

THE LAST RING DAYS OF A LEGEND

As we approach the 25th anniversary of Giant Haystacks' last fight (March 24 1996) Martin Campbell looks at the big man's final ring days, spent many miles from these shores:



INTRODUCTION :

They say all political careers end in failure. It's not quite true for wrestlers of the UK's Golden Days ... but there is most certainly a parallel.

The careers of the two biggest (in terms of weight, anyway) are cases in point. Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks. Both careers ended sadly ... struggling to keep the images alive when in actual fact the game was up.



For Big Daddy it was the blind determination of Max Crabtree to keep his brother as his top-of-the-bill money spinner far longer than Daddy's ability to put on a proper show. Most of those who saw him in his prime felt a real sadness to see the lumbering effort to struggle through the ropes, and a feeling of despair to see credible opponents crumbling within seconds of facing a puffing Big Daddy.

For Haystacks it looks as if it was his medical condition that saw the downhill slide. Interestingly for his British and European fans his last few bouts were over the pond in America, away from his most adoring fans. So, at home his legacy is still a positive one.

In this article we take a look at the last six weeks of the career of Giant Haystacks ... played out in the States

SETTING THE SCENE :

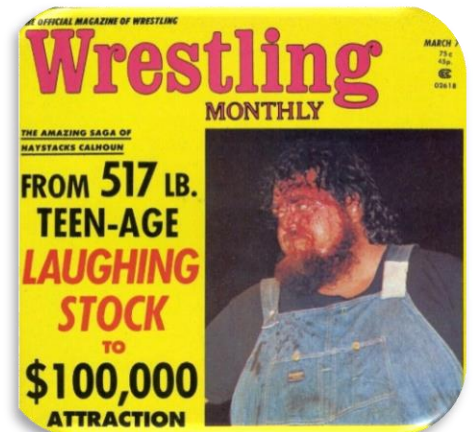
Wrestling Heritage has published a fine tribute to Giant Haystacks, one of the great characters of the Golden Days and a fabulous ambassador for the sport. I have no wish to take anything away from his achievement list ... but when I looked into it I found his last trip to the USA to be fascinating. It is this six-week sojourn that I will concentrate on.



Martin Ruane was born in London of Irish parents just after the end of the war in 1946. The family moved north when Martin was three. Labouring and night-club bouncing took second place to wrestling as Luke McMasters when he was just 21.



His first major boss was Brian Dixon (L) of Wrestling Enterprises. It was Brian who decided on the Haystacks name for Mr Ruane. But once again a British promoter decided to 'borrow' a name from the States. The US seemed a world away back then. No internet, and our only 'in' to American wrestling was through the pages of magazines. And what's wrong with 'borrowing' a name?



So Martin Ruane aka Luke McMasters became



Haystacks Calhoun after William Haystacks Calhoun of America, who weighed in at 42 stones (using wrestling scales) and stood around 6 feet 4 inches. The British equivalent would grow to a genuine 40-stone-plus weight and stood at a billed 6 feet 11 inches. Both wore Hillbilly style wrestling dungarees. The US Calhoun (L) was a big man ... and a big name. His pictures, flyers and posters were often crammed into the magazines that were grabbed off the shelves by fans in this country. They were not exactly dissimilar ...



Eventually our Haystack had to stand on his own two enormous feet, and he became simply Giant Haystacks. He was destined to become a household name, gracing big and small screen, numbering Paul McCartney among his fans and friends and packing halls all over the UK.

In 1978 he held the British Heavyweight Championship for a short time, snatching it before returning it to Tony St Clair.

Before Big Daddy was 'reborn' he tagged with Haystacks. Then they feuded when Daddy went baby-face. As Daddy's weight rose and agility diminished his scraps with Haystacks looked increasingly unbelievable.

Few could argue that the farce of the 'big fight' (R) at Wembley on June 18 in 1981, when Haystacks tumbled out of the ring and failed to beat the count, did anything other than hasten the close of the Golden Days era.

Credible opponents were hard to find for Haystacks. Tony Francis lasted less than 30 seconds in a televised bout. But Haystacks was slowing, having been amazingly agile for such a big man in his early days.

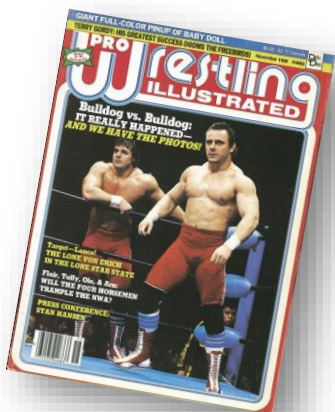
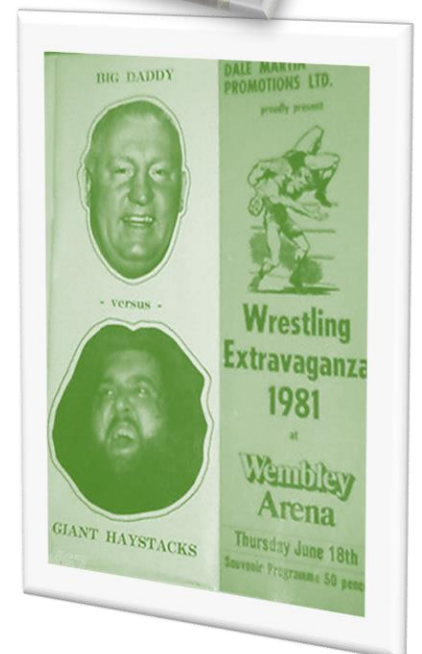
But alongside Daddy he was still 'the' name that was raised when UK wrestling was debated.

EXPORTING HAYSTACKS :

After that Daddy fight, in the 80's, he spent more and more time in Canada where he was billed as the Loch Ness Monster and faced tough opposition such as Jim Neidhart and Cyclon Negro. He lifted the Canadian tag-team belt with Dynamite Kid (L).

The first half of 1985 was spent in Japan where his popularity was sky-high. Much of that time he was tagging with Gypsy Joe, the notoriously tough no-sell wrestler. Austria saw a lot of the big man, too, as did UK television viewers. The Austrian roster was a particularly tough one. One stint saw him climbing through the ropes eleven times in thirteen days.

His feuds with Rambo, a little known Canadian here but a massive name in Europe and Japan, were the stuff of legend. So the Haystacks character was high profile outside the UK and he was as busy as ever ... but not quite as agile as ever. Then ... America calls.



STAX IN THE STATES :

It is now 1996. Giant Haystacks is knocking on the door of fifty. In America, Hulk Hogan (below) is the man who can do no wrong as the King of World Championship Wrestling. He's big, strong, an athletic physique, colourful in a new, all-action, ground-breaking way and he packs the pyrotechnic-lit stadiums. With all due respect this is all a million miles from the UK Daddy/Haystacks scene.



Haystacks' appearances, I'm afraid, made the gulf between the two eras all too apparent.

US wrestlers, for the main part, spoke in glowing terms of UK wrestling. Billy Robinson. Tony Charles. Adrian Street. Geoff Portz. Sean Regan. Wayne Bridges. Great workers all. What America did not seem to appreciate was the change that British grappling had undergone in the time before TV was turned off ... and after.

Kevin Sullivan was a pretty big name in the US, leading the Dungeon of Doom and playing a major role in the WCW set-up. WCW was desperate to bring in someone credible to face Hogan, who was in danger of 'doing a Daddy' by flattening all before him all too easily. They needed a jaw-dropper.



WCW already had a Giant on their books. He was Paul Wight, later to wrestle as Big Show for the WWE. He had only been with the WCW just over a year and was billed simply as The Giant (L). And he was a giant, standing 7 feet and claiming to be the world's biggest athlete. Not fat. Big. Very big. But a Hogan v Giant match needed to be a bit of a way off and gently built up.

So Kevin Sullivan, a fan of wrestling here, suggested Giant Haystacks could be brought in to destroy the US opposition and battle his way to a pay-per-view with Hogan.

I fear Sullivan, still wrestling recently at the age of 70, had not seen any video of the Daddy-Haystacks Wembley match or he might not have persuaded booker Eric Bischoff to bring Haystacks in as the Hogan-killer.

I can only assume Haystacks' health was already failing when he arrived in the States because he seemed able only to perform his elbow drop. US fans were bemused, as this import appeared to be a one-trick pony.

Sullivan told the fans he was bringing in a monster to destroy Hogan, and after the 1996 WCW Superbrawl event, won by Hogan, a massive man appeared at the rear of the stadium and was held back by Sullivan and his cohorts from going after Hogan.

He was introduced as Loch Ness (Dropping the 'Monster' bit that Stu Hart had christened him with in Canada) and would be given his own manager, one Jimmy Hart. Hart used a megaphone to get the message across. Loch Ness's Manchester shouting was a bit tricky for American fans.



So, Loch Ness had arrived. The Hogan-killer was in town. His first match was against veteran Jim Duggan, best known for carrying a bit of four-by-two into the ring.

Duggan succumbed in ultra-quick time to an elbow drop, and so did a variety of people who came into the ring to offer Duggan assistance. One by one they were elbow-dropped. Not an edifying start. A rowdy 'No Contest' but not a thriller by any means.

He carried on with WCW's Nitro shows, flattening (literally) Scotty Riggs and then, two nights later, Buff Bagwell. Riggs lasted sixty-eight seconds. Bagwell, a tougher proposition, lasted a little longer but could not have been proud of his showing. Both were elbow drop wins, but so slow and dull.



Alex Wright lasted two minutes, and after the match Loch Ness and Jimmy Hart did an interview with the legendary Gene Okerlund (L). Ness and Hart threatened to tear Hogan to bits, but the interview is best remembered for Okerlund's derisive comments afterwards about giving Loch Ness the address of his dentist!

A two-on-one handicap match against Kenny Shaw and the Shadow went the same way as the previous matches. Haystacks had chalked up his wins but looked horribly like a fish out of water. He was clearly not well. He was better than this. These were like the Daddy matches back home. His attempts to look 'indestructible' were looking like a no-sell. There was no heat.

The office became very nervous. Hogan demanded a re-think. From what he'd seen, he was not going to even try to make a match with Haystacks look like a main event. A re-shuffle saw Loch Ness pulled out of the Dungeon of Doom team and missing a main event six-man tag match in Georgia. Then Hart turned on him to keep the publicity going.

A plan was devised to put Loch Ness in with the Giant and his new turncoat manager, Jimmy Hart. The two Giants would face each other to get as much as they could from their British newcomer ... but, I suspect, leaving him with as little ring work as possible.

After a lumberjack match, in which Haystacks/Ness did not officially participate, the Giant and Loch Ness had an altercation as the Giant made his way back to the dressing rooms. This was step one in the Giant v Giant set-up.



Loch Ness was then billed to face Lex Luger for the WCW Television Championship (L). It was time for the Luger bout to start. Loch Ness made his way to the ring but the Giant pounced on him and bounced him around the security fences in a pretty unconvincing ambush. Luger strolled past, waited in the ring, and when

our man didn't appear (because he was still grappling with the Giant in the aisle) he was awarded the bout and strolled back with the belt. Loch Ness never even got in the ring, which was undoubtedly the plan.

Just before facing Loch Ness, the American Giant did a bit of a Cassius Clay in a TV interview about facing Nessy. "I can start off with rhymes. I can start off with riddles. Loch Ness, I'll smoke you like bacon on a griddle." (NB Don't give up the day job)

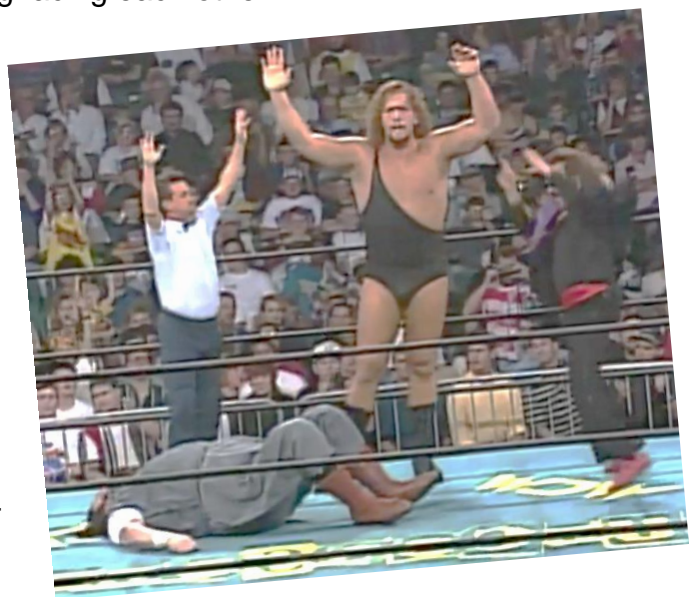
So the Battle of the Giants was set up at WCW Uncensored 1996. The whole show was actually voted the worst major wrestling event of the year by the Wrestling Observer in the US that year. It was a sort of raspberry award.

Before the bout started it was announced the winner would face Ric Flair for the world title and, if victorious, go in with Hogan. That was clearly not going to be our boy.



The event started with Loch Ness tripping up on his way to the ring, which destroyed the invincible monster image somewhat. The most interesting part was seeing the two standing facing each other ... and Giant Haystacks has to look up!!

The bout itself was mercifully short. Poor Haystacks was very stiff. After a couple of minutes he went for his elbow drop, missed and the US Giant, incredibly mobile given his weight and height, leaped high in the air, got Nessie with his leg drop and took the pin-fall (see over). Two minutes and 34 seconds and it was all over.



Eric Bischoff, the booker, does not remember the match fondly. In an interview some time later couldn't recall Loch Ness at first. Then he remembered the fight as being a throw-back to the eighties with no storyline, no reason for bouts and said it was matches such as this that eventually brought down the WCW.

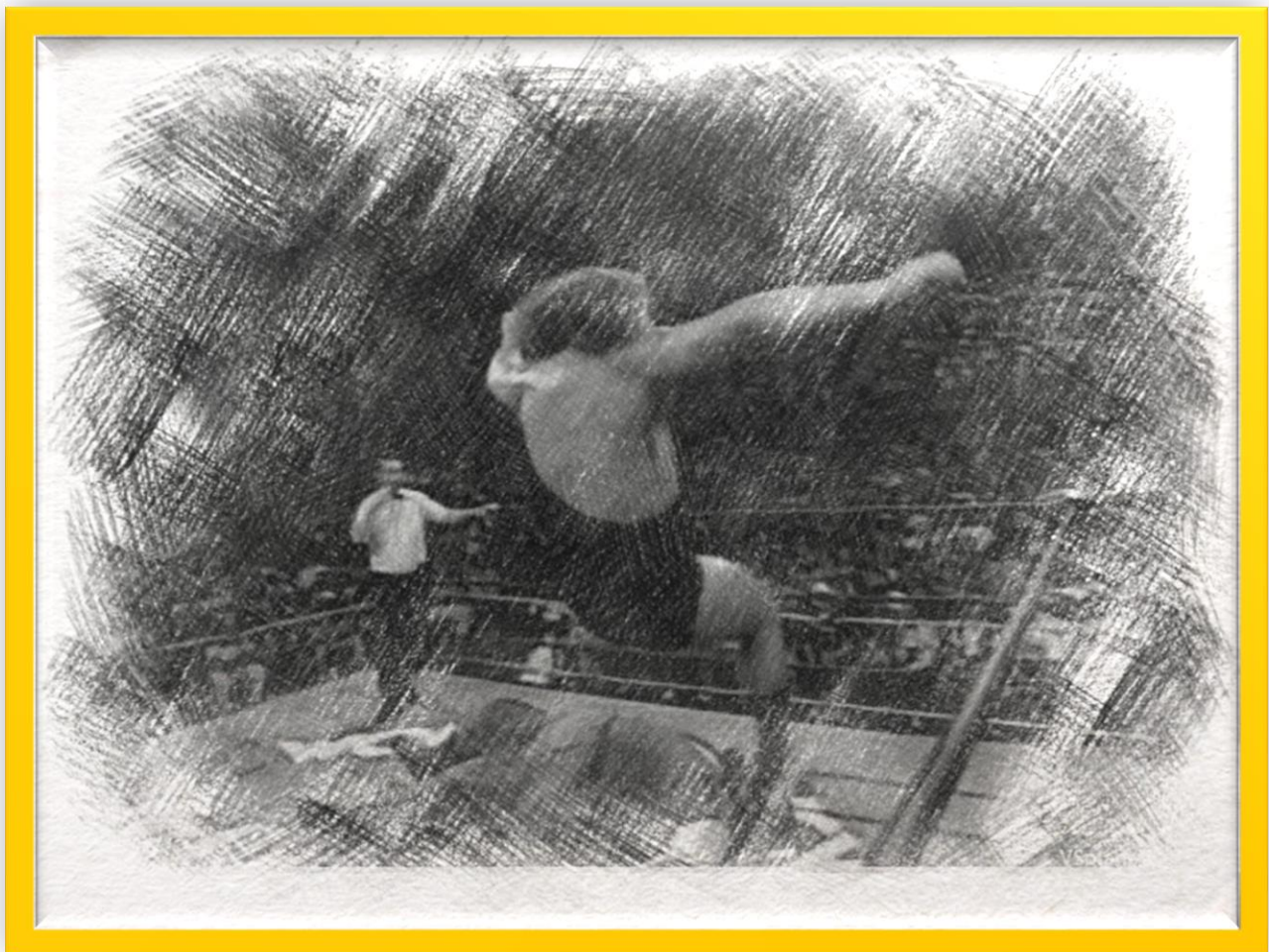
"Eighties psychology and a bad eighties vibe," he said.

Giant Haystacks' lymphoma had ended his career and he passed on two years later. A true legend of UK wrestling. Having looked at the last nightmare six weeks of his career let us wipe them from our minds and remember how much Haystacks gave to the game.

People who knew him remember a real gentleman, a charity worker and a deeply religious man.

He said he never made more than around £600 a week in the glory days because of the expenses incurred, but he loved the game. And the fans loved him back ... even if it was a love to hate. RIP Giant Haystacks.

(Below ... seconds before retirement) (Over ... a postscript)



POSTSCRIPT



Joint Promotions have taken a lot of flak over the years for under-using talent, not recognising opportunities and so on. But to balance things up ... here's an example of Joint thinking ahead (albeit thinking ahead using the past ...)

Back in 1967 our hero was working as Giant Haystacks for Joint and was booked to fight at a club in Kilburn High Road in London. The area, of course, was a magnet for the Irish. In those days people called the area County Kilburn, in fact.

So, thinking on their feet Joint rolled back the years and who should they resurrect for a return yes, the giant ... from County Mayo!!

(Although his parents, Martin and Julia hailed from the area, his only connection with Mayo by 1967 was probably what he put on his chips)

