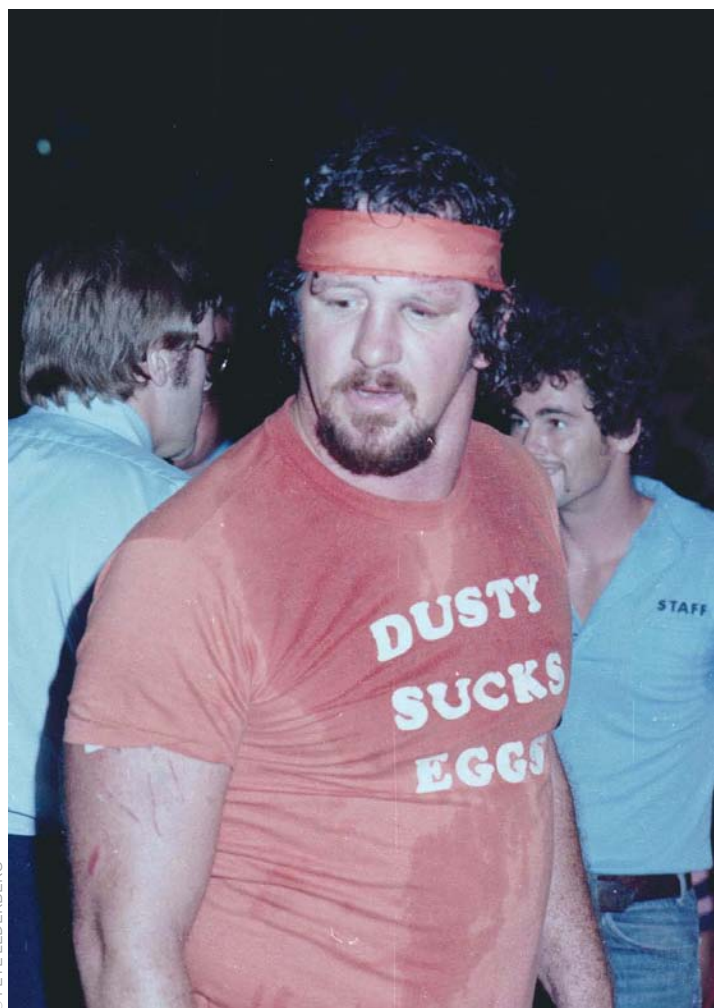


Not only is it 40 years since Terry Funk won the NWA World title, but it's 50 years since his pro wrestling debut

Funk defeated Jack Brisco for the NWA World title on December 10, 1975



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# 50 YEARS OF FUNK

**With two major anniversaries to celebrate, David Bixenspan gets to know one of the most wild but brilliant characters in the history of the sport: Terry Funk.**

It was 18 years ago in Amarillo, Texas that the Funk family promoted a card with help from the WWF, ECW, and FMW that was dubbed *50 Years Of Funk*. The idea was to celebrate 50 years of the family as the top wrestling stars in the area, but it was also promoted as something of a retirement match – or, at least, a last match in Amarillo – for Terry Funk, where he put over Bret Hart in the main event.

A few months later, of course, Funk did what he always does: he came back, signing with the WWF to work under a new gimmick of his own creation, Chainsaw Charlie. The mystery of who that masked man was lasted about as long as it took for him to walk to the ring, as even the normally cold Nassau

Coliseum crowd immediately recognised Funk's distinctive movement and broke out into a "Terry! Terry!" chant.

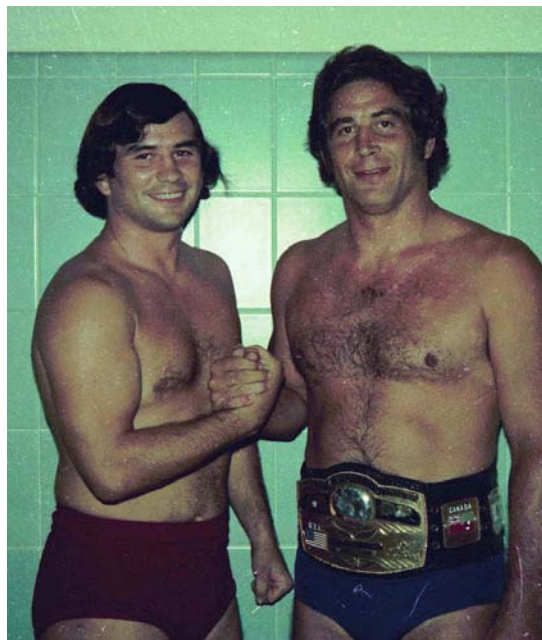
In December 2015, it's *another* 50 years of Funk celebration: the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Terry's pro debut on December 9, 1965, when he faced the legendary Sputnik Monroe. As luck would have it, just one day after the golden anniversary of his first match, there's another huge milestone to celebrate: the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his NWA World heavyweight title victory over Jack Brisco on December 10, 1975.

It's a special time; the perfect moment to reflect on the life and career of the man from The Double Cross Ranch, the one and only "Funker".

Terry and Dory Funk Jr. won the 1977 World's Strongest Tag League in All Japan



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Jerry and Jack Brisco had a rivalry with Terry and Dory Funk Jr. in the early-1970s

## “Just one day after the golden anniversary of Terry Funk’s first match, there’s the 40th anniversary of his NWA World heavyweight title victory over Jack Brisco”

### WHAT THE FUNK DO YOU KNOW?

Many **FSM** readers probably have a certain image of Terry Funk. He probably has a goatee, signifying that it’s the version of “The Funker” we know from his runs in national promotions. He’s likely seen as a pure brawler, whether he was roughing up ring announcer Mel Phillips in the WWF, piledriving Ric Flair through a table in WCW, or covered in blood in ECW and other “hardcore” promotions in his “middle-aged and crazy” persona.

But that’s not the only Terry Funk. Yes, it now makes up the majority of his career in terms of sheer years, if not total matches, but his first 20 years in the business saw Terry Funk as one of pro wrestling’s greatest chameleons. He could be everything from the bloody fighter we’re all familiar with, to a brilliant technician in NWA World title matches, to a pure babyface in Amarillo to Japan. In All Japan Pro Wrestling, he and his brother were among the earliest foreigners to work babyface, following closely in the footsteps of The Destroyer (Dick Beyer).

“We were over there so early, you know,” Funk told **FSM**. “[Foreigners all being heels] became old after a while. What it was, was a reversal: over here, we had the sneaky Japanese, [like] Mr. Moto, Duke Keomuka, and all of those guys. Well, we were the big, ugly Americans for a long time. Whenever I got over there and my brother got over there, it was in a changing period. They were ready for something else; they were ready to go ahead and cheer the Americans, y’know? And accept them as babyfaces, which they never would have done before.”

In wrestling on “the Japanese side”, the Funks became two of the top babyfaces in the glory days of professional wrestling airing in primetime on Japanese network television. Perhaps Terry’s most memorable babyface performances came in All

Japan, in the finals of the promotion’s first annual tag team tournament in 1977, as teaming with Dory Jr. against The Sheik and Abdullah The Butcher, his arm was stabbed open by the wild heels, forcing him to retreat from the match. When he returned to make his comeback, the crowd exploded, and it became such an iconic scene in wrestling history that it was re-enacted during his match at WWE’s second *ECW One Night Stand* pay-per-view 29 years later.

### CHAMPIONSHIP CAMPAIGN

“There definitely had to be a campaign [for the NWA title], or else you didn’t get in,” Funk transitioned to explain how he became champion 40 years ago. “There were a lot of great workers at that time, but they had to be the best in the country. It was a very competitive way of going about it. It wasn’t one guy’s decision, as it is today; it was 26 or 27 territories that had a vote. Several of [the wrestlers] were nominated, and it was between Harley [Race] and I at the time. My brother campaigned very hard for me, and I appreciated that.”

While he was a brilliant technician, Terry was unique in how he carried himself, which made him stand out from past champions.

“I don’t wanna say that Terry Funk wrestled a championship style, because I didn’t,” Funk noted of himself, before drawing a straight line from his work as NWA champion to the “hardcore” style that later became his trademark. “Y’know ‘hardcore’, to me, was always giving 100 percent and giving the best show you can. It’s not going ahead and going in there with chains, buckets, and ladders and bullshit. Hardcore was wrestling at its best. That’s what I felt it was. That’s what I would do, and that’s what I did.”

Terry’s NWA title victory over Jack Brisco in Miami, Florida was just the latest chapter in a long feud,

both in the ring and, to an extent, behind the scenes between their two families. In the ring, they had one of the most iconic rivalries in wrestling history, growing out of Jack's chase for Dory Funk Jr's World title, which culminated in victory on July 20, 1973. At that time, Terry was used as the wilder younger brother who served as an enforcer working to keep top challengers away from his big brother's title, while Jerry Brisco was his foil on the other side. The Funks were usually the heels, with the roles reversed primarily in Texas and Kansas City.

"I'd say it was about 1965, [when] Jack was breaking in [to the business] in Oklahoma," Brisco told **FSM** of the first time he spoke to Terry. "Jack was gonna debut on Oklahoma City TV, and [promoter] Leroy [McGuirk] wanted to make sure he was right

before he debuted on TV because he was such a star [from amateur wrestling] there in Oklahoma. So he sent him to Amarillo to work on Funk's TV. [Dory] Funk Sr. was the promoter at the time, and he found out about Jack's background, so he had Dory [Jr.] and Terry come down, and Jack asked me to ride along with him.

"We drove down there, and that was the very first time we met. I actually met the entire family that night! (laughs) Little did we know how much our careers would be entwined and woven together for basically the rest of our lives. We went out drinking that night. Dory went home; Terry of course was the one who we went out drinking with. It was wild. Everybody in town knew Terry Funk, and Terry knew to say, 'Watch this guy, he'll try to suckerpunch

## "STAY OUT OF JAIL!"

**FSM'S DAVID BIXENSPAN** REFLECTS ON ONE OF HIS FAVOURITE PRO WRESTLING MEMORIES, IN A STORY THAT ENCAPSULATES WHAT TERRY FUNK IS ALL ABOUT.

As a kid, from 1990 to 1993 the high point of my wrestling year was the *Weekend Of Champions* conventions put on in New York by local wrestling radio show host John Arezzi. Each year, the ballroom at the Ramada Inn by LaGuardia Airport would be packed with wrestlers, fans, and dealer tables as far as the eye could see, but the peak was always the slate of big names brought in as featured guests, allowing me to meet everyone from Sting, Sabu, and Konnan to Lou Thesz, Buddy Rogers, and "Superstar" Billy Graham.

My favourite story in my life as a wrestling fan kicked off at the final convention in 1993, where I met Terry Funk. I honestly don't remember that much of what happened, at least specifically. I know that I was a precocious eight-year-old, and he was incredibly funny and nice in needling me about it. I handed him my programme, and he signed it: "Stay out of jail! - Terry Funk".

Come 1999, the roof of my apartment building caught fire, and my floor was badly flooded in the process of putting it out. I was able to salvage most of my prized possessions, but a box of old wrestling magazines that also included the *Weekend Of Champions* folder was directly under my bed, where a ceiling panel had opened up, and it took a direct hit.

On April 12, 2003, Terry Funk and Jerry Lawler kicked off their tour of indy matches by headlining a Jersey All-Pro Wrestling show. It was the same night as the famous Bryan Danielson versus Paul London match in Philadelphia for Ring of Honor, and both shows had bus trips to New York. I picked JAPW, and went with an old Japanese programme in my bag to get signed by Funk. Before the show, he was walking

from the locker-room to the gimmick tables along the back wall where I was sitting with my friends, shaking hands with every fan he passed. He shook my hand, kept going, stopped, turned, and stared straight at me.

He said, "So, did ya stay out of jail?"

I was in shock while frantically trying to explain to my fellow fans what had just happened. I took out the programme, headed to Terry's gimmick table, and got him to sign it, all while he apologised for not remembering my name. It was the coolest thing that had ever happened to me at a wrestling show, and stood in stark contrast to my next wrestler encounter three months later, when Virgil shot rubber bands at me.

When mapping out this article with the **FSM** editor, we agreed that I had to ask Terry about this. I was slightly wary, knowing that he had regularly signed autographs in the same way, as a couple of similar stories had popped up online. But I had to know, so I recounted the tale, and he was clearly getting a kick out of it.

"I wish I could say that [I remembered]. I wish I could say that, but I'm just an idiot who says whatever comes to his mind. That's it! I wish I could say that, because I'm such an idiot that anybody else would take claim to having such a great memory and everything else, but it just looked like you'd been in [jail]! Did you ever think of that?! See, you never thought of that. That never crossed your mind, that you looked like there might be something wrong with you, that you should've been in jail a couple of dozen times?!"

So what exactly was the method to the madness of this type of fan interaction?

"Well, I've signed it ["Stay out of jail!"] a few times over the years. Not a lot, not a lot. If I see a guy who looks like he's been



*Terry Funk often liked to personally interact with fans at shows*

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in jail, looks like he's a shady character, I'll go ahead and comment on it."

So yes, it was a happy coincidence, but Funk thrives on that type of moment.

"Y'know, it's done out of fun. It's done of respect, to you as a wrestling fan. I definitely want to have time for you, and for the others that come up there, and I want to be as personable as I can. That's very important to me, because I've seen people who have been different from that, and I don't like 'em being that way. If they're 100 percent heel, that's okay, that's what I want to do whenever I walk into an arena when I'm a heel. But I don't want them to think that Terry Funk doesn't live up to who he is or what he is."

When trying to verbalise Funk's magnetism as a performer, Jerry Brisco put it in the following way.

"You want to meet him. Just look at him; you want to meet him. He's one of those guys, and he doesn't disappoint."

You can say that again.

you' or 'I'll probably end up suckerpunching him tonight.' (laughs) It was just typical Terry Funk, West Texas, a '60s night out in Amarillo, Texas."

When the two sets of brothers became four of the very best wrestlers in the business, it was only natural that they feud. In the ring, West Texas and Oklahoma had similar working styles, with a heavy emphasis on amateur and catch wrestling influences, so they complemented each other perfectly in the ring. There was also, of course, the natural rivalry between Texans and Oklahomans.

"It's a love/hate [relationship]," Brisco explained. "I'd say it's friendly, but there are fights over Texas-Oklahoma. There's shootouts over Texas-Oklahoma! (laughs) It goes back to both states being prideful people, and what their heritage has been."

But that's just one of many reasons why it was a perfect feud.

"It was just something that had that natural spark at the very beginning, and I remember the very first time. Jack started working in '65, and I started working a couple of years later in '68. I went to Amarillo too, of course, and y'know, the natural thing is, there's two brothers [on each side]... Back then, there wasn't an awful lot of real brothers in the business. We were legitimate brothers, and this was at a time in the '60s when society was changing, the youth movement was coming on - there was a lot of long-haired hippies. Jack and I were the Okies, and we had our hair long, and we were Native Americans. We're Indians, and the Funks are cowboys, so we just had so many things working in our favour to make this thing work. (laughs) You'd have to be awful dumb or blind or just untalented [not to see it]."

## PERSONALITY TRAITS

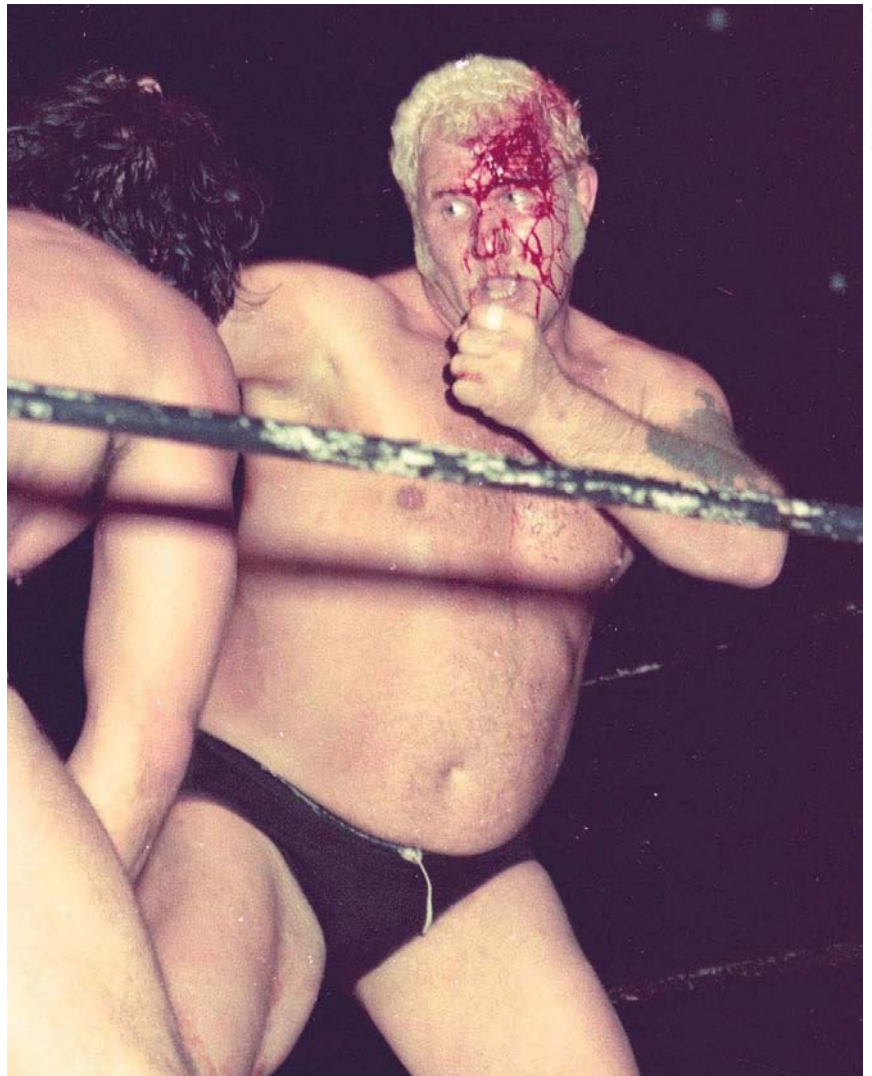
Even if the version of Terry Funk that existed for the first decade or so of his career was more subdued than that which came later, he always had that same air about him that informed everything he did in wrestling, from the way he moved to how he sold, and his style on promos.

"I would lump it into one thing: personality," Brisco analysed. "The guy just had it all, personality-wise. Promo-wise, he could insult you and make you laugh at the same time. Work-wise, he could piss you off and make you cheer at the same time. But personality, you've got to have a personality to be Terry Funk; you can't just go, 'Hey you, be Terry Funk!' You can't do it, y'know? You could go be Harley Race; go be a badass Harley Race and take bumps. You can go be a Ric Flair and style and profile and be a slick son of a gun. You can be that. But you can't be Terry Funk."

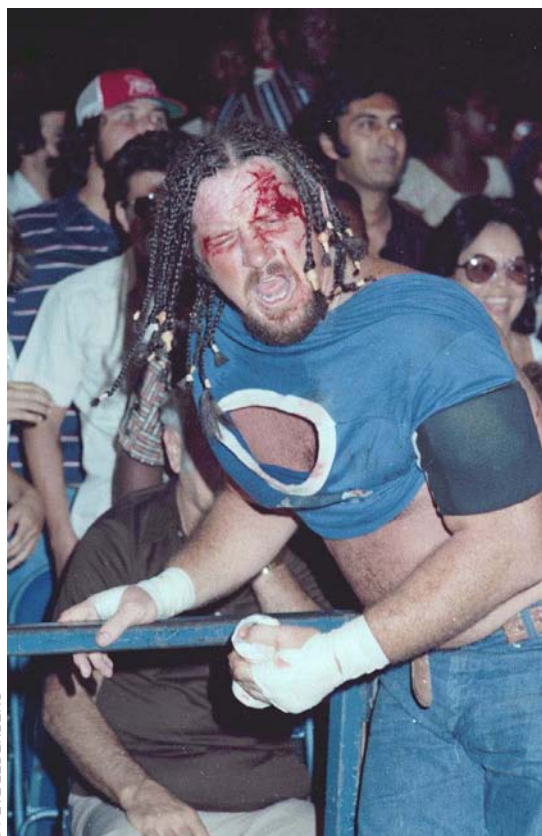
Of course, a good reason for that was that the guy you got on TV was the real Terry Funk, more or less.

"I've been so many places with Terry, but some of my favourite memories are in Japan with Terry," Brisco fondly recalled. He then spoke of one instance in which they were in the midst of a long tour and on a boat trip to work two spot shows on an island with an active volcano. There wasn't much to do for two non-Japanese speakers in the small town, but that didn't stop them.

"We're walking down the damn street, and all of a sudden, Terry pushes me on the damn shoulder and



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According to Jerry Brisco, portraying a badass like Harley Race was considerably easier than showing the personality of Terry Funk

Funk often reinvented himself, and showed a remarkable knack for knowing when to do so

**"I feel it, and I know it, and I know it has to be changed - and I change! I always changed with the times"**

knocks me over. He says, 'Look over there, Brisco!' I look over there and see a goddamn junkyard! I say, 'What is it, like a Japanese Brisco Brothers' Body Shop? That what you're thinking?' He says, 'No, look at the old motorcycles piled up there! Let's see if we can buy one!'

The junkyard owner spoke no English, so their dialogue consisted of Terry pantomiming, making "vroom vroom" noises, and flashing a wad of cash. This motivated the owner to piece something together, so Brisco piped in to make sure he could get one as well.

"So, Terry and I bought motorcycles on that damn island. I think we paid about 50 bucks apiece. Two big ass Americans driving around on junkyard motorcycles; an Okie and a Texan who don't know where they're going, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, on two motorcycles. The good thing about it is it's an island, so you can't really get lost."

They spent the night after the first show riding around, violating a 9pm curfew and a noise ordinance. They behaved the following evening, and then it was time to leave on the third day, so they drove the bikes up to the boat.

"I decide I'm gonna give mine to one of the boys, and be a babyface. You know what Terry Funk's gonna do with his? Take a wild guess. He's gonna drive the damn thing into the ocean and jump off on the dock right before it goes in! (laughs)

"That's one of my Japan stories that I *can* tell about Terry, and I've got a bunch more."

## FORWARD THINKER

Perhaps more than anything else, Terry Funk has always had a reputation for an incredible mind for the wrestling business. That covers everything from booking to in-ring psychology to promos to presentation to evaluating trends and anticipating massive sea changes in the business. For example, he and his brother got out of promoting while their territory was still going strong because he saw the effect national television would have on it. Brisco recalled one moment along those lines that really stuck out to him, but it came just a few years ago.

"Y'know, when Jack and I decided to make our investment with Mr. McMahon [by selling shares in Georgia Championship Wrestling in 1984], we got a tremendous amount of heat, and hatred, and dislike, and threats from several of our peers who we thought were our friends. We thought we did it the proper way, and people who do their research and find out how we did it, they'll find out we did it the proper way. But anyway, that's besides the point. I'm sitting on a bus, going to the biggest show in the history of our business, *WrestleMania XXIX* in New York City at Giants Stadium. I'm sitting right across the aisle from Terry Funk, we're having a good time, in a conversation, bullshitting, and out of the blue, Terry looks at me. He says, 'You know what?' I say, 'What, Terry?' He said, 'You and your brother made the right goddamned decision.' I said, 'What are you talking about?' He said, "When you guys decided to sell out to Vince. I just wanted to tell you that." I said, 'Terry, that means the damned world to me. Thank you so much.' And it does.

"[It's the] greatest compliment I've ever had."



Funk showed his wrestling acumen in how he constantly reinvented himself over the years, in terms of his look and wrestling style. That's something that he chalks up to instinct more than anything else.

"I feel it, and I know it, and I know it has to be changed - and I change! And I always changed with the times. It's not like looking in the mirror and saying, 'Geez, you need to have a moustache on' or 'You need to look a little bit stupider than you do' or 'Get your haircut, Funk' or whatever. It's not that, it's instinct."

His ability to go with his gut is something that's a necessary part of him.

"You cannot really put a definition on instinct. You just feel it. You just know it. You know it's time. Like that song: (sings) 'You know when to hold 'em...' That's the truth, but it's instinct that tells you that - not by the look of the cards, that's pretty common. But instinct in the wrestling business, and being with it since I was five years old, that makes the difference. It gives me that instinct; it gives me ability to go ahead and tell somebody, 'Y'know, I've had failures, too, believe me, but to know what I'm doing, how to draw money, how to draw people, how to draw a crowd. I have that ability, and always will have that ability, because wrestling is my life, and has been my entire life, from age zero to 70.'

"And I truly believe that, from the bottom of my heart."

*After being inducted with his brother in 2009, Terry Funk did the honours for Mick Foley at the WWE Hall of Fame in 2013*