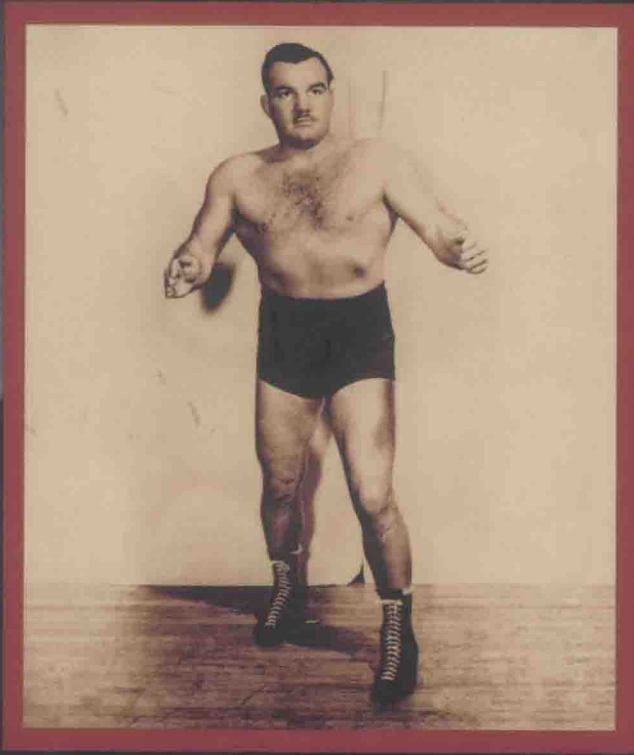


WRESTLING IN AKRON



IMAGES OF SPORTS

Dale Pierce

WRESTLING IN AKRON



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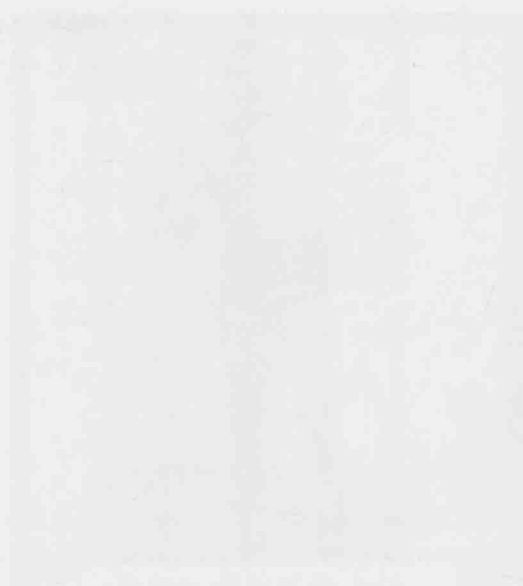
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I dedicate this project to my wife, Denise, as well as to all the warriors of the squared circle and the mat who made their mark in the Akron area.

WRESTLING IN AKRON



AKRON
WRESTLING

FRONT COVER: Don Eagle, the darling of Ohio fans, delivers a dropkick to an unidentified opponent in an Akron match. He enjoyed a spectacular professional career but could not conquer private matters outside the ring and ultimately committed suicide. (Courtesy Jason Sanderson.)

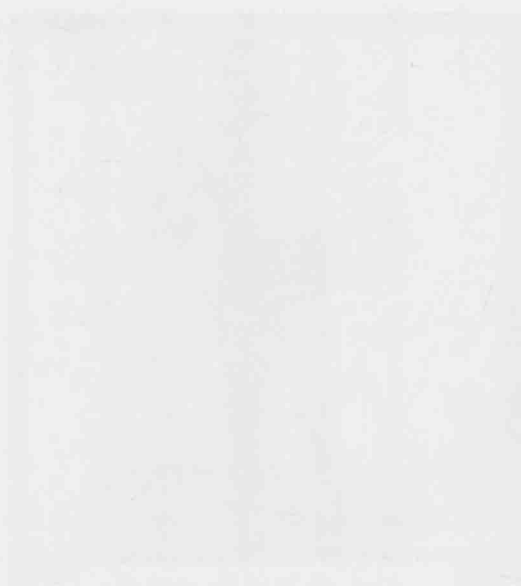
COVER BACKGROUND: "Whipper" Billy Watson of Canada used Toronto as his home base but made many trips into Ohio, both during his stint as world champion and when he was only a contender to the throne. He was a charismatic performer with a vast arsenal of moves to use against all corners. (Courtesy Jason Sanderson)

BACK COVER: Dr. Jerry Graham (far left) poses with a group of wrestlers in California late in his career, after wearing out his welcome in the Midwest. Though always a top draw in the Ohio area, Graham's personal demons were too much to handle, leading to problems both in and out of the ring. After varied "no shows" and brushes with the law, promoters started regarding him as too big of a liability, in spite of his worth at the gate. No longer able to get bookings in the East or Midwest, he headed westward for his last hurrah, as seen here.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Akron, Ohio, has a rich and colorful past. The All-American Soap Box Derby, the rubber industry, the railroading ties, and a number of now defunct amusement parks all make up a glorious history that has been covered elsewhere. What has not been dealt with too often, however, is the area's long-standing love for wrestling, both in professional and amateur forms.

From the seedy days of traveling carnivals and clandestine fights with onlookers making bets in back alleys to actions drawing thousands in major venues, wrestling was always an attraction. Maybe the people of Akron just liked or still like a good fight. Who knows? In any case, the idea of watching men and women do battle with each other has been a passion the locals have long embraced.

Traditionally, the era of the Akron Armory remains the Golden Age for wrestling historians. There were plenty of matches held before this building was completed in 1918 and, of course, lots of action after it was closed to contests in 1976. It was then torn down in 1982. After housing decades of shows and playing host to a number of greats, the arena did have one final hurrah when the wrestling movie *All the Marbles* included some scenes of the armory.

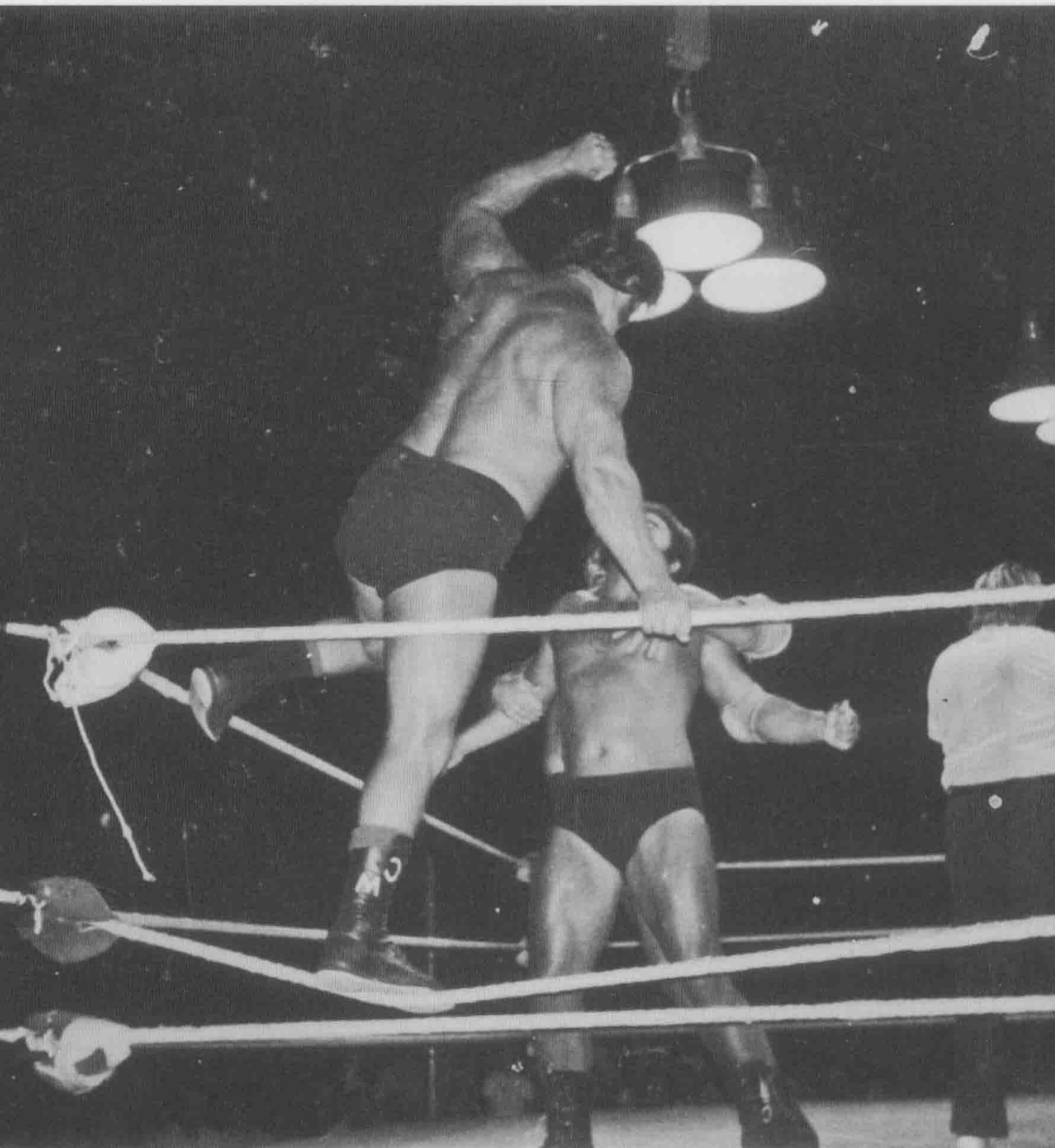
There were a few other venues holding wrestling during the armory's reign, including an Eagles lodge and some dance halls, but it was this 3,000-seat structure that became the embodiment of Akron wrestling for what seemed an eternity.

The armory died, but wrestling lived on. There were the promotional wars between the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) and World Wrestling Federation (WWF), with the latter finally winning out, only to abandon Akron as a monthly stop afterward. There was the emergence of many independent groups who came and went, while others survive to this day, running in smaller venues.

The names from the past that came to Akron reads like an honor roll for pro wrestling. Johnny Powers, Don Kent, Hans Schabel, the Sheik, Pampero Firpo, Lou Thesz, Kurt Von Hess, Marvin Mercer, Abdullah the Butcher, Buddy Rogers, Hank James, Primo Carnera, Bobo Brazil, and Dizzy Davis were just some of the notables who ventured into the area. They were the good. They were the bad. Sometimes, they were the ugly. No matter what the case or individual brand of in-ring mayhem, they always entertained.

The faces and places have changed. Greats from times gone by have been replaced by new stars. The Mighty Jebediah, Jessicka Havok, Durty the Clown, and a host of regional personalities now keep the sport alive, while an infrequent spot show done by a major cable-based promotion still swings by on occasion. In any case, pro wrestling lives on.

Aside from the pros, with their weird antics, posturing, and outlandish televised interviews, there is also the flip side for wrestling in Akron in the form of amateurs. The high schools, community colleges, and, of course, University of Akron all offer their brand of wrestling on the mat. They, too, need to be remembered.



The more things change, the more they remain the same. Professional wrestling has evolved over the decades from traveling sideshow circuits and occasional contests held irregularly in major cities, to high-gloss cable television shows seen around the globe and wrestlers catapulted to true superstar status. Yet, in spite of the evolutionary points, the general concept of good versus evil and smiling fan favorites (known in the inside jargon as “baby faces”) fighting an endless onslaught of heels, or bad guys, has been a game plan held to for ages.

THE EARLY YEARS

The earliest pro wrestling in Akron and environs came in two forms, both of which would seem shadowy by modern standards. Yet, from these dubious beginnings, the traditional style developed with bad guys fighting good in various venues.

First were the illegal fights arranged in alleys, warehouses, and railroad yards. Serbian, Croatian, and Italian immigrants who came to Akron to work the railroads or rubber factories were particularly enthusiastic for this form of combat, though the clandestine brawls attracted all ethnic groups, with bets being places on the combatants.

Likewise, traveling carnivals passing through town had their local wrestlers accepting challenges from members of the audience or, in some cases, prearranged plants, where bets were again taken on the outcome of the matchups. Suspiciously, most endings for the encounters went against the way the bets leaned, so the promoter cleaned up, then moved on to the next town before people realized they had been taken to the cleaners.

From the heart of these dubious practices emerged modern professional wrestling, and with the coming of the Akron Armory, such spectacles would find a longtime home.



Rough and tumble bare-knuckle boxer John L. Sullivan served as a prototype for loads of carnival wrestlers, back-alley prizefighters, and even pro wrestlers in the decades to follow. Though originally a hard-drinking and even harder-living man in his prime, Sullivan became a teetotaler in later years, speaking against the demons of alcohol. Many carnival wrestlers and boxers imitated not only his style, but also his image, with close cropped hair and a handlebar mustache.

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Akron was said to be in the running for a title match between Frank Gotch and Tom Jenkins in 1903, but Cleveland won out instead, as it was considered the home base for Jenkins. Jenkins, in fact, won this encounter in an upset but lost a return match to Gotch, again in Cleveland, in 1905. This was the first true attempt to bring major stars to Northern Ohio. A trend would develop with future promoters suing the draw from these shows as a learning mechanism. They developed regular venues, found sponsors for advertisements in programs (such as the one here), and built wrestling in a continual attraction.