

Gary Mehaffy talks Umaga

Do I need to apologise for my absence?

Well, I will and I won't! On the one hand, we've just come off the back of the Christmas holidays and we all know what that entails! Plus it was my birthday today (January 4th), so I've been doing 1001 things these last few weeks. On the other hand, however, I had intended just before the Christmas holidays to do a new column, this time on Jeff Hardy, but when he won the title I figured it would have been a pretty redundant column to ask them to push him when they just had!

So here we are. Oh, before I go on can I say thank you for all the feedback following my last column on Matt Hardy. I got LOADS of emails from all around the world, even outnumbering the amount I got when I did my piece about HHH. So, again, thanks.

But enough back slapping and high fiving, we're here to look at the man who will be returning to SmackDown sooner rather than later, Umaga.

Most of you will know this, but in case you didn't, Umaga comes from one of wrestling's greatest backgrounds, from the Wild Samoans (he's their nephew). With this, it was inevitable that he would one day be a wrestler himself.

He got his first big break as part of 3 minute warning, Eric Bischoff's weapons of choice, in 2002/3. Personally, I liked them, and thought they could have been progressed up the card, but for one big problem – they were sloppy. Umaga, or Jamal as he was then, had hurt both Pat Patterson and Mae Young in angles in the ring; not good. Hurting an active wrestler, while not good, shouldn't bring too much trouble, but hurting well respected veterans? Now that's a different matter.

He was released in June 2003, and found himself in TNA for a few months before heading to Japan with All Japan. There, he slowly refined his act, becoming less sloppy and more reliable as an all round act. He returned with WWE in late 2005, with most people assuming he would rejoin Rosey for their old tag team.

But how wrong could we be?

When he re-emerged in April 2006, he was a tattooed Samoan savage who spoke no English and had a manager in Armando Alejandro Estrada (the star of the act, at least at the start).

Talk about shocked. I was gob smacked! It was like Kamala for a new generation. Vince has struck again, I thought. And I was sure that Samoa Joe was happy he sided with TNA.

Umaga feuded with Ric Flair and then Kane, which made for boring television and even less exciting matches. He was ok in the ring, and Estrada was gold on the mic (I saw them at a house show in Belfast during this time, and they were both superb). But shortly after he was named number one contender for John Cena's title and the world shuddered again.

Cena pinned him at New Year's Revolution, ending his unbeaten streak, and the match was ok. But their rematch at Royal Rumble was in a different class. They were superb in the ring, with Umaga receiving the majority of the plaudits, and rightly so. On this night, he was a different class.

This got him the nod to be Vince's representative for the Vince/Donald Trump match at WrestleMania, where he faced Bobby Lashley. This was a big vote of confidence, as there was a lot of talk that Booker T would be taking the spot. While it was obvious that he would lose, and the match itself took third place behind Vince/Trump and Steve Austin as guest referee in the importance stakes, at least he was receiving a sustained push. During this time, Estrada became less and less involved with him, and he went out on his own.

He lost his recently acquired IC title to 'fan' Santino Marella, which I felt didn't bode well for his career. He had a distinctly unmemorable feud with Santino, until he demolished him to get the title back. He turned face, well sort of, and in fact may as well not have it was so short lived, which made it look like the booking team didn't really have any ideas for him. He lost the IC title to Jeff Hardy and subsequently entered a feud with HHH in which he was allowed victories over Hunter to help build a true main eventer.

Yea right. He lost that feud, funnily enough.

At WM this year he had an unbelievably boring match with Batista, and the blame lay solely at Big Dave's feet – Batista phoned it in so much it wasn't funny. In June of this year, in perhaps the worst kept secret in wrestling, he was drafted to SmackDown, the main idea of which was to feud him with the Undertaker.

He started off by having a few matches with Mr. Kennedy before he tore his PCL on a house show in early August. And as we all know, well if we watch SmackDown, he's about to make his come back, which brings me full circle.

What does the future hold for Umaga? Well, a WM match with the Undertaker wouldn't surprise me. But I have one big worry about him – he needs to talk. Well, actually, make that he needs a talker/manager. I can't see them doing what they did to Fatu back in the day, transferring him from a non English speaking Savage into an English speaking anti drugs campaigner, funnily enough coming not long after the original ECW had done the same thing with Taz. Well, apart from the anti drugs message. An English speaking Umaga wouldn't work at all.

He does need a manager, although his ring work stands up for itself. Maybe he could join Orton et al, but that would only lead to a wasted Umaga face turn.

He is believable and reliable in the ring, which stands him in good stead with management and fans. He can have good matches with wrestlers of different calibres – thanks to his hard work in Japan. There are several fresh feuds for him since his injury, with another feud with Jeff Hardy a possibility. They have worked over the IC title before and this is a logical extension of it.

But he still needs some sort of manager. A modern day Bobby Heenan or Jim Cornette would be superb, but seeing as all Vince and Johnny Ace seem to want in a manager is a blonde haired, big breasted female valet, it seems unlikely he will get Bobby or Jim.

Would fans accept him as a heavyweight/world champion? I don't know. I would, but I'm not the voice of the people. A contender, yes, but champ? Your call.

He has proved himself in main even scenarios against Cena and HHH. He enables people to 'suspend their disbelief' as all good workers should do. He is respected, finally, in the locker room. He's not sloppy in the ring anymore. The fans accept him as a top level wrestler.

How far should he go on his return? Who knows. But one thing is certain; he should be staying around the top of the card. Some fans will moan about it if he does, but if they take a step back and look at Umaga as an entire package they will see that he deserves to be there and deserves their respect.

As long as he gets a manager! Maybe I should volunteer my services. Or maybe not…….

Well, that's me for this column. If you want to drop me a line, whether you agree, disagree and want to go off on a tangent about something else, then feel free to email me – garymehaffy@hotmail.co.uk – and I'll get back to you asap.

Just before I go, let me rewind several months. I mentioned that I was going to do a piece about how a few ex-WWE wrestlers shaped the modern day WWE. I'm debating whether to do it or not. My intention was to ask them how they viewed their influence on it, but we can't seem to get them. I guess you'll know sooner rather than later if I do!