ONE RING CIRCUS

Extreme Wrestling in the Minor Leagues

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY **BRIAN HOWELL**
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY **STEPHEN OSBORNE**

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Introduction

Stephen Osborne

One of the earliest images of wrestling known to archaeology is a bronze figurine said to be five thousand years old. It depicts two men grappling with one another, with their hands on each other's hips, and it was found in the ruins of a Sumerian temple near Baghdad, where, according to authors of *Wrestling to Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*, wrestling was associated with religious cults. Early examples of taunts and menaces employed by wrestlers to bait their adversaries can still be read on the wall of an Egyptian temple, where they were inscribed by wrestlers in training four thousand years ago. One of them reads: "Look, I'm going to make you fall and faint away right in front of Pharaoh," and another: "I will pin you! I will make you weep in your heart and cringe with fear!" Wrestling, in the words of Roland Barthes, has always belonged to the domain of "rhetorical amplification and magniloquence."

The earliest images of professional wrestling for people of my generation were in black and white, on television, right after the *Ed Sullivan Show* on Sundays at nine o'clock, when villains and heroes engaged in public combat on an epic scale otherwise to be found only in comic books. Every week, as my brother and I watched in astonishment, masked men with fierce names, courtly gentlemen, and crowds of midgets filled our living room with the sound of angry challenges and anguished cries and the smack and crack of body blows. The most spectacular of the villains was Gorgeous George, an effete creature with flowing peroxide-blonde hair who dubbed himself "the Human Orchid," and who was always preceded into the ring by a butler pumping a spray gun filled with disinfectant and Chanel No. 10 perfume.

The greatest opponent of Gorgeous George was Whipper Billy Watson, a champion of the Good, and a Canadian, who defeated Gorgeous George in a series of grudge matches that my brother and I followed avidly until its culmination in the notorious "hair vs hair" match. At the end of this contest, Gorgeous George underwent the final humiliation of having his golden hair shaved off in the ring. I remember my brother and me calling out to each other as Whipper Billy wielded the shears and Gorgeous George writhed beneath them: "They're really doing it! They're really doing it!" We had known as if by instinct that wrestling was not "really doing it," that wrestling was a performance, a kind of fiction – and now a moment of brilliant non-fiction threw that understanding into relief: wrestling becomes even more outrageous by inserting "reality" into its storyline.

Wrestling belongs to the world of the carnival and the spectacle. As Barthes puts it (in his 1957 essay, "The World of Wrestling"): "True wrestling is performed in second-rate halls, where the public spontaneously attunes itself to the spectacular nature of the contest." Wrestling is to be compared to Greek drama, and to bullfighting. "The function of the wrestler is not to win; it is to go through the motions expected of him." Appearances are everything in wrestling: the grand gesture of the hero, the overstated malevolence of the villain. Nothing is hidden; the audience is prepared to be overwhelmed by the obvious: obvious Suffering, obvious Defeat, obvious Justice: these are the tropes that wrestlers take with them into the ring. "What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself, " Barthes wrote. It was to this world of performance and violent athleticism, as it persists on the edge of mainstream media culture, that Brian Howell turned his camera in the late 1990s, when he covered a wrestling match in the Eagles Hall in New Westminster (a city of

100,000, part of the metropolitan exurbation of Vancouver) for a community newspaper. (Wrestling matches are almost never reported by big-city media.) He realized within moments that he had entered a world largely hidden from the public eye (that is, the big-city eye of the media); here was an "underworld," or "other world," with its own spectacular set of customs, conventions, rituals, and taboos, and its own practices and traditions. Here was a world that he wished to make pictures of.

Howell returned to the wrestling hall on his own, with his camera and flash, and began talking to the wrestlers and photographing them. He became knowledgeable in the field. Most of the wrestlers and the promotors whom he met were willing to cooperate and happy to allow him a glimpse of their lives and their art. For the next three years, as he could find the time, Howell attended wrestling matches in small towns throughout the Pacific Northwest. As he did so, his photography evolved into a style that we might call a photography of wrestling.

The camera traffics in appearances, and in appearances only, while pretending to reveal what is hidden by those appearances. Hence the camera has difficulty with activities that (appear to) hide nothing; such is wrestling, which seems to hide not even its own artifice. In a sense there is nothing in wrestling for the camera to reveal: everything is there on the surface. We have a photography of boxing and we have a photography of jazz music (in a way those activities are given their ambience by an intimate black-and-white photography), but there is no photography of wrestling. In a very real sense there can be no "candid" photography in a wrestling hall, where everything is drenched in the same light; even in the murkiest of venues, nothing is "hidden"; neither is there any privacy to reveal: all moments in wrestling are public moments. All of wrestling consists of formal gestures more or

less expertly improvised by both performers and fans. Howell realized quickly that his small range-finder camera, which he handles brilliantly in other venues, and whose speed and flexibility make it the ideal instrument for revealing the "decisive moment," failed to reveal much of what he was experiencing in the world of wrestling, a world in which no moment is decisive, in which all moments are stretched out. The end of a match, for example, is always drawn out, never sudden. One can say that wrestling is itself a photographic way of presenting reality: the moment has already been "captured" by the performers. Howell turned to a larger medium-format camera, which produces a much more premeditated photograph. He began composing images on the ground glass as the action around him unfolded, and he began making the simple and powerful portraits of wrestlers that punctuate the images in this book. In the marriage of the formal portrait and the formal gesture, Howell found a way to respond to wrestling that remains true to its subject: even his action shots are formal compositions. On the cover of this book, a heavyset man holding a soft drink pauses before the camera after a match: he seems merely to have to present himself to the lens for everything to be revealed. In this image nothing has been "captured," or snatched from the passing flux: the image and the moment have duration, as do all moments in wrestling and in all spectacles of excess.

This is a book with many virtues, a work that can be savored for the brilliance of its photography and for the stories it contains of a world unnoticed by many of us: it shows us something that we didn't know before. At the same it returns the world to its subjects: the wrestlers themselves and their fans, who are presented here unsentimentally, with dignity and honor. And what is wrestling, we continue to ask? In the Bible, Jacob meets an angel and

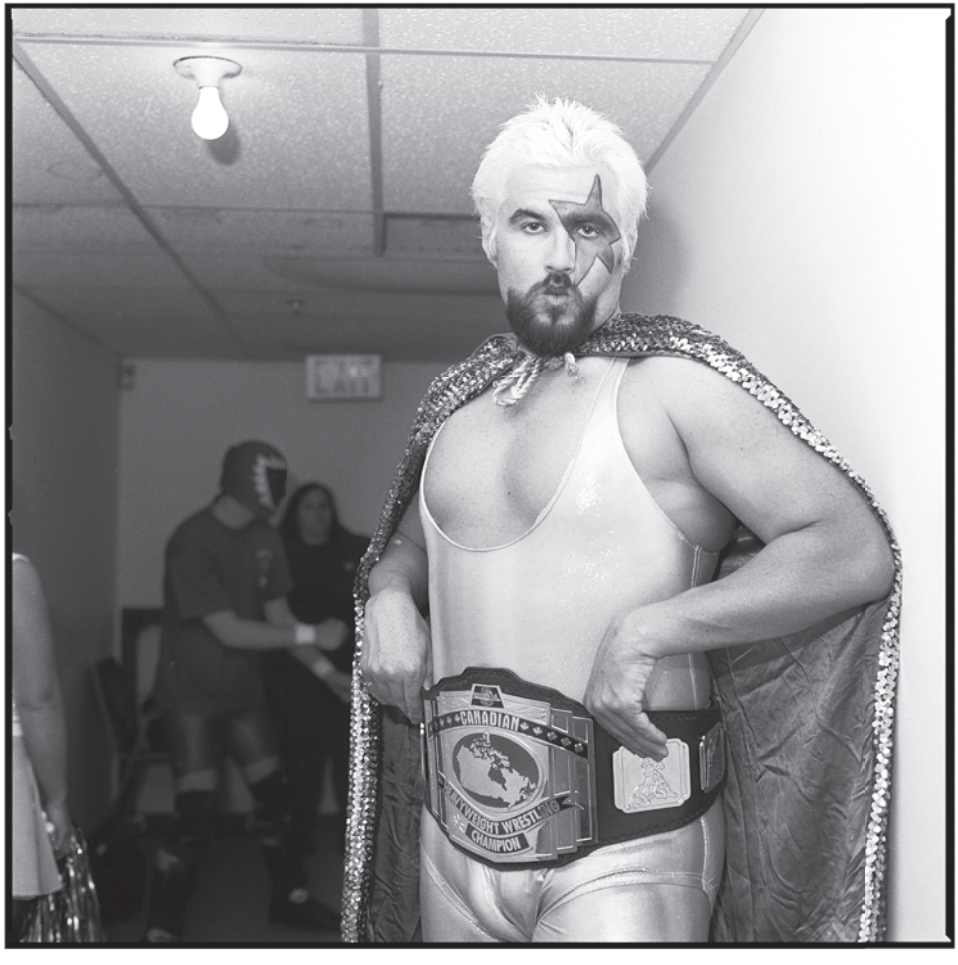
wrestles with him; in the book of Enoch in the Dead Sea Scrolls, angels of Good and Evil struggle for our souls by wrestling with each other; they do not box or duel, exchange parries or pistol shots. Wrestling is duration: wrestling endures.

Preface

Wrestling in North America is dominated by World Wrestling Entertainment(WWE), a wrestling promotion formerly known as the WWF, and whose extravagent televised matches are watched by millions around the world. The "minor leagues" of the wrestling world are the purview of independent operations such as Extreme Canadian Championship Wrestling (ECCW), headquartered in Surrey, BC, whose territory is the Pacific Northwest. ECCW shows travel as far north as Prince Rupert near the Alaskan border, across the Gulf of Georgia to Vancouver Island, and over the line to Washington state. The wrestlers perform in towns and smaller cities, in community centres, high school gymnasiums, Legion Halls, and other low-overhead venues, in front of die-hard fans who treat them like stars. Again and again, they put on their masks, costumes, and makeup, and get into the ring, where promised grudge matches are fulfilled, old challenges met, and new tag teams created to fight "for the first time ever." At the end of the evening, the lights go up, the ring is dismantled, and chairs are stacked; autographs are signed and bloodied faces washed clean. But the age-old story of good versus evil will play out again; familiar characters will soon be back. And so will the fans.

Gorgeous Michelle Starr

Mark Vellios is thirty-four years old and a father of three. During the week he runs a moving company in Surrey, BC. On Friday night he pulls on his pink tights, styles his peroxide-blonde hair, and draws a lurid star over his left eyebrow with pink lipstick, thereby transforming himself into Gorgeous Michelle Starr, wrestler and part-owner of Extreme Canadian Championship Wrestling (ECCW). When he enters the auditorium, the crowd begins to chant: "Ho-mo! Ho-mo! Ho-mo!" His wife Sue watches the door and takes tickets. Gorgeous Michelle Starr makes his way into the ring and picks up the microphone. "I've told you guys I'm not a homosexual," he says. "And I'm not a heterosexual, either. I am what you call a trisexual, and after I'm done in the ring, I'm going to try each and every one of you right there in that corner!"


CANADIAN
CHAMPION

Partner

John Parlett is Gorgeous Michelle Star's business partner. He had been a fan of All-Star Wrestling for years before finding himself in the wrestling business. He often appears a the ring announcer dressed as a hippie or a pimp named T.J. Sleaze. Parlett was instrumental in shaping the direction of the early ECCW shows at the Eagles Hall in New Westminster. The adult-oriented hardcore productions soon developed a cult following with plenty of violence, blood, superb athleticism, rampant homophobia, racial slurs, and lots of laughs. Definitely not for the politically correct. But the Eagles Hall venue has since been lost (it's now the Raymond Burr Theatre) and ECCW is still in search of a venue with the same magic. Three years later, die-hard fans continue to talk about the legendary Eagles Hall shows.

Veterans

ECCW is a stopping-off point for wrestlers working the West Coast. Veterans like Giggolo Steve Rizzono from San Francisco heighten the stature of the shows when they are booked in for a few weeks. Rizzono has the qualities of the old school wrestler: big, tough, charismatic, great with a microphone, a good worker. In the late '90s, Dave Republic (background) came in as an investor and ring personality, and took on the role of "comissioner." He took his share of abuse in the ring, both verbal and physical, while behind the scenes he was dealing with the pressure of making ECCW a financial success.