

# [***In the coliseum of American over-the-topness, WrestleMania stands alone***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BPX-6MJ1-DYMD-6166-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

PHILADELPHIA — He surveyed the Arizona crowd that had paid to catch a wrestling glimpse of the planet's mightiest heavyweight, as measured in both box-office heft and ink-stained muscles. Then The Rock let the abuse fly. And as with so many public outbursts these days, attacking his opponents wasn’t enough. He had to insult the people, too.

“The Rock did a little bit of research, and here's what he found out. This is the truth. This is a fact. The No. 1 city in America for [*cocaine and meth use*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvHyePra-1U) is Phoenix, Arizona,” The Rock said to a roaring crowd that seemed to revel in the insults. Then and only then did he lay the smack down on his WrestleMania opponents.

Were The Rock’s assertions true? Or just an engine for vigorous trash talk? Most importantly: Does anyone really care, as long as the entertainment value is cranked to 11 and WWE churns out more fans to watch and fork over cash for its signature spectacle, WrestleMania, unfolding in Philadelphia this weekend?

Along the murky lines that intertwine sports, entertainment and, yes, ***politics***, the ethos of being bad has never been so good. Say what you want. Do you want. The public eats it up. And for decades, somehow, the garish world of professional wrestling has sat smack in the middle of it all.

Outside the ring, the Superman spandex traded for Clark Kent glasses and a leather jacket, Dwayne Johnson crafts his good-guy image to plug his movies, his tequila label, his men’s care line, his football league — business interests where the bottom line doesn't require calling the competition a bunch of “roody-poo candy-asses.” But under the house lights each week on live TV, Johnson knows storylines are sold on his Hollywood heel persona.

“I feel like everybody wants to be the good guy, the good girl. Everyone wants to be loved and cheered and considered the hero, which is great and it’s natural," he says. “But, I have felt in my career, the rare air is when you have the opportunity to grab it by the throat, you don’t let it go. And that’s the opportunity to be a great bad guy.”

**WRESTLEMANIA AND ITS CULTURAL PULL**

The Rock is set to headline one of two nights of the annual WrestleMania event this weekend in Philadelphia, where more than 70,000 fans each night are expected to pack the NFL stadium that is home to the Eagles.

Banners of your favorite wrestlers, or the ones you love to hate, have smothered city street poles. Philly has been overrun by wrestling conventions, autograph signings, independent wrestling shows, podcast tapings, a 2K24 gaming tournament and all the other trappings that have turned the industry into a mainstream cultural phenomenon.

From the start, WrestleMania was born to be different.

Mr. T and Muhammad Ali helped pack Madison Square Garden in 1985, and “The Showcase of the Immortals” quickly turned a night of wrestling usually reserved for smoky arenas into the Super Bowl of entertainment. As WrestleMania approaches 40, it’s never been bigger — even with brainchild Vince McMahon a pariah and ousted from the company in the wake of a [*sex abuse lawsuit*](https://apnews.com/article/wwe-mcmahon-wrestling-sex-lawsuit-4b7e1cd46a6646538637307bb0c8202b).

Yes, McMahon and Donald Trump even tangled at WrestleMania in 2007 in a “Battle of the Billionaires” match.

“Donald Trump, to a certain extent, represents a great deal of Americana,” [*McMahon said in 2007*](https://www.blueridgenow.com/story/news/2007/03/29/trumps-hair-on-the-line-in-wwe-wager/28028791007/). “He’s larger than life, which really fits into what the WWE is.”

Maybe wrestling really does represent who we are as a nation. But even if you still scrunch your nose like you took a whiff of curdled milk over the very idea that anyone would like this flavor of wrestling, odds are you’ve still heard of The Rock and Hulk Hogan. Andre the Giant and John Cena. You’ve snapped into a Slim Jim because Randy Savage ordered you to, or let out a “Woooo!” at a hockey game like Ric Flair. Dave Bautista won a WrestleMania championship before he ever guarded the galaxy.

“Look at the way it was marketed in the 80s, when Vince McMahon really changed the whole industry forever,” said author Brad Balukjian, whose [*new book*](https://www.amazon.com/Six-Pack-Open-Search-Wrestlemania/dp/0306831554) is on 1980s WrestleMania stars. “He’s got the action figures, he’s got the cartoon and the bedsheets and the lunch boxes. He turned these guys into the Batmans and the Marvel Cinematic Universe of the 80s, in a way.”

**REVEL IN THE UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTED FAKERY**

Fans have long been in on the con — and embraced it. It's a mutual agreement forged for even paying customers to play their own roles in the four-sided ring performance. So they cheer. They boo. And despite all evidence to the contrary, they openly accept that each move is as legitimate a sporting action as anything found in a weeknight ballgame.

Wrestling pretended for so long to be on the up-and-up. Comedian Andy Kaufman drew gasps when he was slapped by wrestler Jerry Lawler on “Late Night with David Letterman.” But the curtain was yanked open long ago. On Wednesday, Johnson and WWE Universal Champion Roman Reigns appeared on the “The Tonight Show” without any manufactured theatrics on their final hype job ahead of WrestleMania.

Former WWE star Dave Schultz slapped a “20/20” reporter in the 1980s for calling wrestling fake. Now ESPN, The Athletic, Sports Illustrated and CBS Sports have dedicated pages that report on both storylines and behind-the-scenes news, where the real drama is more likely found. Wrestling news is treated as seriously as any other sport's.

But is it? A sport, that is.

Debate the definition all you want. Wrestling — a precursor to reality TV and all the Real Housewives — isn’t going anywhere. And its biggest fans are often the athletes who want to emulate the super-sized stars.

This week, Joel Embiid was about to divulge that he suffered from depression during an injury that cost him two months of his NBA career. But before the Philadelphia 76ers big man unburdened himself, he pulled on a WWE T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan of the wrestling company’s most boorish faction, [*Degeneration X*](https://apnews.com/article/philadelphia-76ers-nba-sports-08392b92d17a23ea210e816627c489ca): “Suck It.”

For pro wrestling, momentum is at hand. WWE’s weekly television show “Raw” will move to Netflix next year as part of a major streaming deal worth more than $5 billion. That's some serious cash that even the "Million Dollar Man" Ted DiBiase would envy.

So go ahead. Sneer at wrestling. Or let go, turn a blind eye to the subterfuge and embrace [*Hulkamania*](https://apnews.com/e9b2f9c3f5e44455aa156652b23ae0d4) and the frenzy that followed as a staple of the global sports landscape. Because it's not leaving the building anytime soon.

Consider John Kruk, retired Phillies star and team broadcaster. You'd think that the pinnacle moment of baseball each year would be a must-see for him. But if pro wrestling is coming to town, as he [*told wrestler Kofi Kingston*](https://x.com/awfulannouncing/status/1775320170581352560?s=20) on TV recently, other priorities prevail.

“If it was a World Series game, if the Phillies aren’t participating, and wrestling was on," Kruk said, "I’m watching wrestling.”

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