

# “IF YOU BUILD IT...”

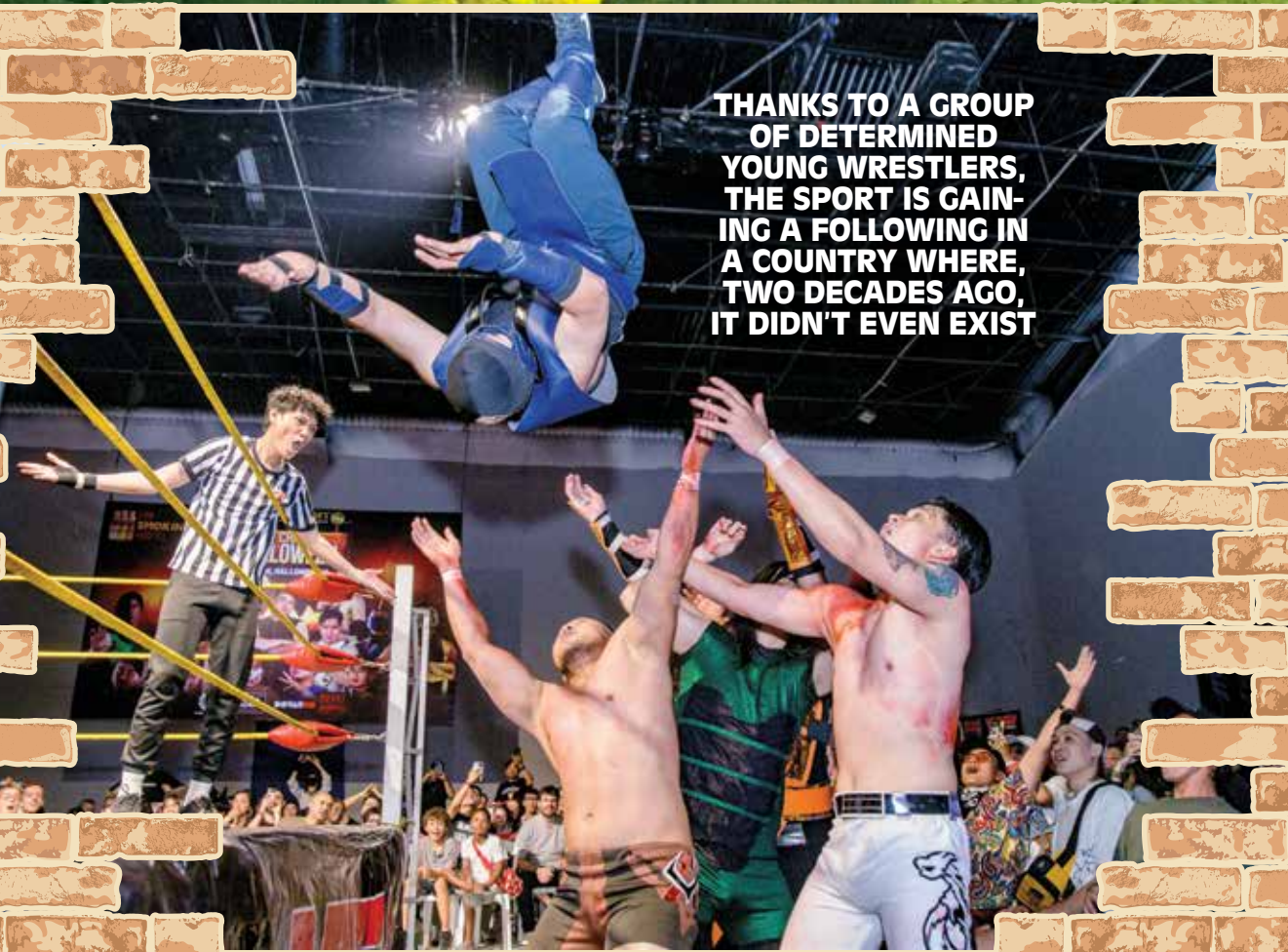
## A HISTORY OF VIETNAM PRO WRESTLING

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
AURÉLIEN FOUCAULT

**T**HE PATH TO becoming a pro wrestler is not an easy one, yet it is a dream shared by many around the world. A top physical form, high resistance to pain, and unbreakable will power are not enough. You also need access to training, to meet the right people, and to possibly attend tryouts—in hopes of entering one of the many professional wrestling promotions in the U.S. But what if you live in a place where wrestling is virtually unknown? And where there are simply no pro wrestling promotions?

Most of our teenage selves would jump on beds, wrestle with our buddies in the sand, show off our gimmicks in

Seeking to be like the performers he saw on WWE TV, Vietnamese wrestler Rocky Huynh joined up with his friends to learn the craft and start a promotion of their own. From its humble roots, VPW is quickly becoming an international league of note.



THANKS TO A GROUP OF DETERMINED YOUNG WRESTLERS, THE SPORT IS GAINING A FOLLOWING IN A COUNTRY WHERE, TWO DECADES AGO, IT DIDN'T EVEN EXIST

front of a bathroom mirror ... before moving on to becoming an accountant or a doctor. Because we've all got bills to pay and, you know, parents.

Well, giving up was not part of Rocky Huynh's vocabulary. In his native town of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, most people had never heard of professional wrestling, and there was not a single promotion in the whole country of more than 80 million people.

Huynh remembers discovering pro wrestling in 2003, at age 9, on a WWE VCD (an ancestor of the DVD, popular in Asia after the heyday of VHS tapes) that his cousin had rented. He was immediately entranced by the spectacle of it all, so he went on a quest looking for other videos. At the time, he says, there were only 10 different WWE VCDs available in Vietnam. Then came cable TV, and, with it, the possibility to watch the Thai True Sport channel, which would air WWE shows on a two-week delay. He would follow those assiduously for years.

These were also the glory days of online forums and chat rooms. So, Huynh started connecting with other wrestling enthusiasts across Vietnam and the neighboring countries. They would exchange and watch online shows and livestreams together, and Huynh was happy to see he was not alone in his love for wrestling.

He kept waiting for someone to start a promotion or open a school until one day, after graduation, when he grew tired of waiting ... and decided to take the matter into his own hands.

It all started in November 2015 with his school friend, now known as CVP, and the one who would become his co-star, Sid Nguyen, the “Prince Of Wrestling.” They would train and wrestle in the playgrounds under the name of Saigon Pro Wrestling Club (SPWC). Thanks to online forums and Facebook, interest grew organically. Many people joined only to leave soon after, realizing the hard work and training





**"The King" CVP, who was a schoolmate of Huynh, is another VPW original, dating back to the promotion's salad days as Saigon Pro Wrestling Club.**

involved, which weren't as glamorous as the TV performances they knew. But some stayed, and the club grew, with many still on the roster today: An D ("The National Treasure"), Rykioh, Damien Wolfe, Lê Tyler, and Phong Trần.

Those who stayed would train each other, exchanging the little they knew, learning from YouTube videos and whatever they could get their hands on. That was until they heard of a group of Japanese wrestlers who had opened a wrestling school in the city of Da Nang. Rocky Huynh tried to get in touch with that group, only to learn that the school failed, due to a lack of students.

But then, Huynh got the info of a man now widely regarded as the "Sensei" of Vietnam Pro Wrestling, respected by all: Japanese wrestler Fugo Fugo Yumeji. Yumeji is a



**Veteran Japanese wrestler Fugo Fugo Yumeji has played a critical role in helping the burgeoning Vietnamese pro wrestling scene.**



**Tag team champs The Mystic Warriors (Rykioh & Xiumin) show off their title belts to challengers Hy Draco & Kira. SPWC/VPW has come a long way from its grassroots origins, gradually adding crucial details such as championship belts, a proper ring, and wrestling gear—much of which, at least in the early days, was made by the Warriors themselves.**

seasoned pro wrestler who fell in love with the Vietnamese martial art Vovinam (also known as Viet Vo Dao) and regularly visited the country to practice. He has since become a master of Vovinam and has even opened a school in Japan.

When Yumeji heard of these young men trying so hard to get wrestling off the ground in Vietnam, he came to see them and offer his help. With his expertise, the group was able to refine their technique, practice more safely, and deepen their understanding of the essence of wrestling. His guidance further strengthened their resolve.

The young wrestlers took a trip to Singapore to connect with the Singapore Pro Wrestling promotion and learn from its shows. Huynh also went to perform in Thailand, where he got the idea of doing wrestling shows on judo mats in the absence of a proper ring.

SPWC presented its first free show in 2018, in front of 25 people. Despite the low turnout, word of mouth took hold. And, in September of the same year, SPWC was able to put on its first ticketed show. Saturday Showdown would draw 100 paying fans.

Tickets at the time cost 50,000 dong (slightly more than 2 USD) and were hand-delivered by the wrestlers themselves, after university classes or work. SPWC was soon ready to organize other shows.

After learning that most Asian promotions had their championship belts made in Pakistan, SPWC got one of its own. Sid Nguyen was crowned the first openweight champion in a triple-threat match.

More shows followed, and the group started welcoming international guests—including the Chinese promotion Middle Kingdom Wrestling, and its American-born former champion, Zombie Dragon.

Interest in pro wrestling was growing, and the SPWC was becoming more professional. The promotion had bookers, belts, and costumes (many of them handmade by the Mystic Warriors tag team, Rykioh & Xiumin). But it was still producing shows on judo mats, pretending to bounce against invisible ropes. Something had to be done.

In the beginning of 2020, Rocky Huynh got the help of Vietnamese-American Viva Van, a star independent wrestler, and current champion





Rocky Huynh hits Da Butcher with an impressive diving cutter.

of six promotions. She created a crowdfunding campaign for SPWC to finally get an actual wrestling ring. She represented SPWC in the

U.S. and had a donation box at the merch table of every show to help the Vietnamese wrestlers get to the next level.

As Vietnam Pro Wrestling has grown, wrestlers have traveled from other countries to be part of its shows: Crystal, who hails from the Philippines, attempts to wear down Singapore grappler Alexis Friggin' Lee with a sleeperhold.



The target was reached after five weeks, and the first-ever Vietnam wrestling ring went into production. The builder the group found in Vietnam knew how to make boxing rings but had never seen a pro wrestling ring. Huynh went and took photos of rings abroad (Singapore, China, Thailand) to show the maker the differences and important details.

In May 2020, the last judo mat show took place, and Huynh announced this was officially

the last SPWC show ever held; the league would now be called Vietnam Pro Wrestling.

The brand-new ring was unveiled at the VPW: UPGRADE show in July of the same year. Then, with COVID ravaging the globe, the world's smaller promotions went into an indefinite pause mode.

Fortunately, VPW returned stronger than ever in 2022, with the new ring, a new host/presenter in the form of Xavier Patricks (aka X-Pat), and strong sponsors such as Heart of Darkness Brewery and Saigon Charlie's hot sauce. The Saturday Showdown show in September 2022 marked an incredible milestone with more than 400 tickets sold at 250,000 VND apiece—five times the ticket price of the first SPWC show in 2008.

This show finally saw VPW obtain the government license that it had been coveting since 2016, allowing the wrestlers to organize future events without fears of being fined or having them shut down by the police.

With a roster now 18 grapplers strong, VPW hosts international guests regularly, and

recently offered Vietnam its first-ever women's wrestling match between Alexis Friggin' Lee (Singapore) and Crystal (Philippines) to great applause.

When asked about the future, Rocky Huynh explains he would like to open a school where young wrestlers can train. He would love to take his roster across the country and abroad. And, hopefully soon, he wants to be able to devote himself 100% to his craft and make a living from it.

Indeed, Vietnam's first professional wrestler—and one of the most beloved stars of VPW—is still a Moto Taxi driver by day. But he most certainly is the only such driver in the world whose signature move, the running knee, hits all obstacles in the face with such force. With passion and hard work, Huynh has done the improbable, bringing pro wrestling to a nation where it was basically unheard of, and proving the dreams of a 9-year-old and his friends could become a reality.

Will any of the American promotions dare come and challenge the rising stars of VPW? ■

VPW cofounder Sid Nguyen lifts fellow mainstay "The National Treasure" An D for a vertical suplex, as a packed house looks on. The continual improvement in live attendance bodes well for the future of pro wrestling in Vietnam.

