

Beyond The Mat: The “Universe” Of An Ever-Changing Industry

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It's a little after 1 a.m. on what is now Saturday, Oct. 21, the day I'm scheduled to meet Matt Allen, 20, on Staten Island for an in-person discussion on New Japan Pro-Wrestling, Japan's premier professional wrestling promotion. I message Allen on Twitter, trying to confirm the plans for the next day, but he's beginning to have second thoughts.

"All right, you may hate me, but I'm not 100% sure I can do it tomorrow," he says over direct message. "It has nothing to do with you or anything, it's me. I just don't feel comfortable meeting someone I met on Twitter."

Allen goes by the username @thcfastestman on Twitter. It is there that he, like so many other fans, find comfort and confidence in an online world full of possibilities while still maintaining a sense of privacy. While he has garnered nearly 12,000 followers on the site, he had not yet taken his online friendships to a real-life setting. To make things easier, I suggest that he bring someone along. "Bring your mom's sister's ex-husband's boss, I don't care," I say half-jokingly. He finally agrees.

I arrive at Wolfes Pond Park, located on Staten Island's South Shore, around 2 p.m. It is, for the most part, quiet, scenic and serene. I stare out at a group of teenage boys playing touch football, and behind them, a beautiful beach.

Allen shows up around 2:45. He walks over, covering his eyes from the glare of the mid-afternoon sun. He's wearing a Sonic (The Hedgehog) T-shirt and faded skinny jeans, one or two rips visible. Typical teenager.

We walk over to the beach, breaking the ice. He catches me staring out at the calm, silent water and says, “Yeah, Hurricane Sandy almost washed this whole thing up.” It’s the perfect backdrop.

I came across Allen on Twitter over the summer, while reading a thread of his tweets on New Japan Pro-Wrestling’s annual G1 Climax, a single elimination tournament to determine the best wrestler Japan has to offer. While scrolling through his account, I noted his diverse interests, from professional wrestling to Ariana Grande to Pixar movies. He is currently a junior at St. John’s University on Staten Island, majoring in communication arts.

For the next 50 minutes, we talk all things New Japan Pro-Wrestling. He shows no signs of nervousness, answering my questions with the level of maturity and precision expected of a long-time wrestling fan. His hands move in all directions, he maintains eye contact with me. His phone buzzes, he ignores it.

In today’s age of media, it is not uncommon for a fan, regardless of age, to keep up with an international wrestling product like New Japan. Streaming services like njpwworld.com allow for easy, uninterrupted access to shows halfway across the globe at any time of day or night, but that won’t stop some fans from still watching a show that might not start until 3 - 4 a.m in America live as it happens. Being a wrestling fan is a full-time job.

What IS Pro-Wrestling?

Compared to other sports, professional wrestling is in a category of its own. It is often referred to as “sports entertainment,” as it combines the theatricality of a soap opera with incredible, unbridled athleticism. Competitors, both men and women, are engrossed in predetermined storylines that are enhanced by weeks of heightened drama, which leads to the fight, or the “match” inside the 20x20 ring.

In the United States, this dramatized form of the sport was born out of amateur wrestling, also known as Olympic wrestling. This basic, ground-based form of the sport laid the groundwork for the sports entertainment form it would mold into in the early-mid 1900’s.

For what is, for all intents and purposes, a “scripted” sport, the money still comes pouring in, with no signs of slowing down. A prime example is the wrestling industry’s biggest event of the year, WWE’s “WrestleMania.” At the 34th installment of the event this past April, which was held at the Mercedes-Benz Superdome in New Orleans, Louisiana, WWE cashed in. Fans from all 50 states and 67 countries celebrated the global event, resulting in a record-breaking attendance figure of 78,133, as announced by WWE during the broadcast. The event itself, according to Forbes, generated an astounding \$14.1 million, while the city of New Orleans, according to The New York Post and Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards, took in an impressive \$175 million, up from the \$142 million that was made from WrestleMania 30 at the same venue in 2014.

According to corporate.wwe.com, the company raked in a staggering \$801 million from ticket and merchandise sales, consumerism of the WWE Network; WWE’s Netflix-like streaming

service, via subscription, and much more in 2017. Elsewhere, New Japan Pro-Wrestling continues to thrive after a critically acclaimed year, according to SportsKeeda.com, making \$34 million (when converted from yen) in 2017, up 10% from 2016. While WWE's numbers pale in comparison to that of the NFL, at about \$14 billion in 2017, \$801 million is nothing to sneeze at for what is, again, considered a scripted and, in extreme standards, "fake" sport.

WHY Pro-Wrestling?

Professional wrestling, at least for the fans isn't about the money. It's about the moments. Ray Hernandez, 23, from Iliad, New York, is a graduate student at Syracuse University, majoring in digital and broadcast journalism. Though he watched from the comfort of his own home, he effortlessly recalls watching the Kenny Omega vs Kazuchika Okada match that main-evented New Japan's biggest show of the year, "Wrestle Kingdom," in early 2017. Omega, the Canadian export who took the world by storm with lightning quick offense and exhilarating striking power, and Okada, Japan's hometown hero and arguably the most gifted athlete in the world today, tore the house down. "That match set the world on fire," said Hernandez, who has been a wrestling fan for close to 15 years. "When I sat down and watched that, I was f*cking floored. I had never seen anything like that in my entire life."

The match was the first of a trilogy between the two superstars. It featured many memorable spots, including the 6'3, 235-pound Okada hitting a back-body drop (an overhead throw that sends an opponent high into the air before landing on their back) on Omega from the ring onto a waiting wooden table on the floor outside, a fall of about 13 feet. "There are

some real classic, hard-hitting Japanese matches, but in terms of work rate, I don't think there's ever been a match like that," said Hernandez. "You talk about the pacing, the athleticism, the conditioning to be able to wrestle for 46 minutes and the story of Omega (after many, many attempts) not being able hit his finisher, the One-Winged Angel....it was just fantastic." Okada would win that battle, but the war was just beginning.

Hernandez believes that that match is what really brought New Japan out into the public consciousness, at least in America, where it was, prior to that match, largely a niche product.

More on this later.

History

The National Wrestling Alliance, or **NWA**, founded in Texas in 1948, was the first professional wrestling organization to expand its popularity outside of its region. The South was a haven for wrestling in the early days of the sport, but would have to compete with legendary wrestling promoters Roderick James "Jess" McMahon and Toots Mondt's emerging, Capital Wrestling Corporation, or **CWC**, on the East Coast, known better today as the wrestling industry's flagship product, World Wrestling Entertainment, or **WWE**.

While the NWA and other promotions marked their territory in the South, the McMahon/Mondt operation was taking over the Northeast. Beginning in the early 1960's, larger-than-life wrestlers such as Bruno Sammartino and Ivan Koloff regularly headlined the

legendary Madison Square Garden, which became the place of worship for the sport. Decades later, the wrestling business as a whole continues to thrive.

Let's face it. Even if you know nothing about professional wrestling, you have at least *heard* of the WWE. Based in Stamford, Connecticut, the company has produced globally recognized names such as John Cena, The Rock and perhaps most notably, Hulk Hogan.

The WWE is undoubtedly the biggest wrestling product in the world. They run an impressive 500+ shows per year all around the world. According to Forbes, WWE has essentially blocked other promotions from major TV deals, with their flagship television programs, RAW and Smackdown, securing five year \$2.3 billion slots on USA Network, essentially keeping any competition away from any affiliates of NBC Universal and FOX.

WWE may be at the helm, but there are many, many others. Each with a fanbase that rival Justin Bieber's "Beliebers" or Taylor Swift's "Swifties." There's

- New Japan Pro Wrestling, or **NJPW**- based in Nankano, Tokyo
- Total Nonstop Action, or **TNA/IMPACT** Wrestling- based in Toronto
- Ring of Honor, or **ROH**- based in Baltimore
- **NXT** (short for "Next")- affiliated with WWE, based in Winter Park, Florida

And many more. With over 90 other recognized professional companies throughout the world, there is so much to choose from. "I think there is a thirst for wrestling other than WWE and what people are traditionally used to seeing on television," said Jason Solomon, a wrestling critic and host of the Solomonster Sounds Off podcast, featured on Spotify and in Rolling Stone.

Each of these wrestling promotions is its own entity, as opposed to, American football, where the 32 teams are under the umbrella of the **National Football League**. It's difficult to assess to say how much the billion-dollar wrestling industry is worth as a whole. However, it is a known fact that wrestling is indeed a billion-dollar industry. The WWE, according to CNN Money, is worth an estimated \$3 billion, with a sales increase of 21% over the last two years.

It's About The Fans

Again, professional wrestling is scripted. In today's world of social media, blogs and dirt sheets, websites where fans and so-called "insiders" spread rumors of returns, match results and more, the wrestling industry no longer attempts to hide the fact that its matches and events are highly scripted. Despite the imaginary curtain seemingly being ripped away, the fans celebrate, vilify, remember, honor, love and hate together, but always remain loyal to the sport that has brought so many together.

And so many do come together. Solomon, who doesn't often get to meet with his fans face-to-face, hosts what is now an annual meet-up in Brooklyn whenever WWE/NXT comes to town. "Anyone can download a podcast and can do so from anywhere," he said. "It's another thing entirely when people donate their time and money to be a part of something." Solomon's gatherings are just one example of the camaraderie shown by wrestling fans. They happen all over the world, in person and online, every day.

Fans vary in interests, age and background. Matt Allen, 19, from Staten Island, is passionate about New Japan Pro-Wrestling. Kiera Vallone, 29, from Brooklyn, thrives off of NXT. Chris Baker, 21, from Queens, loves Ring of Honor.

What is it that takes their breath away, or pulls them to the edge of their seat? What makes them spend their hard-earned money on tickets to an event or perhaps a pay-per-view event or merchandise? My wrestling journey began in my room on a cold November night just over 12 years ago, and it has been a beautiful ride so far, but this is not my story. It's theirs.

Kiera Vallone: Who Run The World? Girls!

NXT:

When NXT, short for NEXT, was born in 2010, few would have guessed what it would become. It started as a (scripted) competition-like show on the Syfy channel, but was soon repackaged as WWE's "minor league" territory.

Still under the WWE banner, NXT is now its own brand, and has become a training ground for both homegrown WWE talent as well as some of the world's biggest stars who are brought in from the outside. Led by WWE legend Triple H, the hour-long weekly broadcast on the WWE Network and sporadic pay-per-view events (typically every 3-4 months) have allowed the performers to hone their skills, wrestling vigorous, hard-hitting matches. They train at the state-of-the-art WWE Performance Center in Orlando, where they are able to focus on every

aspect of the on-camera portion of the business, from wrestling to cutting promos on the microphone and more.

Kiera Vallone, 29, from Uniondale, Long Island, is an associate at Target in Farmingdale, NY. She graduated from Purchase College with a degree in journalism in 2010. Like Allen, Vallone has many diverse interests, but passionately follows multiple pro-wrestling promotions, most notably, NXT.

Like Allen, Vallone is active on social media. She is known as @cosplaycouture on Twitter, where she describes herself as “A crazy cosplayer from Long Island,” in her bio, and more notably, as BlackieChuu (username has no relation to wrestling) on Instagram and Tumblr. Cosplay, short for “costume play” is a hobby in which an individual attempts to recreate a character and their likeness, often from movies and Japanese anime. Often, the costumes are purchased and worn to events such as the popular Comic Con.

Vallone ties cosplay into her love of wrestling, creating the entrance or ring gear of wrestlers all across the board. While she certainly attends events like Comic Con and others associated with cosplay, she goes one step further. Rather than just buying a costume, Vallone creates the costumes herself. Sometimes of her favorite Marvel superheroes, and sometimes of the wrestlers she goes to see at live wrestling events and meet-and-greet-conventions.

Through social media, she’s formed a close crew of fellow cosplayers, most of whom also love professional wrestling, from all over the world. “Some are as far away as Australia,” she admits. “We meet up, go to cons together, help each other find materials.” Her mom, Shari,

encourages the online relationships and the camaraderie, embracing the world of social media as a way for her daughter to share her passion.

We meet at a fabric store called Spandex House on West 38th Street in New York City on a beautiful yet unusually warm December day. Accompanied by her mom, Vallone was looking for a piece she needed for a Mad Max-type project that ultimately never fully materialized.

“It won’t take more than a half hour,” she said the night before. “I know exactly what I need.” Sure enough, we were in and out of the store within minutes. As we stood outside the store enjoying the late-morning sun, she spoke of her cosplay as if on autopilot, but with the same curiosity and excitement that one would talk about their favorite sports team. “I’ve done at least 15 of these,” she said with a smile, referring to her costumes. “Sometimes the character and costume mean more than wrestling skill or how someone is booked. Wrestling is entertainment....cosplay lends itself to that.”

As we walk down Seventh Avenue, her mom dished about her days as a wrestling fan, when the WWE was the WWWF. “I watched a lot in the 80’s, during the Hulk Hogan era,” she said. While the two bond over modern wrestling, Vallone can thank her mom who taught her how to sew, stitch and more at a young age for her love of cosplay. They still share this creative outlet with each other to this day.

Many wrestlers and creators have commented on Vallone’s work on social media including current WWE star Bayley and former WWE/NXT star Neville. “I’m sort of internet famous,” she jokes. “Neville commenting on my cosplay of him still means the most to me. I was in the middle of a cosplay event called ConnectiCon, where I debuted the costume, and my

phone starts blowing up. I saw that Neville himself not only liked and retweeted, but commented something on a picture along the lines of 'Grinning from ear to ear. This is the coolest. You're fantastic!' I nearly screamed and almost cried."

Vallone's love for NXT began back in 2014, when the reincarnated version of the brand took center stage. She said, "I started watching on the first day of the WWE Network when they had their first special." The event in question, NXT: Arrival, took place at Full Sail University in Winter Park, Florida, in early 2014. A few months later, NXT's pay-per-view events dubbed the "TakeOver" series, would begin, and have since been held in London, Chicago and Toronto among other cities.

Why NXT? "First of all, the treatment of the women's division has really helped," she said, in reference to WWE's lack of effort in their women's division for close to a decade. Athletes were replaced with Playboy models, match/storyline quality squandered so that men could gawk at the "lady parts" that were highlighted on camera. They'd been criticized, for a good portion of the mid-2000's, for allowing its female competitors to be looked at as an afterthought, often being delegated to matches under five minutes or even crude stipulations such as "Bra and Panties" matches. In NXT, things are different. "You have women actually getting to tell storylines, have great matches," said Vallone. They go through character development, they have actual rivalries." That's at just an hour per week, as compared to WWE's main roster programming totaling five hours. "No one is oversaturated," she said. "You leave the audience wanting more. I want to tune in to see if I'll see my favorite guy (or girl) that week."

In terms of the wrestling itself, Vallone admires NXT in general for giving its fans a more diverse style of wrestling than on WWE's main roster. She enjoys the high-flying style (which she refers to as "flippy stuff") employed by stars like the other-worldly Ricochet as well as the technical, ground-based style used by the attack dog-like team of Kyle O'Reilly and Bobby Fish. Her favorite? "We don't get to see it a lot, but it feels good when we get to see a really good British strong-style match." Strong-style is much less flashy, but much more painful. The British version is an attack on a specific limb, such as the fingers, often while the opponent is lying prone, defenseless, on the mat. Current WWE UK champion Pete Dunne has mastered this, often twisting, bending and even biting an opponent's fingers to render their hand useless. The Japanese version is more based in hard, stiff punches and kicks to all areas on the body.

Vallone views NXT's matches as "must-see," as NXT has consistently delivered match-of-the-year worthy performances. "I don't even go to Summerslam anymore," said Vallone. "That's how good NXT is. I'd much rather go to a TakeOver than go to the second biggest WWE show of the year."

The match at TakeOver: Brooklyn in the summer of 2015 between Bayley, the loveable underdog, who played the role of the face, or the "good guy," and Sasha Banks, the nasty, ruthless heel, or the "bad guy," is a perfect example of this. Bayley defeated Banks with her finishing move, the "Bayley to Belly," in which she, from the front, locked her arms around Banks, lifted her up and slammed her down to the ring floor spine first, at around the 18 ½-minute mark, which, at the time, was almost unheard of. Most women's matches at that time were well under 10 minutes. PWTorch.com, a wrestling news site, ranked it #1 on their list of top TakeOver matches in a post published in March, 2017. Vallone talked about the match,

which is one of her favorites, with pride. “Bayley was the scrappy little underdog. You wanted to see her succeed.” Talking about it, she sits up a little straighter. There’s a glint in her eyes, as she was at the Barclays Center to see it in person. “Being there live and feeling the energy....for her to get that moment was just magical.”

When she’s not attending a cosplay convention, Vallone watches NXT through her WWE Network subscription and occasionally goes to check out the action in person at a venue like the Barclays Center. Home to NXT’s first ever arena event back in 2015, the promotion has returned yearly, never failing to bring in around 15,500 rowdy New Yorkers who expect nothing less than the best. “I’d easily drop \$300 for good seats at an NXT TakeOver event,” Vallone admitted. “Those are always top quality.”

Vallone made sure to be noticed at NXT’s flagship event, TakeOver: Brooklyn at the Barclays Center this past August. In full costume, right down to the boots, she portrayed NXT superstar Kairi Sane, the Japanese export known for her in-ring toughness. Sane, better known as the “Pirate Princess” due to the pirate-like cape and telescope that she carries down to the ring, won the biggest prize in her division that night, the NXT Women’s Championship, from the rough-and-tough ex-UFC star, Shayna Bayzler. Vallone drew a huge crowd outside the Barclays Center after the show, all of whom chanted “NXT! NXT” in celebration of Sane’s victory as well as Vallone’s excellent work. She posted the outfit in its final stages at home before heading to the show, and users on Instagram praised her work. User “chibifaery” commented “LOOKS SPOT ON!!” and “itssweetladyj” wrote “THIS IS STUNNING! You did a great job <3”. Even with the positive reception, she feels she could have done better. “I’m proud I was able to complete

a good amount of it, but there are still details, like her elbow and kickpads, that I want to go back and complete.”

“I don’t remember how much I spent on the Kairi costume,” she said. “It’s a bad habit. It took me a week to make it, though.” Over direct message on Twitter, she talked about her creative process. She always sketches things out first, and tries to be money conscious. “I saved because I had a bunch of spandex in my stash that I used for the main outfit,” she said. “Spandex House’s scrap pile also helps me save. You can dig through it and they charge \$4 a pound.”

Most recently, the ladies of NXT were recently featured heavily in WWE’s first ever all-women’s pay-per-view called “Evolution,” held at Long Island’s famed Nassau Coliseum, which Vallone attended. It should have been a huge deal in the weeks leading up to it, but at the same time, WWE was promoting an event called “Crown Jewel” which was set to take place in Saudi Arabia, despite fans and media alike calling for its cancellation due to the recent murder of Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi. It was reported that the Saudis paid WWE upwards of \$200 million to hold the event. “I was so mad that they spent BARELY any time promoting ‘Evolution’, their ‘history making/first-time-ever’ PPV and talked more about their Saudi blood money event (where women were NOT allowed to compete),” Vallone ranted over direct message on Twitter. However, “Crown Jewel” was considered a flop with inadequate booking decisions and poorly-wrestled matches. The opposite could be said for “Evolution,” which was hailed as one of the best WWE shows of the year. “It just felt different,” said Vallone. “The event was fantastic and I’m so happy I got to be there live.”

Close To Home: Local Wrestling Takes Center Stage

There is no shortage of local wrestling if you live in the tri-state area. There are 25 local/independent wrestling companies with events listed on nyprowrestling.com between November and April. I frequent a handful, including Victory Pro Wrestling, or **VPW**, based out of Centereach, NY and **NYWC**. Compared to that of a WWE show, the venues are much smaller, but the wrestling itself is sometimes just as good and you can easily find yourself in the front row for \$15-20. “Fans like the intimate nature of the shows,” said Solomon. It’s very different to be up close to the action with 50 to 100 other people as opposed to 50,000.”

NYWC, short for New York Wrestling Connection, is a localized professional wrestling promotion/training school based out of Long Island, New York. Founded in 2003 by former WWE star Mikey Whipwreck, NYWC, home to seasoned vets, also welcomes those with no prior experience to give the sport a try. They’re given time to hone their in-ring and mic skills in private training before showcasing themselves for an audience.

Events take place monthly, often at the NYWC Sportatorium in Deer Park. Typically a Saturday night event, it always appears to be a fun night out for the whole family. Wrestling fans, young and old gather to see the best of what Long Island has to offer (including my friend John Dalrymple, who wrestles under the moniker, or character, of Johnny Radke).

I attended NYWC’s “Till I Collapse” event in late September, thinking that the waning summer nights and stresses of back-to-school may keep the crowd to a minimum. However, the show was a total sellout. I, and many others, stood along the walls for the entire show. Caitlyn Dalrymple, John’s sister, runs social media for NYWC during events. “It’s absolutely insane right

now,” she said, running past me, clearly in shock with the turnout. “I’m going to go to CVS right now so I can get a f*cking memory card. I gotta get pictures of this.”

I stood with Gina, 24, and her two friends, all of whom were attending either their first or second wrestling event ever. “Hey, how long do you think it’ll be before we see ‘Big O’,” they ask me, referring to the popular up-and-coming star with a washboard-like stomach. “He’s in the main event, right?” They’re not happy to hear they’ll have to stand for the next hour and a half or so to see the star, but they stay regardless.

The girls got caught up in the drama of a six-man tag-team match that closed out the first half of the show. An incredible match that featured Bull James, formerly of NXT, that caused the entire audience to regularly erupt in cheers and “This is awesome!” chants. Gina and her friends, still relatively new to the sport, were lost in the moment, beaming and applauding with the rest of the crowd as the six wrestlers put on an absolute clinic. Their eyes darted in every direction, as the six wrestlers battled in the ring, flew over the ropes to the outside and brawled around the ringside area. “That was sick,” Gina, who wasn’t much for words, said in a blasé tone after the match, nodding her head in approval.

Chris Baker: A ‘Nature Boy’ With His Own Stories to Tell

ROH:

Chris Baker, 20, is a senior playwriting & screenwriting major at SUNY Purchase from Bayside, Queens. His Facebook profile picture shows his usual long, flowing hair to be blood-red

(though it changes over time) and he stands at well over 6 feet tall. He is definitely one to catch your eye.

Soft-spoken yet intelligent, witty and just slightly self-deprecating, Baker is an interesting character. While he grew up in the city, he prefers the outdoors, the openness and the peace found in nature. As we talked all things professional wrestling, focusing on his favorite promotion, Ring of Honor, Baker led me through one of Purchase's many woodsy areas, and up a particularly muddy (and steep!!) path to the top of a hill where the sun shined bright in the late afternoon of a warm day in mid-February. A few rickety articles of furniture sit at the very center atop the hill: clearly a hangout for some of Purchase's more adventurous students, including Baker, who seemed right at home, taking in a few deep breaths of the open air.

Baker is musically inclined. "For a long time, I wanted to be a musician," he said. "I was playing bass, I was screaming. I was really invested in music." Punk-rock is a current obsession. "I'm on a huge kick," he said. "I f*cking love it so much. It's so dirty, so weird. Everyone looks homeless."

While Baker's passion for music has never faded, he has also fallen in love with another art form: professional wrestling.

Ring of Honor, or ROH, was born in the wake of, and essentially because of, the closing of Extreme Championship Wrestling, or ECW. The beloved promotion, based out of Philadelphia, was known for their excessive usage of weaponry in its matches. In terms of the

professional wrestling hierarchy, ROH has long been considered to be the second or third most popular wrestling company in the world, even in its infancy.

“If you were to ask ‘What would you describe ROH as in the world of wrestling?’, I very much think it’s an Americanized version of New Japan,” said Baker. “Very wrestling oriented, but with more of a storytelling aspect.” The two promotions have collaborated on numerous events together over the years and will do so again this coming April at a sold-out joint show at Madison Square Garden.

Baker’s history as a wrestling fan began the same as so many others; with WWE. “I was about 7 or 8,” he said. “It was when Matt Hardy was in a rivalry with MVP, when they were having a basketball competition on Smackdown.” Matt Hardy, one half of the legendary Hardy Boyz tag-team, along with brother Jeff, and MVP, short for Montel Vontavious Porter, the brash, arrogant “player.” The two were involved in a comedic, non-wrestling sketch in which they competed to see who could score the most freethrows. “I was like, ‘Who are these weirdly dressed people in the middle of an arena having a basketball competition?’” Baker reminisced, his deadpan humor coming across.

While the sketch was unconventional, it piqued his interest enough that he became a fan. Professional wrestling, not just in WWE but across the board, uses these types of segments to lighten the mood and establish family-friendly content. “We need to stop taking wrestling so seriously,” Baker said. “Some of the best moments, the most cherished moments, are so stupid. So corny.” One moment came to mind instantly, and he plucked it right out of my head. “Like the time where Booker T and Stone Cold (Steve Austin) wrestled around a grocery store.” The

scene hilariously depicts two grown men throwing each other around the produce aisle and into refrigerators of milk.

Years later, after losing interest for some time, Baker started watching again, and it was like stepping in quicksand. “There was a period for maybe a year where I was watching maybe 20 hours of wrestling a week,” he admitted. “The floodgates opened. Monday was RAW, Wednesday was Impact, Lucha Underground and NXT, Thursday was Smackdown. Then there was always a Japan show on or a pay-per-view on weekends.” What’s the appeal? The athleticism, of course, but it’s all about the characters. “I think the cool thing about wrestlers is that they’re real-life superheroes,” said Baker. “It’s different than watching Iron Man or Captain America, because they’re clearly not real life. The wrestlers are real life. They’re real people who you can see in person.”

Full-time college life and adulthood has drastically reduced Baker’s wrestling habit, but he still maintains his love for the sport. “Now I’m down to two or three hours a week, but back then, I’d spend more time watching wrestling than doing anything else,” he said. “It’s always going to be something that I love.”

Baker still attends pro-wrestling events when he can, regardless of venue size. From a Progress Wrestling show at the Elmcreech Center, a sweltering hot youth/adult services center in Corona, Queens filled way beyond capacity to NXT TakeOver events at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn to House of Hardcore shows in local high school gymnasiums, he’s open to it.

Both Progress Wrestling and House of Hardcore are independent promotions, the former founded by ECW legend Tommy Dreamer with the slogan “No Politics, No B.S, Just Wrestling.”

Some of Baker’s cherished memories in wrestling involve meeting some of his favorite superstars, most of whom made a name for themselves in ROH before moving on to bigger things, in an intimate setting. “Some of the nicest people I’ve ever met have been heels in the business,” he said, referring to the “bad guys” of the ring. “Guys like Sami Callihan, who is the nicest person I’ve ever met in wrestling....meeting Chris Hero, who I’ve loved since I was like, 7.” Callihan, one of the most sought-after faces of the independent scene, where he acts as a brash, out-of-control madman, and Hero (now Kassius Ohno in NXT), the knockout specialist who stands at 6’4, 270 pounds but moves like a man half his size.

Not one to engross himself in social media or fan culture, Baker does not understand the allure behind paying thousands of dollars to meet a celebrity. “It’s silly to me,” he said, dismissing mainstream music and TV idols in favor of those who lace up their boots for the ring. “I can go to a local show and meet a superstar, sometimes for free. I’ve met Chris Hero three times now. Now he’s on WWE TV. Sure, he’s not the biggest star, but he’s a star.”

These days, Baker mostly watches wrestling through streaming services alone or with a select few friends. Back home in Queens is a different story. “My crew is a good four or five people,” he says, referring to friends with whom he shares his passion. “I’m probably the most invested. One of them is really casual, one is really into Japanese and Mexican wrestling, others come and go. But we’re all kind of like a clique. We all watch pay-per-views together. We all

rock Bullet Club.” Bullet Club is a powerhouse faction, or multi-man team/group, who blurs the line between what is scripted and unscripted, and is led by former WWE star Cody Rhodes and high-flyers The Young Bucks.

Like with Vallone and NXT/WWE’s “Women’s Revolution,” Baker feels the recent addition of females to the ROH roster is a step in the right direction for a company that, for over a decade, did not regularly include women as a part of their broadcast. Deonna Purrazzo, who is currently signed to WWE and wrestling under the NXT brand, was one of many who helped establish the new women’s division during her tenure in ROH.

“They really have a lot of stars right now,” said Baker, on ROH’s bubbling women’s division. “A girl like Deonna Purrazzo....I’ve seen her perform at House Of Hardcore shows in front of 50 people.” He considers Purrazzo an acquaintance, having met her through a mutual friend in her early wrestling days; even early on, he said, the spark of a superstar was there.

Professional wrestling became a childhood fantasy to Baker. “Throughout middle school and high school, I wanted to be a wrestler,” he said, echoing the sentiments of so many others. However, when it was time to write college essays, he dodged that fact. “When I wrote it, I kind of said ‘Yeah, I don’t know what I want to do’ because I didn’t want to be like ‘Oh man I want to be a wrestler!’” he said jokingly, yet alluding to the idea that such an “out-there” career choice would not be accepted. But really, what’s so “out-there” about it? “I think the cool thing about wrestling is that regardless of what you watch, there’s a story,” said Baker, breaking the sport down to the bare bones. “Whether it’s a five-minute match or an hour-long match or a 10-minute promo, there are always stories there.”

Now, he's changed course. Instead of telling the story from inside the ring, he wants to do so from the sidelines. "I want to tell stories. I want to convey emotion," he says, serious for the first time. "I would love to write for a wrestling show, but I'd also love to write for television (non-wrestling related). I'd love to write for TV in general."

Meet The Professional: Lavie Margolin

Lavie Margolin is a corporate partnership officer at City College in New York City, who develops internship programs for students, as well as a published author. He is also a massive professional wrestling fan, and wrote his newest release "TrumpMania" after the 2016 presidential election.

Donald Trump's involvement in the wrestling business is well-documented. He hosted WrestleMania's IV and V at Trump Plaza in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and was involved in a major storyline with company owner, Vince McMahon, at WrestleMania 23 in Detroit.

"TrumpMania" is less opinion-based than it is a complete and efficient rundown of the Trump/McMahon story, from hosting the early WrestleMania's to the financial bailouts to Linda McMahon, who now serves as Trump's head of the Small Business Administration.

Margolin says that Trump's performances in public settings, particularly at rallies when he knows a crowd is firmly behind him, are very telling. "For Trump, it was learning how to manipulate an audience," said Margolin on his campaign run and subsequent public appearances. "He waits for that reaction when he talks to get that 'cheap heat' moment which

is taken right from pro-wrestling.” Trump has always been a larger-than-life persona, but his involvement with the wrestling business may have been a key factor in his political ascendancy. Margolin feels that McMahon and Trump saw the benefit in each other. “They always propped each other up,” he said, feeling that the two wealthy businessmen, who were never the most popular people, made a pact to “complement” each other. “For McMahon, Trump was kind of like a credibility booster. Respect, on both ends, is hard for them to come by.” The McMahon family ties to Trump are clear, but as of late, it’s been a more personal relationship. “With the exception of some photos in the Oval Office, as a company, they have been very vanilla about it since the election,” said Margolin. Perhaps a wise move.

Margolin describes his peak years as a wrestling fan between 1988-2000. Now, as a professional and a family man, his role as a fan has changed. “I’m aware of everything, but I watch almost nothing,” he said. “I listen to all the podcasts, but I really only watch matches when they get a lot of buzz.” This may be partly because of the lack of new stars. “One of the problems with the business is that they don’t know how to strap a rocketship to anyone anymore,” he said, critical of WWE’s formula but generalizing it to the business as a whole. “We know from the boom periods that it was a situation like Shawn Michaels losing to Steve Austin that made the star.” He’s referring to the legendary Shawn Michaels taking the loss to the younger, more popular “Stone Cold” Steve Austin at WrestleMania 14, which served as a passing of the torch moment between the two stars, and, historically, was the unofficial beginning of WWE’s most acclaimed and beloved era, the “Attitude Era.”

Even with his quarrels, he'll be attending the ROH/New Japan crossover show at MSG this upcoming April, saying that he wouldn't have minded having the worst seat in the house. "It's history being made," he said. "I just wanted to look down on it and take it in."

Matt Allen: Out Of His Shell

New Japan Pro-Wrestling:

Allen's history with pro-wrestling begins the same as mostly everyone else, with WWE. He grew up idolizing their high-flying "Charismatic Enigma," Jeff Hardy, before discovering NXT and other professional wrestling promotions. However, he gravitates towards NJPW as his favorite. New Japan Pro-Wrestling was originated in 1972 by Japanese legend Antonio Inoki, and is the premier wrestling company in Japan.

Stylistically, New Japan may be the most appealing to fans looking for in-ring prowess and technicality. Matches overflow with near-cartoonish athleticism and stamina and often overuse the magic of a high spot, such as competitors hitting their trademark move, better known as the "finisher." On a critical level, it's almost comical how far ahead NJPW is from the rest of the pack. Dave Meltzer, the wrestling industry's top analyst, has rated multiple NJPW matches a 6.0 or higher on a scale that is traditionally 0-5.

Allen, after spending his early years as a wrestling fan watching WWE, discovered New Japan around 7th or 8th grade. "A good friend of mine got me into it," he says. "I'd watch some of the matches and be like 'Whoa! It looks like these guys are really hitting each other....it looks

so stiff and intense!” He fell in love with Japan’s high-flying, high-octane style, quickly discovering a world outside of what he’d previously known. “You don’t see New Japan-style matches happening in WWE,” he said, getting excited. “(Jumping) knees, looking like they’re hitting the guy’s head. Punches that look like they’re really connecting. You see people legitimately headbutting each other in New Japan. You don’t see that in WWE. WWE is the safe show. They really only go for that one big OMG moment during a match. Like whenever Shane McMahon (son of Vince McMahon) wrestles, you know he’s going to do something crazy (like jumping off of 20-foot cages).”

He, like many others, favors the superstars of the Bullet Club. He and his friends admired them not only for their wrestling skill, but also because they serve as sort of the antithesis of the wrestling business, bringing about some much-needed realism by using social media to tease dissent within the ranks. An event called “G1 Special in USA,” better known as “Global Battle,” took place in Long Beach, California in July, 2017. “If I was rich, I would have gone to see it,” joked Allen, wanting to be a part of the rare US appearance by New Japan, one that was full of Bullet Club involvement.

He’s especially taken a strong liking to the leader of the Bullet Club, Kenny Omega. “I truly believe he is one of the best, if not the best talent in the world right now,” he said. “He has the in-ring skills, he has the mic skills. He speaks English in Japan and even though they probably have no idea what he’s saying, they still want to cheer for him. He’s actually fluent in Japanese too, so when he speaks it, those fans freak out even more.” Allen sees him as not just an impressive in-ring talent, but a role model as well. “I have a friend on Twitter who is working really hard to become a wrestler. Omega wrote him a nice tweet saying ‘Hey man, keep

working hard. You got this. Maybe we'll meet in the ring one day.' It made that kid so happy to get a tweet like that from a guy like Kenny Omega."

Allen's love of New Japan is echoed by many, including Ray Hernandez. "The match quality, long-term storytelling, athleticism and overall realism is what really does it for me," he said. "The main thing is that I don't go into it feeling like I'm watching 'sports entertainment' at all. It feels like a real athletic competition." In recent times, the storyline mentioned earlier, between Okada and Omega, reflects that entirely. It took Omega, arguably the biggest babyface in all of wrestling, four grueling matches (two of which lasted for over an hour) over a year and a half span to finally capture the IWGP Heavyweight Championship, the most prestigious title in New Japan, from Okada. Incredible stuff.

Conclusion: Maybe It Is About Me Too. Just A Little Bit

If you had told little 10-year-old me as I watched my first episode of Smackdown of all the places I'd go, all the people I'd meet and all the experiences I'd have because of this incredible sport called professional wrestling, I would have never believed you. Just like everyone you have heard from in this piece, I am a FAN of professional wrestling. I'm one of those fans that tries to clear his schedule when he knows there's a show on, whether it's on TV or on pay-per-view. I'm one of those fans who is down for a tailgate, a meet-up or anything of the sort if it means getting to interact with other fans I've met online or just fans I met 10 seconds ago. I'm one of those fans who can talk mindless statistics and classic moments from

decades and eras way before my time for hours on end. I was a fan then, I am a fan now and I'll be a fan forever.

WWE calls their fans the "WWE Universe." I imagine Vince McMahon sitting in a boardroom at the WWE office in Stamford, CT one day and deciding that he wanted the fans of his creation, his baby, to have an identity. An identity that separates us from any other wrestling organization. So he called us the "WWE Universe." I always thought that it was really humbling. Humbling to be forever linked to millions of people all over the world who try to cast aside reality for a few hours a day to watch these men and women step inside the ring, put their bodies on the line and try and tell us a story.

Professional wrestling has given me more than just a hobby. More than just something to watch for a few hours a week on TV. It's given me memories that will last a lifetime. On Christmas in 2008, I unwrapped a gift from my dad. It was a three-ring binder with a few pages inside, each hinting at something special. On the last page, it was revealed that he and I would be traveling to Houston, Texas for WrestleMania and I just about jumped through the roof. After I calmed down, he told me that I'd better enjoy it because "this is a once-in-a-lifetime thing." I think about that now and laugh, knowing that we've been to seven more since. After Houston, we hit Atlanta, Miami, New York/New Jersey, New Orleans, Dallas, Orlando and New Orleans again. We got to escape from the lingering New York cold and enjoy, at least up until two years ago, a father/son weekend in the sun in a new city watching the sport we both love.

Now that I'm older I tend to take an extended vacation, paying my own way (with the exception of the WrestleMania ticket itself, which is still my dad's one and only Christmas gift to

me) and spending time with the friends I've met along the way, but my dad still travels and meets us at the show. With a new city, bright lights and thousands among thousands of people in front of me, I'm always too caught up in the moment and forget to say thank you, but I just hope my dad knows how grateful I am. How many small-town kids can say that they've been to all the places I've been to at my age? I'm very, very blessed.

Memories that last a lifetime are nothing without the people you make them with. I've met people of all ages from all over the world in my travels, but it's my experiences with three people that I cherish the most. Brandon Rocklein, from Patchogue, Long Island, Graham Mirmina, from New Haven, CT and Spenser Hunt, from Baton Rouge, LA.

From countless nights of ordering Dominos, drinking Pepsi out of oversized WWE-themed cups from 7/11 and watching wrestling on my tiny laptop with Brandon, to taking Jesus-take-the-wheel drives up to Lowell, MA from Purchase in my car with rear brakes that could have burst at any moment with Graham just so we could get to an NXT show to singing "Dream On" by Aerosmith at 3 a.m in front of 150 drunk wrestling fans at the Cat's Meow in New Orleans post-WrestleMania while Spenser and his friend Matt cheered me along the whole way, I could not ask for anything more.

Those guys are my best friends. They are my brothers. And wrestling is the reason why I have them in my life. It's the reason why I have SO many people in my life. It's the reason why I was able to come out of MY shell. It's the reason why I decided to pursue journalism in the first place. It's pretty fitting that I've spent a majority of my college tenure at Purchase, because

whenever I got the chance, I'd drive past the WWE headquarters in Stamford and say "One day."

Whether I work at WWE or not, I'll always be the kid who got to see the Undertaker wrestle Shawn Michaels in a 31-minute classic at WrestleMania 25 (2009) in person for what I STILL think is the greatest match of all time. That moment was like ecstasy. Being in that crowd, feeling that energy, being under those lights and seeing those two guys do what they do in the middle of the ring....there is nothing like it. There will never be anything like it.

Sometimes I find myself saying "Ugh, I've seen everything. I'm not impressed anymore." It's like I'm a little jaded. But then, on a special night, the magic is back and suddenly I'm jumping up and down and screaming like a little kid again. Suddenly it's like I'm watching wrestling again for the first time and I'm in awe of how much I love this sport. I never want to lose that. I never want to stop being that kid. And I don't think I ever will.

Senior Project- Source Log

Events Attended (for reporting purposes only)

- Progress Wrestling- Elmcors Center; Queens, NY- 8-12-17
- NXT Lowell- Lowell Memorial Auditorium; Lowell, MA- 9-22-17
- ROH Final Battle- Hammerstein Ballroom; New York, NY- 12-15-17
- NYWC- NY Sportatorium; Deer Park, NY- 6-30-18
- VPW- VFW Hall; Centereach, NY- 7-21-18
- NYWC- American Legion; Babylon, NY- 7-28-18
- NYWC- NY Sportatorium; Deer Park, NY- 9-28-18

Skype

- w/Matt Allen- 9-30-17
 - Introductory conversation
 - Discussed music, wrestling during his childhood, life in Staten Island, family, etc
 - Off the record
- w/Kiera Vallone- 10-20-17
 - introductory conversation
 - Discussed life at Purchase, life after college, early years as a wrestling fan, conventions, cosplay, etc
 - Off-the record
- w/Kiera Vallone- 2-6-18

In-Person

- w/Matt Allen- 10-21-17
 - Discussed the wrestling business as a whole, love for Ariana Grande, etc
 - @ Wolves Pond Park on Staten Island
 - On the record
- w/Ray Hernandez- 10-31-17
 - Discussed New Japan Pro Wrestling, the politics of the business, etc
 - @ SUNY Purchase
 - OTR
- w/Logan Bruner- 11-16-17
 - casually discussed all things pro-wrestling, acting and more
 - @ SUNY Purchase
 - OTR
- w/Kiera Vallone- 1-28-18

- discussed NXT in-depth as well as the first ever Women's Royal Rumble match, which was set to take place later that night
- @ Starbucks in Uniondale
- OTR
- w/Chris Baker- 1-31-18
 - introductory conversation
 - @ SUNY Purchase
 - off the record
- w/Kiera Vallone- 2-11-18
 - discussed cosplay in-depth, Vallone's life at Purchase, etc.
 - @ Starbucks in Uniondale
 - OTR
- w/Chris Baker- 2-14-18
 - discussed issues with WWE, ROH's strengths, anime, etc
 - @ SUNY Purchase
 - OTR
- w/Chris Baker- 3-1-18
 - discussed ROH's new streaming service, rock music, etc
 - @ SUNY Purchase
 - OTR
- w/Lavie Margolin- 10-4-18
 - talked "TrumpMania", Margolin's history as a wrestling fan, etc.
 - @ Sushi restaurant on 141st and Broadway
 - OTR
- w/ Amine Kassaoui- 11-28-18
 - discussed Kassoui's career as a writer for WWE, how WWE is top dog
 - @ SUNY Purchase
 - OTR

