

Why Wrestling?

David M. Reiss, M.D.

Professional Wrestling is different. But in far more complex and sophisticated ways than the general public knows or understands. Beyond the nature of the sport and the matches themselves, the relationship between the Wrestler and the fan is different than the relationship between audiences and artists/athletes in probably every other type of sports competition or entertainment performance.

Fans root for professional athletic teams – Football, Baseball, Hockey, Soccer etc. Fans root for individual athletes – Tennis, Golf, Boxing, MMA, etc. Some fans are casual, some fans are rabid.

With franchise team sports, the more intense fan is typically immersed in “stats”; the fan certainly knows about individual athletes, but mostly in a very limited manner, regarding on-the-field performance. Allegiance and loyalty is generally more to the Team than to an individual athlete (who may be traded, or may change teams through free agency quite frequently). While an involved fan may know something about the personal life or personality of the athlete, that knowledge is generally irrelevant to the sport itself (unless personal issues interfere with on-field performance, or hit the tabloids). Athletes may have a “persona” on the field of play – but other than very superficially, that is usually very secondary to the focus on technical performance and whether or not the Team is winning or losing.

Athletes in individual-competition sports are often better known as “personalities”. However, while the personality of the athlete may to some extent attract fans or detract from fan support, during the course of competition, the persona of the athlete is very much secondary to technical performance (i.e., winning or losing). An athlete may acknowledge the fans after a competition, or make passing connection with fans during play, but especially in individual sports such as golf and tennis, not only is interaction with fans generally discouraged and considered a distraction, but during the actual competition there are strict rules *forbidding* even casual interaction between the athlete and the fan – the fan who cheers at the “wrong time” (or jeers at any time) during a golf match likely will be unceremoniously escorted off the course. There is a more intense fan involvement, and somewhat more interest in the personalities of the athletes, in competitions such as Boxing or MMA. But *within* those matches, the communication is in one direction – from the fan to the athlete. Only very rarely is there any type of interaction initiated by the athlete towards the fans. More significantly, the matches are not telling a story, they are not intended to involve the fan emotionally beyond the very simple level of following the action. Additionally, the motivation of the athlete during competition is not at all complex—when engaged in battle, the motivation is very simply to win and avoid injury.

The action may be very compelling and intense, but it does not have psychological complexity.

Non-athletic entertainers have a more significant interaction with their fans. Developing a “persona” for public consumption – real or “manufactured” by publicists – is encouraged, and plays a large role in the “box office appeal” of an actor or actress (film, stage or television). However, within the performance itself, it is “bad acting” for the performer’s public personality to upstage the character they are portraying in that particular show. Fans may attend a movie or watch a TV show to see a favorite actor or actress, but *during* the show itself, the focus is upon the character written into that particular script, and certainly, there is no actual interaction, “rooting”, “cheering or jeering” for the entertainer other than as may be appropriate to the plot of that specific performance.

“Reality Television” has somewhat blurred the role of performer and persona. In this still evolving medium, the fan does become involved with the performer’s personality (be it truly “real” or actually scripted) – but the involvement is from a distance. The performer is interacting with other “reality” performers, very rarely if ever interacting with the viewer. “Reality Television” shows which are competitions strongly focus upon the interactions of the competitors with each other, not with the fans; the more personal “Reality Television” shows involve the viewer in the performer’s personal and family relationships – but not specifically implying any relationship with the fan.

Professional Wrestling is different. There are teams and alliances – tag teams, informal and formal coalitions (Legacy, Main Event Mafia, etc.), and even blood-relative families. Yet it is inherent that with few exceptions, those alliances are transient and inevitably will end up as feuds. Fans know and understand this, and in fact, part of the attraction of coalitions is the expectation of the eventual “turn”. Obviously, fans’ connections with wrestling “teams” are very different from rooting for a sports franchise.

I have often been asked about my interest in and involvement with Professional Wrestling. Most frequently, a simple, “Why *wrestling*?” Because Professional Wrestling is different – the sport is unique, the form of entertainment is unique, and from my point of view as a psychiatrist, the relationships between the athletes themselves, and particularly the relationships between the athletes and the fans, is entirely unique, complex, and psychologically extremely sophisticated.

The persona/character of the Professional Wrestler, and the relationship between the Wrestler and the fans is not just a side interest, not just a passing curiosity, not just fodder for tabloids, but the primary focus around which the athleticism and competition revolves. Without any doubt, skill and talent are essential, both to the entertainment value of any match, and to the safety of all concerned. Yet it is the fans’ interactions with the Wrestlers, and the Wrestlers’ direct

communication with the fans – before, during, and after matches – which “makes or breaks” both “getting over” and the success of the Promotion. What is not understood or appreciated by the unsophisticated – often even among the “smart” fans, and certainly within the public at large – is that the dynamics of the interactions between Wrestlers and their fans goes far beyond simply “rooting for the good guy and hating the bad guy” (or visa versa), or “imagining you’re beating up your boss”. Every time a Wrestler steps into a ring, every time a promo is cut, intense emotions and psychological complexes are being activated in the fan; from my point of view, most of which are actually unconscious. Highly charged emotional issues ranging from morality to self-esteem to personal identity to fear of danger (and even fear of mortality) all are brought into play. To some in the industry, an understanding of how to reach fans at this level is largely intuitive; to some it is learned from the Masters of the industry; to some, frankly, it is a struggle.

In future postings, I hope to address from a psychological point of view (but without technical/clinical jargon) a more detailed discussion of the emotional issues that come into play, and the nature of the relationships between the Wrestlers and the fans which promotes “getting into the head” of the fans and the success of both the individual and the Promotion. But to answer, “Why *Wrestling?*”, my response is easy – Professional Wrestling is the most psychologically intriguing, complex and exciting form of athletic competition or entertainment available.

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