

Mick Foley: Pro Wrestling and the Contradictions of a Contemporary American Hero

When professional wrestler Mick Foley won the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE, formerly WWF) World Heavyweight Title on *Monday Night RAW* at the end of 1998, he became a heroic character in the realm of pro wrestling, then at its height of popularity on cable television. Many considered Foley an unusual hero. His character blended masculine heroic qualities of tenacity, endurance, and hard work with characteristics not usually seen in the American hero: a need for communal acceptance, a desire for intellectual growth, and an unattractive aesthetic, with Foley's missing teeth, severed ear, unkempt hair, pear-shaped figure, and lack of the muscular definition usually expected in the wrestling hero.

Mick Foley is a paradox, as his character both embraces and defies elements of the traditional masculine hero. This redefinition of the heroic figure in wrestling, according to Dalbir Singh Sehmy (2000: 202), stems from wrestling's complex relationship among fans, promoters, the media, and Foley himself. Sammond (2005: 133-134) writes that "whether professional wrestling is progressive, transgressive, or regressive (or all these at different moments) depends on how it serves the social goals of its producers, performers, audiences, and its critics." Because of wrestling's participatory nature, allowing fans to directly influence the product, wrestling heroes may perhaps be more indicative of the paradoxes in defining masculinity and American heroism than the heroes created through many other media products. The construction of Foley as hero reveals America's changing and conflicting values regarding its traditions and its definition of masculinity.

Foley's character also illuminates the ways in which a media image can be appropriated to represent various meanings, depending on who is mediating and interpreting the text. Although the cultural producers of Foley's character—the WWE writers, other performers, and

Foley himself—may have particular meanings in mind (and these three groups seldom agree on a single meaning of an interview or match), pro wrestling texts are always polysemic, meaning that the spectacle allows “for a multiplicity of readings and uses” from its fans, as Sandvoss (2005: 123) writes. While there is no purely monosemic text (in which only one meaning and context is possible) nor is there any truly neutrosemic text (since the number of extant readings of a text could theoretically be quantified were such a thing possible), all texts exist on a polysemic spectrum between these two extremes in which readers negotiate meaning for themselves and then potentially influence each others’ readings within the fan community. Each reader has their own self-reflective version of the text based on their own experiences, and the function of fan communities is often to negotiate the meanings of these texts from the myriad personal interpretations into some shared “truth,” similar to the function of Wikipedia in finding the shared definition of a term or event. As Sandvoss (2005: 125-126) discusses, it is often not the facts that are in dispute (fans agree on the date Foley won his first world title or the number of PPV main events he has wrestled in) but rather the context, the meaning of each of these events in relation to the other and to Foley’s overall career trajectory.

Pro wrestling might seem an unlikely lens to examine American culture through, but wrestling’s roots in America trace back to Native American and European cultures. The modern theatrical version of pro wrestling began in the post-Civil War era when ex-soldiers toured with carnival troupes, putting to use the skills they learned for recreation during the war. Wrestling then formed a strong bond with television from its infancy and has thrived in local, national, and increasingly in international markets. From the 1940s until today, wrestling has retained a substantial television and live-event audience through a product that consistently changes as American culture changes. Today, pro wrestling is a billion-dollar business for the WWE, which

airs on network and cable television, and in syndication. The WWE has divided itself into three major brands: RAW, which airs live every Monday on the USA Network in the U.S.; Smackdown, which airs every Friday night on the CW Network in the U.S.; and Extreme Championship Wrestling, which airs live every Tuesday night on the Sci-Fi Channel in the U.S. According to Meltzer (2006b: 4), the average rating for RAW programming was a 3.84 in May 2006, making it one of the highest-rated shows on cable television, and ECW's numbers—after the revived brand's Summer 2006 debut—are lower but represent one of the highest-rated shows in the Sci-Fi Channel's history. Smackdown's consistent ratings on the new CW Network have kept it a staple programming on the new network's lineup, as it was one of the first shows chosen for the new network after its former home, UPN, merged with the WB in September 2006. All three shows are also distributed throughout the world, with the WWE's international popularity growing even at a time when its domestic numbers have remained fairly stagnant or even receding.

The WWE, which particularly targets young adult males, uses its television show to plug not only merchandise but also live events and pay-per-view shows, which act as the climax for ongoing storylines. Among its pay-per-views, the company's annual Wrestlemania event draws particularly well, generating around the 1 million buy mark in the past few years. According to Meltzer (2006a: 6), "the growth in numbers is more because overseas countries are getting PPVs." While the domestic audience is down to the hardcore faithfuls (and there appear to be millions of them, even at WWE's lowest ratings point), the international audience continues to expand.

Wrestling differs from most professional sports presentations in that wrestling characters are often universally scripted to be protagonists and antagonists instead of changing roles relative

to location. While the WWE makes small adaptations to each local performance (such as Mick Foley's "cheap pop" reference to the town they are competing in during his interview to garner the support of the local live audience when addressing the television audience), the show emphasizes the national. Furthermore, as the WWE increasingly markets its product internationally, the company chiefly offers the same product internationally that American fans see. International competitors generally gain a more prominent placing on cards when held in the country of their origin and the company has increased its use of non-American competitors, chiefly for the European, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Japanese markets. Otherwise, however, the company only provides as much translation of its shows as is necessary because many of the international audience members see any dilution of the "Americanness" of the product as inauthentic.

Because of the need to fill daily programming, today's mass media make the mythmaking process almost instant. With television programs and even whole networks (such as E!) dedicated solely to tracing and reaffirming the celebrity of certain public figures, the television industry becomes its own machine for producing myths. Further, networks affirm the importance of their programming by reporting on themselves, so that the events on *Survivor* or *The Amazing Race* are reported on the next morning's news, and the release of *The Facts of Life* on DVD or a *Dynasty* reunion airing on primetime is accompanied by the cast appearing on news programs throughout the week.

Heroes and myths are created in wrestling at an even more accelerated rate, especially since WWE airs a minimum of five hours of original programming each week. The annual Wrestlemania event is treated as a sacred and historic evening even as it's airing, with matches being declared classic and historic while they are in progress. Wrestlers like Bruno Sammartino,

a popular Italian-American wrestler in the Northeast in the 1960s and 1970s, have adopted nicknames like “The Living Legend.” Fishwick (1969: 3) finds that a wider variety of figures in today’s society is being nominated as heroes, and many of these heroes are increasingly compartmentalized for niches in society. This variety makes the hero both less stable and harder to define, as Browne (1983: 92) examines. Popular fictional characters, in particular, have become a focus for analyzing the modern American hero because the characters are generally communally defined and are not as easily demythologized as actual people because their lives are scripted, as Rollin (1983: 23) points out. Pro wrestling stars are particularly appropriate for this examination of fictional heroes because of the active presence of fans in the hero-making process. Wrestling fans directly influence the product through an open feedback process by performing their own acting roles at live events, the roles of ardent sports fans. Rinehart (1998: 67) posits that this aspect of wrestling makes it an avant-garde sport by allowing the spectator to influence the action. The appropriation of a wrestling hero by a vast number of “authors” explains, in part, the contention of Morton and O’Brien (1985: 141-153) contention that the wrestling hero is a complicated figure who cannot easily be generalized.

A growing body of scholarship has formed to analyze professional wrestling; however, this preliminary collection of work into wrestling’s close connection with American society, past and present, has only scratched the surface of an art form that provides an inexhaustible wealth of research material. Wrestling is a particularly apt way to study the culture of a particular time and place and an exaggerated visual text that provides many potential avenues to study the hero-making process in American culture. Pro wrestling is liminal, existing both as sport and drama, fact and fiction, all mediated through a web of complex relationships within the larger construct of the promoter, the media, the actors, and the fans. Furthermore, wrestling is a text that draws

on a variety of dramatic conventions and a unique blending of “high” and “low” culture, reflecting what Levine (1988) identifies as a contemporary questioning of distinctions between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” in American art.

Wrestling has been examined from a myriad of critical perspectives because of the rich possibilities its complicated narrative structure offers for various disciplines. Barthes (1972: 21) claims that pro wrestling is “a spectacle of excess” involving a symbolic show of suffering and justice through the hero’s struggle with the rule-breaking villain. Goffman (1974) further identifies this spectacular element of wrestling’s central narrative, the hero’s appropriation of rule-breaking to retaliate against an opponent who has broken the agreement of a fair fight between the two. Goffman (1974: 418) claims wrestling’s excitement comes through this breaking of the audience’s perceived frame of fair play in sports. I have found this theoretical viewpoint substantiated to a degree in my own ethnographic work (Ford: 2007), such as the revelation of a 74-year-old preacher at one live wrestling event I attended in Kentucky that, “subconsciously, everybody has somebody somewhere he wants to see done that way. Grandma can’t yell ‘break his arm’ out normally because we would take her to Hopkinsville (a town in the region where a mental hospital is located), but she can do it watching wrestling. We can’t do these sorts of things or act this way in our own lives, so we can watch the wrestlers do it.”

This spectacular element of wrestling relies on the instant mythmaking process of both wrestler and wrestling events referred to above. The overflow of visual iconography in wrestling matches and the visual exaggeration of transcending societal norms all play a part in developing this mythmaking process, something Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 82) refer to as “the presentation of the world as spectacle, as a set of performances” through the pervasiveness of media. Wrestling presents the visual extreme of situations and emotions that everyday life

brings us—injustice, suffering, and the insufficiency of “the system” to effectively deal with problems. Later, I will examine how Foley can exist simultaneously as a spectacular mythic figure and as an “everyman.” This is accomplished, in part, by what Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 88) call “the aestheticization of everyday life,” of which the star can become an important part. Although these emotions and images that both Barthes and Goffman find on the wrestling stage are presented in their spectacular extreme, they are overflowing visual representations of some of the most basic human emotions and situations.

Pro wrestling is unique as a cultural meeting place for various academic methods to interact, and sports entertainment has inspired a substantial body of research from a variety of disciplines. As an transmedia text, wrestling allows for various methodologies from multiple fields to complement each other in scholarly analysis. Only recently have scholars such as Jenkins (1997, 2005) more fully emphasized the value of using these multiple methodologies to examine pro wrestling. Jenkins writes about wrestling as a media construction to analyze the companies that promote wrestling, the performers who act out the roles, the fans who consume and shape the product, and the growing body of critics who analyze and appropriate wrestling for their specific arguments and methodological perspectives.

Pro wrestling, then, is a microcosm of American culture, both because it allows for interdisciplinary readings and because it is so directly influenced by its fans. Wrestler Mick Foley’s image provides the material for an effective case study of this mediation of contradictory elements in the contemporary American hero. Foley’s character exists as an example of the conflicts embodied in the modern hero, conflicts that both accept and deny aspects of the traditional masculine hero model that has been considered the template for the hero throughout the relatively short history of American culture. The ways in which Foley both accepts and

disproves these traditional assumptions provide not only an example of the complicated characters involved in pro wrestling but also the current society's struggle to define itself through its heroes after demythologizing so many long-held cultural beliefs.

Methodology

This study seeks to incorporate a close reading of both the factual history of the myth of pro wrestling character Mick Foley and his various representations over the year to help understand the evolving nature of the pro wrestling hero. However, this close reading focuses not only on the wrestling programming but also the fan community's interpretation of the Mick Foley character and the complicated processes in which wrestling texts are negotiated using the three-pronged approach suggested by Sammond (2005: 134)—by looking at the wrestling promoters and Foley himself but also the work of various scholars and the fan community at understanding the wrestling hero. By combining these various methods, I seek to gain a greater understanding at not only potential ways that Foley may represent shifts in the construction of the American hero and the qualities that constitute heroism but also the cultural process by which fan communities and cultural producers negotiate these facts. This study focuses primarily on the wrestling text but draws on observations from my ethnographic research of the fan community as well.

While my audience-based analysis looks completely at how audiences interpret and understand their performance as sports fans, even though they know that the wrestling competition is staged, this piece does not directly employ ethnographic research. Rather, my focus is to understand how fans have influenced the negotiation of Foley's star image by examining the ways in which Foley's story has shifted throughout the past two decades. My

goal is to use my own knowledge of his character's past to understand the scholarship of various theorists who have written on the American hero and particularly on the pro wrestling hero. I first present a brief trajectory of the development of Foley's character, followed by an identification of various struggles that are present throughout the character's evolution and an analysis of what these struggles of defining Foley, both within the fan community and by cultural producers themselves, indicate for the current state of American masculinity and heroism. Ultimately, my goal is to emphasize how the text of a professional wrestling character is fundamentally altered by the interpretation process in a business where fans have a weekly impact on storyline development based on their reaction in the arena and their viewing patterns at home.

The Star Image of Mick Foley

Mick Foley's character developed over the course of twenty years in pro wrestling. Following the definition provided by Ellis (1999: 539) of the star as "a performer in a particular medium whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation, and then feeds back into future performances," Foley's star image emerges out of his various fictional personas and the public dissemination of information about his private life that is incorporated into his star image. The image in wrestling is the fictional character depicted on the screen. These fictional characters are usually either heroes or villains, although they may change freely between the two extremes. Pro wrestling thrives on the relationship between these heroes and villains to build toward eventual grudge matches that fans want to see. Wrestling heroes and villains are defined chiefly through their opposition, as a villain can become a hero by engaging in a feud with one even more villainous than he or she. Similarly, a hero can become a villain by coming into conflict with a

hero more popular than he or she. In the case of a change, the star image usually only alters slightly, as wrestlers generally retain their same basic characters. The chief difference is their view of the fans, as the hero-turned-villain usually abandons his or her supporters, while the villain-turned-hero embraces the fans he or she once despised.

In pro wrestling, the wrestler is the commodity. As Birrell and Turowetz (1979: 220) point out, then, every appearance is an opportunity to sell his or her character identity. This commodification process likens wrestling to another form of public discourse, politics. For instance, as Roper (2004) analyzes, the selling of President George W. Bush's heroic persona during his "War on Terror" led to the cultivation of a protector-figure to respond to the terrorist attacks on America. Wrestling's connection to political life has often been articulated by former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura (2004), who admitted that his understanding of marketing himself as a pro wrestler greatly informed his successful campaign for the governorship in 1998.

The wrestler is a particularly appropriate figure for a study of the star image as hero because, as Powell (1993: 62) points out, wrestling often "blurs the line between truth and fiction" and creates ring identities that are hard to separate from the performer. The wrestler's character may incorporate various aspects of the actor's life. In Foley's case, his stage name is his actual name, and Foley regularly includes his family and his personal life in his on-screen persona. In her ethnography of a training school for pro wrestlers, Mazer (1998, 169-170) finds that the wrestlers themselves often do not know when they have crossed the line from actor to persona. Despite this complicated integration, Mick Foley the star is not Mick Foley the actor behind this image, although aspects of his personal life certainly feed this star image. As Rodman (1996: 101) writes about Elvis, "There's an important distinction to be made between

the real flesh-and-blood body of a given star and the mediated public persona that is all of that star that the general public is ever likely to see or know.”

Mick Foley’s star image has a narrative that wrestling fans know well. Foley began as a wrestler in the mid-1980s, as Cactus Jack from Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. Cactus Jack was labeled “hardcore” or “extreme” because of his love for brawling and the use of weapons in his wrestling matches instead of the more traditional approach of using wrestling holds and maneuvers. This persona built on an aspect of the American hero that Warren (1972: xxi) defines as an ability to withstand hardship and even defeat while eventually overcoming the odds and achieving a “victory of spirit” through a strong sense of self-reliance. By hailing from New Mexico and taking the name “Cactus Jack,” the character connoted the American West, a symbol for traditional masculinity and rugged individualism, tying into the virtues of the American hero Turner (1958: 213) identifies as “the self-made man” and “the freedom of the individual.”

Despite his early character’s villainy, Foley’s image was already developing many of the traditionally masculine attributes necessary for American heroism. He entered Ted Turner’s World Championship Wrestling (WCW) organization, and his Cactus Jack image became recognized nationally. The character competed there throughout the early 1990s, transforming from a psychotic mercenary hired by villainous characters into a sympathetic warrior embraced by fans because of his tenacity. Cactus Jack’s rise to acceptance by fans included a case of amnesia and Jack’s ear getting ripped off during a match with a rival in Germany, a real event incorporated into Foley’s mythology. Fans often read this tragic event as indicative of Foley’s superhuman toughness and his professional drive, considering that he finished the match without his ear and continued to wrestle despite his injury. For instance, according to the bio on the

Unofficial Mick Foley Homepage, “Jack then had to make a decision, reattach the ear or go back to the States for his title shot at Slamboree. Jack chose the latter, and that is why Jack only have 1/3 of his right year” (sic). When Foley left WCW, his image further evolved through participating in “death matches” in Japan that involved barbed wire, fire, and other ultra-violent forms of competition. He then competed in the Philadelphia-based cult favorite Extreme Championship Wrestling, where his image gained a following among wrestling fans, although still usually treated as a villain.

By the time Foley was signed by Vince McMahon’s WWE in 1996, his image was well known by most wrestling fans. The WWE complicated that star image by creating a new persona for Foley: Mankind. Foley came into the ring with a Hannibal Lecter style mask. His look further emphasized actor Foley’s physical weaknesses, such as his lack of toned muscular development, his pear-shaped body, and his severed ear. Mankind was depicted as a sympathetic monster, deranged because of his scarred body and possible abuse as a child and now willing to take out his frustration on other wrestlers. Contrasted with Cactus Jack’s toughness, Mankind was an easily manipulated character because of his intense desire for a father or mother figure, evidenced by his latching on to various personalities in wrestling, including the cross-dressing Goldust as both mother and father figure. At this point, Foley’s image had developed into that of an underground hero, and the growing sympathetic element of his character counteracted many of his violent actions. The significance of the name, Mankind, connotes not only his innocence but also his humanity and his primal nature.

Foley’s image made the conversion from villain to fan favorite not through a particular change in his actions but through a four-part sit-down interview on *Monday Night RAW* in mid-1997 that made the character more three-dimensional and highlighted his sympathetic longing

for acceptance. The interview included an examination of Foley's past by showing home videos from actor Foley's childhood of his pretending to be a pro wrestler. In the home videos, the young Foley demonstrated another persona, Dude Love, who used his initial rejection in heterosexual relationships to fuel a suave personality in the ring that made him a heartthrob among female fans. Both the Dude Love and Cactus Jack personas soon joined Mankind in the WWE, as all three characters fueled Foley's star image.

Foley's various personas strived to align themselves with other wrestlers, as his character continued to strive for acceptance. Vince McMahon's own star image, the evil Mr. McMahon, began taking advantage of Foley's naiveté. Foley's personas grew even more sympathetic as they attempted to fix their physical imperfections to impress McMahon. Dude Love bought false teeth, and Mankind began wrestling in dress clothes to prove he could be a "corporate champion." Nevertheless, Mr. McMahon always rebuked Foley in all his manifestations. Foley's characters always pushed a comic element, trying to cheer the ailing McMahon with sock puppet "Socko" when Vince was in the hospital, playing Twister with Vince to calm him when McMahon was being stalked by arch-enemy Steve Austin, and angrily taking back the leaf-blower he had bought McMahon for Father's Day when he thought Vince was like a father to him. Instead of rallying against Foley for being McMahon's pawn, many fans sympathized with the character and his lack of awareness of McMahon's manipulations. Thompson (1998a) wrote on his Mick Foley tribute site that "most of you will agree that Mick Foley is the hardest working man in pro wrestling. The guy has taken many of the craziest bumps in the business. Unfortunately, we may never see out hero with a major world title" (sic). This was written at a time when Foley was acting as McMahon's lackey, but fans had built up so much sympathy for Foley's various characters and so much respect for the performer that they were changing the

way the storyline would play out, so that Foley would eventually become a permanent major WWE character and even champion by the beginning of the next year. At that time, Foley's character came to the realization that Mr. McMahon was manipulating him and stood against him, leading to his winning the World Heavyweight Title from McMahon's hand-chosen champion, The Rock.

Mankind, Dude Love, Cactus Jack, and aspects of Foley's personal life have all blended into one star image, Mick Foley. This short analysis of Foley's wrestling history is not meant as an authoritative look at his career but rather an identification of the key story that has created Foley as a particularly distinct contemporary hero. Like the super hero and his alter ego in comic books, Foley's personas interrelate and form one continuous character. Robert Inchausti (1983: 71) writes that with the super hero "the multiple spheres of one's existence do not impinge on one another but achieve a kind of harmonious give-and-take." This relationship among Foley's various incarnations has defined his overall character.

The growth of this overall character, Mick Foley, reveals important aspects of the way wrestling uses its multiple narrative forms to create a hero and the way that the hero is constructed by the media, the performer, and the fans. In addition, Foley's development embodies but also challenges aspects of the traditional masculine hero in American culture. Gerzon (1982: 237) writes that "emerging masculinities are unlike the old, not only in their emphasis on diversity, but because they are not based as much on tradition as on experience." Gerzon's characteristics of the new masculinities—the companion, the mediator, the colleague, and the nurturer—both coincide and conflict with more traditional roles of masculinity—the breadwinner, the expert, the father, and the husband. These two strands are present in Foley's overall star image, as Foley is simultaneously typical and atypical. According to Oriard (1997:

394), a star such as Muhammad Ali becomes notable as a hero for his “uniqueness *and* his typicality.” The same can be said for Foley, although his character bears no close resemblance to Ali. Mick Foley is a particularly appropriate avenue to study this ambivalent renegotiation of masculinity and the hero because of wrestling’s reliance on particularly narrow definitions of masculinity to create narratives of physical struggle. Foley’s characters paradoxically renegotiate those narrow definitions by both accepting and rejecting aspects of them. His image will illuminate some of these contradictory themes in the modern hero.

Gender/Masculinity: Brains vs. Brawn

The criticism of wrestling’s narrow definition of manhood and its vilifying of any opposing views of what constitutes manliness has been covered by many critics (i.e., Lincoln 1989, Berger 1990). The critical concern about the effects of such confining representations of masculinity has been waged most broadly by Jhally and Katz (2002), who indict WWE as purveyors of damaging stereotypes and narrow codes of masculine behavior. Jhally and Katz attempt to connect wrestling’s definition of gender roles with broad social problems relating to domestic violence. Jenkins (2005: 306-307) refutes these arguments by claiming that by oversimplifying their subjects, such narrow readings of wrestling participate in the very “anti-intellectualism” for which these critics often condemn wrestling. He particularly attacks their unsubstantiated attempts to liken the ignoring of wrestling’s ill effects to the ignoring of Adolf Hitler’s rise in Germany. Wrestling has become a battleground for an argument that involves methodology (whether an examination of wrestling content can have only one possible reading), mediation (a singular writing of wrestling shows by Vince McMahon and his writing team or a communal definition of the product mediated by writers, performers, and fans), and gender roles

(wrestling as one definition of masculinity or wrestling as a battle among conflicting masculinities). While wrestling glorifies certain aspects of the traditional hero, its treatment of masculinity is more nuanced than a simplistic reading would find. For instance, Jhally and Katz, in their analysis, do not consider the context of scenes they analyze in the overall narrative or whether the person perpetrating a certain action is a hero or a villain. The contradictions in Foley's character and its affirming and denying of traditional masculine attributes are a fitting example for Jenkins' argument of a more layered reading of pro wrestling. A reading of a character such as Foley's in unambiguous terms ignores the importance of his many contradictions.

The chief struggle in Foley's masculinity is his role as both a pro wrestler and an intellectual. Foley's image challenges the long-held belief that being an American hero cannot involve intellectual achievement, the belief that the American hero emphasizes strength and practical application over analysis as emphasized by Gurko (1953: 168). The writing and lecturing success of Foley the actor was incorporated into his character through Foley's three bestselling memoirs *Have a Nice Day* (1999), *Foley is Good...and the Real World is Faker than Pro Wrestling* (2001), and *The Hardcore Diaries* (2007); his fiction novels, *Tietam Brown* (2003) and *Scooter* (2005); his three children's books; and his college lecturing tours. These aspects of his character have been heavily promoted by the WWE as a component of Foley's star image, a character who expresses a growing interest in flexing his intellectual muscles. Foley's achievements as a best-selling author and a college lecturer are now as essential to his narrative as his winning wrestling championships.

On its own, writing is not unusual for a wrestler, but Foley's character brags about his

refusing a ghostwriter to help him tell his story and his handwriting of each book before it is transferred to a typed text. Critical acclaim for Foley's writing has led to even greater respect from wrestling fans. Fans have not dismissed Foley's writing as being for "eggheads," as Warren (1972) warns will happen to the writer in American culture. Indeed, the fans admire "the eloquence of tongue and pen" of their hero, contrary to claims by Wecter (1966: 485) that such abilities are not emphasized for American heroes. The fans embrace Foley's writing, including his section of media analysis and criticism in his second memoir, *Foley is Good*. Foley, then, represents a potential shift in the possible attributes of the hero.

Still, although professing to be an intellectual and a writer, the primary vocation for the Mick Foley character is professional wrestling. No matter how his writing impacts his character, Foley's success is most obviously defined by his abilities inside the wrestling ring to persevere and to successfully compete in individual competition with other wrestlers. Wrestling is a visual drama emphasizing alternations between what Denney (1957: 133) defines as "scenes of dominance and submission." Wrestling is, in short, a dramatic representation of individualistic struggle that some read as masculine in nature. Fans often validate their viewing of pro wrestling based on the toughness these competitors must employ, not just the toughness of characters but also of the people who perform in these roles. For instance, in my ethnography of wrestling fans, I found fans citing the physical nature of the performance. One fan I interviewed at a live event noted that "wrestling takes an extreme amount of athleticism. A pro wrestler may be an actor, but it is still physical, and they are still thrown on the ground and hit with chairs. Even if it is fake, it hurts." Given the violent nature of Foley's performances, fans particularly see his willingness to sacrifice his body for his performances as an important aspect of the Foley character in addition to the "real" man.

Foley is a particularly physical competitor, generally preferring the use of weapons and fist fighting to the more athletic traditions of fast-paced exchanges of wrestling sequences or submission wrestling on the mat. Nevertheless, any simplistic reading of wrestling matches as completely “masculine” is problematic. For instance, an analysis from Pronger (1990) of the homosexual segment of the wrestling audience and their interpretation of a text whose “official” reading is heterosexual to take on homoerotic meaning challenges traditional masculine views of a wrestling match. The study by Dell (1998, 2006) of female fan club newsletters in the late 1940s and 1950s and the study by Salmon and Clerc (2005) of female wrestling fans and their use of the Internet to appropriate wrestling texts through fan fiction also challenge narrow readings of a communal text.

Class: Mythic vs. Everyman

One of the chief sources of Mick Foley’s popularity is his image’s ability to tap into what Sehmy (2000: 123) identifies as wrestling’s “central working class myth.” This myth involves an individual who uses his or her own body to battle against corporate corruption. However, both Jenkins (1997: 50-51) and Trujillo et al. (2000: 538) warn that such an analysis only examines one portion of a large audience, such as the working class, and that any generalizations of a group as diverse as pro wrestling crowds exclude multiple perspectives, as emphasized in the previous section.

Mick Foley exists in pro wrestling simultaneously as a representative of this “everyman” in American culture and as a mythical figure, a living legend. Such a contradiction is not surprising in a culture that creates heroes so quickly, a culture in which people can be considered legends when still in their primes. Because of mass communication’s speeding up of the

mythmaking process, the number of heroes has also greatly increased. Furthermore, Foley's character exists in the world of pro wrestling, where profit is directly driven by the ability to create heroes that the public is willing to pay to see. He must simultaneously exist as a representative of the everyday person and a mythological figure that is larger than life. Pro wrestling has produced a form of entertainment most apt to liken its athletes to mythic heroes, as wrestlers are often compared to the immortals and take on mythological names, from Hercules to Adonis to "The American Dream," tapping into broader ideas of the mythological heroic figure as written about by Raglan (1956) and Campbell (2003). Iconic moments in Foley's in-ring career become mythical images that gain meaning outside the context of the specific event: Foley and a partner being put in a dumpster and rolled off the entrance ramp; Foley's falling off a twenty-foot cage and later having a tooth knocked out onto his moustache in one match; Foley flying through a flaming table during his 2006 comeback match. These violent images become mythic icons in the overall image of Mick Foley. Yet this iconography can simultaneously represent the everyday in the same way that tourist photographs capture the spectacular while also transforming them into commodities, as Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 80) point out.

However, Foley is positioned as a representative of wrestling fans as well. He uses his unconventional appearance to represent this "everyman," a term borrowed from Inskip (2000) to describe Foley. Mick Foley's bodily scars embody what Fiske (1987: 247) describes as the grotesque in wrestling. Foley becomes a hero despite his "grotesque" physical nature because of his intense love of wrestling that fans identify with and his ease at displaying his innermost thoughts and feelings. That emotion is established through Foley's rhetoric, such as this statement in response to announcer Jim Ross's assertion that Foley's persona Mankind enjoys pain:

Is it when I can't get up when my little boy says, "Daddy, I wanna play ball!" and I can't do it? Is that when the fun starts? Is it when a doctor injects a 20-inch needle into the discs of my spine so I can wrestle one more day? Whoopee! Let the party begin. (*Mick Foley*).

This display of emotion and frustration is key to the audience's identification with Foley as a spokesman for their concerns. Foley has constantly been held down, and fans often feel some degree of catharsis in identifying with his character and finding that, no matter how many times he is injured or beaten, that he returns to fight another day, such as the sentiment from the 74-year-old preacher I mentioned above. Foley's positioning, then, as a representative of the fans and also as a mythical figure for the fans to admire, captures one of the key contradictions of the pro wrestling figure, and Foley in particular, as hero, and also captures the aestheticization of everyday life discussed by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 85) that allows Foley to be both myth and representative of the common man at the same time.

The wrestling fans were instrumental in Foley's rise to the top of the wrestling world, supporting him despite what some might consider a less-than-generous push by the wrestling narrative at some points. The night Foley won the title on *Monday Night RAW*, announcer Tony Schivone of the rival WCW program gave the results of the taped match away on the live *Nitro*, revealing that Foley would win the title. "That will put butts in seats," he said. Figuratively speaking, it did, for, after Schivone's announcement, several hundred thousand viewers tuned in to *RAW* to watch Foley, giving the WWE the ratings win for the night (*The Monday Night War*). Fans made Foley their hero because they both identified with and were inspired by his character. As Warren (1972, xiv) writes, "if the hero is the embodiment of our ideals [. . .] then to analyze him is likely to mean, in the end, an analysis of [. . .] ourselves." Foley is as representative of

his audience as wrestler Antonino Rocca was of New York City Puerto Rican fans in the 1950s, as recorded by Wolfe (1982: 30), who asserted Rocca's rise as American hero as one of the strongest examples of a sports hero in contemporary culture. At the time when Foley was thrown off the top of the Hell in a Cell cage and had several of his teeth knocked out later in the match, fan Thompson (1998b) wrote in his commentary to fellow Foley fans that, despite the characters' being written as a villain and many other fans not supporting him, Foley needed their support. "I don't want to see Mick kill himself because the fans don't appreciate him. But maybe now they will. [. . .] Hopefully, the WWF is gonna do whatever it takes to reward Foley for his efforts." By the end of the year, Foley had become a major fan favorite and a champion, due in part to this rising fan support.

Foley's character is also greatly shaped by the wrestling promotion that writes the narrative of his performances. The WWE, a capitalistic enterprise, promotes the heroes who can gain the most appeal from the widest audience. Therefore, while American heroes may appear self-made, they are actually the construction of hero-makers, entrepreneurs looking to use the heroic image of a character for their own profit. In Foley's case, that profit is purely monetary, as the WWE directly capitalizes on Foley's popularity through tickets and merchandising sales. The narrative of Foley's achievement, despite his constant degradation by the Mr. McMahon character, is ironic considering that the establishment the fans are rallying against in the narrative is, in reality, the promoters of Foley's character. The WWE's influence in Foley's rise as hero is similar to those of authors of more traditional fictional texts, such as those of hero-maker Horatio Alger. Gardner (1964: 332) writes that Alger's own obsession with money is echoed through his stories both in the pecuniary motivation of heroes and villains and in the detailed description of monetary values. Similarly, Foley is not only a reflection of the WWE fans' desire and WWE's

creation to capitalize on that desire but also a reflection of negotiations among the varying worldviews of the multiple authors of WWE texts. This negotiation allows Foley to exist both as a myth created for wrestling fans and as an everyday hero created by wrestling fans.

Ideology: Individualism vs. Collectivism, Underdog vs. Champion

The narrative of Mick Foley's rise to stardom emphasizes his character's inherent desire for a cohesive community. Beginning with the nascent character development in WCW in which Foley worked as a hired gun, he has often attempted to bond with other figures, for example with fellow bounty hunter Abdullah the Butcher. His persona Mankind revealed his intense desire to be loved by fans, only to be continually disappointed when the fans chose more attractive or more successful wrestlers over him. Foley's character's search for approval from authority figures caused him to adopt transsexual wrestler Goldust as a mother/father figure, wrestling manager Paul Bearer as "Uncle" Paul, and, later, Vince McMahon as a father figure. On a weekly basis, Foley would try to please his boss and would even call him "Dad." He also looked up to highly individualistic wrestling characters "Stone Cold" Steve Austin and, later, The Rock as big brother figures and sought approval from them by attempting to become their partner. In both cases, Foley was eventually able to win the approval of both characters, despite their lack of desire for a partner. Foley's character's commitment to a wrestling community even led to his forming a group called "The Union" at one point, a community of wrestlers united much like a labor union against the repressive regime of Mr. McMahon's "Corporation."

Foley's need to create a community of professional wrestlers is ironic, of course, in a narrative in which individual competition is the primary focus and in which he is able to gain respect from other wrestlers only through his own achievements. Wrestling, and Foley's

character in particular, embody this contradiction. Pro wrestling is particularly apropos for an examination of the struggle between individualism and collectivism: wrestling has a troupe of characters that is involved principally in one-on-one confrontations but that is also a group of individuals who rely on each other. The WWE is simultaneously depicted as both a tight-knit community of performers and a group all in competition with one another. Many have identified the basic plot of a pro wrestling match as centering on this contradiction. Pro wrestling heroes compete as representatives of the fans and generally attempt to compete based on rules that have been communally agreed on by the wrestlers. However, the villainous wrestler almost always breaks that communal bond during the match behind the referee's back. As a hero, Foley balances his desire for community with the individualistic nature of his job.

Finally, Mick Foley represents one of the most troubling aspects of American culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in defining our own heroism: the paradox between our ideology being built on the toppling of the oppressive force of the ruling class by the underdog with our own country's becoming the major power in the world. As with the popular narrative of American history, Foley's rise to stardom involved a struggle through adversity. Traditionally, when the WWE groomed potential heroes for their champion position, the characters built their momentum through victories. Foley, in contrast, was brought into the company after losing several top-level matches in WCW. In the period between his WWE debut in March 1996 and his winning the title in December 1998, Foley had won only twelve of his twenty-eight WWE pay-per-view matches. In interviews outside the WWE narrative, even Foley questioned whether his character was eligible for hero status. Foley told Inskip (2000) that, when he found out he would be winning the championship, he tried to talk the WWE out of it. "I was like, 'What? Are you kidding? Me? I'm not a, you know, championship guy. I'm the guy who always, you

know, comes up a little bit short.” Fans bought into this underdog story for both Foley the character and Foley the performer, as many believed he would never win the championship. For instance, fan Epstein writes of Foley’s winning the world championship that “hard work paid off for Mr. Foley. Congratulations, you deserve it!”

The writers often positioned Foley as innocent, a character that Leverette (2003: 63) writes “becomes the symbol of the child in all of us.” Foley’s narrative as the underdog builds on the rich history of the underdog athlete in professional sports and mythology that Klapp (1962: 30) references. This underdog status is emphasized in the rhetoric of Inskip (2000), who says, “Foley hung on for years and developed a following. The more body parts he lost, the more fans he gained.” Inskip goes on to note that Foley, a Civil War buff, compares himself to Robert E. Lee, who was “really glorious in defeat.” Foley’s tie to Lee and the South is revealing, as Warren (1972: xxi) writes that Lee became even more of a hero through failure in the Civil War myth than if the South had won the war. Likewise, as Foley lost more matches, fans began to identify with his plight and respected his dignity in defeat. For instance, in 1998, before Foley had reached the world champion status, fans started an online rally to support Foley for the *Time* Man of the Year Award. Foley ended up getting tremendous online support, garnering more than 50 percent of the vote at one point. However, Time did not accept the fans’ recommendations in their final choices for Man of the Year, which Foley fan Epstein called “a despicable act.”

Considering Foley an underdog hero is another paradox in his narrative, however, as he is also one of the top wrestlers in the WWE. Foley’s underdog status becomes compromised by his success, just as perceptions of the United States as an underestimated nation conflicted with its rise as the major international power. One way in which American culture tends to continually

perpetuate the underdog myth is through individual stories of rising through adversity. In Foley's case, his character attempted to overcome his loss of "underdog" status by continuing to be an innocent and honest force in a corrupt system. In his return to the ring after four years away from wrestling, for instance, Foley was positioned much as Atticus Finch was in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Foley, like Finch, was a man with a great reputation who only agreed to use his abilities again when there was no other choice, as Finch uses his marksman abilities only when there is no alternative left. Foley returned to the ring only after months of heckling by young wrestler Randy Orton. He had lost a retirement match in 2000 and had taken a role as WWE Commissioner and occasional spokesperson, a role Foley (2005a) believes increased his overall character's popularity. Foley forsook the big payoff and the glamour of the lights of a return because he felt he could not go back on his promise that he would retire. Foley did not return to the ring, even after being beaten and spat upon, until he felt he had no other choice but to defend his honor and family against Orton's constant verbal assaults.

This reluctance to fight and this commitment to honesty showed great restraint on Foley's part. The writers attempted to cast Foley as an underdog in the narrative because he was a lone voice of honesty among several manipulative and opportunistic characters. Even this re-appropriation of the underdog is undermined by Foley's superior nature as a wrestling veteran. As with Atticus Finch, the fans know of Mick Foley's power and know that he can no longer be the underdog in the ring because he has already proven his superiority by winning the championship on multiple occasions. Furthermore, Foley's guise as an innocent and honest force in the dangerous world of pro wrestling is undermined by the audience's knowledge of Foley's capacity for violence. Foley's mythology is an example of what Mazer (1990: 97) describes as wrestling's ability to dramatize the most basic violent urges repressed by

socialization. Through his reputation as Cactus Jack and Mankind, Foley is perhaps the most violent wrestler to ever come through the WWE. Stone (1971: 59) posits that these contradictions are key components of all pro wrestling texts because the wrestling hero is depicted as someone who wants to overcome the uncompetitive spectacular element of a sport that is corrupting true competition but is, in reality, a part of that spectacle as well. This irony is very much at the heart of the current ambivalence regarding the depiction of the traditional masculine American hero and is particularly appropriate when using Foley as a case study.

Conclusion

Pro wrestling is an appropriate avenue for researching broader themes in American culture because wrestling allows its fans a close involvement in writing and defining the text. Through the instant feedback available in wrestling shows, fans can directly influence the pacing of a show and can rewrite its meaning. Those viewing televised wrestling can mediate its meaning through their own interpretation of wrestling's often ambiguous messages and through their viewing patterns, around which the shows are written. Promoters and performers alter their fictional characters to change the character's meaning, similar to how musicians such as Prince, Pat Boone, and David Bowie "redefine" themselves for a new generation. Meanwhile, fans alter fictional characters through their perceptions and interpretations, similar to the ways that another liminal star, Elvis Presley, has been appropriated to represent a variety of American values. As Doss (1999: 259) concludes in her study of Elvis, "Elvis, after all, is an American emblem, and debates and conflicts over who Elvis is and what he means are comparable to the debates and conflicts over what America is and what America means." Rodman (1996: 1) writes that Elvis surfaces "in ways that defy common-sense notions of how dead stars are supposed to behave,"

popping up not only in for-profit creations but in very personal ways in fans' lives—such as my editor at the *Ohio County Times-News* newspaper in Hartford, Ky., who jokingly refers to his former “Skinny Elvis” days and his current “Fat Elvis” days, in which Elvis’ personal trajectory becomes a metaphor for my editor’s own aging and physical change.

Foley’s image remains an evolving wrestling text because of his continued presence in the WWE. After a brief feud with Randy Orton in 2004, Foley signed a regular contract by the end of 2005, once again wrestling on pay-per-views and competing as a member of the RAW roster on occasion. He has wrestled as both face (hero) and heel (villain) since his return but retains a strong fan following, based not just on Foley’s character history but also on the strong verbal and physical performances of Foley the performer.

When scholars are personally invested in the area they study (and when are we not, in one way or another?), they tend to view their particular niche as singular in its importance, somehow unique when compared to other, similar phenomena. The editors of this book warned me when working on this chapter not to ensnare myself in this common academic trap. After all, almost all forms of popular culture rely on the interpretation of fans to construct any collective meaning if one does indeed exist. As Sandvoss (2005: 96, 121) writes, all fans internalize their fandom and see the object of their fandom “as part of the self” and thus fans read everything from this self-reflective lens.

With this qualification in mind, however, I would argue that pro wrestling is even more directly involved in the negotiation of meaning in its relationship with fans than many other texts because of the nature of a pro wrestling show—in its necessity for a more overt communal definition of what is happening. While a legitimate sports competition can take place without the need of an audience, pro wrestling defines itself as an exhibition which needs an audience. But,

because that audience almost unequivocally knows that the athletic performances are staged, the live audience is playing a role as well, and thus the performers in the ring need the fans to perform the role of sports fans as well in order to complete the overall spectacle. Wrestling promoters and performers constantly adjust their performances based on the performative cues of the live audience, and the nature of wrestling's weekly live events make incorporating audience feedback in the television programs and adjusting storylines based on the perceived communal audience reaction more instantaneous than in most other forms of fictional popular culture, where taping schedules are often months ahead of their airing.

Pro wrestling shows are then particularly rewarding texts in which to study the ways in which its characters and narratives reflect values and conflicts in American culture, as this case study of Foley has demonstrated. And, while these texts may not be wholly unique in this capacity, they do open themselves up to a particular polysemic reading because of the spectacular nature of wrestling's visual performances that invite readers to bring their own experiences into their interpretations of what is happening the mythic characters in the ring. Pro wrestling simultaneously manufactures mythic events on a weekly basis while also presenting myriad potential readings of characters and performances. Thus, pro wrestling shows are popular texts through which one can examine broader issues in contemporary and historic American culture and gain a better understanding of the negotiations between producer and the consumers/performers, the fans, that happen on a weekly basis.

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