

# 'MASS' MEDIATED SPORT

Josh Grau and Jan Todd  
University of Texas at Austin

## ***Evolution of Sport: The Influence of Television on Professional Wrestling***

Professional wrestling's mainstream popularity ignited when television was born in the 1940s. Contemporary American sport reaches more individuals via television than on-site events; thus, television is responsible for the rise of popularity in virtually every sport. However, television has the power to alter the image of sport. Increased media coverage over time transformed professional wrestling from a classical aesthetic art form to a ritual drama in American pop culture.

This paper examines the influence of television on the world of professional wrestling, particularly the development of leagues and titles since the late 1940s. The National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) is the oldest wrestling promotion in the USA, made up of regional promotions with their own titles and several common national titles. The World Wrestling Federation (WWF) was formed in 1963 after withdrawing from the NWA. After rejoining in 1971 as a regional promotion, the WWF officially withdrew from the NWA in 1983. In the 1980s Jim Crockett, one of the main members of the NWA, bought and merged several of the larger regions into one common federation, which became known as World Championship Wrestling (WCW). In 1991, television giant Ted Turner bought Crockett's WCW, which officially withdrew from the NWA in 1993. Since the 1980s professional wrestling leagues and events, such as *WrestleMania* and *Friday Night Nitro*, have become a fixture on cable networks such as TNT and USA, and have spun off a new generation of extreme contact sports, such as American Gladiators and Ultimate Fighting.

Professional wrestling has metamorphosed from an atavistic sport into a glamorized stage show driven by television ratings and celebrity status. This paper also discusses the evolution of the American professional wrestler since the introduction of television. From Lou Thesz (1940s to 1950) to Ivan Putski (1960s-1980s) to Hulk Hogan (1980s to 1990s) to Bret Hart (1990s), the image of the wrestler has changed from athlete to superhero due to the dramatization of the media. In addition, interviews with legendary wrestlers, such as Putski and Bobby Duncam, as well as contemporary wrestlers, are used to get the perspective of the wrestler regarding the influence of television on professional wrestling.