

Dan Wahlers on Chris Benoit and the Hall of Fame.

Chris Benoit Should Remain in The WON HOF

njguy316@yahoo.com

It's Wrestling Observer Hall of Fame season again. Ballots have gone out to the usual suspects of current and former wrestlers, current and former management figures, historians, and reporters. The WON HOF is considered one of the most well respected Hall of Fames covering the sport of wrestling, because it's not a popularity contest, or whomever Vince McMahon is on good terms with at the time, like the WWE Hall of Fame. It's a Hall of Fame that has very specific criteria based on a number of factors. A candidate should have a combination of drawing power, being a great in-ring performer, and historical significance. So only the best of the best are selected for this elite group. I'm honored to have a vote in the process, and it's a job I take extremely seriously.

This year is different than any other voting season, because it's not just about choosing wrestlers and non-wrestling performers this time around. There is a question that voters have to ask themselves and answer as part of the balloting process. This year there is the first (and hopefully) last recall vote to determine whether Chris Benoit should remain in the WON HOF, after he murdered his wife and son that tragic weekend in June 2007. Much like the NFL and Major League Baseball would do in a similar situation, the question on whether Benoit should remain in the WON HOF has been put to the voters. If 60% of the voters vote "No", his name will be stricken from the HOF records permanently.

Chris Benoit was elected to the WON HOF in 2003, after being mentioned on 61% of the ballots, and receiving two more votes than the required number to be inducted. In order to be selected, a performer must be named on 60% or more of the ballots from his or her particular geographic region. It could be said that Benoit was voted in almost solely based on his in-ring skills, and the fact that he was and is widely regarded as one of the greatest workers of all-time. He certainly didn't bring much to the table in terms of drawing power. Historical significance can be debated. Certainly his historical significance after June 25, 2007 will be much greater than anything he ever accomplished during his wrestling career. There is no doubt about that. But this vote took place in 2003, and in my mind, it shouldn't be about what happened four years later.

I don't believe Chris Benoit should be removed from the WON HOF, and I will be voting "Yes" on the recall question to keep him in. I know a lot of people probably won't agree with that decision, but let me explain myself. If you were reading this column last June when the shocking events went down, you know my feelings on Chris Benoit. I was one of the first writers in the internet wrestling community to have an opinion piece about the murders published, and I made my stance very clear. If you didn't get a chance to read that article at the time, or you'd like to read it again, please e-mail me and I'd be happy to send it to you. With the switch over from the old WO.com site, the column doesn't exist in easy access on the net.

What Benoit did was indefensible. There is no excuse for it. There may be reasons and factors that contributed to his mindset with the head injuries and the overuse of prescription painkillers and steroids, and might explain why he did what he did. But there are no excuses. There is no way you can ever excuse a man murdering his own son, let alone his wife. Those actions that Chris took on that faithful day will tarnish his wrestling legacy forever. That's the reality of the situation, and that's the way it has to be when you do something as heinous and unforgivable as what Chris Benoit did. However, I don't believe that we need to tarnish his wrestling legacy anymore than it already has been, and anymore than it will be forever, as long as the history of wrestling is written about.

My reasoning for that is very simple. Benoit was voted into the WON HOF in 2003 by a panel of his peers in the wrestling business, including people he worked with, former wrestlers, industry executives, wrestling historians, and people that write about and analyze wrestling for various well respected print and online publications. I didn't have a vote at the time, but if I did, I'd have voted for him. His career to that point and in the years following up to his death last year make him a no brainer for the Hall of Fame in my view. The vote took place in 2003, and was based on Benoit's

accomplishments and successes up to that point

If he hadn't been elected in 2003, and let's say he were a new candidate on the ballot this year, then absolutely what happened in 2007 would be a major part of his candidacy. Just like his role in covering up and lying under oath about the murder of Bruiser Brody is a major part of the candidacy of Puerto Rican great Carlos Colon, as far as I'm concerned, and one of the main reasons why he hasn't been elected yet. When wrestlers are up for an honor like this, the way they conducted themselves and lived their lives should be looked at while also examining their wrestling career. I'm not saying someone's personal life should be the deciding factor in whether to vote for someone or not, but you wouldn't be doing your job as a voter if you didn't look at all the factors.

Looking at all the factors, I honestly don't know if I would vote for Chris Benoit if he were a new candidate today. That would be something I would have to sit down, and think long and hard about. But I don't have to do that, because the decision on whether Chris Benoit is a Hall of Fame wrestler was made five years ago by a group of people that I have the utmost respect for. His election was based on his wrestling career up to 2003, not up to 2007. If he were a new candidate this year, that would be a totally different situation. But he's not, and it would be silly to remove him for something that happened four years after he was voted in by an expert panel.

I'm not in any way condoning or trying to brush aside the fact that he murdered his wife and son, which I would hope most intelligent people will understand. Whatever respect and admiration I had for Chris Benoit went away when he committed those reprehensible acts. He is being forever and eternally punished for those actions, you can bet on that, whatever your religious beliefs may be. He can't be punished for his actions here on this earth, but it gets awfully hot in Hell around this time of year, or so I hear, anyway.

He's also being punished by having the wrestling legacy that he busted his ass so hard for over 20 years to achieve tarnished and ruined forever, and deservedly so. He will more than likely never be mentioned on a WWE wrestling show again. That means a great deal to someone that took his wrestling career as seriously as Chris Benoit did. He made the decision to do what he did, and in turn he flushed his wrestling legacy down the toilet. There are consequences for every decision you make in life.

With all of that said, I just don't see the point in removing Benoit from a Hall of Fame that he was previously elected to. And the "previously elected" part is what saves him in this instance, in my humble opinion. That's why I will be voting to Benoit remaining in the Hall of Fame, and I urge all of my fellow Hall of Fame voters to do the same. Voting is open until Thursday August 7th.

Thanks for reading. Until next time, take care and be well.

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