. A wrestler may have trouble finding work and move on to another type of employment. Still, many make lifelong careers in the wrestling business, as was the case for individuals such as Jerry 'The King' Lawler or Ric Flair who wrestled into their late 50s and 60s.

Participants in this study have different views on how long they will stay involved in professional wrestling. Some plan to stay active as professional wrestlers until their bodies will physically not allow it anymore. Jamie explains, "I see myself wrestling until God tells me it's time to stop. When I get to when by body and mind both agree at the same time that I can't do it anymore." Cory hopes to wrestle for the rest of his life, and shares that he cannot see himself in a different line of work, "I'm probably a lifer. I don't know how long that is. What else am I going to do? I don't know what people do for a living. I know what I do for a living, I play fight."

Trevor links longevity in professional wrestling to personal health, and expects that advancements and changes in health and fitness may lead to a longer career in wrestling. He explains:

Guys are healthier for longer now, and I think the world is getting greener, even in wrestling. I mean, you see guys with more natural looking physiques and stuff, and they have regulations on people's health. A guy like Randy Orton would just be a lanky, skinny guy decades ago, but now it's like he's in incredible shape and that's what good athletes look like if you're just healthy. So, I think that being more accepted is giving people a chance to have a longer shelf life, so I hope that I can do it until I can't walk anymore.



Some participants view their career as having a ‘shelf life’, and discuss plans to leave wrestling by a certain age. In speaking about the longevity of her wrestling career, Lucy remarks:

I just look at it like this, I want to be able to play tag with my kids, whenever I do have kids, I want to be able to play with them without any pain, or play with them without having to stop every five minutes or something. I gave myself until 30 the latest. I’ve done everything I wanted to in my career. My dreams and my goals, I’ve done them all. I’m going to start slowing down just so I can begin real life and make sure that I’m financially stable and, you know, hopefully one day get married and have kids and all these other things. 30 at the latest, but aiming, maybe, to stop between 28 to 30.

Other participants also state that they plan to end their active wrestling career at some point in their 30s. Phil states, “I’m going to give myself till I’m 30 to really keep pursuing this. I don’t see how I’m going to really stop though, because it’s too much fun.” Richard similarly notes, “When I first started I said that I would probably cut it off at 30... it’s hard to say. I’ll do this until either I just don’t have fun with it anymore, or I stop making any kind of money.” Julian, at 35 years old, says about his longevity, “I think I’m over the hill by and large. There are other things. As an active wrestler I wouldn’t be surprised if this was my last year.”

When discussing possible career paths after he retires from wrestling, Julian is optimistic about opportunities for work and seems comfortable about eventually leaving the sport, “I’ve done other things while I’ve been wrestling, real estate, I went back to school. I wish more guys would do that... I have irons in other fires.” When their actual in-ring careers end, most of the participants want to continue to work in some capacity in the wrestling business. Ray talks about his goal of one day working in a backstage role for WWE:

My only goal would be to get to WWE and parlay my wrestling job into something else, like a backstage agent or something, because I feel like my wrestling mind is better than my wrestling body... I’d like to be in wrestling as long as I can, but I don’t foresee myself wrestling past the age of 30.

Sam, who not only wrestles but also promotes wrestling, explains that he promotes his independent company with the goal of staying in wrestling beyond his days as an active wrestler, “I [own] a wrestling company because I knew that at some point I’m not going to be able to do this, and I love this business more than anything else. So, I got to stay in this anyway I can.” Cory notes that wrestlers who stay involved in wrestling beyond their in-ring careers not only do so because of a love for the sport, but also because they may have trouble adjusting to life outside of the wrestling business. He elaborates:

And it is hard to adjust. Even just from my experience, but I can only imagine for a guy in WWE who’s been to arenas around the world and made this money. How do you go from that to, ‘Oh, I’m just going to work in an office.’ They’re not compatible. Sometimes real life and wrestling, the balance is just weird. I started in high school. For me it was weird. I’d think at times, man I had these people chanting my name yesterday, now today I’ve got this teacher yelling at me because I’m not taking notes. How do I balance that?

## **Income**

When discussing what makes a wrestler successful, some participants in this study associate success with making money. Randall states that a successful wrestler is someone who, “Draws money, you know, sells tickets.” Richard, like Randall, believes that a successful wrestler is a person who can make money wrestling, and explains:

There are a lot of guys who look at a successful pro wrestler as someone who’s just wrestling every weekend. That’s fine for them, but to me, if you’re not making any kind of money, then it’s not really successful. Just like any business, there’s nobody who goes into a business to ultimately at the end of it not make any money. There are guys that will tell you that they just want to have fun with it, or that they don’t care about the money, but it only lasts so long. You can’t tell your electric company that you don’t have their money because you’re having fun. It just doesn’t work that way.

However, while the ability to make money and sell tickets is considered part of being successful as a professional wrestler, all of the participants in this study stress that making

money is one of the most challenging aspects of working as a professional wrestler, especially on the independent scene. Most participants believe that it is not currently feasible for one to make a full time living in the wrestling business. Julian explains that in the United States, except for those who work for WWE, there are very limited opportunities for professional wrestlers to make a full time living in the industry. Julian, who makes what he describes as a “modest” living by working mostly on independent shows, notes that outside of WWE, most wrestlers work on nightly guarantees for their income, even if a wrestler’s match is televised, “Some of my friends that work at TNA who are on TV every week are making less than I do, and I’m working independents without any television exposure. I think there’s something very wrong with that.”

In the current wrestling landscape, outside of working for WWE, the number of job opportunities that provide a full time living in professional wrestling in the United States and Canada – either by working for promotions such as TNA Wrestling or Ring of Honor, or for independent promotions – are tremendously scarce. In discussing job opportunities in wrestling, Trevor states that, “The pool is very, very narrow.” Cory compares job opportunities in professional wrestling available today to those available prior to the monopoly of WWE, “When guys talk about the territory days and working 5 days a week, there were jobs! There were jobs. There are almost no jobs in wrestling. We’re all competing for this select number of jobs.” He discusses in further detail the scarcity of jobs, comparing a job in wrestling to a “regular” job and giving a rough estimate of the number of opportunities that exist to earn a full time living as a professional wrestler:

If you’re a plumber and you get fired from your plumbing place, you can go in the yellow pages and find all these people that employ plumbers, and if not here, then you can move to the town next over, the town next over everywhere. Everywhere you go there’s the opportunity for jobs. With wrestling, like,

WWE has 50 people on TV, and maybe 50, 60, 100 in developmental. TNA's got a handful, they got 50 guys. ROH has got 30 guys. So we're all competing for these few spots. And where the real money is, there's less of those spots. The top guys in WWE, there are like a dozen real spots of guys that are really making a lot of money, and competing for that, it's like, fuck.

While most participants in this study aim to have full time jobs and make money with WWE, they are also realistic about their chances of this ever happening, and recognize the need to work independently in the United States and even overseas in order to earn a living. As Sam notes, "There are guys out there that say they want to get into wrestling because they want to go to WWE and that's it. Well, the chances of that happening are slim to none." Trevor, who makes a full time living in wrestling and recently purchased a house, admits that while he makes a living working on independent shows, he earns most of his income from what he describes as, "doing like, major league type stuff, like going to New Japan and things like that." Lucy, who has supported herself solely through wrestling since graduating university, earns her income through working both independent shows in the United States and tours of Japan. She states, "It's not the best money in the world, but with the work I've been given and the work in Japan, I've been able to financially support myself and live comfortably without being in debt."

Many wrestlers describe the experience of trying to make a living full time in professional wrestling as a hustle. Sam explains, "It's a constant hustle... it's kind of hard when you're making 2-300 bucks a weekend, where you're just hustling to get that, and that's good." Especially for those who earn the bulk of their income by working on independent shows, most wrestlers manage their own careers, and must 'hustle' to ensure that they have enough bookings in order to earn sufficient income to support themselves. Trevor describes his hustle in the wrestling business, comparing how he manages his own wrestling career to athletes in other sports:

It really weighs on you to have to hustle in order to make sure you're career is in order. It makes you kind of envious of other professional athletes that have other people market for them, and field and make phone calls for them. People don't realize how much work goes into literally every single member of every single team in every pro sport, like how much work goes into each individual person, cause we're all doing it ourselves.

A number of participants explain that in order to acquire bookings for shows on a regular basis on the independent scene, a wrestler must have connections with other wrestlers and promoters, and networking is the primary way that wrestlers acquire bookings and earn money. As Richard explains, "It's more about in wrestling who you know than how good you may be, just making connections and then doing the most with the time you're given." Likewise, when discussing opportunities to find work in wrestling, Julian notes that, "It's a lot of right place, right time, knowing the right people and fitting the mold for the opportunity that becomes available. It's very much a crap-shoot."

Thus, independent wrestlers are constantly hustling to secure bookings on a regular basis. Furthermore, those who hope to earn extra money will also work in different areas of the wrestling business. This may include training wrestlers at schools, making appearances at conventions, or making and selling merchandise. Randall, in addition to working on independent shows, earns extra income by training wrestlers at his school. He describes his job as a trainer as a way to, "give back to the sport and industry... but at the same time compensate me making a living in the sport that I love." Some participants are very forthright when talking about the money that can be made selling merchandise. Sam sheds some light on how he goes about his hustle on the independent scene, "You can make money a lot of different ways. If there's a show where I'll come in and do it very cheap, I'll do it for like \$100 or \$50, but I'll make \$400 or \$500 selling merchandise, because I'm a worker." Similarly, Cory explains, "There are guys who are merchandise machines, like Colt Cabana ... Colt is a maniac when it

comes to saving money, making money... I don't want to talk his business, but he's doing well for himself."

Although some independent wrestlers hustle very hard and gain enough opportunities to earn a decent income solely through wrestling, most must take a job outside of wrestling in order to support themselves financially. While only two of the professional wrestlers interviewed for this study held jobs outside of the wrestling business at the time of their interviews, the remaining ones held other types of employment, in addition to being wrestlers, at some point in their careers. Three of the participants had actually recently lost their second job prior to their interviews. Jamie notes, "I just lost my job two weeks ago. I decided that I'm going to go ahead and do wrestling full time... it's possible to be wrestling full time, but the odds are you have to have a background in something." Ray, who has another job outside of wrestling, explains:

I don't really tell a lot of people... but I'll let you know that I do have a real job. Some guys don't though. I think they're crazy... even if I made enough money wrestling I'd still be working a real job, because you never know what might happen in a situation where you can't wrestle. I always worry. I try to still live my dream, but at the same time be realistic about things.

### **Deaths in the Wrestling Industry**

As noted in the introductory chapter, the professional wrestling industry has been plagued by a number of its performers dying young, many before the age of 50, with several of these deaths attributed to poor health, drug use, and suicide. When asked why deaths in the professional wrestling industry had become commonplace, all of the participants highlight drug abuse as a cause in many of these deaths. Some specifically point to steroids as a main factor in the early deaths of professional wrestlers. When talking about professional wrestlers who have died, Julian notes, "Their autopsies are made public. Why would you have an enlarged heart? I

don't know, because you did steroids for 30 years? I think it's easy to see what happened there.”

Ray also feels that steroids are a major factor in these deaths, “They make your inner organs grow. Your heart is not supposed to grow. When that starts growing it doesn't stop growing and it does damage. I think that's the biggest thing.”

While steroids are seen as a main cause of untimely deaths in professional wrestling, many of the participants also observe that these deaths were most likely caused by the combination of different kinds of drugs being abused. On deaths in wrestling, Cory states, “A combination of heavy steroid use and drug use. I think that's the cocktail that does enlarge the heart and puts wear and tear on it... if you're only doing steroids or only doing drugs you're probably okay.” Julian explains that workers in the wrestling industry are more likely to abuse several drugs in order to self medicate and adjust to life in wrestling industry:

When you're in an industry that doesn't afford you health care, you got to cope and self medicate and make it to the next town because you're afraid to miss a match because the guy that's behind you is going to take your spot, and you're more apt to jump into a bottle of pills to make that happen. I think there are only so many miles you can do taking shots every day, or every other day, and taking pills all night long and mixing alcohol and anything else you want to. I think it's really easy to see how that becomes a cocktail for death, and it doesn't take a long period of time either.

Randall also points to self-medication as a potential cause of death in the wrestling industry. In discussing the death of wrestler Brian Pillman in 1997, he observes:

He broke his foot like me, and he had pills prescribed and he had to take them because that was the only way he was able to make a living because that's what he did. But, in order to not feel pain, to do what he had to do, he felt like that's what he had to do because if you didn't work you didn't get paid back then. And if you can't get paid, you're up creek without a paddle.

In addition to self medication, participants also note that a number of the wrestlers who died at a young age during the 1980s and 1990s were likely abusing drugs through partying heavily when touring in the wrestling business. Sam notes, “You're a star. People want to take

you out. They want you to party with them and drink and hang out and have a good time. People get into that lifestyle, but you can only live that lifestyle for so long.” Julian also brings up the partying lifestyle of some wrestlers during the 1980s. Having spent some time working with Ric Flair, who was NWA champion for most of the 1980s, Julian says, “Just to listen to some of his stories and things he had gone through, whether embellished or not, I can’t imagine making seven figures and blowing a large portion of that money on cocaine and alcohol. It’s ridiculous.” Sam and Lucy both note that some wrestlers may seek drugs in order to feel highs similar to highs that one would feel when performing. According to Sam, “A lot of these guys have addictive personalities. Wrestling is like a drug in itself. If you fall in love with this it doesn’t mean you can’t fall in love with something else.”

While drug abuse may have been commonplace for wrestlers during the 1980s and 1990s, most participants indicate that current lifestyles of wrestlers tend to be significantly different from lifestyles during that era. Indeed, many point out that heavy partying is not all that common for today’s wrestlers. During his interview, Julian recounts stories that were passed on to him from veteran wrestlers who lived through the 1980s and 1990s, but he struggles to name any of his contemporaries who he would identify as partiers:

You’ve got now a younger generation of guys who are more concerned with getting on Facebook after their match than they are looking for the bar... I’m really struggling to even think of an example of a guy today that you see out there who’s a partier. I don’t think there are any, and I think that’s good.

Cory, on the topic of partying and drug use in today’s wrestling industry, explains:

It’s not the rock and roll lifestyle it once was in the 80s, and even the 90s, I guess from what you hear. Even when I started, drugs were a little more popular than they are now. I was talking to Daniel when he was in town, and he was telling me just how boring the road is there in the WWE. Everybody’s got their iPads now, because the Wellness Policy, that’s legit. Guys get suspended from that now. Nobody’s taking drugs. People aren’t really partying almost at all. You’d be more apt to find a cooler with grilled chicken in it than a cooler



of beer in the locker rooms these days. That being said, it's still a fraternity. There's still some crazy, crazy guys, not necessarily big drug users like there used to be or anything like that.

According to a few of the participants, overwhelming amounts of stress in their lives may be the real cause of early death for some wrestlers. Sam, who both wrestles and promotes his own wrestling company, explains that wrestlers balance a variety of types of stress in their lives, including the stress they place on their bodies, the stress of constant travel, and the stress of trying to balance their personal and family lives. He states, "Wrestling is a stressful job. Right now in the US, the number one occupation for suicide is a police officer. You would think that's not like my job. It's a stressful job, wrestling is no different." Jamie also describes the difficulties that wrestlers may have in balancing the physical stress of wrestling with the stress of travelling in addition to trying to manage their family life:

You got those guys that are on the road constantly. They pop pain pills to cope with their day to day pain, in their backs and arms and wherever their pain may be, and on top of that some guys don't sleep, and you mix that with sleeping pills. Some guys are depressed because wrestling can mess up your family and your relationships. Some guys drink. And you mix all this stuff, and what do you get? You get, you know, you get another dead wrestler, which I hate to see, but sometimes it's just how it is. It can be tough.

Trevor compares the stress faced by professional wrestlers to that of athletes in legitimate sports and of musicians:

We have so much physical stress on top of the mental stress, and the creative stress of what we do. Both of these worlds are completely separate. Athletes have several months at a time where they can just be at home and be a normal person... the only place where I've ever seen where they're together is pro wrestling. They of course have their fair share of long nights and lavish lifestyles and things like that, but those two worlds are detached. The only place where they're together is pro wrestling. I mean you see a lot of musicians die, probably much earlier than they should have. They last maybe a little bit longer, they might not see their health problems arise until they're 50, then they're like, 'Maybe I shouldn't have done all that shit when I was 20.' But, I think it speeds it up for wrestlers being under such physical stress. I think it's

just a kind of a thing that the world in general just isn't educated with the type of things we do to ourselves.

When discussing wrestlers who were lost to drug overdoses, suicide, and mental stress, Lucy explains:

I feel like a majority of these people that die young, it's either overdose or suicide. And I think overdose is self explanatory. Suicide is revolving back to what I was saying about coming down on that high of being at your peak, being at your best and everybody knowing your name and you're a quote unquote has-been, sometimes that can really be too much on somebody, or especially if they're influenced by drugs. I know a lot of people in wrestling have a lot of mental issues as well, myself included. All of us are kind of messed up in the head. That combination on its own is not really a good one.

Indeed, certain types of stress – whether it be creative pressure, physical stress, stress from travel, or the stress of managing one's work and family life – may lead wrestlers to engage in drug use in order to cope. However, while the participants in this study acknowledge the pressures that wrestlers encounter throughout their careers, some were adamant that engaging in behaviours such as drug use or in other activities that may be harmful to one's long-term health is ultimately a personal choice. As Richard states, "It's not pro wrestling's fault that somebody decided to use sleeping pills to go to sleep, and then use cocaine to wake up. That was someone's personal choice." Trevor, who has been wrestling since the age of 14 and has worked around the world in wrestling locker rooms for US promotions and for promotions in Mexico, Japan, Europe, also believes that engaging in physically destructive behaviour outside of wrestling, such as heavy drug use, is a personal choice. He explains:

When I was first starting in New Japan, this is the same time that I took a year and went and lived in Mexico as well, around this time I was 18 or so, and being and going from a local wrestler, then overnight becoming a mainstream star wrestler in Japan and Mexico with these guys that have been around since the 80s and stuff, immediately I was kind of mindful, but nervous, about that transition. Am I going to be around all this stuff that's been killing people? And I'm around a lot of these guys that have lived through that, and you can see that it was much different. They tell you how things used to be, and how

things used to go on, and you'd still see it. I still lived through a lot of it, but it's much less and guys are much more concerned now than they used to be. I think now when you see guys die young, like you see someone overdoses or something like that, I think now, maybe not 20 years ago, but definitely now, it's a case that they would have done that no matter what they were doing with their life. 15 years ago, people that were dying prematurely, definitely a case of them being irresponsible and because they were a wrestler. Nowadays, I think that everybody is careful enough to the point that we're no crazier than normal people, I think that people that suffer now, they would have suffered if they were an accountant, or whatever the hell they're doing.

Along the same lines, in talking about how today's wrestlers are trying to manage their behaviours in comparison with the wrestlers of the past few decades, Jamie explains:

You still have that one group of guys that look at the past and say, 'We need to be like that. Wrestling still needs to be like that.' Like, no! A lot of those guys hated their lives. They went through all that so we wouldn't have to. You know? Like, we shouldn't do that. Then you have those guys that are from the past that teach these new guys their past ways, and that's how these new guys think, 'Okay, that's how it's supposed to be because it's 'old school.'" Okay, if that's how you think, then I'm sorry. That's just how it is, and the business is rough, man. It is rough.

## **Conclusion**

This study clearly shows that the professional wrestling industry is very dynamic, and the participants share an understanding of various aspects of the industry, particularly pertaining to the issues that affect their work and health. Most participants fell in love with wrestling as children, and aspired to become a wrestler in their teens. All participants spoke about the importance for aspiring wrestlers to receive proper training at a reputable school, which typically refers to a school where notable wrestlers have trained and have gone on to have successful careers. Participants view those who start their own shows without a background in wrestling and who wrestle without proper training as a problem for wrestlers hoping to gain experience working on the independent scene.

The constant travel associated with working as a professional wrestler can be mentally and physically exhausting, but can also create stronger bonds amongst wrestlers who tour together, as well as provide them with an opportunity to visit places that they otherwise would not. Participants note that every wrestler is inevitably injured at some point in their career, and that they become accustomed to living with pain day-to-day. It is also evident that wrestlers feel a certain pressure to work while injured, as they do not want to miss work opportunities or lose their spots. In addition, they feel an obligation to perform for their fans in spite of injuries. While some participants are hesitant to work hardcore style matches due to the high physical risk involved, they nonetheless feel that this style has its place in wrestling, particularly when it serves as a way to better tell a story to an audience. All participants are aware of the new research being conducted on head injuries, and they are more concerned than ever before with protecting their head and limiting the number of concussions suffered.

While maintaining a certain physical appearance is still important in wrestling, the participants are largely of the opinion that the message underlying WWE's Wellness Program is trickling down to the independent scene, and, as a result, wrestlers are becoming less apt to use steroids to enhance their physiques. Still, a few participants question the legitimacy of the wellness policy, and claim that more privileged wrestlers get away with using performance enhancing drugs. It is also evident that the wrestling business is highly competitive, and that wrestlers are very individualistic by nature. For this reason, the wrestling business is very political, has never been unionised, and is not likely to become unionised in the future.

Participants have different expectations about their longevity in wrestling, with some stating that they plan to stay in wrestling until they can no longer physically wrestle, and others devising an exit strategy, hoping to pursue other work. All participants note that there are a limited number of jobs for wrestlers in today's industry, with most having to take jobs outside of the industry until they have the opportunity to earn more money. All were quite adamant that WWE is the only real place in the United States where a wrestler can earn a full time living. Finally, participants agree that the high number of deaths during the past fifteen years in the wrestling industry has influenced the industry as a whole, and that while there is still a party scene for wrestlers and many are still taking risks in the ring, wrestlers are more likely nowadays to take better care of themselves and refrain from excessive drug abuse, steroid use, and shots to the head in order to protect their health and long-term future.

## CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

### Discussion of Findings

Overall, it is apparent that all participants in this study are very passionate about the wrestling business, and express a genuine love for the sport. These individuals wrestle not only as a means of making a living, but more importantly because of their desire to perform, dedicating nearly every aspect of their lives to the sport. That being said, every participant is forthright in explaining that there are not many full-time jobs in wrestling, and that hoping to make a full-time living as a wrestler can be very stressful, given the physically and mentally demanding nature of the work. While only a few participants currently hold other jobs outside of the wrestling business in order to supplement their income, it should be noted that nearly all have held more than one job at some point while wrestling in order to earn enough money to be able to survive while pursuing their goals in the wrestling business. Moreover, a few of the participants currently earn their living by working a combination of jobs in the wrestling business; for example, wrestling in addition to taking on duties such as promoting, training wrestlers, and selling merchandise. Still, most participants are aware that wrestlers cannot wrestle for their entire life, and must transition into other types of work in order to support themselves. For instance, Julian, age 35, is already making efforts to establish himself in work outside of wrestling to support his family in the future.

The findings indicate that the high number of deaths in the wrestling industry that have been publicized in the mainstream media has influenced the behaviours of the performers who are currently active in the wrestling industry. Participants note that wrestlers in today's industry are becoming more health conscious, and are less likely to partake in lifestyles that revolve around partying and heavy drug use, having taken note of the number of wrestlers who adopted

such lifestyles during the 1980s and 1990s and died soon afterwards. Participants are also aware of the role that head injuries played in the Benoit tragedy of 2007. It would seem that more wrestlers today are aware of the long-term damage that blows to the head can cause, which has resulted in wrestlers becoming more concerned with how their actions in the ring will influence their overall quality of life. Participants also note that wrestlers are becoming more health conscious in terms of learning modern dieting techniques and training. For example, many practice activities such as yoga in order to increase flexibility and improve safety when working in the ring.

It is also important to note the trickle down effect that WWE has over the professional wrestling industry as whole. This influence is evident when examining various aspects of work in wrestling on the independent scene. Most participants note that they are less likely to regularly work a 'hardcore' wrestling style, as WWE is not interested in signing hardcore wrestlers. Similarly, participants are of the opinion that there have been significantly fewer wrestlers using performance-enhancing drugs, such as steroids, on the independent scene within the past few years due to a desire to one-day work for WWE, which has adopted a wellness policy prohibiting the use of such drugs by performers. Cory, in his interview, expresses a 'What's the point?' attitude towards steroid use in order to attain a muscular body because WWE currently screens performers for such drug use before signing them. Participants also note that there is somewhat less pressure for wrestlers to look like bodybuilders in order to become successful, explaining that more of those working for WWE now look like athletes rather than bodybuilders. Still, wrestling remains a very cosmetic sport, and wrestlers feel pressure to be in the best shape possible, as being in shape is a part of 'looking like a wrestler,' and adds a sense of legitimacy and authenticity to their performance. Thus, while wrestlers

nowadays may be comfortable with looking more like an athlete than a body builder, a focus on muscularity still exists within professional wrestling, as observed by Souillere (2006). Pressure to achieve and maintain an impressive physique is an added stress for individuals hoping to earn a living in wrestling, as they are always striving to look their absolute physical best. As Sam discusses, wrestlers feel a pressure to 'look the part' of a wrestler. Furthermore, according to the literature, professional wrestling, and more specifically WWE, through its story telling and showcasing of muscular bodies, promotes certain societal attitudes concerning gender and masculine dominance (Souillere 2006; Souillere and Blair 2006). Hence, in professional wrestling, muscularity is tied to masculinity, and the idea of what a wrestler should look like is synonymous with what a man should look like.

Although the heavy amount of travelling involved with work in professional wrestling allows wrestlers to see the world while building friendships with those with whom they work, it seems that travel is one of the more stressful experiences for professional wrestlers. Participants note that on the independent scene, wrestlers often travel with many people packed into one vehicle, driving for considerably long hours for little pay. This experience can be very stressful, both mentally and physically. Wrestlers find it mentally stressful to drive for many consecutive hours, be away from home and family life for a long period of time, and receive little remuneration for doing so. Additionally, wrestlers find it physically stressful to drive for many hours to a show while crammed into a car with other wrestlers, have to wrestle, and then have to cram into a vehicle again and drive another several hours to another performance.

The lifestyle of a travelling professional wrestler may be better suited to an individual with no or minimal familial commitments than one with a family to care for, as the constant need to be away from home for work can add much stress and make it more difficult to achieve



a work-life balance. As noted in the literature, people involved in precarious forms of work are less likely to engage in long-term planning activities, such as starting a family or buying a house (Glavin 2013; Lewchuk et al. 2013). Only one participant in this study has a young family, and future studies looking into work and wrestling would benefit from having a sample consisting of more wrestlers with families in order to examine how these wrestlers balance their family life with their wrestling life. Wrestlers may be able to build friendship networks with other wrestlers while working and travelling, but having to shift from workplace to workplace and constantly establish new working relationships makes it more difficult to establish support networks, especially given the competitive nature of the work resulting in increased stress.

The findings also indicate that much of the mental stress suffered by wrestlers stems from the precarious nature of the work. As noted in Chapter II, Scott-Marshall (2009) associates precarious work with instability, lack of protection, insecurity, and social and economic vulnerability. Professional wrestling is certainly a job that lacks protection for workers, with no union and no benefits at any level of the business. Furthermore, most professional wrestlers must hustle to find new work opportunities in order to support themselves. According to the literature, precarious workers are always seeking new work as they are highly aware of their lack of job security, and must constantly reestablish relationships in new workplaces in attempts to try to find continued work (Roderick 2006; Smith 2009; Turner 1969). Independent wrestlers especially are always looking for their next bookings and next means of making money, as most wrestlers are paid only on nightly guarantees. As with the case of the precarious work of soccer players noted by Roderick (2006), professional wrestlers will take bookings and work even when injured, for there are very few places to work and earn a living in wrestling. In addition,

professional wrestlers tend to have a ‘don’t work, don’t eat’ mentality when it comes to finding and maintaining work in the wrestling business.

The findings of this study also support the demand-control model of work related stress. According to this model, those who experience high levels of stress in their job tend to face high demands with limited opportunities for decision making and low levels of support from supervisors and colleagues, whereas those who experience less job stress tend to have more control over their work in addition decision making capabilities (Krahn et al. 2007; Sparks et al. 2001). Participants note that much of the stress in their work is derived from situations over which they have little control, such as the necessity of travelling long distances, workplace and industry politics, managing physical pain, lack of access to medical insurance, and having to balance other jobs with wrestling. Aspects of wrestling that the participants seem to find most rewarding usually offer them more control, such as the creative freedom of wrestling and interacting with fans. These findings support Glavin’s (2013) analysis that workers find a strong sense of mastery and self-worth in areas of their work where they have a significant amount of personal control.

Professional wrestlers fall under the category of contract workers. Such workers are less likely to become unionized, are more likely to face irregular income, and have a higher fear of not being paid than workers in more secure employment relationships (Lewchuk et al. 2013; Jackson 2010). Professional wrestlers in North America have never had a union presence. Nearly all the participants are of the opinion that a union for professional wrestling will never exist largely because professional wrestlers are distrustful of one another and are individually minded in a business sense. With a limited number of job opportunities, making a full time living in wrestling is difficult, and creates a high level of competition amongst wrestlers. The

findings of my study also indicate that promoters would not be in favour of any sort of unionization within the industry. During several interviews, participants describe independent wrestling promoters as poor business people, with Lucy in particular describing some promoters as ‘shady people’. Sam notes in his interview that wrestling promoters do not want to be regulated or held accountable by any sort of governing body. Moreover, Julian explains in his interview that most independent wrestling promotions simply cannot afford to operate while providing its wrestlers with certain benefits that a union may demand, such as health insurance. While there is no doubt that it would be quite difficult for wrestlers to band together at all levels of wrestling in the United States and form an industry union – similar to an actors’ union such as the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) or ACTRA – it might be possible to form a union more similar to the bodies of players’ associations in the NHL and NFL, with the possibility of WWE wrestlers having their own wrestlers’ association. As Cory mentions in his interview, a union for WWE wrestlers would hypothetically be possible if its top stars took the lead in organizing a union, which would result in many benefits for workers. Thus, while a union for all wrestlers may be a grand undertaking, forming a union at least for those who work for WWE may be more manageable, especially with the aid of its top stars threatening to leave the company if their demands are not met. Still, given the high level of internal competition within WWE, and the scarce number of jobs within the wrestling industry as a whole, a union for WWE wrestlers will most likely never come to fruition.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

As mentioned in Chapter IV, finding participants for this study was a difficult process, resulting in a relatively small sample size. Future studies on work and health in professional

wrestling would benefit from a larger sample size in order to be able to find consistencies and contradictions, and perhaps uncover new themes and issues that have not yet been explored. Furthermore, only one woman participated in this study, which made it impossible to develop an understanding of women's reality in the wrestling industry. Future studies would benefit from the experiences and insights of women wrestlers, as this would provide a more holistic understanding of gender differences and relations in the wrestling business, an industry where women have traditionally been marginalized. Moreover, issues of race and ethnicity are not examined in this study and were not discussed by the participants. The sample for this study consists predominantly of white men, with only two participants that could be considered visible minorities. It would be worthwhile for future studies of professional wrestling, and combat sports in general, to consider the experience of minorities in these sports, as this would better reflect the industry and allow for an analysis of race and ethnicity.

Chapter III briefly mentions the role that cable television played in helping WWE broadcast its programs on a national basis, thereby allowing WWE to establish a national and future global dominance over the professional wrestling industry. Professional wrestling, just like other entertainment industries, is dynamic, and the structure of the industry itself changes as new technologies are introduced. Thus, it would also be worthwhile for future studies to examine the role played by new technology and new media in transforming the work of professional wrestlers. For instance, getting in contact with the caliber of participants that I was able to interview for this study would not have been possible if not for social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter. Therefore, it would certainly be worthwhile to examine how a relatively new technology, such as social media, and a more recent means of making money in wrestling, such as broadcasting wrestling events through the Internet, impact the work

experiences of wrestlers as well as other aspects of the industry as a whole that affect wrestlers' work and health.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the data gathered from the participants in this study show that performers in today's professional wrestling industry are becoming increasingly aware of physical and mental health issues and strive to improve various aspects of health and safety in their work. It is also evident that professional wrestling is a highly precarious form of work, with a limited number of spots for workers, which results in a highly competitive employment environment. Professional wrestlers on the independent scene are always seeking work, having to constantly establish new workplace relationships in hopes to find a more secure spot somewhere in the future. Moreover, WWE holds a virtual monopoly over the entire industry, and its influence is seen at all levels of the wrestling business.

Today's professional wrestlers acknowledge the risks that are commonly associated with their sport, and are making greater efforts to ensure safety in their work, as well as maintain good health in the long term. These efforts include physically toning down in-ring styles to a safer and more manageable level, finding means of maintaining physiques without steroid use, and choosing other means of coping with physical pain aside from the use of painkillers. The actions of industry leader WWE with regard to issues of health for its workers, such as its wellness policy and insisting that wrestlers work a safer in-ring style, have also influenced the behaviours of wrestlers on the independent scene as they aim to one day wrestle for WWE. Only time will tell if these actions can be sustained over the next several years, and if the current younger generation of professional wrestlers will go on to live comfortably into old age.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Acronyms**

ACTRA – Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists

AWA – American Wrestling Association

AJPW – All Japan Pro Wrestling

CZW – Combat Zone Wrestling

ECW – Extreme Championship Wrestling (formerly Eastern Championship Wrestling)

GLOW – Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling

IWC – Internet Wrestling Community

NFL- National Football League

NHL – National Hockey League

NFLPA – National Football League Players Association

NHLPA – National Hockey League Players Association

NJPW – New Japan Pro Wrestling

NWA – National Wrestling Alliance

SAG – Screen Actors Guild

PWG – Pro Wrestling Guerilla

ROH – Ring of Honor

WCCW – World Class Championship Wrestling

WCW – World Championship Wrestling

WWE – World Wrestling Entertainment

WWF – World Wrestling Federation (now WWE)

WWWF – World Wide Wrestling Federation (now WWE)

## APPENDIX B

### Consent Form



#### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

##### Wellness, Wrestling & Employment – A Qualitative Study of Work and Health in Professional Wrestling

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Joseph Fargiorgio, under the supervision of Dr. Vivian Shalla, from the Sociology and Anthropology Department at the University of Guelph. The results of this study will contribute to a final Master's thesis and will be published in the near future.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact:

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#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the knowledge of those who work in the professional wrestling industry and their experiences with physical and mental health issues. I am interested in how you describe your work in the wrestling industry and what you identify as risks to your physical and mental health. I am also interested in how you deal with health issues and how you feel about how the industry deals with health issues. Finally, I am interested in what changes you would like to see in the wrestling industry and what advice you would give to those looking to make a career in the professional wrestling industry.

#### PROCEDURES

**If you volunteer to participate in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:**

You will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview. You will be discussing your experiences in areas of health, work, and professional wrestling. The interview should take approximately 1 hour of your time. The interview will be audio taped only for research purposes, will not be made publically available and will be held in private. If you would like to receive a transcribed copy of your interview, you may request it within four weeks of your interview date. The transcript will be send to you electronically and you will have two weeks to discuss any revisions with myself (Joseph Fargiorgio). You have the ability to make omissions, additions, or corrections to your information in order to ensure accuracy. You also have a time period up to six weeks following your interview date to remove yourself completely from the research project without reason.

After the study is completed, the results will be provided to you in the form of a one-to-two page summary. Also, the final thesis will be provided to you upon request.

#### POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

During the interview process, some people may experience discomfort in discussing personal physical and mental health issues. If this is the case, a break from the interview may be provided or you may choose to skip to another question. Also, all of your information will remain private and confidential. You also have the option to remove yourself from the research entirely at within six weeks without a reason.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

By participating in this interview, you will be sharing your knowledge with the social science community and furthering academic research into professional wrestling and other sport and entertainment practices. There is a current lack of research in the academic realm concerning issues of health in professional wrestling, and your experiences of being involved in the professional wrestling industry will help to increase awareness of issues of health in professional wrestling.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

All information gathered from all participants will remain private and confidential in this research study. Information from the interview, including verbatim quotes, might be included in written reports, publications, or conference papers. In all such cases, real names will not be used; each participant will be given a pseudonym. In addition, any identifying information will be modified to protect the identity of participants. All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed, and then recorded to a USB key with a password lock that is to be held by the primary researcher. Any printed documents that relate to your direct participation in this project will be held by myself (Joseph Fargiorgio), may be shared with my advisor (Vivian Shalla), but will always be held in a safe and secured manner and will be locked with key in a filing cabinet at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. All other data collected during the interview processes that may relate to your direct participation and that is stored electronically will be encrypted onto a USB key with password and permanently deleted following this study's completion. Any written documentation will be filed and locked in a filing cabinet with key and will be shredded and disposed of following this study's completion.

### **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw without consequences of any kind up to six weeks following your participation in this study. You may exercise the option of removing, omitting, or adding to your data from your interview up to four weeks following your participation in this study in order to ensure accuracy. You will have two weeks following this request to discuss any changes with myself. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise that warrant doing so.

### **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

You may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:

Director, Research Ethics  
University of Guelph  
437 University Centre  
Guelph, ON N1G 2W1

Telephone: (519) 824-4120, ext. 56606  
E-mail: sauld@uoguelph.ca  
Fax: (519) 821-5236



**CONSENT**

Please check the appropriate boxes below to indicate your consent to participate, followed by your signature:

	YES	NO
I have read and understand the above information and I agree to participate in this study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I give the researcher permission to audiotape my interview.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would like to receive a transcript of my interview.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please list an e-mail address that can be used in order to send the results of this study and your transcript:

You will be given four weeks to request transcript and two weeks to request changes. Any communications regarding any changes to your transcript will be conducted via e-mail.

**SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT**

I have read the information provided for the study "Wellness, Wrestling & Employment – A Qualitative Study of Work and Health in Professional Wrestling" as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**SIGNATURE OF WITNESS**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Witness (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Guide

#### Wellness, Wrestling & Employment – A Qualitative Study of Work and Health in Professional Wrestling

#### Interview Schedule

During this interview, I would like to converse with you about your experiences in the professional wrestling industry and any experiences that you have encountered regarding physical and mental health. Feel free to share your experiences however you wish.

#### Opening Grand Tour Question

Let's begin: [press play on audio recorder]: "It's [date] and I am sitting in [place] with [participant]. We are going to talk about her/his experiences in professional wrestling. [Participant], where would you like to start?"

[Probe] Perhaps we could start with your experience breaking into the business.

[Probe] What motivated you to become a pro wrestler?

#### The Work of a Professional Wrestler

How would you describe the job of a pro wrestler to someone who has never seen the sport?

How would you describe the culture of pro wrestling?

Would you say that the culture is different today than it was 5, 10, or 20 years ago?

[probe] What do you think the future of wrestling is going to look like?

What would you describe as the most challenging part about being a pro wrestler today?

What would you say are the most enjoyable aspects of your work?

What would you say are the least enjoyable aspects of your work?

What would you say makes a successful pro wrestler?

#### Health

How important do you feel it is to have a good physique in wrestling today?

[Probe] Do you, or do a lot of wrestlers feel pressure to have a good physique today more so than was the case during the 80s or 90s in wrestling?

What are your experiences with injuries?

How have you coped with the injuries?

[Probe] You mentioned [x]. Could you elaborate on that?

[Probe] How has your style of wrestling developed in relation to being mindful of injuries?

[Probe] What would you say to someone that works a high-risk style of wrestling?

How much pressure exists in the industry for wrestlers to work while injured?

[Probe] How did you manage to wrestle through your injury?

[Probe] How did you manage to cope with the pain?

[Probe] What's your opinion on wrestlers that use drugs to cope with pain or injuries?

What would you describe as risks to your health in your profession?

[Probe] What would you say is the biggest risk?

[Probe] How would you go about managing such risks?

Could you speak about the mental aspects of the wrestling business?

[Probe] What would you say are the major stresses in your job?

[Probe] How do you cope with such stresses?

[Probe] Could you speak about any political aspects of the wrestling business?

Why do you think that we've seen so many wrestlers die before age 50?

How do you think that wrestlers today are dealing with this?

How long do you see yourself wrestling for?

[Probe] Do you see yourself doing something else after retiring from wrestling?

## **Policy**

What are your opinions of the Wellness Policy in WWE?

[Probe] What are some key issues that you see with the policy?

[Probe] How would you improve the policy?

[Probe] How would you feel about other wrestling groups adopting similar policies?

Would you be in favour of a union for pro wrestling?

[Probe] Would having a union make a difference on issues related to injury and health?

[Probe] Why do you think that we haven't seen a union in wrestling yet?

What changes would you like to see within the wrestling industry as a whole?

[Probe] How do you think these changes could be made possible?

[Probe] What changes do you see as most practical?

What advice would you give to anyone looking to break into professional wrestling?

Is there anything that else you would like to speak about?