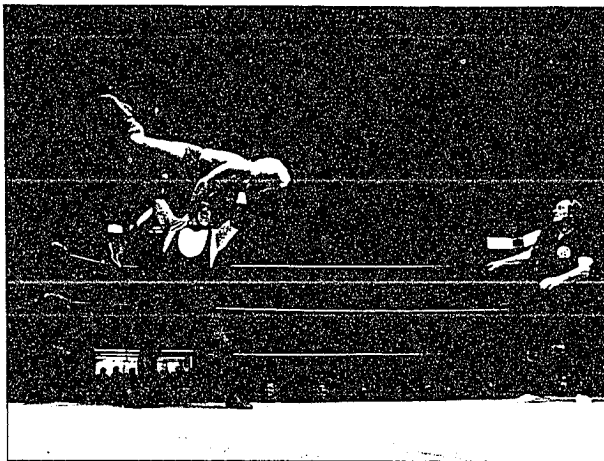


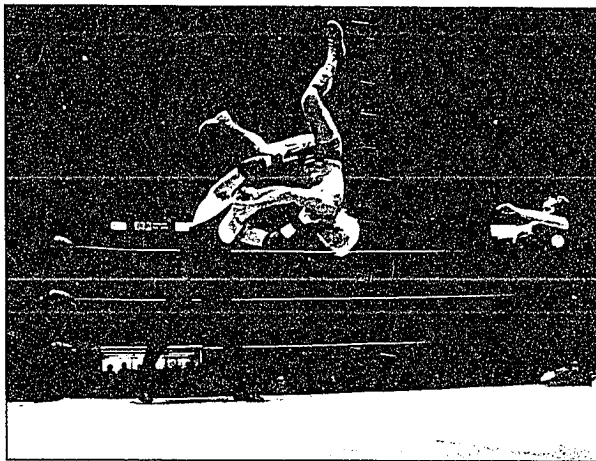
MOM, APPLE PIE & WRESTLING

Michael DavisMike Klingeman

The Sun (1837-1994); Mar 24, 1985; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Sun
pg. SM10



Sgt. Slaughter has Nature Boy where he wants him . . .



. . . throwing him over in a controlled flip . . .

By Michael Davis and Mike Klingeman

MOM, APPLE PIE & WRESTLING

The Civic Center has been awash in villainy for almost two hours. At 9:45 p.m. on a Saturday, America is on the ropes again, and from his \$9 seat, Yard Dog decides he just can't take it any more.

This is what he sees:

During a tag-team match, a feral-looking Nikita Koloff is pounding the bejeebers out of Dusty Rhodes, a.k.a. the American Dream. Koloff is using a chain. Outside the ring, Ivan Koloff glares, Rasputin-like, at the crowd, growling something which sounds like Cookie Monster speaking English backwards. The crowd does not like this. It would like the Koloffs nuked.

"Shut up, you ——— commie! USA! USA! USA!"

Michael Davis is sports editor of The Evening Sun. Mike Klingeman is a sportswriter for The Evening Sun.

Cue Yard Dog, who, in an unpremeditated wave of patriotism, hurls himself ringside like an MX missile and sprays the contents of his soda cup on the suspect Russians.

Yard Dog, a scruffy biker type, is immediately hustled off by four security men. His army fatigues disappear behind a moving patch of blue. But he is remembered by someone in the crowd.

"You got 'em, Yard Dog, you uneducated moron, you! USA! USA! USA!"

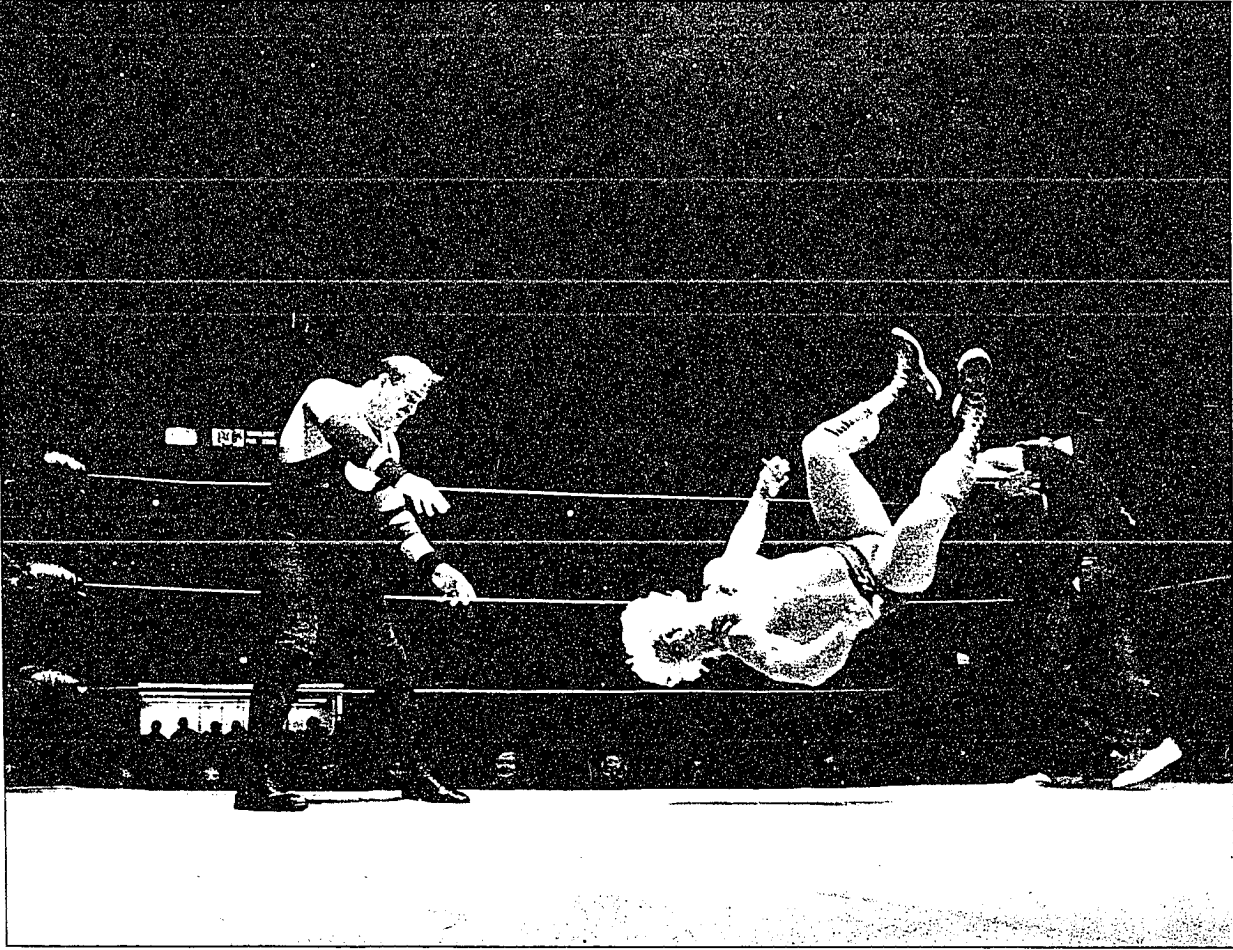
The crescendo of tired Olympic cheers builds from this blue-collar anvil chorus. It's Oriole Section 34, cubed.

"These folks are Working Class Only; ain't nobody here with a whole lot of money," says Ralph Herndon, a 310-pound house detective who, in blue coveralls, looks like a black Haystacks Calhoun. He came from Washington for the show, and is sitting amid an odd melange of skullcaps and USA hats, of Meade High School lettermen's

jackets and Iron Maiden T-shirts. The kids say professional wrestling is camp, sort of like "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" with C-minus choreography.

Nearer the ring, a man and woman are sharing french fries. The fries and their hair are identical colors: half-black, half-brown. Behind them, a middle-aged, greased-back Elvis cheers his T-shirt's namesake: The Boogie Woogie Man.

The Boogie Woogie Man, a.k.a. Jimmy Valiant, has long blond hair and the name Chewbacca on the seat of his pants. He and his tag-team partner, Bob Backlund, are Good. Their opponents are Evil. They are Billy Graham, who is bald, and the Barbarian. What seem to be pulsating corpuscles atop Graham's skull make his pate look like a half-finished lobotomy, or \$2.29 ground round. "You could have nightmares about the way the top of his head looks," says Oriole announcer Tom Marr, who is ringside.



... and sending him hurtling to the mat.

Photos by David Harp

The Barbarian, less repugnant, is wearing a choke collar, with studs, and has the equivalent of a large black tarantula painted over one eye.

The Good are not amused. The Boogie Woogie Man calls them slimy dogs, and groins both within a five-second span. Good triumphs, in 10:13, less time than it probably took to apply the Barbarian's makeup.

Grace Johnson, 59, is ecstatic. She lives in Westminster and arrived by bus. Mrs. Johnson likes wrestling for "the excitement, the men." From her second-row seat, she has had both. Once, Backlund gave her a sweaty hug, staining her blouse with his blood. Her granddaughter, Kathy Watson, swooned over the blouse and traded for it. Mrs. Johnson got the flowered knit sweater she always wanted; three years later, Miss Watson still hasn't washed the blouse.

Last year, Mrs. Johnson — a great-grandmother — was hit with a chair thrown by the Samoans. She received only a sprained knee, but now her 3-

year-old grandson Maurice, nicknamed Bam-Bam, balks at attending the matches, "because Nana got hurt."

Others are taunting the wrestlers, hoping for their own badge of courage. Fred Creutzer of Parkville — Dr. X to the crowd — wears a white mask with a black X and barks insults at the ring, like some yippy chihuahua who gets underfoot. Too often, he succeeds. George (the Animal) Steele, who has a green tongue, once chased him up the aisle. "I've been spit at, called names and grabbed," says Mr. Creutzer, who works in a Mars supermarket freezer.

Dr. X has an American flag in his pocket. It is there to pay tribute, not to tease. "This is for Sgt. Slaughter," he says softly. "He shook my hand at the Capital Centre; he's U.S. of A. all the way."

As Slaughter's match approaches, the flags multiply, and Mickey O'Shea becomes more visible. In his Sunny's Surplus uniform, Mr. O'Shea is a scaled-down clone of Sgt. Slaughter. He has the

same mustache, same hair (short and bald on top), same look (a pouting frown with jutting jaw). Mr. O'Shea, who is from Randallstown, looks so much like Slaughter that the Iron Sheik took a swipe at him last year.

□

The Saturday night security detail earns its pay at the Civic Center. They're often abused by the customers ("Chicken-head biters and geeks," is how one guard described the crowd) and often abusive. Wrestling shows are their anathema. Says one guard: "If wrestling were the only thing on TV, I'd turn on the radio."

With courage fueled by alcohol in excess, one sorry patron recently transgressed the tenuous yet perceptible breach between spectator and performer. "Didn't take an instant before Rowdy Roddy Piper saw the guy coming toward the ring," says Larry Beatty, a world-weary shock

were dragging the sucker away." Wrestling's most unfortunate moments occur when spectators blur the distinctions between fantasy and reality; when they begin to take all the raging bull from ringside too seriously.

The wrestlers certainly don't. Backstage the performers have been known to kibitz, chain-smoke and share stories of their children and the lonely road, not unlike long-haul drivers at a 66 truck stop. They are serious only about two things: per-

forming well and avoiding injury. (A wrestler recently dodged a misfired dart aimed toward the Civic Center ring by a fan. "It landed right at my feet," said usher Bob Greco. "I still have the dart at home.")

"The truth is, wrestlers are intelligent, approachable, rational, real people . . . and great athletes," says 30-year-old promoter Gary Juster, a backstage heavyweight in the National Wrestling Alliance. "We don't have a high percentage of Rhodes Scholars, but we don't have a high percentage of illiterates, either."

"When problems arise in arenas, it always strikes me the reason is the wrestlers are professionals while the fans are not," he says.

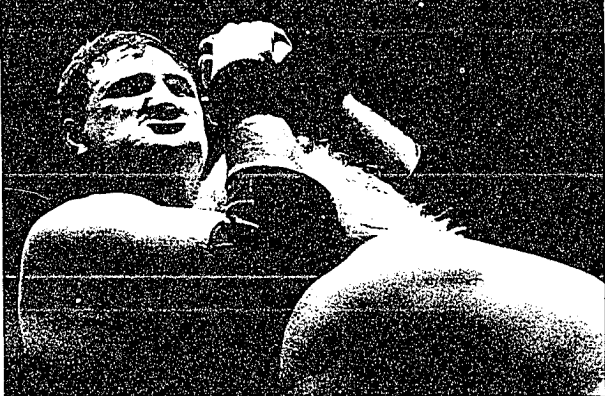
Often a fan incident can change the course of the evening's script. "A villain who senses things are getting out of control will take a fall quickly and end the match," says Gerald Morton, an English and drama professor at Auburn University-Montgomery, who was co-author on the recently published tome "Wrestling to Rasslin'" (Popular Press, Bowling Green State University). "They won't mess around. These guys have been shot at and stabbed before by fans, so they must always take precautions to protect themselves from some fans. But they must do it in such a way as to not turn off the rest of the audience."

No one is more aware of the crowd's visceral ebb and flow than Slaughter, the 36-year-old, 6-foot-6, 305-pound ersatz marine.

Government records reveal Slaughter, a.k.a. Robert Remus, never served time in the U.S. Marine Corps, though he claims to have been a drill instructor from 1966 to 1973. Slaughter dodges all questions about his armed service record — for good reason.

"We've been 'interested' in Slaughter for a couple of years, since he began using our paraphernalia, but the guy has been very elusive," says Capt. Jay Farrar, of the Public Affairs Office of the U.S. Marine Headquarters in Washington. Captain Farrar's office has received 50 complaints in the past year from true-blue marines, citing Slaughter's abuse of the uniform. "What they really didn't like — and we know of two such cases — is when his opponents staged attacks on people wearing dress blue uniforms, whom we strongly believe were not marines. Then Slaughter came in and rescued the guys."

However, the USMC could do little (until last fall, when Congress passed a law prohibiting the use of the Marine Corps emblem and insignia by civilians). "That gave us recourse to fight back," says Captain Farrar, whose office fired off a letter demanding that Slaughter stop because his actions "reflect discredit on those who have served." Neither Slaughter nor his former Connecticut agent, Mark Sotichek, ever



Slaughter holds Nature Boy in a head lock.

replied.

"Our next step is to try and get the U.S. attorney's office involved," says Captain Farrar. "From a public relations standpoint, it may not be worth the effort. You've got to look at this broad-minded Sgt. Slaughter isn't a bad guy. He's trying to uphold good things. But he's abusing something that marines hold near and dear to us, just for showmanship."

Slaughter's response? "We have no comment on that," said Maria Passerelli, his secretary-booking agent in Westport, Conn.

Slaughter was born August 27, 1948, and grew up in Eden Prairie, Minn., a southwest suburb of Minneapolis. From all reports he was an unremarkable (save for his stature), well-mannered student at Eden Prairie High.

Slaughter is recalled fondly by John Ryski, his football line coach, as being "a quiet, shy kid who didn't particularly like contact sports at first. He was never muscular, but from his sophomore year on he was awfully big and awfully strong." Legend has it "Big Bob" broke off an arm of a seven-man practice sled one day. "Aw, it was rusted," Mr. Ryski remembers him saying.

After high school Slaughter worked for his father's roofing business and then became a barber. He broke into wrestling in 1974 after attending a camp in Minnesota run by ex-wrestler Verne Gagne. That was back in a time when the military was in disfavor. Now, Slaughter is cresting majestically on the country's current nationalistic wave. Slaughter appealed to Republican leaders — to no avail — to allow him to recite the Pledge of Allegiance at an Inaugural Ball last January. "If Mr. T can be Santa Claus at the White House, then Sgt. Slaughter ought to be allowed to recite the Pledge," he reasoned.

Thanks to geopolitics and the na-

tion's jingoistic frenzy, the Slaughter character, a Bad Guy turned Good Guy, has become, in effect, an American Phenomenon. (Expect the story in *USA Today* soon.) "It's nice to walk down the aisle now and have people shaking my hand instead of spitting on me," he says. "That abuse gets old."

Since its earliest days, the plotlines of wrestling's passion play have been directed by political and cultural swings.

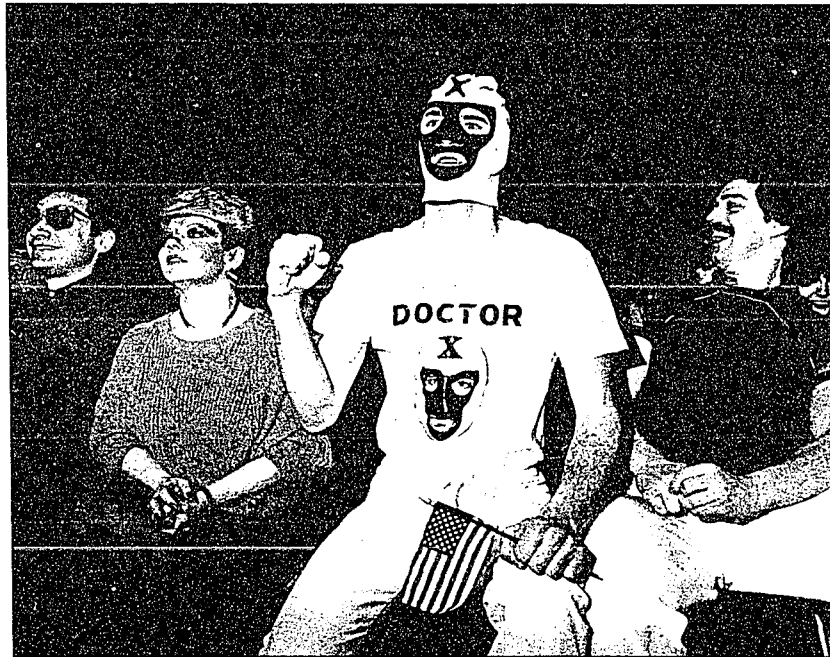
"After World War II, the sneaky Japanese and the Nazi Germans were standard villains," says Morton. "Now, new national foes like the Iranians and the Russians have given birth to new confrontations."

You can't attend a wrestling card these days and not expect to find bogus Russian villains, like Ivan and Nikita Koloff or Nikolai Volkoff, scheduled in a feature match. The dreaded 305-pound Volkoff, who regularly is pelted with produce, begins each match by singing "Hymn of the Soviet Union," the Soviet national anthem, in a voice that Ray Diding-er of the *Philadelphia Daily News* wrote "would clear Red Square on May Day."

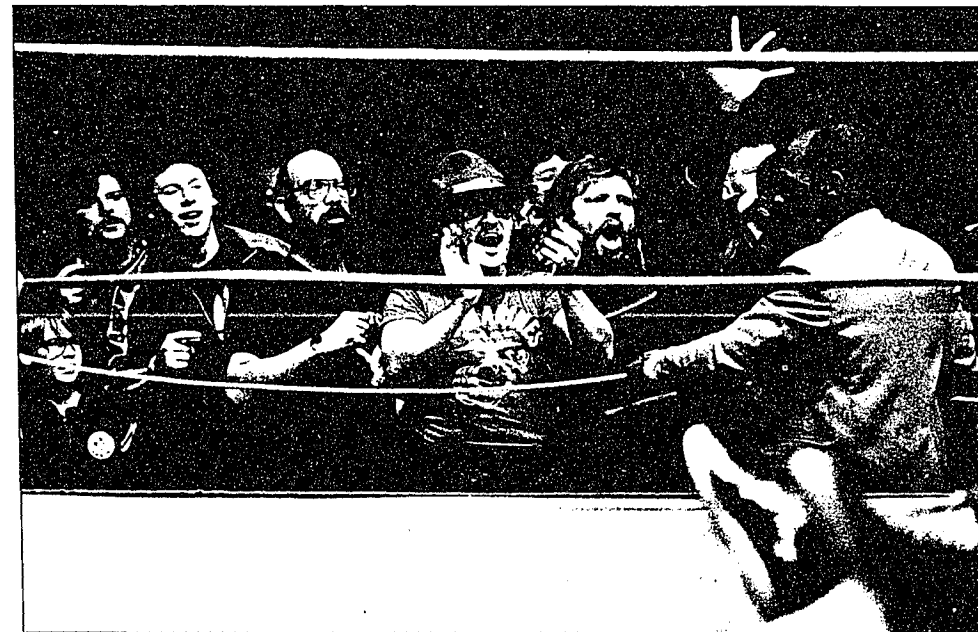
Thus, the satisfactions of pro wrestling in these nationalistic times are lip-smacking good to commonfolk: They not only see us win the battle of the Superpowers at ringside, they witness a character like Sgt. Slaughter twist Uncle Ivan's arm until he says "uncle."

As Morton told the *Los Angeles Times*: "Wrestling is such a broad spectacle or drama, it plays itself out like a soap opera does. It can change quickly to react to current events. It is not confined by intellectual concerns and it can do what its audience wants it to do."

"Wrestling will put in the ring the representation of our greatest nightmares and then try to destroy them."



Above, Fred Creutzer, a.k.a. Dr. X, cheers on the wrestlers. At right, youngster at ringside clutches American flag. Patriotism is a major theme of many wrestling matches.



Fans cheer defeat of Nature Boy (his feet can be seen lower right).

That's why people go, because they're willing to buy that. Evil is simple enough for them that it can be represented. It's cathartic."

Slaughter crossed the metaphysical brink between Evil and Good on a night in 1983 when he overpowered the Iron Sheik in Allentown, Pa., a pig-iron city where the scars of unemployment are all too visible. It was the perfect setting for the fiery eruption that would propel Slaughter clear out of Hades. Or Allentown, at least.

The moment of transmutation was both preposterous and ingenious. Promoters had claimed that the Iron Sheik, a sizzly fiend who formerly fought as the Sheik, presumably in his pre-Geritol days, was descended from a line of wild-eyed Iranians. He was said to be a distant cousin of the "kooks who had held Our Boys hostage in Eye-ran!"

Before the match, the Iron Sheik waved a flag bearing the likeness of Aya-

Allah Ruhollah Khomeini. Slaughter countered by unfurling Old Glory and unlocking the gates of wrath. "I stood up for America that night," says Slaughter, "just like everybody in the hall wanted to."

Ever since, it's been the Sgt.'s stripes forever pounding in the hearts of his legion fans. He gets fan mail by the gunnysack delivered to the Connecticut headquarters of Cobra Inc. USA, Slaughter's corporate barracks. Fathers line up to have their sons photographed with him. "Mothers have asked him to baptize their babies, and others swear he has healing powers," says Passerelli, who books Slaughter's travel, answers the mail and fields the ever-growing commercial offers being thrust his way.

Examples? This year, Hasbro Industries discussed creating Sgt. Slaughter action figures as part of the G.I. Joe merchandise line. Slaughter, a budding recording artist, already has cut a 45 on the Camouflage label and intends to follow with an album. ("He wants to do a couple of ballads and a few recital numbers," says Passerelli, who would not disclose whether Slaughter's warblings recall John Wayne or Wayne Newton.)

Slaughter says he worked every day of 1984, except New Year's Eve and Christmas Eve, and will allow no letup in '85. "The only states I haven't wrestled in are Alabama and Utah," he says with regret. "But I'll be appearing in Salt Lake City soon . . . and I've invited the whole Osmond family to come out!"

Spend an hour with Sgt. Slaughter and you walk away wondering where his act begins and ends, since he seems to slip in and out of his public persona easily. "It's like a politician, or anyone else who comes in contact with the public," says promoter Juster. "You hear the adulation all the time, and after awhile you begin to believe it all."

Slaughter says he is a patriot and "a throwback to the old-time athlete. I don't smoke, I don't do drugs and I drink only occasionally." He says he often speaks to school groups and has worked with the disadvantaged. He has helped raise money for the restoration of the Statue of Liberty.

He appears to have a heart proportionate to his massive frame. He says he is a favorite son of Vietnam veterans, and that the sunglasses he always has on his person were among the personal effects of a serviceman who was killed in Southeast Asia. They were given to Slaughter by the man's school-age son in Atlanta.

Clearly, he has a soft spot for young people. This night, he would pose for snapshots with two young boys, minutes before entering the ring. "He is a good kids' person," says Larry Beatty, the medic. "I've seen him stop and give autographs to children at almost the moment he steps out of the ring. If I had just spent 20 minutes in the ring with a 400-pound guy who was acting like he wanted to make 8 ounces of orange juice out of me, I'm not sure I would be ready to talk to anybody for a while."

For his labors, both in and out of the ring, Slaughter likely will make an estimated \$250,000 to \$500,000 this year, vaulting him into wrestling's select company of perhaps a dozen millionaires-in-the-making. He took an Andre the Giant-sized step toward financial independence recently by breaking away contractually from second-generation promoter Vince McMahon, whose World Wrestling Federation is by far the country's most powerful.

The wrestling industry, which generates an estimated \$250 million annually, thrives in what sociologists might call a closed society. Its leaders operate in virtual obscurity, their movements all but undetected. As with the mob, secrets just don't leak easily. "If only our CIA were as controlled and enclosed," sighs author Morton, "our country would be in better shape."

"And when you understand the jockeying that goes on between the three top promoters [Juster's NWA, McMahon's WWF and the Midwest's American Wrestling Alliance] you can begin to see how vicious this business can be," he says.

Wrestling, the nation's No. 3 spectator sport behind auto racing and horse racing, has been a consistent draw for decades. But the sport is in the midst of a giddy television resurgence, thanks to cable TV in gen-

eral and MTV in particular. Three of the top 10 programs on cable during October were wrestling shows on either the USA Network or Superstation WTBS, according to *Advertising Age*. MTV and McMahon have formed a marriage of convenience, co-promoting wildly successful rock 'n' roll challenge matches at Madison Square Garden and elsewhere.

In February, MTV promoted and televised "the war to settle the score," a comic book come to life, before a Garden sellout of 22,000. Like Popeye defending Olive Oyl, WWF champion Hulk Hogan — upholding the dignity of that flower of maidenly virtue, Cyndi Lauper — fought to a draw against the evening's Bluto, Rowdy Roddy Piper. What prompted these wrestling vidyots to duel was Piper's effrontery of breaking one of Lauper's gold records over the head of Capt. Lou Albano. The latter, a former wrestler-turned-manager, played Lauper's overweight and overwrought father in the Lauper video, "Girls Just Want To Have Fun."

The WWF claims that "35 percent of all young people in America, 18 to 34, are proud to call themselves wrestling fans." MTV, which wants to be the nation's purveyor of sex, song and sock, believes if you have wrestling in your soul, it's likely you have rock — or is it rocks? — in your head.

There is a distinction between the wrestling spectator and the wrestling viewer. An *Advertising Age* survey in July revealed 45 percent of the cable TV viewers were 18 to 34. Fourteen percent attended college, 13 percent earn more than \$40,000 a year and 11 percent are professionals. Watching wrestling on cable has almost become a Yuppie holy obligation.

Wrestling whips college basketball by a 3-to-1 margin in the ratings on USA Network, and the audience appears to be growing. The nation's No. 1 cable show is USA's "Wrestling TNT," a bizarre wrestling news-and-talk show taped in Owings Mills. It is what TV would be like if the Bomb fell and mutants took over the stations.

The TNT set is so tacky it

could trap horseflies. It has the standard desk, couch and urban backdrop of the "Tonight" show, but the Manhattan skyline hanging behind host Vince McMahon appears to have been fashioned by somebody's Cub Scout den mother.

TNT's patter is so vulgar and brainless it inspired critic James P. Breig of the *Long Island Catholic* to write: "Picture Johnny Carson on steroids and with a lobotomy and you have some idea of what TNT is like." But the Friday night show is seen in 1.4 million homes weekly and is considered a white-hot TV property.

Why? Because it has a unique sense of chaos. Last fall, they televised the nation's first triple-ring ceremony. Wrestlers Butcher Paul Vachon and Diane Page exchanged vows on the mat, then they exchanged blows with some of the invited guests, including the Wild Samoans. It degenerated into a brawl, climaxing with the lovely bride being pelted with a coconut cream pie. She got her just desserts.

Slaughter, whom some merchandisers see as an alabaster Mr. T, is himself a made-for-TV caricature. When time allows he continues to make local TV car-dealership commercials, as he does for Larry's Chevrolet, for small truckloads of money. There has been talk of including the Sgt. Slaughter character in a Saturday morning action cartoon show.

"Sgt. Slaughter knows the time is right to make it now while he can," says author Morton. "In wrestling, anything can happen. He could get injured and have his career ended overnight. And you always have to worry about the fans. They are fickle, and could turn on him at any time."

This night, at a stop in Baltimore, in a match for "the NWA championship of the world," the fans are turned on to him.

□

The Sarge enters first, marching in to "The Marine Hymn" and glad-handing like a politician. Mickey O'Shea gets his wildest wish: The two Sgt. Slaughters face and salute one another.

There are pockets of nate. Someone yells, "Hey, Gomer!" A placard reads, Slaughter the Sergeant. These people are craning to see Ric Flair, a.k.a. Nature Boy, the champion who rides in on an electronic carpet of rock music, in a long white robe with pink sequined butterflies. The hair is platinum. He is Barry Manilow-brow.

Unperturbed by the dazzle, the Sgt. begins to disrobe: first the hat, then the shirt, which he hurls at the darkened crowd. It is caught by a man in the eighth row. What will he do with the keepsake? "Wash it first," says Jerry Allen.

The match begins, and it is the Sgt. who has the upper hand. His hand is in Flair's hair, messing about as if searching for fleas. Nature Boy feigns insult, and a moment later he is parallel with the floor, caught in a headlock and kicking his feet like a 6-year-old who has to go to the bathroom. Bad.

But Flair gets up, as he must, and whacks the challenger's throat with karate chops — once, twice, three times. Then he throws the Sgt. out of the ring, where he lays at the feet of ageless Lena Warner, of Glen Burnie. "Get in there, you jackass you!" screams Mrs. Warner, who makes a menacing gesture toward him. Three ushers move in on Warner. The Sgt. recovers.

But what is this, blood? Is the Sgt. bleeding? The ooze cues the chant.

"USA! USA! USA!"

Now Nature Boy has the Sgt. in a headlock, and his face is purple, and a marine in a Camp Hansen T-shirt is screaming, and Mickey O'Shea's sunglasses are steaming. First the hockey team in Sarajevo, and now this?

But the Sgt. breaks free, and delivers the Slaughter Cannon, which is like a triple windup by Eddie Feigner, and suddenly Nature Boy is outside the ring. And defeated.

Sgt. Slaughter raises the championship belt. Whistles blow. Fists, both white and black, go skyward, but only momentarily, because now the Sgt. has been disqualified for throwing Nature Boy out of the ring. The generic crowd reacts accordingly.

"Bull----! Bull----!"

Briefly, they tangle again in the ring, and the Sgt. parades out with a satisfied look and the belt he'll have to give back. "Flair's got more money, he paid somebody off," growls the marine from Camp Hansen. "You saw who carried the belt

out, didn't you? The Sgt's gonna get a Texas Death Match and whip him."

The crowd of nearly 6,000 isn't particularly happy, but America didn't lose. It only got screwed. There's a difference, in pro wrestling as in life.

