

## How Do You Learn to Fall Off a 20-Foot Ladder?

### Exploring Hardcore Professional Wrestling as One of the Last Keepers of Kayfabe

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Existing in the fringes of a world that exists arguably already on the fringes of popular culture, hardcore professional wrestling occupies a controversial space. While some propound it as an extension of the art form of professional wrestling, its critics argue it is a form of mindless violence and not what professional wrestling is meant to be. Regardless of opinion on its practice, hardcore professional wrestling presents a product where the line between performance and reality is razor (if you will excuse the pun) thin. Such a presentation calls into question the difference between reality and performance. It is a contemporary rarity in the world of professional wrestling where kayfabe has diminished elsewhere. In this essay, we interact with prior works of scholars that explore kayfabe, those who have given thought to the world of hardcore professional wrestling, and we also present multiple examples of hardcore professional wrestling to articulate it as one of the last spaces where elements of bygone kayfabe remain in the ethos of modern professional wrestling.

#### **Exploring Kayfabe and Hardcore Professional Wrestling**

Kayfabe in professional wrestling has been the subject of several inquiries. The notion of kayfabe as being an illusion, more specifically presented as the “illusion of realness” (Smith 54) or “the illusion of authenticity” (Pratt 140), brings about particular interest when conceptualizing the role that hardcore professional wrestling has in maintaining kayfabe. When imagining these two definitions one may reflect upon moments in professional wrestling that evoke audience reactions that allow for the suspension of disbelief and genuine investment in what is happening before them. We as consumers of professional wrestling can reflect upon storylines, characters, matches, promos, and moments where we bought into the illusion of professional wrestling. Arguably, those experiences have

dwindled over time, as the professional wrestling consumer has become “smarter” to the product and developed a greater understanding of the behind-the-scenes workings of the sport (Wrenn). The reasoning for the reduction in these moments of “buy-in” has been a shift in the professional wrestling industry’s presentation. In a foregone era, the heel who garnered the jeers of an audience disappeared into the night to resume his life as a family man (Barthes). The heel of the contemporary, however, whose everyday “normal” life is seen through social media, is known by consumers to not be a genuine villain (Olson). While impact of more knowledgeable consumers on the production of professional wrestling has opened doors to interactions that were not previously possible, it has also presented a dilemma in which the maintenance of kayfabe has become debatably moot due to the consumer knowing that professional wrestling is a work.

Hardcore professional wrestling offers grey area to this dilemma in that the element of constant danger and violence may leave consumers wondering if what is unfolding before them will end as according to plan. Hardcore professional wrestling presents consumers with a constant presentation of over-the-top violent themes filled with blood and brutality (Chow and Laine). Hardcore wrestling’s appeal may come from the same source of the uneasiness that it produces in consumers due to unfamiliarity with anything like it. Professional wrestling fans know that body slams and punches are a part of professional wrestling, but who said anything about tables, ladders, and light tubes? Hardcore wrestling leaves consumers questioning how and why something may go wrong in a match and gets “real.” The popularization of hardcore wrestling itself has been presented as the byproduct of consumers of professional wrestling watching hardcore matches that happened elsewhere in the world beyond the familiarity of fans (Laine). The consumption of hardcore wrestling and its history over the last forty years will be explored in the next section of this essay as a means for presenting hardcore wrestling as being one of the few remaining preservers of the “realness” (Smith 54) and “authenticity” (Pratt 140) of kayfabe in contemporary professional wrestling.

### **Hardcore Wrestling and the Captivated Consumer**

Commonly the origins of hardcore wrestling can be traced to the Memphis territory in 1979. It was during this time when in Tupelo, Mississippi that Jerry “The King” Lawler, Bill Dundee, Larry Latham, and Wayne Farris had a tag team match that saw the wrestlers leave the ring and brawl at the concession stand within the Tupelo Sports Arena (Lee). Even during an era when kayfabe was still the cornerstone for professional wrestling, the now famed Tupelo Concession Stand Brawl was like nothing that professional wrestling audiences had ever seen before. The match generated headlines in the mainstream and drew the interest of many. Fans had never seen professional wrestlers engaged in what appeared to be such chaos before, and it presented an element of uncertainty as to what

exactly was going on. The success of this match would see other iterations of the match take place over the next few years within the territory.

One participant of a later iteration of the Tupelo Concession Stand Brawl would, fittingly, introduce many consumers to hardcore wrestling a decade and a half later. Atsushi Onita participated in a Tupelo Concession Stand Brawl match in 1981 along with Masa Fuchi, Eddie Gilbert, and Ricky Morton while on excursion to the United States from All Japan Pro Wrestling. In the 1990s when creating his promotion Frontier Martial-Arts Wrestling (FMW), Onita recalled how the hardcore brawling style of professional wrestling in Memphis had captivated consumers. Having this knowledge, Onita would take hardcore professional wrestling to the next level in FMW and would revolutionize its standing within the sport by piquing both the curiosity and the captivation of consumers globally. FMW pushed the conventional boundaries of professional wrestling through having matches with stipulations such as the “exploding ring deathmatch” in which rings were armed with pyrotechnics designed to detonate during and at the conclusion of matches. The unbelievable scene that these matches created, coupled with Onita’s ability to captivate the emotions of his audiences by his own display of emotion, produced a professional wrestling product that would become a global curiosity. FMW’s popularity would spread from Japan to North America and Europe through VHS tapes that captivated consumers of “traditional” professional wrestling. One of the most captivating FMW matches took place between Onita and his longtime mentor and friend Terry Funk in 1993. Funk and Onita wrestled in a match where the ring was surrounded by barbed wire and explosives that were set to detonate when a countdown timer expired. As Funk laid motionless with the clock approaching zero, Onita covered up Funk in a desperate effort to shield his friend from the explosion. This moment remains reflected upon within professional wrestling as a compelling display of emotion and reality intertwined within the performance. Audiences of the match were emotionally moved by the display of selfless desperation by Onita to save a friend, and amidst the bloody brutality of the match, there was a sense of humanity that resonated with consumers.

The intrigue FMW generated among U.S. consumers has been identified anecdotally as the impetus for the emergence of Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) in the 1990s, which further pushed the commonly accepted connotations of what professional wrestling “was” to consumers. ECW’s presentation of hardcore matches in the mid-1990s, along with a gritty motif, was representative of a counterculture to the comic book style presentation of the former World Wrestling Federation (WWF) and World Championship Wrestling (WCW) of the era. ECW offered viewers an alternative professional wrestling experience that differed thematically than its counterparts. Hardcore wrestling in ECW pushed the envelope on what was part of the presentation and what was reality, leaving consumers with a questioned sense of what exactly they

were witnessing. In an era when professional wrestling consumers were becoming increasingly more aware of the sport's production, ECW pulled back the curtain a bit by presenting a production that the consumer, in some cases, could not decipher as fact or fiction. ECW wrestlers were not the clichéd gimmicks of their WWF and WCW counterparts; instead they were creations more vested in the "illusion of realness" (Smith 54) and "the illusion of authenticity" (Pratt 140) than anything many consumers had been familiar with.

Its mainstream contemporaries noted the reactions that ECW generated with consumers when WWF and WCW both began presenting hardcore matches and more "reality" based products in the latter half of the 1990s. Both saw the use of ladders, chairs, tables, and a variety of other unconventional objects find their way into and outside of their squared circles. These items' use presented again that element of unfamiliarity and danger to a consumer group who thought that they were now in on the secret of the show. Most wrestling fans knew by the late 1990s that wrestlers' finishing moves that looked devastating were done so in a cooperative way to not cause any actual harm, but as Jim Ross famously said: "How do you learn to fall off of a 20-foot ladder?" Not knowing what was going to happen next in many of these high-risk matches captivated audiences and created resounding memories within the Attitude Era that are still talked about today. Hardcore wrestling brought back a sense of kayfabe curiosity that was nearing absence from the sport in the late 1990s.

Modern hardcore wrestling has evolved and continued to push the envelope in its presentation just as traditional professional wrestling and the movesets of today have. World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) has centered entire pay-per-view events on hardcore match stipulations such as Hell in a Cell, Tables, Ladders & Chairs, Extreme Rules, and Elimination Chamber. One of All Elite Wrestling (AEW)'s most anticipated pay-per-views came in the form of a show that was main evented with an "exploding barbed wire deathmatch" between Kenny Omega and Jon Moxley, as well as a highly rated cable television deathmatch between Chris Jericho and Nick Gage. On the modern independent professional wrestling scene, companies such as Game Changer Wrestling (GCW) have seen a tremendous rise in popularity with at their core several storylines that have culminated in deathmatches and generated intense emotional reaction from consumers both in attendance and on the Internet. These examples are all demonstrative of producers of professional wrestling displaying an understanding that hardcore and deathmatch professional wrestling, while controversial to some, is a generator of consumer intrigue and investment. Such investment and intrigue are arguably centered on the curiosity of these match stipulations, and an uncertainty of what their outcomes are.

## Conclusion

Hardcore professional wrestling over the last forty-plus years has gone from the aforementioned fringe of an already fringe product, to a consistent element of professional wrestling's mainstream. This rise in popularity has come with both captivation and controversy over its place within professional wrestling. Whether in support or opposition of its practice, hardcore wrestling has continuously cemented its ability to spark the emotions of its audiences one way or the other. Even as professional wrestlers who work hardcore and deathmatch style matches are trained to prevent actual harm to the best of their abilities, audiences of these matches see only the ultraviolent happenings in front of them. This in turn creates an uncertainty in viewers as to whether or not there will be a safe outcome for performers. This thread of uncertainty positions hardcore professional wrestling as one of the last maintainers of a "kayfabe reality" in the sport.

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