

The drama of blood lust

Wrestling wins Oscars galore

By NICK MARTIN

Mike Loren drives his heavy pointed boot into Fred Atkins' stomach, then delivers a judo chop to Atkins' face when he crumples in agony. As Atkins falls to the floor, Loren leaps high in the air, landing his heels with piledriver force on Atkins' unprotected face. With a sneer of triumph, Loren grabs a handy piece of rope, and begins to strangle what remains of Atkins' life force. 12,000 people scream in hysterical terror as Atkins nears death.

Several would-be saviours rush to Atkins' aid, only to be repelled by a dozen policemen and a heavy wire fence which surrounds the combatants. "Help him!" screams a woman in front of me. "Oh shit, man," breaths a frightened West Indian beside me. Is Fred Atkins doomed?

You rarely see a 'straight' wrestler any more. They all have a gimmick, generally a weird costume or unusual background, anything to add to the colour of the circus.

But wait! There is a third man inside the enclosure. George Karelis delivers a meaty fist to the point of Mike Loren's nose, forcing him to release his grip on Atkins' throat. Suddenly Fred Atkins makes a miraculous recovery, leaps to his feet, beats Loren to a pulp, and leaves his battered carcass sprawled behind him as he exits to the cheers of the multitudes.

Eventually Loren staggers to his feet, and drags himself off, still snarling defiance at the disdainful throng. It's wrestling night at Maple Leaf Gardens.

On a hot June night, there are 12,000 people here to see the mayhem. They come in every shape and size, from the little kids high in the grays from where the grapplers look like the proverbial ants to the sweet little old grandmothers in their \$4.50 ringside seats, smiling in utter contentment as the blood flows.

It has not been an artistic first bout — Atkins, the Australian veteran, is too old for acrobatics. But good has triumphed over evil, with a helping hand from the referee, and basically, that is what wrestling is all about.

At last comes the main event, pitting the Sheik, an Arabian villain with some 30 straight victories in Toronto, against Lord Athel Layton. With his string of consecutive victories, all of dubious means, the Sheik has become one of the Gardens' biggest attractions ever. Like Cassius Clay, the Sheik attracts huge crowds who came to see him get his.

The bout has not even started when the Sheik attacks Layton from behind. However, reacting to the Arab's attack like the Israeli Air Force, the English nobleman quickly turns the tables. The referee, Tiger Tasker, signals the official start of the bout as Layton chases the Sheik and his slimey manager, Abdullah 'The Weasel' Farouk, around the ring.

It appears as though the Sheik has met his match when suddenly, an errant judochop catches Tasker, knocking him from the ring to the concrete floor, where he lies motionless. With law and order disposed of, a horde of villains pour out of the dressing room to help the Sheik destroy Layton. A couple of heroes rush to help Layton, but they aren't needed. With backup referee Pat Flanagan helping the near-dead Tasker to the dressing room, Layton proceeds to wipe out his opponents, relentlessly charging through them to hit the Arab

Eventually Layton disappears under a pile of attackers, and the Sheik folds his tent and beats a retreat to his dressing room. Minutes later, the blood-covered Layton is helped from the ring. The ring announcer announces that the referee, with his last breath before losing consciousness, had decreed the bout 'no contest'.

"The Sheik should be disqualified!" screams the woman in front of me. "Oh shit, man," says the West Indian beside me. From behind comes a torrent of Blue Italian, ending with "Referee stooooopeed!"

Wrestling is one of those forgotten pastimes, existing just on the fringes of the sports world, perilously close to falling into the category of side show freak houses and cheap carnivals. Like its closest kin, the roller derby, it was once for real. But the times and the people have made it into something totally different. Like roller derby, it exists in poorly placed television time slots and a hidden corner of the sports page, while drawing fantastic crowds.

Football, hockey and basketball are for the bluebloods that can afford season tickets. The wrestling fan could afford a baseball ticket, but he wouldn't know much of what was going on.

Wrestling attracts the lower end of the great Silent Majority. They watch it on TV over a case of beer, learning the backgrounds and the fantastic holds of each new rassler so they will be completely knowledgeable when they see it live. Their kids go to have a good laugh, recognizing as kids can that it is completely phoney, that, sure, these guys aren't as flabby as they look and you have to be in great shape to get knocked around like they do, but nothing ever lands hard and no one is hurt by any of the death-dealing blows. The kids know it's all a show.

This is what scares you about wrestling. Certainly the kids don't think it's real, and there are a number like you who go every once in a while for a laugh, knowing it's all an act.

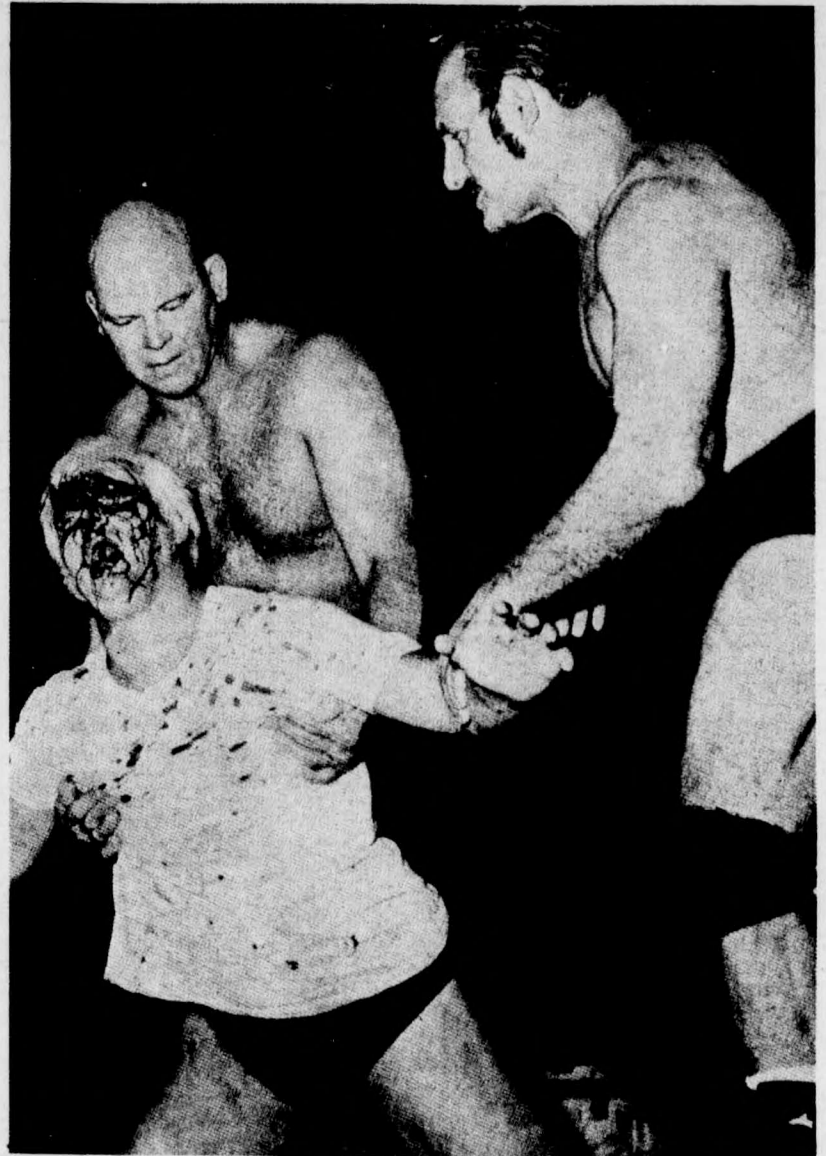
But the woman in front, with the screaming lungs, thinks she's seeing men really being maimed. And the West Indian beside you believes the violence and blood are as real as the latest newsreel from Vietnam. And the Italian behind you thinks the referee is really blind to the atrocities being committed.

Several thousand of these people are here because they believe this violence is real. The little old ladies have a contented smile because they are happy with what they're seeing. When they scream for blood, they mean it.

It is easy to get caught up by the crowd and cheer the hero and boo the villain. But then comes that moment when you realize that the bloodlust of the crowd is real, that we have not advanced far from the days of the Roman circus. For some of these people, the pain being inflicted is real, and they are here because they enjoy it.

Wrestling is a show, a circus, a comedy act. It is there to be laughed at, like circus clowns. But to some of the crowd it is vitally real, it is their day, once every two weeks, when they drop their mask of normality and show the animal lying close to their surface.

You watch a wrestling crowd, and then you know why there are so many things wrong, and why so many people don't care.



The show just has to go on. — *The Wrestler*

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