

INTER-GENERATIONAL COMPETITION

The Emotional Impact of Wrestling Storylines Mirroring Contemporary Social Issues

David M. Reiss, M.D.

All sports and athletic competitions involve a “battle to the top.” Competition occurs between established players and teams as championships are challenged by the existing “stars” and “superstars”. At the same time, competition occurs between younger participants attempting to “make a name” for themselves and launch themselves into the upper echelon of their sport.

From a psychological point of view, competition between younger athletes/rookies and established players/stars can be viewed as a combination of adolescent rebellion against parental figures and sibling rivalry. That is, in most athletic competitions, the actual age difference between rookies and established stars (i.e., the separation between “generations”) is at most 10 or 15 years – hardly enough to represent a “generation” in the sense of a true parent/child relationship, more of a competition between older and younger siblings, although the mentoring of younger athletes by older competitors does carry a “parental” flavor.

Professional wrestling certainly involves this type of “intergenerational” competition, but with added complexity. While there is competition for championship belts within the ring, there is equally as intense competition between athletes for places on the roster of the major promotions and “positions on the card” within whatever level of promotion in which they are involved. Whether wrestling in a gym for a paycheck that might not buy dinner or challenging for a world title in a PPV, there is no rivalry in any sport more intense than this level of competition.

We all know that it is not all that uncommon for professional wrestlers to stay active well into their 40’s and beyond, which is a relatively rare feat in most other professional sports. We can debate as who *should* be wrestling in their, let’s say, “mature” years, but there are certainly many in their 40’s and beyond who are as competitive and entertaining as ever. Who can forget the performance of Robbie Ellis of South Portland Maine the 2008 CAC Reunion – in his mid-60’s, trim and in shape, giving no quarter to an opponent probably less than half his age. Having active athletes at that stage of their life is of course unheard of in sports such as baseball, hockey, or football (although Brett Farve may eventually have to compete with his grandson for the starting quarterback position). In other less demanding sports, such as golf, athletes can continue competing in

later years, but it is acknowledged that they are playing on a different level – providing entertainment, enjoyment, and the excitement of competition, but playing within a “Seniors” division, unable to compete with those in their prime. Professional wrestling is one of the few sports where competition exists between athletes who may *actually* have a sufficient age difference to be parent-and-child.

Recently, both of the major professional wrestling promotions, WWE and TNA, have produced storylines that involve major interactions between younger athletes and groups of significantly older “Legends” of the sport – the TNA importation of the stars of ECW; and the dramatic WWE storyline involving the “rookies” of NEXUS not only challenging established Stars and Superstars, but having ruthlessly attacked a group of retired “Legends” when Ricky Steamboat was being honored regarding the release of a DVD of The Dragon’s storied career. In the latter case, the attack was upon retired athletes who were truly old enough to be the fathers or even grandfathers of the rookies. The initial beat-down of the retired veterans by Nexus was very striking. I do not recall when a *group* of rookies took on a *group* of Legends so viciously

Photo by Bill Koneski



Stepping outside of the squared circle – particularly in the U.S., there has been a heightened awareness of social and political intergenerational conflict: the younger generation is acutely aware of the economic demands of the retirement the “baby boomers” and the youth are battling politically to address their concerns; while the members of the generations of parents and

grandparents are frightened that they will be abandoned and left with insufficient resources during their later years, as retirement funds have been decimated by the economic meltdown and many of the youth are hesitant to “mortgage their future” for the wellbeing of their forebears. Youth are affected by cuts being made in funding for schools and after-school programs; the process for getting college loans has changed; it was been more difficult for teenagers to find summer jobs than ever before. At the same time, there is talk of cuts in Medicare health benefits, cuts in Social Security retirement benefits and increasing the age of eligibility for Medicare and Social Security benefits. As recently as October 18, 2010, USA Today featured opposing editorials, “*Do a favor for the grandkids – don’t give seniors a raise*” vs. “*Seniors need relief to keep up.*”

It is not my intent to turn this to a partisan discussion or to support any particular socio-economic point of view – nor do the wrestling promotions promulgate a political agenda. However, particularly in these trying times, the recent storylines emotionally “hit home” with adults without being so technical or politically obvious

as to lose the interest of kids. Certainly, none of us wants to pay to see Wade Barrett sit down with the Undertaker and discuss health care and Social Security. None of us wants to see the Motor City Machine Guns call over Tommy Dreamer to talk about 401K retirement plans.



TNA file photo

Yet at the at the time, the recent WWE and TNA storylines are at least indirectly dealing with *realistic* current social issues regarding the very powerful ambivalence of youth regarding *honoring* elders vs. *displacing* elders; and the conflict of the seniors between supporting youth and looking for youth to support them.

As I see it, the mature fan's enjoyment of wrestling and emotional involvement in the storylines significantly increase from having an awareness of the complex and serious issues that are being played out symbolically, or perhaps *even more* so, by having the action unconsciously "hook" realistic concerns, fears and conflicts. Even if the storyline is at some level a caricature, or "over the top," if it strikes the right chords, it can be emotionally powerful and engrossing. A youngster may be rooting for John Cena to withdraw from "Nexus" for the obvious reason of seeing a hero prevail; but at the same time, I see an extraordinary psychological impact for many adults in viewing a mature star at the height of his success displaying a sense of painful conflict as he finds his career and livelihood in jeopardy if he does not submit (and even humiliate himself) to the demands of a younger generation – the same week that 60 Minutes had a segment on the amazingly high number of successful professionals, many with Ph.D.'s, who have lost their jobs, depleted their pension funds, and are competing with youth for entry-level positions just to survive.



With this type of storyline, entertainment can be maintained in a manner in which a child or youngster (or unsophisticated adult) might not even notice or care about the implied issues and will not lose one bit of the obvious physical majesty of the ring action; while the more socially aware adult fan will find him-(or her)-self even more emotionally engrossed and more willing to lose oneself in the “magic” of the show on a deeper psychological level.

Wrestling has always depicted certain social, nationalistic and ethnic themes – at times in ways that would not currently be considered appropriate or “politically correct,” even as satire. Perhaps we are now seeing a more sophisticated and subtle incorporation of contemporary social issues, artfully portrayed without being partisan or taking sides but at the same time being able to generate a passionate response from fans regardless of their political persuasion.

The purpose of all forms of art is, in fact, to evoke emotional responses that are not necessarily easy or simplistic. Feelings aroused may or may not be comfortable. Psychological reactions may not even be understood by the observer. The observer spontaneously experiences a sense of release or catharsis and through that process, is drawn into the world created by the artist, suspending rational belief in the service of the immediate experience – that then becomes a very personal bonding between the psyche of the artist and the psyche of the patron.

This discussion of intergenerational competition dissects only one of many wrestling themes that have far more depth than the general public realizes. Intergenerational battles and feuds are a part of all sports to some extent certainly have always been an aspect of professional wrestling. However, from my point of view, the recent storylines are actually quite complex, nuanced and socially aware. Working the ring and the mic to effectively engage the audience at these multiple levels simultaneously takes great skill. Professional wrestling is not “just” a competition, nor is it “just” an athletic exhibition. At its best, wrestling is a drama, an artist’s rendering that portrays and mirrors deep and intense emotional responses to social, economic and political conflicts that are occurring in society. These recent storylines are powerful reflections of our current culture. What other sport can, simultaneously, be as playful, meaningful, and poignant?

David M. Reiss, M.D. is a psychiatrist, based in San Diego, CA. Dave may be contacted directly at dmr@DMRDynamics.com

