

John Wiswell ranks the year's best 100 matches

.The Riren 100

By John Wiswell

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Section A: Why Write This?

Welcome to my top 100 matches of the year. If you just want the list, skip to Section B. Section C is the meat, with countdown and review of every match. Most of these thoughts were written months apart as I watched the individual shows, edited at multiple periods throughout the year. Writing all this in one weekend would probably kill me, but taking a few minutes to write about a great match is a good way to reflect on our collective hobby, especially in this period when so many people have mistaken "criticism" to mean "stuff I hated." So this list is a response to those Top Fives and Top Tens that seem so sad, as with seven hours of wrestling on TV in the U.S. per week and numerous indies, if you only saw five matches you want to celebrate you really need a new hobby. This is something we love. Each match in both Section B and C list the wrestlers, the date, the company and the show name, so you can track down the episode or DVD of anything you like.

The list covers every WWE and TNA pay per view as well as their television shows. I'm pretty sure that if it weren't for my local library intervening I would have irrevocable brain damage. But you'll notice most of the matches aren't from those two companies. The list expands to every ROH DVD and PPV this year, and all the Pro Wrestling Guerrilla, Chikara Pro and IWA: Mid South I could get my hands on. Miscellaneous North American indies, such as IWS, got fewer viewings, but if readers have any matches they want considered, they can submit them to riren100@gmail.com. I've regularly watched NJPW, NOAH, Zero-1 and Dragon Gate, with a handful of AJPW, El Dorado, SEM, DDT, BJW, general Joshi and Battlarts on the side. A match must be watched at least twice to be on the list, as you can't have a full grasp of a match in just one viewing. Again if you feel a match is unrepresented, feel free to drop me a line. Honestly my only regret in putting the list together is the absence of Lucha in my life, which comes from not getting the proper television stations. That, and I'd like to go outside every so often. Maybe read a book.

A list like this brings up the fundamental problems of comparing wrestling matches. For instance, there is no such thing as the one formula for a great match. Not every tag match has to have a Ricky Morton character selling his way up to the hot tag under the oppression of a Midnight Express. Not every great singles match needs to be a Hart Dungeon technical clinic. The formula or story wrestlers try to tell can be just as important as how they tell it, and a variety of things succeed. Shawn Michaels can make a match more compelling by showing a leg injury in every motion he makes, while Samoa Joe can make a match just as compelling by noticeably ignoring that same pain, and Umaga may add to his aura by completely disregarding everything an opponent throws at him. The psychology of how and what to show in response to an opponent's offense is one of many factors that can make a match shine. Many things come into play, and different features become the basis of different matches: the way moves are executed, the kinds that are used, how they're pulled together, the characters that are established, the physical chemistry, how they play the audience, general audience participation, how sympathetic or convincing selling is, the tenacity shown by someone who fights against injury or physical limitations, the story that is told, how the performance resonates with the style of the company. Rather, it's how things work and what qualities come together that make a match, and they can come together in many different wildly entertaining ways. The importance in a list like this is less ranking one match above another, and more recognizing the many successful works in this art.

How are we supposed to compare matches without a rubric? Usually I hate comparing them, and generally avoid the practice except in this annual column. How the heck are you supposed to judge Michaels and Jericho's Ladder Match against McGuinness and Danielson's mat fare in Japan? A comedy tag against a hardcore war? The truth is that one match at this level is seldom truly better than another. One match does certain things that another doesn't, or does those things better. Especially in comparing your favorite matches of a year, you'll find they are both better than each other at specific things. One has a perfect ending and frequent references to wrestling history, while another has more passion and more amazing highspots. Usually the best match of the year is the one that did the best at the things you care for the most. And in that spirit, I admit that most of these rankings are intuitive and based on personal preferences. I'll also accuse that every other list is, too. The goal really isn't to determine #1, #2 and #3, but to gather a hundred matches I loved and hope it resonates with others.

Despite all that, I expect hate mail for putting a comedy battle royale as high as I did.

Because I couldn't provide a timely update to the list last year, one match from the very end of 2007 that demands recognition will appear on the 2008 list. Every December wrestling critics face this problem with the dead zone of releases: not everything that happened in 2008 is yet available for viewing. Pro Wrestling NOAH is infamous for releasing matches long after they happen, PWG has yet to release its Battle of Los Angeles tournament, which is infamous for having at least one must-see match, and ROH still has several releases to go. Starting this year (or technically, next year) each Riren 100 will be updated in the March-April period when everything from various companies has been released. In that interim I welcome any readers to submit other matches for consideration or re-consideration.

Given that there are a hundred matches, I'm sure you'll disagree with at least one being ahead of another. And even though there are a hundred, I'm sure there are some you think I missed or was a bastard to exclude – I had 28 matches on my "short list" alone that I had to cut. But know that any criticism of match placement is less interesting than your response to what I actually wrote about the match. If you have a gripe, your own list (even just a Top 3), or if you have other matches you want to see praised, I encourage you drop a comment on pulsewrestling.com, or e-mail me at Riren100@gmail.com.

Section B: The List

1. Kenta Kobashi, KENTA, Atsushi Aoki & Akihito Ito Vs. Kensuke Sasaki, Katshuhiko Nakajima, Takashi Okita & Kento Miyahara (August 17) – Pro Wrestling SEM and Kensuke Office: SEMex: Take The Dream Vol. 6
2. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Austin Aries (taped December 26, 2007, aired March 7) - ROH: Rising Above
3. Edge Vs. The Undertaker (August 17) – Hell in a Cell Match from WWE: Summerslam
4. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Chris Sabin & Alex Shelley (April 18) – ROH: Tag Wars 2008
5. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Bryan Danielson Vs. Claudio Castagnoli Vs. Tyler Black (August 2) – Four Corner Elimination from Death Before Dishonor 6
6. Bryan Danielson Vs. Claudio Castagnoli (July 25) – ROH: Northern Navigation
7. Kenta Kobashi, Tamon Honda & Shuhei Taniguchi Vs. Takeshi Morishima, Takashi Sugiura & Naomichi Marufuji (February 21) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Second Navigation at the Osaka Prefectural Gymnasium #2
8. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Jay & Mark Briscoe (March 29) - Relaxed Rules Match from ROH: Supercard of Honor 3
9. Kenta Kobashi & KENTA Vs. Kensuke Sasaki & Katsuhiko Nakajima (June 14) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Great Voyage 2008 in Yokohama
10. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Austin Aries & Bryan Danielson (June 7) – ROH: Respect is Earned 2
11. Shawn Michaels Vs. Chris Jericho (October 5) – Ladder Match from WWE: No Mercy
12. Austin Aries Vs. Jimmy Jacobs (June 28) – ROH: Vendetta 2
13. Muscle Sakai Vs. Brother YASSHI Vs. Takaku Fuke Vs. Fuuka Vs. Tetsuya Naito Vs. Ippei Ota Vs. Seiya Sanada Vs. Hikaru Sato Vs. Kiku-Jumbo Vs. Akira-Araya Vs. KUSHIDA Vs. TAKEMURA Vs. Danshoku Dino Vs. Sanshiro Chono (June 17) – 14-person inter-gender inter-weight-class Battle Royale from Minoru Suzuki's 20x2th Birthday Party
14. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Austin Aries (March 29) – ROH: Supercard of Honor 3
15. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Kevin Steen & El Generico (September 19) – ROH: Driven 2008
16. Nigel McGuinness Vs. El Generico (August 15) - ROH: Age of Insanity
17. Bryan Danielson Vs. Tyler Black (July 26) – ROH: New Horizons
18. Hiroshi Tanahashi Vs. Suwama (April 9) – AJPW: Champions Carnival 2008
19. Austin Aries Vs. Go Shiozaki (February 23) - ROH: Sixth Anniversary Show
20. The Royal Rumble Match (January 27) – WWE: Royal Rumble
21. Jay & Mark Briscoe Vs. Naomichi Marufuji & Takashi Sugiura (March 2) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Second Navigation at the Nippon Budokan
22. Austin Aries Vs. Bryan Danielson (taped March 16, aired May 29) – ROH: Take No Prisoners
23. Naomichi Marufuji & Katsuhiko Nakajima Vs. KENTA & Kota Ibushi (September 14) – ROH: The Tokyo Summit
24. HHH Vs. Umaga Vs. Jeff Hardy Vs. JBL Vs. Chris Jericho Vs. Shawn Michaels (February 17) – Elimination Chamber Match from WWE: No Way Out
25. Takeshi Morishima Vs. Kensuke Sasaki (September 6) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Shiny Navigation 2008
26. Kevin Steen & El Generico Vs. Naruki Doi & Masato Yoshino (March 28) – Ring of Honor: Dragon Gate Challenge 2
27. Jimmy Jacobs Vs. BJ Whitmer (April 12) – No Rope Barbed Wire Match from IWA: MS: April Bloodshowers
28. KENTA & Taiji Ishimori Vs. Kotaro Suzuki & Yoshinobu Kanemaru (December 7) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Winter Navigation 2008
29. Jay & Mark Briscoe Vs. Chris Sabin & Alex Shelley (April 19) – ROH: Return Engagement
30. Austin Aries Vs. Erick Stevens (January 11) – FIP Title Match at ROH: Proving Ground
31. Takeshi Morishima Vs. Takashi Sugiura (June 14) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Great Voyage 2008 in Yokohama
32. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Bryan Danielson (February 23) - ROH: Sixth Anniversary Show
33. Mike Quackenbush Vs. Johnny Saint (March 8) – World of Sport Rules Match from Westside Xtreme Wrestling: 16 Carat Gold Tournament Night 2
34. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Tyler Black (taped March 16, aired May 29) – ROH: Take No Prisoners
35. Kurt Angle Vs. Yuji Nagata (January 4) – NJPW: Wrestle Kingdom 2
36. Masato Tanaka Vs. Manabu Nakanishi (April 6) – Zero 1 Max: Miracle Rocket: 2nd Impact
37. Kurt Angle Vs. AJ Styles (August 10) – "Last Man Standing Match" that was actually a Texas Death Match from TNA: Hard Justice
38. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Bryan Danielson (September 13) – ROH: Battle of the Best
39. Aja Kong Vs. Meiko Satomura (October 26) – Sendai Girls
40. Brent Albright Vs. Adam Pearce (August 2) - Death Before Dishonor 6

41. Bryan Danielson Vs. Low Ki (January 5) – PWG: All Star Weekend 6 Night 1
42. Austin Aries Vs. Go Shiozaki (October 24) – FIP Title Match from ROH: Return of 187
43. Roderick Strong Vs. Erick Stevens (February 16) – Full Impact Pro: Redefined
44. Shawn Michaels Vs. Jeff Hardy (February 11) – WWE: Raw
45. Minoru Fujita & Takuya Sugawara Vs. Ikuto Hidaka & Munenori Sawa (August 3) – Zero-1: Fire Festival 2008
46. Umaga Vs. Jeff Hardy (January 7) - Steel Cage Match from WWE: Raw
47. Edge Vs. The Undertaker (March 30) – WWE: Wrestlemania 24
48. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Brent Albright & BJ Whitmer Vs. Davey Richards & Rocky Romero Vs. Austin Aries & Bryan Danielson (January 26) - ROH: Without Remorse
49. Kurt Angle Vs. Shinsuke Nakamura (February 17) – NJPW: New Japanism in Ryogoku
50. Naomichi Marufuji Vs. KENTA (October 8) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Autumn Navigation
51. Yuji Nagata Vs. Masato Tanaka (October 13) – NJPW: Destruction 2008
52. Bryan Danielson Vs. Tyler Black (May 9) – ROH: Southern Navigation
53. Bryan Danielson Vs. Tyler Black (January 25) - ROH: Breakout
54. Ric Flair Vs. Shawn Michaels (March 30) - WWE: Wrestlemania 24
55. Mitsuharu Misawa, Naomichi Marufuji & Takashi Sugiura Vs. Kenta Kobashi, Yoshihiro Takayama & Katsuhiko Nakajima (July 18) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Summer Navigation 2008
56. Kevin Steen & El Generico Vs. Homicide & Hernandez Vs. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Davey Richards & Chris Hero (October 24) – 30-Minute Iron Team Match from ROH: Return of 187
57. Jay & Mark Briscoe Vs. Katsuhiko Nakajima & Kota Ibushi (September 6) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Shiny Navigation 2008
58. Takeshi Morishima, Naomichi Marufuji & Go Shiozaki Vs. Roderick Strong, Davey Richards & Rocky Romero (May 9) – ROH: Southern Navigation
59. Shingo Takagi & BxB Hulk Vs. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black (March 28) – Ring of Honor: Dragon Gate Challenge 2
60. Bryan Danielson & Eddie Edwards Vs. KENTA & Taiji Ishimori (June 21) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: European Navigation
61. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Roderick Strong (September 19) – ROH: Driven 2008
62. John Cena Vs. Dave Batista (August 17) – WWE: Summerslam
63. Kurt Angle Vs. A.J. Styles (June 8) – TNA: Slammiversary
64. Shawn Michaels Vs. Chris Jericho (July 20) – WWE: Great American Bash
65. Shingo Takagi, BxB Hulk & Cyber Kong Vs. Kota Ibushi, HARASHIMA & Antonio Honda (April 13) - DDT and Dragon Gate co-present DDG Returns
66. Bryan Danielson Vs. Tyler Black Vs. Kenny Omega (November 8) – ROH: Bound By Hate
67. Eddie Kingston Vs. 2 Cold Scorpio (March 1) – IWA: Mid South: The 500th Show
68. Shingo Takagi & BxB Hulk Vs. Kevin Steen & El Generico (March 29) – Ring of Honor: Supercard of Honor 3
69. HHH Vs. Jeff Hardy (October 5) – WWE: No Mercy
70. Roderick Strong Vs. Davey Richards (September 13) – ROH: Battle of the Best
71. MEN's Teioh, Shinobu, Onryo & KUDO Vs. Makoto Oishi, Tsutomu Oosugi, Hercules Senga & Yuki Sato (October 27) – BJW: Men's World
72. Bryan Danielson Vs. Bad Bones (March 9) - Westside Xtreme Wrestling: 16 Carat Gold Tournament Night 3
73. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Jay & Mark Briscoe Vs. Brent Albright & B.J. Whitmer Vs. Jack Evans & Jigsaw (January 11) – "Ultimate" Ultimate Endurance ROH: Proving Ground
74. Kenta Kobashi, Tamon Honda & KENTA Vs. Yoshihiro Takayama, Takuma Sano & Go Shiozaki (April 27) – Pro Wrestling NOAH at the Tokyo Nippon Budokan
75. Jay & Mark Briscoe Vs. Homicide & Hernandez (October 25) – ROH: Ring of Homicide 2
76. Giant Bernard Vs. Hiroshi Tanahashi (March 23) - NJPW New Japan Cup: Who Is The Highest?
77. Mitsuharu Misawa Vs. Takeshi Morishima (March 2) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Second Navigation at the Nippon Budokan
78. Shingo Takagi & BxB Hulk Vs. KENTA & Taiji Ishimori (March 20) – Dragon Gate: The Gate of Generation
79. Bryan Danielson Vs. Mike Quackenbush (March 7) - Westside Xtreme Wrestling: 16 Carat Gold Tournament Night 1
80. Jun Akiyama & Takeshi Rikio Vs. Kensuke Sasaki & Katsuhiko Nakajima (April 27) – Pro Wrestling NOAH at the Tokyo Nippon Budokan
81. Naomichi Marufuji Vs. Roderick Strong (July 25) – ROH: Northern Navigation
82. Kurt Angle Vs. Christian Cage (February 10) – TNA: Against All Odds
83. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Naomichi Marufuji & Go Shiozaki (August 1) – ROH: Fueling the Fire
84. CIMA, Dragon Kid & Ryo Saito Vs. Masato Yoshino, Naruki Doi & Genki Horiguchi (March 29) – ROH: Supercard of Honor 3
85. Roderick Strong Vs. Rocky Romero (January 27) – Pro Wrestling Guerrilla: Pearl Habra
86. Chris Sabin & Alex Shelley Vs. James Storm & Bobby Roode (November 9) – TNA: Turning Point
87. Bryan Danielson Vs. Katsuhiko Nakajima (September 20) – ROH: Glory By Honor 7
88. Bryan Danielson Vs. Claudio Castagnoli (June 28) – ROH: Vendetta 2
89. El Generico Vs. Taiji Ishimori (March 7) - Westside Xtreme Wrestling: 16 Carat Gold Tournament Night 1
90. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Jimmy Jacobs (September 14) – ROH: Tokyo Summit
91. Chris Sabin & Alex Shelley Vs. Masato Tanaka & Daisuke Sekimoto (October 25) Pro Wrestling Expo: Part 3: Blue

Chapter

92. Bryan Danielson Vs. Naomichi Marufuji (May 10) – ROH: A New Level
 93. Roderick Strong Vs. Tyler Black (August 30) - PWG: All Star Weekend 7 Night 1
 94. Edge Vs. Rey Mysterio Jr. (January 27) - WWE: Royal Rumble
 95. El Generico Vs. Kota Ibushi (April 19) – ROH: Return Engagement
 96. Naomichi Marufuji & Takashi Sugiura Vs. Jun Akiyama & Takeshi Rikio (April 12) - Pro Wrestling NOAH: Global Tag League at the Hiroshima Green Arena
 97. Kurt Angle Vs. Samoa Joe (April 13) - TNA: Lockdown
 98. Claudio Castagnoli Vs. El Generico (January 26) - ROH: Without Remorse
 99. Naomichi Marufuji Vs. Mike Quackenbush (March 9) - Westside Xtreme Wrestling: 16 Carat Gold Tournament Night 3
 100. Randy Orton Vs. HHH Vs. John Cena (March 30) - WWE: Wrestlemania 24

Section C: Countdown & Reviews

100. Randy Orton Vs. HHH Vs. John Cena (March 30) - WWE: Wrestlemania 24 - "Great ending. Great ending. Great ending." It was all I could say for minutes after this match. I couldn't even explain why, though I can now. HHH and Cena's exchanges throughout the match teased that Pedigree, and HHH finally got it. In came Orton with a kick to the head WWE built so well that he believably could steal the victory with HHH just two feet away and having been a non-factor for at least five minutes. HHH's Pedigree, Cena's ability to escape it and Orton's kick to the head - pieces of recent WWE history flowed together for that perfect "son of a bitch!" ending. Before the conclusion, Cena and HHH's exchanges absolutely carried the match. Orton was almost a prop for them, much as he was in the build to Wrestlemania. That he came out of all that only to steal it suited his character perfectly in a storyline that didn't suit him at all.

99. Naomichi Marufuji Vs. Mike Quackenbush (March 9) - Westside Xtreme Wrestling: 16 Carat Gold Tournament Night 3 – First, a big anti-shout-out to the wXw producers that decided to show extreme close-ups of Marufuji protecting Quackenbush on so many stomps, kicks and ground moves. Any other camera angle would have hidden it entirely, as they always do in every other promotion. It was particularly annoying because these are two guys with great ability for detail work, such that very few people in any given live audience see the flaws, and get immersed how they frame and execute things. That was the quality that set this apart. WXW saw a lot of matches with big offense, stories and complex exchanges at 16 Carat, but this was one of those that stood out thanks to the ability to make more of what they did without even having to pause and burn time registering it. It was about reactions, frustration and easy escapes, which flowed into more prolonged selling (not merely pain and exhaustion, but in the confusion, frustration and struggle of whoever was in control too). It's odd that this had almost half the time of Hero Vs. Danielson from the same show but was so much more effective. They had just enough time to do just about everything they needed to, never went crazy, and had a magnificent number of little reactions to offense throughout.

98. Claudio Castagnoli Vs. El Generico (January 26) - ROH: Without Remorse – A fun opening segment bled into balanced action before one errant kick gave the whole match a course. Serious credit goes to Generico's phenomenal selling, which was sympathetic throughout, and he seldom forgot to do something like limp or clutch his leg to remind us of that weakness, even after pulling off some amazing counters. They nailed the Yoshitonic reversal to the Ricola Bomb even better than they did at 2007's Race to the Top, and yet Generico was able to suck everything right back into his weak leg. That earned him a great final comeback, pulling off offense that should have been implausible given his leg injury, but making it believable in driving the sympathy that deep. And the final minute? Well that was just out of this world.

97. Naomichi Marufuji & Takashi Sugiura Vs. Jun Akiyama & Takeshi Rikio (April 12) - Pro Wrestling NOAH: Global Tag League at the Hiroshima Green Arena - From the opening exchange you knew this was going to be the best match of the night. Marufuji and Akiyama went into a streak of offense that had to end in a Mexican stand-off, but they kept it going just a few beats longer than most guys could. Akiyama was showing he brought his A-game despite his injury (and against two opponents who had beaten him in the past), while Marufuji was proving his quickness and ability. They were fluid and aggressive at the same time in a way you don't see out of two guys anywhere in the world very often, and they carried it throughout the match. Rikio played the significantly slower, mean brick wall of a man, serving as more of an unyielding force than even Morishima was playing before his title win. It paid off later, making when Sugiura actually picked him up mean more. Marufuji's unusually long exchange with Rikio that chopped him down to size was also unusually entertaining, especially for something where his most spectacular offense was a dropkick. And even if the slow equalization of Rikio bored some viewers, Akiyama made up for it in spades taking just about anything Marufuji or Sugiura wanted to throw at him. Spear? Sure. A vertical suplex from a man more than fifty pounds lighter than him? Sure. German Suplex from the other guy? Hell, he'd take a dropkick to the face mid-move, to boot. Akiyama deserves significant praise for his energy that night, in showing exhaustion and weakness, and in counters and delivering moves (like some crazy flying knees).

96. Kurt Angle Vs. Samoa Joe (April 13) - TNA: Lockdown - Slower and more meaningful than the normal TNA match, this brought elements of the Japanese "realistic" fight style, but wasn't as nuanced. Angle and Joe weren't as expressive in pain or active in grapples as Yuji Nagata or Bryan Danielson might have been, instead relying on the atmosphere they established. They carried themselves with a gravity that trumped that of all their previous matches. But as someone who does not follow MMA, this didn't look anything like an MMA match to me - unless tests of strength, ear claps, Lariats and long Figure Fours are MMA standards I just haven't seen before. It was essentially a more basic modern pro wrestling match, drawing on realistic fight atmosphere. Their minimalism worked well, but truly clicked in the final stretch where they went into more holds with fewer breaks in-between. The final six or seven minutes of counter-wrestling told

more of a story and was more engaging than the previous fifteen minutes of a genuinely good match.

95. El Generico Vs. Kota Ibushi (April 19) – ROH: Return Engagement – During his ROH tour Ibushi essentially did the same moves in three matches with very little in the way of varied execution or build, leaving those matches fun but not as substantial as I’d hoped. That made enough sense; he was wrestling in front of a brand new audience for his first times in the country. This was the match where he changed it up. Just Generico getting the knees up to block the first attempt at a Standing Moonsault seeding the second (and successful) attempt made that better. The match had several such intelligent touches that are crucial to great flying. You had Ibushi and Generico in the ring, so you knew they’d bend like Gumbi and sell like they were dead for each other. And you could take for granted what a sound base Generico would be on most receipts, whether just eating crazy kicks and flipping offense, or catching his opponent and sending him flying with heavyweight offense that might not normally fit, but did here. Anybody can do a lot of big offense, but it takes smart wrestlers to build it, and gifted wrestlers to hit timing like this. They had this sense of beats – Ibushi coming in with a handstand kick to send Generico to the outside, a beat, and then his rebounding Moonsault, or Generico lifting him for the Michinoku Driver and waiting just another beat to drop him. These things are so much more special when the hesitation feels neither too short nor too long. It creates amazing memories, and there’s no surprise that a few exchanges here are people’s "moments of the year." I don’t think I’ve ever seen Ibushi pull off the "Matrix move" sequence any better than here.

94. Edge Vs. Rey Mysterio Jr. (January 27) - WWE: Royal Rumble – I joked that this was the best match to happen in front of the worst crowd of the year, and it’s one of those things that pops into my head when people say crowd response should define how good a match is. This crowd insisted on cheering Edge and booing Rey Jr. despite weeks of stories, their entrenched characters, how every other audience reacted, and did so in such nonsensical fashion as to be obvious that it was a crowd of those "cool" fans I try to avoid sitting too close to at Burger King. Edge and Rey Jr. were stuck, as they even had a planned finish that forced them not to alter their roles on crowd response. They wound up having a great match despite their audience, in the sort of story that is how WWE should have brought Rey Mysterio Jr. into the World Title scene in the first place. Not by having Mark Henry and Great Khali kill him. You do it by having him utilize small, logical tricks like tripping a guy when other opponents would just lie on the canvas, or land on his feet when other guys would crash and burn on the outside. Edge was more than a foot taller and yet looked convincingly weak whenever Rey Jr. had the advantage, and channeled that into looking diabolical whenever he got the chance to dominate. When they slowed it down Edge used unusual holds to keep things interesting. Really, the variety of offense is what set this apart from Orton/Hardy that same night, as while Orton and Hardy relied on the same tricks over and over again until the finish, Rey Jr. and Edge innovated. They worked in front of an unenviable "smart" crowd in the middle of a storyline where they could not plausibly switch roles, and still managed to turn the audience at special moments and finally capture them in the end. They deserved a far better audience (don’t bother defending them – this is the crowd that cheered for hepatitis fifteen minutes later), but they couldn't obscure what a great story was told. And damn, what a finish.

93. Roderick Strong Vs. Tyler Black (August 30) - PWG: All Star Weekend 7 Night 1 – Strong is a master of combos. He’s developed in his stocky powerhouse role over the years and built several series of strikes and grapple moves into believably devastating and match-ending moments that border on overkill, but more often, like in this match, are very exciting and quickly push the match to another level. This worked out very well for Black, who is more adept at sprints or places where he can showcase (and receive) big offense. Black also ragdolled very well for his shorter opponent, making Strong a believable aggressor. Black’s own aggression was great as a response to Strong’s brutality, particularly in his little comeback series early on that ended with a very satisfying stomp to the abdomen, where years ago he would have done something much nuttier. Once they got up to that level, they traded offense and flowed remarkably.

92. Bryan Danielson Vs. Naomichi Marufuji (May 10) – ROH: A New Level – If you go back to Final Battle 2005, it’s startling to see how much Marufuji has grown as a technical wrestler. Then many critics said the match was doomed because Marufuji was a spot monkey, and he surprised with a sound ground game. This time Marufuji was even faster and at greater ease in holds than Danielson, able to switch gears and add a little flair or move through a hold more quickly. That spirit made the mirror-wrestling work better than it normally does, and spoke a grudge Marufuji’s character might have held against Danielson for that lucky folding pin three years ago. Marufuji was able to go through all that and coax the audience into an idea of how this whole match would go, only to turn around and attack the neck and create a new opening in the match, letting him set up the possibility of the Shiranui ending things. Even there it was fiercely competitive and some of the more compulsively watchable mirror wrestling, and later, desperation wrestling from Danielson I’ve seen this year.

91. Chris Sabin & Alex Shelley Vs. Masato Tanaka & Daisuke Sekimoto (October 25) Pro Wrestling Expo: Part 3: Blue Chapter – I wish this could have happened in front of a healthier crowd, but what can you do? Both teams wanted to be in control, and the greatness came when one would scramble to make the most of a chance to get control back. Since Shelley, Sabin and Tanaka are all excellent sprinters, the desperate spurts of offense came off very well, while the rest of the match was defined by fighting to keep control over an isolated opponent. There, Sekimoto shone as he refused to go up for moves, while again the other three simply had the quickness to escape or hit something effective for the breather before an attempted tag. The match was defined by what tricks someone had left and how far they could press their luck, leading to perhaps too many hot tags. For other men and other matches, maybe. Not this one, though.

90. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Jimmy Jacobs (September 14) – ROH: Tokyo Summit – A lot of clever use of the ring area, whether it was sliding in and out of the ropes, rebounding from them, or borrowing NOAH’s infamous "death move on the walkway." Both guys have some smart offense for that sort of thing, but it was interesting

to see it all framed into a match where neither was comfortable enough in a straight-on confrontation for the whole match. Jacobs in particular looked pensive against the champion. It even meant some shady moves with the referee, but they were at least clever moves for once, like using Todd Sinclair to throw off McGuinness's corner headstand. McGuinness's rare 2008 role as an ROH good guy worked with competent wrestling and reliable striking on his part, but mostly took off because of how careful Jacobs's performance was. From his looks of uncertainty holding a wristlock to the multiple attempts to get the comfort of control in the Guillotine Choke, he created an easy avenue for McGuinness to use to return to his heroic roots.

89. El Generico Vs. Taiji Ishimori (March 7) - Westside Xtreme Wrestling: 16 Carat Gold Tournament Night 1 – An excellent, tight flying match. Tight in that they accomplished so much in fifteen minutes without rushing, and tight because their execution was so dead-on. From teasing dives to counters to a Yakuza Kick to a Moonsault to the floor, this was the match everyone hoped for when they heard these two would go at it. They paced themselves with holds, making sure not to go too crazy until the end, but never resorted to simply sitting around. Their time made that possible, even as their sense of expansion made it seem longer than it was at the appropriate high points.

88. Bryan Danielson Vs. Claudio Castagnoli (June 28) – ROH: Vendetta 2 – Castagnoli played off of two themes in Danielson's ROH persona. The first was a lightheartedness that expanded quickly this year, as he relaxed into this role as the most popular and arguably most technically sound wrestler in the company. Danielson would ease up in his matches, taking more ease with holds and goof around some, and when he relented enough to mess about with Castagnoli, Castagnoli was able to go even with him. The second trait was much longer-running: Danielson liked to force his opponents around, striking on them at his pace and forcing them from hold to hold. Castagnoli was too big, too strong and too versed at mat wrestling for Danielson to succeed like that, providing a different challenge than even Morishima or Stevens did. That made it more dynamic than Danielson's average midcard ROH performance, and they seized on it to elevate Castagnoli in ways the first McGuinness match simply failed to accomplish. The portion where they messed around was funny, but it also gave the audience a suggestion as to how much longer things would go when they turned serious. Then the match kept going, Castagnoli didn't crumble under Danielson's blows and couldn't be dissected the way Stevens had the previous night. It was actually a brilliant precursor to their deadly serious feud later, as from the opening minute Danielson was taken aback by how tough Castagnoli was for him, and he was the one who jumped at the opportunity to turn things serious when his opponent would have continued in more playful fashion. By the end, all the traded high-end offense made Castagnoli's seem on par with Danielson's, which was no small boost.

87. Bryan Danielson Vs. Katsuhiko Nakajima (September 20) – ROH: Glory By Honor 7 – One of those Danielson matches where really simple things meant a lot - and it does mean something when the former ECW Arena gives you a round of applause for a leg trip. I am not insulting other approaches to wrestling when I say it simply makes so much more sense for Nakajima to be able to stop a big kick from Danielson when Danielson's leg has been worked on and he's already been pushing how much he should have done on it. At the same time, that kind of approach made it a world away from the normal Japanese superstar debut in ROH's U.S. shows, with Danielson treating Nakajima like a serious threat from whom he didn't even want to receive one kick. By the time Nakajima caught Danielson from the apron, anyone unfamiliar with Nakajima knew exactly why. Contrast this with Kota Ibushi's matches in ROH, where Ibushi was doing everything in his repertoire in every match, and you see fewer amazing moves, but more art to the wrestling. When they started throwing bombs at each other it meant more, with the anticipation for Nakajima's side, and the intensity Danielson had saved. Plus for all the people who hate Kurt Angle, Nakajima actually attacked Danielson's leg for a substantial period before attempting an Ankle Lock!

86. Chris Sabin & Alex Shelley Vs. James Storm & Bobby Roode (November 9) – TNA: Turning Point – It was good to see the Guns unholstered for once in TNA. Sabin particularly came across like a star, with heroic charisma on pretty much every tag and conducting some of his finest anti-double-team offense since early in the Team 3D feud. Sabin and Shelley were obviously able to hit a lot of beautiful tandem offense on the dastardly bad guys, but the sheer length of the match really opened things up emotionally, letting them invest more than just pretty moves. There were pretty moves, of course – the Tower of Doom that Shelley initiated from the Tree of Woe was just about the coolest use of that tag team trope TNA has ever done. Storm and Roode played the solid supporting villain roles well, with Storm really excelling at bullying the smaller guys and improving his game, be it in the clever execution of a drop toe hold or in putting on a hat while taking Shelley for granted.

85. Roderick Strong Vs. Rocky Romero (January 27) – Pro Wrestling Guerrilla: Pearl Habra - It was foolish to hope they'd catch the pace of their original PWG match, but they sure tried. Having Romero get a submission in the opening seconds was actually brilliant, playing into the unique athletic animosity between the two of them, as well as setting up the importance of submission holds. Those defined the match, almost like chapter points around fast-based action that was still largely ground-based. Strong and Romero wrestle each other in a way in PWG that simply cannot last too long. Very few wrestlers in PWG (if any) could throw this much this fast and still produce a sense of sympathy and believability. It could have gone a lot longer and I'd have been happy (maybe even happier), but they earned the brevity with their step-and-a-half pacing, tremendous physicality and downright angry execution. What other opponents have these guys faced that could go this fast and not miss a beat?

84. CIMA, Dragon Kid & Ryo Saito Vs. Masato Yoshino, Naruki Doi & Genki Horiguchi (March 29) – ROH: Supercard of Honor 3 – It paled in comparison to its predecessors and its overkill at the end was undeniable, but similarly undeniable was the excitement of the match. CIMA was not the same man who had visited ROH two years prior, and hurting badly he chose smarter routes of injecting personality into the match and letting his partners do the flying. Dragon Kid soared as is his trademark on an ROH Supercard, while Yoshino really picked up his game. On nights like these he is one of the best cruiserweights in the world, able to bully, to hit blistering offense, and to eat offense,

playing any role that's needed at any moment – stuff too complex for some wrestling fans, but mandatory in Dragon Gate, and even to the uninitiated, very forgivable when Dragon Gate guys visit Ring of Honor. Yoshino, Doi and Dragon Kid provided enough horsepower and CIMA enough non-workrate amusement to make this one of the year's better trios tags, while Saito wisely stepped in when necessary, and Horiguchi followed the leads of his more capable teammates.

83. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Naomichi Marufuji & Go Shiozaki (August 1) – ROH: Fueling the Fire – Marufuji continues to be my favorite visitor in ROH as he screws around and yet is so talented that he can pull off almost anything he wants in the normally overserious ROH main event scene. In this case it meant out-healing the heels, spending much of the early part of the match cheating and beating on Jimmy Jacobs. Go was able to follow his lead well thanks to months of cocky conditioning under Larry Sweeney, showing much more character than he would have in August of 2007. Jacobs was a perfect victim, having known how to take these beatings for years (I can't remember anyone who made Go's chops look this good save Aries) but this time adding the seasoning of being the villain everyone wanted to see roughed up, even if it was by unfair means. They spun all that energy into some excellent competitive wrestling, letting Black do the heavy lifting in sprint periods where he was most capable. Marufuji meshed as well with Black as everyone had hoped, but Jacobs held up in the hot and heavy stuff much better than usual with a strong sense of timing and (eventually) fatigue. Then it became a matter of partners playing well off of each other, and Marufuji was excellent at adding a little more to a cut-off to set up Go, or Jacobs would find just the right time to cut an opponent off (like that Spear to break up Go's Suplex reversal to a Small Package that was simply inspired). All said, it was an excellently-wrestled unusual match for America where the villains were the victims of more antics than the foreign heroes, and those attitudes and antics clicked as well as any of the high-quality physical wrestling fans demand from ROH. While it wasn't exactly the sort of match Eddie Guerrero would have wrestled, it reminded me of him in way I wish I felt more often.

82. Kurt Angle Vs. Christian Cage (February 10) – TNA: Against All Odds -

Making up for a disappointing outing the previous month, Angle and Cage gave the standard opening to a TNA match, with a stiff feeling-out process and general frustration (though even in this they did better than Booker and Roode did that same night). What really set this match apart was the energy they had from the first attempt at an Ankle Lock (in an innovative position, as the men fought on the apron), which carried all the way to the run-ins. Samoa Joe served as a fair enforcer, considering that his participation was minimal until the absolute idiocy of interference at the end. Those shenanigans detracted from the overall match, but even then Angle and Cage tried to keep things going with rhythmic big moments (going for a finisher, winding up with a chair) that could have ended the match if they landed.

81. Naomichi Marufuji Vs. Roderick Strong (July 25) – ROH: Northern Navigation – I had to watch this three times to really get a grasp on it. We all had mixed feelings about Gabe Sapolsky's departure, but there were definitely shows that could have used different shaping under his reign and Northern Navigation was one of them. This should not have followed Danielson Vs. Castagnoli 2, and might have actually been the best possible warm-up for it. It wasn't as long, wasn't as smoothly wrestled, was a very similar athletic competition and didn't even try to build to the heights of the previous match, making what was a great match look bad just because of when it happened. Even the crowd was noticeably quieter than they had been for the half-hour chain-wrestling marathon right before this. When watched independent of the show it was on Marufuji worked holds like very few people in Japan or America can, Strong had great counters and a better sense of vulnerability (even humorous vulnerability a few times, like biting the ropes to break a hold), and they built to some great combo false-finishes that you'd expect in a high-profile match with Roderick Strong. Strong's ability to express vulnerability has improved a lot this year and matched up very well with power-based comebacks, holding back on agile moves like his Malenko-style dropkick and making them even more special. Marufuji was able to play at any level that Strong could take it, giving entertaining offense of all stripes and handing Strong whatever he needed whether it was agony on the mat or being caught in the middle of a flying move. All of Marufuji's responses were crucial because, even in 2008, timing was the key to a great Strong singles match – but here they followed timing like true professionals, whether it was elevating the violence, or simply building to one guy taking the other down in a thirty-second exchange. This match might sell some DVD's if placed on another show. Instead it was one of many rich dishes on a show, perhaps better taken à la carte than in order.

80. Jun Akiyama & Takeshi Rikio Vs. Kensuke Sasaki & Katsuhiko Nakajima (April 27) – Pro Wrestling NOAH at the Tokyo Nippon Budokan - I don't know who lit the fire under Akiyama's ass in 2008, but he went on a tear in tag matches. Here he showed the most life of all the big tag matches since his rejuvenation, showing so much emotional investment against Sasaki and so much concern for Rikio. Rikio was such a great brick wall against Nakajima that the only disappointment is that they weren't in the ring more often. The whole match was snug to scary degrees, faster paced than is usual for three of the four men, and so aggressive that you could tell it was personal even without following the Japanese scene before seeing this. Just a battle.

79. Bryan Danielson Vs. Mike Quackenbush (March 7) - Westside Xtreme Wrestling: 16 Carat Gold Tournament Night 1 – Here's a switch. Let's have somebody dominate Danielson in a technical match for a change! And if that's what you want, it doesn't get better than wXw's budget lighting creating a solar flare over Quackenbush's shoulder as he stood, arms folded, watching Danielson writhe in an Indian Deathlock. Of course, Quackenbush didn't really dominate, they just teased how much better he could be thanks to speed and smoothness, playing off the German crowd's rabid hatred of "Overrated" Bryan Danielson. You knew the technical exchanges would be great with Quackenbush's ability and know-how and Danielson's attitude and attention to detail. The crowd only gave them more with which to play.

78. Shingo Takagi & BxB Hulk Vs. KENTA & Taiji Ishimori (March 20) – Dragon Gate: The Gate of Generation

– Clearly a really good match, but also a very weird tag team match. Ishimori bumped and flew for Shingo, KENTA laid in savagely on Shingo, and Ishimori and Hulk worked really well together. Most of the pairings worked out, but none of the multi-man action sunk in, so that even when three or four guys were in the ring it only clicked when the emphasis was on two of them (aside from Ishimori's beautiful reversal of a Pancake into a Dropkick). KENTA's cocky shtick usually comes off as odd or forced, but actually worked with the way he treated Shingo. The finishing stretch was by far the most entertaining part of the match, as you'd expect, but it's hard to pinpoint when that stretch began. It seemed to come up right out of the middle of the match with Shingo starting to get comeuppance on KENTA, and rolled on for several minutes into some of the best (and scariest) strikes Dragon Gate has ever seen. In case you were wondering, Shingo still throws one of the best Lariats in pro wrestling, and KENTA still throws some of the best kicks to the head.

77. Mitsuharu Misawa Vs. Takeshi Morishima (March 2) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Second Navigation at the Nippon Budokan – Easily Misawa's best singles match in years, with only his title victory over Marufuji in December of 2006 coming close. The opening minutes had the energy and stiffness of the 2007 Samoa Joe match, but didn't disintegrate the way that match did. Misawa brought actual strategy and used a surprising amount of aerial offense, building up to a great suicide dive for Morishima. Morishima was stellar on offense, and gave Misawa everything he wanted on defense, creating one of those magical Japanese ending stretches where the crowd was feverish for everything.

76. Giant Bernard Vs. Hiroshi Tanahashi (March 23) - NJPW New Japan Cup: Who Is The Highest? – Real or a performance, Bernard's fatigue made this match. He channeled it into believable selling for things as small as reactions to Tanahashi's strikes, to being vulnerable to much bigger offense that he still normally would have been able to counter out of pure power. He pulled it into things as simple as staggering when catching Tanahashi on a flying move. For his part, Tanahashi put in significant fire and played the flashy face role audiences demanded (and sometimes imagined, disregarding his actual character) during his heelish period in 2007. Watching Bernard's offense build (particularly for the Sitout Tombstone) while Tanahashi threw everything he had at the giant was a great way to cap off the New Japan Cup.

75. Jay & Mark Briscoe Vs. Homicide & Hernandez (October 25) – ROH: Ring of Homicide 2 – Hernandez is impressive in TNA, but they didn't give have a platform like this in all of 2008. More than twenty minutes in the main event, and in ROH a TNA visitor of his mass alone feels special. But against the Briscoes, those brawlers who can bump like Hell, you had a guy who could simply overwhelm two brawlers who like having their way with every opponent and had grown too limited to adapt like the Murder City Machine Guns or Steen & Generico might have in their place. Meanwhile of course anything Homicide did in his return to ROH in New Jersey was treated like gold from the crowd, but he actually played an excellent general behind Hernandez's brawn, deliberately playing multi-man offense, power and brawling to get the upperhand and frustrate the Briscoes with their own strengths. It was almost like a comeuppance for the Briscoes after two years of being allowed to run roughshod over way too many opponents. You had Homicide straight up insulting them at multiple points, including a headbutt that took them right back to the Rottweilers feud years ago. That lit a real fire under Jay Briscoe, bringing the passion to the Briscoes' offense that is necessary to making their style work. And while some may have seen things like Hernandez's dive as contrived, it really attested to how a little more structure allows these teams to work their offense rather than just do it.

74. Kenta Kobashi, Tamon Honda & KENTA Vs. Yoshihiro Takayama, Takuma Sano & Go Shiozaki (April 27) – Pro Wrestling NOAH at the Tokyo Nippon Budokan – Go stepped up in a big way in his early segments with Kobashi and Takayama, showing respect, frustration and power, and generating some great emotion, especially in briefly turning against Takayama. The match never reached those heights again but followed a good course. For once Takayama actually seemed to care about a match. Kobashi and KENTA going to town on Takayama was great fun, especially with Kobashi and Takayama going after each other after the match. The final minutes were particularly engaging for the formula of four guys preoccupied on the outside while two traded pin attempts inside.

73. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Jay & Mark Briscoe Vs. Brent Albright & B.J. Whitmer Vs. Jack Evans & Jigsaw (January 11) – "Ultimate" Ultimate Endurance ROH: Proving Ground – The first fall featured some crazy creativity, particularly from the Vulture Squad. The second fall was so manic and uncontrollable, rising to one hard crashing wave at the end with the ladder. It wasn't too long, but as a short single fall it was wild and more riveting than almost any single-fall match on WWE or TNA television this year, regardless of length. The final fall had more heart and energy than the Briscoes' title loss at Final Battle 2007. Mark Briscoe was the soul of the match, showing so much guts and determination. Whitmer and Jacobs had a great moment of a showdown. The Vulture Squad brought the spectacle. Jacobs and Black looked like a fine-tuned team after only working together for a few matches in ROH.

72. Bryan Danielson Vs. Bad Bones (March 9) - Westside Xtreme Wrestling: 16 Carat Gold Tournament Night 3 – Especially upon re-watching it, it's impressive how many comebacks (major and just one-move momentum stoppers) Bad Bones pulled out that would typically signify dominance or physical superiority, but that he pulled off sympathetically. Danielson earned his dominant parts of the match better than he did in any other match of the tournament, not merely with technical savvy like he tried to pull off against Chris Hero, but with so many allusions the offense of past opponents (as well as how he beat them). He thought he deserved to be in control here, having used so many tricks for breathers and advantages before. He made many of the parts where he was in control about revenge on an audience that had hated him from the first minute of Night 1. Those dualities – Bones' sympathetic offense, and Danielson's cocky control – rapidly enriched everything else they did.

71. MEN's Teioh, Shinobu, Onryo & KUDO Vs. Makoto Oishi, Tsutomu Oosugi, Hercules Senga & Yuki Sato (October 27) – BJW: Men's World – Some of the most beautiful exchanges I've seen in a wrestling

ring this year, and one of those matches that makes me wish I could follow BJJ more regularly. There's always 2009. For now, there's this. Teioh can still go very well, especially put into the sequences of pairs in this kind of match. Similarly a guy like KUDO, who I think has issues that stand out even in 2 Vs. 2 matches, was just about flawless for the bits and pieces he jumped in to perform. It's a series of sprints punctuated with a little humor (like the opening "dong" quadruple kick), and while sprint matches seldom have much story, these make them as much art in the form as anything. Some of the grace on display here would make Dragon Gate vets blush. It's good to see some of these faces popping up in Dragon Gate now.

70. Roderick Strong Vs. Davey Richards (September 13) – ROH: Battle of the Best – They came in with an interesting dynamic. Richards wrestled like he thought he was in the right: he took the fight to Strong immediately, standing up to him and trying to embarrass him for a year of being treated like a lackey. But it was actually Strong who had been wronged back at Respect is Earned 2, and Strong who really had an axe to grind, so he was even more assertive as soon as he could shake loose of Richards's holds. At first it looked like Richards was going to run, crawling to flee away from Strong's stinging chops, until he was stuck in the corner and had to strike back. For a moment he was back in that lackey role, and whatever had made him come into the match swinging took over for the remainder. In all of it Richards looked about as good as he ever has, with masterful delivery of things as simple as a knee lift (finally making that move look like it should floor someone, as opposed to just doing it for that purpose), shoulder charge in the corner, and even his expression after the obligatory opening Mexican Standoff. He kept determination and weakness in his posture and face at nearly all times, but let that play through everything he executed. Execution has long been his greatest strength, and against Strong he had someone who could almost match it, but even when he couldn't, could at least follow the structure of a brutal match that swung between strikes, throws and grueling holds. Thus Richards had to fight for a Camel Clutch mid-match, and Strong knew him enough to immediately go for a second Tiger Bomb at the end.

69. HHH Vs. Jeff Hardy (October 5) – WWE: No Mercy – The Hangman Pedigree tease was insane. In fact, most of HHH's little variations added energy to the match, like his surprise attack at the opening and cheap pin attempt, first rope elbow drop to end a series of them, and sifting through vintage holds to maintain the advantage. Never has his version of the Flair corner bump felt more natural to one of his matches. Hardy deserves a medal for taking that missed plancha, feeding into what HHH setup with the partially blocked Flying Clothesline from the apron. That crash and burn led to one of the better domination periods HHH has had, thanks in part to his opponent being a ragdoll, but also with HHH getting creative in his abuse, looking more like a dominant powerhouse than normal. Hardy was more than a ragdoll, though, bringing his patented passion and framing it in gutsy little packages, like that horrendous flip to the outside, and then catching HHH with it a second time. The conclusion was reminiscent of Tyler Black Vs. Bryan Danielson from ROH's Breakout, except (oddly for WWE) it was even more over the top. But Hardy's natural connection with the audience sold the resilience, and noticeably getting into position for HHH's reversal may have made some people's blood boil, but it couldn't ruin such a strong match.

68. Shingo Takagi & BxB Hulk Vs. Kevin Steen & El Generico (March 29) - ROH: Supercard of Honor 3 – Everyone seems to overlook the sudden drop from their hot start into something resembling a "heat segment" on Hulk by two guys who were over as babyfaces, which dragged the match to a crawl. I don't know why they felt the need to cool things down when they had the crowd ready from the start, but when they picked up again it was beautiful. Dueling sawed off powerhouses in Steen and Shingo with Hulk and Generico as energizing as ever, hot false finishes and two teams working in feverish tandem. When it was good, it was as good as anything that weekend, and if you check the date, you know it was a heck of a weekend.

67. Eddie Kingston Vs. 2 Cold Scorpio (March 1) – IWA: Mid South: The 500th Show – One of the more watchable struggles IWA:MS has featured in years. IWA:MS has a lot of off-kilter matches and a lot of off-kilter strike exchanges, but these two summoned a great rhythm that felt distinct to the company. Their exchange at the middle of the match clicked far better anything Mid South has seen since Low Ki left (at least until that point). They carried that intuitive sense of striking all the way to the end of the match, gradually making Kingston a more believability threat as it progressed. Technical wrestling is one of Kingston's weakest points out of character, and it really said something to exhibit that in the opening with Scorpio manipulating the weakness in character. Not only did Kingston have something to prove against a much more famous opponent, but he was at a disadvantage in versatility of offense. He showed with little things like quickly going from a boxing stance into a collar-and-elbow tie-up, and hammered home his disadvantage in all the force he had to apply to get a hold to work, how he could only take the advantage through really basic holds (Kingston couldn't rely on more than headlocks for the first half of the match), and emphasizing the pain of the holds he was caught in after reversals. You could see not just frustration, but desperate attempts to out-think Scorpio on Kingston's face. The ending came out of nowhere, but it had to, and it spoke to Scorpio overlooking Kingston's greatest strength after manipulating his weaknesses earlier.

66. Bryan Danielson Vs. Tyler Black Vs. Kenny Omega (November 8) – ROH: Bound By Hate – While not Omega's debut, this is how you introduce a bluechipper to an audience. It's probably go down in people's memories as his first appearance. They started him out as humorously naive against the omnipotent Bryan Danielson, with Black going after any openings Danielson left, giving Omega breathing room. Gradually he shone more against each man, surviving big offense, escaping big holds, and eventually hitting his own stuff in some very well-timed deliveries while the more seasoned wrestlers tried to take each other out. Letting him hang in when they abused him in various ways worked, especially by not focusing on grinding him down for too long. By the end it was totally believable that Danielson had to destroy him to beat him, and the finale certainly accomplished that. Around that you had Black's opportunism and Danielson's incredible technical savvy to spin out plenty of entertaining moments, building and building to an excellent three-way dance.

65. Shingo Takagi, BxB Hulk & Cyber Kong Vs. Kota Ibushi, HARASHIMA & Antonio Honda (April 13) - DDT and Dragon Gate co-present DDG Returns – What a moment when Honda kicked out of the Domsday Heel Kick, tried to sit up with no idea where he was, skin beat red from exhaustion, and a little trickle of blood rolled out of his nose. HARASHIMA and Ibushi were on fire the entire match, and it might have been even better if Honda had sat more of it to let them play off of Shingo and Hulk. Kong showcased more character than usual, picking good spots to jump in and providing fitting brutality for the match-ending knockout.
64. Shawn Michaels Vs. Chris Jericho (July 20) – WWE: Great American Bash – Sting Vs. Angle last year was criticized for being too technical and straight-laced when it was supposed to be a bloodfeud. This seemed aimed for the same ends, with even better exchanges, but satisfying itself with smaller retribution, like Michaels making him scream in the Figure Four. What was a good exhibition with a vein of antagonism turned great, through, when Cade came out and set up that scary Moonsault. Then came the elbow and Michaels's eye injury. Video packages played in the following month didn't do justice to how aggressive the match got, including Jericho's reaction to and escape from the desperation Crippler Crossface. HHH and Michaels insisting on using the Crippler Crossface has caused a lot of mixed emotions, but Jericho escaping it and attacking Michaels's eye with greater fervor than ever was an inspired way of channeling those emotions into the flow of the actual match. The ref stoppage was so unusual and disturbing that the crowd simply stared, but that was part of its disturbing appeal.
63. Kurt Angle Vs. A.J. Styles (June 8) – TNA: Slammiversary – The kind of athletic wrestling we all wish TNA would showcase more often. Even Angle has lamented it in shoot interviews, and throughout 2008 he produced it on PPV's. You had two guys near enough in size that they could do just about anything to each other, with Styles having the distinct aerial advantage and Angle having a superior ground and throwing game. Still Styles tried to dig into him with things like the Backbreaker or Pumphandle Rib Breaker, trying to prove himself by asserting himself through all these facets of offense. It produced such a meaty pro wrestling match that Angle had to resort to more brawling, specifically in punctuating his dominant periods with straight punches to keep Styles weak. The ending was hammy, but the body of the match was so refreshingly competitive that it proved itself despite the booking.
62. John Cena Vs. Dave Batista (August 17) – WWE: Summerslam – Everyone expected this to start out slowly for no good reason, other than that when WWE is unconfident about guys they always tell them to start with slow basics. That's the way we're used to it, I guess, but Cena and Batista went with their strengths and produced the heavy bombs within minutes. I was surprised WWE played it off as Batista only being "three seconds better" the next night when he clearly drilled Cena with the first Powerbomb and looked like a wild animal after the kick out, in comparison to his opponent looking dead. Cena deserves huge credit for his work in 2008: he choked against Orton, was the one pinned in the three-way at Wrestlemania, was eliminated at Backlash, lost clean to HHH in their big rematch, lost to JBL on PPV in a brawl and then went down to Batista at Summerslam. The Royal Rumble was his only big PPV win of the year until his return from neck surgery at Survivor Series, and in everything else he made a concentrated effort to help his opponents. It was no different at Summerslam, where he was vulnerable in everything he did, from getting tossed around to struggling to hoist Batista onto his shoulders (including in one very cool reversal).
61. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Roderick Strong (September 19) – ROH: Driven 2008 – An excellent execution on the premise of a champion comfortable with plodding dominance trying to stop a very explosive challenger. Being dynamic worked so much better than their similar bland roles from the Without Remorse match, and Strong presented something unusual as the explosive challenger by relying on high-impact strikes, power moves and combos instead of the traditional flying or charismatic-based offense, making him not just someone who might beat McGuinness, but someone who challenged him on his fundamental strengths of a height/strength advantage and striking power. Everything after they returned from the floor for the second time was magic, with Strong getting more and more interesting combos and opportunities, breaking out of McGuinness's attempts to define the match. Their timing got better as they went along, lending more gravity to the things they tried with little pauses or just the right pace in-between a series of moves.
60. Bryan Danielson & Eddie Edwards Vs. KENTA & Taiji Ishimori (June 21) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: European Navigation - One of the impressive feature was how they packaged Edwards and Ishimori's normal offense. Ishimori loves to do the fake-out dive, but Danielson set it up so well this time. Similarly by having a fast exchange of strikes in the corner, Ishimori and Edwards setup the Backpack Stunner better than I've ever seen it done before. Things that normally look awkward were slick here. That smoothness helped keep the flow of the match, and so long as it seemed to come across without a hitch, the highs and lows were easier during multi-man offense and the much simpler stuff Danielson did worked much better. Instead of simply looking out of place by messing around the Surfboard, he came across as an awful prick that fit right into his team. The match speaks the aesthetic tag teams can create when they make everything click; otherwise, would a stomp to the arm get such a cry of sympathy from the crowd moments after a running power move? And just like that, Danielson and KENTA fit their more established offense in, one much more technical-based, the other with big kicks, able to plug them in at any time to the faster, more fundamentally exciting stuff Ishimori and Edwards would try. It made for a match where almost anything they wanted to do could fit in and where Danielson and KENTA were superstars, but also where Edwards could make himself with one of the best performances of his career.
59. Shingo Takagi & BxB Hulk Vs. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black (March 28) – Ring of Honor: Dragon Gate Challenge 2 – A sadly overlooked level in Tyler Black's rise in Ring of Honor, showing he could step up in big tag match situations even better than he did at Final Battle 2007. Black's athleticism shown as he managed to serve as a great base for Hulk and go nuts with Shingo. Shingo brought a sorely-missed fire back to Ring of Honor, plugging himself into ever spot where he could help, again showing his brilliance in tag scenarios. Shingo and Hulk flowed over the match, dropping in a great variety of offense while letting their opponents shine in their own ways. Jacobs had a

minimized role, but was sound in what he did, while the others flourished. Amazing sprint-style action. The team of Shingo & Hulk will be missed.

58. Takeshi Morishima, Naomichi Marufuji & Go Shiozaki Vs. Roderick Strong, Davey Richards & Rocky Romero (May 9) – ROH: Southern Navigation – This belongs on the list solely for Morishima's Azucar sexy dance, and I will hear nothing to the contrary. The first half of the match is a very good testament to the roles of comedy and lightheartedness in ROH, which completely won over the crowds and often came in unexpected ways. The one homophobic moment was irksome ("That was gay! That was gay!" Really, guys?), but other than that it all clicked, even Richards slingshotting Romero into a low blow late in the match. They transitioned from the No Remorse Corps as loony goons to threats fairly seamlessly, especially thanks to the NOAH team's excellent give-and-take. Even Morishima bumped for them. You build that all around Romero being at the top of his game, Marufuji going a hundred miles an hour, Richards filling every gap he could find and Morishima, Strong and Go all bringing real force to it, and you had the right mix of fun and riveting action.

57. Jay & Mark Briscoe Vs. Katsuhiko Nakajima & Kota Ibushi (September 6) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Shiny Navigation 2008 – Jay Briscoe has never had such a believable nearfall from a Lariat. I mention the Lariat from a match of numerous amazing tandem moves because its success showed why this match worked. Dragon Gate has plenty of matches with amazing acrobatics, but between Ibushi and the Briscoes this match had a fundamental passion, pretty wild leading to a few errant palm strikes, but mostly holding to a serious devotion. Ibushi's reversal mid-whip to the outside into a Moonsault on the other Briscoe signaled how crazy it would get, and the guys definitely didn't disappoint on that end either.

56. Kevin Steen & El Generico Vs. Homicide & Hernandez Vs. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Davey Richards & Chris Hero (October 24) – 30-Minute Iron Team Match from ROH: Return of 187 – I watched Return of 187 and Ring of Homicide 2 on the same day, and couldn't help comparing this match to the Six Man Mayhem from the other show. Realistically this had more rules, had more guys and was even more gimmicky, but it far out-shone the scramble on almost minute-by-minute basis. Sure, the guys in the Mayhem hit a lot of impressive stuff, but these men made it all fit together much better, whether it was Hero abusing Generico, Hero and Richards collaborating for a fluke double tag-in, Jacobs fleeing a challenge to set up Black entering as a formidable opponent, or LAX's disdain for the Age of the Fall. These eight men had a better sense of beats in action than the six in a one-fall match, using tags to set up some hot entries (like Hernandez's house of fire first entry). Upon re-watching it I came to terms with the two ways to approach this match: 1) it had way too many guys and rules, or 2) it had an amazing number of top-shelf tag wrestlers that should be able to make anything work. Fortunately the latter was the stronger force in the actual execution. So Steen and Hernandez were screwing around as the two biggest guys in the match, where Richards could only try to be a beast against either of them, and moments later when Black and Homicide swapped in you'd get a beautiful exchange, only for Jacobs to try to break up Homicide's momentum. And in the middle of that kind of heated action you had Richards take advantage of a totally unrelated leg weakness in Steen to escape a certain fall – a memory to detail that validates looking for story in this type of match. That kind of flow is hard, and having to keep it up and keep improvising this level of creativity for a half an hour is a true feat. It only suffers for the lack of a proper finish, when everything they'd sustained so well for twenty-five minutes bottlenecked and even the winners got confused. Sometimes ROH is lucky they have the talent to execute the things they write for them.

55. Mitsuharu Misawa, Naomichi Marufuji & Takashi Sugiura Vs. Kenta Kobashi, Yoshihiro Takayama & Katsuhiko Nakajima (July 18) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Summer Navigation 2008 - Sugiura was the warhorse of this match, providing some great striking and power moments with each opponent, building around a match where the emotional highs came from Takayama and Kobashi's self-destruction. Takayama being so petulant and Kobashi gradually losing his temper worked so well in a match where they were facing younger, faster guys with some unnerving raw power. Turning it around mid-match and having the younger guys play off Takayama and Kobashi's issue made guys getting knocked off the apron more entertaining than it had any right to be. They let Misawa rest well and pick his involvements, setting up a great comeback for Nakajima and some above-par interactions with Kobashi, especially him getting pummeled in the corner. They had a match that could easily coast on the Kobashi team's internal strife, but built so much more into it; Marufuji and Kobashi are as reliable as it gets in NOAH for fun moments in tag matches and this was no different with Marufuji's smart counters and fake-outs. They were trying to have something at least a little special on nearly every tag-in. Quality NOAH trios tags are essentially about how many iterations of the guys can work out well, and this was one of those where nearly everything clicked.

54. Ric Flair Vs. Shawn Michaels (March 30) - WWE: Wrestlemania 24 – For pure nostalgia and emotion, nothing will top this match. After an unparalleled career, fans refused to see flaws in Ric Flair's game. There were plenty of flaws – he couldn't hit his Shin Breaker and he was off on chops, but that didn't matter. Shawn Michaels overusing the Superkick didn't matter. They channeled dozens of wrestling memories through a clever eyepoke, a low blow everyone saw coming, Michaels's Figure Four-style hold, and repeated attempts with Flair's classic Figure Four. They rode what suspended disbelief the storyline had built (mostly what Flair's riveting promo from the previous Raw had built) to create as many hopeful moments as possible before the inevitable fall. I'm not even close to Flair's biggest fan, but the emotion that night was too great to ignore.

53. Bryan Danielson Vs. Tyler Black (January 25) - ROH: Breakout - A radically different upstart story from the ones told in Erick Stevens's January matches, Black and Danielson told of an upstart character testing and digging on the veteran without sacrificing any of the athleticism. Really, this wouldn't have worked without that athleticism - Black was taller, faster, far more agile, and managed to show it early on without having to go out of his way. The somersault into a slap was great early punctuation of that theme. They put Black on display, at first with counters and escapes, then later with tenacity, flying and some serious bombs in his offense, while never forgetting what they established earlier. Danielson's

early retribution made the best use of palm strikes in a long time, and from there they hit a fast middle gear that they kept up for a surprisingly long time, turning Black from an upstart to a caustic equal. The finishing stretch is phenomenal, but the actual ending is indefensible. Maybe Black intended to land the Phoenix Splash differently. It was something for them to think about for the inevitable rematch.

52. Bryan Danielson Vs. Tyler Black (May 9) – ROH: Southern Navigation – At Breakout Black was constantly responding to Danielson, with his most impressive offense being a slap across the face. This time he came out at the bell and hit Danielson with his style of offense. The lead couldn't last, but it defined the match as something between two guys who were much closer to the equal than the kick-out-kid act Black had in their first match and at Take No Prisoners against Nigel McGuinness. The offense wasn't just flying, but some slick kicks in unexpected positions to counter Danielson's offense, and at least one truly impressive power spot with the Powerbomb into the corner. Black presented a package of threats that defined the match as different, even as Danielson's simple technical genius and striking ability let him find his openings and tear Black apart. It always warms my heart to see a crowd in a high-octane company like ROH cheer louder for a Dragon Sleeper than a Backbreaker onto chairs. Danielson was possibly even more on his game than at Breakout, not having to dictate quite so much of the match but firing up like a good disgruntled veteran (veteran by ROH standards, anyway), and working holds like the Indian Deathlock and Heel Hooks that functioned viciously and entertainingly, even as the low-demand style of that offense made Black's cutting edge repertoire look even flashier.

51. Yuji Nagata Vs. Masato Tanaka (October 13) – NJPW: Destruction 2008 – This was my match. I had an internet black out three days before it happened and wouldn't check e-mail until I had the chance to see it, unspoiled and unfettered. I threatened at least two other writers with physical violence to preserve its sanctity. There was a glee in my life at the mere prospect of Nagata, my favorite Japanese wrestler of 2007 now back from a health scare, facing Masato Tanaka, who had been on a tear like no one else in the country in all of 2008. NJPW Vs. Zero-1 had me giddy. Nagata and Tanaka knew it was more than just Tanaka's first singles match against a top NJPW guy – it was the Tanaka singles match against * the * NJPW guy. That was why they fought evenly in a lock-up and went forearm for forearm to start things off, before expertly switching to Nagata trying kick Tanaka's head off his shoulders. There was an equality about them, each man with his assortment of killer strikes, of hazards on the mat, and suplexes that could destroy. Tanaka reminded us of that last part when he dragged Nagata out and dropped him on the concrete to maintain a struggling advantage. Of course it turned into Tanaka being the weaker one, almost embarrassing himself in moments like the failed Spear on Nagata that merely turned into a front facelock, but all of it came out of a great sense of understated showmanship in front of NJPW's audience. Tanaka was the hero in his buildings, but the vulnerable antagonist here. Nagata was the quintessential Japanese hero, upright with the big holds, almost punishing Tanaka for the audience. Tanaka put him in the perfect frame of peril for the second half, especially on those sick Sliding D elbow strikes. Nagata's bloody nose only added to the spirit he was wrestling for.

50. Naomichi Marufuji Vs. KENTA (October 8) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Autumn Navigation – One of those matches that brings up the futility of comparing matches at all. Contrast this sixty-minute draw of amazing moves and a handful of dramatic false finishes to a tight fifteen-minute story of hatred and brawling. Which is better? They're nothing alike and have disparate appeals. For the few threads that run through the match, especially in what offense was chosen when, it hardly deserves high praise. Yet the amount of athleticism, toughness and innovation displayed throughout with a focus that never dropped to plodding or wondering what to do absolutely makes it one of the hundred most notable matches of the year. The ending has grown on me more subsequent viewings, not a dramatic false finish or the strikes galore of the KENTA/Kobashi Vs. Sasaki/Nakajima tag in the same promotion, but two guys worn out and relying on those same palm strikes, barely able to stand and yet damned if they'd let the other guy one-up them here, in the main event that would give the other guy two belts. The storied rivalry of KENTA and Marufuji will last a great deal longer, but it came through in so much of what they did, not raw hate, but an emotion just as dangerous in how competitive they were and how badly they wanted this victory – and more importantly, how badly each didn't want the other guy to win. That's what makes this going an hour not hurt all the matches against other competitors of similar ability that their offense will end. It made all the kick-outs worthwhile – and critics of overkill be damned, but they did have the decency to protect the Pole Shift by having a battered Marufuji struggle to get over to the cover. But especially in subsequent viewings what stood out wasn't the ungodly offense they ate over that hour, but how they so seldom meandered, paused or stretched something out unnaturally. That gravely hurt the Kondo/Marufuji title match from AJPW – it was a great twenty-minute match that went forty. A lot of NOAH singles go longer than they need to, and longer than the wrestlers have the talent to give them a sense of substance. Clearly they paced themselves in the opening ten minutes, but there was an overwhelming feeling that these were two wrestlers going at each other for an hour, not two guys doing a match for an hour. Outside of that, it was a heck of a ride.

49. Kurt Angle Vs. Shinsuke Nakamura (February 17) – NJPW: New Japanism in Ryogoku - They worked Angle's Ankle Lock in clever and believable ways that we largely haven't seen since he went to TNA. Nakamura had some of the best counters of the hold to date, making Angle fight him in one direction only to turn around in the hopes of an escape or reversal. The Jujigatame also hasn't looked this devastating in NJPW outside a Yuji Nagata match in quite a while. They channeled MMA moves into pro wrestling logic in the fashion many Japanese matches only aspire to these days, wholly explaining the shortness of the match through the danger of the Ankle Lock and Jujigatame.

48. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Brent Albright & BJ Whitmer Vs. Davey Richards & Rocky Romero Vs. Austin Aries & Bryan Danielson (January 26) - ROH: Without Remorse - People have overlooked how good the first fall of this match was. There was too much competition for these guys to snatch pinfalls or apply effective submissions and it quickly

turned into the generic ROH scramble. Black's Twisting Moonsault to the floor has never been stable and required even more focus to pull off than anything else guys were trying (plus he'd almost missed it at Breakout the previous night); that in addition to pinfall attempts in general not being anticipated in the match made Richards's technical roll-up perfect. From there things developed interestingly, truly exploding in the final fall that made Richards and Romero look like they belonged in the ring against Aries and Danielson. It's a shame ROH didn't capitalize on that performance more later on because it could have seriously helped the tag and singles careers of those two guys. Not that Aries and Danielson were slouches; their offensive flurries were inspired and Aries busted out the mother of all great hot tags. The final minutes were simply mesmerizing.

47. Edge Vs. The Undertaker (March 30) – WWE: Wrestlemania 24 - Just by positioning this match last on Wrestlemania, WWE gave it something no storyline could. Why put a match everyone considered a lock for the Undertaker to win in the main event? It had such a bad build. But WWE does stupid stuff all the time. Oh Christ, were they going to have Edge break the Undertaker's streak after all? That was on everyone's mind from the second the pre-match video played. The slow beginning dampened that anxiety while Edge wore Undertaker down to his physical level with a series of moves on the outside, necessary to turn the match into as even a contest as it was. It really clicked when they got into Edge's counters, showing how much Edge had prepared while feigning arrogance and idiocy with Vickie Guerrero. Those same preparations made Undertaker's ultimate counter of the Spear with the Gogoplata all the sweeter, showing that while he'd tried to rely on force, he brought preparations of his own (even if the commentators didn't mention it). It was more nuanced than that (Undertaker planned ahead to counter the counter to his Old School Arm Bar Smash), but they let Edge's preparation override his to give that last surprise more kick. The false finish with Charles Robinson sprinting down the incredibly long rampway to count the fall after the Tombstone was as brilliant a way of getting around the Tombstone as an inevitable match-ender as anything. The following minute with the goons and the Spears had the raucous magic the match called for.

46. Umaga Vs. Jeff Hardy (January 7) Steel Cage Match from WWE: Raw – They showed great chemistry throughout 2007 and opened up 2008 with a bang. A good, steady start with Umaga dominantly more actively (rather than relying on some of the boring holds that killed audiences in latter-2007 bouts) and a few premature hope spots, including a phenomenal reversal that almost saw Hardy escape over the top of the cage. Everything from the moment they returned from commercials was solid, as they drew the crowd into everything including Umaga's nerve hold, which usually quiets the crowd (even Ric Flair couldn't make it work). Orton's presence at ringside detracted from the emotion between the two guys, but he provided some tremendous facial reactions to Hardy's comebacks. Hardy didn't dominate, but every time he came in control he looked legit without damaging Umaga's aura. Each of the chair attacks could have feasibly finished the match, and while I hate the idea of a savage who pins people with a thumb-punch relying on a weapon, his chairshot to Hardy's back was sickening. The finish was a great tease that had me screaming at the TV for Hardy to dive onto Orton. Umaga and Hardy is one pair I never tire of watching go at it.

45. Minoru Fujita & Takuya Sugawara Vs. Ikuto Hidaka & Munenori Sawa (August 3) – Zero-1: Fire Festival 2008 – Hidaka is golden so long as he's motivated and his opponents can keep up. Every time Going up against his most infamous partner in Fujita guaranteed that here, and Hidaka went on a roll for the first ten minutes of the match before the Sworn Brothers really took over. Both sides had great energy, even in the sick holds the Sworn Brothers threw on Hidaka, carrying the emotion from exchange to exchange in inspiring fashion. You have to love the way the Fire Festival crowd got invested in this, especially as it went on. It had little to none of the awkwardness in exchanges that hinders a lot of the lesser Zero-1 I've seen; this is the type of stuff that makes me go out and get more from that great Japanese indy. It didn't have false finishes so much as things everyone believed might end it, a subtle difference – this didn't have the "gotcha!" effect of many matches that hinge on big kick-outs.

44. Shawn Michaels Vs. Jeff Hardy (February 11) – WWE: Raw – A match of character from the opening fist bump and chop. Hardy proved he could play the top babyface against anyone, and Michaels managed to play a subtle heel role that could be cheered on offense but simultaneously could be rooted against. Rather than building to one climactic ending moment, they built a dozen lesser moments that made it compulsively watchable wrestling television, from a meaningful clothesline spot to a huge powerslam on the floor. My one complaint is that this match also featured the goofiest moment of the year: Shawn Michaels going for a standing second rope double axe-handle to Jeff Hardy on the mat, specifically because everyone counters it with a boot to the face, so that he could catch Hardy's leg and apply a submission hold. Planning ahead to counter a counter to a move that could not work in the first place was like wrestling metafiction.

43. Roderick Strong Vs. Erick Stevens (February 16) – Full Impact Pro: Redefined -

Do you enjoy watching the sweat spray off of grown men's chests while they chop each other? Then this was the feud for you. The significant size difference between Strong and Stevens takes a lot of people out of their matches (particularly new viewers who don't follow the indies). Strong is primarily a striker and power wrestler with some solid technical ability, but being smaller, his striking and power moves aren't believable enough to let him dominate Stevens, and he isn't an aggressive enough technical wrestler to make picking Stevens apart believable on a regular basis (as, say, William Regal or Bryan Danielson might have been). The two were very clever in this match to lock horns so much of the time and fight over hammerlocks, often with Stevens legs bent to some degree to give the impression of him being a little shorter, and given Stevens enough control time to underplay the usual Strong-dominance that hindered previous matches. Stevens followed through on his own physical success and became too confident, given Strong little openings for logical reversals, but never too much. They framed their struggle such that Stevens was elevated to Strong's level in character, and Strong was elevated to a physically believable level. And while you can't credit the wrestlers for the camera work, the camera angles contributed to neutralizing the

size issue. The match was such a struggle that the one (possibly accidental) belt shot believably put things in Strong's power, and Stevens sold and bumped like a martyr to accentuate it. The subtle story of Strong's underhanded tactics was also brilliantly woven in, such that you might convince yourself he wasn't up to something until the end. They made the most of that available passion by executing things so fluidly, moving through a complex struggle in a way that was easy to follow. It far outshone the looser matches that follow in ROH.

42. Austin Aries Vs. Go Shiozaki (October 24) – FIP Title Match from ROH: Return of 187 – This match showed how much Go had grown in singles over his ROH tenure. He wasn't as stiff in falling and taking moves, more natural with reversals, and his character was well suited to the expanded story. At the Sixth Anniversary Show only Aries had scouted Go, where this time Go was prepared for many of Aries's trademarks, even willing to threaten a Brainbuster before Aries had hit one. His new attitude fit cowardly dodges (like bailing to the ropes in avoiding Aries's dropkick escape trick), and especially well in brutalizing Aries with different kinds of chops. Just like before, Aries took everything like a champ, but this time Go had a smarmy personality to redefine the match, making it less about out-doing the original, and more about telling a new story. Casting Aries as a stronger underdog who needed the quick strikes and high risk of the first match, but included more ground-based striking hoping to keep the bigger guy loopy also switched up original role nicely, though simply not as radical a change as Go becoming the villain. From the plays on original strategies all the way to the plunge of a finish, this was a heck of a way to introduce Go as FIP champion to the ROH audience.

41. Bryan Danielson Vs. Low Ki (January 5) – PWG: All Star Weekend 6 Night 1 – Fantastic nuanced minimalism. If you want to do technical wrestling today, watch matches like this to see how Danielson and Ki used small expressions and motions while sitting in a hold to express their struggle. They incorporated elements of amateur wrestling and MMA seamlessly into a free pro wrestling grappling style, and their ease with grappling counters needs to be seen. Even if you like PWG's commentary, this is better without because Excalibur and Bryce Remsburg couldn't catch everything these guys hinted at, and their actions were so in touch with the intimate crowd that the crowd's groans and cheers served as a much more fitting soundtrack. The hesitation in their approaches, the hesitation towards switching holds, and even how much they managed to do with their legs twined in the opening segment was fascinating. Danielson using the front of not wanting them to strike each other, and later of trying to escape Ki's retribution, threaded all the lock-ups and technical exchanges before Ki got his highly satisfying chance to lay into him. That chance was also a great example of how to make really hard strikes mean something rather than just doing them at all points during a match. Here they built up every really painful action so that it meant more emotionally when it happened. Low Ki was definitely off in the final minutes, seeming to go completely against the flow and logic of the match (crossing the ring to take a breather when he had a viable pinfall opportunity, going for a Phoenix Splash and messing it up, seeming to require Danielson to scoop him up into a hold), but even if he wasn't hurt (and that did seem more like the result of an injured performer than intention), the ending delivered and rested atop a stunning body of a match.

40. Brent Albright Vs. Adam Pearce (August 2) - Death Before Dishonor 6 – Some matches mean more simply because of where they happen. You let Bourne and Mysterio Jr. go free on Raw and even if they do something merely on par with what's normal in an indy, it means more because of how they work that material with that novel audience. Albright and Pearce took classic elements of NWA title matches and brought them to ROH for that same kind of imported meaning. It helped that they were structured very well: Larry Sweeney stepped in only to be cut off, and the fall through the table and Piledriver were totally believable elements to an ending we didn't want to see but thought was certain. And it was about damned time Albright got an ROH crowd that appreciated the way he fired up. The crowd treated them like titans, and Albright in particular stepped it up for them, in the way he put effort into every grope for the ropes, the delivery of the German Suplexes, right up to the last seconds, adjusting his angle and grip on the Crowbar to force Pearce to give in. That is the testament to detail that always enriches a match: working the Crowbar with aspects of technical wrestling a match that was far from technical, making the whole thing better. Pearce has been a good bully and focus of comeuppance for a long time, but I've never seen him in such a position to make the most of it.

39. Aja Kong Vs. Meiko Satomura (October 26) – Sendai Girls – If you were squeamish at Morishima attacking Danielson's eye in ROH last year, fear Aja Kong. Even Michaels and Jericho weren't this deep with their eye-related violence. It wasn't just starting the match with a spinning backfist, but taking so many opportunities to dig at Satomura's eye, even when she was just lying in a lackadaisical cover. If it was a chinlock? An opportunity to rake the eye. If Satomura started coming back? A palmstrike across the brow. Kong wasn't a mere sadist, but tickled to be one. Satomura had all the necessary fire and technical ability to play the role, but the best fun came from her simply trying to chop down this mammoth opponent – and it's saying something when solid desperation comebacks aren't the highlight of a match like this. They weren't content for a simple comeback story, but made Kong resilient when she wasn't formidable. In that way, they went from the best kind of return match for Satomura to the best kind of competitive match for both of them. Unsurprisingly the mix made it the most emotional women's match I've seen all year.

38. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Bryan Danielson (September 13) – ROH: Battle of the Best – I would be a happier wrestling fan if more people could do this much this well in mat holds. What an opening, completely harnessing the tone of ROH's Japan shows for a scientific wrestling match that took both men so seriously that neither could rush into anything. Other matches use slowness to stall, build (often empty) emotion or to save the wrestlers exerting themselves as they pad the time they're in the ring. This was all about emphasizing how good and how dangerous McGuinness and Danielson were. It never became as hot as Unified or Driven 2007, focusing on the contest aspect without resorting to as many strikes or generic fighting spirit. Instead it was essentially the Survival of the Fittest

2007 preliminary without the short time limit. In one sense it was necessary, as it was the wrong crowd to do a big blow-off style match. In another sense it was prudent, in that they added another diverse chapter to their storied history, something that won't resemble anything too much as to seem cheap – as I already mentioned, it was an extension of a previous match that had been clipped by circumstances. It was refreshing both because it was so different from the Sixth Anniversary Show match, and because the two are so good at technical wrestling. Danielson wouldn't just stall to clasp his hands in a double underhook; he fought for the proper angle. McGuinness looked for the chance to hit one stunning Reverse Elbow for several minutes, rather than throwing one whenever he felt like it. They even performed McGuinness's mule kick in above average fashion, with Danielson in more believable ring positioning to try to counter it the first time only to be suckered. At all times they were vulnerable: sometimes they were tired, sometimes in pain or unable to escape a hold, sometimes only looking for a counter or the ropes when they weren't available. In the previous match on the card El Generico hit a Top Rope Splash to almost no effect; here, an Irish Whip was devastating. How expressive they were as they went from moment to moment carried very simple wrestling far beyond what a lot of matches that rely on much more dangerous feats accomplish.

37. Kurt Angle Vs. AJ Styles (August 10) – "Last Man Standing Match" that was actually a Texas Death Match from TNA Hard Justice – If 2008 was Kurt Angle's last year in wrestling, this match would have been a suitable end. With its athleticism, ferocity and conclusion, this would have been the note to walk out on, setting up Styles for a permanent main-eventer run so long as TNA could sustain him. A shame, then, that TNA immediately followed it up with an angle and two TV rematches, and Styles was pushed back into the bizarre "unaccomplished young gun" role later in the year. It started out with a peculiar charm in its brawling, for there's nothing like seeing two guys fight all over the aisle way only to still rely on professional wrestling offense like a Capture Suplex or plancha. Especially in the style that Angle wrestles, it suggests that pro wrestling is the most effective offense outside the ring – obviously false, but reinforcing something very positive in a wrestling match. They reserved hitting each other at full force to important moments, like the double Cross-Body Block mid-match. The taunting reversals were also smarter, as Angle would catch Styles in a Powerbomb and actually fold him up for the pin, only pulling him up into Styles's own Styles Clash once he kicked out – something Styles ought to do himself. Styles played the same game with an Ankle Lock, where he braced himself and stayed mid-ring, not immediately following Angle to maintain his leverage, but letting Angle crawl forward a little and lose all of his own leverage before finally grapevining the legs. Not just stealing from each other, but showing each other how they could do their offense better was a great layer to some of their upper tier exchanges, and added meaning to the first fall. It was that same pointed familiarity that carried to Angle fighting to have his way on the top rope, a place he can usually charge up onto and have his way, and ultimately trying to brutalize someone with one more Suplex and getting it turned on him in devastating fashion. It's always a big statement when a guy wins a match with something he's never (or rarely) done before and it still makes total sense.

36. Masato Tanaka Vs. Manabu Nakanishi (April 6) – Zero 1 Max: Miracle Rocket: 2nd Impact - Masato Tanaka went wild in the opening minutes, establishing a white-hot atmosphere of hatred around the fight before channeling it into a more traditional Japanese pro-wrestling match. From thereon they hit a flow where they could rely on passionate violence or the more standard big-time wrestling style without breaking the story they told or their hold over the audience. Both halves of this dualistic flow complimented the other, and especially with the brawling on the outside and some of the struggles mid-match, added energy when they switched up. Nakanishi was almost guiltily fun as the immovable object-style powerhouse, really coming into his own mid-match and towards the end with a great sense of when to do nothing and let Tanaka accentuate his strength. So Nakanishi resisting an Irish Whip became as impressive as Tanaka hitting a Sliding D at top speed. Some may find this match too chaotic or think it went overboard, but you have to appreciate how they channeled their brief excesses into a truly minimalistic ending – perhaps a standard finishing sequence for Tanaka's big matches these days, but fitting far better than usual.

35. Kurt Angle Vs. Yuji Nagata (January 4) – NJPW: Wrestle Kingdom 2 - I think most people expected more of a technical, mat-based match, especially early on. I know I did. Instead they surprised me by going for the heavy artillery early. The prideful attempts for knockout kicks were great touches, and the almost resentful exchanges of Suplexes should have established animosity for any American viewers who didn't know the backstory of the IWGP belt situation. Angle just was not going to chain wrestle in the opening, but if he was going to stiff Nagata, Nagata was going to bring it back to him. Saving the chain wrestling for later was unorthodox, but completely worked, especially with their series of reversals of high profile finishing holds. You had to love Nagata refusing to show weakness in his leg even as Angle ripped on it, and something possessing Angle to work Nagata's leg more aggressively, logically and convincingly than he did to any TNA opponent in all of 2007, just four days into 2008. Nagata is a very underrated seller, in that he simultaneously conveys feeling pain and fighting through pain, conveying weakness and toughness, which makes any course of action he might take plausible. It's equally believable that his leg would give out the next time he went for a throw, or that he'd be able to Saito Suplex Angle to death, and the NJPW audience will passionately buy into either. Throughout the match you can see him take rounder steps with the leg Angle worked over, and have to catch himself when he tries to rest on it – he doesn't express the weakness constantly, but it's downright to say it he forgets it. Meanwhile, is downright fun to watch Angle freeze up in agony from every strike, in what might have been his most entertaining selling since his jump to TNA. It lacked an explosive ending appropriate to such a clash of stars, but it was great up until that finish.

34. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Tyler Black (taped March 16, aired May 29) – ROH: Take No Prisoners – What a one-two punch this was with Danielson Vs. Aries, making Take No Prisoners one of my favorite PPV's of the year, up there with Summerslam. While Danielson/Aries was much more fluid, competitive, consistent and arguably deeper, this had higher highs. Everything from the chairshot on was special, and McGuinness introduced his end-match

formula of a ridiculous number of kickouts in grand fashion. You couldn't have asked for a better subject than Black, who bumped and sold like he was getting murdered. It's a testament to Black's ability to read, flow with and command crowds that his F-5, a move he'd never even used in ROH before, was a believable nearfall. Even months later on PPV I was ready for the title to change hands at his last roll-up attempt. Yes, McGuinness's domination in the first half gets tired. Yes, on repeated viewings the kick-outs can be a bit much. Yes, Black submitting works to negate a lot of what the match set up, and a knockout pin wouldn't have been difficult to use instead. But this made a star even better than the Breakout match, and in tandem with it, got things rolling for Black's great year in Ring of Honor.

33. Mike Quackenbush Vs. Johnny Saint (March 8) – World of Sport Rules Match from Westside Xtreme Wrestling: 16 Carat Gold Tournament Night 2 – You know what? I dare you to do this when you're 65. Seriously, while Michaels Vs. Flair from Wrestlemania had an incomparably more dramatic build, Saint's sheer ability here put Flair's to shame. And one can't discount the references in this contest either, right down to the hold Quackenbush used to win his only fall. The creativity of counters (including pretending to stumble when trapped in a Front Facelock), fluidity of exchanges to take control back from one side to another, and the packing of meaning into little moments (like Saint finding a way to return to his feet when trapped in knucklelocks before the first bell, or him managing to pull a Bodyslam just at another) took this far above the normal technical match between men of any age and experience level. The lack of animosity didn't hurt it at all, suggesting hate-based wrestling some companies force too hard into every angle might not be necessary – the legitimate surprise of Quackenbush (such as after the first fall) only complimented the veteran. Little dashes of humor were structured to reinforce how sound Saint was, again only reinforcing the drama of a hateless but difficult match. When you add how rad it is to see a 65-year-old man effortlessly catch Mike Quackenbush's arm and roll into a submission hold that only requires him to do a push-up… well, it sure gets on this list.

32. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Bryan Danielson (February 23) - ROH: Sixth Anniversary Show - The restart was a great bit of wrestling theatre, and an homage for what Ring of Honor is supposed to stand. Someone can go for a DQ and escape with the title in WWE (in fact, Randy Orton did that same thing at No Way Out a few days before this match), but here the locker room wouldn't allow it. So while it was by-the-numbers before the disqualification, the real match began after the restart. It still couldn't match Unified or Driven for intensity or creativity, and the men didn't hit a similar groove. McGuinness's attack on Danielson's arm was uninspired, hailing back to one of the things that held back their first match at Weekend of Champions Night 2. However, they built out of that and into a solid brawl where the heavy bombs of offense meant a lot. The best theme was how McGuinness handled Danielson's head after Danielson promised not to go after his. At first he was actually hesitant to do damage there, then he hit a desperation Lariat that dumped Danielson on the back of his head. Later he hit a Tower of London, only to cut himself open. You could interpret that he was just doing enough to get an advantage or actually became absorbed in his own fear of damage to his head, but thereafter he went right back into arm work (much better stuff than earlier in the match, including stealing Danielson's Cattle Mutilation) and striking. By that stretch they at least earned their conceits, particularly the question of why Danielson wouldn't go right after his head after the DQ and his cowardly escape attempt. The last ten minutes climbed back up to the best these guys can do together, with references to their history and some logical innovations. Hey, McGuinness put his arm up at 1 when the ref was checking if he was conscious in a hold. It's about freaking time someone did that. And it figured into the point McGuinness really wanted to make. Beyond any dubious concern for his health, he'd never been able to fairly and decisively beat Danielson, and whether he recognized his shortcuts before snapping at the end or not, he was trying in his way. When he gave in and went for Danielson's eye, though, he threw it all away and embraced perhaps the most wicked mid-match turn in ROH history. He was a prick at the start of the show, but this was a whole other magnitude.

31. Takeshi Morishima Vs. Takashi Sugiura (June 14) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Great Voyage 2008 in Yokohama - Sugiura is still trying to prove himself in high profile matches. He succeeds every time, but it's mostly despite NOAH's wishes, and he drifts back down thanks to their lack of attention. In matches like these, his effort bleeds through to character in little moments like the Super Hurricanrana and German Suplex combo in this match: the first move being unusual athleticism from him and the sort of move that always makes Morishima psych up in anger, opening him to a second sledgehammer move in the beautiful and surprisingly powerful reversal into the suplex. That one exchange embodied everything Sugiura brought to the table: agility unbefitting his shape, strength unbefitting his size, excellent technical skill and strategic plotting of offense. Morishima gave him enough time to seem like a real force (if not a real threat), even taking a Kobashi-style drop off the apron at one point. None of this hurt Morishima, however, who came across as a juggernaut who necessitated loads of high-level offense from his opponent. Sugiura is a more believable fighter at the heavyweight class than anyone ex-Junior in NOAH, and when Morishima turned things around he laid into Sugiura with some very visually effective punches, forearms and lariats. He earned that "Japanese monster!" title the commentator kept shouting, and was only made more believable by how varied Sugiura had to keep his game, reversing a back suplex into a splash here, picking the ankle there, all in the attempt keep himself in control. Morishima further accentuated that struggle with his own high-end offense near the end, both trying to make a point as a would-be dominant champion, and to break this smaller but driven opponent. A top-turnbuckle Double Stomp just to keep Sugiura down was impressive, but how many times in the last year have you seen Morishima Moonsault? That a former Junior Heavyweight, even one as strong and talented as Sugiura, could struggle to *remain* in control lent this a drama you can't get in every match, but which couldn't have been given to a better challenger.

30. Austin Aries Vs. Erick Stevens (January 11) – FIP Title Match at ROH: Proving Ground – This reminded me of the much-lauded Cena/Michaels 2 match from Raw last year. Then, you could tell Michaels was more responsible for it working so well, but could also see that Cena was capable and bringing everything he had to his role.

Here, Aries was clearly in charge more of the time, but every time Stevens took over he showed character, confidence, effort, power and ability. This is the kind of match that makes somebody because when Stevens was given something, he used it, rather than just going through it and getting back under the direction of his more seasoned opponent. Aries's big traits were setting the pace of the segments, bringing much more variety to the offense, and growing increasingly agitated and aggressive. The build-up to the double count-out was inspired, and Aries's dive was crazy (though ROH used an awful camera angle that obscured just how far he jumped). Everything after the restart of the match possessed exhilarating sprint, with every thirty seconds pointed by some purpose – going for the 450, going for the Horns of Aries, and going for the Doctor Bomb. Because of that directed energy, everything worked even better, and Aries's amazing reversal to the Suplex came off as even more impressive. It should have made Stevens, but unfortunately ROH's handling of him in 2008 wasn't as good as some of his performances.

29. Jay & Mark Briscoe Vs. Chris Sabin & Alex Shelley (April 19) – ROH: Return Engagement – In mid-2008 people were surprised that the Briscoes would claim they needed to go back to their roots with more brawling. But if you watched this match, you could tell why. They tried submissions and both wound tied up in the ring. They tried to go flying and Sabin bowled them over even with the referee getting in his way. Even when they pulled some big reversals, like Mark flying into the ring to turn Shelley's Air Raid Crash into a setup for Jay's Jay Driller, the Guns turned it around on them again. All their wars with the Age of the Fall had left their state-of-the-art fast, flying and innovative rusty, below the level they were at last year. They walked into the match prepared to wrestle the same gameplan as last year with little preparation, continuing to fall back on the big tricks of 2007 even late in the match, hitting one big slow tandem move just to setup their Doomsday Device variant, and found their execution was off and the fatigue they went through left them too sluggish to hit it before Sabin could run in. It doesn't get plainer than Jay Briscoe picking up Alex Shelley on his shoulders for that Springboard Doomsday Device only to end up getting Skull Fucked. As Sabin and Shelley said at the top of the show, they spent the year off studying the Briscoes's offense, and came out with fast counters and their trademark tandem moves in ways the Briscoes weren't ready for. The Briscoes were probably physically stronger and possibly tougher, so it made sense that those things were what helped them hang in. Their reliable offense was ugly and simple, like a quick and loose Death Valley Driver, chops to the throat and the ground-and-pound based offense that granted them their longest stretch of domination. Their coolest counters were things like an Exploder Suplex on one guy that slammed him onto his partner to break up a submission – technically complex, but relying only on brute force. The Briscoes simply did not have the skills in complex clutches that they'd once had, while Shelley & Sabin had only gotten better at picking spots. It was a good story that made for a less compelling match than their 2007 encounter (#1 on the Riren 100 in 2007), but not by too much.

28. KENTA & Taiji Ishimori Vs. Kotaro Suzuki & Yoshinobu Kanemaru (December 7) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Winter Navigation 2008 - KENTA started out with an aggression that would really define him as one of the greats in the world if he could bring it to more singles matches and keep it up. For this match more than any other in the two teams's feud, he was the defining element, almost a dangerous veteran in the role someone like Takayama or Kobashi normally plays. That made every time either guy went so much as even with him that much more impressive, and despite being a former singles (and still tag) champion, Kanemaru still showed the benefits of being elevated. It meant that much more for them to actually bust open and dominate KENTA. Ishimori was more on-point with offense and reversals than usual, and he's usually one of the best, and his dynamic spills helped Suzuki and Kanemaru look slicker than ever. And really, how cool was it when Suzuki caught Ishimori's legs during his normal cocky dive fake, only to yank him out of the ring and wing him into the guardrail? They established peril and consequence, and got rolling at more apt times than pretty much any NOAH Juniors tag match this year, without so much of the perfunctory deliveries that show when unseasoned guys don't know what they're doing. Similarly their crescendos were higher, better-timed and better-executed than even the previous matches the teams had with each other could lead you to expect. They stepped up, including more character like Suzuki's struggle at ringside to take the bell, putting attitude into places that would normally be lulls. Especially on this show NOAH had a lot of to prove, but these might have been the only guys to prove it.

27. Jimmy Jacobs Vs. B.J. Whitmer (April 12) – No Rope Barbed Wire Match from IWA: MS: April Bloodshowers – There are some difficult decisions in the Riren 100. This match is one of them. Matches like this have truly great moments and truly stupid moments, with the latter not being hidden, and sometimes outright emphasized. The minutes spent with duct tape only for somebody run in and cut it apart in thirty seconds was downright depressing. A few stretches of the match dragged. Some of the setups took so long that they further disjointed an already questionably paced match. The trade-off is that the highpoints were so impressive that if it did make it onto the list, it wouldn't be low. I wrote "highpoints," not "highspots," because this wasn't about big flip or head drops, but periods of wrestling greatness in a long, thought-out match. It demands to be lauded. The pacing here isn't as much of an issue as their I Quit match as, between the damage they did, the destruction around and in the ring, and the atmosphere they played off of, this came across as a drawn-out war rather than listless. They started it off with remarkable sense, doing a great job of expressing the danger of the barbed wire in various ways: the traditional fighting of Irish Whips, the less common baseball slide under the wire, and Whitmer clutching his hand from just touching the stuff. The first real contact with the barbed wire was surprising and logical at the same time, simply great. We know Whitmer and Jacobs have great brawling chemistry (they earned two spots on the Riren 100 in 2007), and that brawling really worked. The use of duct tape in their I Quit match seriously hurt matters, and it definitely didn't help this time, but it didn't do as much damage because they were so much more focused. They built to a final chapter that you couldn't even classify as a finishing stretch. It was a chapter in a damned long, damned brutal match. The Barry White Driver off the apron was simply insane. The two Sentons were breathtaking - I have to use that word because for once it's true. The table not giving way made my breath catch in my throat. That one defective table accidentally provided IWA:MS with its most evocative

finish in years, mixing irony, brutality and Jacobs's great psychology. This match was disturbing and should never be done again - but it should also be on the list.

26. Kevin Steen & El Generico Vs. Naruki Doi & Masato Yoshino (March 28) – Ring of Honor: Dragon Gate Challenge 2 - I lamented this in the Riven 100 last year, but it really seems like the top Dragon Gate wrestlers work harder in PWG and ROH than in their home promotion. Maybe it's the encouragement of more vocally passionate audiences. Maybe it's insecurity in wrestling in a foreign country, or they're trying to advertise themselves to these new markets. Maybe they're earning those pricey plane tickets, or maybe they love their craft but can't physically keep this sort of performance level up all year round, but they seem to go faster and put more energy into their work in these American companies that have very similar in-ring styles to that of their home promotion. Here Doi and Yoshino were at their very best as a unit. They were a little on the faceless side, but that was a strength, allowing them to watch each other's backs and file in against either of their opponents seamlessly. Yoshino was particularly on, picking his spots and hitting them with better pacing than I normally see him do in Dragon Gate. Steen played a very suitable powerhouse while Generico did everything you could expect from him, absorbing punishment and building small comebacks into a larger array of exceptionally structured offense. They all switched between strikes, work on the mat, work near the ropes, stuff on the outside, double teams, flying offense and power offense such that every exchange felt either fresh or more exciting than the last. This built to one of the best false finishes ROH has ever seen, and a highly satisfying real finish. A must-see for all fans of sprint tag wrestling.

25. Takeshi Morishima Vs. Kensuke Sasaki (September 6) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Shiny Navigation 2008 – You can hate the decision of the company, but you shouldn't hold it against the match two guys put on. These two walked into a war. Morishima approached Sasaki with a blunt physicality that matched or trumped the veteran, giving the match energy and necessitating the slower holds in this match, giving it a direction that was the only thing seriously lacking to Sasaki/Marufuji in Kensuke Office. Of course it helped that the two fought in a very similar style, making it much easier for them to click. But damn did they click, and from there you got tastes of Morishima's astounding agility, made all the more impressive by him physically dwarfing Sasaki. Moves like Morishima's early Dropkick (and shortly later, the Suicide Dive) added flare to what was already working, and later when he pulled out the Moonsault he got the properly augmented response. All these elements were tethered to the big brawl atmosphere, which lent itself just as much to a Missile Dropkick as to the three teased count-outs in the first ten minutes. The pliable atmosphere wasn't a mere result of their reputations, but hard work in softening each other up, constantly requiring additional strikes or surprises to be able to hit the next big thing. Sasaki wrestles like he's made of iron, but all of Morishima's offense and resilience did more to build him as at or near that level of toughness than any of the Misawa matches. Those who hated this match on Morishima's behalf would be well-served to go back and watch the crowd reaction to his signature offense. He lost, but he left an enormous star.

24. HHH Vs. Umaga Vs. Jeff Hardy Vs. JBL Vs. Chris Jericho Vs. Shawn Michaels (February 17) – Elimination Chamber Match from WWE: No Way Out – Wow, probably the best Chamber match to date. They started out with very simple, very athletic mat wrestling from Michaels and Jericho, then upped the ante with Umaga's power (particularly his double Samoan Drop and "ass through the glass" attack), and after JBL came in it became utterly entertaining chaos. The string of eliminations hindered what could have been a much longer, deeper match, but the final sequence between Jeff Hardy and HHH was very well done with a great fake-out of a false finish. Great star power, everyone made the most of the time they could, and everyone went fully into their roles.

23. Naomichi Marufuji & Katsuhiko Nakajima Vs. KENTA & Kota Ibushi (September 14) – ROH: The Tokyo Summit – You don't get a better pure athletic pedigree than this. Switching primarily between the pairs of Marufuji & Ibushi and Nakajima & KENTA was wise, with the latter provided their increasing animosity through highly similar striking offense, while the former provided more aesthetic Junior heavyweight action with allusions back to when they were a team in the 2007 Differ Cup. From there they were able to play up Ibushi essentially auditioning for NOAH again by risking everything, and once again using it to produce a world-class performance. It was no mere exhibition for any of the men involved, with Marufuji and KENTA using some fresh counters to each other's trademark offense, upping that rivalry as well. It made perfect sense that it aired on Samurai TV from the continuity of what guys did with each other, as well as putting on a match that belonged on any top-level NOAH show. They had an interesting use of overtime, not going overkill, but packing five more minutes of action on top of a great half-hour. While that didn't add what it could have, it fit nicely atop an amazing body of a match.

22. Austin Aries Vs. Bryan Danielson (taped March 16, aired May 29) – ROH: Take No Prisoners – People who say they take story over athletic wrestling often overlook the elements of story in matches like these. These were two extremely talented and versatile wrestlers who were too familiar with each other to be trapped easily, thinking sometimes three and four steps ahead. They kept emoting to give clues about what they were trying, and several of their chains had their own easily understood intuitive logic. They grew frustrated and fought to loosen each other up enough to find a weakness they knew how to exploit, and made the pursuit every bit as meaningful as a showier, more obvious story-match like McGuinness Vs. Danielson at the Sixth Anniversary show through their expressiveness, little motions and vast references to their history. There were so many little elements dropped in, more than average for Aries or Danielson who love such things, like Danielson checking his forehead and being surprised he wasn't bleeding, Aries whipping off his elbow pad to do more damage only for the exposure to be turned around on him, and the way Danielson put up his hand to intercept Aries's knee strikes while stuck in the Horns of Aries hold. The elements of narrative as the two guys tried to dissect and destroy each other came together with truly beautiful technical and high impact wrestling, mixing some of the best trading holds in contemporary wrestling with hard and meaningful shots. One kick to the spine from Danielson meant more here than three do in the average Low Ki match – and really, more so than three would in the average Danielson match, as they kept things so enticing and diverse that when one of

the guys busted out a serious strike it meant something. This outstripped any of the Best of Three series they had in 2007 by going faster in the technical wrestling early on than Honor Nation, putting more emphasis on creativity and knowledgeable counters in the final segment than they did at Glory By Honor 6 Night 1, and creating as strong a dynamic in Aries focusing on the head and neck and Danielson focusing on the arm as they've ever done in any of their matches in any promotion. What elevated those area-specific attacks is that the two men were so good and so familiar with each other that they had to rely on other modes of attack just to weaken each other, and that they had real fireworks to throw in and make the area-specific attacks visually impressive, as well as going out of their ways to express the pain and struggle of the onslaughts. Altogether their work flowed like no two other guys in Ring of Honor can together. Just as I said in 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007, if I could watch these guys wrestle one new match per year against each other for the rest of my life I'd die a happy fan.

21. Jay & Mark Briscoe Vs. Naomichi Marufuji & Takashi Sugiura (March 2) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Second Navigation at the Nippon Budokan - Marufuji and Sugiura are all I could ask for in a tag team. Marufuji has character, bumps well, sells well, has a great sense of timing in nearly all things, and gives a Junior heavyweight feel to his portion of a match, while Sugiura is an excellent powerhouse, gets the most out of simple strikes than almost anyone in NOAH, and brings a grounded feel to his matches that lets opponents and partners alike spring over him. All that was on display this night. They were a great unit to play off the Briscoes's high octane offense, shaping their performances into segments. While a few of the exchanges looked highly choreographed, most of them were exciting or downright beautiful. The ending was one of the most phenomenal counters this decade.

20. The Royal Rumble Match (January 27) – WWE: Royal Rumble - Every year you can rely on the Royal Rumble match to be worth watching. There are the small things, like unusual pairings that work so well you can't wait for the sparks to turn into feuds (Morrison/Michaels and Umaga/Undertaker struck me the most, and frustrated me most when they didn't materialize immediately afterwards). There are the nutty ways people try to stay in the ring. The Royal Rumble has unique advantages, like its entrants arriving every ninety seconds causing the spectacle of entrances to become part of the match. A surprise entrance, like Rowdy Roddy Piper's this year, is an amazing thrill that matches any twisting Moonsault or narrow escape from elimination (and CM Punk marking out over the Piper/Snuka stand-off was almost as good as Piper's entrance itself). Similarly because of the ninety-second intervals, something not having a big payoff (like that Piper/Snuka standoff) doesn't hurt the match because so much can be going on that the remaining contestants can compensate. After the first ten guys entered this Rumble did just that, providing the ultimate in A.D.D. entertainment. It seemed like there were more miscues in this Rumble than usual, with things like CM Punk standing in the middle of the ring for ten seconds with Morrison on his shoulders, waiting for Miz to come down the aisle and charge him, or Undertaker throwing Umaga to the ropes and wandering away while Umaga tried to hold himself in position for a follow-up. The production work was also more questionable than usual, with the camera sticking on wrestlers who were in the middle of awkward pauses, or not filming the big action (like Undertaker's table attack on Snitsky). Still, you could rely on amazing moments that the cameramen would catch, like Cody Rhodes's kamikaze charge against Snitsky that nearly caused a double-outage and Shelton Benjamin's springboard into a Double Stungun on two men that were standing on the second rope. Cena's entrance electrified the crowd and imbued the match with a magic that lasted to the end, surging strongest in the Final 3 segment. Cena's surprise redeemed any shortcomings of the match, making the final moments some of the most exciting of WWE's year. Certainly Cena's surprise overshadowed the blatant stupidity of Finlay being "disqualified" and walking off with Hornswaggle. It's next to impossible to appreciate how great this was on tape if you know the surprises and outcomes in advance. Of everything in the wrestling world, the Rumble is one match you must witness live or at least without foreknowledge.

19. Austin Aries Vs. Go Shiozaki (February 23) - ROH: Sixth Anniversary Show –

Especially in early 2008 Go Shiozaki was at a stage in his career when he needed to be framed. He still can use help, but has improved – and so it's funny that his best singles match happened before he began to turn the bend. He didn't need to be "carried," but he needed to be given something. Austin Aries gave him everything. They rapidly established that Go was stronger, more durable and possibly with greater stamina, while establishing that Aries was faster, a superior technician and with much more versatile offense. The most impressive part of all that they established is how they managed to establish two things at once: Aries having to avoid the heavy chop by running and getting momentum for his own strikes, or Aries manipulating holds while Go could power out of them. It all made intuitive and logical sense so that this could be watched critically or just for fun and appreciate the engaging performance all along. Aries threw in more little touches than usual, like returning to the overhead elbow multiple times in petty fashion trying to make a point to himself, or throwing kicks and knees to escape pinfall predicaments instead of just kicking out. Go responded with one of the best powerhouse performances of his career to date, using force to counter some of Aries's innovation and finesse (like one counter to the knees, which was a counter to a Suplex attempt, which ended in a Fisherman's Buster that could have easily ended the match). Aries flew for Go's offense and showed physical strain that highlighted how bluntly tough his opponent was, even to simply hit a move on. This was a classic example of making a guy seem incredibly tough such that beating him meant something.

18. Hiroshi Tanahashi Vs. Suwama (April 9) – AJPW: Champions Carnival 2008 – It was fascinating to watch Tanahashi simultaneously put on the best athletic performances of the tournament and simultaneously be the most hated man in the building. He was the backbone of the Carnival this year, but his best performance was in the finals. Suwama was AJPW's last chance to show up the outsider, and the crowd simply lived through him. He embodied what they wanted through his normal tough guy attitude, but what elevated the match was how they turned the scenario into something that felt so personal. It was personal in the slap instead of a clean break in the opening, personal again in the way Tanahashi tried to throw with the stronger man early on, and Suwama's indignant palm

strikes in an attempt to escape the Reverse Indian Deathlock. That spirit was present much later – Suwama reversing a trademark flying move into a Saito Suplex, and in him vindictively attacking Tanahashi's leg in reprisal for his Dragon Screws. But they graduated from that simple level to Suwama simply trying to destroy this guy who no one could eliminate, and Tanahashi not merely playing the comeback kid, but the guy who was just too good. That was the crucial difference, making Tanahashi a rare but incredibly effective underdog heel. And that seamlessly transitioned to the exhaustion of two guys who had reached the end of the tournament, unloading their high-end offense without success. Tanahashi simply being too good made even one big move, like the double-arm-capture Suplex, a match-threatening move even after Suwama had just dropped several bombs. I'd wish Tanahashi was allowed to be like this more often in NJPW, but it was really the kind of story you can only tell as an outsider.

17. Bryan Danielson Vs. Tyler Black (July 26) – ROH: New Horizons – An improvement on all the themes of their previous matches. Danielson's technical assaults were more disgusting and creative, from the way he bent Black's leg in the opening minutes to the late-match transition from a Sleeper into a Jujigatame. Black was the upstart, disrespectful, underhanded and just opportunistic enough to be a threat, especially in taking advantage of Danielson's few mistakes, like the flubbed Neckbreaker on the apron. In nearly all things Black showed an amazing athleticism that merely needs to be tempered with the experience and toughness that comes with time, but in being able to take the match to his opponent more than at Breakout or Southern Navigation, he pressed the notion that he was improving faster than most ROH stars. There's a temptation to list all of the great false finishes and moments, but I'll let them speak for themselves for those who have seen them, and once again point out that they didn't only work because they were cool. Every ROH show has something cool-looking on it. This was head and shoulders above the average ROH match because of how well Danielson meshed with Black, how they accented each other's offense, and finding that medium between smart wrestling and sprinting.

16. Nigel McGuinness Vs. El Generico (August 15) - ROH: Age of Insanity – Say what you will about "kick out mania" in McGuinness's title defenses, but some of them work. This is probably the best example of it. Generico has this connection with indy audiences and a sympathetic trait in the way he bumps and sells that makes the most outrageous kickouts and comebacks more exciting rather than hurting a match, and making him the best available candidate for this kind of a match. Not that he relied on it as heavily as he did against Castagnoli at Without Remorse; he wrestled smartly, with a lot of scouting for counters, and a righteousness when he stood up for himself that only got richer as the match went on. McGuinness responded by starting out unbeatable and gradually becoming completely shocked with this bean poll who would not submit or stay down. McGuinness owned his offense better than perhaps in any match of his up until this point, placing it all well, but delivering it with more attitude, like methodically bending Generico's arms in holds. All of Generico's logical and brilliant little counters seemed to get less expectable as things went on, and set up perfectly for McGuinness to start countering him. It was just another floor in the building of Generico as a star (sorry for the pun). Steen's appearance was a classic tag team moment, working so much better as an inspiration than an interloper in their Glory By Honor 7 rematch. It was a match about unfathomable guts, and it would be difficult for ROH to do it better without having the underdog win.

15. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Kevin Steen & El Generico (September 19) – ROH: Driven 2008 – While they started out like a force, Steen & Generico soon had to rely on their best tricks just to win back the flow of the match. Black was simply too quick and resourceful, and Jacobs too efficient an opportunist for them to keep control, frustrating them with a mix of tactics and sheer ability. They warranted a highlight reel of Steen & Generico's best from their biggest matches throughout the year, like the combo from the Yoshino & Doi Dragon Gate Challenge 2 bout, the isolated Sharpshooter setup from Death Before Dishonor 6 against the Murder City Machine guns, and the finishers from earlier matches with the Age of the Fall. That "greatest hits" approach put the match on an amazing roll, especially as Black would hold out or Jacobs would break something up, only to fire the challengers up even more. Generico was at his best, living through the crowd's enthusiasm, and hanging in multiple times, waiting for that one miscommunication that would cost Jacobs & Black. Ending it on the Package Piledriver & Brainbuster was perfect– their original finisher, a validation that they've always had it and the audience always knew it. Maybe ROH put off their title victory too long, but this was as great an ending as you could have had on that night.

14. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Austin Aries (March 29) – ROH: Supercard of Honor 3 – One of the drawbacks to a list like this is putting this match below the first. It really is a case of one being different than the other, and both are absolutely worth going out of your way to see. Here they changed things up so well, infusing more mat wrestling, and making exchanges based on the London Dungeon, knees and Horns of Aries just as exciting as the high impact offense of Rising Above. Aries went at McGuinness like a man possessed, embodying the phenomenal energy he had from the end of 2007 through the early part of 2008. The biggest thing for me was the suicide dive, which once again determined the course of a match. This time it destroyed Aries, and those moments where he was completely out of it were truly something special. It would have been an amazing title change had he pulled it out in his momentary comeback, but McGuinness's victory was assured. The ending wasn't executed quite like they wanted due to McGuinness's lack of smoothness, but still worked to drive Aries out of the title picture. It's been long enough, though, that I'm certainly ready for them to wrestle again.

13. Muscle Sakai Vs. "brother" YASSHI Vs. Takaku Fuke Vs. Fuuka Vs. Tetsuya Naito Vs. Ippei Ota Vs. Seiya Sanada Vs. Hikaru Sato Vs. Kiku-Jumbo Vs. Akira-Araya Vs. KUSHIDA Vs. TAKEMURA Vs. Danshoku Dino Vs. Sanshiro Chono (June 17) – 14-person inter-gender inter-weight-class Battle Royale from Minoru Suzuki's 20x2th Birthday Party - Have you ever seen a man thrown out of a battle royale when his opponents trick him with a surprise birthday celebration? Or a woman getting bodily ejected for not having a penis? Or a flock of wrestlers racing to pin a giant midget Jumbo Tsuruta (played by Kikutaro)? If one or more of the above has been missing from your life, track down Minoru Suzuki's 40th Birthday Party (a Samurai TV special named for and presented by Minoru himself).

You may see things higher on this list, but don't be fooled: nothing has a better finishing stretch than this match, which includes slow motion, mood lighting, flashbacks and death by sword. I'm pretty sure that if you've never been to Sunday school you can still pass through Pearly Gates after you die by presenting present proof of purchase of this show. Treating arrivals more like run-ins than entrances led to so much comedy gold, and if any website has a "Comeo of the Year," Sanshiro Chono deserves it for coming out of nowhere to kick the roster to death, apparently for nothing more than having allowed one man to kiss another.

12. Austin Aries Vs. Jimmy Jacobs (June 28) – ROH: Vendetta 2 – Featuring some of the best images of any match ever to happen in ROH. They're a promotion of noticeably smaller production budget than WWE and TNA, but Jacobs reversing the Brainbuster into his Guillotine Choke on top of the bleachers in front of a nasty fall, illuminated by the edge of the spotlight, was simply amazing. It was unsurprising for two guys with such a sense of drama to produce these moments, but their impact remained. That reversal also called to a preparedness for each other's offense; where Jacobs had skewered Aries with the Spear through the ropes at A New Level, here Aries waited to the last second and kned him in the temple. They seemed to walk in expecting it, too, leading to Aries waiting for the proper setup to his Heat Seeking Missile, and Jacobs doing the same with his running setup to the Guillotine Choke/End Times long after they'd returned to the ring. It went another level up with Aries's brutal counter to that hold into his own Horns of Aries/Last Chancery, suggesting not just the steps they'd thought ahead, but how bitter they were. They looked out for chances to deliberately bait and break each other's signature moves in disrespect. The physicality was apt for expressing animosity in almost every moment, and everything linked to something else in the match so that it could be technically less complex than something like what Aries had with Danielson at Take No Prisoners, but surpass it emotionally. Jacobs was the opportunist in things like grabbing the referee to make Aries pause in the middle of an offensive series, or something much more severe, like going for Aries's cut. That latter attack was disturbing and I'd be happy to never see anything like it again, but it fit perfectly with Jacobs's underhanded and vicious plan of attack as he rakes, bit and dug his fingers into the wound. Jacobs's talent for the little things shown through, whether it was the perfect facial expression as he was slammed into a wall to suggest greater impact, or using a different kind of back rake than anyone else normally does and thus avoiding the stigma of that normally hackneyed move. Throughout 2008 Aries wrestled with a special intensity that channeled perfectly into crowd brawling and comebacks against Jacobs's gory tactics. And while ROH has had a lot of exhilarating finishing sequences, Jacobs deliberately taking Aries to a point where he could only hit parts of his infamous combo rather than the whole thing set this apart, especially in the resulting finish. Not many people could turn Dropkicks into believable knockout blows in ROH.

11. Shawn Michaels Vs. Chris Jericho (October 5) – Ladder Match from WWE: No Mercy – Some people asked why Michaels would take Jericho's alley-oop and climb right up the ladder for a possible victory moments in if he'd set up the match to extract revenge. It's a fair question, and grudge matches are sometimes ruined by that kind of thing. But in context, minutes into the match, going for the easy win right there would have embarrassed Jericho. It was too ripe an opportunity not to pluck. That same desire to embarrass bled into his desire to injure when he saw the opportunity to hurt Jericho's leg, leading to that series of punishment. Mostly, though, Jericho was the man possessed for the early period, frequently putting Michaels in painful holds he knew couldn't win him the match, hitting flashy offense like a Springboard Shoulderblock to the outside, and smashing his head inside the ladder, often seeming more interested in making a point than in setting up or climbing a ladder. It never took away from the basic pettiness of Jericho's approach to Michaels, which he returned to in moments of disability like after the escape from the Figure Four and kicking the ladder into his face for good measure. It was good on the simple level as well as the thoughtful, for after Michaels acted like such a superman in their Judgment Day match. Jericho was driven and bitter in great ways, like pretending to be woozy just long enough for Michaels to set up a ladder attack, and then kicking it into his face. The match went beyond that into more complex exchanges, as displayed in that one where Jericho then ascended the ropes intending to send Michaels falling to his doom, only to get thrown off, and things rolled on from there. Jericho's desire to be Michaels (and be more than him) played through with obvious studying of HBK's offense, baiting him for his offensive tropes and innovating in his own ways, trying to hurt him and steal his most famous match. That and Michaels's heroic commanding act provided all the drama you needed for such a high stakes match. You have wonder how long they've wanted to use that finish, of both men holding onto the unfastened ends of the belt. It's certainly one of the wrestling visuals of the year.

10. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Austin Aries & Bryan Danielson (June 7) – ROH: Respect is Earned 2 – They came out of the gate establishing dynamics, with the DQ-hiccup and Danielson and Black having to remind their partners that if they wanted to get at each other that they'd have to play it smarter. Better than any video package ROH could put together you got the concept of a potentially bitter rivalry between Black and Danielson, with a vicious feud between Jacobs and Aries. And in just three minutes they managed to make their guys look smarter and more mature than WWE and TNA's rosters of supposedly unstoppable jocks that can do whatever they want without recourse. Aries went on to play an ass-kicking machine, not tagging in too often and thus becoming special whenever he broke up a pin (with some of the most personal pin-breaks in recent memory) or tagged in to punk out the other guys and go hog wild. Danielson was the competent standard for his team with lots of striking and mat wrestling that made sense and looked great, but also highlighted how gifted Black is in counters and mishaps. Black looked very capable throughout the match, more like a legitimate main-eventer than he did in the (still great) beating he took at Take No Prisoners. He can hang. Meanwhile Jacobs was less rational in his attacks, simple, brutal, and confused between winning the match (which mostly meant taking an advantage on Danielson) or attacking Aries. The interweaving stories on an athletic competition between Danielson and Black and a sometimes petty, sometimes incredibly intense feud between Aries and Jacobs made this one of the best tag matches I've seen all year. Usually two singles

wrestlers teaming lend themselves to a certain kind of match, but Aries and Danielson's gravitas and experience definitely elevated things. When Aries and Jacobs finally piled to the back Danielson and Black so effortlessly switched into final gear, almost like the end to a great singles match that emerged from a tag.

9. Kenta Kobashi & KENTA Vs. Kensuke Sasaki & Katsuhiko Nakajima (June 14) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Great Voyage 2008 in Yokohama- Eight minutes into the match Nakajima ran across the ring and booted Kobashi in the face. Kobashi has received a running boot while peacefully standing on the apron so many damned times that it's become ironic, and for once he acknowledged that, not bending over in pain or falling to the floor, but threatening to climb in the ring and rip the little bastard's head off. Before that there were fun moments, like the opening semi-mirror wrestling of Nakajima and KENTA, and the first showdown between Kobashi and Sasaki, but it was at that boot to little reaction when I knew I was watching something special. The Kobashi/Sasaki rivalry is more about making points than actual victories, and it was good to see Nakajima play into that. You could tell that theme of one-upmanship was present when Sasaki grabbed Kobashi mid-pose to reverse his chops with his own patented series of corner attacks. You could tell why they fought so hard to resist a simple Vertical Suplex. This is a different kind of exhibition wrestling than pure athleticism (though the Junior partners certainly showcased that), something many of Kobashi's post-return matches have run on. This was one of the nights where it really clicked between Kobashi and his opposing veteran, and the match received a serious boost from the younger partners playing into it. How great was it when KENTA dropped the pretense of respect towards Sasaki, faked out Nakajima and charged the enemy corner with a flying boot? More performances like this could help build KENTA/Nakajima into something like the old generation's Kobashi/Sasaki. By mid-match every wrestler established a dynamic with every other, even his partner, and was playing off them, with Sasaki roughing up KENTA and KENTA beginning to really stand up to him, while Nakajima got what he deserved at Kobashi's hands. I've never been so happy to watch Nakajima take a beating. It got hotter with every new permutation of pairings; instead of the normal procedure of a guy tagging in and it registering that these two would now go at it, it was a treat to see whoever came in go at it again. The wrestlers responded to that vibe by getting even more serious and straightforward, like when KENTA went straight for the STO out of a counter to a simple kick. The fever they got at the end of the second third of the match would have sufficed, but the final minutes were beautiful chaos, with the veterans too preoccupied with their glorious brutality to recognize the amazing and match-threatening stuff happening feet away from them. American and European wrestling fans still mystified by how Japanese pro wrestlers connect to crowds would be well-served to study the structure and execution of this match.

8. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Jay & Mark Briscoe (March 29) - Relaxed Rules Match from ROH: Supercard of Honor 3 - By far the best match between the Briscoes and any version of the Age of the Fall, making references to a slue of other quality encounters. The first half was the best crowd brawling I've seen anywhere since Death Before Dishonor 5 Night 1, with Jacobs and Black doing almost as well at relentless and inventive crowd brawling as Steen and Generico had back then. They paced things so quickly that hardcore offense that would have been hackneyed in IWA:MS or tiresome in WWE was vibrant, and the producers had to keep switching cameras every few seconds to keep up. Mark Briscoe's dive off the balcony was ballsy in itself, but this put Jay Briscoe in a 1-on-2 scenario, harkening back to the Briscoes' advantage at Final Battle 2007 - and just when the heroes thought they had rallied, Jacobs came back with an amazing counter to the Springboard Doomsday Device that was as beautifully executed as Marufuji's counter in NOAH, but that fit even better into the story because Mark Briscoe was already so banged up from his own aerial antics. The Briscoes carried the table through crowd to an ovation like the Public Enemy, and drew the audience to a fever pitch like old ECW vets. All the spills onto chairs and nearfalls in the second half were cringe-worthy, but also exciting almost without compare. Such a strong story was executed so well with such intensity and variety that you can instantly remember why the Briscoes were so popular in 2007. This match had all the greatness of the Briscoes Vs. Steen & Generico feud of that year, all the more enjoyable because it came about in the finale (or what was supposed to be the finale - silly ROH).

7. Kenta Kobashi, Tamon Honda & Shuhei Taniguchi Vs. Takeshi Morishima, Takashi Sugiura & Naomichi Marufuji (February 21) – Pro Wrestling NOAH: Second Navigation at the Osaka Prefectural Gymnasium #2 - Kobashi's was the most exciting return to wrestling since Shawn Michaels to the WWF in 2002 (at least between the U.S. and Japan – I need more Lucha in my life). His matches automatically had high passion from the crowd, and Kobashi showed himself to be in much better shape than we could have expected. Here, from his opening strike battle with Sugiura and on, Kobashi was on task the whole match (and every strike exchange he had with Sugiura was meaningful to some degree, not to mention just fun). They built up Kobashi's confrontations with Marufuji and Morishima exceptionally well, using Marufuji first to build a whole chapter of attrition and offense on him. Marufuji has more sense of character, especially in the role of the disrespectful, competent upstart, and he served perfectly in the role of the first offender and first guy Kobashi's team could really work over, setting up Morishima as a juggernaut for his team, and as an even more impressive force when he finally squared off with Kobashi. Kobashi and Morishima's brawling at the end was savage, and worthy of taking place in a scale model of Tokyo. Taniguchi was a good punching bag with a very spirited exchange against Marufuji near the end, Honda was used sparingly but as a very effective (though limited) force, and Kobashi was the maestro, giving something to all three of his opponents while still looking strong. It's heartbreaking that we may never get Kobashi at this level against Morishima at this level in singles.

6. Bryan Danielson Vs. Claudio Castagnoli (July 25) – ROH: Northern Navigation – Ring of Honor's big, technically sound love letter to the Canadian wrestling fans. It showed when they worked the bridging Knuckle Lock into the Monkey Flip in a way that made sense for what might be the first time in any country this decade. Castagnoli was trying to break Danielson's bridge on weight alone to conserve energy, but Danielson wouldn't give.

Using the same tactic with more force, Castagnoli tried to jump for more leverage, but when he went high enough, Danielson got his feet up to initiate a counter. But Castagnoli was still too sound and agile to lose it there, and flowed into the same counter when Danielson tried to float over and cover him. Neither man wanted to break the knuckle lock out of pride and fear of what the other was planning, leaving them open to possible pinfalls as they waited, only to end in a double bridge that led to another stalemate of offense. It seems that Castagnoli's great singles matches in ROH feature these things done in hundreds of other matches a year, but make sense when he does them (like the Mexican Standoff opening his match with Morishima last year). This whole series was a testament to the detail-work throughout the match, and it brought up the same theme as their Vendetta 2 match: Castagnoli might be Danielson's equal at everything, only stronger and taller. This time they expressed the theme more cohesively, through a lot more mat wrestling, less comedy, and integration of those humorous moments right into the dramatic arc of the match, like the imitations of Danielson's catchphrase and signature moves that at once amused and subtly followed the crowd's desire to root for the ROH founding father. It was supposed to be a respectful match of dueling good guys, but Castagnoli's frequent frustrations, that crowd's leaning and Danielson's newly jocular approach to wrestling shifted it into a nearly unique situation where you could appreciate how well Castagnoli did something or how hard he hit, then immediately go back to sympathizing with Danielson. And it didn't matter if Claudio Castagnoli the man (as opposed to the wrestler, two different things ROH fans sometimes confuse) was really the technical mind that Danielson is in the ring, because he's damned good and showed that throughout here, putting on some mat and chain wrestling that very few people in the company have the talent to even attempt. Usually it's Danielson who grinds an elbow into a joint to help a hold, or keeps changing his footing to balance leverage. Like most great modern technicians, they broke it up, able to throw in strikes, get to their feet with something new, or even add agility, like the height and grace in those Monkey Flips. One would go to striking and power moves only for the other to have the proper technical counter, particularly in how Danielson had scouted all of Castagnoli's match-enders this time, responding to how he'd failed at Vendetta 2. That emphasis on technical wrestlers, smart counters to big offense and the ending to Vendetta 2 all came together for the perfect ending. If Castagnoli had these kinds of matches at the beginning of the year, he would have gotten a much better reaction come A New Level.

5. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Bryan Danielson Vs. Claudio Castagnoli Vs. Tyler Black (August 2) – Four Corner Elimination from Death Before Dishonor 6 – I love that a combo into a Neckbreaker by Black was a believable near-fall. It was a testament to how well this story was told, because Black has never won a match with that move, barely ever even does uses it, and it may have never ended a match in ROH history. It was all about what went into the match as a whole. The build to Castagnoli snapping was excellent. The match began with increasingly aggressive (though subtle) chain wrestling between him and Danielson, and as the night went on Castagnoli was unable to get one up on him, even when he thought Danielson was focusing on someone else. One such moment was Castagnoli catching Danielson at unawares and trying a Dead Lift German Suplex, but hesitating in the hold for just a moment let Danielson adjust and flip out of the throw. Thus it made so much more sense that when Castagnoli interrupted him possibly eliminating McGuinness, it was with another German Suplex in another unawares situation. Castagnoli got too carried away, and just like at Northern Navigation, Danielson only needed the one mistiming to keep his shoulders down in a technical pin. The ass-kicking Castagnoli handed down on the ring crew was great, and as far as screwy eliminations go it would be hard to surpass what he did with Danielson. McGuinness enriched it, laughing on the outside and keeping the referee safe – not out of kindness, but because he knew he'd be able to pin Danielson in a minute. The four fulfilled so much up until then, giving competent flying, chain wrestling and big time striking that fleshed out most of what an ROH audience would crave, and created a general platform upon which anything could be done and be emotional later. All those cut-offs and chains of offense, and even McGuinness being so underhanded and cowardly, made that Neckbreaker nearfall possible. Nor did they rest upon it or go to as simple a story as McGuinness and Black's Take No Prisoners bout. Black had inspired counters and reversals (like the showstopping aerial reversal into a Powerbomb – how was that possible?), McGuinness cut his last challenger off with great simple tactics and references to Take No Prisoners, and in general they highlighted the best of Black's underdog persona and the best of McGuinness's beatable persona that managed to dodge the kick-out-mania that hindered some of their other performances. Here, those kick-outs meant as much as Castagnoli being unable to kick-out earlier.

4. Jimmy Jacobs & Tyler Black Vs. Chris Sabin & Alex Shelley (April 18) – ROH: Tag Wars 2008 – The emphasis leading up to the match was Shelley's old issue with Jacobs, but they aimed for more than mere hate. Sabin and Black kicked things off with the fluid technical and athletic displays reminded people who had been hyped on a grudge between their partners that these guys had a better strength than expressing pure hatred, and wisely made the audience want more of this. By establishing that athletic rivalry they were able to drop in Shelley and Jacobs going at it at will while sustaining a flow all four guys were adept at keeping. It didn't take away from what Shelley and Jacobs put in, as both were on the top of their game, and Jacobs was especially effective in his frequent attempts to choke out his old nemesis in his End Times Guillotine Choke. Their old rivalry thrived in pettiness, throwing chops like slaps and trying to set up more complex moves too soon. That rolled over into multi-man stuff with Black playing the best second you could ask for, interrupting Shelley's advantages and daring to stop one of the great waves of combo attacks and begin one of his own, something Jacobs jumped right into. There have been many times this year I've wondered about Jacobs's health and specifically how strong his leg is, but in this you couldn't tell anything had ever been wrong, not just for the way he took it to Shelley, but how wildly he bumped. He made a Dropkick to his shin something special with an unexpected somersault; not overkill like people might complain about in other matches, but something that added to the moment. He did things like that all match long, knowing the angle to take the Shell Shock or fall from his End Times when caught with a Superkick. That level of attention to detail, not

merely to how spectacular your offense looks or how deep into the artificial pace you are, but that level emphasis and consequence to the actions was a subtle part of why this match worked so much better than a lot of ROH tags. Yes, it was incredibly high octane, but if you watch again you'll find each guy cycles out for a longer period of time on average than in most ROH tag main events, recuperating from the offense he's eaten. When it led to inevitable instances of all four men being down it circumvented the ROH cliché because they actually earned it, rather than by simply doing a bunch of cool stunts like the Briscoes Vs. Aries & Ibushi tag right before them. And none of this is even to say that their action wasn't on par with the normal ROH tag; it was well above it, but they presented it wisely as well as more crisply. You knew a match with Black, Sabin and Shelley would feature abundant well-timed combos. Oh, and a special shout-out to Jimmy Jacobs for taking most disgusting Skull Fuck I've ever seen.

3. Edge Vs. The Undertaker (August 17) – Hell in a Cell Match from WWE: Summerslam - Their TLC match had the huge spots (including one that was more dangerous than anything in this match), but it didn't string them together with a story as engrossing as this. This didn't need any interference: it was Edge's coming-out party after a long reign as Smackdown's coward champion, and did more to make him formidable in half an hour than that entire reign did. He walked into the match psychotically resilient, playing off the Undertaker's stoic character by moving in every direction and taking the action to him. He put himself out to hurt Undertaker, whether it was climbing in the corner a minute in for mounted punches that couldn't last, Spearing him into the steel steps early on to hurt him down to his own level and get the kind of physical advantage that had made the Wrestlemania match competitive, or diving off the ladder to conclude a satisfying in-match story of his more familiar TLC offense within the Undertaker's Cell. But it didn't end there, and the two literally burst through that smaller story when they spilled to the outside one more time as Edge Speared him through the wall. That moment, and when Edge charged across the commentary tables for yet another huge Spear, had almost all the emotional impact of the Mick Foley Hell in a Cell falls, with neither being nearly as dangerous (though still brave for both men). They took all their supposedly "garbage" offense and framed it, teased it and created the enormous emotional components that have not existed on this level of intensity since Foley retired. They didn't settle for amazing emotion, either, getting creative and sewing threads through the match, like setting up the tables and then not returning to them for fifteen minutes, or Edge's hidden camera attack as a reference to the Hell in a Cell match he ruined. That camera shot could have ended the match, but it simultaneously couldn't – Undertaker would not let himself die there. Better, Edge was barely fazed, moving right on, because he'd brought a dozen dastardly (and many self-hazardous) plans with him. He had so much in his arsenal, from the variations on the Spear to the use of weapons to attacking Undertaker throughout the environment, that when the Undertaker got the advantage he couldn't be ready for some of those elements to be turned on him. Undertaker using the tables, the camera and one deadly Tombstone was a great close to a match that elevated Edge long before it ended. This kind of performance could make a guy long beyond one month of television. This is something that should be remembered in promos and highlight videos for a long time. Edge deserves enormous credit because this was his match even moreso than TLC was – his offense, his pacing, often overcoming the things he was doing to himself to break his opponent. The Undertaker, a master of character and well-rested from months off, was then easily able to hit a homerun from a supporting role, with well-timed comebacks and giving Edge plenty of high-end openings.

2. Nigel McGuinness Vs. Austin Aries (taped December 26, 2007, aired March 7) - ROH: Rising Above - No one takes a lariat like Austin Aries. Of the three major Lariats in this match, Aries flew like a madman for two of them, and sold the other like a total threat despite not being a knockout blow. That also played into the greatest strength of this match: Aries and McGuinness respected every piece of established offense, whether it meant fearing it, having an escape or counter prepared, fighting out of it, or looking seriously hurt by it. The only glaring flaw was McGuinness disregarding Aries's Brainbusters near the end, but that was absorbed by the atmosphere they built. There was so much studied, smart wrestling to this, despite the big offense (and that offense was truly built), not in the rapidfire way of Richards/Aries from Man Up, but in a slightly more methodical main event fashion that gave you time to relish what they were doing. Quite possibly the best singles match ROH has put on PPV.

1. Kenta Kobashi, KENTA, Atsushi Aoki & Akihito Ito Vs. Kensuke Sasaki, Katshuhiko Nakajima, Takashi Okita & Kento Miyahara (August 17) – Pro Wrestling SEM and Kensuke Office: SEMex: Take The Dream Vol. 6 - This is how you structure an hour match (or at least, an hour elimination match). There was basic reflection in the rosters, with one veteran, the one top protégé, and two distinct rookies to give their strategies recognizable shape. Those strategies were mostly in how to play off their arrival orders, and most of the guys performed amazingly in those roles. Aoki excelled in his niche within that first fall, using the guidance and protection of the stronger Junior KENTA to earn an elimination. Okita was a beast amongst the Junior Heavyweights, and carried that attitude right to Kobashi's entrance with a great show of disrespect and force. As usual, Kobashi gave the physically strong Junior a little shine (before disposing of him in a fashion mirroring how Sasaki had treated one of his pupils). Ito was grease for Sasaki, but that just added drama, and even as grease, Ito worked at a good clip to hit impressive offense crisply before getting crushed. KENTA being in for the first fall was brilliant strategically because it gave the Burning team a chance to dominate early on while saving their biggest gun for last. Sasaki coming in third made just as much sense, bringing in Kensuke Office's biggest gun to pick off guys tired out from the first fall, which of course would be very competitive. That left Nakajima with all his kicks, sprints and athletics to dazzle in the final fall, mostly in support of Sasaki. Meanwhile Kobashi would come in last for his team, as rested as possible and capable of throwing down with any survivors. The structure was great, but the execution made it a modern classic of Elimination Wrestling. Aoki shining in that first fall only to be unable to breathe in Sasaki's Boston Crab, and then Kobashi coming in, being disrespected by Okita, losing his temper and trying to get rid of the upstart with the same Boston Crab hold his rival used on one of his boys. That it failed showed a little more of Okita, as well as suggesting Kobashi was a little weaker

and would have to work a little harder. KENTA gave one of the best performances of his life with every piece of offense he knew, and drawing that offense together splendidly to shadow whoever his partner was, whether it meant giving Aoki an opening on Miyahara or spring-boarding to help Kobashi hit the Half-Nelson on Sasaki. Nakajima was similarly a total star in his much shorter entrance, still running around for almost a half an hour and taking a vile beating. Possibly better than any of Nakajima's offense was that long beating Kobashi put him through, forcing Sasaki to watch for once, and see exactly what he's been doing to smaller NOAH guys. It's almost impossible for me to separate the execution from the planning in several of these moments because of how well they worked like how KENTA, Nakajima and Sasaki teased the Triple German Suplex only to set up for it later. They knew how to make several things special in a match full of killer blows and holds. The structure was phenomenal as a whole, as much like the quality Cena Vs. Michaels had on Raw last year, it was hard to believe this was almost an hour by the pace at which they moved and things turned.