

MARCUS SAMUELSSON'S
TASTE OF BERMUDA

YOUR TV IS ABOUT TO
GET A LOT FANCIER

THE RICH CULTURE OF
LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

AMERICAN WAY

FEBRUARY 2016

SMACKDOWN

THE STARS OF
WWE GET READY FOR
WRESTLEMANIA 32

LEFT TO RIGHT:
BRIE BELLA,
MARK HENRY,
NIKKI BELLA AND
JOHN CENA

By Adam Pitluk



Family Tradition

If you're part of the 650 million households who tune in to WWE wrestling annually, or if you're someone who has contributed to the 7 billion WWE video views on YouTube in the last 12 months, then you can identify everyone on the cover even in their street clothes (including deciphering which Bella twin is Nikki and which one is Brie).

And if you're one of the devotees who have been watching professional wrestling since WWE's predecessor, the World Wrestling Federation (WWF), held its first mega event, dubbed "WrestleMania," at Madison Square Garden on March 31, 1985, then you're familiar with the skyrocketing trajectory and upward mobility the brand has exhibited over the past three decades (see our cover story on page 40). If you're not, it's time to become one, because it's just plain fun to watch.

For me, WWE (and the WWF before it) produced a narrative that weaves its way through my life.

Like many boys in the 1980s, I loved watching professional wrestling. My dad enjoyed watching it with me, most likely because he used to watch it with his dad in the 1950s and '60s. After my grandfather punched out from his job in Forest City's lumberyard, he and my dad would watch Gorgeous George and Whipper Billy Watson. Decades later, when my dad would take me to see the Junkyard Dog and Tito Santana at Cleveland's Richfield Coliseum, my father would visibly revert to being a kid again.

Right around the time Dad and I were watching Macho Man Randy Savage execute the diving elbow drop from the

top rope, there was a teenager down in southeastern Texas who was starting to attract all sorts of attention as much for his sheer size as for his brute strength.

At the time, Silsbee, Texas, was a working-class town of about 3,000. There were racial tensions, and the town naturally self-segregated. And although Mark Jerrold Henry had his issues and scuffles growing up, the local and state media were focused squarely on him in a good way. Folks in town stopped calling him Mark and started calling him Big Foot, or the Teenage Mastodon, or the Loch Ness Monster.

For here was a kid who, by the time he was 17, was lifting 800 pounds. That was — and still is — unheard of. Mark Henry set every single record in the Texas High School Powerlifting State Championships, some of which still stand. What's more, the people in and around Silsbee — of both races — rallied around Mark and put their preconceptions and racial biases aside. They recognized that poverty was their problem, not race. And they recognized that a local teen was capable of something no other teen anywhere in the world could do. To understand the story of Mark Henry is to understand the story of perseverance personified. His road from high school weightlifting champion to two-time Olympic weightlifter to Arnold Strongman Classic champion to — eventually — WWE World Heavyweight Champion is a road that is extraordinary, and yet in the small wrestling community of WWE, not altogether uncommon.

As we celebrate Black History Month, please read the Q&A with Taraji P. Henson, star of Fox's smash hit *Empire* (page 38),

and get a look at Jimi Hendrix's onetime London home (page 26). You can also learn a little bit about the history of the Tuskegee Airmen (page 10) from an American Airlines pilot. And, prepare yourself for the book about Mark Henry — one of the best superstars and athletes in WWE history — which he and I are working on.

I'm 39 years old now, and I watch wrestling with my two daughters. These days, it's John Cena and Roman Reigns and The New Day and Sheamus who dominate the sport. It's a symbolic passing of the turnbuckle from generation to generation, a symbolism that's not lost on me as we prepare for *WrestleMania 32* in Dallas on April 3. It'll be Mark Henry's last, as he prepares for the next chapter of his life.

To truly get a sense of my earlier sentiment that professional wrestling has had a profound impact on my life, look at the picture above (complete with John Cena). Even though Taylor Swift was in town the night before, my wife and daughters instead chose *WWE Monday Night Raw* as our big family outing for the week.

Actually, I chose it for them, but they thoroughly enjoyed themselves. My father was proud.

Adam Pitluk
Editor

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