

My Wrestling Journey



The travels of Our Man from Down Under

John Shelvey

Part 4: "Let's Get It On"



Jim Barnett (hatless) and Johnny Doyle. From late October '64 to '73 they shared the promoting duties (each one doing a sixth month stint in Oz). Doyle died in '69 leaving Barnett to steer the ship until the end of '73).

On one Saturday evening in October 1964 a momentous event took place that would eventually change the sporting entertainment landscape and television viewing habits of thousands of Aussies.

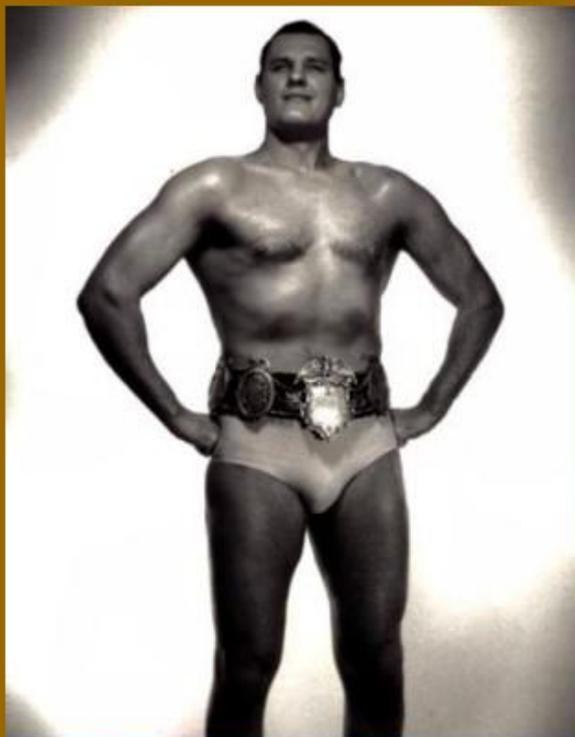
The Yanks had landed and their ever growing troops of mat men would usher in the rise of a wrestling promotion that would be the envy of all such enterprises around the world.

Under the banner of 'World Championship Wrestling' a small band of grapplers overseen by their promoters, Jim Barnett and Johnny Doyle, launched their

particular type of mayhem on the Aussie public.

Affiliated with a U.S.A. group called the I.W.A. (International Wrestling Alliance) they had included in their party, one Killer Kowalski, as big a name in the wrestling world as there was at that time. The Killer had been well chosen as the promotions 'World Champion' an excellent choice as any casual wrestling fan who read the pertinent magazines, would know that Kowalski had held many titles in North America and Canada.

I was aware that Walter, as he was christened, was not the NWA champion (considered as THE title to be the holder of) however based on the belts he had won and the fact that he had wins over all the leading heavyweights of the time, I was happy to have him as 'our champ'.



Killer Kowalski in his prime.



Taken from an early television match, Dominic DeNucci belts Aussie George Lackey. The Italian had as hard a forearm smash as I've seen and he seemed to enjoy handing them out to luckless opponents in matches I witnessed. Lackey was used as a jobber villain by the Yanks, but actually was a good worker.

I found the first viewing of the t.v. matches unnerving. Kicking and punching was the go! If I remember correctly, it was Dominic DeNucci, who would quickly become the people's favourite and especially the Italian fans idol, who before he had been announced to the crowd and before he had even removed his fancy short ring jacket, was attacked from behind by his Aussie jobber. De Nucci then turned, walloped his assailant, hoisted him into an aeroplane spin and pinned him! I'm not sure if the bell had even been rung to start the match! Then we had what

you might call the semi final of the telecast, a match - up between, one Dale Lewis, a clean technician and a good worker and Buddy Killer Austin. Two killers in the one party, I hear you ask? Well, Buddy had come by that moniker after an opponent had died 'sometime' after Buddy had given him a pile driver during a match and an enterprising and uncaring promoter had thought 'Killer, why not'!

The match was strangely lacklustre, a couple of punches, a kick and otherwise pedantic hold for hold for the fifteen minute duration of the match. One expects so much more from a 'Killer', wouldn't you concur?

The main event to close out the telecast, was between the other Killer, Kowalski and babyface Canadian Emile Dupre who, although he fought valiantly and was the possessor of a very good drop-kick, was ultimately pulverised by the bigger man. So there it was, the first t.v. show was over and I was left kinda enthralled and yet kinda appalled! I was to learn that the kick and punch, the pulling the hair and trunks, the eye rakes and the biting, the blatant fouling in front of the referee, the attacking before the bell was just the tip of the iceberg when it came to the shenanigans of the North American wrestlers.

Foreign objects and not so foreign objects such as chairs, the ring bell and even the referee would in future be used to subdue opponents and being an aficionado of Gordienko, Szakacs, Kidd, Robinson and Joyce, I could have turned my back on the whole Barnett, Doyle productions. But I didn't. Slowly over the next couple of months the Yankee version of this wrestling game took a hold so that by the time the troupe went home for the Christmas holidays, although I was yet to attend a live show, the product, as weird as it was, had caught me, hook line and sinker!



Killer Kowalski doing his thing, this time in Japan against Shohei Baba.

Making up the numbers was needed, as the Yanks travelled to Australian cities, and local Aussie wrestlers were seconded. (Yes, belatedly I found out that there was wrestling in Oz, taking place in clubs that I as a youngster couldn't attend. I also later learned there were infrequent cards at Sydney's White City Stadium). The Aussie workers were well skilled, wrestling British style, however for many years they would serve as cannon fodder for the American guys, losing in minutes (sometimes less) on television and not much longer in the stadium match-ups.

Killer Kowalski: A big man who in the fifties and early sixties had a fantastic physique as well as a

head of hair! By the time he landed in Oz, his hair was thinning and he had become a vegetarian, which meant his body had lost a fair bit of muscle. However his look belied an engine that seemingly never overheated! Walter was an all action man, forever moving, locking up, swarming over opponents, always attacking. He would have an opponent bent over the ropes and be punishing him with kicks, the referee would step in and put on a 'five count', at the five count the Killer would release his man while simultaneously whacking him on the side of the head. Having released his opponent, the Killer would grab him once more and illegally assault him again. He did sell for his foes but not for long and it was his constant domination and relentless attacks of his rivals that soon had him labelled as 'the most hated man in Australia'.

Looking back now, I realise that 1964 was for me, a most traumatic year. I had finished school where I had captained both the football and cricket teams as well as played for the first fifteen when there were no football matches, so no more kudos or adulation for me. I left my home and extended family and friends. I was going to travel ten thousand miles away from everything I knew. There would be no more laying awake very early in the morning waiting impatiently for my dad to poke his head around the door, to tell me it was time to get up to go fishing at the Tench Hole or at Major Calvert's lake. No more standing behind the goals at Crawley Town, no sitting in front of a black and white box in our three bedroom council house watching the football, cricket and boxing. No more pie and chips on a Saturday evening sat in front of the tele, watching Cannonball or Seventy Seven Sunset Strip followed by a cowboy show, maybe Bronco or Chyenne starring Clint Walker (what a wrestler he could have made. Clint said on a couple of occasions that his dad had wrestled pro. but when I contacted him years later, Clint while confirming the story about his dad, told me that he left home as a teenager and never returned, never seeing his father again). I knew that I'd be able to follow the sports mentioned above in Oz, but I was pretty sure I would not be hearing the dulcet tones of uncle Kent Walton for some time. I made a vow to myself that once I had turned eighteen, I'd be back!