

The Dream

Just about every indie pro wrestler knows *The Dream*. *The Dream* is the hope, the desire, the wish that someday, he'll make it to the big time – WWE, TNA, or maybe ROH. He has visions of his name in lights and screaming fans clamoring for his autograph dancing through his head. And it all seems so attainable. After all, if an average looking guy like Jeff Hardy can make it big, why can't anyone? *The Dream*, unfortunately, is what keeps indie pro wrestling going. It's all driven by young guys' hopes that they'll somehow get discovered in a dingy American Legion hall and get called up to the big leagues.

The chances are about 1 in 10 million. It's all a really, really long shot. And when you think about it, WWE and TNA already have development promotions that they recruit their talent from. If you're not in one of those gigs, chances are good you'll never even get looked at. That's just the reality of the situation. You can try to get into one of the feeder leagues, but considering how many people try out for them, it's hard to even get to talk to anyone.

Even so, thousands of young guys all over North America continue to pursue *The Dream*. They accept any booking they can get anywhere they can, even if the "purse" is a crumpled \$20 bill. It's all worth it if it means a shot at realizing *The Dream*. Town to town, week to week, guys in the indies give it their all in front crowds of 50 toothless screaming people in middle school gymnasiums, Freemason halls, and strip mall parking lots. Some shows pay out more; some shows, you get stiffed. Either way, the "pay" is nothing to speak of, and you have to hold down a regular day job to make the rent. It's all OK, though – just keep chasing *The Dream*.

And then let's suppose you do get called up. *The Dream* has come true! What then? Well, if you're like 99% of the other guys who've gotten called up, your career will go something like this: You'll get the call. You'll be sent to one of the development territories to hone your skills. This is where most guys wash out. They fail to get over with the fans there and get dropped like a hot potato. But let's suppose you're not one of those guys. Let's say you get over with the fans and you show some awesome ring ability. So you get sent up to WWE, where you wrestle a few dark matches. Let's say the bigwigs there like you, so they decide to

give you some TV time. On TV, fans take a liking to you, so the bigwigs decide to give you a push. What then? I'll tell you what then – they give you a silly gimmick and have you read promos off a teleprompter. You don't much care for the gimmick, but that's OK because you're giddy with the excitement of being on national TV. You give it your all because you want to be a team player and don't want to blow your big shot.

So you do the gimmick the way they tell you to, and it goes OK for a little bit, but then you notice the bigwigs start telling you that you can't do certain of your favorite signature moves. You can't do that superkick that you practiced for years because the superkick is Shawn Michaels' move. You can't do that tombstone piledriver, either, because, well, that's the Undertaker's. And that fantastic senton bomb you've been practicing off the diving board at the local public pool? Forget it – that belongs to Jeff Hardy. Thus limited, you notice the fans aren't popping for you the way you had hoped. This is the beginning of the end. Once the fans stop cheering, there's only one way to go – down. Your push ends. Soon you notice other new, fresh guys coming in to make their debuts. They're the next big thing; you, on the other hand, are yesterday's news. You get the word that you're going to have to do a few jobs for these guys to, you know, help get them over.

You have time remaining on your one year contract, so they job you out. *The Dream* is coming to a close. You hope that somehow you'll be reinvented and get another push, but in your heart you know it ain't gonna happen. The pro wrestling rotating door is always full of new guys, all chomping at the bit to get their shot, and you're in the way. Eventually, the dreaded day comes – you're released. So you go back to the only place you can go back to...

The indies. Granted, now you have some credibility, some star power, having been to the big leagues. Instead of getting \$20 a show, maybe you can demand \$100. Of course, few promoters can afford to pay you that (or at least that's what they say), so sometimes you have to agree to work for less. But even if you do get the \$100 you expect, that's nowhere near enough to make ends meet. Even if you wrestle eight times a month, which is a stretch, that's only \$800 per month, or \$9,600 per year. Heck, you can do much better than that selling big screen TVs and

Blu-ray players at Best Buy, and you don't have to deal with bruised ribs, mat burns, or broken bones.

Think this isn't the case? Think it ain't so? Think it can't possibly be this bad? It is, trust me. If you don't believe me, just ask guys like Kid Kash, Colt Cabana, Justin Credible, Gangrel, or Jon Heidenreich – guys who've been there – and they'll tell you. The big leagues are a dog-eat-dog world, and to make it there is hard enough; to stay there, you either need to be a monster like the Big Show, John Cena, or Batista, or your father (or father-in-law) has to be a former WWF wrestler or WWE executive (a la Cody Rhodes, Ted DiBiase Jr., Triple H, and Randy Orton).

Forging our own dream

I have a dream. My dream is that the gatekeepers of *The Dream* someday won't just be Vince McMahon and Jeff Jarrett. What do I mean by that? I mean if we all share *The Dream*, why don't we pursue it on our own? Really, why do we need two big shots to determine whether or not we realize our ambitions?

Think of it this way. Mary Kay is a cosmetics company that sells its product line through an "independent sales force." In other words, it's makeup that housewives sell to other housewives door-to-door. The big promise is that you can become independently wealthy by selling cosmetic products to your friends, family, and coworkers. But the way to make big bucks, they say, is by recruiting other women into the business. You make a cut of whatever your recruits sell. And if your recruits recruit new people into the business, you get a cut of whatever they sell, too.

The big draw to this is a pink Cadillac. Yep, you read that right – a pink Cadillac. That's because the very top sellers in the Mary Kay company get to drive a pink Cadillac company car around town. They're the bigwigs, the hotshots. That pink Cadillac just screams, "Hey, look at me! I'm somebody! I'm driving a Caddy! And not only am I driving a Caddy, it's a pink Caddy!"

But here's the deal: If you want a pink Cadillac – if that's your goal – you don't have to sell lipstick and mascara door-to-door to get one. You can get a job or start your own business, save up enough money, go down to the Caddy dealer, and buy one off the lot! Sure it wouldn't be easy. You'd have to work hard and save your nickels and dimes, but I bet it would be easier to get your pink Cadillac that way than by selling stuff door-to-door and trying to con your friends into selling the stuff, too.

The point is you don't have to follow someone else's roadmap to reach your dreams. You can march to the beat of your own drummer. If you have a dream, you have to *make it happen!* Don't let someone else dictate to you how or when you can do something.



NICHOLAS PILCH

We don't need this guy: We all have a dream. We all have just one life to live. Why let this guy dictate to us whether or not we live our dreams?

How does this apply to pro wrestling? Easy – if we reinvent our sport, if we shatter our paradigms and reexamine how we sell ourselves and our product, *independent pro wrestling can become very profitable.*

We can realize *The Dream* on our own.

Laissez-faire

Make no mistake; I'm a big, big supporter of the free market system. Bobby Heenan once said, "If you own a gas station and don't like the idea of someone else opening up a gas station across the street, move to Cuba!"

He's right. Competition is ordinarily what keeps the wheels of capitalism turning, but in the case of pro wrestling, the ease of one's ability to either become a wrestler or a promoter is really, really hurting the business' credibility. It's just too easy to rent a building and a ring, hire a couple of 19-year-olds fresh out of a wrestling "school" or a backyard fed, and call yourself a promoter. Anybody can do it. And these days, just about anybody is. The result is a slew of poorly organized, poorly promoted shows with very poor production values that turn potential fans off: "Oh for crying out loud, look at that," they think. "Those pro wrestlers have a guy in a gorilla costume, a guy in a Spiderman getup, and a guy dressed up as a transvestite. Why does anyone go to that?" And that's before they even see all the botched spots, the befuddled match pacing, the nonsensical storylines, the lousy acting, or the 400 pound tub-of-lard in spandex.

We can't change the easy entry nature of the pro wrestling business – not unless we get government involved to "regulate" it, which just means you'd have to pay a tax or buy a license to run a show. That just cuts into indie pro wrestling's already meager profit margin. So regulation is not the answer. Some promotions that run shows in states that have athletic commissions may disagree about that, but that's just because they like the lack of competition that regulation engenders. So while we can't block unqualified newcomers from entering the business, we *can* raise our expectations. As fans, performers, and promoters, we all need to raise our expectations of ourselves, of the business, and of each other.

That, essentially, is the core principle of this book – that we all need to raise our expectations. Fans need to expect more from shows, from individual matches, and from individual performances. Promoters need to expect more from the pro wrestlers they hire. They need to expect wrestlers to be in proper shape, to have the proper gear, to present the proper appearance, and to have the proper training. Pro wrestlers need to look at themselves hard in the mirror and ask themselves, "Why am I doing this?" If the reason is to make it big, then you must set your goals high and develop a real plan to achieve them. You can't be half-ass and expect to make it anywhere. Nobody has gotten anywhere with a half-ass effort.

Cutting Corners

One of the biggest problems in indie wrestling today is too many guys are cutting corners. Now before I get into this point I need to make something perfectly clear because many guys I talk with get this concept confused: There is a major difference between being frugal and being cheap. To be frugal is to spend money wisely. A frugal person recognizes that certain things cost money – there’s no way around it – but when it comes time to buy something, they always look for the best deal to stretch their dollar as far as possible. To be cheap, on the other hand, is to try not to spend money at all – even when it’s required for something to be successful. For example, a new wrestler who buys a pair of used wrestling boots that are in perfect condition on e-Bay is being *frugal*. In contrast, a new wrestler who doesn’t buy boots at all and instead wrestles in his sneakers is being *cheap*. Another example: A promoter who repairs his still functional ring ropes by neatly re-taping them with ring rope tape himself instead of buying new ropes is being *frugal*. A promoter who leaves his ropes ratty or repairs them with duct tape from Walmart is being *cheap*.

We need to stop being so *cheap* in indie pro wrestling!

You may be laughing at the examples I just gave, but you shouldn’t because they’re real! I see this type of stuff in just about every single indie show I attend. While I understand most indie promotions are shoestring operations, they’re still businesses, and there are certain



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First rate advertising: I bet this sign really packed the house that night. It looks like the promoter hired an ax murderer to paint it for him – in blood. I mean, really?

expenses that must be paid when running any business. Extreme attention to detail is critical to success, yet so few people in pro wrestling observe it. And that's where we've gone wrong. We're cutting corners to be cheap and avoid spending money. We're not paying attention to detail because we rationalize that "good enough is good enough" or because if we pay attention to detail, we'll spot so many things wrong that need to be fixed. If we ignore what's broken, it'll fix itself, right? The fan that shows up and sits in the front row won't see the tears in the mat because they're too busy watching the action, right? The fans won't notice that I'm fat and out of shape if I wear a t-shirt to cover up, right? After all, if I can do some really awesome high spots, it doesn't matter if I'm fat, right?

Wrong. People *do* notice the details. People pay attention. What we would like to go unnoticed is normally the thing fans (our customers) notice *first*.

To understand this lesson better, let's look at the US military. The United States has the finest, most professional, most unbeatable military in the world, and it's all because our military leaders instill the importance of extreme attention to detail in our young military men and women. When I joined the Air Force twenty years ago, I wondered why my drill sergeant would bust my chops about the condition of my foot locker. Everything had to be positioned precisely in an exact configuration. My underwear had to be folded into perfect six inch squares. My socks had to be folded individually. Every button on every pair of pants and every shirt had to be buttoned as they hung in my wall closet. For the longest time I didn't understand why. It all seemed like unnecessary harassment to me. Finally one day – I don't know why – I summoned the courage to ask my drill sergeant why he was such a stickler about such trivialities. To my surprise, he didn't glower or shout at me as I expected. Instead he dropped the drill sergeant act for a moment and said, "Well you see, son, we have no idea what you'll actually be doing in the Air Force once you finish boot camp. You might be working on jet engines or you might be working on nuclear missiles. I don't know. But I do know that's precision stuff. People's lives depend on that stuff working correctly. We can't afford sloppy work. We can't afford to allow young guys to do a half-ass job. This foot locker? To me it

represents that jet engine you'll be working on. If you can't keep a foot locker up to snuff, you sure as hell can't keep a jet engine running right."

Clearly what we do at indie shows isn't on the scale of a jet fighter engine or a nuclear missile, but there's a clear lesson to be taken from what my drill sergeant told me – success or failure lies in the details. As such, if you want to improve your indie shows or your matches, you must stop cutting corners. You must stop being cheap. If you're a wrestler, you must get fully trained and be constantly working to improve your craft. You need to get in tiptop shape and you must have proper wrestling gear. If you're a promoter, you need to make sure your show presentation is topnotch. You need to recruit only the best performers who conform to what I wrote just a few sentences previously. And you need to realize that there are certain unavoidable costs associated with running a pro wrestling show.

It's time to stop cutting corners.

Pro wrestling schools

From what I wrote in the section about how we got here, you may have concluded that I'm down on pro wrestling schools. That's not true – I'm down on bad pro wrestling schools. As I alluded to earlier, anybody with a ring and a building can open a pro wrestling school, whether they know how to teach pro wrestlers or not. And the sad part is, just about every kid who watches "Raw" every Monday wants to be a pro wrestler. It's like "American Idol." When "American Idol" holds their tryouts in any given city, the line of hopefuls wraps around the building. Thousands upon thousands of people want to be stars. Thousands upon thousands of people want to be rich and famous. Thousands upon thousands of people have dreams of someday being a big name singer like Jessica Simpson or Britney Spears. But the problem is, only a very small percentage of those thousands of thousands of people actually have the talent to be a star. In fact, as evidenced by the hilarious outtakes from the "Idol" tryouts, many of the people in that line that wraps around the building can't carry a tune in a bucket.