Choke Hold

Shawn Decker reunites with his pro wrestler hero—and goes to the mat for HIV.

April 1, 2008 By Shawn Decker

Pro wrestling is in my blood, just as HIV is. And the wrestler who captured my boyhood imagination most was the notorious “Nature Boy,” Ric Flair.

I’m 32 now. But as a kid, living with hemophilia, I marveled at Flair’s ability to do things in the ring that would kill or maim someone with a bleeding disorder like mine. He took chair shots to the head, pile drivers on tables…and just about every time, he bounced back to win. My love for the Nature Boy was cemented a few months after my HIV diagnosis and 12th birthday, when I got to meet my antihero before one of his matches.

Yes, I’d caught on that pro wrestling matches were as predetermined as my seemingly grim, ’80s-era fate with AIDS. But as I survived each year, and into the 1990s, Ric Flair’s presence in wrestling helped make time stand still. Watching him scream at opponents on TV and bleed all over the place, I thought, “If he can keep going, so can I.”

By the time I turned 23, however, my virus had me locked in a sleeper hold. Twelve years after being diagnosed with HIV, I was staring down an official AIDS diagnosis and my first taste of HIV medications; a daunting tag team. To escape, I took a trip down to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, to celebrate my 24th birthday, and as my friends and I were having dinner there, Ric Flair walked in! His career—like my health—was in a bit of slump… Could his absence have contributed to my slumping T-cell count?

“Hello,” I said, introducing myself and disclosing my HIV status, trying to make it not-weird by explaining how his kindness, years before, had meant so much. Flair, renowned for his generosity with fans, graciously thanked me.

I never thought we’d meet again. Which is why, nine years after that second encounter, I was so excited to get the opportunity to interview Ric Flair for this magazine. My first real conversation with the greatest pro wrestler of all time!

The phone rang. It was the man.

As a person living with hemophilia, I just had to ask him what his bloodiest match was. But he

couldn’t pinpoint one in a 35-year career. Understandable. Then I gushed like an open wound, “You know you’re like a superhero to people with bleeding disorders, right?”

Next, I asked how the wrestling business grappled with HIV, particularly in the 1980s, when little was known about transmission. Flair said it was a concern, but that they just went ahead and did their thing. Then I asked how it affected outside-the-ring activities, mentioning unprotected sex.

“Shawn, I’m not comfortable with this interview right now,” Flair said. Quicker than the wrestler Rey Mysterio Jr., I changed the topic, but I couldn’t resist coming back to HIV. Thinking a humorous touch could pull this whole thing up off the mat, I asked, “What will come first: a universal eye care plan for pro wrestling referees or a cure for AIDS?” I sent Flair reeling. He said he didn’t want to make light of AIDS, so I babbled about my own history. Then he opened up.

“I just didn’t know we’d talk about wrestling in that light,” Ric said. “Wrestling has nothing to do with HIV. It just doesn’t. We’re very sympathetic, obviously. [But] we don’t talk about [HIV] in terms of wrestling.”

The master of the figure-four leg lock wished me well, and, mercifully, I released him from my finishing maneuver, the Awkward Turtle. We said our goodbyes, then hung up. I was miffed.

Then I remembered how this whole story had begun: with someone (me!) who was drawn to pro wrestling because it helped me avoid something uncomfortable…talking about HIV, an opponent and topic I no longer fear. And so it was that, two days later, I sat with my Dad watching Ric Flair, in one of his final pay-per-view matches, do what he does best: wrestle.

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