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Fighting for Connection: Empathy, Cooperation, and Crowd Work in Scottish Professional Wrestling

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Action, Drama, Characters The deep-rooted popularity of professional wrestling in Scotland is somewhat elusive, yet among its vibrant fanbase and practitioners, the uniquely identified theatrical sport-performance is as much a hobby as it is a lifestyle. This article compares two sides of the professional wrestling experience, from a ringside seat at a show in Perth, to the passionate environment fostered in a training school in Glenrothes. Between conceptions of reality and unreality as it pertains to the common attribution of 'fake' to professional wrestling, this article additionally dives into the emotional requirements of participation, from the wrestlers and fans alike, of 'selling' a display of violence through inherently empathetic vulnerability.

To open vulnerably, I will admit that with the opportunity to conduct my own fieldwork came significant anxiety. As the mouthpiece for whoever I would end up speaking with, I wanted to ensure that I did not misrepresent their thoughts, opinions, and realities. Such worries drew my mind to one of the most commonly misrepresented, yet most passionately followed social factions in Scotland; the 'indie' professional wrestling community. Based on the responses I received when trying to explain my project to those not familiar, the words 'professional wrestling' conjure imagery of big, scary people "[acting] out a fight in front of paying spectators" (Smith 2006: 54). If such visions seem familiar, I aim to facilitate a greater understanding of the combination of passion, creativity, and physical ability that relies on the core tenants of cooperation and crucially, mutual empathy, to 'sell' its grand

displays of action.

My journey began with a research trip down an online rabbit hole. Within ten minutes, I had found six independent, or 'indie' promotions with exceedingly varied visual presentations and promised levels of legitimate violence. From advertisements tagged with 'family friendly' to event posters featuring superhero movie-esque ensemble casts of wrestlers, I found it a challenge, albeit an amusing one, to narrow down my ethnography to a manageable field. Based on personal time and distance constraints, I decided to attend a show from local promotion Fair City Wrestling (FCW), set to be hosted in Perth on the 28th of March, two weeks after the start of my research. Those weeks passed, and after a chain of bus connections, I was in the field for the first time.

I arrived at the venue, the Tulloch Institute Club, thirty minutes before the start of the show. All indicators reminded me that I was on an proverbial island; in the corner of a town I was unfamiliar with, at the end of a line filled mostly by parents and their large numbers of loudly excited children. Much of the line held or wore pieces of wrestling merchandise, of which I had none, and chatted about the results of the previous FCW show in town the month prior, which I had not been to. I blame any early separation between myself and the thriving wrestling fan culture in front of me on the new ethnographer's tendency to stick themselves to a wall like a security camera, which I certainly suffered from in the early goings of both of my days of study. Still, as we funneled into the main room, the vibrant atmosphere, in color, temperature, and facial expressions, stoked my enthusiasm. If I was purely an ethnographer when I arrived, then by the time I was directed to my front row ringside seat, spinning floor lights, fog machine smoke, and the anticipatory giggles of kids behind me made me only half-so. I was at a professional wrestling show, and thus, from then on, I had a role to play as a fan.

Following a brief welcome speech from the show's announcer, Stevie Wizard, the show began with a three-person match, amusingly called a triple-threat, for one of the promotion's top prizes: the FCW Women's Championship. The match lasted roughly ten minutes, featuring sequences where two of the wrestlers would "lock up," grabbing each other by the head and arms in a power struggle, then evenly trade offensive moves, such as strikes, slams, and submissions (Chow 2014: 73). They continued until one gained an advantage, at which point they would be interrupted by the third wrestler, who would insert herself into the action and start a new one-on-one confrontation. The progression of sequences took advantage of the moral alignment of the characters in the match, with two of the wrestlers, including the current Women's Champion, Brodie Adler, being presented as protagonists, called "babyface[s]" in wrestling terminology, and one, Ellie Armstrong, as an antagonist, or "heel" (Kerrick 1980: 144).

The split allowed for comprehensible storytelling through the exchange of "heat," or who had the advantage at any given point, which prompts both positive and negative crowd reaction (Kerrick 1980: 145). If a babyface (or 'face,' for short) was on top, the crowd would cheer them on, and just when the face would almost win, the heel would stop them, changing the flow of the story. When the two faces fought, the crowd wanted to see who was best, and when the heel would cut in, they wanted to see them get their commupance. This cycle repeated a number of times until all of the wrestlers began complex, three-way sequences, timing their signature offensive and defensive moves with

each other until the underdog babyface, Eden, managed to pin the heel's shoulders to the ring mat for a referee's count of three to win the Championship for herself. Evidently, triple-threat matches do not require for the current champion to personally lose in order to lose the match, something established in the pre-match welcome speech.

I would later learn the story I saw was a clear example of the basic match template, with built-in sections to establish good-bad dynamics, work out who has the advantage, how they could possibly win, and then eventually build to a 'finish,' where the strengths and weaknesses of each character all come to a head to result in a conclusion. Some version of this formula formed the basis of each of the following five matches on the show; the babyface and heel would start the match fairly even, then after some villanous tactic, the heel would gain 'heat' by 'working over' the face, deliberately and ardently using targeted offense, often on a specific body part so the audience could track the agony the face experienced. They would beat them around the ring, poke them in the eyes, and choke them up against the ropes; the face's expression would be racked with pain as they screamed out to the audience, who would in turn scream their support back, as well as their opposition to the heel's dastardly antics. The same children I witnessed smiling cheerfully outside the club before the show heckled the heels mercilessly, likely held back only by the fear of using curse words in front of their parents. My favorite in the moment was a particularly creative stinger thrown at a tall heel with notable body hair and bald head, who a child sitting directly behind me accused of being a "baby orangutan."

"To speak of movement as a way of knowing implies that the way people move is as much a clue to who they are as the way they speak"

(Vara 2024).

It was partway through match number five, a fast-paced, hard-hitting affair for the FCW Junior Heavyweight Title that I noticed my objective eye beginning to slip. Coming in, I had intended to immerse myself in the environment, taking intermittent notes on my phone when I noticed something anthropologically interesting. I kept to this schedule early, but as the show proceeded, instead of writing much down, I instead shrugged away my instinct to remain an academically inclined fly-on-the-wall in favor of letting the show in front of me sink its impression into my memory. I tracked the moves, not to categorize them as displays of symbolism or something equally insightful, but instead as in the same way the crowd around me was: as an engaged fan of professional wrestling. I joined in on cheers when a wrestler lept from the highest ring ropes onto their opponent, or when a face sprung into action after minutes of being 'worked over' by the heels. I was swept away, somewhat, by the fervour of the action. Every punch, kick, grab, and throw communicated a story engaging enough to make me reconsider the reason I was there in the first place.

One of the most remarkable aspects of professional wrestling as a live medium is a concept adapted from its carnival roots called kayfabe. Kayfabe, as I would later be told by prolific Scottish indie wrestler Daisy Jenkins, is the word given to label the live fiction of pro-wrestling; a way to

"keep the integrity of the business to yourself."

The sporting competition which frames the narratives told in a wrestling ring is a 'work,' meaning the outcomes of the matches are predetermined. However, the performers

involved and the promoters running the show decide the actions, physical or otherwise, taken to perform those narratives, sometimes before a show begins, and in the case of the wrestlers, often on the fly during a match. I knew about the existence of kayfabe beforehand, but exactly how heavily it influenced the room took me by surprise.

There was a tangible ebb and flow at play at all times, whether a match was ongoing or not. Due to the unending fiction of the kayfabe, every time a wrestler would perform a move, or yell out a taunt to their opponent, the audience would respond in kind, with a cheer, boo, or taunt of their own. The heel wrestlers would often take visible note of the response their actions would prompt, and prod back in a manner informed by their character. During a one-on-one, or 'singles' match involving the aforementioned "baby orangutan," the insulted heel responded to the heckling by kicking the babyface in the ribs, then leaning out of the ring and braggin to the heckler about how "nasty" it looked. The babyface would use the same tactics, with facial expressions and body language being their main tools to 'sell' their pain, telling the internal story of the match entirely through physicality. Celia Vara describes the logic of using movement to describe facets of one's personality in her ethnography on kinaesthetic empathy, with the quote supplied at the beginning of this section being an especially pertinent way of phrasing it (2024). While more traditional forms of character-building and storytelling are still at play, in the on-site context of a show, the way the performers move does a majority of the job enlivening the story.

"From the outset it was clear that, to have any chance of escaping from the preconstructed object of collective mythology...[I] must instead grasp boxing through its least known and least spectacular side: the drab and obsessive routine of the gym workout" (Wacquant 2004: 6)

To go past the extensively maintained fictional front of professional wrestling, one must, at bare minimum, be in the room while the 'workers' prepare to do their work (Kerrick 1980). Two weeks after the FCW show, I found myself at the Fife home base of Pro Wrestling Ready (PWR Pro), an indie promotion and training school. During my commute to the gym, a relatively expansive unit of a storage facility in the southeast corner of Glenrothes, I was once again struck by classic new-ethnographer anxieties. I was stepping into a world I had only seen the shiny front of, and with no intention of participating physically, the main thought on my mind was that surely, I would be out of my depth. My fears were dashed immediately, as contrary to Wacquant's forays into the "drab and obsessive" gyms of the "pugilistic world," I found the PWR Pro gym vibrant with a sense of shared purpose and enthusiasm equally reminiscient of studio art workshops and stage play rehearsals as martial arts schools (2004: 6).

My first interaction with an out-of-character professional wrestler was, not as I had been preparing for, laden with eye rolls and shrugs in reaction to some random university student poking them with questions, but instead opened with a friendly smile and handshake. The instant warmth came courtesy of 'The last of the Great British Heavyweights', Andy Roberts, the head coach at PWR Pro, who after introducing himself, asked if it was my first day of training. At first flattered anyone would consider me, visibly nervous and actively holding a pencil, a worthy candidate for pro-wrestling training, I then felt a sense of excited anticipation at the prospect of

surveying a gym full of people, who, if anything like their coach, would be effortless to engage in conversation. From my perch in the corner second nearest the door, Andy introduced me to a number of the talent who would be training that day, thus beginning a literal and figurative line of questioning.

My first instinct that I had cracked through the barrier of kayfabe was both true and false. It was true in the manner that both I and the wrestlers I was interviewing were removed from the bounds of live performance. I watched as the group, roughly 15-20 strong, with tenure ranging from nearly twenty years to just a few months, warmed up with stretches and various wrestling-specific movements, such as rolls, body bridges, and by 'running the ropes.' As they moved on to drills, mostly choreographed sequences of moves one may include when planning a full match, I took note of the extensive conversation in the line between wrestlers waiting their turn. One would give advice to another about how to properly land a 'worked' punch, then demonstrate on a third. The curtain was certainly pulled back, but only to me, in my physical presence, was able to view the full extent of it.

With each new person I spoke with, the conversation would begin the same way. We would trade names, but when I asked for permission to quote them in this ethnography, they clarified that I should use their 'ring name.' Ring names are the titles every wrestler assigns to their character, and are often based on one's family or personal connections. Ring names serve as a signature identifier, and also as an indicator of the range to which kayfabe extends. Even in an ethnography designed to gain a unique insight into the hidden world of pro-wrestling, I was given a responsibility to uphold the previously described "integrity of the business," a responsibility I will gladly keep to.

"There's no other hobby or sport that would gather this eclectic a group of people"

My first round of questioning concerning how someone on the 'inside' would describe professional wrestling to someone utterly clueless revealed awareness of a common misunderstanding. "They think it's judo," I was told by Lexi Kimbo, a dual discipline drag-queen pro-wrestler. "Wrestling's like a dance, but it hurts...there's a wrestling language.. .[things] that you don't really understand if you're not in it."

A dichotomy between 'real' and 'fake' continued to appear in further conversations in two common shades, one of genuine misattribution of activity, like how Lexi described, and one of intentional condescension. Current PWR Pro Heavyweight Champion Tommy Kartel spoke to me about the variety of people who diminish the extreme range of efforts that go into professional wrestling because of its pretedermined aspect.

"What's fake about it? I didn't imagine it.. People see it and think they can do it...you need to be able to promote yourself, eat clean, train, that's not cheap." He emphasized how just because an onlooker misidentifies pro-wrestling as a farce imitating combat sports, and not its own multifaceted discipline, that does not mean that it suddenly isn't difficult to do.

This false emphasis on the real-fake dualism became increasingly nonsensical the more time I spent in the PWR Pro gym. To conceive of professional wrestling as "participants [acting] out a fight in front of paying spectators" would ignore the reality of what I was seeing (Smith 2006: 54). As the drills got more complicated and physically demanding, the 'trial by fire'

atmosphere I unconsciously expected was instead replaced by a room of highly motivated, enthusiastic individuals wanting nothing but the best from and for the person across from them in the ring. Professional wrestling proved not to be a liar's imitation of combat, but an inherently empathetic display of extreme creativity and physical skill.

"While seemingly violent and antagonistic, pro-wrestling is actually a practice of caring for the other" (Chow 2014: 73).

While professional wrestling seemed less and less to me simply a subcategory of theater, I was assured principles of the theatrical world heavily applied to the overall presentation. A question I levied to everyone I spoke with was on the nature of wrestling as a form of acting. Current PWR Pro Women's Champion Kate Calloway described that from the perspective of a performer,

"if you think deep, you're maybe an actor, but it's all under the umbrella of pro-wrestling."

Tommy Kartel echoed this viewpoint, firmly stating "I consider myself a pro-wrestler" ahead of settling for being perceived as a combination of other adjacent disciplines. Daisy Jenkins succintly described the middle-ground pro-wrestling straddles "between sport and theater" (Smith 2006: 54): "we're re-actors...when people ask me if I have an acting method, I wouldn't know how to approach it as an actor, 'cause I'm not one."

One of the longest tenured wrestlers in the gym, 'TV's' Umar Mohammed, connected the dots between the theatricality of professional wrestling and its inherent empathetic quality. "It's still for me, theater...it still hurts, but you're pretending that it hurts...if you're getting punched in the face, how are you going to sell that move?" The selling, in a kinaesthetically empathetic way, is what gets the crowd on board with the story. Head coach Andy later stressed the point to the room in-between drills, describing "the face [as] a visual representation of the crowd...it's all about gaining sympathy from the audience."

Umar cotinued on the vein of representation: "When I'm a good guy, it comes across like, what's my beliefs?...I think there's genuinely like only two Pakistani wrestlers in all of Scotland.. .there's not a whole lot of representation there, so I've tried to incorporate that more into my character...for my cousins growing up, I want them to have someone they can look up to." In the same manner that witnessing a suffering babyface motivates the crowd to cheer for their comeback, and looking on as a heel cheats their way to victory tells the crowd to react negatively, seeing a character that reminds the exceedingly diverse audience of professional wrestling of themselves makes them, in all ways, want to care.

I closed each interview by asking if there were any subtle aspects to the business that beginners don't always understand. Almost unanimously, I was told that the most important thing for an aspiring professional wrestler to focus on was to be unapologetically themselves in the ring. Putting yourself on display so that those like you in the crowd can relate with your character, as Umar told me, is both a fantastically efficient way to draw that all-important sympathy, but also to feel comfortable in your own skin. Lexi Kimbo spoke enthusiastically about the overlapping importance of "being true to yourself...[and having] fun!" in both parts of her performance life. Additionally, I heard similar advice from a majority of the gym to build one's character around a version of your personality dialed from as one normally acts to the

extreme. Professional wrestling is a business of exchanging empathy, thus what you put into it is what you get out of it. Contributing what makes one unique into their presentation makes the performance more 'real' than anything else would.

"[Professional wrestling] is a process of mutually becoming vulnerable" (Chow 2014: 80)

I begun this ethnography with an admission of vulnerability, in keeping with the realities of the pro-wrestling business I was privy to in my fieldwork. Despite its outward air of secrecy presented by kayfabe, professional wrestling relies on being able to see the vulnerabilities in the performers, and encourages the audience to reciprocate. The connection between the representational babyface and the crowd cheering them on, and the villanous heel and the chorus of boos that follow them facilitates an ouroboric emotional exchange, where everyone in the room can simply enjoy themselves playing their part in the grand display.

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