

COVER STORY

Batista and Christian move to Smackdown, RVD and Show join Raw

HEADLINE ANALYSIS by Wade Keller, Torch editor

Although there will still be some final trades later this week, the major portion of the Draft Lottery came to an end this week with more major moves. World Hvt. Champion Batista was shifted to Smackdown, where he will likely feud with JBL right away. Christian also moved from Raw to Smackdown, separating from Tyson Tomko (who may be reunited with Christian through trades later this week).

Rob Van Dam, who has been out of action for months after undergoing knee surgery, moved from Smackdown to Raw and shot an angle with Carlito. The Big Show also shifted to Raw, where no obvious feud awaits him.

The Raw to Smackdown moves were Chris Benoit, Randy Orton, Hassan, Christian, and Batista. The Smackdown to Raw moves were John Cena, Kurt Angle, Carlito, Rob Van Dam, and Big Show. All in all, pretty even. If you consider Batista and Cena a virtual wash as champion babyfaces and Angle and Orton a virtual wash in the top heel category, there's not a huge difference between Christian, Benoit, and Hassan (w/Khosrow Daivari) to Smackdown and Carlito, RVD, and Show to Raw. Benoit and RVD are exciting workers, Christian and Carlito are colorful heels with upsides, and Show and Hassan are role players with Show being the bigger, more credible name at this point.

On paper, an argument could be made that Raw got the better end of the deal since it got a hotter babyface champion in Cena, a more polished top heel in Angle, and a bigger name in Show compared to Hassan. But it's not as if a reasonable case can be made that Vince McMahon fleeced either roster. The balance of power ultimately didn't greatly shift, but new potential match-ups were created.

The biggest surprise is that Carlito was moved to Raw, but at this point Chris Jericho remains on Raw—putting both “talk shows” on the same brand. Smackdown lacks a deep heel roster, although Batista can feud with JBL this summer and then Randy Orton this fall, once Orton is healthy enough to wrestle again. From there, Eddie Guerrero or Christian could work feuds with Batista, or Chris Benoit or Undertaker could turn heel to feud with Batista. There is also the resurfacing of the Brock Lesnar factor, who could be a great fit in a feud with Batista. Muhammad Hassan also jumped, but he isn't considered an immediate option to work a top program with Batista. This is all assuming they stick with Batista as the World Champion of Smackdown through WrestleMania, and there are no indications that is not the case. Undertaker will remain a part time, top tier babyface cohort of Batista. The two teaming together may have some appeal against the right duo of heels, too. Booker T and Rey Mysterio would be the next tier of high-level Smackdown babyfaces.

On Raw, the stage is set for John Cena to defend the WWE Title of Raw against Triple H, Kurt Angle, and perhaps Chris Jericho or Edge between now and WrestleMania. Cena will share the top babyface spotlight with Shawn Michaels, with Kane, Big Show, Rob Van Dam, and Shelton Benjamin filling out the second tier babyface slots.

From a match-up standpoint, the top title match feuds should benefit everyone involved. JBL should help bring out better promos in Batista than Triple H did. Being so close off air may have hurt the chemistry between Hunter and Batista once they split up on air. Batista may be better reacting to JBL's insults than he was in countering Triple H's self-aggrandizing. In the ring, Batista would have benefited from a full-fledged feud with Angle more than feuds with Batista, Orton, or Christian.

Cena will benefit tremendously from working with Hunter inside the ring. Cena's spirit, energy, and charisma on the mic has potential to revitalize Hunter's stagnant promo style. Cena also has a chance to advance as a worker if he feuds with Angle, Edge, and Jericho. The mic exchanges

TOP FIVE STORIES OF THE WEEK

By Wade Keller, Torch editor

1. Batista retains against Triple H in Cell, then is shifted to Smackdown

The Batista–Triple H feud ended—for now—on Sunday night at Vengeance when Batista scored a pin in the Hell in a Cell match. They had a strong match that came in second to Michaels vs. Angle as Best Match of the Night (Michaels–Angle received 64 percent of Best Match votes in the PW Torch.com Poll, with Batista–Hunter in second place with 20 percent). Batista was then shifted to Smackdown, giving Hunter a reason for wanting revenge for his ego at a later date—perhaps WrestleMania 22.

2. Brock Lesnar says he has matured and wants to return to WWE

Brock Lesnar says he has matured and is ready to try being a WWE wrestler again, assuming Vince McMahon is willing to take him back. “I'm ready for it now,” he said in an interview with the *Bismarck Tribune*. “With the lawsuit and everything going on, I just hope we can resolve this thing, and Vince can open his doors to me and just give me a second chance.” He said he doesn't know what the timeline is for such a return. “I have no idea (where it stands). I guess it stands on the end of your pencil, when it gets on the Internet. That's probably where he'll catch the news. It's either that or me calling him. But I don't know what else I'd be. What else is there for me?” He explained why he walked away from WWE. “I wasn't ready for what (McMahon) had put on my plate. I couldn't eat it all. I tried to, you know. That's just me being me. He asked me, 'Are you ready for this?' And I just said, 'Bring it on. Let's go.' I wasn't ready to be traveling 300 days a year. I wasn't ready for the money. I wasn't ready for the responsibilities. I wasn't ready to be a father. I wasn't ready to be a husband. I wasn't ready for a lot of things. I had a lot of growing up to do. I was forced to grow up.”

3. JBL and Blue Meanie incident addressed officially on WWE.com

JBL is on record for the first time discussing the controversial beating he gave Blue Meanie at the ECW PPV last week: “Before the brawl at the end of the pay-per-view, he starts cutting a shoot promo on me, saying I'm the reason he got fired and the only reason I got where I am is because I suck Vince McMahon's d**k. I was incredulous,” JBL said in a WWE.com article. “I thought there's no way he could really mean this. So I got to work with him at the end, and here we are trying to give the fans a great finish when we begin to lock horns in the melee. But he's basically not even acknowledging my presence. Now I might have caught him snug with a shot, but then he starts throwing back heavy punches, including a body shot. So make no mistake, I club him back to make sure he knows I'm not playing, and I think I got him with a shot over the eye and one near the forehead and apparently opened him up a little. Backstage I asked him if he wanted to finish it right then and there,” JBL continued. “He told me it's all a show and that he didn't want to fight. And he pretty much ran off.” Blue Meanie also commented. “To me, it's just really sad. JBL is supposed to be one of the top guys,” Meanie said. “He's supposed to lead by example, not by fear.” Paul Heyman also commented, and they actually hinted at a match being booked in the future. It's rare for WWE.com to acknowledge so openly “other wrestling websites” creating a furor over something within WWE, but they acknowledged the widespread coverage elsewhere.

4. Michaels and Angle have another strong PPV match, second in series

Sunday night at the Vengeance PPV, Shawn Michaels evened his series with Kurt Angle, scoring a pinfall in another great match—the second singles match between those two. Angle told the IGN website last week that Vince McMahon originally wanted his rematch with Shawn Michaels to be a street fight. “I'm more of a pro wrestler, though,” said Angle. “I don't like to have gimmicks. I don't like to have gadgets and stuff. I just like to go out there and entertain the fans by wrestling. So we talked Vince into having the same match again, to let us go in there and entertain the fans on wrestling alone. Plus, we don't want to take away from the Hell in the Cell match.” He also praised his chemistry with Michaels in their first match, noting they didn't have any practice time in a ring or dark matches. He said they planned to try outdo the WM21 match. At just over 25 minutes, it was comparable to their WrestleMania four–star–plus first match. A third match may be held off until WrestleMania 22, giving each wrestler a spotlight marquee match once again that likely wouldn't involve a World Title.

5. Hogan returns for special Raw appearance, teams with Michaels, Cena

With Hulk Hogan's VH1 series debuting on Sunday, July 10, it's no surprise he'd return to Raw to raise his profile. He returned to the ring this Monday night, teaming with Shawn Michaels again and John Cena for the first time in a six–man tag against Christian, Chris Jericho, and (designated jobber) Tyson Tomko. The timing was great not only for Hogan, but also for WWE as it gave WWE a chance to spotlight Cena in an ideal situation where he could literally rub shoulders with two of WWE's all–time top babyfaces. Cena played up his wide-eyed amazement at teaming with Hogan, playing into his character's genuine respect for pro wrestling history and past as a fan. Cena only wrestled briefly at the start of the match, then Michaels tagged in and took a beating before hot–tagging in Hogan who did his signature sequence including a big boot and a legdrop. Cena posed with Michaels and Hogan, then left the ring early and bowed as Hogan and Michaels closed out the show together.

THE BIG STORY

TUSCON, ARIZONA—In the match that was billed as the final encounter between two former friends, Rey Mysterio beat Eddie Guerrero in a main event match that comprised the final half hour of the broadcast. The match was given a “big fight” feel with promos and video packages throughout the broadcast leading into the match. Eddie was seeking a victory against an opponent he had been unable to defeat, while Rey was seeking revenge for the vicious attack delivered by Eddie in previous weeks.

Rey managed to fight off Eddie’s “demonic” attack, which served as the key part of the story during the last portion of the match. Then Rey scored the win. The match wasn’t so much an adrenaline rush built on highspots, but was more story-oriented with slower pacing and fewer dramatic sequences.

MATCH RESULTS

(1) Joey Mercury (w/Nitro & Melina) beat Heidenreich at 3:54 when Nitro super kicked Heidenreich while the referee was distracted. Michelle McCool and Melina got into a scuffle that followed up on last week’s altercation between the two divas. (1/2*)

(2) Paul London and Chavo Guerrero wrestled to a No Contest at 2:45 in a Cruiserweight Title match when Juventud Guerrera, Super Crazy, and Psicosis interrupted on a giant lawn mower. The group, named the Mexi-cools, made their debut on Smackdown to issue a statement that they were taking over and were going to make gringos work for them rather than the other way around. (3/4*)

(3) Muhammad Hassan (w/Khosrow Daivari) beat Big Show at 3:35 with a chair shot to the throat. Hassan was brought over to Smackdown as this week’s draft pick following the “the time-honored tradition of doing a job on his way out” to John Cena on Raw earlier in the week. Matt Morgan distracted Big Show at the conclusion of the match. (*)

(4) Rey Mysterio beat Eddie Guerrero at 28:00 with a 619/Drop the Dime combination. (See Big Story for match details.) The one-dimensional nature of the first 80 percent of the match worked well toward the finishing sequence and catered to the story they were trying to tell, but it didn’t work toward the match being particularly exciting most of the time. (**3/4)

OTHER NOTES

Smackdown GM Teddy Long introduced a new Smackdown Championship, which JBL tried to lay claim to. After interruptions by Booker T, Chris Benoit, Big Show, and Muhammad Hassan, Teddy announced a six-way match for the Smackdown title match on next week’s show, also involving The Undertaker. Booker, Benoit, Big Show, and JBL threw Hassan out of the ring for his repeated string of complaints... Randy Orton opened the show by vowing revenge on The Undertaker for his WrestleMania loss. Undertaker interrupted Orton’s promo and struck down a lightning bolt on Orton... Melina challenged Michelle McCool to a match on next week’s show. Nitro and Mercury weren’t too supportive of the decision... Torch Scores: PM-4.5, BM-7.5, JG-6.0, JP-7.0, JC-8.0, WK-7.0...

WWE NEWSWIRE

•**In the interview with the *Bismarck Tribune*, Brock Lesnar talked about why he signed with WWE despite having another year of college sports eligibility and the potential of competing in the Olympics.** “I locked myself in the basement of the house that we were living at for a whole month, because I knew the WWE wanted me,” he said. “I didn’t know what to do. I just made that decision. When I was digging in my pockets to chase my buddies out to go grab a beer and a steak, or something, and I was digging deep and there was nothing in (them), I said, ‘It’s time to open a new chapter and see what happens.’” He also talked about what he went through from there. “I had to go in with an open mind, keep (my mouth) shut and my ears open,” he said. “They just didn’t stick me out in the ring. I trained for a year-and-a-half, every single day. I committed to myself. I committed to Vince McMahon and I wanted to be a pro wrestler. From the day I signed on the dotted line, I turned that switch, and I just wanted to become an entertainer. I got the same feeling out of it as I did as an amateur wrestler.” Regarding his attempt to make it in the NFL, he says he has no regrets. “The only regret that I would ever have is not doing something,” he said. “I can tell my grandkids and my kids — I mean, I might not have made the team. I was on the practice squad, but how many kids from Webster, S.D., have got a football card in a Minnesota Vikings jersey? I’m man enough to admit that I wasn’t ready for that, either, but I just threw myself in there. There’s only one way I know, and that’s full throttle and to the wolves.” He said in the future he’d like to be an amateur wrestling coach. “I love coaching. I think I would make an excellent coach. My heart was there for that, but the timing isn’t. I don’t think I could commit right now to it, because I know that there’s other carrots out there dangling in front of me.” Lesnar was inducted into the Bismarck State College Hall of Fame for his days as a wrestler with the school, where he went 33-0 in his sophomore year.

•**Kurt Angle said Vince McMahon has seen him endure a year without neck problems, so he has confidence in him again.** “I don’t care if Triple H is on the card or The Rock or Stone Cold, eventually I was going to prove to Vince that I deserved to be the top guy,” Angle told IGN.com. “And if it weren’t for my neck injuries, I believe I would be right now. I’d be the franchise. But my neck injuries set me back about a year and half to two years, and that also lowered Vince’s confidence in me because he didn’t know if I’d be healthy from one week to another. Now that I’ve proven I can go a full year, full time without hurting my neck, without getting injured, knock on wood, I think that’s why he traded me to Raw. He wanted to give me a fresh beginning. He noticed that I wasn’t having any problems with my neck anymore, and it looks like I’m ready to go again. This is round two.” He also said one of the reasons he thinks he was moved to Raw was to help move Shelton Benjamin to the next level. “I believe he’s the best pure athlete in the company, and he’s learned the system so well, he’s going to be a tremendous wrestler for years to come, no doubt about it.”

Angle said while he enjoys injecting humor into his promos, he did not enjoy the angle with Booker T and Sharmell. “I didn’t enjoy that very much,” he said. “That’s what was called of me, so I did it, but I’m glad to be back on Raw right now.” He said he did enjoy his interplay with Rey Mysterio where he said, “You’re a boy living in a man’s world, and I’m a man who likes to play with boys.” He said he loves when humor is part of his character.

He also said he has not had a chance to wrestle Ric Flair yet and he wants to get that chance now that both are on Raw.

•**Steve Austin strongly praised John Cena as perhaps the next huge star in pro wrestling who could break his gate and merchandise records.** “John Cena is a person that potentially... maybe, could he break all the records?” Austin told the *Manchester Evening News*. “I’d love to see if he can, and if he does then it’ll just be another high point for the business so I wish the guy all the luck. He’s doing real well. He’s handling it real well. He still has a way to go, but he’s certainly on his way. He’s got the rocketship on his back, the WWE’s pushing him hard, he’s got a good head on his shoulders, he’s got a good work ethic. He goes out there and gives the people everything he’s got. I see no reason why John Cena can’t have an extremely successful career.” Austin also talked about his future, his movie aspirations, and his potential return to the ring.

WWE NOTEBOOK

The line by Chris Jericho about Kevin Nash “pulling a hamstring just picking up the phone” was scripted by the writing staff and Vince McMahon, not ad libbed by Jericho. The word from backstage is that Marty Jannetty did spend time in jail for battery, thus the comment on the air during the Christian/Jericho promo on Raw... WWE has teamed up with Ronald McDonald House Charities for a golf tournament in Ontario in August... As is the case in many markets this summer, a TV advertisement for the upcoming Smackdown taping on July 26 features Triple H & JBL vs. John Cena & Batista in an “Interpromotional Tag Match.” For the record, WWE sources insist there is zero chance that the brands will be merged, but instead that they’re just adding some top wrestlers to upcoming events as a special attraction to increase attendance... A number of lower card wrestlers will be given their notice in the next month or two. That was discussed by management at the Anaheim event this week and wrestlers are bracing for it... Brian Gewirtz’s final night as part of the creative team was in Anaheim on Monday. He is now moving to the movie division to work on a script and isn’t expected back until late in the year or perhaps not until early next year... There remains concern within WWE about attendance in the U.S. The attendance overseas is keeping things stable. Without those gates, there would be a lot fewer smiles these days... The Undertaker’s theme music was used by the San Antonio Spurs during introductions of their opponents prior to last Thursday night’s game seven. The NBA is in charge of music for intros during playoff games, but the Spurs have used that music before when

their opponents have been introduced... WWE's Hall of Fame Ceremony PPV is available on PPV with inDemand beginning July 1. It's a two hour version of the ceremony... There has been communication between Matt Hardy and WWE management in the past two weeks. He has been told that he should delay signing the TNA contract until Vince McMahon can decide what kind of offer if any he wants to make for his return. Hardy has been up front with TNA about his needing time to make a final decision. Hardy asked a crowd at an indy show in Chicago last weekend where he was signing autographs whether he should return to WWE or sign with TNA. The crowd chanted "TNA, TNA" There were also "f— Vince" chants... Hardy and Lita have been on good terms lately, but are not by any means a couple at this time. Lita and Edge are not together; Edge is working on fixing his marriage instead...

Joey Styles is keeping his full time Monday through Friday day job, but is signed on to work various ECW-related voicecover projects... Ric Flair suffered a minor knee injury in his match with Kurt Angle on Monday, but is otherwise fine... Although the first solid ECW buyrate returns are a couple weeks away, the latest indications are more sobering for those enthusiastic about the project. The preliminary estimates or guesses of 600,000 to 800,000 will probably end up quite high compared to reality, which is expected now to be 350,000 to 550,000, still very good. Paul Heyman has not been re-signed. His contract is up at the end of the year, and WWE still may not renew his deal (due to political grudges, a lack of trusting him, and the general of lack of respect for "wrestling knowledge" in WWE's current "sports entertainment" environment). WWE is planning tentatively for a second ECW PPV next year no matter what. If Heyman were up for it, TNA President Dixie Carter seems to be the type who would definitely pursue him for a head creative role... Peabody's Downunder in Cleveland (where Chris Jericho has played with Fozzy a couple of times) is now advertising that John Cena will be performing there July 26... Ric Flair, Roddy Piper, and Hillbilly Jim were the WWE celebrities at the WWE licensing show early last week... Angle made a run at the best explanation in the fewest words explaining and defending pro wrestling's in-ring workings during an interview with IGN.com. "(P)ro wrestling is not fake, it's sports entertainment," he said. "We go out there and we perform, and a lot of what we do out there is real, but we're not going to insult anyone's intelligence, there is a predetermined winner. It's just the fans don't know who it is, and that's what makes it so intriguing"... CNN International aired a segment on WWE's business which included interviews with Shane McMahon, who said the first key to overseas business is getting television, and from there all else follows. John Cena was also interviewed... Comic Images, the company that produces WWE Raw Deal the Collectible Card Game, has been given the okay to include Legend Superstars in their game. Thus far a Hulk Hogan and Roddy Piper have been announced as being included with Batista, Captain Charisma, Christy, Smackdown GM Theodore Long,

Basham Brothers, Chavo Guerrero, Heidenreich, and Muhammad Hassan for the 16th expansion set due to debut in early September...

Hulk Hogan is scheduled to be on Raw on July 4 also to help raise his profile before the debut of his VH1 reality series, "Hogan Knows Best"... The man who planned to burglarize the home of Jerry Lawler pleaded guilty last week in U.S. District Court. Says an AP story: "David Tate pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court to all but two counts of an eleven-count indictment. It charged him with extortion, conspiracy, transporting drugs, and prostitutes across state lines and planning to burglarize the home of professional wrestler Jerry Lawler. In the plea deal, federal prosecutors dropped two drug counts and child pornography charges in exchange for a 14-year sentence." The man faced life in prison without the deal... Cena was interviewed on ESPN's All Night radio last week to plug Vengeance. Cena said he was nervous when he debuted on Raw because he was so used to Smackdown and was now working with all new talent in a live format. They talked about the greatness of the lottery format and how both belts were on Raw, and how Cena could still get drafted or traded back to Smackdown. Cena jokingly said Teddy Long would have to give up his house to get him back. They talked about his victory over Hassan and how he probably still thought he was unbeaten. He talked in character about beating Hassan. The host asked about his CD. Cena said it was doing great and he liked it. They talked about his spin belt and that it was the most expensive belt in WWE history. They mentioned the fact that the Pistons have belts. They ended plugging the PPV again... There will be lower and mid-card wrestlers traded between Raw and Smackdown later this week... In the dark match at the Raw/Smackdown tapings in Anaheim this week, Val Venis beat Maven. It was just a warm-up to let fans know it was time to return to their seats for the start of Raw... Former AWA and WWF broadcaster Rod Trongard died on June 16 from liver cancer at the age of 72. Trongard had a 50 year radio career. He retired just last month...

C.M. Punk will work a few more indy dates before going to OVW... Game seven of the NBA Finals on Thursday night was the top rated network show, drawing an 8.5 average rating and 15 share of the actual viewing audience. CBS finished second with a 6.4 rating, followed by NBC at 3.4, UPN at 3.2, and The WB and Fox tied for fifth at 1.7. Smackdown was down only 0.1 compared to last week, while the NBA game seven was 2.0 higher than last week's game four... The June 21 Raw drew a 3.9 rating, with a peak rating of 4.5 for the Lita-Edge wedding in quarter hour number 5. The overrun rating for the main event match of Triple H & Kurt Angle vs. Batista & Shawn Michaels was 4.1. Complete quarter hour ratings were: 3.5, 3.7, 3.9, 3.8; 4.5, 3.9, 3.9, 3.8; 4.1... The June 18-19 weekend ratings were in their usual range with Velocity drawing a 0.5, WWE Experience a 0.5, and Heat a 0.8...

LIVE EVENT RESULTS

June 19 Smackdown brand in Manchester, England: Paul London beat Billy Kidman to retain the Cruiserweight Title with a 450 splash, Big Show beat Carlito (w/Matt Morgan) with a chokeslam, Funaki beat Chavo Guerrero

THE BIG STORY

ANAHEIM, CALIFORNIA. – Hulk Hogan made a surprise return on WWE Television when he was announced as the third partner to John Cena and Shawn Michaels for a six-man tag match against Chris Jericho, Christian, and Tyson Tomko. Hogan's return gave viewers a chance to watch three generations of WWE superstars in the ring together at one time with Cena paying the ultimate respect of giving Hogan and Michaels the ring for a series of pose downs following the expected victory over Jericho, Christian, and Tomko. The finish came when Hogan gave Tomko the big boot followed by a leg drop for the victory. On commentary, Jim Ross summed up the special moment, "These are the nights that remind you of why you love the business."

MATCH RESULTS

(1) Big Show beat Gene Snitsky at 2:10 with the chokeslam. The match was scheduled to be Kane and the first Smackdown draft pick against Edge and Snitsky, but Kane chased Edge and Lita through the stands to the backstage area before the match could begin. Eric Bischoff decided to change the match to Snitsky against the draft pick, which turned out to be Big Show. (1/2*)

(2) Kurt Angle beat Ric Flair at 16:10 with the Ankle lock. The match was set up earlier in the night when Ric Flair confronted Kurt Angle about being the best ever in the business. After calling himself a "mark" for Angle, Flair said he would counter Angle's offensive moves in the ring. During the match, Flair used several classic cheating tactics to counter Angle's mat wrestling offense, but by the end of the match, Flair didn't look confident or comfortable given his age and physical limitations. Kurt Angle fulfilled his dream of wrestling Ric Flair and the two put together an above-average grueling battle. (**3/4)

(3) John Cena & Shawn Michaels & Hulk Hogan beat Chris Jericho & Christian & Tyson Tomko at 6:30 when Hogan pinned Tomko following a big boot and leg drop. John Cena received a "superstar" crowd reaction, which was barely topped by Hogan's "mega-superstar" crowd reaction. After the match, Cena and Hogan posed in the ring then Cena left to give Shawn Michaels the opportunity to pose with Hogan. (*1/4)

OTHER NOTES

RVD was introduced as the second Raw draft pick on the show during Carlito's Cabana. RVD was still wearing a knee brace to support his surgically repaired knee. RVD wore an "ECW" t-shirt and garnered several loud "RVD" and "ECW" chants from the crowd. RVD talked about his passion for pleasing the fans before Carlito attacked RVD's knee and spit in his face... Todd Grisham interviewed Batista backstage about his victory over Triple H at Hell in a Cell. Batista said Triple H took something from him in the match, but said it didn't matter because he was still wearing the World Heavyweight Title belt... Kane stalked Lita in her locker room and threatened to make her life a living hell for his own enjoyment... Chris Masters made Tajiri tap out to the Master lock in the Master lock challenge... The first round of the Raw Diva

ORLANDO, FLA.—In the first edition of Impact following Raven's NWA Title victory at the Slammiversary PPV, Abyss was introduced as the first challenger for a shot at Raven's title. The closing moments of the show saw Raven give his first address as NWA Champion, only to be interrupted by a returning Sinister Jim Mitchell. Raven and Mitchell exchanged words until Abyss entered the ring from behind and silenced Raven with a Black Hole Slam after countering the Raven Effect DDT. Mitchell's alliance with Abyss was set up earlier in the show when he courted Abyss's services backstage to give Abyss a voice against the political mess of the TNA Championship Committee.

MATCH RESULTS

(1) Michael Shane (w/Traci) beat James Storm (w/Chris Harris) at 8:46 when Shane super kicked Storm. Traci and Harris were kicked out of the ringside area early in the match, but Traci returned with Alex Shelley to serve as the distraction necessary to aid Shane in scoring the victory. Storm did score a visual three count in the closing sequence, but the referee was distracted and unable to make the count.

(2) Shark Boy beat David Young at 3:39 with a quick roll up. Mike Tenay and Don West built up Shark Boy as an important act because of his pending lawsuit against Disney for their use of his name in a recent movie. Basic Impact match.

(3) Samoa Joe beat Delirious at 3:34 with a choke out following the Muscle Buster. TNA built upon Joe's Slammiversary performance by presenting Joe as a legitimate tough guy with a ferocious attitude. Joe's intensity and unique style separate him as someone TNA can bank on to stand out amongst the crowd of all-too-similar wrestlers.

(4) Christopher Daniels beat Prime Time Elix Skipper at 11:58 in a non-title X Division match when Prime Time tapped out to a neck vice. Daniels effectively worked on Prime Time's neck and upper back throughout the match to set up the sound psychological finish of a tap out to the neck vice. Prime Time tried to counter Daniels's offense based on his familiarity with his former tag partner, but wasn't able to overcome Daniels. Smart match.

OTHER NOTES

This was the first week where Impact was available on TNA's website. The release of the show was delayed by several hours and there were many problems downloading and accessing the huge video file, which took hours to download... Ron Killings and Konnan sat down with Mike Tenay to discuss the 3 Live Kru, but B.G. James was not present. The Outlaw interrupted followed by Monty Brown, who was dressed in James's ring gear. Outlaw and Brown delivered a beat down on Killings and Konnan then Brown mocked James's ring introduction... Jeff Jarrett complained to Larry Zbyszko about not receiving an NWA Title match. Zbyszko teased that "new talent" was in line for a title opportunity before Jarrett... Samoa Joe vs. Chris Sabin was announced for the next TNA PPV...

with a roll up, Matt Morgan beat Mark Jindrak with the F-5, MNM beat Hardcore Holly & Booker T to retain the Tag Team Titles when MNM hit the Snap Shot on Holly, Rey Mysterio beat Eddie Guerrero with a 619/Leg Drop combination, Orlando Jordan beat Heidenreich to retain the United States Title, John Cena beat JBL and Kurt Angle to retain the WWE Championship with the FU on JBL with Steve Austin as special enforcer. [Daniel Smith]

TNA NEWSWIRE

•**TNA experienced many server problems during the first week of TNA Impact broadcasts being shown exclusively on their website.** After a several hour delay on Friday, June 24, the new Impact broadcast was released on TNA's website, but was not easily accessible. TNA created a downloadable file for fans to view the broadcast at their own leisure instead of streaming the broadcast online—which would have resulted in buffering problems from the sheer volume of visitors—but TNA ran into problems because the file was too large to download in a reasonable period of time without interruptions. In a statement released on TNAwrestling.com, Bill Banks said: "The TNA staff will be reassessing the situation and consider new options in order to ensure these difficulties don't repeat next week. Our goal is to make Impact as easy and accessible for all to watch. We want to thank everyone for their patience." TNA is without a television clearance until a tentative deal with Spike TV is completed for TNA programming to begin airing in October. Until then, all domestic programming outside of PPV's will be contained exclusively on TNA's website. TNA will continue to honor its international television deals by delivering Impact programming to established markets outside of the U.S. Two TV industry sources believe it's more likely than not that TNA and Spike TV will announce a "done deal" within the next week or two. The deal would likely start as a cash-buy for TNA, but with the stip that WGN refused to add where TNA wouldn't have to pay if ratings were strong enough. All indications are there is no panic by Dixie Carter over the state of the company without TV at the moment, and even skeptics say they have been given every indication she and parent company Panda Energy are committed to TNA as a long-term project no matter how well or poorly things go over the next six or twelve months.

•**A.J. Styles's NWA Title reign lasted only one month because he was never looked at as a long term champion in the first place by those in power—even those who love him.** Styles won the title because he happened to be Jeff Jarrett's challenger during a month when Dixie Carter took a stand and wanted to assert her authority and have him drop the title. Styles may be moved back to the X Division and feud with Samoa Joe. Monty Brown was considered for the NWA Title win instead of Raven, but the feeling is management is so high on Brown, they didn't want his first big title win to come too early before he was ready. He is seen as their potential franchise player in a year, though. He has a rep for having a great attitude with just enough skepticism to keep everyone around him honest.

TNA NOTEBOOK

Based on the Impact tapings from June 21, the

line up for the July 17 "No Surrender" PPV includes these matches: NWA Title Match—Raven vs. Abyss in a dog collar match, X Division Title Match—Christopher Daniels vs. Petey Williams, NWA Tag Title Match—The Naturals vs. Team Canada, Samoa Joe vs. Chris Sabin, A.J. Styles vs. Sean Waltman with Jerry Lynn as referee, Monty Brown & The Outlaw vs. Konnan & Ron Killings... There were several minor injuries to report from the June 21 Impact tapings. Michael Shane and James Storm hyper-extended their knees during the opening match on the June 24 edition of Impact. Alex Shelley and Petey Williams suffered broken noses and The Outlaw received a gash on his head... Expect a Waltman vs. Lynn feud later this year since both have expressed interest in reviving their feud. The two had a legendary series of matches in Minnesota in the early-'90s that put them on the map, and that carried it over to the Global Wrestling Federation on ESPN... The scouting report on Samoa Joe within TNA is that he is tremendously skilled if not a bit too stiff, but has to work on his appearance (not weight, just overall look) and how he carries himself with facial expressions (although that opinion may pass the more TNA people see him). The feeling is he will benefit from a new environment and a new mix of opponents when it comes to his path to becoming an all-around, versatile ring general. Hopes are high for him and the political forces with power right now are behind him, so he could end up being a major player in TNA in coming months, rather than a C.M. Punk situation who had great potential but didn't have the right friends in TNA in power to take advantage of it... In asking around, the "shoot heel of the month" in various wrestling locker rooms isn't Jeff Jarrett for bailing out of the PPV match, but JBL for beating up Blue Meanie. Although Jarrett lost a lot of wrestlers' respect for refusing to participate in the PPV main event because he wasn't going to win, the feeling was the PPV was ultimately better without him and he didn't physically hurt anyone, so JBL edged him out. Jarrett was scheduled to regain the NWA Title originally, and it was the finish being changed that upset him most of all. "Had he not been told he was regaining the belt originally, he was probably wouldn't have had the temper tantrum about the finish," says one TNA source...

TNA TV TAPING RESULTS

•June 21 in Orlando, Fla. at Universal Studios, TNA taped four weeks of Impact for broadcast on their website, TNAwrestling.com.

Taped for June 24: Michael Shane beat James Storm. Shark Boy beat David Young. Samoa Joe beat Delirious. Christopher Daniels beat Prime Time Elix Skipper. Raven gave his first public address as NWA Champion. (See Impact Big Story for detailed match report.)

Taped for July 1: Sean Waltman beat Sonjay Dutt with the X factor. Waltman played the heel in the match. Lance Hoyt beat Eric Young (w/Petey Williams) with a big boot. Team Canada beat down Hoyt after the match until The Naturals made the save. Abyss (w/James Mitchell) beat Sonny Siaki (w/Apolo) with the Black Hole Slam. Raven attacked Abyss after the match and challenged him to a dog collar match at the "No Surrender" PPV for the NWA Title. America's Most Wanted beat Simon Diamond & Trytan when Storm pinned Diamond following a super kick. A.J. Styles beat Alex Shelley with the Styles Clash. Waltman came to the

ring after the match and got into a shouting match with Styles.

Taped for July 8: Chris Sabin beat Eric Young with the Cradle Shock. Samoa Joe came to the ring after the match and choked Sabin. Zack Gowen and Mikey Batts wrestled to a No Contest when Jeff Jarrett interrupted and laid out Gowen with a guitar shot. Jarrett vowed to take Abyss's title opportunity against Raven. Samoa Joe beat Prime Time Elix Skipper and Shark Boy when Joe made Shark Boy tap out to a choke hold. Petey Williams beat Amazing Red when Petey made Red tap out to the Sharpshooter following the Canadian Destroyer. Petey taunted Christopher Daniels, who sat in on commentary during the match. Abyss beat Cassidy Riley with the Black Hole Slam. Raven came to the ring after the match and Abyss choked him with a chain. The Naturals & Lance Hoyt beat Team Canada when Hoyt pinned Bobby Roode following a big boot. Team Canada beat down the babyfaces after the match.

Taped for July 15: Simon Diamond & Trytan beat Sonny Siaki & Apolo when Trytan hit the T-3 (F-5) on Apolo. Monty Brown and The Outlaw interrupted a match involving Konnan and Ron Killings leading to a pullapart brawl. No sign of B.G. James. Petey Williams & Eric Young beat Christopher Daniels & Samoa Joe when Petey pinned Daniels following the Canadian Destroyer. Chris Sabin and Samoa Joe fought to the back when Sabin interrupted during the match. Shocker beat Sonjay Dutt with a pinning combination. A1 & Bobby Roode beat Sean Waltman & A.J. Styles when Roode pinned Waltman following a running clothesline. Styles and Waltman fought after the match and had to be separated by security and Jerry Lynn.

ROH NEWSWIRE

•ROH Notebook: New ROH World Champion C.M. Punk has agreed to defend the title at ROH's July 8 debut in Long Island. Punk's opponent will be named on the night of the show... Several matches have been signed for ROH's return to the New Yorker Hotel in Manhattan on July 9. Homicide will face Jay Lethal, Colt Cabana will face Nigel McGuinness in a European Rounds match, and Samoa Joe will defend his Pure Title against Austin Aries... Jack Evans will take the next couple of months off from Ring Of Honor to let some lingering injuries properly heal... A huge six man war has been signed for July 23 at "The Homecoming" when ROH returns to Philadelphia, which will feature The Rottweilers of Homicide & Low Ki & Ricky Reyes (w/Julius Smokes) vs. ROH Pure Champion Samoa Joe & Jay Lethal & James Gibson... The next Ultimate Endurance has been signed for the July 16 event in Woodbridge, CT. It will feature four teams. The first two teams have been signed. They are The Carnage Crew of Loc & Devito and The Ring Crew Express of Dunn & Marcos...

OVW NEWSWIRE

LIVE EVENT RESULTS

June 17 in Louisville, Ky. at the Six Flags Amusement Park (part of the Summer Sizzlin' Tour): The Thrillseekers (Johnny Jeter & Matt Cappotelli) beat Paul Birchall & Ken Anderson when Jeter pinned Birchall, Deuce Shade and Ken Doane wrestled to a no contest in a TV Title match when the ten-minute time limit expired and Doane refused to extend the match an

extra five minutes, Seth Skyfire & Alexis Laree beat Mike Mondo & Ms. Blue when Laree pinned Ms. Blue following a top rope cross body block, Danny Inferno beat Blaster Lashley via DQ when Kenny Bolin hit Inferno across the back with his briefcase, Danny Inferno received his two minutes alone with Aaron Stevens for defeating Lashley, but was so beaten down by his match with Lashley that he was unable to take advantage, Brent Albright beat Lance Cade to retain the OVW Title when Cade tapped out to the Crowbar, Jerry "the King" Lawler & Chris Cage beat Tank & Chad Toland (w/Jillian Hall & Melissa Coates) when Lawler pinned Tank following a piledriver...

ETC. NEWSWIRE

•Raven defeated Samoa Joe in the main event of the Warrior One show in Oshawa, Ontario, Canada with Mick Foley serving as special referee. The show, produced in connection with the Ultimate Warrior, featured a mix of local Indy talent and recognizable names from North America to give local fans a wide range of matches, styles, and personalities. Outside of Raven vs. Samoa Joe, the other big match was Bryan Danielson returning from his tour of Europe to take on Kid Kash and local Indy wrestler, Extremo, in a triple threat match. The match ended in disqualification. Team Canada, led by Coach Scott D'Amore, defeated Sinn and Elvis Osbourne in popular match with the Canadian audience. Other notable names on the card included: Nigel McGuinness, Jimmy Jacobs, Gail Kim, and Jimmy Hart (as a manager). The show was taped to air on the Pro Wrestling Superstars PPV series to debut at a future date. [Slam! Wrestling]

ETC. NOTEBOOK

On June 24 and 25, Full Impact Pro ran two shows in Florida, which featured CM Punk in his final appearances for FIP. On the June 24 show, Punk beat Azrieal then teamed up with Jimmy Rave, Samoa Joe, and Fast Eddie Vegas where they were defeated by Colt Cabana, Spanky Kendrick, Sal Rinauro, and Azrieal. On the June 25 show, Punk lost to Colt Cabana in the main event... Various TNA superstars participated in the June 25 NWA Cyberspace show in Wayne, New Jersey, where Jeff Jarrett was victorious over Michael Shane to retain the NWA Cyberspace Title. Sonjay Dutt, Shark Boy, Prime Time Elix Skipper, Rodney Mack, and Abyss were also on the card... Pro Wrestling Guerrilla is running a double shot of shows on June 9 and 10 to celebrate their two-year anniversary. Scheduled for June 9 is A.J. Styles defending his PWG Title against a mystery opponent, who is being advertised as "a man who has faced and sometimes beaten champions from around the world." Also scheduled for June 9 is Christopher Daniels defending his X Division Title against Chris Sabin and Petey Williams vs. Ricky Reyes. On June 10, all PWG Titles will be on the line when A.J. Styles defends his PWG Title - if he retains on June 9 - against Christopher Daniels and James Gibson in a three-way match. Chris Bosh and Scott Lost will put the PWG Tag Titles on the line against Chris Sabin and Petey Williams, Super Dragon will face Kevin Steen, and Ricky Reyes is scheduled to face a different mystery opponent... [Special thanks to Chris Vetter, Sean Radican, James Caldwell]

THE BIG STORY

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY.—After a five-week hiatus from Ohio Valley Wrestling, Jim Cornette made his return to OVW TV to deliver a poignant speech at the top show. Cornette's forced vacation from OVW for disciplinary reasons resulting from his temper getting the best of him in a backstage dispute was turned into a storyline on camera with Cornette indicating he was briefly fired by WWE because rumors were swirling that he was not serving his role as on-camera "matchmaker" with the best of intentions. Cornette called out Kenny Bolin of Bolin Services to find the underlying cause of where the rumors were coming from.

A very hesitant Kenny Bolin came to the ring with his assistant, Ms. Blue, and indicated he only wanted to be Cornette's assistant. Cornette wasn't buying it so he challenged Bolin to a match at the July 1 Six Flags show where each man will assemble a team of superstars with the manager of the losing team having to kiss the foot of the winning manager. Bolin agreed and began to holler at Cornette, which led to Cornette delivering a stiff right hand to Bolin's face followed by a kiss to Ms. Blue.

MATCH RESULTS

(1) Chris Cage beat Chad Toland (w/Tank Toland) with a roll up when Chad collided with Tank on the ring apron. The match was set up so Chris Cage would receive an opportunity to face Tank Toland if he could beat Chad Toland. The Tolands' valets, Melissa Coates and Jillian Hall, were banned from ringside.

(2) Tank Toland beat Chris Cage when Ken Anderson interfered on Tank's behalf. The finish came when Ken ran to the ringside area and shoved Cage into the ring giving Tank an opportunity to deliver a stiff clothesline to the unsuspecting Cage. Following the match, Chad Toland returned to the ring to assist in a three-on-one beat down on Cage. Jim Cornette intervened and threatened a suspension of Ken Anderson for his interference. Cage countered by saying he would rather handle his business with Anderson in the ring. Cornette decided to make a match of Anderson and the Tolands vs. Cage and the Dudley Boys for the July 1 show at Six Flags.

(3) Da Beast & Osama beat the Thrillseekers (Johnny Jeter & Matt Cappotelli) when Da Beast pinned Cappotelli. The finish came when Mo Green made his dramatic return to OVW to give Da Beast a chain to use against Cappotelli while the referee was down. Mo revived the referee in time to count the subsequent pin attempt by Da Beast. After the match, Mo celebrated with his new tag team, which replaces the Heartbreakers.

OTHER NOTES

Jim Cornette asked Aaron "The Idol" Stevens to the ring for an interview regarding his recent attacks on Danny Inferno. Once Stevens and Beth Phoenix entered the ring, Cornette said he was tired of watching Stevens attack Inferno only to run away when Inferno had a chance to retaliate. Cornette made a match for the July 1 show with Stevens vs. Inferno in a No DQ match. On top of that, Cornette added that firefighters would be ringside to ensure that Stevens doesn't run off, as he's prone to do. To take care of Beth Phoenix, Cornette brought out someone who would ensure her interference would not be present during the match—Synn. Synn chased Phoenix to the backstage area as Stevens tried to save his valet...

TORCH BACKTRACK

The following are excerpts of Pro Wrestling Torch #338, cover-dated June 10, 1995.

•Ten years ago, the Torch Cover Story headline read: “Chris Benoit makes his debut in the WWF.” Although he didn’t sign with the WWF at the time, his tryout was newsworthy due to his well-earned stellar reputation on the international scene. Said the Cover Story:

The wrestler rated number three in the world in the Pro Wrestling Torch 1994 Yearbook “Worldwide Top 100 Ratings” has shocked the wrestling industry by agreeing to work for the WWF. Rumors began Friday, three days before his first WWF match, that he was planning on attending the WWF TV tapings Monday in Struthers, Ohio.

Benoit, 28, has spent the past five years wrestling for New Japan under a mask as The Pegasus Kid. He made brief appearances in WCW where his in-ring talent wasn’t seen as enough to overcome his lack of height, charisma, and interview skills. He began wrestling for ECW several months back and was being groomed to be ECW’s top singles wrestler.

In a dark match that actually took place during the live Monday Night Raw broadcast while a taped match was airing on USA Network, Chris Benoit lost to Bob “Spark Plug” Holly (an initial loss is usual policy for all new wrestlers).

It should be said that as of deadline there is no confirmation that Benoit’s match was anything but a “tryout” match of sorts. Although Benoit did not contact ECW officials to tell them of his WWF plans, he did tell friends that he was going to go to the WWF TV tapings and see if he liked the atmosphere and the organization. The WWF is considered the most well-run and initially the most impressive organization to new wrestlers. If seeing and liking the atmosphere is all it was going to take for Benoit to agree to wrestle for the WWF, he’s probably ready to sign a contract. It is also possible an agreement was reached with the WWF on Monday afternoon.

Vince McMahon watched Benoit’s dark match from ringside and appeared absolutely delighted with what he saw, smiling broadly throughout the match (even though the finishing sequence appeared to be messed up by Holly). Other WWF personnel watched from the wings of the arena, including Pat Patterson, Dok Hendrix, Rene Goulet, and Tony Garea. WWF wrestlers gathered in the runway to watch the match, also.

Benoit essentially had a lifetime guarantee of being a top worker with New Japan, but apparently his desire to be a star in the United States and also follow in Dynamite Kid’s footsteps caused him to agree to make this move. Benoit played telephone tag with ECW during the week, although because he didn’t say in his messages he was jumping to the WWF, ECW officials were confident the rumors were wrong. Although Benoit is not booked for any ECW dates—thus this is not a repeat of the Sabu situation—his apparent departure has come without forewarning. Paul Heyman had spent extensive sessions tutoring Benoit on his interviews, which ECW officials thought he had great appreciation for.

Full story available at PWTorch.com/members.

TNA PPV REAX

The following are reader comments regarding WWE’s Vengeance PPV...

Marcell Womack of N.J. (8.0): Vengeance was pretty fulfilling. Carlito’s successful title defense was smart. Although 0–2, Benjamin has not cleanly lost to Carlito, and Carlito gets a win so last Monday doesn’t look like a fluke. Well booked. Am I the only one who was looking for Matt Hardy to get involved in the Kane–Edge match? Angle–Michaels II was spectacular, but I sure wish someone would give Kurt a tissue and some Comdex—he should not be snottin’ all over the ring during every PPV. Hey Kurt, people have to lie in that, you know! I didn’t expect Cena to win the Triple Threat match, but it was a good match. I certainly didn’t expect to see Godfather. The main event had some really great spots. Everyone I was watching with flipped when Triple H hit Batista with the barbed wire chair and you could see his back was bleeding. Thumbs up for the abuse they took in the ring. I just have this gut feeling that we’ve not seen the last of Triple H as Raw’s Champion. At least tonight he didn’t get the W.

Red from Mesa, Ariz. (7.0): Vengeance had a WrestleMania lineup, but while it didn’t deliver as well, it was still a very entertaining night of wrestling. Benjamin and Carlito had a good first match to start of the PPV. Hopefully, Carlito will stay away from the Cabana and we can see him wrestle more. Edge and Kane could have had a better match, seeing as how much bad blood was poured into it. Angle and Michaels delivered another perfect match. It’s another one of those matches where you can’t decide who you want to win. I hope we still see more of Lillian Garcia in more than a ring announcer role. She’s very talented and can be a great asset to WWE. If Angle–Michaels didn’t happen tonight, the three way match would have been the best match of the night. John Cena showed off his best wrestling since his OVW days and his first couple of months with WWE. I hope we see more of it. The Hell in the Cell was, well, a Hell in a Cell. You can’t really make it bigger than when Taker and Mankind had their match, but it was still good to see Triple H lose again.

Shawn Rossi of San Diego, Calif. (7.5): This non-major WWE PPV was so loaded it was a sure thing to do well. Batista–Triple H was the best match, as the gimmick cage added much, drawing our attention away from noticing their normal boring methodical clash of styles. Great to see Trips lose again, and now we can see Batista in new battles ahead... although it’s a good bet Trips will still keep himself in the title picture, this time with Cena. Michaels–Angle was once again a classic, and props to both for their athleticism and work ethic. The Triple Threat match was good, and helped advance Cena in the ring as WWE Champion. Kane–Edge had decent action, and I am still a little surprised at the acknowledgement of Matt Hardy chants by the announcers if he is not coming back soon. Maybe it’s reverse psychology to stop them? I could have done without the Lillian–Viscra sketch on a PPV and on Raw instead— and definitely without Grisham’s story. However, Carlito–Shelton worked well. All in all, a good PPV, and in Vegas Blackjack terms, it held at 17.

TORCH POLL BRIEFING

Vengeance did well in the Torch’s online poll, with 92 percent giving it a 5.0 or higher, and 81 percent giving it a 7.0 or higher. Best match votes went heavily toward Shawn Michaels vs. Kurt Angle, which got 64 percent, with Batista vs. Hunter coming in second place with 20 percent and John Cena vs. Christian vs. Chris Jericho in third place with 11 percent... Among those who watched both ECW One Night Stand and Vengeance, 71 percent were more entertained by ECW than Vengeance, with 15 percent choosing Vengeance, and 14 percent saying it was too close to call... Three-out-of-four believe that ECW One Night Stand will actually draw a bigger buyrate than WWE Vengeance. Only 15 percent felt Vengeance would outdraw ECW, while 10 percent said it would be really close.

Of those polled, 30 percent either choose not to or don’t have the ability to order PPVs. Of the remaining 70 percent, 13 percent said they would have ordered Vengeance, but didn’t because they spent their budget on ECW already. That’s relatively good news for WWE that the vast majority of this sample of customers were at least willing to consider ordering both PPVs. (Only 2 percent said buying TNA’s PPV factored into their decision on Vengeance, which is bad news for TNA)... Bad news for WWE is that of the 70 percent who sometimes order WWE PPVs, 22 percent didn’t feel the Vengeance line-up was strong enough to earn their business. Considering WWE loaded the show with both world champs defending their belts and Angle vs. Michaels II, it an effort was made to load the line-up. Only six percent said they were waiting to read reviews to decide whether to order a replay... When asked how they wanted to see the title matches turn out, 87 percent wanted Batista to retain the World Title against Hunter. Only 31 percent wanted to see John Cena retain his title, as 42 percent wanted to see Christian win and 27 percent wanted to see Jericho win.

Last week we asked about the Lita-Kane wedding, specifically the playing of the Matt Hardy video. The top choice with 43 percent was “The whole thing feels way too personal and vindictive and I wish they’d go in a different direction.” 29 percent voted for, “It makes me think Matt Hardy is going to be returning very soon.” 17 percent thought it was a funn tease and 12 percent thought it was bad business to promote a wrestler not under contract.

Each week at PWTorch.com, we run a poll on who earned “MVP of Raw” honors. This week was a loaded show, and as of late Monday night, Angle and Ric Flair were tied with 23 percent of the votes, with Hulk Hogan in third place with 16 percent, followed by Rob Van Dam at 12 percent and John Cena at 7 percent. Shawn Michaels received only two percent of votes, less than Christian and Chris Jericho, who each received four percent.

Most people were happy to see Carlito jump to Raw (47 percent), while 22 percent were against it, and 31 percent didn’t care all that much since he’s not a big enough of a star to make a difference. Carlito, though, was chosen as the MVP of the June 20 Raw, edging out Cena. Angle was the runaway winner of June 13 MVP voting with 45 percent.



The Matt Hardy decision that could change the industry

Let's get one thing out of the way right up front. It's possible Matt Hardy is overrated, and once he's given a main event slot, he'll be a disappointment. He hasn't proven himself in a major singles program yet. Maybe he's just not that good.

With that said, though, let's set up reality. Hardy is a hot commodity. The degree of his popularity is only anecdotal, based on chants at WWE arenas not just in the U.S., but in Europe, too. He signed autographs at an indy show in Chicago this past weekend for three hours. He began signing at intermission, and more than 1,000 autographs later, he was still signing after the main event ended.

Hardy is in a unique situation. Unique in the literal sense. What wrestler has ever had his long-time girlfriend cheat on him while he was at home recovering from surgery, and to be betrayed by one his best friends whose wedding he had attended a few months earlier? Add to it, Hardy was fired, and the grassroots campaign that he has initiated and fueled has led to his name not being forgotten—as his critics and enemies within WWE would have predicted—but raised in profile to the point that WWE is mentioning him regularly on TV.

An entire WWE storyline has been based around Hardy's personal life, with Kane playing a character loosely based on Hardy. The storyline, though, isn't working particularly well because it's difficult for fans to take Kane seriously in a role when most see Hardy as the real "babyface who got betrayed and screwed over."

Lita was turned heel because of fan outrage at what she did to Hardy. Edge's path to being a main event singles wrestler has been derailed as he has become seen as more Lita's inamorato than a serious title contender. Kane has been relegated to crying one week and threatening to kill his ex-wife another. You don't know whether to fear, scorn, or pity him, but you can hardly admire him.

WWE has a mess on their hands. They have a storyline based on real life, loosely (since Amy Dumas and Adam Copeland aren't together and never really were in a full-fledged relationship sense of the word). Glen Jacobs was never with Amy in real life and fans know it. Matt Hardy, the only actual potentially sympathetic character, is not under contract. Fans are anticipating his return.

Meanwhile, WWE management looks foolish for underestimating Matt Hardy's popularity and potential. It's not that Hardy's a proven top tier player, but he had shown enough in recent years that he deserved a chance to become one—and then either succeed or fail. But a variety of factors—his brother's shadow, injuries, spite from key members of management, and a mix of apathy and ignorance toward his character and ring style has kept Vince McMahon from giving Hardy the push he deserves.

Now, McMahon and WWE management in general are in a position to have to eat a little crow. Lines of communication have opened up between Hardy and WWE to the point that he's hesitant to sign his TNA contract. He wants to hear what WWE has to offer. He will be making a decision within the next two weeks.

That decision, I believe, could change the course of the wrestling industry.

Truth be told, if Hardy rejoins WWE, it won't be but a blip on the map of the Top 50 Stores of 2005. He'll feud with Edge in some form or fashion, and it will either draw or not draw based on how well or poorly the storyline is designed and executed, and in real life he'll either get back together with Lita, end up platonic friends, or keep his distance. In any case, it's not really that big of a deal.

The disappointing reality of the situation is that Hardy is a bigger deal outside of WWE as a renegade who was wronged than he is back with WWE as a wrestler who was wronged and a boyfriend who was betrayed, but leaped back as soon as WWE offered him a return ticket to the roster. Hardy would go from sympathetic folk hero to a sellout who was willing to actually turn a real-life heartbreak and betrayal into a mere wrestling storyline. It would be akin to Bret Hart returning to WWE a year after the Survivor Series Swerve to cash in and have a singles match with Vince McMahon, Shawn Michaels, or Earl Hebner. Those who sympathized with him would feel used, disappointed, exploited, and let down.

When Edge and Hardy wrestled, fans would see a WWE contracted wrestler facing another WWE contracted wrestler in a worked fight that is meant to "fool" them into thinking it's real. There would be teases and rumors of real punches or snug headlocks, but neither would risk their jobs or well-being by intentionally trying to hurt the other. It would be awkward. The goal of wrestling is to put two talented wrestlers who have respect for each other into a situation where as artists they make fans believe they don't like each other and settle their differences in the ring—like Batista and Triple H did on Sunday. When two wrestlers actually hate each other, the chances of them having a great match go down sharply.

And what happens when the "feud" ends? Matt could end up back with Lita in either a real-life reflection of a happy ending or an awkward pairing of two wrestling characters who aren't really together in real life. Or Lita could remain with Edge in a pairing that loses its original reason to exist when the Hardy feud is over. And would Hardy then be moved into main events as a babyface against JBL or Triple H or Kurt Angle? Or once the turbulent waves provoked by Hardy settle, it is more likely he would be stuck in the middle of the card feuding with mid-card heels—either because ultimately that's where he belongs or because those in management who don't like him would make sure they were proven "right" after all?

Meanwhile, TNA would be without a hot commodity in Hardy and have to make a go of it on Spike TV (assuming the deal is consummated in the next week or so) with their existing roster. WWE is not going to let any major names go once TNA gets on a strong network with a decent timeslot. TNA will have to create stars. What are the odds of the Jarretts letting that happen?

On the other hand, if Hardy decides to sign with TNA—and a lucrative offer is sitting on his table—it could change the course of the industry. I don't say those words lightly, and I don't say them as if it's

inevitable. But his decision could have such impact.

Hardy is the only chance TNA has to sign someone with legitimate WWE name value who has a major upside (i.e. he hasn't been pushed to the top and failed, such as "Outlaw" Billy Gunn; he isn't well past his prime like Kevin Nash). He is perceived by fans as a wrestler who wasn't given a fair shake. Truth is, he wasn't. He has charisma. He's healthy.

So if he signed with TNA, he could be the first major name who had a WWE offer on the table who chose to sign with TNA instead. He would be a wrestler with the best chance to make a big difference to TNA right off the bat. The fans who have been chanting his name at arenas would likely seek him out on TNA's TV shows or PPVs. They would be interested to see what he say, and whether he's as good as the legend he has created.

Hardy earned good money for years in WWE. He admits he doesn't necessarily need to work another day in his life to get by. But more money would be nice, providing an added layer of security and freedom. But TNA offers him something right now that WWE can't—instant freedom and a different kind of opportunity.

In WWE, Hardy knows what he gets. He gets a roughly \$200,000 downside guarantee with a chance to earn \$300,000–\$600,000 on average the next three years. He will work every weekend and half of the weekdays either wrestling or traveling or appearing at various functions. In six months, he may or not feel creatively, artistically fulfilled. Hardy, a type-A, self-motivated, leader-by-nature, is not built for WWE's structure. He is built for adventure, entrepreneurship, and self-fulfillment. In WWE he likely gains more financial security and fame than if he bypasses a return offer, but he already has sufficient security and fame as is.

If he signs with TNA, he can spend the next year or two exploring creative options that won't likely be available to him in a more structured WWE environment. In TNA, he will be given a six-figure guarantee. In TNA, he will only have to work three or four times a month, giving him the option to do what he wants where and when he wants otherwise, be it selling his reality TV concept, hosting seminars, working indy dates, writing a book on his terms, or perhaps promoting indy events again (and working on new ways to market the shows, such as internet streaming).

And if things in TNA work out, and TNA takes off, he would be seen historically as a major factor in fostering that much-desired "second place to earn a good living" for wrestlers. Without him, TNA may not have the juice to reach that level.

Even if TNA fades away after a year or two, having had a chance to present himself in his vision, not Stephanie McMahon's, he would have a more developed persona for WWE to run with. If Hardy returns to WWE, he'll be haunted forever by "what ifs" no matter how well things go. If he signs with TNA, even if things don't work out, he'll know at least he tried to map his own course. And that feud with Edge is his "Money in the Bank." It might mean more after the Kane mess is a distant memory.

“Hogan looked at putting Rock over as a cleansing.”

In the following twelfth installment of a six-hour “Torch Talk” conducted on March 24, Kevin Nash defends how Hulk Hogan wielded his power over the years, then talks about the prospects of Eric Bischoff buying WCW, Bret Hart’s move to WCW, Vince McMahon’s work ethic, and the roles of Shane and Stephanie now and into the future. Next week, he talks about how he imagines WWE will work after Vince McMahon.

Wade Keller: Okay, so Hulk Hogan does what he does out of self-preservation, but what if it hurts the wrestling industry in the process? When you talk about his approach, these two words come to mind: Selfishness and gluttony. There is a point where you have to ask how many millions of dollars and how much fame do you need where you just want more even if everybody can see it’s not for the good of the industry that made you so rich and famous. Why is Hogan’s desire for more at the expense of the good of the industry’s future not gluttony and selfishness?

Kevin Nash: I don’t think he can see it.

Keller: So you’re saying he doesn’t intentionally hurt the industry?

Nash: Absolutely not. Absolutely not. He doesn’t do anything with malice. If he does something that is detrimental to the business... he didn’t have a master plan to go out and steal two f—in’ WrestleManias. He had no plan to hurt the business. It’s just that when he has in his contract, when Henry Holmes puts down creative control, then Terry (Bollea, a/k/a Hulk Hogan) has creative control. Then it becomes, “Brother, if it doesn’t work for me, then f—in’ brother it didn’t work for me.” That’s not Terry’s fault. That’s the mother f—ers who booked the contract with him. That’s what I’ve always said. Hey, it ain’t my fault I can’t book TV. The guys who put creative control in his contract caused it.

Keller: But you had a falling out with Hogan. What was that about? Wasn’t it frustration with him abusing the power he had?

Nash: Absolutely. But at the same time, I’ve got to look at it like a man and say to myself, “Is my frustration the fact that I can’t control Hogan or is my frustration in the fact that I don’t have the control that Hogan has? You know what I mean? What’s the actual frustration as a man? I’m a realist. My realization is I’m f—in’ envious of the fact that he has those mother f—ers over a barrel. That’s my envy. My envy isn’t the fact that I can’t control him. My envy is the fact that he has a better deal than I’ve got.

Keller: But wouldn’t you want to look at him and be not just envious, but also admire that when he had the power, he didn’t abuse it, that he took a step back and said, “Wait a second, I have all of this power. Let me make sure, because I’m already rich beyond my wildest

dreams, that if there’s two roads to take and they each benefit me greatly, I take the road that benefits the industry and not the easiest road to take”? I would argue he didn’t do that often enough.

Nash: Yeah, but at the same time, he looks at putting Rock over at that WrestleMania as a cleansing. To me, I don’t think Terry ever had a problem passing the torch. He would have passed the torch to Sid, I think, at that one point, but Sid said, “No, what you need is a big vicious heel.” Sid didn’t want Hogan’s boots. That’s the story I’ve heard. Of course, that’s locker room f—in’ legend. At the same time, Hulk will put over who Hulk feels is worthy of being put over. Dwayne was a guy that he looked at and felt it wouldn’t hurt him because he’s the sh—. If I look at the business and I look at before I got into the business, I don’t think the business would be in as good a shape if there wasn’t a Terry Bollea. If there wasn’t Terry, I wouldn’t be sitting where I am right now.

Keller: I just say at what point does that...

Nash: There are so many guys, and I’ve known a couple of guys who have had incredible success and incredible monetary success and those guys tend to be more selfish than anybody else in the business. It takes so much to get that f—in’ spot and that f—in’ cut of merchandise and that kind of stroke. It takes so much to go up that ladder that when it comes time and somebody says, “You need to give something back,” you can’t help but think, “F—you!” In a business where you’re not hitting a curve ball and not hitting a 30 foot jump shot, when everything’s a work and you’ve got that power, as much as I’d like to say, “You did this and you did that,” I’ve been in that situation before... The thing is, I don’t begrudge anybody their deal. If your deal is you can tell everybody you can f— off and you don’t ever have to come to work and you make the most money, you’re a better businessman than I am. I mean, that’s kind of the way Scott (Hall) and I looked at things. We were “don’t hate the players” long before anybody was hatin’ players. We had a great contract. We had favored nations (guaranteed highest paid contract in WCW) and they wanted to bring Bret in. And Bret wanted 2.5 million and that was more than us. Eric (Bischoff) came to us and said, “You guys have a favored nation in your clause, but we can’t pay you guys that same money. Will you guys take a bump up, but less?” We went, “Sure.” We could have f—in’ went, “No, f—that, we got favored nation. F— Bret Hart.” I looked at it that he was a buddy of mine and f—, how much was he going to make? Two-point-five? I know he hasn’t made anything near that the last 20 years dragging his boots from Calgary. Let a brother make his money. I’m the first to say go ahead, you know?

Keller: Do you think Bret Hart would have brought the WWF Title belt onto Nitro if he had the opportunity before dropping the belt, which is something Vince McMahon apparently feared happening?

Nash: No. No way. You know what, man, I spent a lot of time with Bret. It was one of those deals where if Bret didn’t feel any love anymore for that company, Bret would just have walked away with his shoulders down, with that Oggy Doggy look that said if you don’t want me, I’ll go somewhere else.” I don’t think Bret is in any way malicious.

Keller: Do you think Vince thought Bischoff could have talked Bret into it and Bret would have gone along with it for two and a half million?

Nash: Nah, he wouldn’t have done it. Bret might have been angry, but Bret had the relationship with Vince and with WWF way better than I did, and I would never have done anything to hurt the franchise.

Keller: Why do you think that was one of the main reasons used to justify the Survivor Series Swerve rather than Vince agreeing to just have Bret drop the title under different circumstances later on?

Nash: I think they got scared. I think after Bret said, “No, I’m not going to drop it here, I don’t want to drop it in Canada,” they f—ed him.

Keller: Did Bret Hart take his hero status too seriously?

Nash: The thing about Bret, man, was when the business was the drizzlin’ sh—s, and Bret had the belt, we’d draw in Canada. He was a god up there. No doubt about it. When you look at things, people say, “He’s a mark.” No, Bret was super-over, he was a great champion. If everybody in this business—it’s the egos that make things so crazy, you know? Bret had a giant ego, but Bret was great. I mean, he had a reason to have an ego. He brought it to the table. He could talk. He could work. He could do it all.

Keller: Were you hoping Eric Bischoff would end up buying WCW?

Nash: F— yeah. They were going to do the show out of Las Vegas. They were going to put the WCW logo on top of the theater. They were going to let New York have New York and we were going to take Vegas. We were going to become the party show. When I heard all that, I thought, Oh man, because Eric has that vision. He has that vision because he’s got kids. When he laid it out to me, of course, the ATM machine was going to be open for a couple more years.

Keller: When it sounded like the WWF might actually buy WCW, what was your thinking at that point? Positive? Negative? Or not sure of what to make of it?

Nash: When I heard they were going to buy it—in retrospect, now I hear what the deal was. It was basically that they gave it to him. If you want to see what kind of business people that company was at that time, they basically had a better deal with another company and sold a piece of their company away. You know, it’s like anything else,

that dot-com thing went crazy and Time-Warner is a great company. I have nothing bad to say about it. They've got their people back. They took the dot-com guys and told them to go home, let us run our company, and they've become profitable again.

Keller: Time-Warner gave away WCW because they wanted to get \$50 million of losses off of their books. In a sense, they got \$50 million for it because they took that off their books. They also basically said they didn't want it anymore, so take it and the contracts with it. Vince didn't want a handful of the bigger contracts.

Nash: Yeah, and it was a beautiful eleven months for me because I think I was at \$2.6 million that year or something crazy like that. I sat home for eleven months and they were telling me I could take fifty cents on the dollar. I was, like, what? Are you not following the stock market. I just lost high six figures in the dot-com collapse. You think I'm giving money back? (laughs) Some of the wrestling community was hot. F— you, this is a business. I'm 40 years old. You never give money back.

Keller: That answers my next question. How badly did you want to get back into the mix?

Nash: You never give money back at that age. Especially not at 40. Look at what happened when I came back. I blew out a bicep and I blew out a quad.

Keller: Do you feel badly about that?

Nash: I feel like I f—ed them. I feel like I got a huge contract. I was the highest paid guy they probably have had over those two years because I worked about three months for what I got paid. People say, "He got hurt all the time." It's just like, hey, how about me? Vince knows after sitting there with two blown quads trying to get them back. He knows what I went through to get to that Hell in a Cell.

Keller: Describe what it was like for you going through the same recovery that Vince McMahon is going through?

Nash: I talked to him on Valentine's Day. I talked to Vince. I called him because I knew where he was in his rehab. I mean, as a man, especially for someone as strong as he is, it's like being castrated. You're in a wheelchair. You're an invalid.

Keller: And you had single, not double.

Nash: Yeah, and I was 43, not 58 or 60, whatever he is. I called him up and I told him, "If there's anyone who can come through two of them, it's you, you f—in' ornery prick." If there's anyone on this planet who can, it's him. He will. He's already on crutches.

Keller: Were you worried he would be set back by going too quickly through rehab?

Nash: I was supposed to be in a wheelchair and I went to Summerslam. It was at Nassau Coliseum and I made sure I walked into that building on my own with no crutches. I Vic'd (Vicodin) up to do it, but I did it. There was no way I was going to let anyone see me on crutches. I was not going to. That's just business. It's the no-sell. I'll walk in and this thing will blow up all night, and then I'll go home and get it drained. But I will not come in on crutches and look weak.

Keller: Do you think Vince takes the "don't show weakness" mantra too far, or do you think it's one of the traits that has made him successful?

Nash: I tell you what, when I was with him, and this was back in the day when he had your folder. If you were the champion, he was in charge and had your folder in his hands. It was "This is Your Life." You'd spend a lot of time with him. You'd do media all day long and then go to bed at two in the morning. Seven o'clock the next day your phone would ring, and he'd say (imitating Vince), "Big D, you ready to go to the gym?" I'd go, "F—, you've gotta be sh—ing me? I just got three hours of sleep?" I think that was his whole thing. The guy was like an android. He never sold. He never slept. He went 100 miles an hour. You drank scotch with him all night, and the next day he'd get up and train the legs like mad. What the f—? This guy doesn't sell sh—. To me, you set a pretty high bar. The thing was, if you didn't kind of come up to that expectation, you better not walk into his office and beg for something or demand anything unless you are right up there with him. His personality is one of his strongest traits. He was in a position to say to you, "What have you done?"

Keller: Do you think he would have been a great wrestler, and do you think he regrets not having done that full time when he was younger?

Nash: He and Hogan stole it a couple of years ago at WrestleMania. To me, he's not that great of an athlete, but he was able to have the psychology and he's a fearless mother f—er. He don't give a sh—. To me, when he held the trash can and Shane (McMahon) jumped off and put that double dropkick into his face, I look at that and I'm thinking, it's the father's son. (laughs) I couldn't imagine telling my son, "All right, tonight, son, I'm going to put a trash can right in front of my face and I want you to jump 900 feet and kick it in my mouth." It's unfathomable. I look at that and I realize they've given so much to this business on so many levels that I have absolutely nothing to say but f—in' way to go. (laughs)

Keller: Are you surprised that Stephanie McMahon has taken on a greater and more high profile role than Shane has?

Nash: No, because I think Shane is more of the office guy. I think Shane is kind of the organizer. I think Shane will take Linda's part and Steph will take Vince's part. Shane's got good ideas, but I just think that Stephanie is more geared toward that, especially with Paul (Triple H) as her husband. I think that Shane is really good in the media. I think the only thing is Shane is a little more current than everybody else. I think Shane keeps up with trends. Shane was the one who came up with the name Diesel.

Keller: Didn't he come up with the idea for the DX video? He saw something similar to it at a club?

Nash: I think so. He said, "Diesel, Dad. It's like, buff, for black dudes." It was right before Shaq was Diesel. Ninety-three was way before that. Shane's always been ahead of the curve on that. He has a hip factor that people would never get from the Greenwich white boy image.

Teaching and Learning

Teaching is a tough business.

Take Jim Cornette, booker in Ohio Valley Wrestling, the longtime developmental territory in Louisville, Kentucky. Recently Cornette was sent on a five week sabbatical because WWE Administration told him he might be suffering from burn out and would benefit from some rest. This stemmed from an incident where Cornette, the teacher, got into a power struggle with Kevin Fertig, a student, over the proper time and place to wear a hat. Administration (John Laurentas) felt Cornette might have gone too far in admonishing his student about the requirements of professionalism. Cornette found himself in the place of countless teachers before him, mistrustful of the Administration, wondering if the clear fact that he knew more about his profession than his boss did might have made this time off less of a sabbatical and more the beginning of his end.

Also like many teachers before him, Cornette had to wonder if his substitutes would undo all the hard-earned teaching he had done with his students. That turned out to be the case. Trainers Tommy Dreamer, Al Snow, and Lance Storm booked a nonsensical mess in Ohio Valley, featuring a Vince Russo-esque tournament with contestants still in the thing after losing, and a focus on trainers instead of students. Attendance and TV ratings quickly plummeted.

So when Cornette returned to the Davis Arena and scheduled himself for a 19 minute interview, ears perked up. Cornette, a man not afraid to rant against his enemies and one of the best talkers in the entire history of the business, surely had something to get his off his chest. Only a couple of weeks after the ECW One Night Stand pay-per-view, where another rival and great talker, Paul Heyman, had gotten accolades for his own shoot comments, Cornette was poised to remind everyone of his own top shelf talent.

But teachers are about students and Jim Cornette is now a teacher. He knew that the wrestlers in OVW were all watching. So Cornette cut a pretty entertaining speech during which he blamed his absence and problems on manager Kenny "Star Maker" Bolin. Sure, in 19 minutes he got in a few subtle multi-layered shots at guys who'd "rather climb a tree and tell a lie then stand on the ground and tell the truth," but he used his time to build a main event match featuring his students at the next big Ohio Valley Wrestling show. Cornette was ranting, but he was also teaching. Selling tickets and making the show strong came before his own personal feuds.

There's another teacher in Ohio Valley, Tommy Dreamer, who had his career moment at ECW's One Night Stand. Dreamer has been preaching OVW wrestlers the conservative WWE style, teaching fundamentals of mat work and ring psychology to not rely on career shortening shortcuts and cheap tricks with no shelf life.

So what does teacher Tommy Dreamer, with the eyes of the OVW wrestlers on him, do on the big stage of the ECW show? Use table spots, chairshots, lots of blood, and a cat fight to get the Big Heat.

So what do you think OVW students want to do? Practice the hard, sometimes boring basics over and over or use what the their teacher did to get immediate fan reaction?

One of the hardest things about teaching is your students really do watch everything you do and say. Tommy Dreamer did what was right for Tommy Dreamer first and not his day-to-day teaching job. Jim Cornette did the opposite. It'll be interesting to see who the Administration appreciates the most.

WWE VENGEANCE PPV

JUNE 26, 2005

LAS VEGAS, NEV. AT THOMAS & MACK CTR.

Jim Ross, Coach, and Jerry Lawler called the matches.

(1) **Carlito beat Shelton Benjamin at 12:45 with a quick roll up to retain the Intercontinental Title.** The announcers played up Benjamin's injury sustained at Raw six days prior slowing him down. Carlito used the exposed top turnbuckle, then Benjamin knocked himself out on an attempted Stinger Splash. Good opener. (**1/2)

(2) **Victoria beat Christy Hemme at 5:09 with a roll up using the bottom rope for additional leverage.** Intense. (*)

Backstage, Todd Grisham interviewed John Cena, who said he felt like the new kid on the block on his first day at school. Grisham revealed that he peed his pants in biology class in tenth grade and from then on was known as Todd Piss-am. Cena was silenced by the revelation then built to a strong crescendo when hyping his title defense.

(3) **Kane beat Edge (w/Lita) at 11:19 with a chokeslam.** Kane fought off outside interference by Gene Snitsky, Lita, and Edge's briefcase to secure the victory. There were chants of, "We want Matt," "You screwed Matt," and "She's a crack whore" directed towards Lita during the match. Following Kane's victory, Jim Ross declared that Kane was back to his monstrous form. (**)

Backstage, Todd Grisham interviewed Shawn Michaels, who indicated he wanted to even his record against Kurt Angle and top his WrestleMania performance.

(4) **Shawn Michaels beat Kurt Angle at 26:09 after hitting Angle with Sweet Chin Music as Angle flew at him from the top rope.** They worked a very similar match to the WrestleMania classic with the same pacing, finishing sequence, and offensive attack by Angle. They did a good job playing off the finish at WM21. Angle had Michaels locked in an ankle lock—the hold he previously submitted to—for an extended time. Michaels eventually broke the hold and eventually score the victory with his superkick. Two seasoned pros put on a wrestling clinic. (***1/2)

Backstage, Coach chided Batista for being the underdog against Triple H. Batista said Triple H needed to kill him to walk out with the World Heavyweight Title. Triple H interrupted causing a pullapart brawl.

Lillian Garcia walked out and invited Viscera to the ring. She got on one knee to propose marriage to Viscera. Lillian was serious in her request, but a reluctant Viscera said, "I think I'll take that into consideration." The Godfather and five ho's interrupted to break the serious tone of the proposal. Godfather told Viscera to fulfill his sexual appetite on the Ho Train before tying himself down to marriage. Viscera pondered his two alternatives before agreeing to take a ride on the Ho Train. Lillian cried.

(5) **John Cena beat Christian (w/Tyson Tomko) and Chris Jericho at 15:19 to retain the WWE Championship.** Tomko was kicked out of the ringside area early in the match, but returned to assist Christian. The first segment of the match was standard triple threat wrestling with one-on-one action in the ring while one wrestler was on the outside. The five-minute finishing sequence involved some well-timed sequences and convincing nearfalls, which led to the dramatic finish where Cena lifted Christian for an FU, spun his feet into Jericho to knock him out of the ring, and then hit the FU on Christian for the win. (***1/2)

(6) **Batista beat Triple H at 26:58 in Hell in a Cell to retain the WWE World Heavyweight Title.** The finish came when Batista set up a Batista Bomb, but Hunter was going to hit Batista with a sledgehammer on the way up. However, Triple H couldn't swing the hammer in time, and Batista executed his finisher to deliver the final blow in the match. Both men bled heavily. Late in the match, Batista kicked out of the Pedigree. They used a chain, a barbed wire steel chair, Triple H's sledgehammer, the ring steps, and the cell walls as weapons. Each time Triple H introduced a new weapon, Batista used the weapon against him. They did a good job with the match format. The finishing sequence was predictable if you really thought everything through, yet perfect for the circumstances. (***1/4)

Bruce Mitchell, columnist (7.5)

The best part of these shows is watching Shawn Michaels and Kurt Angle work those ankle locks. It's a thing of beauty. Angle and Michaels had another great match. Angle did a great job gobbling up Michaels, who sells better than anyone in the business.

Triple H and Batista also came through with a solid, well thought out match. The shortcuts, the blood, the sledge hammer, and the chairs were used in balance. Both guys did what they did well. Christian and Chris Jericho did a nice job showcasing John Cena and helping him get back on track.

Lillian Garcia needs a new agent. She can sing, she can act, she can do a lot more with her career than follow the circus around the country just to say "In this corner..." On the other hand Coach ought to thank his sponsor. He gets chance after chance to announce and is still no good. Shelton Benjamin needs to work with someone who can push his abilities. Christie Hemme is improving.

Jason Powell, columnist (8.0)

The result of the main event should finally convince doubting mainstream fans that Dave Batista is a long-term champion. After all, he's the first person in recent memory to defeat Triple H in three consecutive title matches, and the first wrestler to knock off Hunter inside Hell in a Cell. The match itself was very good and would have received my vote for best of the night were it not for the latest Kurt Angle vs. Shawn Michaels classic. Overall, this was a night of good wrestling. There was nothing along the lines of twists, turns, or storyline surprises, but the wrestlers did their jobs well and carried this event to a high mark. However, I couldn't bump my score up any higher simply because this show was so one-dimensional. Nothing about this event left me feeling compelled to watch Raw or Smackdown this week, which seems to be an ongoing trend in WWE pay-per-views.

Notes: Do we really need buffers like the Big Vis-Lillian Garcia skit between matches? The pre-match videos take several minutes, and the introductions can take up to five minutes, so there is plenty of time in between matches for the crowd to settle after a hot match. If WWE insists on placing buffers between the top matches, I would prefer intelligent backstage vignettes and interviews over hokey skits and some of the lame T&A matches we've seen on past shows... The three-way title match was disappointing early on because the wrestlers relied on the usual approach of one wrestler getting injured at ringside and allowing the other two wrestlers to work a glorified singles match in the ring. Fortunately, the threesome got together at the end of the match and included some good three-way spots that led up to the finish... Why in the world was Coach added to the broadcast team? He adds nothing to the broadcast and usually causes me to zone out the announcers to avoid listening to his lame act... Here's hoping that WWE does something to shake things up in the near future. The draft lottery has

had its moments, but the overall booking has been too straight forward. The angles are predictable, as are the finishes of most of the pay-per-view matches. Doesn't this company have any surprises or hot storylines left up its sleeve?... Replay Factor: The main event and Angle vs. Michaels are worth the pay-per-view fee...

James Guttman, Torch columnist (7.0)

WWE went back to the formula that makes them famous. They stack up some really great matches and then mix in some really subpar skits and promos to drag the overall feeling down.

Honestly, how great would these shows be if World Wrestling Entertainment had a writing team that could script awesome segments as wrap arounds for matches like HBK and Angle? The things that the company does to balance out the good points of the show is mind blowing.

Viscera and Lillian exploded tonight and it took the ghost of 1998 to do it. Godfather's cameo as the seductive pimp that lured King Mabel away from the announcer was just plain stupid. Every time Raw begins a nonsensical angle, they seem to go out of their way to undercut any positive points it could have. Vis is good, then he's bad, then he's good, then he's bad. After all this, we still don't know what his character's goals are or who he's here to fight.

On the flip side, you had Michaels-Angle. This one was great and helped to set up the third chapter of their ish. It's good to see Kurt doing what he's best at. Save the bestiality for the Heidenreichs. This is an Olympic Hero.

Batista beats Hunter in a very good Hell in a Cell and the plot thickens. Batista could end up on Smackdown alone. If that happens, it could be John Cena that gets served his bitch card by the Game in a month or two. Hunter could end up on Smackdown alone and win their Smackdown Title. You have the option of neither going to Smackdown and someone else winning the Smackdown belt. There's a plethora of options. I'm going to stop trying to figure out what they're up to. We'll all find out in like three days anyway.

Hopefully they can push Carlito without killing Benjamin. They always seem to have a tough time finding that balance.

Cena's match was good. Edge and Kane was alright. Christy against Victoria wasn't. So it goes. There was enough good stuff to keep anyone happy. It wasn't ECW. Then again, nothing is ECW... because ECW went out of business over four years ago. The end.

James Caldwell, contributor (8.0)

Batista and Triple H told a great story in the ring to capture the essence of Batista finding a way to absorb all of Triple H's tactics—whether in the ring or in the storyline—and using those elements against him for the ultimate victory. The CIA calls it blowback. Batista calls it retaining the World Heavyweight Title. As someone who isn't a big fan of gimmick matches in this era, I felt like the story in the ring, the convincing nearfalls, and the strong portrayal of Batista's character helped deliver a fantastic main event match to cap off a thrilling and

well-done PPV.

Now, we'll have to find out whether Batista heads to Smackdown with the Heavyweight strap leaving Triple H to feud with John Cena's WWE Championship or if Triple H heads to Smackdown to try his hand at the new Smackdown Title. But, the story remains a very solid main event match with a great in-ring story.

Cena vs. Christian vs. Jericho delivered in a very strong way with a fast-paced match that consistently felt like it was in a higher gear. It was also one of those matches where I could have seen nearfall after nearfall and not grown tired of sitting on the edge of my seat. Cena came out looking very strong—as he should have—and the match delivered as a compelling championship match holding its own on the card. Solid work all around with Christian and Jericho bringing the workrate and Cena bringing the high energy to create a complementary and well-balanced match.

If Angle and Michaels were shooting in the first segment of the match, as they did at WrestleMania, Angle made Michaels look like a kid on his first day at amateur wrestling school. However, that didn't matter in the end when Michaels and Angle took it to another gear for the final five-minute stretch of breathtaking action. Fortunately, the ref bump didn't detract from what amounted to a great follow up match to WrestleMania that overcame minimal hype on Raw. By comparison, I wouldn't give this match a higher rating over WrestleMania because the action just wasn't on the same level for a consistent stretch of time.

Kane is definitely back. Forget the crying. Forget the pathetic monster. Kane overcame multiple odds and looked very strong coming out of his victory against Edge. Once the Draft Lottery shakes out, a return to the top of the card could be on the horizon for Kane. But, of course, what would a discussion on any match involving Lita be without a critique of her wardrobe? If Lita's pants were any lower, Gap would have to add a new pants category right below ultra low rise.

When I thought the Viscera and Lillian storyline couldn't have become any worse, WWE finds another way to show their blatant disregard for decency. And that's just The Godfather making his return. I'm sure the boys in management got a kick out of seeing their fantasy world played out on television with strippers drooling all over the character that embodies their fantasy persona. Listening to Coach and Jerry Lawler throw out Vince McMahon's spoon-fed lines as if they were two pigs sitting at the lunch table in between biology and math is the perfect example of how far away from growing up management is. And Vince wonders why WWE can't get an automotive sponsor when the product contains such low-brow and juvenile content with a distorted view of reality.

Christy Hemme was decent in the ring despite making screeches as if she was a chicken having eggs plucked from her in an attempt to get the fans behind her for the babyface comeback. Unfortunately, the fans were too distracted by the screeches and weren't all that interested in seeing Christy. If WWE were actually intent on investing in the Women's Division, I would say the match was a good step forward from a storyline perspective. However, we know the Women's Division is nothing more than a way to give Jack Doane a paycheck.

Let the recycling of previously trashed storylines begin with WWE moving the concussion syndrome

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off Randy Orton and directly onto Shelton Benjamin. Unlike Orton, I hope WWE actually has something in mind for the storyline rather than burying Benjamin with a disabling injury.

Coach started very rough on commentary to the point where I was dreading the mere thought of listening to him for three hours. Either he improved as the night wore on or he didn't bother me as much because I started to ignore him like I would Don West. Either way, his presence wasn't as painful at the end of the night as it was at the beginning.

Pat McNeill, columnist (8.5)

For fans of WWE Raw, tonight's show delivered in a big way. The three main matches were everything that the company could have hoped for. The weak parts of Vengeance were the poor women's match and the Viscera segment with Lillian Garcia and the Godfather. Frankly, those two segments weren't integral to the event in any way.

The opening match between Shelton Benjamin and Carlito was okay, but it never quite got there. It needed more intensity to be a great opener. Maybe the storyline injury to Shelton Benjamin hurt the match in that regard. The Kane vs. Edge match with Lita involved was a throwback to the Attitude era booking of the late-'90s. If there is a legacy from the ECW pay-per-view of two weeks ago, it may be that WWE once again feels comfortable with the type of angles and matches they ran during the Monday Night Wars. The skit with the Godfather and the use of a Triple Threat Title match also contributed to the retro feel of Vengeance.

As for the Matt Hardy tease, having Coach and Lawler mention the Matt Hardy chants (but not the

other anti-Lita chants, like "She's a crack whore") should raise a big red flag as to how ready WWE is to do business with the Sensei of Mattitude. Someday, maybe we'll find out who Lillian Garcia pissed off to get into her current storyline. Jim Ross made sympathetic noises about her predicament, but it was obvious that Coach and Lawler had the correct WWE spin on that angle.

Conspiracy theorists will have a field day wondering why Johnathan Coachman was on commentary tonight. Maybe Vince McMahon believes that J.R. is a better announcer when he's annoyed. Or maybe Coach is being phased into commentary so that he can take a spot on one of the main shows soon. Ross was on his toes tonight in the play-by-play seat, so mission accomplished.

The three C's (Cena, Chris Jericho, and Christian) had a very good three-way match tonight, which makes it harder to understand the criticism of Cena. If WWE doesn't think the Doctor of Thugonomics is a good worker, then they shouldn't put him on television every week against the likes of Tomko and Hassan. On three of his last four pay-per-views, Cena stepped up and delivered in the big match environment, and he's incredibly over with the company's target audience. Let Cena be Cena.

The two main matches deserve all sorts of superlatives. You can nitpick about Hell in the Cell, but if the goal was to make Batista look like a tough SOB, then WWE did a fantastic job. The second Michaels vs. Angle match may have been better than the first one, and we're looking forward to the third one.

—Please see **ROUNDTABLE**, pg. 12

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3868**EVENTS SCHEDULE**

- 6/18 Ring of Honor in Morristown, N.J.
- 6/19 TNA Slammiversary PPV
- 6/19 WWE in Manchester, England [S]
- 6/20 Raw live in Phoenix, Ariz.
- 6/21 Smackdown live in Tuscon, Ariz.
- 6/21 TNA TV taping in Orlando, Fla.
- 6/22 OVW TV taping in Louisville, Ky.
- 6/26 WWE Vengeance PPV
- 6/26 WWE in San Jose, Calif. [S]
- 6/27 Raw/SD TV in Anaheim, Calif.
- 6/29 OVW TV taping in Louisville, Ky.
- 6/30 WWE in Seoul, South Korea [R/S]

FIRST CLASS (WARNING: SEAL TO BE BROKEN BY ADDRESSEE ONLY)**PPV ROUNDTABLE** continued from pg. 11**Wade Keller, Torch editor (8.0)**

Three really good main event matches and a solid undercard with three matches that felt as important as the time they took up adds up to a really good PPV event.

The challenge of the night was to get John Cena over despite the challenge of standing out on a card featuring two big rematches—Hunter vs. Batista in the Cell and Michaels vs. Angle II. He did it. They would have buried him and his title if he wasn't in the second-to-last spot on the card, yet it also added to the challenge of not being lost in the shadow of the two matches surrounding him. Thanks to very good performances from Chris Jericho and Christian, Cena came out of this event looking like a star.

Batista and Hunter also came through. They had a near-perfect Cell match given the skills they bring to the ring. They aren't going to dazzle like an Ultimate X match, so they have to tell their story in a convincing, dramatic fashion. They did it, with just the right amount of violence. They didn't try too hard and come up short, but they didn't shoot so low that it was boring or pedestrian. They seemed to know their strengths and played into them perfectly.

Shawn Michaels vs. Kurt Angle had a similar match as their last one, and that's not a problem at all. Angle said in an interview last week that he had to talk Vince McMahon out of adding a stip to their first rematch. Vince may think it would have been better with a stip, but this worked precisely because there wasn't a stip. The match was similar enough that the drama of Michaels getting out of the

submission hold that he tapped out to last time was a great "sequel finish." Add chairs or brawling through the crowd, and the drama of the finish wouldn't have had the same impact. While they didn't do anything crazy in the match, they made sure everything meant something. They put on a true clinic in the literal sense in that every young wrestler should study their two matches and learn how to make the most out of everything from selling to teasing comebacks to making comebacks to near pins and near tapouts.

Kane pinning Edge isn't a big deal. Edge can recover. But it does indicate Edge isn't headed to main events right away. With Lawler acknowledging Matt Hardy by name, I suspect Edge will be occupied with a Hardy feud soon.

Carlito and Shelton had solid chemistry. I'd like to see them keep working together. Shelton can help Carlito be seen as a serious, competitive worker rather than an interview segment comedy figure. Meanwhile, Carlito can help bring out Shelton's personality in promos and interaction during matches. Both are similar enough in size that they compliment each other.

The Viscera segment with Lilian was fine. I was entertained and not offended. Maybe I should have been, I don't know. Lilian was great in her role. Viscera plays his role perfectly. The question is who are fans supposed to cheer or boo? Or should we just agree that Lilian and Viscera might be two likable characters who just weren't meant to be together?

In-House Note: Next week's issue will include an announcement about the release of the Ultimate Insiders #2 DVD set with Matt & Jeff Hardy.

COVER STORY from pg. 1

in any of those potential feuds would also be strong.

The scene is set for Triple H to be the centerpiece heading into WrestleMania 22—and politically that was probably Goal One of this Draft Lottery. Hunter can chase Cena for the rest of the year, and either win the title and lose it or never win it, and then enter the Royal Rumble looking to earn a title rematch. He would likely win the Rumble, and the mystery for several weeks would be which top babyface champion he would choose to face. It would set up Hunter vs. (good friend in real life) Batista as the top match at WM again with potentially Cena vs. Edge or Angle or even Michaels as the other main event.

If Cena catches fire, Hunter could choose to face him instead in the top match, with Batista defending against Orton, Guerrero, JBL, Benoit, or even Brock Lesnar (although it's a longshot Vince McMahon would settle with Brock and rush him back into a WrestleMania main event that soon, as Lesnar will likely go through a humbling series of tests for a year before main events were handed to him again).

After feuding with Orton, there is no obvious opponent for Undertaker. Perhaps JBL or Guerrero or Christian or even Hassan is Taker's designated WrestleMania opponent.

There were no notable mid-card moves during the actual lottery process, such as Rene Dupree, Rob Conway, or one of the Bashams shifting to a new environment, but such moves could come later in the week.



How C.M. Punk should debut on WWE

One Way Or Another: Last week on the Torch website's VIP message boards, one reader asked a question of the staff writers: What one angle, if any, could boost the business of WWE in the same fashion that the Austin-McMahon and NWO storylines spiked the wrestling boom of the 1990s?

It was a simple question, but it was a loaded question. There isn't any "magic bullet" angle out there that will guarantee higher ratings for World Wrestling Entertainment. Great money-making angles don't materialize out of nowhere. A promotion needs to have good storytelling and to build up momentum before a shocking storyline twist can put them over the top. The Austin-McMahon feud of 1998 came after Mike Tyson had catapulted the World Wrestling Federation back into the national consciousness. The New World Order angle in 1996 came after World Championship Wrestling had pulled even with the McMahons thanks to months of success with their "WCW Monday Nitro" show.

The smart thing to do when business is down is to make long-term plans and keep your plans flexible in case a wrestler or concept catches fire with the fans. Play the percentages, don't do anything stupid, and be ready to capitalize when the next talent or trend presents itself. Then again, it is summer. We haven't done the McNeill Factor's traditional June Booking Fantasy gimmick column, where the author takes the WWE and reshapes it into something more entertaining. Can a simple angle revitalize World Wrestling Entertainment?

Our Story Begins: Dig, if you will, the picture. Shortly after the conclusion of the Draft Lottery, former Ring of Honor heavyweight champion C.M. Punk makes his full-time debut on Smackdown. In a brief backstage skit, General Manager Theodore Long welcomes the Punker to Smackdown, saying that he's been impressed with Punk's performances on Sunday Night Heat, and the recommendations he received from Ricky Steamboat and Mick Foley. Punk says something innocuous about how it has been his life's dream to wrestle for WWE.

A few weeks go by on Smackdown. Finally, in the middle of a Divas bikini contest, C.M. Punk hits the ring and takes the microphone. Punk tells the audience that he thought being on Smackdown would be the pinnacle of a great career, but it had instead been a frustrating experience. He talks about how WWE used to be about professional wrestling, but now Smackdown was all about no-talent Divas, untrained rookies in the Tough Enough beauty pageant, foul language, racy content and people using their political connections to score championship matches for themselves. He, C.M. Punk, is "straight edge." No drugs, no tobacco, no promiscuity and definitely no alcohol. His body is a temple, his mind is pure, and he is starting a crusade to clean up World Wrestling Entertainment. Punk invites everyone in the arena and everyone backstage to join him and help take back WWE.

Why C.M. Punk? Well, for starters, Punk is the best talker outside of the WWE and TNA rosters. His "straight edge" character has drawn real heel

heat in Ring of Honor and MLW, and it's sure to be a hit in WWE, where the fans are taught the importance of beer by future Hall of Famer "Stone Cold" Steve Austin. Why a Crusade? Well, this gimmick won't work unless the McMahons are behind it. By having the scrawny heel Punk recite all the common complaints of insider fans, McMahon can teach the general public that only bad guys complain about the content of WWE Smackdown. Punk's litany of complaints can be adjusted as the months go by to fit whatever conventional industry wisdom is circulating at the time. If Punk comes across like he should, the Crusade can also reduce legitimate complaints against WWE to non-specific whining.

Punk's first challenge should come from the returning Rob Van Dam, who takes exception to Punk's strident attitude and asks the new guys to "mellow out." As we prepare for the big RVD vs. Punk match at SummerSlam, every week we see Punk lobbying a different Smackdown superstar to join his Crusade. Some blow Punk off. Some wrestlers are amused. One or two of them become angry. Finally, RVD and Punk wrestle at SummerSlam. Punk scores the win thanks to the surprise interference of his two new allies, Mohammed Hassan and Khozrow Daivari.

Hassan and Daivari are the perfect additions to C.M. Punk's crusade. The Arab-American heels need to be moved from an anti-USA stance to an anti-WWE stance, for their safety and for the long-term good of the promotion. Once Hassan and Daivari come on board, fans won't be tempted to cheer Punk as a "cool heel." Plus, the (fictional) Muslim backgrounds of Hassan and Daivari lend themselves to the straight edge gimmick.

We head into No Mercy with The Crusade taking on, let's say, Van Dam, Hardcore Holly, and Charlie Haas in a big six-man tag team match. Meanwhile, C.M. Punk is teasing a big announcement for the show. After his team wins their match, Punk drops a bombshell. Punk is bringing the "greatest wrestler of all time" onto Smackdown to join his Crusade. Punk goes into full John the Baptist mode, stating that while he, Hassan and Daivari are talented superstars, he, C.M. Punk, isn't fit to lace the boots of the leader of the Crusade, the man who is on his way to Smackdown. Punk challenges World Heavyweight Champion Dave Batista to a match on Smackdown so that he can prove once and for all that The Crusade is the true future of WWE.

The Friday episode of Smackdown opens with Dave Batista accepting Punk's challenge for the main event. The match takes place. Punk is allowed to look good, but is overwhelmed by Batista's power. Hassan interferes. Daivari interferes. Batista fights them off, and then referee Brian Hebner gets bumped. Batista holds his own against the Crusaders, but he is getting worn down.

Finally, there is a sound of a car crash and Mick Foley charges down the aisle in his homemade referee's outfit. Foley hits the ring, clears out the bad guys and nails Batista with a double arm DDT. The foursome give the champion a beatdown as the

revived Dave Hebner throws the match out. We go off the air as Michael Cole and Tazz speculate as to why Mick Foley would do such a thing. We get our answer next week on Smackdown, as Mick Foley takes credit for coming up with the Crusade idea in the first place. Foley recites his usual litany of anti-sports entertainment, pro-wrestling complaints, and gets a few good verbal jabs in at Vince McMahon at well. Foley says he's always been "straight edge," even though he never held the term until he met C.M. Punk. The reason he brought the Crusade to Smackdown was to go after the one true World Heavyweight Champion, Dave Batista. Eventually, the Crusade will take the title from The Animal, and Teddy Long and Vince McMahon will have to accede to their wishes. Batista makes his entrance, and after some hemming and hawing, a hardcore match between Batista and Foley is signed for Survivor Series.

Foley and Punk should have a good working dynamic. They played off each other well during Foley's last Ring of Honor run, and I suspect we'll see a story similar to this when Foley and Punk are together this weekend on Ring of Honor's events in New York.

Survivor Series arrives, and the match between Batista and Foley more or less turns into a handicap match between Batista and The Crusade. Foley acts more craven than usual and lets Punk, Hassan, and Daivari do his dirty work for him. Batista proved his ability to work the hardcore style on Sunday. Eventually, Batista overcomes all the obstacles again and pins Foley in the center of the ring.

Then the fun begins. A large masked man hits the ring, scoops up the exhausted champion, and hits him with the F5. A bloody Foley grabs the microphone and introduces Batista to the "greatest wrestler of all time," Brock Lesnar. Lesnar un masks as the broadcast goes off the air. The former multi-time WWE champion comes in with a ton of momentum, an anti-WWE gimmick that's tailor made for him, and has two of the better talkers in sports entertainment to help him get his points across.

The rest of the story is simple. Lesnar and Batista don't wrestle one-on-one until WrestleMania, where The Animal ends up getting the better of The Big Thing to cement his place as World Champion, and the dominant big man in WWE. Mick Foley gets to use his ability to put over Dave Batista as a credible and dominant World Champion. Brock Lesnar gets his spot back, uses his credibility to help out the company, and hopefully regains the trust of the McMahon family and earns a decent paycheck. C.M. Punk gets to be a part of a significant storyline with skipping over too many big names in the Smackdown hierarchy. Nobody gets shoved aside politically. And in the end, Vince McMahon gets to make all of his storyline points and Dave Batista gets big wins over two well-known former World Champions.

Sure, it will never go down this way, but you can't stop a guy from dreaming.