

Professional Wrestling: The Ultimate Storytelling Device

Introduction

“Wrestling is a much more complicated storytelling form than people give it credit for.”
– Eric Bischoff, *Controversy Creates Cash* (1)

The two main components in professional sports are competition and emotion. The first makes a sport legitimate, while the second makes it exciting for a fan to watch and care about certain teams. Rivalries are created out of continuous play and dominance, where one team is usually the underdog that the fans are waiting to overcome the tougher opposition. Professional wrestling uses both of these components, but is in a class of its own when it comes to athletic competitions. Viewed more as a show than sport, professional wrestling integrates complex storylines to give each match a greater meaning than a mere exhibition match like one would see in boxing, for instance. To run a successful professional wrestling business, the emotion component must be significantly higher than that of other sports. Henry Jenkins III states that “as a consequence, wrestling heightens the emotional experience offered by traditional sports and directs it toward a more specific vision of the social and moral order” (2). The competition becomes predetermined in an effort to maximize the drama behind one man’s quest to a championship, for example. What many don’t realize is that the writing process and range of possibilities for storylines in wrestling is endless, just like thinking of a plot for a fictional novel presents an unlimited amount of options.

The heart of any story is some form of conflict. Without conflict, there is no story, and there is no significance behind any wrestling match, regardless of how good it is. Knowing this, there are only seven potential stories that can be written at any time, each of which highlights a different kind of conflict. This essay will look at each of the seven conflicts in more detail, and see how modern-day professional wrestling intertwines each of the seven conflicts together to put together shows that draw viewers in. The reason why this is worth a thorough analysis is that storytelling is the single most important part of making professional wrestling successful, more so than actual wrestling talent, more so than the actual matches in the ring, more so than the money flowing into a company, and more so than the production value of a company. If a match doesn’t tell a story with a good psychology, the audience won’t be engaged and the business will suffer. If a wrestler cannot communicate verbally on the microphones in interviews and promos in the ring, that wrestler

significantly hinders his or her chances to be successful. Good stories, along with good characters, are a must for this business to continue to grow.

Man vs. Machine

“That chamber is a cold, heartless structure, willing to execute all who enter it.”
- Jim Ross, promoting SummerSlam, 2003

The first conflict which we will examine is that which features man vs. machine. Although at first glance it doesn't seem evident where this type of storytelling comes into play in professional wrestling, one must look at how the physical aspects of the business have evolved over the last decade or so. With audiences becoming more and more sophisticated to the in-ring product, writers are forced to come up with creative new stipulations for the culminating matches that top off their storylines. This trend began notably in 1994, with the first-ever televised ladder match being presented at Wrestlemania X, a new violent alternative to the already well-established cage matches. A popular line that WWE fans are familiar with is announcer Jim Ross's claim of “how do you learn to fall off a fifteen foot ladder?” that is used repeatedly on WWE footage when it warns its young viewers not to attempt what the moves they see at home.

Since then, the envelope has been pushed significantly. Wrestling fans have seen hell in a cell matches, the most notable of which was Mankind's infamous match with The Undertaker at King of the Ring in 1998. These matches are notorious for being incredibly violent for featuring what Jim Ross has frequently referred to as a “demonic structure.” Simple ladder matches, which were never all that simple or painless to begin with, are presently more featured with tables and chairs in what is known as a TLC match (tables, ladders, and chairs). In 2002, Eric Bischoff as the General Manager of Raw introduced an Elimination Chamber match, an even more sadistic version of a hell in a cell match.

These kinds of matches are significant because of their use. A hell in a cell match is rare, with perhaps only one being featured yearly, if at all. When the writers decide that the story necessitates a more violent match such as a TLC match or an Elimination Chamber match, they are cluing the fans in on the fact that the storyline at hand is extremely important and that the issues between the men battling it out is significantly personal. These matches almost guarantee brutality, which increases the potential for injury, which heightens the sense of drama already at hand with the featured rivalry. What the WWE is trying to do when using these matches is tap into the emotions of their fans in order to generate more orders for their pay-per-views, where the majority of these matches are featured.

Another aspect that comes into play when using these “demonic structures,” as JR calls them, is that not only does it elevate a normal feud to a heated and bloody rivalry, but it also changes the nature of the storyline itself. During these matches, the announcers never fail to emphasize how the steel of the ladders and the cells have “no give” and feel “no pity” when a wrestler’s body is thrown into them. Therefore, a wrestler’s challenge becomes not only to overcome his opponent, but to overcome the machinery around him which can serve as a useful weapon on his behalf or a dangerous adversary in itself.

Man vs. Self

“All my life, I’ve had people like you in my ear... *Hey Eddie, those personal demons that you battled everyday, they’re too strong for you... you can’t beat them.*”

– Eddie Guerrero to Brock Lesnar, SmackDown! 2004

Internal conflict has always been a focal part of wrestling storylines. It’s these types of conflicts that result in feuds beginning, and offer explanations to audiences for why a particular character behaves the way he or she does. Depicting the man vs. self conflict usually comes hand in hand with giving justification to an audience for what are referred to as *heel* and *babyface* turns. A heel is a villain in the ring, a rule breaker who cheats to win, whereas a babyface, or face for short, is the hero of a storyline. Switching from one side to the other is common, but must be justified in the storytelling process in order to provoke an appropriate and authentic reaction from the fans. Good examples of recent usage of this classic storytelling device can be seen with characters such as Kane, Mickie James, and the Guerreros.

Eddie Guerrero in particular is a unique case that absolutely personifies the struggle between a man and himself. Outside of the wrestling ring, the second-generation international superstar was plagued by “demons” as later played up in wrestling storylines. However, the truth of the matter is that Guerrero battled and overcame drug addictions, losing his job and almost his family, to rise above the ranks in the WWE and become heavyweight champion. This is a story that sells itself and was taken from its real life context and wrapped into an intricate wrestling storyline that saw Guerrero continuing to overcome all odds in his quest to be champion.

This storyline instantly enabled Guerrero to connect with the audience, which is the most important part of bringing the story to life on TV. As Eric Bischoff says, “the real art in our business is the ability to connect with an audience and ultimately manipulate that audience’s emotions” (3). Eddie Guerrero brought that connection to life, endearing himself to fans that truly sympathized with the man behind the character and wanted to see him legitimately succeed. In a

world known to be predetermined and fueled by scripts and storylines, Guerrero tapped into a true underdog role who garnered fan support based on true events in his life. These kinds of storylines that blur the line between reality and fiction are very popular in this day and age among fans of professional wrestling, an intricacy that Eric Bischoff capitalized and exploited in the promotion he helped run, WCW (World Championship Wrestling).

Eddie Guerrero tragically passed away in November of 2005, due to heart failure from his past “demons” that finally caught up to him at the age of 38. Even with the loss of one of its premiere *SmackDown!* superstars, the WWE continued to capitalize on real life events happening outside of the ring. A storyline began later involving Eddie’s nephew Chavo Guerrero Jr., who was a midcarder on *RAW*, the flagship show for the WWE. Chavo walked out in front of the fans and swore to recapture championship gold for his late uncle, and subsequently lost the match. This prompted an in-depth internal crisis within Chavo, who could not look past his image as a failure for failing his uncle. So powerful was this crisis, that Chavo eventually “resigned” from wrestling in a very dramatic and emotional storyline that feasted off the genuine emotions stirred up once Eddie Guerrero passed.

Although Eddie’s version of internal conflict was met with a supportive and genuine emotional response from his fans, the version produced by Chavo didn’t compare to the first. The fan response generated by the latter storyline, although also based loosely on true events (in this case, the death of Eddie Guerrero and his nephew’s love and admiration for him), did not compare to the former. This trend also was evident in Eric Bischoff’s implementation of WCW, which attempted to blur the line between reality and fiction to the point where the overall effect was lost on the fans. These type of storylines, while controversial at times, are high risk and high reward – it’s very likely that the fans will be uninterested, but if they catch on, the storylines can be extremely successful and pay off in dividends.

Man vs. Supernatural

“Without death, there cannot be life. So all things must die.”
- The Undertaker to Batista, *SmackDown!* 2007

One of the most regular characters in WWE television has been The Undertaker, a wrestler who has been working for Vince McMahon since 1990. The Undertaker is considered among many fans to be a legend for his lengthy run in the company, having been involved in many memorable feuds with the likes of Shawn Michaels, “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, Mick Foley, and his younger “brother” Kane. The most memorable aspect of The Undertaker, however, is the versatility of his

character which has survived an incredible revolution in the way professional wrestling is marketed, and most importantly, written storyline wise.

The Undertaker's character is layered in mystique with a tease of supernatural forces, which brings us to the next central conflict, man vs. the supernatural. One of the key pieces to the puzzle that make Mark Calloway truly become The Undertaker is his memorable entrance. The 1999 movie *Beyond the Mat* summed it up perfectly when it said that professional wrestling is "about spectacle, not about who wins or loses" (4). Nothing defines The Undertaker these days quite as much as his dramatic entrance, one of the most detailed and chilling entrances in the modern day of the business. From the droids coming out carrying torches, to the lights dimming to an eerie blue, to the fans on their feet in their overwhelming support for his character, The Undertaker has become a classical WWE icon due to his character connection with the supernatural and the superior acting that brings that character to life.

The man vs. supernatural conflict in professional wrestling walks a very thin line in professional wrestling. Although fans are willing to suspend their disbelief in exchange for a logical storyline that plays on their emotions, anything that is too over the top in the supernatural can come across as humorous and lower the dramatic effect of the character. The Ministry which was headed by the Undertaker walked the line well, but once the faction broke up, everyone went in different directions. Gangrel, a brooding vampire figure, eventually disappeared from TV, losing his appeal when engaging in a loner fight. Edge and Christian both went on to become legendary in tag team wrestling, participating in feuds that are still talked about with the Hardy Boyz and the Dudley Boyz, all of which usually culminated in some form of ladder or TLC match. The Undertaker's character in particular not only remained intact and lived on with the fans, it thrived with them as well.

In 2000, the WWE decided to modernize The Undertaker's character and tweak what had worked for them for a decade. In order to refresh his character and avoid his storylines becoming stale, they strayed from the supernatural and turned Mark Calloway into a motorcycle-riding, bandanna-wearing "American Bad Ass" who used Kid Rock's appropriately named song as his theme song before eventually switching to "Rollin'" by Limp Bizkit. In an effort to reconnect The Undertaker with a younger, more mainstream audience, this change in The Undertaker's persona allowed him to have renewed and fresh feuds and storylines that seemed different now that he himself was different. From time to time, the WWE repackages its performers in an effort to give them a better chance to connect with the audience and make them care about their performers. The

Undertaker is an excellent example of this, and has since switched back to his more brooding demeanor, still commanding respect from opponents and fans alike. Although the man vs. supernatural conflict is not as pivotal as the man vs. self or man vs. machine conflicts already looked at, in the rare occasion that it does work (the most notable with The Undertaker, although Kane was also successful), the characters created become memorable both in storylines and in the minds of the WWE fans alike.

Man vs. God

“Allow me to introduce to you... the only tag team partner Shawn Michaels is going to have here tonight... he has many names... He’s the Holy Roller. He’s the Hipster from Heaven. He’s the Man Upstairs. From the kingdom of heaven, please welcome God.”
- Vince McMahon introducing God, Backlash, 2006

Religion and professional wrestling at first glance seem to mix as well as oil and water. However, the man vs. God conflict is not without its perfect example in the world of vivid characters and storylines that push the envelope on what is politically correct. Vince McMahon in particular has always enjoyed pushing his stories into borderline offensive limits, and very conveniently covers himself by saying that it’s all done with a sense of humor. As stated by Lowney in her essay on the ironic counterclaim on WWE’s part to their attack from the PTC, “humor gives audience members permission to interpret moral claims in a new way” (5). Religion has not escaped unscathed in the WWE, with the perfect example being as recent as 2006.

In yet another classical example of blurring reality into the edges of their storylines, Vince McMahon in late 2005 started a feud with Shawn Michaels where he consistently tried to “lure” Michaels away from his newfound Christian faith and back to his wilder and more notorious days early on with the WWE. Michaels battled out of personal problems during his hiatus from the wrestling ring that lasted approximately four years, and this provided the perfect fodder for a story that would connect the popular Michaels even better with the audience at the end of 2005.

The storyline started invoking religion much more heavily after WrestleMania 22 in April of 2006, which all truly began with a backstage segment before Vince McMahon’s match with Shawn Michaels. Vince was shown kneeling with his family as they said a prayer, which began with Vince booming out in his unique voice: “God... I don’t like you... and you don’t like me.” The live reaction of the audience was an amused one, and the WWE capitalized on this. As an aside, this is an excellent example of how the WWE is flexible in its writing process, which must be responsible for creating at least four hours of fresh and new television each week, for 52 weeks a year. The

writers and performers alike listen to the fans and adjust their storylines and actions, respectively, to draw the most emotion from their audience.

Following that night, the WWE fully integrated religion into the now heated and dramatic rivalry between Michaels and Vince. If there was any doubt that the man vs. God conflict would ever become blatant in the wrestling world, those doubts were put well to rest in 2006. Vince went out to the ring on *RAW* and began invoking humorous religious pictures with his own figure cropped into them. He went on to visit a church with his son Shane in a televised segment that saw him attempting sophomoric humor while poking fun at his own character and the church itself, blending what might have seen offensive in a protective cloud of humor and parody. He also went on to found his own religion which he dubbed McMahonism, a theme that lasted for several months. All of this was viewed with mixed reactions by fans, but nothing was more bizarre than when Vince booked a pay-per-view match where he would team with Shane to face Shawn Michaels and God. God's entrance consisted of a spotlight walking slowly down the ramp and accompanied by holy music, in what was an extremely creative use of parody and irony.

This might seem completely over-the-top and downright offensive to those outside of the wrestling community, but the bottom line is that the storytelling process in wrestling feasts off controversial storylines like this one. The entire purpose of this particular storyline was to further the crowd's hatred of Vince and heightening the anticipation for Michaels to exact revenge for Vince's mockery of his newfound faith. Done with the type of humor that laces a film such as *Dogma*, the purpose of the man vs. God conflict as exemplified by the Michaels/McMahon rivalry still remained relatively simple in its nature. That purpose was to show a morally corrupt Vince get his in the end by the virtuous hero, fan-favorite Shawn Michaels. Even God couldn't get out of that.

Man vs. Environment

"I'm serving notice to every one of the WWF superstars. I don't give a damn what they are, they are all on the list, and that is Stone Cold's list, and I'm fixing to start running through all of them."
- "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, King of the Ring, 1996

Some of the greatest stories told, particularly in sports, involve underdogs overcoming all odds to achieve the impossible. Appropriately, then, perhaps the single most popular form of storytelling done in professional wrestling invokes the conflict that places man against his environment. Garnering an immediate fan connection to a wrestler by putting him in an almost impossible situation to win, the man vs. environment conflict very rarely is unsuccessful in wrestling and is in fact one of their most used central conflicts in their storylines. Nowhere is this

shown better than in the storyline that arose between Vince McMahon and “Stone Cold” Steve Austin.

During the time this storyline was implemented, the WWE was engaged in a ratings war with WCW, which had been dominant with the acquisition of Hulk Hogan and the formation of the nWo (New World Order), a rebellious faction that was anti-authority and had no regards for the rules. The WWE was on the losing end of this war for 80+ consecutive weeks, before slowly adapting their storylines to attract an older demographic male audience. Instead of targeting children, they began targeting 18-34 year old males. This significantly changed the storyline writing process which began producing more risqué, dramatic, and all around raunchier stories in an effort to change the image of the WWE and make it more attractive for its new targeted audience. One of the storylines produced during this time period that revolutionized how stories would come to be used within a WWE context and consequently turned the tide in giving the WWE the advantage over WCW was the highly regarded and infamous McMahon/Austin feud of the late 90s.

This storyline saw the emergence of Mr. McMahon, Vince’s on-screen character. Playing a tyrannical boss to contrast Steve Austin’s “blue collar” anti-authority rebellious image, the storyline immediately took on a life of its own. Ironically, Steve Austin is the first character designed to be a heel to the fans that became a babyface. Not only was this surprising, but his level of popularity skyrocketed to the point where, according to Jim Ross, Austin netted approximately \$13 million in the span of one year in merchandising and overall revenue. As is essential for all stories, however, a good protagonist needs a better antagonist, and Vince McMahon turned out to be the perfect contrast to Steve Austin.

The reason the man vs. environment conflict works so well is because it is basically the core of what becomes a good underdog story. The WWE thrives on underdog stories, but the McMahon/Austin feud brought it to a whole new level. By taking real-life owner Vince McMahon and putting him on-screen to “screw over” Austin at every opportunity he got, the odds were stacked against Austin. Looked at through the lens of a casual fan, Austin represented the everyday working man who was had to deal with an irrational boss. Who couldn’t relate? Watching Steve Austin physically get his revenge on Vince by putting his hands on him and taking him down gave the crowds a huge thrill. They could relate with Austin’s frustrations and they could live vicariously through him. Instead of being a rebel, Austin became a hero and a focal point of the WWE during this stretch, considered by many to be the last golden era of professional wrestling.

This feud is perhaps one of the most important examples of how important the story is in the context of professional wrestling. Vince McMahon, as the owner, was extremely limited in how much he could physically engage Austin in the ring. The physical action was therefore more limited in this feud than it would normally be with two full-time wrestlers. The WWE had to get more creative in its approach to this storyline, especially with how popular it was with the fans. Eric Bischoff put it nicely when he said that his “theory was, people would pay for the quality of the story, not the talent in the story” (6). The McMahon/Austin feud also set a precedent to how future boss/employee feuds would be implemented, a good recent example being the McMahon/Michaels feud mentioned earlier. It is clear that the man vs. environment conflict thereby makes up the heart of all wrestling storylines. Even so, there are still two more options that haven’t been considered.

Man vs. Nature

“The Latinos portrayed characters who were common, humble men trying to make an honest living; support their families; and accomplish their goals and dreams.”

Race, Masculinity, and Latino Wrestlers, *Steel Chair to the Head* (7)

Wrestling stories as they are written have always played into the physical differences between two opponents, further cementing the fact that size is one of the most critical components of any professional sport. Whether it’s basketball, football, or baseball, the more height and weight a person has on his opponent, the better his odds of pulling out a win. Professional wrestling, particularly the version popularized by WWE, has always strived on using football-sized athletes. This instantly makes smaller-sized wrestlers a special minority in the business. Usually, a smaller wrestler (shorter than 5’11) becomes successful because of his exceptional wrestling talent. Two good examples are Rey Mysterio and Eddie Guerrero, both of whom overcame the stigma that they were too small by winning a world heavyweight championship apiece. The rise of Rey Mysterio in particular to the top as champion had a man vs. nature center conflict that it thrived on, which will be the focus now.

One of the biggest obstacles placed in front of Rey Mysterio’s quest to become champion in early 2006 storyline-wise was his size. Standing at 5’5 and weighing less than 200 pounds, Mysterio won over audiences by his spectacular *lucha libre* style. However, he needed more than that to become heavyweight champion and thus representative of the WWE as a whole. As has been stated, the story behind a wrestler is much more important than the actual in-ring wrestling talent this wrestler brings to the table. The WWE needed a storyline that would propel Mysterio to the next level in the hearts of the fans, and for better or worse, they found one with the passing of Mysterio’s real-life friend, Eddie Guerrero.

Dedicating matches to his friend Guerrero garnered Mysterio the support of audiences across the nation, culminating in a Triple Threat Match at WrestleMania 22 that saw Mysterio finally winning the heavyweight championship. However, a good portion of fans were not entirely convinced and accepting of Mysterio as the champion, deeming him too small to be a legitimate face to lead the company. The WWE, in an effort to solidify Rey Mysterio as a man whose heart was bigger than his size, adopted a man vs. nature conflict to carry Mysterio's storylines and help solidify him as champion in the eyes of all the fans.

The nature in question that became Mysterio's biggest adversary was his size. Being referred to by announcers as the "greatest underdog champion of all time," each of Mysterio's championship defenses seemed to be his last due to his rather large size disadvantage with any challenger that came forward. Mysterio's biggest obstacle was himself, which accentuates the man vs. nature conflict perfectly. What separates this type of conflict from the man vs. self one that fueled Eddie Guerrero's rise to the top is that the former is purely physical while the latter is mental. Rey Mysterio from the very beginning can be seen to be at a natural disadvantage, at times even fighting men over a foot taller than he was. Guerrero, as a contrast, had his personal issues and demons that plagued his mind and his life that he needed to overcome. Although Guerrero was also small in size, his man vs. self conflict dominated his run to the top as champion.

The WWE had finally found out how to make Mysterio legitimate by tapping into the simplistic man vs. nature conflict that went on to fuel his storylines during his title reign on SmackDown. However, the move backfired in many ways. By constantly putting Mysterio in as the underdog when he was in fact champion, many fans were still never sold on him as being truly deserving of his championship run. He was never seen as dominant because he had poise and heart to win his matches – he came across more as lucky to get out of matches while still holding the gold. The conflict, story, and the goal itself of cementing Mysterio as a true champion all failed in this regard, although the WWE still places significant emphasis on a man overcoming his physical limitations. However, none in the modern era of wrestling were done to the extent of Mysterio's title reign, which ironically didn't do quite what it had set out to do.

Man vs. Man

"See, your problem is that you're looking at this as a *wrestling* battle – two guys getting into the ring together to see who's the better athlete. But it goes so much deeper than that. Yes, wrestling's involved. Yes, we're going to pound each other's bodies and hurt each other really bad. But there's more at stake than just wrestling, my man. There's a morality play."

- Jake "The Snake" Roberts, Interview in WWF Magazine, *Steel Chair to the Head* (8)

This final conflict is the most basic conflict that underlies any wrestling storyline that's ever been written. However, basic does not necessarily equate to simple. For a storyline to make sense, there has to be an antagonist and a protagonist – a hero and a villain. The fans need a reason to stand behind the hero and cheer him at the shows, willing him to victory over the wrong-doings of the villain in the story. Simply putting Wrestler A and Wrestler B into a match without any background on either character or some form of reason why the match is taking place is not enough to be successful. Henry Jenkins III states that “wrestling enthusiasts have no interest in seeing a fair fight but rather hope for a satisfying restaging of the ageless struggle between the “perfect bastard” and the suffering hero” (9). There has to be a very clear and distinct reason why one wrestler wants to have a match with another, and this comes back full circle with the storyline writing process. No story means no emotion, and no emotion means indifference – perhaps the worst reaction a professional wrestler can get from the audience.

There are three main storyline reasons that are consistently referred back to when establishing a new man vs. man conflict in a wrestling context. First is the need to be the best, which in this business means carrying championship gold. If Wrestler A is heavyweight champion and Wrestler B wins a battle royal to become the new #1 contender, even if both were friends prior to the battle royal, the groundwork has instantly been laid out for a new rivalry to begin. Eventually, one man's quest for gold and the other's quest to remain at the top of the proverbial mountain clash into perhaps the most basic wrestling storyline that can be done.

Another reason that is not used as frequently but is perhaps more effective is two men battling it out over a woman. A recent example of this would be the love triangle storyline that featured Chris Jericho, Christian, and Trish Stratus starting in late 2003 that stretched well into 2004. The storyline is more complicated and involved than a simple championship feud, for in this particular case, Jericho and Christian start out as best friends while Jericho begins pursuing Trish. What made this storyline even more complicated was the role clash that existed in the beginning, since Jericho began as a heel and Trish as a babyface. Eventually, it was revealed that Jericho's pursuit was naught but a result of a bet with Christian, and their heel status is further established as the audience gets to see Trish's heart get broken. It was almost like something seen out of a daytime soap opera, further showing that professional wrestling is quite versatile in its stories.

This storyline in particular didn't end there, however. Making it even more complex, and getting deeper into the characters, it was slowly revealed that Jericho had legitimate feelings for Trish while Christian became more and more jealous that he was losing his best friend. This

naturally created tension between Christian and Jericho, which built like a crescendo until their differences had to be resolved in the ring at the biggest pay-per-view of the year, WrestleMania. The drama heightened until WrestleMania XX, where their match saw Trish betraying Jericho to side with Christian in a brilliant role reversal and the climax to the story. In one moment, Trish became the heel and Jericho became the new babyface as the fans sympathized with his betrayal at the hands of his former best friend and the woman he had been pursuing over the last few months leading to the pay-per-view. This storyline is an excellent example of the careful planning that must be in place for pay-per-view matches. By the time Jericho and Christian came out to have their one-on-one, man vs. man confrontation in the ring, the fans knew exactly why each man was in the ring and they were already emotionally engaged. It was all over a woman, Trish, a simple enough concept made more and more elaborate by all the small details used to build the story for the match. The result was a natural rivalry and transformation of all three characters, whose storyline continued for a long time with good success.

The third kind of storyline purpose behind a regular one-on-one match that doesn't involve the first two is where creativity must come out the most. If there is no championship on the line and no woman in the picture, there must be another legitimate reason for two men battling it out for months in a rivalry. There must be a personal issue, a vendetta, an injustice that must be resolved by the hero of the story. Without this, the matches themselves become meaningless and the fans will become indifferent. A great example of the WWE creating a storyline that reflects this idea is the one that featured Triple H and Shawn Michaels. Both are close friends in real life, but the story given them to enact for the fans was that Triple H was tired of consistently being in the shadow of Michaels. He wanted to prove to the world that he was the better man, and then proceeded to assault Michaels in a parking lot, beating his former best friend badly. With the history on-screen of Michaels and Triple H being close friends who founded D-Generation X, the storyline immediately resonated with fans who were also excited to see Michaels return to action after his hiatus from the ring. All of this combined at the right time and moment to create an excellent rivalry that lasted for over a year, with and without championships on the line.

Conclusion

The biggest criticism regarding professional wrestling is that the competition is not legitimate. It's not like the NBA, MLB, or NHL where championships are won based on who the better athlete is. What critics fail to understand is the purpose of professional wrestling is to be a form of entertainment. Winners are chosen not by who is necessarily the better athlete, but by who

the storyline calls to advance. The means by which matches are won fuel rivalries and keep the stories alive; the matches themselves are not the focal point, but rather devices used to advance an intricately detailed plot. It is the theoretical build of what a story should be – there is a rise in action, and then a climax scene where the conflict is resolved. The climax in wrestling is saved until pay-per-view matches, where fans pay to see whether or not the hero comes out on top in the end. Regardless of which of the seven main conflicts drives a particular storyline, if the fans care enough to tune in to see the next development of the story, then the WWE has succeeded and will continue to succeed so long as they continue engaging the fans emotionally. Other professional sport leagues will never be able to say the same, unless the infamous hockey brawls in the NHL become rigged. As they say in the business, never say never.

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