

Razor Blades and Shame

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There are moments in life, however brief, that an unspoken sentiment is shared by so many that it becomes an energy unto itself- the kind of energy that's propelled nations to fight wars and outsider candidates to win elections. At the end of the decade, professional wrestling- fans, wrestlers, and promoters- had something to prove. It wasn't enough to kindly explain to the uninitiated that *despite the predetermined nature of match finishes* that this shit- the battering taken on the bodies of performers- was, actually, far more real than anyone knew. To chase the respect of those who will never care, violence needed to be amplified.

The rise of Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) may have been the direct result of this coalescence of energy. The convergence of two deeply felt sentiments: that a) professional wrestling was embarrassing *because it was fake* and the wrestling fan was an idiot for not understanding this, despite gladly acknowledging it any chance they had, and b) all those working in professional wrestling were performing on a *show for children*. The idea behind ECW was that they would explicitly define their show as *one for adults*, with a hard-R rating, and use profanity, sex, and violence as a means to achieve this end.

If Hogan's transcendent moment of betrayal was enough to secretly engage the lapsed teenager, ECW became something they could proudly identify with: Sabu smashing tables, Rob Van Dam diving into the fifth row, Balls Mahoney destroying chairs on unprotected skulls; barb-wired and thumbtacks. Even their thirty-second commercial spots for mail-order VHS tapes screamed with sinister brutality, and was always sure to cut-out seconds before an act of horrifying violence was committed- tantalizing and enticing the blood-thirsty teenager- who'd dare his friends to sit through a "taipai death match," giddily pointing to the explicit gore- what's fake now, motherfucker?

The violence was what offset the shame. The violence was what made wrestling cool. The violence became addictive.

Two years later, there was a silent understanding that John should be the one taking Eric to the hospital- after all, he was the promoter of our very first JBW show; "John's Basement Wrestling"- use of the basement meant to differentiate from every other idiot who thought they'd play wrestling by throwing terrible punches and denting cookie sheets. The basement, not such a bad idea; something that could be used year-round, with walls acting as pretend guard railing, miscellaneous items around for foreign objects- board game boxes as faux steel chairs, TV remotes for microphone headshots- a couch for *high spots*. We even had two older kids- local wrestling school trainees- who could be featured in our *main event*.

Like comparing the old monster movies- the Mummy, wrapped in toilet paper and Frankenstein with bolts in his neck- to the bloody slashers that came after, the contrast between our goofy headlocks and Earthquake splashes became jarring when Eric and Joe took the stage; jaws agape watching snap-suplexes on the concrete, powerslams and powerbombs- moves that men with more experience, more pay, and more motivation wouldn't take in front of twenty-thousand people, happening ten feet away, in front of a dozen horrified on-lookers. Guided by adrenaline in calls that must have been made on the spot, heavy-weight steel chairs were dented over skulls... which is when Eric, as slyly as he could, produced a pair of scissors.

The blood was real, I excitedly told the girls we invited- the premise was a party in John's lavish upper-middle class home; his parents on vacation; booze and beers to be had in the absence of

supervision. The girls, single and ready to mingle, and now you're the kid eating worms- and just as doperly unaware.

What was rightfully horrifying in retrospect only produced a sense of misguided pride. We had done it- we had put on a wrestling show- we had a match that rivaled anything on TV, even if only in brutality. The girls left us to it that night- to sweep thumbtacks and mop up puddles of blood- high on what we accomplished, high on professional wrestling. Their seats, empty at our next show.

[Excerpt from [Razor Blades and Shame: The Emergence of Extreme Violence in Pro-Wrestling](#)]

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