

Todd Martin's WWE Raw TV report

WWE Raw Report

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The Big News: There's a new world champion, and I've seen him wrestle on more indy shows than Triple H or Edge.

Show Analysis:

At the start of the show, Shane McMahon said that Vince McMahon is in fact really a private person. That line had to be intended as comedy. Shane further declared "we won't be forthcoming" with his physical condition. This was more fine comedy. Like any real person who was not being forthcoming ever explicitly said that he was not being forthcoming. Shane called for the people to pull together in this time of uncertainty, which was booed. This angle means nothing.

Jim Ross came out to give a farewell statement. It was nice for them to let him speak in Oklahoma and also a smart move to try to counter any potential backlash. Ross said that it was an honor to be at home. He said that he is excited to be the voice of Smackdown, which was booed. He thanked Jerry Lawler and put over Michael Cole as a hard worker and a friend. Cole was of course not warmly received, but he did a good job in his first week. Ross added that he hopes fans will join him on Smackdown.

Edge eventually interrupted (it felt like they missed the cue and Ross was left out there to ramble for an extra couple minutes). Edge criticized Ross for being arrogant and said that nobody cares about him. Edge said now Ross will get to commentate for him, but Ross wasn't having it. So Edge had the Naturals escort Ross from the building.

Edge pointed out Raw has no GM and no world champion, and added that Raw wrestlers will never have another shot at his title. He gloated and started to leave, but Batista came out. Batista assaulted Edge and laid him out with a Batista bomb. At that point, CM Punk ran out with a referee and cashed in the Money in the Bank briefcase. He hit the GTS and scored the pin. The crowd reaction for this was underwhelming.

Mickie James beat Jillian Hall, who resumed her horrible singing gimmick. It feels kind of unfair that after all the Hogan family drama that it's Brooke who is still being made fun of. Mickie won the match with punches, a spinning head scissors on the floor and a head kick for the pin.

Rey Mysterio came out for an introduction speech. Lilian Garcia pronounced his name correctly, so props to her. Rey congratulated Punk and said he's happy to be on Raw. Santino interrupted. He welcomed Rey but said anyone who hides behind a mask is either incredibly ugly (Super Porky), incredibly stupid (Juventud Guerrera) or the Bat Man (Val Kilmer). Santino complained about Rey appearing on the cover of WWE Magazine instead of Santino. Santino finally gave Rey a chance to speak, but Rey attacked him and gave him the 619. Santino was hilarious here.

Punk backstage thanked Batista for the assist and said he feels awesome. JBL came in and asked how Punk could feel good about winning a title by defeating a defenseless man. Who's the heel here? JBL called

Punk a paper champion and an asterisk and challenged him to a title match. Punk accepted.

John Cena came out, and put over his match with HHH as a match that will go down in history. Sure, John. He used the new “WWE universe” phrase which is cheesy as hell. He further talked about how Punk winning the title will go down in history. He noted that he likes Punk because Punk used his brains and would accept a challenge from anyone. He said he should wrestle Punk for the title, and asked fans whether they would rather see Punk face JBL or Cena.

JBL interrupted, and announced he is declaring martial law. I like that as a concept on a number of levels. Having wrestlers resolve their issues rather than general managers makes the wrestlers feel more important. JBL brought in private security, and together they removed Cena from the building. Cena in his promo was off the charts obnoxious. Cena’s promos are frequently scripted in an obnoxious manner, but this one was so bad. He came across as this annoying, dishonest carnie cheerleader.

Cody Rhodes and Ted DiBiase beat Darren Wade and Steve Anthony. DiBiase used his father’s fist drop and Cody hit a DDT for the pin. I like these guys as a heel pairing, but this is going to take time. There was a shocking lack of heat for them. I mean, it’s not like I expected much, but Cody did turn heel last night and there wasn’t even mild booing. Instead they were greeted with deafening apathy.

After the match, Cody said that fans wanted to know why he turned on Hardcore Holly. I saw no evidence whatsoever of that. He continued anyway. He said that paying his dues sucked when he had to carry Holly’s worthless career. Cody added that he’s not patient, and he’s too talented to have to pay dues. DiBiase asserted that young people are nothing but obedient sheep, while they took matters into their own hands.

Jamie Noble introduced himself to Katie Lea. He said he’s going to get respect on Raw prison rules style, by going up to the biggest guy and drawing the line in the sand. Kane was there, so Katie encouraged him to prove his point against Kane. Noble told Kane not to listen to his Larry the Cable Guy tapes without his permission, and told a threatening knock-knock choke. Kane grabbed him by the throat, but Noble kicked him and ran away. Kane chased him to the ring and choke slammed him on the announce table.

WWE has these tacky new “Did you know” graphics, which are nothing but shameless promotional points about WWE business. Come on, WWE, you can find a more organic way to put yourself over. “Did you know” is supposed to reveal interesting tidbits, not trumpet how many video games you’ve sold.

Chris Jericho came to the ring and said he was swindled out of the title and burglarized and the fans cheered at his misfortune. Jericho continued that Shawn Michaels’ eye is a serious problem and he is endangering himself by continuing. Jericho challenged Michaels to a match at the Great American Bash and said he would take something valuable from Shawn Michaels.

Kofi Kingston then beat Chris Jericho via DQ. Jericho slapped him around and worked him over. Kingston came back with a leg drop, but Jericho hit an enzuigiri, bulldog and lionsault. Kingston rolled up Jericho and grabbed the tights, but Jericho rolled through and grabbed the tights himself. At this point, the referee inexplicably disqualified Jericho. The crowd booed and the face/heel dynamic was completely out of whack.

This was such a stupid, crappy finish. Wrestlers have grabbed the tights in tens of thousands of matches and they never, ever get disqualified for it. The referee just refuses to count the pinfall. This made about as much sense as a referee randomly in one match insisting that a four count is needed for a pin. Kingston looked like such a loser celebrating this victory, but Jericho attacked him and went after his eye.

CM Punk beat JBL. JBL's security was at ringside. Punk used an arm drag and knees. JBL hit a clothesline on the floor and followed with a sleeper. Punk hit a bulldog, high knee and springboard clothesline. John Cena and Cryme Tyme showed up and took out the private security. That allowed Punk to hit go 2 sleep for the pin.

Final Thoughts:

Wow. Okay, so there is a lot to talk about on this show. We will have to see how they follow through, but this might be the most noteworthy edition of Raw in a very long time. After years of burying young talent, this was the week where WWE woke up and made a concerted and obvious effort to reshape the card and get over a bunch of new talent.

This is an exceedingly positive development. WWE booking over the past year or so I think has on balance been pretty good. It hasn't been inspired, but it has been for the most part logical and not insulting. The big problem has been that the same guys are always on top, and it makes the product feel stale. Well, WWE seems determined to rectify that.

Up and down the card you can see efforts to get over new talent. Lance Cade is associated with Chris Jericho. Cryme Tyme is associated with John Cena. CM Punk, Kofi Kingston, Cody Rhodes and Ted DiBiase are champions. Jamie Noble and Santino Marella appear to be entering into more high profile feuds. As a trend, this is a positive development.

However, WWE if it is going to continue in this direction needs to have patience. They have spent too much time teaching fans that if you're not a star you don't mean shit. You can't overcome that assumption in a week or even a month. It's going to take a lot of time, and there are going to be growing pains. At first a lot of these guys are going to be greeted with complete apathy. WWE needs to have patience, and see over time which guys appear to be getting over.

This show felt very fresh and new, and that's a positive. But I don't think that the returns are going to come in ratings or pay-per-view buy rates immediately. If anything, they may go down in the short term. But there's nothing that can be done about that. I'm a big advocate of trying to freshen up the card.

In theory, I love what WWE is trying to do. In practice, I'm not quite so enthusiastic. The biggest example of WWE's new Raw philosophy was CM Punk winning the world title. As far as that particular move goes, WWE doesn't get high marks. I like the idea of elevating Punk, but I wasn't a big fan of the execution.

To begin with, Punk has just been buried on ECW. He lost so many times to so many nobodies. He badly needed rehabilitation before getting the title. This is an argument for more in the way of long term booking. If you're going to elevate a guy, you need to set the fans up for it so when it happens they will be totally into it. If it comes out of the blue, there's a much greater chance the audience will reject the guy.

I also didn't like the way Punk won the title at all. He won like a chickenshit. He let someone else beat up the champion and then took advantage like a coward. That's a clever way to present a heel, but

it's no way for a face to win the title. If they thought enough of Punk to give him the title, they should have done so in a manner that told fans they were serious. The way he used the backdoor to get the title kind of buried Raw as well.

A final note on the Punk title switch is again the two main titles have switched brands. I saved my rant on the concept of the draft this year because I've made it before, but I want to make my point on the titles and the draft again.

The notion of a championship is that it proves you are the best at something. If the title doesn't symbolize that, it's hard to get people to care to see a championship match. Two titles already undermines the idea of a championship, but at least you can think that one title means you are the best wrestler on Raw and the other means you are the best wrestler on Smackdown.

However, when the titles are flipped it undermines the whole idea. Triple H hasn't proven he is better than the wrestlers on Smackdown. CM Punk hasn't proven he is better than the wrestlers on Raw. Instead, the titles are essentially props – shiny belts to fight over but that don't have any fundamental meaning. Even if fans aren't consciously thinking about this, I think it really undermines the ability to sell the company's title matches.

Well, that's Raw. I've got a couple of things to plug this week. First, I've got a new piece up at <http://www.mmapayout.com> discussing the most important fighters to the business of mixed martial arts. I think it's a really interesting read and I suspect it will spark some debate. Part I is up now and part II will be up tomorrow.

Second, there's a lot of UFC 86 coverage by me this week at CBSsports.com. Coming up is a piece on the Quinton Jackson-Forrest Griffin fight, as well as the staff preview featuring picks from myself and other writers. Then I will be back live blogging from Octagonside in Vegas Saturday night with all the preliminary results and thoughts from the card. That was well received last time, so please check it out at the CBS MMA section on Saturday.

Finally, I want to close by making mention of the passing of James Melroy, a writer for the Long Beach Press Telegram. James was an avid wrestling and MMA fan, and was helpful and kind to me when I moved to Los Angeles. He was a funny and smart guy, and he passed away way too early. I'm going to miss him a lot. You can read more about James here: http://origin.presselegram.com/news/ci_9723217

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