

My Wrestling Journey



The travels of Our Man from Down Under

John Shelvey

Part 10: The Prodigal Son Returns, Spiros Arrives and the Greeks go wild!



*Aussie icon
Roy Heffeman*



Roy Heffernan.

One of the keenest of the local wrestlers, Roy Heffernan is the holder of the "Mr. Australia" title which he won in a perfect man competition back in 1948. Before turning to the professional ranks, Roy stole as an amateur of no mean ability and was also a particularly fine weightlifter. The use of heavy weights in training has made him one of the strongest wrestlers in the country. Although he utilises a variety of holds, Roy likes to take his falls with the Suspension Drop, a devastating form of attack that finishes his opponents off there and then. To apply the hold, Roy hoists his opponent across his shoulders, then straightens his arms above his head and smashes his victim to the mat from a height of about eight feet. One Suspension Drop is enough, they never come back for more. With six years experience as a professional behind him the local star rates a shot at the overseas wrestlers visiting this country and should also be considered as an opponent for Pat Meehan's version of the Australian Heavyweight Championship. Roy Heffernan is 26 years of age, weighs 231 pounds, stands 5ft. 9in. in height and possesses a 51in. chest.

Roy Heffernan was an Aussie wrestling icon. He took to weightlifting early and soon had a body that was made for the wrestling mat. However, Roy was not an overnight sensation, as taking up wrestling in the mid forties, he struggled for recognition and it was almost a decade later that he set off on a long journey to search for fame and fortune. America was his destination, with wrestling stop-offs including amongst others, India, Germany, South Africa and Blighty, Canada and then finally the States.

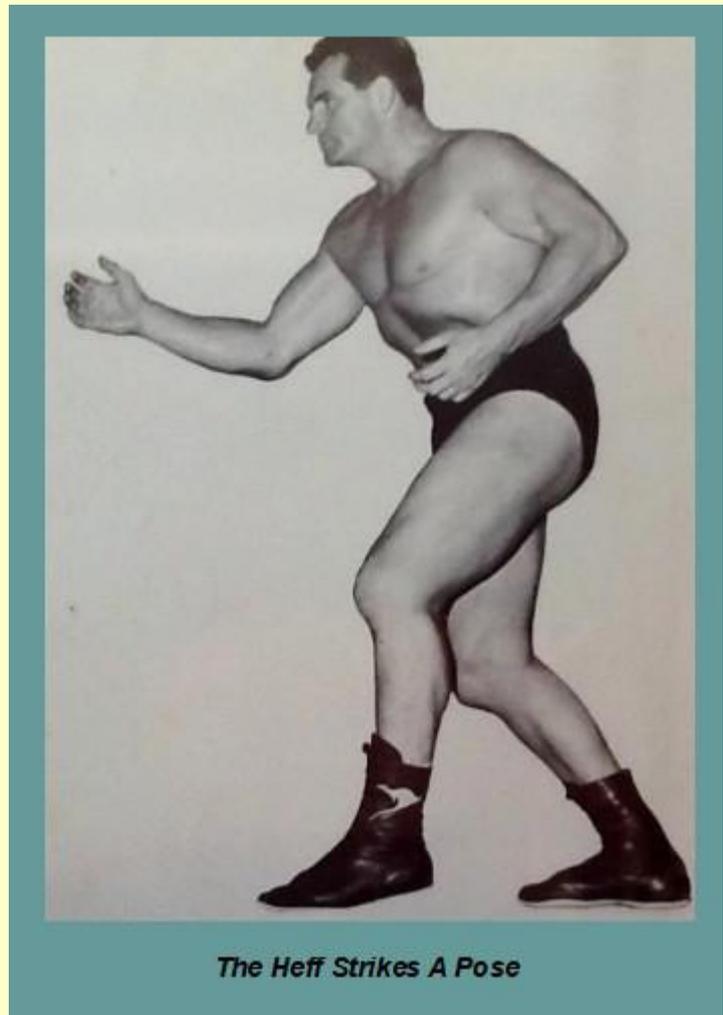
If he had left his country of birth as a rough diamond, it was a highly polished Jewel that returned to Australia in 1965. I was quite excited when it was announced on t.v. that Roy, one half of probably the greatest tag team ever to strut their stuff in North America and Canada,

was returning home. The Kangaroos, as Heffernan and partner Al Costello were known, had held numerous titles, including the acknowledged as real (by the American promoters) World title.

Roy's first foray at the Sydney Stadium was quite low-key. His was a mid-card match up with the clean cut Al Fredricks, a wrestler who's appearances were usually in just that position. Roy, who would be thought of then, a technical villain, wrestled through the fifteen or so minutes in gentlemanly fashion as the fairly staid match progressed. Then, out of the blue, Roy used a punch a piledriver and a cover. One two three, the bout was over. The crowd who had given Roy a very warm homecoming welcome and who had politely applauded throughout the quiet performance, started to boo. Roy had done the unthinkable, using a villains move, the piledriver to win a match, he had hoodwinked the crowd, made up of mostly immigrants from all over Europe, who wanted to take an Aussie to their hearts as their own adopted country hero. Very quickly the crowd became hostile and very volatile, which I found very strange as they were quite used to villains carrying out much more heinous crimes than a quick punch and one piledriver. I must have been visiting the bathroom directly after, as the crowd were still acting ugly when I spotted Roy's 'manager'.

I believe Roy had met the guy (a former child actor) on a plane when returning to Australia, and he was booked to appear in one of Sydney's night clubs. I approached him and being rather polite as an English gentleman should be, I actually heard myself apologise to the gent, for the crowds' unruly behaviour towards his charge. It became quickly apparent that the entertainer was 'three sheets to the wind' as the great Poet Laureate John Betjeman would say (he wouldn't). Sipping the drink in his hand, he slurred 'They wouldn't know class when they saw it' I believe his cabaret stint was a flop and I feel that the 'class' he was referring to was himself, rather than Roy Heffernan, who was 'class' personified! I never saw or heard of the 'manager' again and he died some months later back in the States.

Roy continued his villainous ways for several months, bewildering the fans because, much of his performance would consist of holds and manoeuvres that other villains just didn't use. No stomping, no eye gouging, but wrestling to the rules and then suddenly an underhand clever move that would start the crowd howling for his blood. Long before Brian Maxine used his sawing motion across the throat of his opponents, Roy pulled that out of his kit bag frequently and it drove the crowd nuts! I always used to shake my head at the fans reaction to this move, when either man performed it, as it seemed to me to be the move almost anyone of any age, could perform on anyone else, without doing them the least bit of harm. Eventually, I guess when it was clear to the promoter and booker that Roy was staying put in Aus. they decided that he had had a good winning run and in the semi final of a one night knock out tourney, Red Bastien pinned him to win the match. After the announcer had announced the winner, a disappointed Roy offered his hand to the redhead Bastien. The crowd was adamant 'no don't do it Red' 'no don't trust him Red' They had seen this scene plenty of times previously. A hand extended, taken and then a foot to the mid section, followed by a beat down, that's the way the bad guys of wrestling were. Not this time though, as after a thoughtful minute or two, looking at Roy, then at the crowd and back again, Red took Roy's hand, they shook, the crowd gave an audible breath and Roy Heffernan was now and forever a good guy, just like that! (T. Cooper).



A couple of weeks later and Roy having taken a good guy mauling from Curtis Laukea, rolled away from the huge mans dive off the top rope and then pinned the winded Hawaiian for the match. He had beaten a bad, bad man and was now the Aussie hero the crowd had wanted to see all those months ago. For myself, I was disappointed with Roy's turn, as now, when facing a technical wrestler, he would wrestle a clean match and generally they were okay matches, sometimes won by the more experienced Roy, or end as time limit draws and these matches were quite well received, but Roy had dropped all his little 'bits and pieces' he would use to wind the crowd up with. However, when faced with a heel opponent, Roy would sell, sell, sell. We would see very little of the vast wrestling arsenal he possessed and if he was to win, it was often that he would mount a brief comeback and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

I'm sure I was in the minority when it came to preferring Roy as a 'scientific heel' and Roy had paid his dues, so if that was the way he wanted to go about his wrestling then I could only say 'Goodonya Roy!' Australia's finest wrestler.

I mentioned earlier in the series, a cafe just across from the stadium. Now that I was an apprentice I had to travel to Sydney Technical college every other Friday to attend Wood



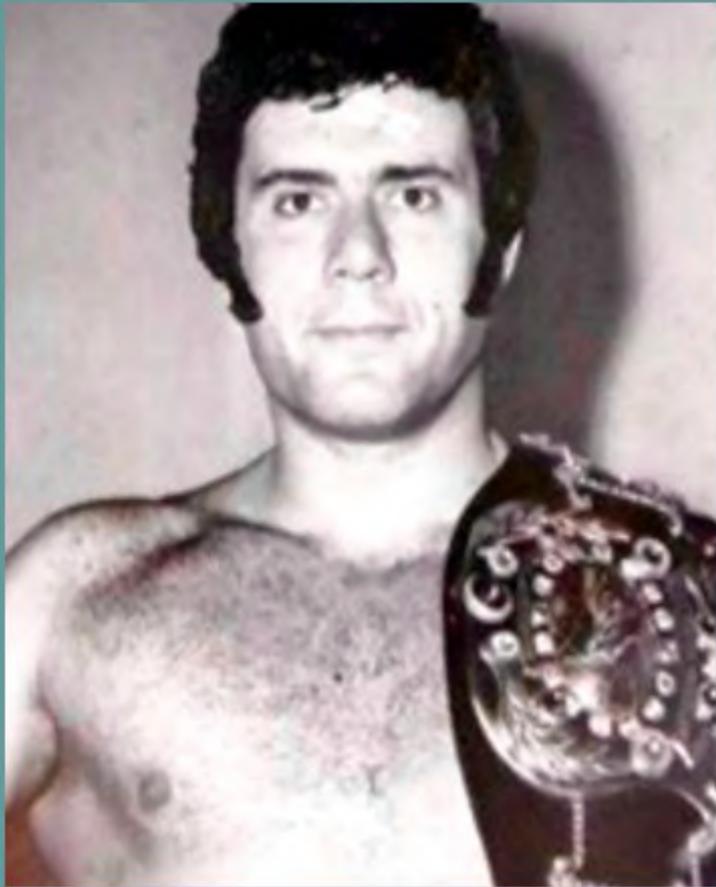
Like all Aussies, Roy liked a drink!

Machinist Classes. As the stadium wrestling was on a Friday, I was ideally placed to visit the citadel after machine class was over. I'd catch a bus to the stadium and as the area was devoid of shops or places of interest I'd go in to the cafe. The problem I had, was that Tech. finished at 4.30pm, I'd arrive at the stadium just after 5pm and the ticket office didn't open until 7pm or sometimes later. No mobiles in those days, no iPads or computers, just a very busy road a couple of car showrooms and the cafe. At first I'd order a meal together with a cup of tea or coffee, but found once I'd finished same, just sitting there wasn't going to cut it with the proprietor, who would ask me to leave and I'd find myself out on the street with at least another hour and a half before 'opening time' at the stadium. So, like Baldrick

would many years later, I came up with 'a cunning plan'! I would ask for a tea or coffee first, take my time drinking it, then after an interval I thought I could get away with, I'd then order my meal. Unfortunately I still found myself outside in the rain, cold or heat, depending on the season, with still around an hour to whittle away. I never did solve that dilemma, although I did visit Rushcutters Bay a few times in the calmer months and there's a story there for another time. Back to the WRESTLING part of this piece.

On the only occasion I saw a wrestler in the cafe (I imagine the fastidious Jim Barnet would have advised his players not to be seen frequenting such a low-end joint) I found myself sitting across from Czya Nandor, the Hhhhhhh, Hungarian, (channeling Arkwright) he was quietly sipping from a cup when Mark Lewin and Dominick DeNucci opened the door and popped their heads in. Lewin with a grin on his face said something and Nandor replied looking a little sheepish, maybe even nervous, DeNucci said something as did Lewin, they both laughed and left. Nandor looked decidedly uncomfortable. I hadn't heard the quick conversation, but I got the impression there was some teasing going on!

On one other occasion, perennial stadium referee Ron Hansen, was having a meal when Sammy Menacker popped in accompanied by another guy, not a wrestler and said in his deep drawl, 'Hi Ron, how are yer doin'? Ron, looking sad and under the weather, replied 'Not too good, I've got a touch of the flu'. Slammin' Sammy, with a big grin on his face said 'Oh that's okay Ron, we'll just get someone else to ref.' 'Ron, turning even paler than he already was, blurted out 'No! I'm okay, I'll be all right' Sammy gave Ron a big smile and left, closing the door behind on a worried looking Ron, who did indeed tread the boards that evening. Unkindly, I thought the whole little incident was quite funny.



Spiros Arion, The Modern Day Londos

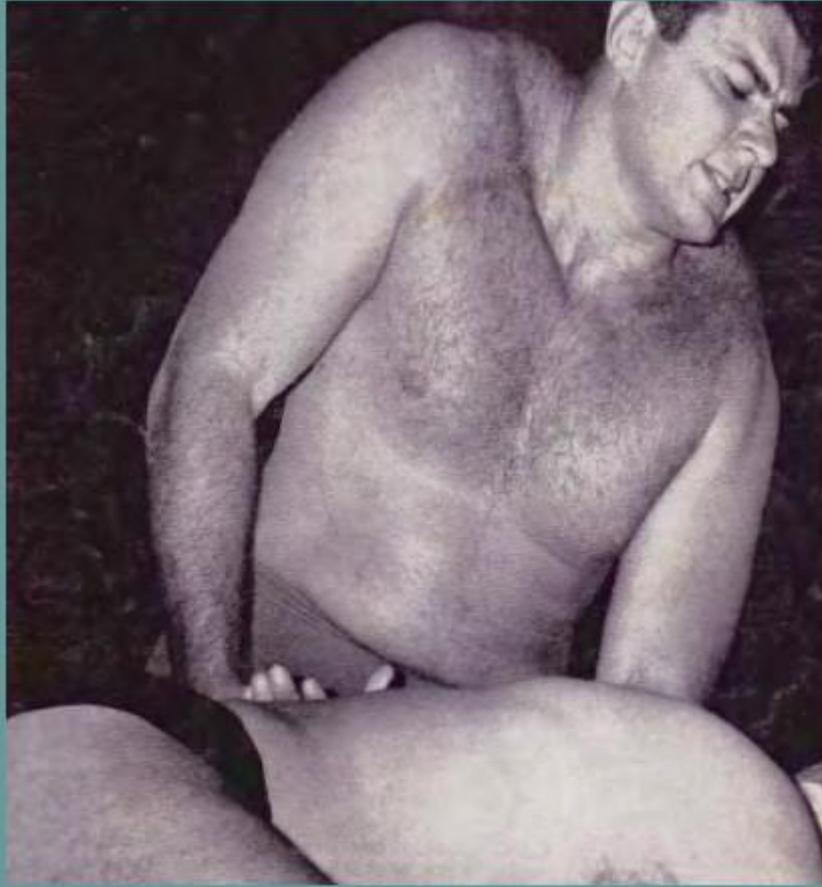
'Spiro, Spiro, Spiro!' This cry would ring out at times during a Spiros Arion match. I wasn't a huge fan of his, but even so, the hair would stand up on the back of my neck as the crowd shouted themselves hoarse with all the fervour of rabid football crowd. He was without doubt the Jim Londos of his day, albeit Spiro's career was not anywhere as lengthy as 'Jeeemy's' it has to be acknowledged, that by winning the Australian version of the World Title (very early in his career) as well as the British version a couple of decades later, as well as giving Bruno Sammartino considered by many to be the real 'World Champion', genuine competition in title matches, Spiro deserves his place in any Wrestling Hall of Fame.

I found Spiro's performances a touch inconsistent, sometimes he was 'on' and sometimes he was not, often both in a three fall match. I saw him many times, but really

only remember a couple of matches. One, against the Destroyer, was typical of his 'on off' matches. With the Destroyer's mask up for grabs, the first fall was just okay, the second was poor and the third was good, although what made it memorable was after Spiro had taken the winning fall. The Greeks (and maybe a few others) stormed the ringside, desperate to see the masked man's face. I have always believed the Destroyer had decided, or was perhaps told to try and leave the ring and return to the safety of the dressing sheds with his mask in situ, thus necessitating another match, thus lining the promoters pockets once more. He certainly went through the motions, trying to get through the ropes, but the crowd were both determined and packed deep, shoulder to shoulder, insistent he wouldn't renege on the 'unmask if you lose' match stipulation. Eventually, the Destroyer ripped off the mask, threw it down on the canvas and with a very 'peevd off' look on his face, stormed off through the now very happy Greek fans.

The best match I witnessed Spiro in, was one which pitted him against Dick the Bulldog Brower. The match was very nip and tuck and the Bulldog levelled the score when he lifted the Greek up and over his shoulder, leaned back into the ropes and using them as a springboard, leapt forward and landed on top of Arion with the ref tolling the three count. In the decider, Bulldog went to the well once too often and as he leaned back onto the ropes Spiro slipped over Brower's back and doubling him over the tope rope, belted him hard across the chest. Brower went down, Spiro slipped back into the ring and as Dick staggered to his feet, he was hoisted up in the air and suffered an atomic drop (uncle Kent may have called it a spine drop) followed by the three count.

Spiro was a big, lean guy when he first landed in Australia, he beefed up during his McMahon years and was back looking lean as well as mean, in his Brit. years.



Spiros lays on a hammock

Next time...The Bulldog and Scarpa: Legit or work? Also, cops are deployed!