

TOXIC WRESTLING FANDOM

By

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My name is Steamy Ray Vaughn (ok not really but that's the handle I use on most social media) and I've been a pro wrestling fan for 30+ years. I've written wrestling columns in the past, but as I've gotten older and time has become more of a scarcity, I prefer going in the comments section, on Reddit or on Twitter to have discussions with other wrestling fans, since that's what I've always liked. I love a good debate and since writing a column doesn't guarantee engagement, I've chosen to go that route.

However, I've been seeing a trend coming in the last few years, but it's gotten worse in the last few months, of really extreme tribalism amongst wrestling fans. I vividly remember the Monday Night Wars, I was in high school and was around for the newsgroups in Usenet, the forums and the birth of what would become the IWC. I was hooked on the Net pretty much the first time I got my own computer (I think I was around 15) and since I always liked wrestling, having the chance to talk with fans from all over the world was fetch as hell (*Stop trying to make fetch happen Steamy, it's not going to happen!*).

If you watch documentaries nowadays or hear from WWE, they'll tell you that there was an all-out war between WCW and WWF, that there were fans on both sides and that there could be only one. Nothing could be further from the truth. I remember very well that while there were people who only watched one product, most wrestling fans watched BOTH. Yes, they might prefer one over the other, but you wouldn't hear the kind of vitriol you see online today between "WCW" and "WWF" fans. They shared an audience who liked pro wrestling and were interested in what the nWo was doing, as well as what Austin was going to do to Mr. McMahon. Were Vince and Bischoff serious? Of course. But for most fans, it was more fun and games than an "I hate you" war

So, what changed?

1- History is written by the victors

1.1- WCW goes under

The narrative that has been pushed by WWE over the last 20 years is that it truly was a war, that WWE were in danger and that Ted Turner and Time Warner were out to spend whatever amount they could to steal WWE's top stars. I'm slightly exaggerating of course, but the message has still been that WWE was the underdog and that basically it was a war to end it all.

Since WCW's closing, there hasn't really been a company that has come even close to challenging WWE for talent. Because let's be clear here, it's all about talent. Yes, there are other metrics that matter when it comes to running a wrestling company, but the bread and butter, the item that is the scarcest is talent. That's why WWE built a Performance Center, to try and recruit athletes who may not become wrestlers otherwise and ensure they have talent to put on TV. It can take years for someone to break out of the pack and become a star, so when there's an International free agent or someone who is making noise on the independent scene available, they become valuable.

Iron sharpens iron. You can teach someone how to do the moves, how to take a bump, but it's by getting in the ring with someone else, especially someone better, that they'll grow. When WCW and ECW closed, WWE now had access to all these great pro wrestlers and no one to outbid them. That was a sweet deal and for decades, it went unchecked. Sure, there was TNA, but while they had some good young talent, they weren't going to outbid WWE; the talent that stayed in TNA either loved the company or weren't on

WWE's radar. When NXT was at its peak, it was the go-to destination for veteran Indy talent and international free agents to go and be a part of the WWE system but with more freedom and a much lesser chance to get lost in the shuffle. WWE had the perfect system in place. It could use its Performance Center to find potential gems as well as sign the top independent talent who bring credibility to their developmental brand and potentially become stars on the main roster, it was the best possible scenario for a company that sat alone at the top of an industry. But then came AEW.

1.2- Mo money, mo problems

Now financially, WWE's basically fail-proof at this stage thanks to their huge TV deals and selling the Network to Peacock. Before they sell even a single ticket, they are guaranteed about 750M\$ in revenue. We know they have a ton of revenue, but what about expenses? Well, like any other business, their biggest expense is people, more specifically talent. As a public company, it's not enough to just make money, they have to show growth quarter over quarter or the stock value falls. If the stock value falls, the net worth of the biggest shareholders (which at the time would have been The McMahon family/Triple H) also falls. Having someone else with money, that's got a national TV deal in place barely out of the gate, that's bad news. Now it's no longer take it or leave it dear wrestler. If you don't like the WWE's offer, you can go knock on Tony Khan's door and see if he's willing to pay. Good for talent, bad for business.

All's fair in love and war

What did WWE do? Immediately they put NXT on the USA Network for 2 hours (whereas it used to be a 1 hour taped show on the WWE network). Now I don't believe this was done just because of AEW. It makes sense to sell the rights and get even more money, but the timing sure was convenient. All of a sudden there's competition for talent, and WWE paint the target on AEW. A new generation of wrestling fans have grown up hearing that competing with WWE is bad and that WWE is the be all and end all. They now aim for a repeat of what they did against WCW, but it backfires. The tactic doesn't work and NXT moves nights to Tuesday. This was a big blow to WWE's ego. NXT was their ace in the hole. Putting RAW or Smackdown against Dynamite would have absolutely won them the "ratings war", but not only would it have been overkill, there could have been no denying that the WWE wanted to put AEW out to pasture before it could even become a thing. But NXT? It's a small show, it's also very similar in nature to the product AEW would put on and they can spin it as a coincidence. With that, the seeds were planted. While the discourse wasn't as toxic as it would get later on, there was some partisanship on both sides. The "Wednesday Night War" they called it. And so the whispers started.

2 - The American Nightmare returns

2.1- Wrestling has more than one royal family

In 2019, Cody Rhodes, The Young Bucks, Kenny Omega and ROH put on a massive event in Chicago. A love letter to independent wrestling; no letters on the marquee, just two words: All In. That night, sitting in the stands is a lifelong wrestling fan and son of a billionaire (Shahid Khan, owner of the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars and EPL's Fulham FC), Tony Khan.

2.2- #AllElite

The success of that event, combined with the clear passion and desire of The Elite to stand out and prove that you can have a successful and lucrative career without the WWE, results in the Elite joining forces with Tony Khan to form AEW. They start off hot with their first event, Double or Nothing in 2019. Here is this new company that's never put on a show before, and they go straight to PPV. It was a bold move, and it worked. To put a cherry on top of a successful event, Jon Moxley, previously known as Dean Ambrose, debuts. Mox had just left WWE voluntarily, letting his contract expire and choosing to join a brand-new promotion instead of staying in WWE and the security that comes with a steady paycheck. Soon after, we learned that AEW will be airing a TV show on TNT every Wednesday starting in October 2019. The whispers now become murmurs, especially given that 4 of their wrestlers are going to be Executive Vice President.

Wrestlers and bosses? How does that work?

Is this going to cause a conflict of interest? What kind of power will they have and can they co-exist? Wrestling is a business of egos and while they may all be aligned now; their backgrounds couldn't be more different. The grandson of a plumber, born into wrestling royalty and who made a name for himself in the biggest promotion in the world; two skinny brothers from California who became experts at marketing themselves and helped bring attention to tag team wrestling and a young Canadian gaijin who made a name for himself in Japan by having incredible matches that caught the attention of the IWC.

The prodigal son returns

And for the next few years, we see talent leave WWE to go to AEW. Some of it due to releases during the pandemic, some of them choose not to renew their deals in order to take advantage of an opportunity to have freedom and be themselves while making good money, it seems it's a one-way street. And then, a shocker, Cody Rhodes, one of the founding members of AEW, an EVP and one of the biggest stars on the original roster leaves and returns to WWE. He comes back to WWE in triumphant fashion, at WrestleMania, with the exact same presentation he had in AEW. Same gear, same nickname, same music, same entrance. He's welcomed like a conquering hero and presented as a star. This isn't Stardust, it's not Legacy Cody, the message is clear...this is the man. WWE doesn't do this often. Right away it's clear that Cody isn't being brought in just to be another guy, but a top guy. This was the Cody who was stuck in the "Codyverse" in AEW, refusing to turn heel and who was floundering in the midcard. By doing this, WWE was sending a message to wrestling fans and to any potential AEW talent that was hesitant about possibly joining WWE.

Why would an EVP leave?

Now this event starts discussions. What happened backstage to make Cody leave his own company? Did he not get along with The Bucks? Were his ideas ignored? There are rumors that the inmates run the asylum in AEW and now the backlash starts. Fans who ignored AEW, who made fun of Cody for his work in AEW celebrate his return at WrestleMania as the conquering hero who came home. It's not just that someone from AEW signed with WWE, that was going to happen one day, but it was Cody Rhodes, who was the most visible EVP. To be fair, we don't truly know what the EVP job entails, there's never been much clarity given apart from having some influence over creative, but Cody was on TV wearing the

headset, he was much more open and transparent about his duties. People therefore assumed he was happy and was looking forward to AEW's continued growth and then, he goes to WWE. Not only were there murmurs, now there's rumblings. The earth is shaking amongst the fandom and while we're not at the catalyst yet, it would soon come.

END OF PART 1

“And I need you to open up your ears and hear this. Nobody wants you here, they never wanted you here. That whole locker room's afraid to say it. Not me. So, get out!” – Eddie Kingston; AEW Dynamite November 11 2021

3 - The Cult of personality

You knew this was coming, CM Punk was the big fish, he was Moby Dick to pro wrestling's Captain Ahab. Here was the guy who gave WWE the finger and quit. He left pro wrestling altogether, started doing MMA, acting in movies but stayed away from the squared circle. He joined WWE Backstage on FOX, but that wasn't what fans wanted. No, fans wanted to see CM Punk wrestle. There were a lot of people clamoring for AEW to do whatever it took to get CM Punk on board. WWE fans meanwhile hoped that time had healed all wounds and Punk would return to the company that helped make him a superstar.

3.1 – The Return

On August 20th 2021; it happens. CM Punk officially returns to wrestling, and not in WWE, oh no, the Chick magnet chooses AEW and declares that he will wrestle for the first time in 7 years at All Out against Darby Allin, one of the young homegrown stars of AEW. Fans go nuts. People are crying in the stands. Ice cream bars aplenty for the fans in attendance, *(it's a celebration bitches)*! Finally, the white whale has been caught. It's high fives and champagne all around. The moment is perfectly executed and a massive PR win for AEW.

3.2 – The Split

And then everything goes tits up. I don't need to recap everything for you here, we all know what happened. But the end result was that fans were pissed. Here was the guy everyone was waiting for and after only a year in the company, a great year I might add, things turned sour. The shouts are resounding, you can't avoid them. You're either on team Punk or Team AEW.

Fans on both side jump on this meaty bone like a starving cannibal; it's too juicy; it's too tasty; they have to feed. Some blame Punk, some blame Tony Khan, some blame The Young Bucks, some blame everyone. But when CM Punk opened his mouth on September 4th 2022 and went into what has been referred to as “The Gripe Bomb”, there was no turning back. Punk comes back to AEW in the summer of 2023 but it makes no difference, he gets fired after another incident. Now what? Everyone is looking for answers. They tried putting him on an island to himself, tried moving on from the drama, but the drama was never going away.

Clearly Punk wasn't happy and the second run was doomed before it started. Trust is like a mirror, you can try to fix it if it's broke, but you'll still see the cracks in the reflection. We will probably never know what happened. Breakups are never easy and this one hits like 100 tons of bricks.

Then the unthinkable happens, he returns to WWE, the company that fired him on his wedding day, the company that bankrolled the lawsuit that caused a permanent rift in his friendship with Colt Cabana, the place he swore he would never go back to. What was once a trench war now degenerates into a frontal assault on all sides. The earth is shaking, the ground is splitting, staying in the middle is not safe. Those tremors you felt before? That's nothing, because the world is on fire.

4 -The instigators

Now I've been laying out a timeline of when and how the rift happened between wrestling fans into AEW vs. WWE. But to pretend like everything was copacetic at first and that this is all due to specific events unfolding would be a simplistic answer. In 2023, we are extremely divided as people. Extreme ideals are now becoming more and more normal due to the fact that everyone has a voice now. You hate black people? You don't need to put a hood over your head, join the Klan and fear getting your ass kicked anymore, you'll find like-minded individuals somewhere on the Internet and now you can say everything you've ever wanted to say and get cheered on.

You're a sexually frustrated young man who feels insecure and hasn't been able to get a girlfriend? It's not your fault, it's the women's. You need to take the red pill and you'll learn everything you need to know. You're not alone anymore, you're a part of a community and you've got an enemy. You can even go on Twitter and leave a nasty comment to a Tweet by those damn man-hating feminists or those "Woke" snowflakes who champion diversity. The worst that'll happen to you is either you get a nasty reply back, get blocked or get your account suspended/deleted (and hey you can just open another one). You try that IRL? You might get your cap peeled.

There are always going to be people with bad intentions, and you're likely to find them online but that's part of the deal. You take the bad with the good. However, there is a special kind of person, a person who not only promotes toxicity and who encourages discourse, but is actively making money off of it. We have the Donald Trumps, the Andrew Tates, the Tucker Carlsons and FOX News of the world, amongst others, that monetize outrage for money. Pro wrestling is no different, and while there are a lot of people who go that route, I want to bring up who I feel are two major culprits who profit from negativity and encourage division on the platforms they built due to their status amongst wrestling fans.

4.1 – Eazy-E

He's back and most definitely not better than ever

First off is Eric Bischoff. Now I'll give the devil his due, Bischoff has had some good ideas. To paraphrase his original philosophy when Nitro debuted: he says that you can be better than, lesser than or different than. If you can't beat them at their own game, then change the game. Nitro was revolutionary at first and forced the WWF to adapt. With that being said, it didn't last and after the initial play, Bischoff had no answers. He focused on short-term success but was never able to have a plan in place for what comes next.

The nWo is cool right? People love their shirts and that's the storyline that brought you to the dance, let's double down. Those cruiserweight guys that steal the show every week? Who cares, they're fine where

they are. That Goldberg guy sure is hot, the crowd loves him, let's pad his record and pipe in those "Goldberg" chants so it sounds even better on TV. Bischoff talks a big game about Tony Khan and AEW, or at least he has since they stopped booking him, but what does Eric Bischoff know about promoting? The man never had to put his money where his mouth was. WCW was a line item on a major corporation's budget.

Why Bischoff is irrelevant

Bischoff was playing with house money. You can't fire an owner; you can fire a middle manager. Yet, according to Bischoff, Tony Khan doesn't know what he is doing, he's a fan boy, he doesn't know how to handle talent etc. That's funny coming from a guy who has been Hulk Hogan's lap boy for 20+ years and who fumbled the biggest angle in WCW history. Bischoff's ghost-written book "Controversy creates Cash" at least gets the title right. Bischoff has always thrived on controversy. He tries to convince people that he's this expert and this very knowledgeable businessman who took on the WWE and won, but he's just another one in a long line of people who booked a wrestling show, had some success and eventually flamed out.

He's very similar to Vince Russo in a way, just with the added responsibility of having to report on financials to his higher ups and the perception that he was the one who made WCW a success. I don't know why anyone would listen to what this man has to say about business and take it to heart. Why would I listen to the guy who contributed to WCW becoming so toxic that AOL Time Warner basically gave it away for peanuts? As a TV character, Bischoff was great. If he wants to tell old stories about his days in WCW, that's fine, but to act like he knows enough to dunk on a man who has actually put up his own money and has already achieved more success than Bischoff is ridiculous. But he's got a name, a podcast and he uses that to play into the outrage and to push a narrative that gets him views.

4.2 – The Racket Man

Someone gets this man a cheeseburger, stat!

But now we get to the most toxic, the man who seems to live off of outrage, Mr. James E. Cornette. I've listened to a lot of Cornette. He's a fantastic storyteller and he's very entertaining. He has a deep knowledge of wrestling history but when it comes to modern wrestling, he's a terrible influence on the culture. Some would say he's a cancer even, but Jim Cornette is, at the very least, consistent. He likes old-school Southern Style wrestling.

There's nothing wrong with that. It would be hypocritical of me to write a whole novel about toxic fandom and then shame someone for liking something I don't. My problem with Cornette is that he is actively hurting the business he claims to love. If you listen to Jim talk about AEW, you'll hear about how it's terrible, he'll call out the talent and wish for them to break their necks. He will review Dynamite, review PPVs and seemingly hate 90% of what he sees. He'll call people names, degrade the product and just go on tirades on how it's all fake BS and whatever other expletives he can add.

Corny the carnny

I believe that Cornette exaggerates, I have no doubt he hates the AEW product, he doesn't like the orange Cassidy gimmick, thinks modern wrestling has strayed too far but yet, he keeps watching. He

keeps putting out clips on YouTube to just blast AEW because it makes him money. If you look at what gets the most views, the most engagement on his YouTube channel, it's him talking crap about AEW. You look at the comments section and you'll see that his fans are all for it, parroting his views and praising him for them. But yet, he's not exactly complimentary of the WWE product either. He's not nearly as down on it, he will not go into the same level of rants but it just doesn't seem like he enjoys anything. At this point, outrage is a job for Cornette.

Here's a man who says he wants to "Piss on Vince Russo's grave" because of their beef over incidents that took place decades ago. I can't imagine hating someone that much over something so small, can you? I get that pro wrestling is important to Cornette, that it's his life and he blames Russo for what he perceives as its downfall. I know there's also personal issues between the two, but at this point it's getting ridiculous. The world changes, the business changes and you either adapt or die. If Russo hadn't come along, someone else would have. The culture around that time was high on outrageous content like Jerry Springer and Howard Stern. ECW, while nowhere near the level of popularity and reach that WWF and WCW had, were also cult favorites, presenting a different vision of pro wrestling. There were the wild violent death matches which gathered a lot of attention, but some forget ECW's contribution to modern wrestling. Rey Mysterio, Chris Jericho, Chris Benoit, Dean Malenko, RVD, Jerry Lynn, The Dudleys, Sabu, Eddie Guerrero, Lance Storm and many more got their first break in ECW. WWF had the resources, ECW did not, so they took a page out of both ECW and the media landscape and the Attitude Era was born. Vince Russo did a lot of idiotic things, but to act like he killed pro wrestling all by himself and hold that level of resentment towards him is unhealthy.

Should we listen and should we care?

Unlike Bischoff, Cornette has more credibility and has achieved real success in pro wrestling. He's been a popular manager, has worked with lots of different promotions, helped book shows, ran his own promotion and even contributed to the growth of some of the biggest stars in the history of professional wrestling though OVW.

His words carry more weight than AEWsuxWWErulz42069 on Twitter and yet he chooses to use his platform to demean the athletes who put their bodies on the line for our entertainment. Kenny Omega is a frequent target of his, and why? Because Omega did some comedy wrestling in a small promotion in Japan years ago. He wrestled a 9-year-old girl and a blow-up doll, and as such he's committed the cardinal sin of disrespecting the wrestling business and he must burn in Hell. This kind of vitriol is just unnecessary and over the top. I don't fault Cornette for having an opinion, again he has the right to think that something is dumb and criticize it but it goes beyond that. If you hate the product that much, why do you watch it? Because money of course. If the podcast stops, Cornette's fanbase will go elsewhere. He doesn't like to travel and has so much bad blood in the industry that it would not be easy for him to land a full-time position in a major promotion.

I don't think he wants to do that either, he's not getting any younger and so if he wants to keep earning regular income, the podcast must go on. Would he still get listeners if he only talked about his past experiences? Of course. Would he get as many clicks and downloads as he does now if he wasn't so outspoken? No. Expletive filled colorful rants are Cornette's bread and butter. If there's no appetite for his content, he wouldn't make it. Classic supply and demand.

Cornette is trickier to fit in a box than Bischoff. I can point a finger at Bischoff and confidently say "This guy's talking out his ass" but with Cornette, how much of it is true anger and how much of it is just him dialing it up to 11? I don't have an answer for how to counter Cornette's extreme views on wrestling. I

guess the best I could wish for would be for him to tone it down a little. Maybe don't call for wrestlers to suffer career-ending injuries, try to sprinkle in a little bit of positivity every now and then and stay away from name-calling whenever possible. That's most likely wishful thinking on my part. If you are entertained by Cornette then by all means, listen to him. Do remember though that he is making himself miserable for money and be careful about parroting his talking points.

Conclusion

I could list a lot more names in this section, but honestly there are too many. It seems that there's a large group of people who want to get attention off disparaging AEW. If you look at the comments section under my columns, you'll see that the loudest voices are the ones trying to discredit my views because of the promotion I support. I tend to respond to a large portion of them because first, I love to argue, and second because I feel that someone has to speak up and try to rise above. Am I above being a little petty and condescending? Of course not, but my goal is to have real conversations.

END OF PART 2

“And even though the battle was won, I feel like we lost it; I spent too much energy on it, honestly I'm exhausted; And I'm so caught in it I almost feel I'm the one who caused it” – Eminem, Like Toy Soldiers

On September 7th of 1996, rapper Tupac Shakur was riding in the passenger seat of a rented car when he was shot in a drive-by incident after leaving a Mike Tyson fight. He was taken to the hospital, but died 6 days later at the age of 25. A few months later, on March 9th 1997, Christopher Wallace (better known as The Notorious B.I.G.) was also killed in another drive-by incident after leaving the after-party of The Soul Train awards in Los Angeles. He was only 24 years old and a father of two young children: a 3-year-old daughter and a 4-month-old baby boy.

These two men's careers and lives are now intertwined due to their feud and their deaths, that many speculate was a direct result of the East Coast vs. West Coast hip-hop beef that was going on at the time. While there has been progress in Tupac's case and the murder seems to be gang-related, there are still questions as to whether Wallace or his producer Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs were in any way involved in the shooting. While Wallace's killers have never been caught, it is widely accepted that the murder was most likely a “retaliation hit” for the previous murder of Shakur.

Two great artists were snuffed out of this world while still in the prime of their lives, due in part to events that came from “tribalism” of which style of hip-hop was better. This isn't the only reason, as gang violence, drugs and the criminal lifestyle were absolutely factors in the two men's deaths, but they are mostly remembered not for their songs, or their talent, but for their tragic deaths.

I've taken a long time to get to this conclusion, and while there hasn't been this level of violence as it relates to these wrestling rivalries, I thought rap beefs would be a good way to introduce what can happen in extreme cases. In the last two parts, I explored what events led us here and talked about some of the players that stoked the flames for their own monetary benefit. Now it's time for me to say my piece.

5- What now?

Now that I've laid out what I feel are the reasons this divide is growing, I want to look at what we can do to try and bring the heat down. I've spent a lot of time talking about WWE and their actions, I've talked about WWE fans putting down AEW but that's not to say AEW fans don't have to shoulder some of the blame.

Toxic Gossip Train?

I'm an AEW fan, to me the WWE product is not enjoyable, hence I don't watch it (outside of a few clips on Twitter) but I recognize that some AEW fans take their love of the company to the extreme. While some people are thriving off negativity, we also have fans who go to the other end, with toxic positivity. For those people, everything in AEW is perfect, nothing ever goes wrong and any criticism is seen as an attack. I don't think AEW is perfect. I love the product, but I think the women don't get enough time on TV; I dislike the ROH integration into AEW, especially with them using the term “World Title” for the ROH belt, and I feel like they overuse 4 way matches to have a reason for a title to be defended. I can also accept that some people might disagree with me, and I accept that the AEW product is not for everyone.

I defend AEW a lot, I can't help it, because I love the overall product. I always end up enjoying myself after watching an AEW show. I've never wanted to turn off my TV at something. Some stuff I love, some stuff I like, some I don't care for but overall, AEW has earned my fandom.

It's important to acknowledge that opinions differ. There are the trolls who just like to make fun of AEW because it's fun to join the dogpile, but that's not who I'm referring to. Take for example the recent Texas Death Match between Hangman Page and Swerve Strickland. I absolutely loved it; I was on the Copeland of my seat the entire match and it was awesome. Some people felt the blood drinking spot was disgusting and that the match was too violent. Those people have the right to say "I didn't like it" or "It wasn't for me" and not be called an "E drone" or be told to go back to watching WWE.

When we do this, we are no better than the same people who call TK a cokehead, say AEW is a backyard wrestling company, that TK doesn't know what he's doing and any other disingenuous comment meant to attack the concept of AEW as a whole. It's great that you're passionate about the product but you should try and engage respectfully with others, even when they are trying to goad a reaction out of you. If your response to a constructive criticism is to try and demean the person, then you're engaging in toxic behavior. I'm not saying you can't reply and state that you feel differently, you should absolutely do so, debating can be fun. Just try to keep the topics at hand and be reasonable. It's perfectly fine to agree to disagree.

The last word on Mistah Cody

At this point, Cody Rhodes has been gone from AEW for almost 2 years. He's doing very well for himself in WWE and there doesn't appear to be any animosity between Cody and AEW. He was a big part of the company when it first started, but I do think he is more at home in the WWE environment. I hope he gets his big win at WrestleMania to capture the belt that eluded his father and brother. Nothing but love for Cody. Fans need to let this one go; this is a case of two parties outgrowing each other. AEW's has acquired lots of world-class talent since 2020 and Cody's babyface character hit his ceiling around that same time. In my opinion, Cody's plan was always to go back to WWE. I think he had fun with All In, he liked being an Indy wrestler for a while and was most likely sincere in his desire to help launch AEW. This is also my theory as to why he disqualified himself from ever challenging for the World title after Full Gear 2019.

Dusty Rhodes never held the WWE World title, neither did Dustin. Both these men had (and in Dustin's case still do) amazing careers and success, but they never could get that one accomplishment. Cody has had to spend his career in the large shadows of two legends, and this is the one thing that he can do that neither has. This was also most likely why he didn't want to win the AEW World title. He wanted his first major World title win to be in WWE. I think the desire to go back also got reignited once he reached a deal with WWE to reuse the Cody Rhodes name. Remember that for a while, he was only Cody, no last name due to trademark issues. He told fans he didn't mind and in fact liked being just Cody better, but it wasn't true. Cody is a smart man; he knew coming in hot at WWE would not help get him his name back.

He took the diplomatic approach and the seeds were laid for an eventual return to WWE. Add this with becoming a father for the first time, seeing AEW grow from an idea to a national promotion which attracted top talent and for the first time in decades; providing a true alternative to WWE, but being stuck in limbo with a gimmick that wasn't working with responsibilities he didn't enjoy and the possibility for a big return with a large raise; it makes a lot of sense to take the deal. No one should blame Cody for doing

what was best for him. He had no ownership in AEW, he was an employee and he got an opportunity to be the first big name to jump.

Oh my god, is that RC Cola Phil?

Punk is a hot-button issue. From the official stories I've heard from reading wrestler's books, hearing shoot interviews (including Punk's) and simply from observation, I gather that Punk has a very short fuse and holds grudges. He's an intense guy and that's been a big reason for his success. He's been very open about his belief that "Luck is for losers" and he doesn't seem to be great at communicating his frustrations before they boil over. I don't know the man personally, but this seems to be an accurate description based on available information.

If you like Piña Cabana

I wish we knew more about the resentment Punk feels for Colt Cabana. I read the petition Cabana filed when he sued Punk to cover his legal expenses stemming from the defamation trial, but legal petitions are not statements of pure fact. They're made to present your case in the best possible light. According to this document, Cabana believes Punk's legal team were worried about Cabana settling with the WWE Doctor and testifying against Punk, hence why (allegedly) Punk told Cabana to use the same attorney and that Punk would cover the legal fees.

They both agree that sometime during the trial, Cabana sought to get his own legal representation and that's where the dispute comes in. From the information I've been able to gather, there's no clear event that's publicly been described as to why the dispute happened. All we know is that Punk initially said he would be billed for all legal fees and eventually as costs spiraled, a dispute over money occurred. The biggest culprit here is the legal system in my opinion. I still don't get how a suit against Cabana was able to proceed past a motion to dismiss. Cabana wasn't the one accusing the Doctor, he simply provided a platform for Punk to vent; I am not a lawyer but it never seemed right to me.

He who must not be named

It's really sad that a long-time friendship ended this way but it's clear that for Punk, Colt Cabana is a very sensitive subject. I believe Punk when he says he never demanded Cabana be fired or removed from the AEW roster before singing with the company. That being said, there was no way they could share a locker room and so TK made the call to sideline Cabana. It was smart business; Cabana was already being used sporadically and so he continued paying Colt's salary and eventually began using him in the relaunched ROH. Everyone wins right?

This is the best explanation I can come up with of why Punk was so offended by that "worker's rights" line from Hangman. To me and most of the audience, that line didn't hit until Punk sent a direct shot at Hangman once Punk returned from foot surgery. Looking back on Punk's AEW run, both Eddie Kingston and MJF said way worse, but for some reason, that subliminal line from Hangman really got under Punk's skin. Maybe the fact he got injured so soon after winning the title, coupled with the fact that he was pissed about the line made it worse. He had no outlet to channel his anger into, so it stewed up inside him and he just had to let it out.

Won't someone please think of the money

Right here, this should have been nipped in the bud. I always try when writing these columns to stick to publicly confirmed facts, as well as my best guess based what's the most logical explanation. Whatever happened after that Punk promo, it didn't solve anything. If Punk hadn't torn his triceps at All Out 2022, would he have done the same thing at the media scrum? I can see how two major injuries so close together right after a big moment could have just sent him over the Copeland. I maintain that after that, even if there hadn't been a locker room brawl, Punk and AEW should have parted ways. I think most of the wrestling fandom would have understood and probably respected Tony Khan's decision if that had been the case.

Saturday Night Fever

There's been rumors that the Collision deal happened because WBD wanted Punk back. I find that highly unlikely. WBD is such a massive company, they're still dealing with the aftermath of their merger and are restructuring their whole content catalogue, I don't think they would have time to pay attention to the inner workings of their wrestling programming. I've said it before, live sports are the most desirable content to cable providers right now. It's one of the last types of programming that consistently attracts viewership and where streaming doesn't dominate the genre. The "One Bill Phil" line was TK's; he said it himself not long after Punk's Collision debut. What I believe is most likely is that WBD wanted more AEW programming (discussions were probably ongoing for some time) and that TK saw an opportunity to bring Punk back and separate him from the people he had issues with. It was a bad idea and a massive mistake. This isn't a case of hindsight being 20/20; if you're CM Punk, this is basically a golden ticket to do whatever you want. You trashed the company in public, sitting right next to the owner and got rewarded by being the centerpiece of his own show.

It's all about The Elite bay-bay

As for The Elite, their silence on the issue means that I have nothing to go on to make an educated guess about what they did after "Brawl Out". I've heard the same rumors as you, but again, they've said absolutely nothing publicly so I don't know what they did or didn't do. The one thing I will say is I believe that AEW should publicly explain what the EVP roles entail. It seemed at first that they would be in charge of creative and would have a major say in hiring talent, but we know that changed. Is it a ceremonial role only? Meaning a cherry on top of their current contracts as a Thank you for helping start AEW? That would make sense. If they do have official responsibilities, then we'd need confirmation as to what those are to judge their potential actions as it relates to the CM Punk situation.

At the end of the day though, what's done is done. We can rehash the issue all we want, try to find a culprit but I believe blame goes all around. Mistakes were made and it ended up blowing up in people's faces. As someone who loved Punk, this turn of events disappoints me immensely. I lost all respect for him after All Out 2022's Gripe Bomb. Airing your dirty laundry so openly in public unprompted is unacceptable. It shouldn't have happened; but it did. The best thing for all parties was to move on.

Who do we pin the blame on then?

There's been lots of talk as to why they never tried to bury the hatchet after the incident and the truth is we don't know. Did Punk try to communicate with Omega and The Bucks after the brawl? Did he try to

give them a call? Did he try to fly himself to a Dynamite show after The Elite returned and talk it out? Some might ask “Well why didn’t The Elite do that?”, it’s true, they could have. In the same vein, Punk is an adult, a very rich man and the instigator of this entire debacle. Did Punk have legitimate criticisms about The Elite? Were there preceding incidents we are not aware of? Maybe. However, the entire situation became public because of Punk’s actions.

My point is simply that there’s blame on all sides. Punk should have handled his emotions better; The Elite shouldn’t have gone to confront Punk right when he was this angry. Tony Khan should have cut off CM Punk’s mic when he was going off the rails at the press scrum or simply have him escorted out of the building immediately after it was over. It doesn’t matter anymore, what’s done is done.

In the end, it doesn’t even matter

Punk is back in WWE and hopefully this run goes better. AEW will continue on just fine without him. Throughout history, stars have come and gone; and it’s an opportunity for someone else to fill the gap. I understand that recency bias is a thing, and that people are taking Punk’s return to send jabs at AEW, but honestly, why bother? Human beings make mistakes, whether they’re a CEO, an EVP or a talent. If you’re a fan of WWE and a fan of Punk, then I’m happy for you that he is back. If you’re a fan of Punk and AEW, I understand that you’re disappointed and conflicted. This is not what anyone was hoping for or thinking would happen when Punk first appeared on Rampage, but that’s unfortunately the way life goes sometimes. If AEW without Punk is no longer interesting to you, that’s fine too. If you still enjoy the product though, it’s time to move on. As I said, no one is irreplaceable, big stars have come and gone, yet the business is still here.

6-Steamy’s Final Thoughts

Are we done yet?

Before I end this novel, I want you to close your eyes and think back to one of the first times you told someone that you liked pro wrestling or that someone found out that you liked pro wrestling. What did they answer? Did they tell you that “It’s fake”? Did they make you feel stupid for liking wrestling? And what was your reaction? I’m willing to bet it wasn’t “Yeah you’re right, it’s fake but I think it’s cool”. If it was, you’re a saint and someone with a control over their emotions so great you should run humanity. I’m guessing most of you either ignored it or you tried to defend it. We always feel the need to justify our fandom to outsiders.

We will answer that yes, it’s predetermined but it’s a physical sport and the athletes get hurt, that the bumps themselves aren’t fake even though they protect themselves. Thankfully, the veil has been lifted for a while; pro wrestling is more accepted as part of the mainstream now. The old “it’s fake” argument doesn’t really make much sense when no one is pretending that this is an actual competition nowadays. There are a million podcasts, wrestlers do out of character interviews, you can interact with your favorites on social media and see into their real lives. I’m not sure the conversation I laid out above is something Gen Z fans can relate to? Or that if it does, it’s as common as it was for us who grew up during the 80’s. Yet, now it seems we are turning amongst ourselves. The loudest voices call for us to pick a side, they want our outrage, they want us to be their soldiers and attack the enemy. Resist.

It seems a lot of people like to attack Tony Khan or Triple H directly. For TK, while I do agree that he should be more careful about what he posts on social media, I can sympathize. Remember, this is his family's money and if AEW closes tomorrow, the Khan family take a big financial hit. They wouldn't go bankrupt, but that doesn't mean it wouldn't hurt. As for WWE, the McMahon family is set for life, especially with the sale to Endeavor. For them, it's a matter of pride. Vince McMahon has always wanted to stand alone at the top of the mountain, and he has passed on his life's goals to his son-in-law. Vince may not be physically present at every show, his direct influence may be significantly decreased, but he will never truly be gone as long as his loyal soldiers are there.

What brings us together?

We all love pro wrestling, that's what we have in common, we can be different races, ages, nationalities, genders, sexual orientations, but we love professional wrestling. Don't listen to the promoters, on either side, trying to rile you up. Don't listen to those who point a finger of shame at a company to draw you in, whether it's for money or just attention. Talk to each other about what you like and what you don't like, but don't resort to attacking each other.

And finally, if a product doesn't entertain you, if you hate a certain wrestler or if you hate certain forms of wrestling, don't watch it. Turn off the TV, don't click on the YouTube clips, don't start flame wars with people that enjoy that product to tell them how wrong they are. Why waste your precious time on this earth on something that brings you negative emotions? There's enough content out there to last you until the end of times. Don't let the carnies draw you in for their own personal gain. Remember why you like wrestling in the first place and focus on that. In the immortal words of Brian Zane, like what you like, just don't be a dick.

Until next time, this has been the Steamy Files, fans ain't dumb but extremists are

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