

**Rocky Hardin aka "Rocky Rage"**

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Rocky Hardin (b. 1989, Portsmouth Ohio) is a professional wrestler with All Star Wrestling (ASW) who wrestles under the name "Rocky Rage." He lives in Cedar Grove, West Virginia and wrestles full-time. In this interview, he speaks about all aspects of the wrestling industry, including his gimmick, payment, techniques, and the particularities of the independent professional wrestling scene in West Virginia.

This interview is part of a series of interviews with independent professional wrestlers in West Virginia.

Interview with Rocky Hardin aka "Rocky Rage"  
Independent Professional Wrestler  
September 10, 2019

RH: Rocky Hardin  
EH: Emily Hilliard

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EH: Why don't you--oops--why don't you introduce yourself and tell me your name, when and where you were born?

RH: My name is Rocky Hardin, I was born in Portsmouth, Ohio in 1989, so 30 years old now (laughs).

EH: Nice. And where do you live now?

RH: Right now I'm in West Virginia, a little town over Cedar Grove. So...

EH: Why don't you tell me how you got into wrestling.

RH: Always been a fan. Watched it since I was growing up. Moved to West Virginia when I was like 16, 17 and knew that there was a place in Ohio, in my hometown, that trained guys. So I had a really good job, I was 19 at the time, living in Logan County. Got a hold of the people in Portsmouth, and they're like, yeah, we'll totally train you! So I left everything behind--I had like 200 bucks maybe and yeah. Couch surfed 'til I got a job and my own place and started training and it just consumed me. Like it just completely took over. Like any free time that I had I was studying wrestling tapes and Youtube was a lifesaver. (laughs)

EH: And when you were a fan what were you watching?

RH: When I was a kid I was watching WWE. I was a big big fan of people like Triple H and the Hardy Boys so anytime those guys were on TV I was glued. I was glued to everything they were doing. Yeah, pretty much everybody when I was growing up. Like anybody that was on TV like I was completely struck by 'em. And to be able to work with them now-- a lot of the guys that I watched when I was growing up--is mind blowing. So pretty blessed!

EH: So did you ever go to live matches as a kid?

RH: No, actually I went to a few of the independent shows in my hometown but I never made it to like a WWE house show. My mom had a very hectic work schedule so every time they would come in it's like you know, she couldn't get off work and it was usually like Columbus or Cincinnati, so I wasn't able to. But I got like every Pay Per View, so it kinda made up for it.

EH: (laughs) So how did you get involved with ASW? Was that your first wrestling was with ASW?

RH: Yeah, um (laughs) so I trained with a place in Ohio and then I moved back to West Virginia and then I went back to Ohio to train at another facility and in the meantime when I was back here in West Virginia, I met the promoter of ASW, Gary Damron, and he kinda (laughs) was like, who's this scruffy kid--I was like 160 pounds at the time and he was like yeah, yeah okay, sure I'll use ya kid, you know. But then he needed some people for a Battle Royale and he was like hey, you know, he's been helping out

with posters and doing all this stuff and driving over to Gilbert, hanging posters up and advertising. He was like--I'll give Rocky a try. So got in there in a Battle Royale, a guy hit me with a clothesline, we went over the top rope, I done a backflip and a half, my head bounced off the floor. I had a little bit of a concussion. That was like the "Welcome to the business, kid!" So yeah, and it was December 26th and in 2009 there was a bad snow storm, so a lot of places were shut down and people couldn't get to their homes and I was driving back from Gilbert with a concussion. I don't remember driving much that night! So but thankfully I didn't wreck. So (laughs) but yeah, it's crazy.

EH: And was that your--did you have a wrestling-- I know it's not called persona--what's the term in the biz?

RH: Oh, like a gimmick? Like a wrestling...

EH: Yeah, what was your gimmick?

RH: Yeah, at that time I was Rocky Rage and that was at and I had a pair of gold pants that I wore and it was crazy. But once I got out there, it was, you know it hit. I was like, okay this is what I was supposed to do. And (laughs) yeah I didn't have like any cool gimmick, it's just like and here's Rocky Rage and no one knew who I was. So that was pretty fun.

EH: And could you describe the gimmick, or how has it evolved?

RH: Oh my gosh, yeah. I went from Rocky Rage to let's see, maybe the month following that I was Pure White Trash: Rocky Rage. And I had like these cutoff blue jeans and an airbrushed wifebeater and pretty much any kind of stereotype trailer park, white trash stigma I tried to find and embrace. But I'd done that for a while got bookings and looking back it's like oh my gosh, what was I doing. But people liked it and I was the bad guy and doing that gimmick in like Danville, and it was crazy 'cause Gary's like, this is not gonna work, you're not gonna get booed, everyone's gonna cheer you. And no-- I actually went out there, got some heat, the people were like, Boo! I hate you! Blah blah blah, giving me crap--which is my job. You know, so it's like those are my cheers, right? And then in one match it just changed. I went from being like one of the most booed bad guys to getting over with the crowd as a babyface. Like the crowd made me the good guy. And then from there I started doing like crazy strikes. So I wanted to drop the white trash thing and get some...

EH: What is "crazy strikes?"

RH: Just like different ways to hit people. Like different counters, punches, elbows, forearms...

EH: Like playing dirty?

RH: No, not necessarily, just like I started getting obsessed with people that would do like cool kicks and cool like forearms and elbows and it's like okay, well how can I pick somebody up and throw him off my shoulders and as they're falling be able to you know hit 'em in the face on the way down, or knee 'em in the face. So I started, and I don't even know who came up with this, but it was before a show and someone was watching me do a practice match and like, "Oh my gosh, he's a specialist on knockin' people out!" And I was like, Knockout Specialist, Knockout Specialist--there it is! That's what I am! And I went as the Knockout Specialist Rocky Rage for a long time, like years. All the way up until I think 2017, some--yeah, 2017.

07:19

And 2018 actually is when I started the thing that I'm doin' now. And which some promoters are like you can't say that, you can't do this, because it's I'm the Savior of Wrestling. I lost the title at ASW and I was like their top good guy. So the promoter was like, and I was begging him. Like hey, let me do this as a bad guy. No, he wouldn't do it. And then finally one day he's like, you know what, maybe we'll give it a shot. And I said yes! Here we go this is it! And it was a weird night because everybody was like really nervous and like all the boys in the back was like, are you serious, that's happening tonight? So everybody like went up top--there's like this, we call it the Bird's Nest, the Eagle's Nest, and everybody went up there, was like watching out 'cause they're like this is crazy, he's done this for years, he's the top good guy, how's this gonna work? So I snapped and I went heel, bad guy, and my thought process was, I'm going to be delusional. I'm going to be...something's not quite right. So I'm so full of myself that I am saving wrestling. So I'm the Savior of Wrestling. Which got over big time. Ended up gettin' shirts and can't keep them in stock so that's pretty cool. But yeah, so now I'm the Savior of Wrestling. White Trash to a striker to a guy that might have you know, split personalities. So... (laughs)

EH: So what do you think switched with the White Trash? Why did you get over?

RH: I don't know really. Because at first it was--I was doing a really good job. The best part to--the best way to learn in wrestling is for you to start out as the good guy. And you can learn from working the bad guys, they lead the match, all of this. And I started as the bad guy. And it's like, okay, so I'm learning everything on the fly, like learning it backwards. I'm like oh my gosh, this is crazy. And I don't know how it got over with the crowd. Because I was a nervous wreck. I was like there is no way I'm gonna be able to do this. And then like the people just went from hating my guts to...I think it's because they saw that I was actually putting in a lot of work and doing a lot of, or having a lot of good matches and not afraid to throw my body out there. And I think they just went from, "Oh yeah it's fun to boo the bad guy," to like hey look, respect, and clap clap clap. And I think that's what the transition was. But I was just-- I don't know, I just got tired of like the blue jean thing. I was like man, I just want to get rid of that. Because at the time, what you wore was like a big thing with a lot of the veterans, and now-a-days most of the guys wear blue jeans, so it's... (laughs) It's crazy now. But yeah, I just, I don't know. I just wanted something different.

EH: But it seems unusual 'cause usually it is working class characters are pretty--they're faces, right?

RH: Yeah, you know. Dusty Rhodes, you know, son of a plumber. Yeah, usually--because they can related to that. They see those guys as one of them. They can be one of the guys sitting next to them in the crowd or someone at the local bar drinking a beer with 'em on a Friday night. And people can get behind that. So and that could have been something too, but it was crazy because like I was supposed to be the guy that like opened the show and just like okay, he's just a filler, you know. And then they're like "Rocky, Rocky." And I was like what is happening here? It was crazy.

EH: So does the promoter control the storyline?

RH: Yeah. Usually with ASW, Gary Damron's the end all be all. He does everything for the company. Well, he has help too with set-ups and stuff like that, but that weight's on him to come up with ideas and the cool thing about Gary and there's some other promotions too that's like this, is you do have leeway. Gary has a lot of trust with me now, going on 10 years working for him, to where I can throw out ideas for other guys to not just myself, but yeah. He's the one that usually comes up with everything or me and him will sit down and we'll try to come up with some stuff. But yeah. He's...usually like the booker is the person that takes care of all of that.

EH: But it also seems like the fans have some say, because they're kind of...

RH: Yeah, yeah--if we're doing a storyline or we're doing some kind of angle--anybody--and the fans aren't getting behind that, that's getting scratched. You know? Because at the end of the day it's whatever makes the fans happy. That's what the promoter's gonna go for. A smart promoter listens to the crowd. Just like a wrestler, you know, if I'm in there and I'm listening to the crowd and they're not into if I'm giving 'em this kind of match and let's say I'm doing you know, chain wrestling, mat wrestling, and the crowd's not into that, okay, well let's switch it up. Let's try some dives and some high flying stuff. If they're not into that, well then hey look, I'm getting ready to do a comedy spot real quick and it's gonna be haha, look at me, look at Rocky, he's an idiot. But yeah, you have to be able to listen to the crowd and book, book according to what they want. Some promoters don't do that and you can see like a decline on some of their stuff and some promoters and I mean, everybody has done this, I mean even like WWE people complain about, "Oh well we don't like so and so and why is he getting pushed." Well, there's a reason, maybe they're selling tickets or maybe they're doing something. You can't please everybody, you know, that's something that I've definitely found out in wrestling is not everybody--if you have 400 people in your crowd, there's gonna be like 2 people that's gonna be very vocal, that they don't like, whatever. But yeah, a promoters will listen to the majority of the crowd and go from there.

14:09

EH: Mmhm.

RH: So Gary does a really good job of doing that.

EH: Yeah. So what's the scope of independent wrestling in West Virginia right now, would you say? So there's ASW, are there other--that seems to me like the one I see the most--but are there other, is it promotions or companies?

RH: Yeah. There's quite a few actually. There's ICS--they run in like Dunbar. There's Pro-Wrestling Conquest they're in Kanawha City. You have a company called UWA that runs around the Hurricane area. Let's see, there's Mega, there's quite a few promotions. And it's crazy because you know, 2 years ago wrestling was different than it is now. It's changed dramatically for the better.

EH: In West Virginia or like independent wrestling?

RH: Independent wrestling--like wrestling as a whole, but that effect has carried over to West Virginia. And I've seen shows that would draw, you know 15 paying people to now they have over 100 paying people and I'm starting to see fans go to a lot of different shows. Like they will follow--me and one of the other wrestlers, Huff Manly, we were at a show in Ohio a few months back and there were people from West Virginia that drove all the way to Ohio to watch us wrestler. So it's crazy. And the fans are like--they're turning into--it's almost like, wrestling has turned into like this, like a cult following to where it's like, hey look, we're gonna support these guys, we're gonna buy they're merch, we're gonna go see 'em we're gonna--I mean it's insane. I'll sell out of my shirts within a month. Like I'll get an order in and the bulk of 'em's gone like as--the first show that I take 'em to. It's amazing. But yeah, like the fans are more rabid, they're more, they're into it. And they know--I think that most of the fans know like what wrestling is for the most part. And you're starting to see more people like show respect to that, instead of it being like "Oh, well that's stuff's fake," and it's like, well look, I've had 1,2,3,4 teeth fixed, I have 4 more cracked in the back, my knees are shot, my neck's shot, and now you're starting to see people that's like, hey look, no matter if the finish is pre-determined, you guys are breaking your backs for this. And that's the cool thing. So people are starting to understand, like okay, yeah. It might be a worked environment, but that's a beating that they're taking night in and night out.

EH: Why do you think it has a sudden boost in popularity?

RH: (laughs) I don't know. I know like there's a new company that's starting, it's called AEW. There was--there's a lot of talk about that--that's blowing up. They got their own TV deal. They're selling out arenas in like minutes. So I don't know if it's like well what's going on over here, what are we seeing, like is this--what's the big hype about this? And then they see like, okay, if they used to watch WWE, they'll say, okay, we'll that's a little bit watered down but this stuff over here on the independents, not so watered down. A lot more risk-taking, a lot more dives and hard hits and crazy moves that you don't even see in WWE. And I think a lot of people that were wrestling fans that kind of dropped out because they didn't know anything about the independents, now with social media and the influence of that, that's getting it out there more in front of some of those older fans. It's like hey--that's pretty cool. That reminds me of when I was a kid and I watched wrestling. And that's what I want to support. And I hear that a lot. Like, I'll hear guys say like, like fans will come up and tell me, hey, this is kind of like the stuff that--it reminds us what we watched when we were younger. It seems more edgy, more raw. And I think that's what people like. It's not as washed down.

EH: Yeah. Do you think it reminds them of the Saturday Night Wrestlin'--like the local West Virginia stuff?

18:45

RH: Yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeah. I have--when I go to ASW that's over in Madison, I've had--I kid you not--almost every show I'll have people come up and talk about when they were kids, they would go to that building to watch...

EH: To Madison?

RH: Yeah, yeah--to the Madison Civic Center--to watch wrestling in the 80s and you know, they remember seeing Macho Man run through there, and Lanny Poffo and it's like okay, now we have wrestling back and it's almost--not nostalgia, but kinda? You know, yeah...

EH: Well like those kids are now dads, basically.

RH: Yeah, and now they're bringing their kids to it. And it's starting, and it's continuing a tradition. And that's what I like about it. One of the coolest things, I'll never forget this--me and my wife a few years back were at a Target in Charleston and I get out of the car and there's a truck in front of us that's parked and this guy just keeps looking at me and I was like--what is going on--he just staring me down. And he hollers for me so I go over to him and he's like, "Hey boys look at this!" And he has 2 sons and they hop out of the truck and he's like, "There's the champion right there" blah, blah, and he's like going crazy and like he turned into that kid that he was when he went to the shows. And I was like, that is so cool. Like, and I think that's the moment that I realized like what we're doing as wrestlers and promoters and bookers, like, we get into a routine to where it's like, okay, this show's done. Next show. Okay, next show. And I think sometimes we need to step back and be like okay, well this is stuff that like brings families together in its own weird unique way. Like fathers are bringing their sons and their daughters. Yeah, cause it's not just for boys now--there's a lot of little girl fans. Like you'll see a bunch of little girls there. And it's like okay, this is awesome. And they're screaming, hollerin' and throwing stuff just like everybody else. So it's really cool to see that it is like a tradition, it is like a family tradition now. And that's really cool.

EH: Yeah, and I mean there's probably not that much local live entertainment that's in that area.

RH: Um, especially in Madison. Yeah, no. Not really anything and there's a lot of you know, it's a town based on coal mines. So everybody's pretty much tight knit, everybody knows everybody, and there's not a lot of stuff for people to do. So when peoples at the store and they're like hey look, there's a poster--oh

yeah John said he's gonna be at that show. And it's like oh, well I'm definitely going. It gets people, it gets people out of the house in a positive, in a positive light. And they don't have to worry about like, oh I wonder if someone's gonna you know, one of the wrestler's gonna drop an F bomb or do something--no, because it's a family show, but it's not just for kids, you know? And there's something for everybody, so you don't have to worry like ASW, like they don't have like--they don't sell any alcohol or anything like that, so they don't have to worry about taking their kids around people getting drunk, so it definitely gives us something to look forward to, because there's not really you know, in Madison I don't even think there's a movie theater.

EH: Yeah.

RH: You know? I think the closest one would be like in Logan or if they wanted to come to Charleston. I don't think there's anything really for them to do on a Saturday night. So...

EH: And just like even when those hall of famers were in, they were talking about Madison as a--like Jim Cornette I think was talking about Madison as this locus of wrestling. Why do you think that is?

RH: 'Cause the fans! The fans are the reason that wrestling's allowed to live there. They're hardcore about their favorites--they love to hate their favorite bad guys and cheer their favorite good guys. They're very passionate and I think that's the only word I can use for those fans and I'll tell, I tell anybody--I was on a podcast when I was in Texas, and they're like "What's one of the favorite places you like to go to?" Madison, West Virginia. Hands down. Like those fans are nuts, like in a good way. Like they get into everything, I mean they'll cheer, they'll boo, they'll scream. They're not afraid to--'cause you'll go to some shows and it's almost like some people are afraid to get into it at first. Not in Madison. Like, people are screaming when they're coming through the doors sometimes. And yeah, it gets us all hyped, even more so. And it kinda gives us that adrenaline to--maybe we will do a dive off the cage. And maybe we will do something a little crazy. But yeah, it's the fans and people in that area just--they always seem to just have wrestling in their blood. And it's still going today. Like ASW can go another 15 years and I believe that they would be completely fine. So yeah, wrestling's been big there since I mean, who knows how long. I mean seriously, like I think the Pofflers (sp?) ran it the early 80s in that area, and they drew well. And the people that watched it, like I said, they still live there. They, they grew up with it, so yeah.

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EH: And you sort of the difference too with WWE or what you see on TV is you have to rely on facial expressions because you don't have a microphone normally, it's like body language, facial expressions?

RH: Yeah, the WWE you have to use like the facials as well, but it seems like, and I'm not downing the WWE or any kind of TV outlet, but it seems like a lot of times its--I'm trying to think how to put this. On the independents, we have to use more of our selling. We have to sell more. We have to show people like our faces even more than they do on TV, because if you watch a match on TV it might go like 6 minutes, 7 minutes. We'll go out there for 15, 20, 30. (laughs)

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So we have to definitely, you know, show our faces, make sure that you know, we're selling the right thing if someone's working our leg. Make sure that we can relate the pain that we're going through in the ring and let the fans see what's happening and let them feel. Because at the end of the day, if the fans aren't behind you, like, you might not get booked the next show. You have to, you have to bring them in. You have to use your body to be able to bring the fans in. So yeah, I mean I think we do rely on it more than WWE. And it's working, so... (laughs)



EH: Yeah. So, yeah one of the things, so I was at the match where--he was like the Middle Eastern character and then there...

RH: Oh, oh, oh yes...

EH: With the camel flag?

RH: Uh...oh gosh, was it--hold on I'm in a spot now. I'm trying to think who that was. Uh...

EH: Maybe he was some kind of sheik.

RH: Yes! Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Uh, um... and see, he has it harder because he had a mask on, so it's hard for them to use that facial expressions, then they have to use their arms and their legs and over exaggerate everything even more so.

EH: And someone gave him...someone tried to give him, or the guy wrestling him--someone tried to give him a pocket knife.

RH: Oh my gosh, yeah. Okay. Like the wrestler gave...the fan gave the guy--oh yeah. So

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When I say they're passionate, they are really passionate. There was a...there's been a few times that I would go to a show and the bad guy's doing their thing and some old guy's like "Oh yeah, not today!" Pulls that knife out. But yeah, I've seen that a few times actually (laughs) that's how much people get into it sometimes.

EH: What's the craziest thing you've seen a fan do?

RH: Oh my gosh, I've had fans jump in the ring on me, I've seen fans jump in on other guys. Let's see, I've seen fans pull knives out (laughs). Let's see--what are the craziest things? A lady threw a shoe at me, like took her flip flop off and threw it at me, and then she threw one in the ring and then I grabbed it and I looked at the promoter--it was Gary--right in the eyes and as I launched it and bounced it off the ceiling. And then me and Huff Manly are in the ring and it was a match that ended up lasting like an hour. Like there was 25 people involved in the match, but I started out with Huff Man and myself, and we get in there and I grabbed a shoe and I threw it because she already hit me with it and threw it in the ring and one of the strikes that I do is a rolling elbow, pretty much I just do a complete spin and on my way around I give you a forearm to the face. And as I'm spinning, all I see is like blonde going between us and I hit him and when I hit him, like I turned around and I grabbed her because again, you don't know if they have a knife, if they have a gun. So I grabbed her and I'm like are you kidding me? Like seriously guys, can someone come and get this lady out of the ring? Like come on, for real now. But yeah, she was really feeling herself that night. Haven't seen her since, though!

EH: (laughs)

RH: So...so, yeah.

EH: Well with characters like the sheik, and I was at one at Dunbar, and it was like 2 guys in pink shirts and their whole gimmick was like they were gay and fabulous. And they wrestled these--seemed like out of towners who sort of had--they had like a male stripper thing going and they were really buff and

greased up and the crowd loved the big guys in the pink shirts. So I was sort of thinking about the way-- I mean obviously there's a lot of stereotypes, but also you can see public opinion--it's almost like a good tracker for public opinion and politics in a way too, because you see the way people respond to these characters.

RH: Yeah, one of my best friend in the business, Shane Storm, he used to do a tag team gimmick called "Team GAY: Gorgeous and Young."

EH: (laughs)

RH: And this was back in like the mid-2000s? I believe? And they were, oh my gosh. They had so much heat. Like it was ridiculous like--they would just walk out and people back then were like, oh yeah, you're gonna die tonight. And they've had riots started, like, police got involved. Yeah. But--and it's cool because like wrestling is one of the things to where you can take let's say being gay and do like a gay gimmick to where it's like, okay I'm gonna be as flamboyant as possible and but the sole purpose is to get a reaction. It's really, really a strange thing. That would be someone else for you to talk to.

EH: Shane Storm?

RH: He has stories. Like it's ridiculous. But yeah, there was a--oh gosh, what's his name-- like "The Liberal" or something...

EH: Oh yeah, The Progressive Liberal.

RH: The Progressive Liberal, yeah. It's like, and it's also a touchy subject too, like politics and religion are always very touchy, but to see someone say, okay, hey look, this is something that's a hot topic, I'm gonna take it and I'm gonna run with it. It is crazy to see the reactions that they get sometimes. Which is cool, like you know, hey, good on them. I don't know like, you might get some heat that you don't want (laughs) you know. But, you know.

EH: Like almost crosses the reality line.

RH: Yeah, yeah. And see that's something else too--you still have those fans that blur the lines so if you know, say someone in the crowd is very homophobic and they see someone doing that--"I'm gonna stab this person tonight in the parking lot!" It's like are you--okay. So sometimes those people have to be a little more cautious when they leave a building.

EH: Yes, yes. Yeah, I've also noticed--well like a lot of the local West Virginia guys--I went with some friends and they were like, it's like body positivity for men! There's all different kinds of body types and people seem to cheer for--like when they wrestle the greased-up buff dudes from out of town, people seem to like the underdog who might not be the most you know, buff or jacked dude.

RH: Yeah, it's always a story of the underdog. That is always gonna--it always has and always will be the easiest thing for someone to get behind. And like I said earlier, it's almost like if you're at the bar and you look over--hey look, this looks like a guy I saw at the bar the other night. Or he, this guy could be sitting right next to me. So it goes back to that. It's easier to relate. But yeah, I know a few guys that are like, live in a gym, you know, and sometimes they go out there and it's not the reaction that they want and someone that's 115 lbs. will get that crazy massive insane reaction, which--and see, that's another thing too, like I've had a few guys that, 'cause I train people too--I train wrestlers and I had one of my trainees told me, "You know man, I'm only like 155 lbs. I don't know if I." I was like look, if you can get over with the crowd, I don't care if you weigh like 87 lbs. You'll get booked, you'll have matches, you're fine. But that's

the key. So no matter what you look like, you have to be able to get over with the crowd. And today's business is I think--because wrestling's always been like a bodybuilder atmosphere, and it's like well you gotta be 6 foot 3, you know, 240 or 250 and now you're starting to see guys that are maybe you know, 5'10, 200 lbs. to be able to do stuff that 15 or 20 years ago it was out of the realm of possibility. And like I said it's just easier to relate to people. You want that guy to win. You want that guy to, yeah, you know what--screw him! Knock his teeth out. So it's cool, man, it's really cool. And it's not necessarily like what you look like now. It's hey, you can be the average Joe and go out there and be a superstar. You know? So it's really cool to see. And even in WWE, you'll see guys, like Daniel Bryan. He's a shorter guy, not like the biggest built dude in the world at all and like the fans threw a fit until he got his championship match. And if you woulda took Daniel Bryan 20 years ago and put him in there, he never would have had a main event at WrestleMania. You know? Even though he's an amazing worker, it was just a different time. People looked at wrestling as you have to be this certain cookie cutter, you know, and it's not like that now, which it gives a lot of other guys a lot of other opportunities. Because there's been wrestlers that may not be 6 foot 5 that are amazing, now how to get over with the crowd and now they can get a shot at like WWE or even like AEW or TNA or Ring of Honor or whatever. Not because they are 6'5", but because they can go out there, connect with the crowd and put on a really good match. So that's what the business needs more of in my opinion.

EH: Do you think that's because of a rise in local independents?

RH: Maybe because I think like Daniel Bryan was on the independent scene before he went to WWE and he was one of the best. Every one of the--the worst kept secrets was every hardcore fan knew, hey Daniel Bryan is amazing, this guy can go out there, like because on the independents, like I said, you don't really have that restriction. Like you can go out there and if they promoter says hey, look just go out there at least 30, do whatever, just don't break the building down, they can go out there and put on a clinic and once the fans see like okay, hold on a second. These guys that don't live in a gym and aren't 6'5 or 6'4 or 6'3--they can do amazing stuff. They can do crazy stuff on the ground, they can do a lot of amazing stuff. And there's some big guys that can do that too but I think that it's--people's tastes are changing. A lot of the fans--they want to see good wrestling like not just like Hulk Hogan that you know, goes out there and is like, "Whatchoo gonna do, brother?" But they want to be entertained. They want everything. They want to be entertained, they want to see good wrestling, they want to see high flying, they want to see hard hits. So when a guy gives them all of that, they don't care what they look like. They just, they throw that out the window and that's what I think wrestling needs more of.

38:01

EH: I'm interested in the economics of it. So you work another job, right? You have like a...

RH: Uh, no!

EH: No? That's interesting.

RH: No, wrestling pays the bills. I train people, I merchandise, my pay for wrestling. Yeah, I was a CNA and what is it?

EH: CNA?

RH: Yeah, like a certified nursing assistant.

EH: Oh right.

RH: And I was wanting to go back to school for RN and it's like hmm... you know, my wife was actually the one that's like, just--why don't you give this a shot. You're doing well, you can take that time to get more bookings and focus more on wrestling and I was like, oh man I don't want to do this. Because it was scary. It's insane. But I went ahead, I jumped in it head first, and haven't looked back! So yeah.

EH: So how long has that been going on?

RH: A little over a year now.

EH: Cool.

RH: Yeah, and it's been really good, so I cannot complain at all. And it's amazing because like my daughter's in preschool now and she has soccer games so I'm able to you know, pick her up from school and take her to school and don't have to worry about day care and all of that stuff. And I get to go out and wrestle a lot more and travel and yeah. So I cannot complain at all. I feel very blessed.

EH: Cool. What's like an average rate for a match?

RH: It just depends on the person. And some wrestlers might get paid a little more than their friend and if they find that out then there's heat there, so it's one of those subjects where you could be best friends but you don't talk about...you know what I'm saying? It really just depends too. Like sometimes if you're in something a little bit more hardcore crazy, you might get a little extra. Or if the crowd's up, if there's more people out there, you might, some of the guys, all of the guys might get a little extra on that too. But yeah, that's kinda one of the things to where it's not really talked about among the boys. It's kind of like, you know, when the promoters come in with the pay, if it's not in an envelope, it's one of those handshakes, pass it off thing. So yeah, it just depends. I do well, though. You know. And you know, when I first broke in, this shows the difference too in how wrestling's grown around here. When I first started wrestling I had other jobs, right? And I went, I think my first year, year and a half, without getting anything. Like no money at all. So that was a little like, if I got like some gas money, I was like, Oh my gosh, this is awesome! But yeah, now guys when they're breaking in, they're getting something starting out. So it's pretty cool to see that some of the guys that's coming in now is not just like, well been wrestling for 2 years and I've not made a dime. Now they're starting to you know at least get some stuff covered. And once they, it just goes back to being able to get over with the crowd. Once they get over with the crowd then that's going to, that determines what you make. That determines your pay on wrestling. Because if you're really over, the promoter's gonna want you back to bring those people, your merchandise. So there's a lot that goes into it.

EH: What about health insurance?

RH: Independent contractor! (laughs) Yeah, no.

EH: Yeah, that's probably tough.

41:54

RH: Uh, a little bit--yeah. I mean I have health insurance, but of course it's not through--it's not from wrestling.

EH: Right, right, yeah.

RH: Yeah, that's fun.

EH: Is that through your wife?

RH: Yeah. Yeah. So yeah--that part sucks. If only we had health insurance in wrestling. Ah! Life would be amazing.

EH: Maybe we'll see what happens with this election. (laughs)

RH: (laughs)

EH: But let's see, what else. Yeah, so with folklife we think about vernacular knowledge, so knowledge that is not formal, people don't learn it in school. And thinking about the way wrestling has that and also artistic expression--so like in the costuming, in the gimmick, in the actual moves. But yeah, so I guess I'm interested in how you transmit or teach wrestling and how you learned. Is there some kind of formal book about wrestling moves? How does--do people have different kind of knowledge that you encounter? Like no, we call this over here--call that this over here and in this place in the country it's called something else or whatever?

RH: Yeah, like if I'm training somebody to be a wrestler, like I'll have like steps that they go through. Like you want to learn how to take a back bump, a front bump, hit the ropes, lock up. And you just go from there, start building towards. Like okay, now suplexes and German suplexes and you know, all that. But wrestling is one of those--I can get in there with someone that don't necessarily speak English and for the most part have a match with 'em without talking. Now of course we're not gonna be able to do a lot of like crazy insane stuff because you know, if I don't know that there's a flip piledriver comin' (laughs) that's kinda hard to do right then and there. But yeah, wrestling is--and that's something that a lot of the older wrestlers don't want to admit when we say, you know, it's art. We're creating something from nothing. And I'll always tell the guys too, try to create your own stuff. If you like a move, do the move, get good at it, but then try to find a way to make it your own. It's like I'm trying to think about the whole--anything here that's different than-- I know like in Mexico it's like the opposite so it's like getting adjusted to that. Like how you work. Like the body part. In most places it's like, you work the left. Left arm, left leg. A lot of stuff in Mexico is just backwards. My buddy Shane Storm--he's been to Mexico a few times. Again someone you would, you would--he's a trip. But...and you know, okay, so I went to Texas--I worked a lot in Texas and okay, so in wrestling there's a lot of time you see this at the beginning part of the match. It's called chain wrestling it's hold for hold, counter for counter, move for move pretty much. Just grab ahold, get out of that hold without letting go blah blah blah. And (laughs) Texas was a little different because like Texas like they--in the back--this is breaking the wall, but okay--in the back they would say okay, well headlock, headlock takeover, grab the head blah blah blah. They would talk about every step. And I was blown away by that. I was like what are you guys doing? Like what is happening? One of the guys came up to me and he was like, so here's what we can do tonight. Step 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 at the chain wrestling. And the way I've always been taught and the way it is is you just go with that like in the ring. There's no talking, you just do that. So that was a little different. But...

EH: For chain wrestling.

RH: Yeah, for chain wrestling.

EH: And then some of the other moves you talk about?

RH: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. If I'm, now I've had matches where we didn't talk anything. Like one of the guys would be late and I'm in my gear and he gets there and he's like I'm hurrying, and it's like well, there's my music, so I'll see you out there!

46:43

And stuff like that is when you need to be able to, you know it's called walk and talk. You know, call it out there. You need to be able to come up with the match on the fly, and piece it together and make it make sense, and not just like slow and hey, I gotta guy in a headlock for 20 minutes. You gotta be able to, be able to pick the pace up out there. And some guys out there today it's like, oh no we can always talk about our match in the back from A through Z. It's like nope, promise there's gonna be a time when you cannot do that. And there's been a few guys to where they're fresh out of wrestling training and they're like okay, yeah, here's what we can do, and it's just spot, spot, spot, spot, spot. And then someone gets out there and they forget what's next. And they're like, just standing there, like I have no idea. It's like no! Oh my gosh. You have to be able to constantly think. It's a thinking man's game. You have to be able to go out there and if someone messes up, if someone's throwing you off the ropes and they bend over to you know, do a back body drop, but they're supposed to do like a clothesline or something like that, it's like you have to be able to take like 2 or 3 steps and be able to fix that without making it look bad. And that's an art. Like that's, it's an art form. I'm trying to think how to explain it. So yeah, that's one of my big things. Like before I'd grab someone, and we're talking about training, and I put them out in the match. We'll be able to go over like hey, here's how you work on spots, and here's how you build a match up. But we're also gonna have these matches before you wrestle to where you're learning how to just call it on the fly. Don't even talk. Just go out there and tell by the way you're moving your arms or the guy's moving his arms, what's happening, what's coming next. Body positioning on all that stuff. So yeah. I don't know if that helps.

EH: [unintelligible] improv

RH: Oh yeah, yeah yeah yeah. And that's what I like to do. I like to set up my big stuff and all that. But I mean I'll go and have matches to where it's nonstop step, step, step, step, step. And I mean that's cool, I mean I can do that all day, all night. But there's something, I don't know it's like free. It's like a free feeling when you can just say, alright look, we'll just call it out there. I'll see you out there, man.

49:21

It's good, it's just, we'll figure it out. And to be able to go out there and just take--not take your time--but like just take everything in. Because I feel a lot of times guys will--they're taught to just do spots and that's what wrestling is today. It's all spots. But on the independent scene and I think it would even work good on the WWE TV in general--if you're out there and you're just able to take that in and work with that crowd and then you can go into all this big dives and flips and big move, big move, big move, but there's got to be in my opinion, there's got to be times to where you're out there and you're just like, look let's just have some fun. Because if I'm havin' fun, you're havin' fun, the crowd's gonna know that we're having fun--they're having fun, you know? And if they're having fun, you're gonna be remembered when people leave the show, and you're gonna get talked about, the promoter's gonna hear the fans say oh hey, I liked Kasey Huffman or Huff Manly, he was awesome, he done this cool thing and he done this and I'm learning something too. Well not learning, but I'm realizing this more now, is fans...fans will remember more if I, like I can get out there and do all this crazy fast-paced stuff but if I just take that second and say, 'cause I'm usually the bad guy, and say something to him to where people are like, oh my gosh this guy is a A-hole! Okay, there it is. When they leave, that's what they're talking about. Not the fact that I done a cool piledriver or I done this crazy rolling elbow and took a guy's head off. It's that thing that I said, or that thing that I done, or you know, the time that I hit a guy and I just like looked at him and kinda like smiled and people were like this guy's evil. And that's what guys are missing today. I think guys are missing the point to where sometimes it's not all about the cool stuff it's about that connection with the people sitting in the seats.

EH: And you identify as a storyteller.

RH: I love it. I love being able to go out there and just tell stories. And that's what I tell my trainees. It's like hey guys, look we're storytellers. At the end of the day, we're storytellers. It's not about me getting all my stuff in, you getting all your stuff in. It's about going out here and telling a story and when guys forget that, their matches in my opinion just aren't--they don't get over as much. (sighs) That's my...when, when I get out there there's sometimes to where it's like--especially if I'm working with one of the guys I've known forever and I've worked a thousand times, it's like I won't even...I'll have no idea what we're doing. And once we get out there I'll be able to tell the story. You know? On the fly. And then the next thing you know, the crowd's into it and they're booing and hatin' my guts and throwing stuff and little old ladies are wishing death threats on me. So yeah. I've had some people say that they wish that my family would die in a car wreck and that they would love to catch me outside after a show and all of this stuff. And then when they do catch me, it's like, man that was awesome! It's like okay buddy, okay.

EH: Yeah, right.

RH: But yeah, it's, like I said it's like a free feeling to be able to go out there and tell a story and tell a story and let the fans know what's happening. Like let them follow along and make them like control their emotions. Like make them boo, make them cheer, and it's I dunno, whenever I have like a really good match like that I always tell like whoever I'm riding with or whoever's in the back, I'm on that wrestling high, 'cause it's like an adrenaline rush that just doesn't wear off. So yeah, wrestling is definitely my drug. It's (laughs) that and caffeine (laughs) but, yeah. It's...that's my favorite thing. Just to be able to go out there and just tell a story. A struggle. A good guy versus a bad guy or you know, that high school bully versus that nerd that's had enough and it's like, I'm not a nerd! I'm gonna...and you know, and that's what I like. I like to tell stories.

EH: Well it also seems like the ASW guys--just like, maybe it's also from hanging out with you guys in the locker room--but it's like you're not the cool bros, they're not the nerds, but you guys have all kind of like an alternative--you're like the punk kids in high school. Or something, you have an alternative coolness.

RH: Yeah, yeah...Yeah, okay, that's a good way to put it. Yeah, and that's the cool thing about wrestling too man, it's like (sighs) I don't know, it seems like no matter what your background is, once you're in a locker room, I don't know it's like everybody's just--I can't explain it. I guess that's the best way to explain it. It's just--I don't know. It's yeah, it's like a do it yourself attitude in a way, which is kinda punk rock, I guess? But I mean (sighs) I'm trying to think how to... 'cause that was really good. I never thought about it that way before.

EH: Yeah, I mean even like the--just independent wrestling for me the closest analogue I have is like DIY venues for music. Like underground music, you know, it feels similar.

RH: Yeah and you know, I think that you know, I was talking about people like that underdog feeling. And I think that also fans like that, that alternative, that underground wrestling vibe. There was a company in the 90s that got really popular because it was underground. It was like this alternative. They were the punk rock of wrestling, you know, it was ECW. So maybe that's like the independent thing too. That's another cool factor about it, is it is like a do it yourself. It's the punk rock of wrestling. So, yeah.

55:32

I like that.

EH: Let me look at my questions here... Oh when there's like a broad--there's always commentators at ASW shows, where is that--is that streaming on Facebook or where is it airing?

RH: No, that's filmed for the DVD. They film all of their shows. They have them on DVD. They do put 'em online sometimes like on YouTube. But yeah, those are, that's for the DVDs.

EH: Let's see. What about Stephen P. New--should I talk to him? He's like the lawyer?

RH: Yeah, and when you talk to him, tell him that Rocky said stop giving out free shirts when I'm trying to sell my shirts. We have this big thing going on. He'll get a kick out of it. Yeah, I love him--he's a great guy. Fantastic guy. But I do this thing where I put on Facebook like #buymymerch or whatever and he comes with his shirts and he gives 'em out for free, and my thing is, I always tell him, you're taking money out of my pocket! He's not. But still! Yeah, he's another good one. He knows his wrestling history. Fantastic guy. Don't tell him I said he was a fantastic guy 'cause then we have heat. But yeah, he'll be a good one to talk to.

EH: Okay. Let's see...

RH: I don't know if that answers your question.

EH: Oh yeah, I was just wondering.

RH: He's one of the sponsors for ASW.

EH: Right, right.

RH: And always a cool guy. I was trying to get him in the ring and we did work something out and it was pretty fun.

EH: Well I saw the one where they punched his daughter's paintings (laughs)

RH: Oh yeah! Yeah, there was that. I think my buddy Tracy Smothers was involved in that one.

EH: Yeah.

RH: Yeah, yeah. Tracy's amazing. He's awesome.

EH: What's the end game for you? What's your ultimate goal?

RH: I have no idea. I have no idea. I'm just taking it a day at a time, seeing where it goes. I learned in wrestling, never say never--who knows what will happen. If I move on to another area or sign a contract with somebody then that would be cool, of course, but if not, I'm perfectly fine with just working independents in the U.S. Yeah. My end goal, I don't really have an end goal. It's just, I'm going with the flow. And it's taking me some pretty cool places and I've got to meet a lot of cool people and I've got to wrestle with people that I looked up to as a child and yeah. It's--I'm happy with it. It's cool. I'm happy where I'm at if, like I said, if I go somewhere else then hey, so be it. But you know, you never get your hopes up, you just do what you're doing, focus, grind, grind, grind and see where it goes.

EH: Cool. I covered these... What are the current storylines in ASW right now?

RH: Well right now I just got my ASW Heavyweight title back. Working on a few things that's gonna be happening soon, so, fans will see that eventually. There--oh man there's so many things that's getting ready to happen.



EH: So it's October's the next...

RH: Yes, yes. October

EH: 14th I think.

RH: I think so. I can find out. But yeah, like this is one of the weird spots to where it's like, okay, some of the storylines just ended and now we're getting ready to go into, you know, the next chapter. And that's what independent wrestling is almost like episodic television, where it's a never ending story. It can go on and just keep telling stories and stories and stories. Oh man, there's so many cool things about to happen. Ugh. Oh there's so many things, but as soon as I spill it, Gary's gonna be like are you kidding me? October 12th is the next one. And that's gonna be a fun match, actually, that I'm in. A nasty brutal match, but it's gonna be a fun match. We're actually inside of a steel cage but fans are bringing weapons so we're taking weapons and putting 'em inside the steel cage. So it's gonna be bloody and we're gonna be jumping off the top of the cage--I just have a feeling someone's falling or slamming or jumping off of that. So that's gonna be fun. (laughs)

EH: Oh yeah, so you guys also bring a lot of WWE people, like--so is there still a circuit for retired folks?

RH: Oh yeah, yeah. And it's like I said, in the independent circuit's doing really well so like a lot of the people that's no longer with WWE can--it's not like a death sentence when they get fired or they ask for their release because they can go to the indies and make a fantastic living, you know, working here, working there. And the cool part about it is we're independent contractors and now they're free of their contract so they can be their own boss. They can, hey I don't want to do something on the 13th so I'm not doing anything on the 13th. And like I said, they're able to make money, they're able to still get in there and do whatever it is, whether it's manage, wrestle, sign autographs. But yeah, there's definitely a place for them on the indies once they're done with WWE.

EH: Who designs your posters? They're really good.

RH: Okay, yeah, that's not me!

1:01:58

(laughs) I think Gary has some guy--who was it. I think one of his guys is Chris Chandler. He designs a few of the posters and then he has another guy I think that still does them. And I think he lives in PA. I think his name's Aaron Dravin. But I'm not 100% sure on that right now. But yeah, I think the poster that's happening for October, that's Chris Chandler and he does amazing, amazing posters. And that's something important too. It's like, fans have to, if they're walking past a gas station, they see a poster, they gotta be able to tell that it's wrestling. Some people would just be like here piece of paper, we're good. It's like people, you have to grab their attention for them to see what's happening and make them want to come to the show. And that's one thing that ASW is really good at is the poster. The artwork is awesome. So...

EH: Well I think those are my questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

RH: I mean it's crazy because you have West Virginia that's a coal mining area, and it's not like the richest state in the country, but they're continuing to come to shows, they're continuing to support wrestling, you know, it's their childhood. As long as they continue to do that, like wrestling has a very good life in this state. Out of all the places that I've wrestled, West Virginia is my favorite place to work. It's amazing. The people are awesome, even the ones that wish death threats on me (laughs) but no, it's

really good and I've been doing this this year makes, this December 26th makes 10 years that I've been wrestling. And because of wrestling in West Virginia, I've been able to travel, I've been able to meet and work with some of the best in the world and the people that I've looked up to before I got into the business. And it's because of the fans in West Virginia. So yeah, I just hope that next year at this time, you know, it's still like this and yeah, we can just keep bringing wrestling to the state. So...

EH: And do you think there's like a particular--like it has a particular hold in Appalachia? I don't know, maybe because of Smoky Mountain Wrestling and Saturday Night Wrestling'?

RH: Yeah, it's I think wrestling is one of those things where it's just in their blood. They grew up with it, it's a tradition as old as the mountains, you know? And that's why I don't think wrestling will ever leave West Virginia. And I think that's why it's going to continue. In my opinion it's going to continue to grow. People have always, like I said, there's just something special about the wrestling fans in West Virginia. You know, they grow up with it. It's in their lives. You'll go to Madison and go to Kroger and you'll hear people talk about what happened at ASW in aisle 3, you know, which is pretty cool. But yeah, no. And like just going to like different places and getting stopped at a Walmart or something, and just hearing the fans' stories--that's when it starts to sink in. It's like naw, this it's who they are for the most part. It's amazing.

EH: Well thanks so much.

RH: Oh, no problem.

1:05:51

END OF TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW