When Wrestling Was Rasslin’

The Wild and Exciting Inside Story of Legendary Houston Wrestling

By

Peter Birkholz
FOREWORD

“Didn’t you used to be Peter Birkholz from Houston Wrestling?”

It starts with the question, then the recognition, then the smile. The people approaching my dad would talk about their favorite wrestler, favorite match or memory. They would explain how they were at the Sam Houston Coliseum every Friday night when there was a match, or how they watched the Houston Wrestling show every time it was on television. Yet there was something more to these memories than just the wrestling match—sometimes they had shared these precious moments with family and friends that had since passed. To them, Houston Wrestling was something special.

My dad is familiar with the song and dance of public recognition from his days as a professional wrestling promoter. It could come from an electrician making a house call who recognized him from his television show on Channel 39, or an older man in a bait shop right before a family fishing trip. Even my high school assistant principal turned out to be a big fan of “Haystack” Calhoun. It could be in a grocery store, gas station, or restaurant. No place is safe. Dad can always find a wrestling fan in the Houston area. I have often wondered--what is this “used to be” Peter Birkholz? He has always been my dad, and I never understood what the fuss was about. I knew that he was involved with promoting professional wrestling, and not many sons could say that about their father. However, it was not until he started
writing this book and began using my brother and me as sounding boards for his stories that I started to understand how special Houston Wrestling really was.

The legendary Houston Wrestling promotion may have rung its final bell decades ago, but it is kept alive through fans that still remember and appreciate its renowned history. Evidence of this can be found on countless Internet chat rooms where pictures, programs and memories are shared between wrestling fans—older fans who want to recollect their ringside experiences, and younger fans wondering what professional wrestling used to be. This was the era when men of honor ruled the ring, when the heels always cheated and still lost, and when the celebrated athletes of previous generations were still in their prime and no one could beat them. Wrestlers today often imitate these superstars of yesteryear, but they can never replicate Gorgeous George, Lou Thesz, Ed “Strangler” Lewis, or Buddy Rogers.

My dad’s book offers insight into the Houston Wrestling promotion that no one else can give. As a boy he viewed wrestling as any child would—the larger than life characters became his heroes! However, his life was different than most young wrestling fans. He had many opportunities to rub elbows with the giants of the ring. His uncle, Paul Boesch, was already in the professional wrestling business in Houston. The stars of the day that made their way through the territory could frequently be found at Boesch’s house or at family events. In his younger years, my dad mowed the yard for his uncle and would also mow the yard of “Dangerous” Danny McShane, who lived across the street from Paul. McShane was the nemesis of one of my dad’s favorite wrestlers, “El Medico.”

He, like most boys, imitated his favorites, and sometimes that got him into trouble. While in elementary school, the class bully broke his favorite crayon on purpose, and Dad responded with a classic “El Medico” brain buster. To his surprise it actually worked, sending the boy to the floor like a sack of potatoes. It was not enough to be in trouble with his teacher
and parents. The fact that he received a rebuke from “El Medico” himself makes this story complete.

Working the Houston Wrestling promotion was not just left to his uncle, Paul Boesch. The entire Birkholz family was into wrestling. His father John was a wrestler, referee, and a security guard at events, and his mother, Rosalie, worked the box office and often babysat wrestlers' children when they were in town. He and his older brothers, Bill and Howard, were successful amateur wrestlers. A dangerous combination when combined with the costumes from their mother’s dancing school. Whenever their parents were out of the house, the three boys donned the props from the dancing school, created wrestling alter-egos, and put together make-shift wrestling matches much to the delight of their babysitters. His younger sister, Denise, somehow survived growing up in a house with three wrestling older brothers and grew up to work the box office as well. It was a family business, and Dad, of course, worked there as well.

He started as a “go-fer,” taking care of small tasks and making sure the wrestlers had everything they needed. The older wrestlers took a liking to him, maybe it was because he reminded them of their sons they left back home while traveling, or maybe because they just liked seeing a young man working hard in the business which was their livelihood. They told him stories in the locker room or while on long car trips between venues, and he committed those tales to memory. When he shares these fantastic stories in this book, it is like you are hearing it straight from the legends themselves.

My dad took on more responsibilities as he grew older. He received a Masters in Business Administration from Sam Houston State, and eventually went back to teach management and marketing. With his business education in hand, he was conscripted to work full time for the family business. My dad's rise in Houston Wrestling wasn’t overnight; it took decades of hard work and dedication to become Paul Boesch’s “right hand”
and eventually put together his own promotions. It even took a fateful interview with Ernie Ladd for him to get in front of the camera instead of behind the scenes.

During this time, he got to meet an incredible cast of world-renowned wrestlers. He experienced the camaraderie of the dressing room before a match, the roar of the crowd in anticipation when the lights went out and the spotlight went on, and he knew the wrestlers as people when they were not in the ring. Some of them were larger than life like the characters they portrayed, some were professional athletes that found themselves in the ring for a few extra dollars, and others were normal family men trying to make a living. However, most of them wrestled because they loved wrestling and everything that it entailed.

By the time he was ready to be the named successor of Houston Wrestling, the era of regional wrestling promotions was in its twilight. The game stopped being about local wrestlers, fans, and matches, and became a fight for survival. The industry changed into a war between traditional regional promotions and the unstoppable national wrestling promotions that forever changed professional wrestling. This war was waged in television contracts, big mergers, backroom deals, and other bloodless business battles. In this book, my dad will explain what was really going on during the last years of the promotion.

Unfortunately, I do not have many wrestling memories to share. I was born in 1984, when the “die was already cast.” It was the beginning of the end. My Houston Wrestling memories are faded, as much a mix of fantasy and reality as wrestling itself. I was only three or four at the time. My dad took me to the matches and sat me in the highest corner away from the entire crowd. I remember the Road Warriors in their red and black make-up, wild hair, and shoulder pads with spikes. Ric Flair’s robe was particularly impressive—even from the “nosebleed” seats you could see it shimmer in the light. I recall
the sound of a body slam against the mat and the roar of the crowd that followed; all of the sights and sounds that a night of Houston Wrestling had to offer. If you were there, you would remember as well.

However, I have one profound memory that stands out from the rest. My father sat me in my usual spot, the highest chair at the highest corner away from the action. He had to go work on something, but left me in the eyesight of my great-uncle Paul Boesch who was standing on the arena floor, surveying the entire scene. He watched the wrestlers in the ring, the reaction of the crowd, the admiration of the event. This had to be one of the last promotions that included the legendary promoter, the summation of a lifetime of work. I cannot imagine what was going through his head. Could he have been reflecting on Houston Wrestling’s past? He might have been thinking about all the memories he had in the Sam Houston Coliseum, the cast and characters who made their way down the aisle and into the ring. Or was he, knowing that his era was over, just enjoying the match like everyone else? Did he, in that brief moment, become another spectator caught in the wild spills and thrills that made professional wrestling fans go crazy? I’ll never know. My great Uncle Paul died of heart failure in 1989.

The Houston Wrestling offices were long ago shut down, and then torn down to make way for a parking lot. The Sam Houston Coliseum, a venue for numerous events, parted with its wrestling heritage like a garage sale before it, too, was brought to the ground to make way for progress. All that is physically left of Houston Wrestling are the programs and pictures shared in countless Internet chat rooms, and the heirlooms such as chairs, turnbuckles, and signs collecting dust in some attic or garage in the Houston area, or, worse, sold to the highest bidder online. But to those who were a part of Houston Wrestling—either as a wrestler, a fan, or somewhere in-between—Houston Wrestling will never be forgotten.
When Wrestling Was Rasslin’ is a celebration of the legacy of Houston Wrestling. Everyone who was anyone wrestled in Houston, and this book is a chronicle of wrestlers, events, and matches that cover an entire century of classic Houston Wrestling action. Armed with a one-of-a-kind collection of wrestling programs that goes back decades, and his memory of events through his own eyes and experiences, my dad opens the door to the past, allowing us to not only remember the legendary matches, but the legendary wrestlers. His insight is unparalleled; no one else can tell this story like he can.

If you consider yourself a fan of Houston Wrestling, while reading this book you can put yourself in your favorite seat in the coliseum, and relive the excitement as you turn each page. I hope you enjoy the stories as much as my dad enjoyed writing them.

Peter Allan Birkholz Jr.
THE WARM UP

There is an old Native American saying that states it takes a “thousand voices” to tell a story. Never has this been more true than in the story you are about to read. For this story is going to be told by a storyteller who has listened to a “thousand voices” and has experienced a thousand Houston Wrestling events as a child, teenager, member of a wrestling family, wrestling television producer, and wrestling promoter.

For over twenty years, numerous wrestling fans, friends and family members have encouraged me to write a book on Houston Wrestling—the promotion, the television show, the phenomenon. They felt it was a story that should be told by someone who knew and lived it. I have never thought of myself as an author, but I do enjoy telling a story, especially a great story.

The story of the legendary Houston Wrestling is just that—a great story! A great story that features many of professional wrestling’s greatest superstars and fascinating folklore, along with some of the most creative innovations in the history of the sport and plenty of history-making events involving the legendary Houston Wrestling promotion. It is a story that any storyteller would be anxious to tell.

I was blessed to work with my uncle, the legendary Paul Boesch, for over twenty-five years. I had the privilege of growing up in a wrestling family because both my uncle and my father wrestled professionally. I was fortunate to work in the Houston Wrestling promotion, one of the most famous wrestling promotions in the history of the business. I also had the opportunity to listen to some of the greatest storytellers in the wrestling world. Among them were such greats and legends as Lou Thesz, Bronko Nagurski, Ernie Ladd, Nick Bockwinkel,
Paul Boesch, Bronko Lubich, Fritz Von Erich, John Birkholz, Wahoo McDaniel, Jose Lothario, Johnny Valentine and dozens of other superstars.

I will make every effort to keep this story as factual as possible; however, please bear in mind that much of this story is comprised of a “thousand voices.” Many of the tales were heard through several generations. There will be parts of this story that are comprised of historical records written by others who, despite their best efforts, may not have been one hundred percent correct. Parts of this story are based on my own collection of Houston Wrestling programs that listed wrestlers on the weekly cards and chronicled major professional wrestling news. Parts of this story have also been told hundreds of times before they reached the ears of this storyteller. Finally, parts of this story will be told through the eyes and perspective of a storyteller who loved Houston Wrestling and, being only human, is vulnerable to recollections, emotions and perspectives that have been weathered by time.

How does a storyteller separate fact from folklore? Should he even try? Could it be that the wonderful combination of fact and folklore is what turns a story into a great story?

The bell has sounded! The floodgates have opened and thousands of stories are pouring out. Some of these stories are over a hundred years old. Other stories have never been written. Until now.

Houston Wrestling is truly a great and wonderful story. And I love to tell a great story!

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Interested in reading more? The rest of “When Wrestling was Rassling: The Wild and Exciting Inside Story of Legendary Houston Wrestling” is available at Amazon.com in Kindle and paperback format, as well as Lulu.com in paperback format. Visit www.whenwrestlingwasrasslin.com for more information.