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THE SECRET LIFE OF THE WRESTLER WRESTLING FAN

Understanding What the Fan Really Wants

David M. Reiss, M.D.

In my previous articles (“Why Wrestling?”; “*Sports and Entertainment – and More...*”) I introduced some of my views and ideas regarding the psychological aspects of Professional Wrestling. Below is the outline of seminars presented at 2011 Cauliflower Alley Club Reunion, with comments upon my talk offered by professional wrestling Immortals Ted DiBiase, Sr. and J.J. Dillon.



One of the most common questions – if not the most common question – asked of people who personally know a Professional Wrestler is certainly, “A Professional Wrestler? What is he/she *really* like?” I’d like to stand that question on its head, and ask the question, “A Wrestling Fan? What is *he/she* really like?”

From my perspective of a Psychiatrist, who has evaluated over 10,000 people from all walks of life, I hope to offer somewhat different insights into ring psychology, focusing upon the often unconscious psychological reactions of the wrestling fan, discussed in non-clinical, common language.

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I – What the fan wants from the experience (but doesn't necessarily doesn't realize he/she wants

A. The obvious (conscious) motivations

1 - Outlet for frustration and anger

Everyone has frustrations, grievances, grudges, and angry feelings that they cannot safely or appropriately express. Imagining attacking a specific person or that person being "beat down" (boss, co-worker, friend, family member) can safely release tension and relieve feelings of helplessness and weakness.

2 - Release of aggression

Everyone has a capacity for pure aggression that needs to be kept in check in day-to-day life. Having a time and place for the fantasized (vicarious) expression of aggression can also provide a sense of emotional release and can counter feelings of helplessness and weakness.

3 - Quest for justice:

A - Reward of the righteous

Daily, the average person is exposed to incidents of injustice involving both personal issues and general societal events. Cheering on the victory of the "righteous" restores a sense of "balance" to an unbalanced world.

B - Punishment and revenge against the unjust

Regardless of personal philosophy, faith or belief, the impulse to seek revenge for slights and injuries, and punishment for the "wicked", is an unavoidable human impulse. Cheering on righteous punishment, without needing to take any personal responsibility for the act, releases tension and also restores a sense of "balance" to the world.

5 - Blood-lust, sadism, masochism

While every person is inherently capable of, and unavoidably experiences, aggressive impulses – for various more complex reasons, there are those who overtly enjoy inflicting and/or experiencing pain, or watching pain being inflicted.

6 - Beyond "good" and "evil"

a. Ignoring the "politically correct"

b. Briefly living outside of common laws and morality

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Society imposes restrictions upon behaviors if one is not to be considered “bad”, “evil” or “sociopathic”. Restrictions range from the logical, ethical, humane and moral limits upon behavior, to politically-enforced codes of behavior which may be of questionable, dubious or malicious “moral” authority. The ability to participate in a virtual world where there the need be concerned about “political correctness” or the complexities of morality can be temporarily suspended provides a sense of release and relief.

B. Inherently deeper (unconscious) emotional connections and motivation

1 - The wish to be indestructible

Part of child/human development involves the hope and expectation that we will be perfectly, totally, and consistently protected; that we will be made invulnerable and indestructible. Simply put, that we will “live happily ever after.” No matter how much life proves that to be a childhood fairy tale, we retain a secret wish to return to that sense of total security. By watching larger-than-life figures who appear to be invulnerable to pain and injury, unconsciously, those feelings of safety are revived.

2 - The wish to be all-powerful

As a child ages, the fantasy of being invulnerable becomes more complex and develops into a wish to be all-powerful, a quest for omnipotence over one’s environment (physical environment and interpersonal environment). The fantasy is established that if I can connect with or join forces with another very special person, group, or institution, together we will become all-powerful and indestructible. A large percentage of the population never matures beyond this view of life. Especially for those who have experienced trauma during childhood, the wish for invulnerability can become extremely entrenched. “Normally” every child goes through some emotionally difficult/traumatic events, and therefore, this dynamic is basically universal. However, the more traumatic that a childhood is, the more difficult it is for a person to mature past the view of life that requires them to hold on to a sense of “secret” invulnerability. This occurs particularly in situations where the child suffers or witnesses abuse (whether within the family or outside the family, such as in the community). Wrestling storylines can unconsciously trigger this fantasy for those who continue to have a hidden wish for omnipotence, providing a significant sense of emotional release and gratification that may not be consciously appreciated, but still may have almost addictive qualities. This is perhaps the most powerful connection to the fan base, whereby one can overcome experiences of everyday frustration, helplessness, defeat, or even depression and despair.

3 - The wish for an “extended” family

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The secret sense of personal loneliness in our society cannot be underestimated. Beyond the issues of invulnerability and omnipotence, participation in the “wrestling community” establishes a simple but powerful sense of being a part of a “virtual family” which can provide at least a transient sense of relief and comfort through an emotional connection with specific “larger than life” characters within the wrestling “family”. The unique interaction between the wrestler and the fans, which is different from the interaction between performers and audience that develops in essentially every other form of sports and entertainment, powerfully allows the development of a sense of personal connection and “family.”

II – Fantasy and suspension of reality

The fan base wants to suspend their sense of reality and, consciously or unconsciously, enjoy the feelings of relief and release as discussed. A useful way to understand the “degrees” of suspension of reality is to view the spectrum of “fantasy” as ranging from the realistic, to the unusual-but-not-improbable, to the improbable-but-not-implausible, to the implausible/irrational. The most powerful emotional connection to the fans is formed by maintaining a position roughly in the middle of that spectrum – improbable but not implausible. If events are realistically “improbable”, but not completely implausible or irrational, an almost hypnotic state can be elicited. In that state, the fans can feel directly emotionally involved, leaving behind “realistic” everyday concerns and boundaries, without feeling that they are being “manipulated” or “fooled”.