

Pro wrestling spectacle tarnishes amateur image

Professional wrestling, the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) in particular, has taken off in popularity, drawing crowds at every venue on the circuit and topping sports like college basketball on a number of US cable networks.

All the attention, not to mention money, has got to get advocates of real wrestling (the amateur variety), like York wrestling coach John Park a little disheartened.

"As a wrestling purist, I don't condone it. But it's a great form of entertainment, and a lot of people really go for it," said Park a former member of Canada's national team from 1976 to 81. Park did not compete in the Montreal Olympics as he was an alternate team member at the time and missed his second chance at the Olympics with the boycott in 1980. The boycott effectively ended Park's career as a wrestler, with his best success coming in the form of a bronze medal in the 79 Pan-Am games, and began his new career as a coach.

"There's no formal tie between amateur wrestling and professional wrestling. Basketball players can go from college to the NBA, football players can go to the NFL but in wrestling you just go from amateur to the Olympics and that's it," Park said.

After returning to the hotel after a day of wrestling at the CIAU championships in Sackville New Brunswick, Park found it hard to sleep, so he turned on the television. Park scanned the channels and like numerous other viewers, wound up watching Saturday Night's Main Event, the WWF's monthly extravaganza.

"It's an interesting phenomenon," Park commented on the spectacle. "Where else can you watch good and evil fight it out all the time. There is the occasional legitimate technique, but most of it is choreographed before they go into the ring."

Being involved in wrestling for along time, Park caught a glimpse of some familiar faces stepping into the ring. Most

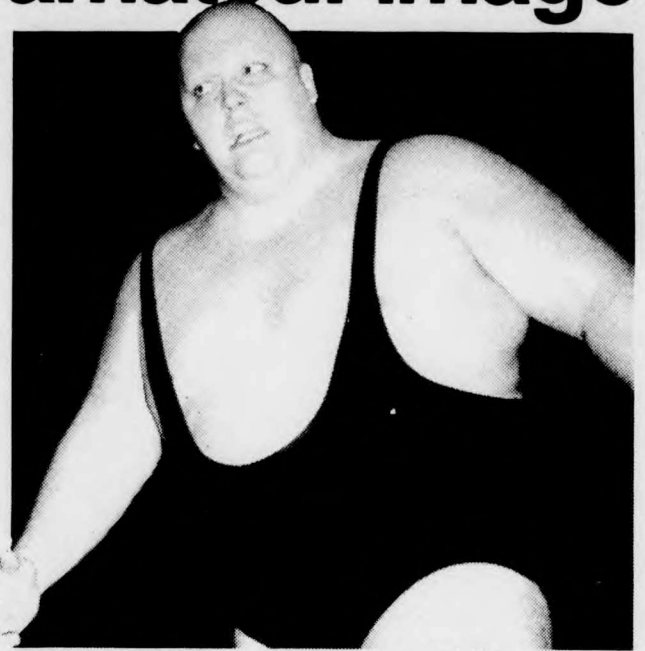


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noticeable was the menacing sneer of King Kong Bundy, the 458 lb evil behemoth. Park recognized Bundy as Erin van Lithe, a former wrestler with the US Olympic team. Van Lithe graduated from MIT, the prestigious New England technical school, with a degree in engineering and if you can believe it also used to sing opera, part-time, with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. No foolin'. He was working for an engineering firm and singing opera on the side. "I guess," said Park, "there's more money in professional wrestling than engineering." You might recall the gentle giant in the movie Stir Crazy. According to Park it was Bundy/van Lithe.

But all fun aside, Park feels that the image pro wrestling portrays and the frequent references to the amateur backgrounds of the wrestlers, hurts the image of the amateur sport. "It's like comparing a world ranked figure skater to the roller derby," Park said. "They're not giving us (amateurs) any assistance, but they're using our name and therefore tarnishing our image." Park feels pro wrestling is hurting the amateur sport's chances of gaining a high profile or larger following.

But if Park has his way this all might change. Park feels that if they use the amateur name the pro ranks should offer some assistance to amateur wrestling, possibly in the form of money. It's with this idea that Park will be approaching the city's top promoter, Jack Tunney, sometime this week. Park hopes Tunney can help him ease the financial burden of



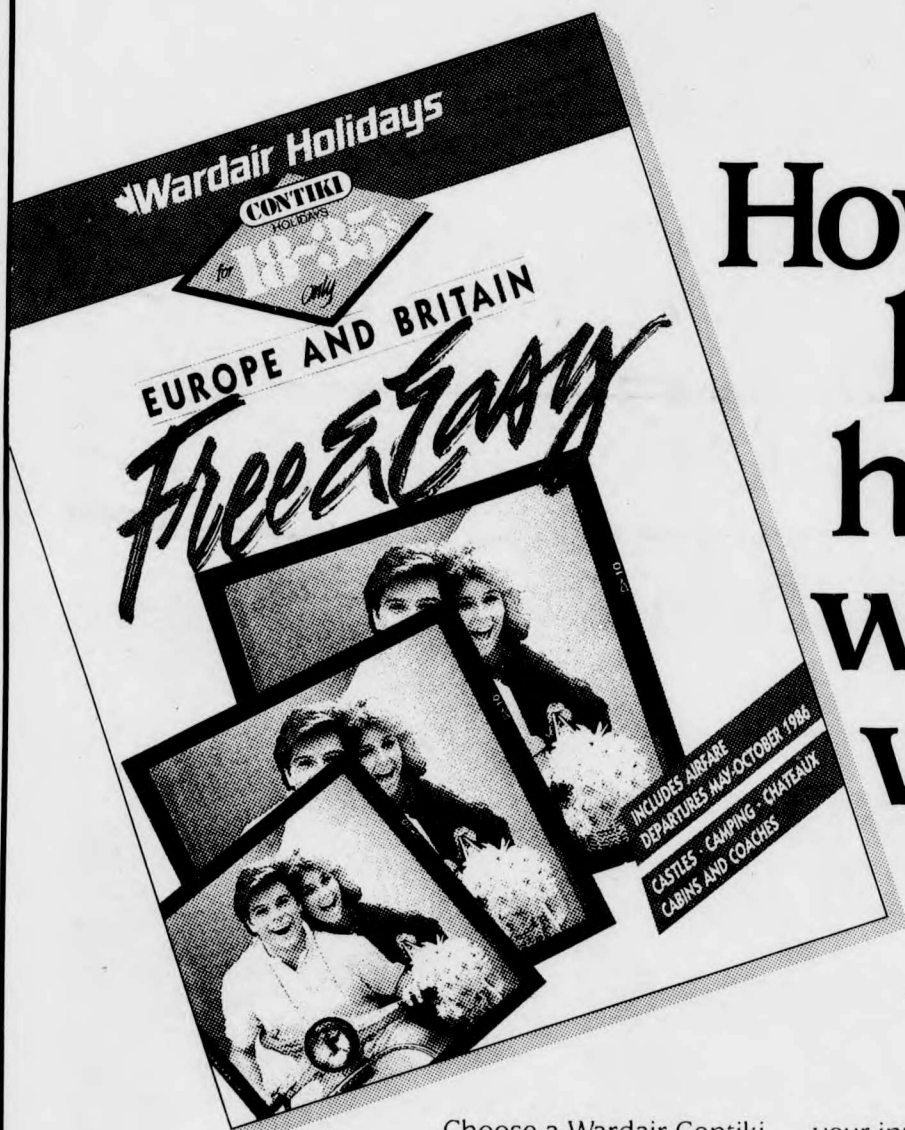
MIT grad and opera singer Erlin van Lithe.

moving off campus and outfitting the new facility with proper equipment, somewhere in the neighborhood of \$35,000.

Tunney, who was recently elected as the WWF's President, has been questioned in the Toronto media at length about the fakery of the sport and as a result was in no mood to hear Park accuse the pro ranks of tarnishing Amateur wrestling's image. But after the rough start, Tunney has agreed to meet with Park and talk.

This all may sound like money starved amateur sport jumping onto the mega-buck bandwagon, or at least following

closely behind picking up stray dollar bills that fall off, but think about it. If pro wrestling loses whatever ties it has with amateur wrestling, what sport will they be able to connect themselves with to gain athletic credibility? A little money in the amateur coffers, might silence some critics and make claims to amateur backgrounds easier to swallow. If one percent of the gross from every wrestling card promoted in Canada was donated to the Canadian Amateur Wrestling Association, Canadian wrestlers could get the best coaching, facilities, and competition available. At the same time all pro wrestlers, even King Kong Bundy and the Iron Sheik would come out looking like good guys in the end.



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