

## Joe Babinsack looks at the WWE year in review and title situation

Championships just aren't what they used to be. But in an industry where storylines trump perceptions of greatness, and scriptwriters trump talent in the ring, and the "audience of one" dominates the crowds of tens of thousands, the championship title (can we call it a belt today?) still remains the ultimate goal of any wrestler looking for meaning in an often meaningless sport. The Super Bowl still means the most, and so does the NCAA Basketball Champion. But we still live in an era where College Football renders its yearly seasons moot, and cobbles up a pretend world champion. Major League Baseball has long been a joke, where a few teams dominate the field. But then Hockey has a greatly balanced league, and the NBA as well, but they fall by the wayside in comparison. So, back to the main point, are championships still meaningful? In 2008, there were a few dozen champions in the sport. Some of them notable, many of them worthy, but can the title make the man? Or, are we looking at an industry that has let its crown jewel(s) tarnish to the point where the prop has no meaning, even if a king could wear the crown? The WWE Championship seems to be the most notable of all the belts. This year, it has been held by Randy Orton, by HHH, by Edge (in a real stretch of competitive storyline) and now by Jeff Hardy. With HHH moving to SmackDown! to augment the move from CW Network to MyNetwork TV — in other words, from one low level national network to another, the WWE Championship got more attention than usual. "Trips" held the belt for something like seven months. Of course, the dynamics of a son-in-law holding the belt are infamous, and the reasons for the jealous guarding of the belt still somewhat a mystery, but in 2008, HHH didn't exactly destroy as many careers as he might have. Kozlov, in hindsight, might have been one he may have been able to get away with. But it was a year where Randy Orton gained some valuable experience (and has come back from injury looking world-class. Well, not Von Erich, but Olympic. Well, not Mark Henry but more Kurt Angle. Well, then again, storyline dangerous, not real life. Well&hellip;. Geez, did this one get away from me fast!) Orton transitioned to HHH, and Edge, after his own injury (which was the subtle theme of the year in the WWE — injury plagued,) was able to be a major player for the year — with the OTHER BELT — grabbed the current SmackDown! belt to show who's boss on Network TV. Edge finally gave way to Jeff Hardy, who likely deserve the belt a half-decade ago based upon pure talent, but pissed away his chances on multiple levels, and strangely enough grasped the gold at the end of a year in which he has come tantalizingly close to "three strikes" and you're out. With Hardy at the top of the heap, it provides for a lot of interesting dynamics, some positive, some not. Hardy, with a harder edged style, is capable of being a tweener type champion, mixing it up with faces and heels. He certainly deserves more than an "eke it out" title holder, and his high-flying style should win over youngsters and the more mainstream fans alike. Hardy has the respect and the hard working ethic to raise himself to the level of the belt, and make it meaningful. On the other hand, Hardy has far too many similarities to certain other former WWE Champions — guys that had issues (public or not) and had issues with size and the realities of appeasing "the audience of one". But with Hardy finally gaining the one achievement of his career, and one that he and his brother Matt have gained (arguably in terms of ECW being a second tier title) the support system and the mutual respect should help things stay sane. And hopefully so, since the WWE certainly doesn't need to be questioned about some of its policies and practices. The WWE Championship, having been held by top notch talent, seems to be a prop worth much, but then again, shares top billing in the WWE Universe, and how much that diminishes the belt remains a big question. From my perspective, the dual brands are a positive, and it's hard to even comprehend the bureaucratic headaches if one title was shared between a network station and a cable station. The obvious answer would be to make a WWE Universal belt only defended on PPVs, but that would only further diminish the branding. The WWE remains in a Catch-22&hellip; it cannot raise the prominence of either of its belts without completely diminishing the other, and it cannot create a new belt without completely diminishing both of its current ones. Why did HHH just HAVE to have his own belt way back when? And people wonder about the underlying complaints about Trips&hellip; The other WWE belt, the one defended now on Raw — and boy, is this all very confusing — is now the one that had some interesting twists, and featured mostly Edge dominating the scene (when not trading the belt with the Undertaker) on the CW in the beginning of the year, only to have CM Punk rise to the occasion, with the Money in the Bank win, to derail Edge's dominance. Hardcore's delighted, even though CM Punk looked more like Mikey Whipwreck than long time indy champion of note. Then came Chris Jericho in what has to be his greatest year ever, and the man who must be the MVP of the WWE, let alone the industry. Without Jericho, no one stands out on either roster. Even with his strange loss to Batista, and what definitely looked to be a watering down and hotshotting of the belt, Jericho came back strong, and despite his heroics, despite the (cough) elevation of CM Punk, and despite the early feud between Edge and Undertaker, all now seemed to be place holders for the return of &hellip; John Cena. Cena certainly is someone that wears the belt proudly and strives to raise himself to the Championship level. Cena also draws the attention of a younger generation of fans, and the WWE almost desperately needs to attract new and younger fans, since it's off over reliance upon an aging roster hasn't done it any favors, and there's no such thing as bringing in a top guy with a built-in fan base these days. As for the older fans, Cena still can't throw a punch, still can't overcome a pretty-boy image, and despite his natural gifts and work ethic, he just can't connect to the expectations of half the fan base. Which is actually good, since the face/heel dynamic pinpointed on Cena alone creates great visuals and fan participation. Which is bad, since on the other hand, the WWE has been forced to put blinders on when it comes to Cena, and rushed his return/title match/title victory to the point where it threw a lot of potential money down the drain. Cena's the champ. Yay! Cena's the champ. So what's next? The polite surprise of the 2008 RAW brand has been some interesting underneath storylines. Michaels/Flair, Michaels/Jericho, Legacy, Cena/Batista, and now Michaels/JBL. At least the belt is no longer the sole and only thing Creative thinks about! Rounding out the arguable "big three" of WWE Championships, we look at ECW. I think we can now say that the WWE has

properly positioned ECW. The old ECW is DEAD. The new ECW is the training grounds, with notably names (Mark Henry) and solid roster generals like Finlay and Matt Hardy, and at least now, a number of neo-ECW talent (CM Punk, Morrison, Miz, etc) that can be pointed at as examples of why ECW is the starting point for new and great talent. Not so ironically, CM Punk held the ECW Belt at the beginning of the year. Chavo Guerrero had a great storyline entrée into the scene, but there was a shaky end with Kane grabbing that belt, and some scary matchups with Mark Henry in a feud of guys too big/bulky/unathletic to tout this belt.. But now it's been several months since Matt Hardy has worn the crown, and his matches with Evan (don't call me Matt) Bourne and others, and eventual feud with Jack Swagger could help cement Hardy's role in the company, far more than could have ever been expected a few short years ago. In that sense, Matt's ECW reign may be nowhere near box office importance today, but his mark on the WWE may prove to be just as valuable. Matt has the energy, the appreciation of the crowd, and the pure talent to put guys over and prepare them for what will happen next. 2008 has been an interesting year for the WWE. With the Hardy's and John Cena leading the way, 2009 looks to be better, maybe a little less drama, maybe a few less injuries would be nice, and most of all, maybe a lot of improvements in storylines to make it all more meaningful. Joe Babinsack can be reached at [chaosonejoe@yahoo.com](mailto:chaosonejoe@yahoo.com) . Next up: TNA/ROH/NWA championship overview, a look at Evan Bourne before he was a star, and much, much more.