STD Jokes, @TheRock and Why I Cancelled @WWE Network [VIDEOS]

October 8, 2019 By Shawn Decker

It's no secret that I'm a fan of professional wrestling. At it's best, it's a fun escape- a Cirque Dude Love Soap Opera where you get to see things settled the old fashioned way... with a suplex off of the top rope or the game changer that is a sock puppet crammed into the mouth of an unsuspecting foe.

But lately, the largest wrestling company in the world, WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment), has been, well, less than entertaining. Between their flagship programs, Raw and Smackdown, I TiVo five gruelling hours of content. Typically, I watch both in about 25 minutes, scanning past the sludge and only watching the characters or matches I'm interested in. For $10 a month, I also subscribe to the WWE Network, which has the entire library of my childhood wrestling memories. Whenever I need a quick fix of Bobby "The Brain" Heenan's cutting wit, I'm just a few clicks away from scoring.

Well, yesterday I not only cancelled my WWE Network subscription, I also cancelled my Season Pass for Raw and Smackdown. A couple of things went down last weekend that made it an easy decision.

I'll start with the lesser of insults, so I can really finish big with this blog post.

Over the last several months, one of WWE's best wrestlers, Bray Wyatt, re-emerged from a hiatus with a creepy new character, The Fiend. He's basically a cross between Mr. Rogers and a cool-looking slasher from an independent horror movie. When they fast-tracked the popular heel ("bad guy" in wrestling lingo) into a match against Universal Champion, Seth Rollins, many expected the hapless champion to be picked off. But, once again, WWE disappointed, choosing to write a lame ending where The Fiend win's a No Disqualification match by... disqualification? Or wait, was it a stoppage because the referee wanted to get back to his hotel in time to catch Stephen Colbert's opening monologue?

The ending was a botch. That's wrestling lingo for a screwed up move. The live audience started shouting "AEW!", which is All Elite Wrestling, the new rival promotion that is headed up by Cody Rhodes, Kenny Omega, The Young Bucks and WWE veteran Chris Jericho. Not only do they have incredible talent, they also have the financial backing of the Khan family, who own the Jacksonville

Jaguars and a European soccer team that I'm too lazy to look up. The Khans have more money than the McMahon family, who own WWE. Nothing makes a billionaire more nervous than another billionaire with better ideas.

My guess as to why WWE wimped out on The Fiend is because they have another one of their blood money, cash-grabs in Saudia Arabia on Halloween. I mean, what better way to have The Fiend conquer the hopelessly dorky and hapless champion, Seth Rollins?

But the main reason I'm taking a breather from WWE's sleeper hold isn't the boring, predictable content. It's what went down last Friday night of Fox. See, one of their big shows, Smackdown, moved to network television for the first time. For months, announcers salivated at what was to come. With their cable ratings dwindling month-by-month, it was time to step up- especially since they'd have more people tuning in to see what pro wrestling in 2019 looks like.

Since they've knee-capped all of their modern talent with scripted promos and lame storylines, WWE had to rely on promoting the appearance of Hulk Hogan, Ric Flair and The Rock. Before anything happened, announcer Corey Graves screamed, "If you're not into this than you better check your pulse!" The only thing that had happened up until then was Vince and Stephanie McMahon came out to say, "Welcome to the show!" after his lame theme had played for about a minute or two.

Then some fireworks went off.

After that, The Rock's theme song played for about four minutes. Then he got to the ring and stared at the audience for about two minutes. I'm sure it was exciting if you were starstruck, in the arena, feeling awesome because you're in the same "room" as a famous dude. But the real problem was that, once he started talking, I just didn't like the smell of what The Rock was cookin'.

During a segment that featured current WWE Women's Champion and defiant curfew breaker, Becky Lynch, and the newly crowned King Corbin, The Rock decided he'd needle the heel, Corbin. Set up by Lynch's lame characterization of Corbin as a "Super Tough Dude", The Rock said, "because you're a super tough dude... these people are going to be chanting something they think every time they see you: S.T.D.!"

"S.T.D.! S.T.D.! S.T.D.!"

Becky punctuated the lukewarm Rock stew by informing Corbin that the chant would stick with him forever. You know, like herpes and HIV. Then they beat up Corbin- who had just spent weeks winning a grueling 16-man tournament in order to be crowned King of The Ring, discarding him from the ring like a bag of non-recyclable trash.

Oh but Shawn, it was just a joke!

OK, but a joke has to have some kind of premise. This was just a hot mess. How does The Rock

know what the crowd thinks of when they see King Corbin? That's awfully presumptuous. But The Rock is a confidant man and most of his hot takes on crowd reaction are spot on, hence his ability to connect. So let's assume he's projecting his own feelings onto the audience, and it is indeed The Rock who thinks about S.T.D.'s when he looks at Corbin… well, what is it, then, exactly? That he has tattoos? Or that he's well over 6 feet tall? Maybe it's the muscles, or the fact that Corbin is balding prematurely?

I have no idea. But if I told someone that there's this wrestler and man, I just can't think of his name.. let's see, he's tall, lots of muscles…. tattoos! He used to have more hair but decided to shave it off because it was going anyway… oh and he yammers on a lot more on the mic than he actually wrestles… "Oh, wait- are you talking about The Rock?"

Hell, I use "S.T.D." as a joke every time I'm at a speaking gig. I disclose that my initials are S.T.D. as a way to break the ice. It always gets a laugh. The audience by that point already knows I'm HIV positive and, by giving them the opportunity to laugh at the ridiculous coincidence, it shows them that I'm comfortable with my status. "Please, feel free to laugh if you hear anything funny- and feel free to ask me any questions you have about HIV."

Back to Smackdown… after that bit, the rest of the show chugged along at the usual plodding clip and, as always, WWE favored stars from other sports ("…real sports!") like MMA (Cain Velasquez) and boxing (Tyson Fury) over their own, misguided and mismanaged talent.

Don't get me wrong. I still love wrestling, which is at its best when it creates its own little world of make believe, where athletes compete against each other using the most ridiculous moves imaginable. Right now, in terms of live television, that is happening on Wednesday nights with AEW "Dynamite" on TNT and WWE's NXT on USA Network. NXT is where famous independent wrestlers and up-and-comers get their feet under them before an eventual (for some) move to "the main roster" of Raw or Smackdown, where terrible writing and commentating kills the magic that was so meticulously crafted on NXT. NXT thrives in large part because of WWE owner, Vince McMahon's, limited influence over the content.

In AEW, Cody Rhodes holds a lot of sway and, thus far, I'm impressed with what I've seen. Cody and his brother, Dustin (formerly "Goldust" in WWE), are sons of the legendary Dusty Rhodes, who became famous in an era where most of the people who watched wrestling thought it was real. Rhodes was a genius in the ring and then, subsequently, out of the ring. Before he passed, Dusty spent most of his time grooming the next NXT generation of wrestling stars for WWE. The influence of Dusty's spirit, Cody's modern-day sensibilities and Dustin's ability to make you believe what you are seeing is real makes AEW stand out.

Ultimately, when I watch wrestling, I want to forget about my own life for an hour or two. I want to be surprised in a good way, as opposed to the "S.T.D.!" chants that made me wonder how many people in that audience spent the rest of the night thinking about things other than wrestling. Anyone in that arena or watching on television living with an STI (Sexually Transmitted Infection) likely felt more stigmatized after seeing that.

Me? I’m out there. I’m public about my status. That joke seemed more juvenile and dated than personally offensive. But even though I’m over twenty years removed from a time when I wasn’t talking openly about being HIV positive, I can still recall the sick feeling in my stomach whenever an outside influence reminded me of my status. And more times than not, the takeaway was that it sucked to be me.

Perhaps my fascination with pro wrestling will stick with me my whole life. You know, like HIV. It’s probably because a huge turning point after my HIV diagnosis at age 11 was when my dad pulled a few strings and I was able to meet my favorite wrestler, Ric Flair. The overly confidant bad guy was just a real sweetheart when he posed for a picture with me, and the world opened up a little bit more. Anything seemed possible after that. Even, perhaps, my own survival.

I’m sure I’ll check back in with WWE at some point. And I’m sure I won’t agree with every creative decision that AEW and NXT have in store for me. But, for now, I’m just excited to be investing in programming that I’ll actually watch and not just skip through as it if were a commercial for a motorized scooter or overpriced, “military style” non-reflective sunglasses or The Rock’s next lamestream movie.

And, if you don’t like this blog entry, then I got four words for you:

Positively Yours,

Shawn Decker

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