



Steel Belt Wrestling

The Eras Tour

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Introduction

- ▶ Pittsburgh, Buffalo and Cleveland shared wrestlers and promoters on and off from the 1930 until the 1980s.
- ▶ Area was blue-collar and geographically concise. Pittsburgh and Buffalo top 10-15-sized cities
- ▶ Key promoters: Pedro Martinez (all three cities), Ed Don George (Buffalo), Toots Mondt, Bruno Sammartino and Geeto Mongol (Pittsburgh), Larry Atkins (Cleveland), Al Haft (Cleveland and Pittsburgh)
- ▶ Ethnic appeal (Bruno, DeNucci, DiPaolo very important) Rapid turnover and hot shotting hurt (lesson for today), Rustbelt factor (is wrestling recession-proof?)

Golden Era - Pittsburgh 1936

- ▶ Elwood Rigby (part of Curley office) starts to promote in October 1935, sells out with Ed Don George of Buffalo against Joe Savoldi, uses world champ Danno O'Mahoney
- ▶ Seeing success, Bunny Buntach seeks promoter license and loudly complains he is being denied because he is a Republican. Buntach in league with Al Haft and his champ, Everett Marshall
- ▶ Competing cards set for March 1936 setting up city as wrestling Mecca. Rigby announces Shikat after O'Mahoney double cross
- ▶ Shikat renounces trust, goes with Haft, denied chance to wrestle in Pittsburgh. Buntach show washed out by flood - no head-to-head
- ▶ Shikat and wrestling end up in federal court over contract disputes



Results

- ▶ Headlines blast wrestling
- ▶ Business in Pittsburgh falters
- ▶ Rigby license pulled in October 1937, big spender stays barely a step ahead of law
- ▶ Gates average \$1,000 as fans lose interest. Buntach backs out, almost zero wrestling in 1938. Loss of credibility. Sporadic until late 1950s

New Wrestling War Rages as Dick Shikat Jumps Over to Outlaw Loop

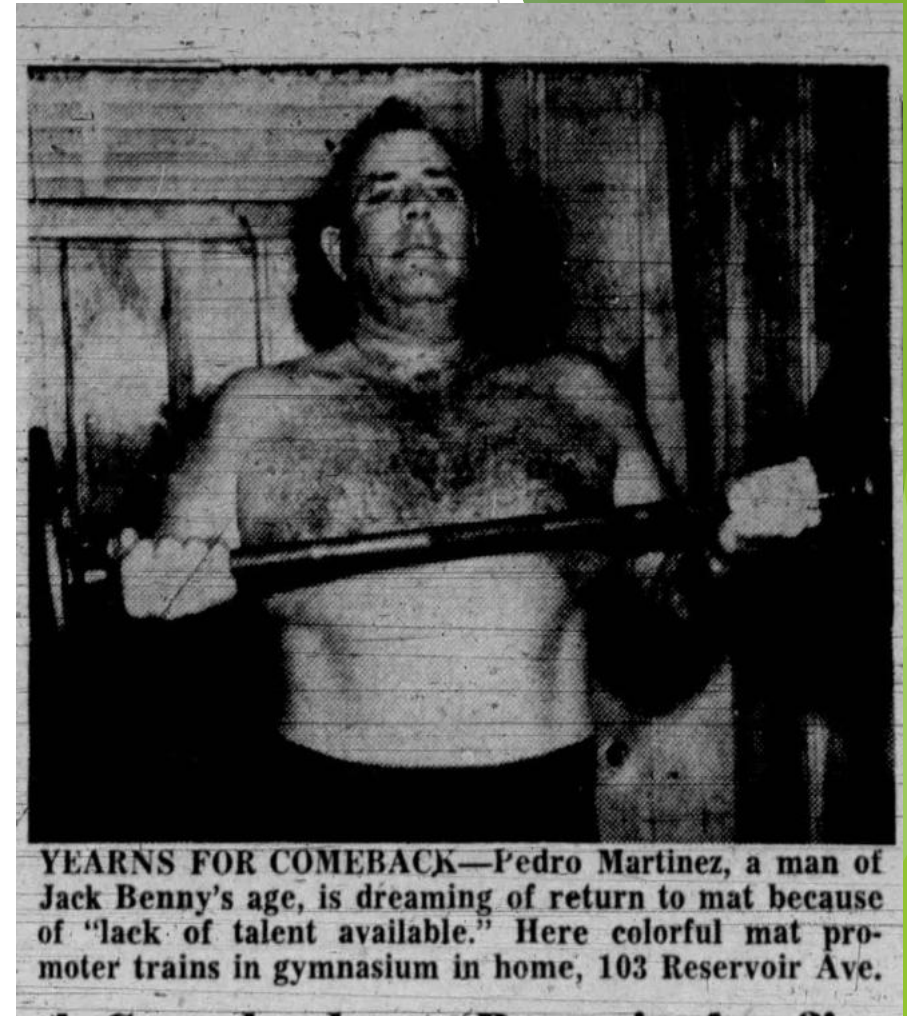
**WRESTLING IS "FIXED,"
IS CHARGE IN COURT**

**6 Promoters Control Wrestling
SHIKAT TESTIFIES IN
FEDERAL COURT PROBE**

Champion Admits 'Trust'
Controls Wrestling.
Curley is on Stand for
Five Hours

The Martinez Era

- ▶ Pedro Martinez starts promoting in Rochester in 1943, buys out Jack Ganson share and works with Buffalo hero Ed Don George
- ▶ Briefly goes to NY, punches out Toots Mondt in 1952 when feeling shortchanged. Back in Rochester, breaks with EDG and vows to wrestle at 295 pounds because he was better than EDG's crew.
- ▶ Says his man Lord Carlton will pay \$1,000 if he can't pin EDG's men Verne Gagne and Yukon Eric both in an hour
- ▶ EDG sells out to Pedro for \$100,000, consolidates NY and 16 cities in all



The rise

- ▶ Martinez starts slow, 831 fans see Nagurski and Gypsy Joe, Oct. 1955 in Syracuse. Hits on Gallagher Brothers as lead tag team against Ilio DiPaolo, his eventual son-in-law
- ▶ Area booms. 13,000-plus for Gallaghers vs Brazil & Layton in Cleveland. Fritz Von Erich is lead heel. Annual Parade of Champions draws 10,000-plus every year; Pedro buys bank building to turn into sports complex
- ▶ Funorama in 1961 draws 25,000 to War Memorial (other events) for Carpentier-FVE. Yetter: “feather in Pedro’s cap”
- ▶ Makes run at Pittsburgh in 1962 at Forbes Field (Don Leo vs Yukon Eric), animosity with Mondt controlling city



The fall



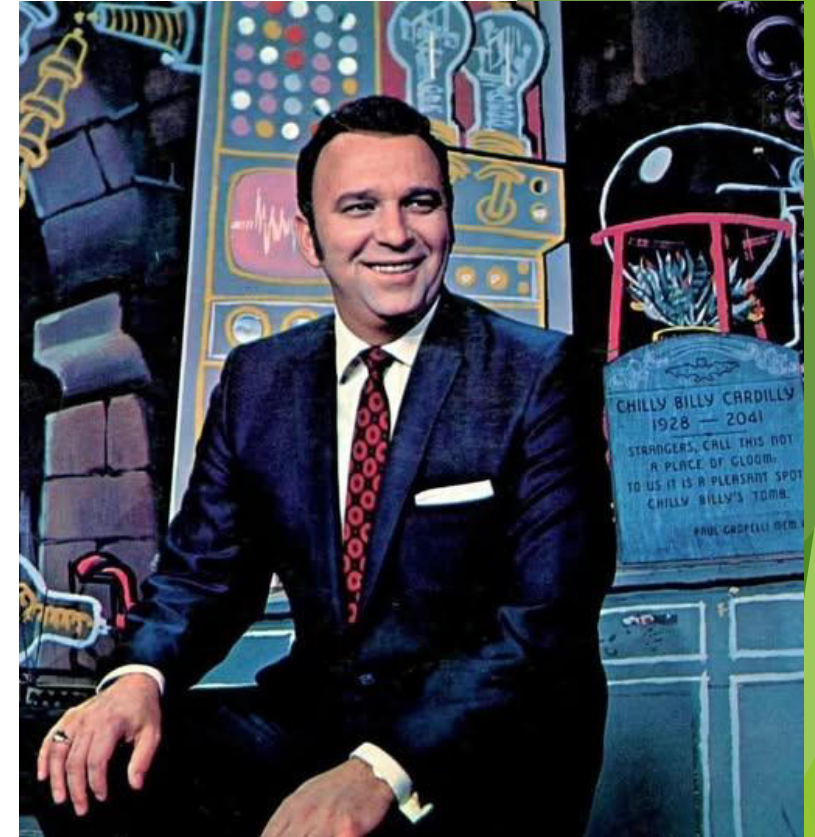
A young Cholak

- ▶ Buffalo trying to outdo itself every week as city starts to lose population (70,000 in decade), attendance in 4,000 range into 1963 and 1964, and dropping
- ▶ Hot shots - radio jocks, Cookie Gilchrist refs Brazil-Cholak; Same performers as Beast, Cholak, Magnificent Maurice become headliners. Powers emerges as top heel
- ▶ Tapes from Chicago replace local TV show. Martinez borrows money from Ilio and Yetter and leaves them hanging; loses over \$300,000 in six years
- ▶ Result: Promotional overreach kills territory, 10-month gap between shows (1 drew 800). “A drowning man reaching for a straw to keep him afloat”-Yetter. Loss of credibility

The Studio Wrestling Era

- ▶ Promoter Mondt was running the small Islam Grotto in the 1950s and debuted the local Studio Wrestling TV show on Nov. 15, 1958 on Channel 11 with Mal Alberts as the host.
- ▶ It started as a 1-hour show, later expanding to 90 minutes. Often most matches were 2 out of 3 falls
- ▶ Bill Cardille would often fill in for Alberts and in October 1961 officially took over as host
- ▶ Among the early stars were Johnny Valentine, Chief Big Heart, Marvin Mercer, Frank Townsend and Tokyo Joe

Cardille also hosted Chiller Theater



‘Crusher was over’

- ▶ Mondt had run big shows at Forbes Field in Pittsburgh but in 1961 the Civic Arena opened and he started running mostly monthly there
- ▶ Local talent like Ace Freeman, Jack Vansky and Eddie Faieta and Bruno Sammartino, supplemented by national talent like Buddy Rogers, The Kangaroos, Dr. Bill Miller, Johnny Valentine, Bobo Brazil and others
- ▶ Crusher was top draw. Beat Baba in 3:48, choked out promoter Rudy Miller on air

WRESTLING'S <i>Greatest</i> RE-MATCH			
 NWA WORLD'S CHAMP	FORBES FIELD also JAPANESE SUMO MATCH 24-STAR	 TONITE, FRIDAY SEPT. 8 9 STAR 9 BOUITS IN ALL-24	 NEW TV CHAMP
NO TV 6-MAN-6 BATTLE ROYAL ROCCA, APOLLO SAMMARTINO vs. CHOLAK, ADKINS, MURPHY	ROGERS vs. CRUSHER VALENTINE vs. GREAT SCOTT YOSHINO SATO vs. ACE FREEMAN INTERNAT'L. JUDO MATCH • 12,000 RUSH SEATS NOW ON SALE AT \$2.30 WINDOW NO. 10 OPEN AT NOON TODAY!		NO TV AUSTRALIAN TAG MATCH KANGAROOS vs. THOMAS & SIKI • CALHOUN vs. GREAT TGOO
Tickets at KAUFMANN'S-HORNE'S Prices \$5.90 \$3.50 \$2.30			

Eadie on Crusher: 'He'd come out an do an interview with a six-pack of Iron City beer on his shoulder and talk about going to the Polish and the Croatian clubs and dancing with all the ladies. Bruno was the local hero, but Crusher was over.'

Bruno becomes Pittsburgh wrestling

- ▶ Bruno won the WWWF World Title in New York from Buddy Rogers on May 17, 1963, though in Pittsburgh he was just called the World Champion. 1966: Bruno took over the territory from Mondt and installed Rudy Miller as figurehead though Ace Freeman did a lot of the promoting.
- ▶ Bruno had a formula for shows every 3-4 weeks. Heel comes in; they have 3-4 matches. Bruno loses the first on COR or blood, inconclusive second match leads to Bruno winning on DQ or COR, then a blowoff match, often a Texas Death match or specialty match.
- ▶ Crusher, Killer Kowalski, Waldo von Erich, Bulldog Brower, Dr. Bill Miller, Prof. Toru Tanaka, Hans Mortier, Johnny Powers, Gorilla Monsoon were all fed to Bruno in this fashion, later George Steele, Luke Graham, Baron Scicluna, Stan Stasiak, Ivan Koloff would do the same.



Bruno loses title, sells territory

- ▶ In January 1971, New York Bruno lost the title to Ivan Koloff in NYC. While still appearing regularly in Pittsburgh and all surrounding towns also traveled in other places and sold Pittsburgh to Geeto Mongol, who turned himself babyface and won the International Tag belts (Pittsburgh's version) with local favorite Johnny DeFazio.
- ▶ By 1972 Geeto wasn't getting rich and sold the territory to Buffalo Promoter Pedro Martinez. Pedro brought his NWF guys in mixed with the local Pittsburgh guys and while some were Pittsburgh regulars others did not get over with Pittsburgh fans.
- ▶ Guys like George Steele hated Pedro and refused to work in the territory.



The Executioner vs Johnny DeFazio

The NWF Era (1969-1974)

- ▶ Martinez “loans” Buffalo-Cleveland to Powers in 1968; Powers can’t repay but Pedro keeps him on
- ▶ Powers (25 y.o.) reopens Cleveland with Bruiser’s guys and DTB TV plus Rocca, Gallaghers and himself, getting 3,000-4,000 per week. Shifts to Detroit & Pittsburgh guys, afraid Bruiser will grab town
- ▶ DeNucci is DiPaolo successor and Ladd ignites territory in his first big run as heel. Ladd turn on Waldo Von Erich on TV in January 1972, biz explodes, Powers is Cleveland hero with health clubs, SRO vs Sheik
- ▶ NWF grows as Martinez buys Pittsburgh from Geeto Mongol with help of Jacobs family, adds Montreal. Imperial overreach and questionable payoffs.



Ernie “The Big Cat” Ladd

Big events

- ▶ Big writeup in Wrestler as “Feud City USA” \$20,000 advance in Buffalo for Pedro’s 30th anniversary, Oct. 1971. Powers-Von Erich, Sheik-Brazil
- ▶ Super Bowl of Wrestling, August 1972. \$50K advance from Duquesne Beer, chariots from Hollywood, three rings. Powers wanted nose fixed, Valentine broke it, setting up main plus Ladd-Abdullah. But only draws 5,400 in 70,000-plus
- ▶ Ox Baker riot - Powers split with Ladd in rare double turn (“know my audience”) and turned heel December 1973. On Jan. 31, 1974, Ladd wins \$5,000 if he breaks Powerlock, Baker runs in and destroys Ladd.



Abdullah the Butcher

Demise

- ▶ Powers goes bankrupt, debt of \$870,000, leaves his 24-room house, 500 left hanging at his health club (investments in roller derby). To his credit, went on TV about it
- ▶ Unbeknown to most, he had dropped world title to Inoki in Japan in December 1973. Sets stage for Inoki in Japan.
- ▶ Pittsburgh fans balk at NWF. Booker Valentine's methodical style did not work. Pedro "lost interest" - son Ronny. Bad economy in Rustbelt, Cleveland Arena closes
- ▶ Bruno buys back from Pedro in 1973, rebrands as Super Pro, but Pittsburgh TV is canceled. Pittsburgh took over Buffalo and other towns for a few months. Crowds dwindled and by November 1974, wrestling in Steel Belt is dead
- ▶ Another case of promoters getting too big, loss of credibility



REBUTTAL—Johnny Powers, with his wife, Karen,
tells it "like it is." Plain Dealer Photo (Michael J. Zaremba)

Conclusions

- ▶ Know your audience - Crusher and Bruno in Pittsburgh, Powers in Cleveland - different fan bases respond to different stimuli
- ▶ Lesson true then, true now: how many earth-shattering events can you promote before they become run of the mill? Stale formulas
- ▶ Real-life intrudes with court cases, financial issues, loss of venues equals lack of credibility
- ▶ Can you beat the big cliques? Pgh-Buff-Cleve (later IWA) all operated outside of the NWA, WWF mainstream for a good part of their existence. That's a problem even today - finding the niche

