

Ben Miller on WWE no longer promoting like sport

SERIAL KILLING

By Ben Miller

“I gotta tell you, it’s all in the storyline.”

-Vince Russo, September 22, 1999

Vince Russo, progenitor. Those three words may not cause Vince McMahon’s heart to palpitate quite like “state athletic commission”, but they must be at the very least annoying.

It was nearly ten years ago that Vince Russo granted me his first interview discussing his job as the WWF’s head writer and his overall views on professional wrestling. While that interview ended up being much more famous for comments that helped Sonny Oono and company successfully sue WCW for racial discrimination, Mr. Russo’s most interesting ideas were about the changing nature of the business. He thought, as the McMahons think today, that wrestling needs to more of a serial business than an event business. He thought that long running storylines put butts in front of television sets, not worked athletic competition.

With the recent Wrestling Observer Newsletter cover story on the same topic (November 10, 2008 issue), the debate over whether wrestling works better as a serial-based business or event-based business has begun anew. To long time fans like myself and my friends, the answer is clear: we like events. We certainly like stories building up our events, but we are not tuning in to a wrestling show in hopes of seeing bad acting and attempts at campy comedy.

The question is not one of personal taste, however. It may be true that my decision to purchase Wrestlemania tickets again this year was more tortured than in years past (though the prospect of a government spending investment-induced economic contraction played no small role), but in the end the types of fans who look forward to the Battle of Los Angeles every year hardly matter to WWE. The real question is which path leads to the greater overall success of the company.

The argument that professional wrestling realizes greater success when booked based on big events has history behind it. In every era of professional wrestling dating back over one hundred years, promoters have gotten wealthy building main event matches. The storytelling medium has changed over time “ newspapers to radio to television to the Internet “ but the fact that stories have always built to an ultimate match has always remained.

Even in today’s WWE, the building of stories that pay off with big event matches still exists to some degree. Pay-per-view could not function without it. First time matches, gimmick matches and blowoff matches still receive significant attention, even if attempts at comedy seem to often be the focus of weekly television shows.

The success of MMA and the similarity of traditional pro wrestling to MMA also supports the notion that pro wrestling should be event-based. Creating archetypal stories of conflict between two competing athletes has led to many of the most successful UFC shows. There is certainly an argument that if pro wrestling promoters returned to that style of booking, similar pay-per-view success would follow.

There is a counterargument to this idea of event-based booking, and it in some ways also arises from the success of

UFC: the information age has killed the possibility of worked sports being promoted around events.

Why do people buy UFC shows? Certainly the stories and the personalities built from those stories play a part. But UFC would sell a tiny fraction of what they sell today if people knew what would happen in advance. Sports, which are fundamentally event-based, derive much of their appeal from the conflict that arises in the unknown. Both sides believe they are superior, but the only way to prove it is to set up some ground rules and go to war.

There is great incentive for a fan to watch a sporting event as it plays out because of the inherent drama that cannot be replicated by simply reading a result. Moreover, intense fandom leads to even more drama during the event because viewers begin to understand the strategy and actions that build to actions in the arena.

In wrestling and other dramatic mediums, intense fandom has the opposite effect. While hardcore fans of movies and television shows can rewatch their favorites repeatedly and enjoy the unfolding of the story, their knowledge of the product often makes events more predictable. As the audience becomes more deeply involved they may want to see more of their favorite characters, but they are also likely to absorb storytelling conventions that lead to predictability.

For WWE and other wrestling promotions, the age of instant information has only exacerbated this effect. Whether it concerns MMA, movies or wrestling, people gain reasonable levels of knowledge faster than ever before. That may lead to greater interest in big sporting events, but in scripted entertainment it usually leads to demand for more stories, not bigger stories.

WWE is stuck in a difficult position. There is no question that sports-like event promotion has the potential to draw bigger buyrates, allow for longer careers and lessen the pressure on the creative team. There is also no question that increased access to information makes promoting a worked sports-like event more difficult than ever before. The McMahons seem to have cast their lot as a serial-based promotion and they may never be able to go back. Their job now is to create characters and storylines that ensure that the serial-based style of promotion won't get killed, too.

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