

‘Pro wrestling is like a drug.’ Saturday night with the Bushwhackers & co



Published in 2018

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Photo: Impact Pro Wrestling

A resurgent New Zealand pro wrestling scene is seeking another shot at TV stardom. Jamie Wall heads to Mt Roskill to watch the return of the Bushwhackers, and the generation they've inspired.

There's a girl, aged about 10, sitting a few feet away from me. She's living and dying on every single thing happening in front of her. As the curtain whips open and the next smirking bad guy walks out, I can't help myself. We both rise in unison and boo the shit out of him, along with about 250 others in the Lynfield Rec Centre, Mt Roskill.

The big event is Kiwi As, Mate, an [Impact Pro Wrestling](#) (IPW) presentation headlined by New Zealand wrestling's greatest ever exports, The Bushwhackers. About an hour before the lights went low, the music hit and the wrestlers entered the ring, I had been cruising around backstage. There was a great deal of excitement in the air, not just because tonight was a big deal for the promotion, but because right now pro wrestling in NZ is on the way up. On the way, maybe, to matching the glory days of the weekly television wrestling show *On The Mat*.

On The Mat has the distinction of being not only one of the longest running shows in local history, but also the first Kiwi TV product to be sold and broadcast overseas. These days it's the wrestlers themselves that are hoping to make it big on the international stage, but there is hope of local wrestling being broadcast once again on network TV.

Of course, all of them would love to emulate even a modicum of success the Bushwhackers enjoyed during the "golden era" of wrestling in the 1980s. Back then, Butch Miller and Luke Williams would compete in the likes of Madison Square Garden and other sold out arenas across North America.

This was back in the heady days of the WWF, when national stereotypes were commonplace and often offensively racist. Think crafty Asians, dastardly Soviets and barbaric Africans or Polynesians. However, due to the Bushwhackers, New Zealand got off pretty lightly – their characters were a pair of camo-panted roughnecks who marched into the ring flailing their arms above their head. And occasionally licking people.

Though both in their 70s, Butch and Luke still know how to cut a promo. I meet them after a patient line of fans gets their pictures taken with the duo, complete with their trademark tongue-poking-out pose. They've done this sort of thing a million times before, including several times this week for the likes of Radio Hauraki and *The Crowd Goes Wild*. I barely have to ask one question before both men launch into an impassioned piece to camera, detailing their career highlights and what it means to be back performing in New Zealand.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mM7BDdK_2RY

Their gravelly voices belie long careers doing it tough in and out of the ring, and it's touching to hear how much pride they have at being the only New Zealanders to be inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame. It's an honour they share with the likes of Andre The Giant, Hulk Hogan, Ric Flair and, somehow, Donald Trump.

Among the new breed of wrestlers at Kiwi As, Mate are wrestlers Mason Daniels, and "Daddy's Boy" James Shaw. The secret, they agree, lies not so much in creating a character out of nothing, as building the performance on your own personalities "turned up to 10".

"There's not so much a character there, I'm just an everyman out there that makes me relatable," says Daniels. "There's 100% chance we could have something like *On The Mat* again. There's been a lot of talent leave (NZ) recently and they're taking over the world (the most notable being [Dakota Kai](#), who made it to the famed WWE), people who have left here in the last few years. So the talent is definitely there to have a weekly show."

"It's starting to work its way back to the way it was in the old days," says Shaw. "I reckon we're looking at having a show on TV comfortably in the next five years. I'll be around, I love it too much."

One of the female wrestlers on the card tonight is the “Princess of Ponsonby” Ashlee Spencer, who came up with the gimmick after having to serve real life versions of that ilk while working as a bartender at the Long Room on Ponsonby Road.



The Princess of Ponsonby. Photo: Jamie Wall

While her character is loathed by crowds outside of Auckland – they see her as encapsulating everything detestable about New Zealand’s largest city – she tells me the 09 locals sometimes embrace her. Another controversial persona is Mr Burns of the so-called “Young Nats” faction. The Young Nats managed to cross over into mainstream consciousness last year when [one of their billboards was mistaken for a real National party election hoarding](#).

Burns says he was surprised to discover how deeply the hatred of a certain style of rightwing politics runs among wrestling fans. “The hardest part for me is having to dive into the comments sections on Stuff articles for material. It’s far from pleasant, but that’s character research.”

The event itself is everything an indie wrestling fan could hope for, full of well crafted spots and often nonsensical storytelling. Shaw’s match with Bushwhacker Luke is about 80% insults about each other’s age, fitness and mothers, with the young upstart eventually being predictably humiliated by the 71 year old legend.

The Princess needn’t have worried about her gimmick being over tonight. A couple of minutes into her match a woman next to me snarls for her opponent, Britenay of the Waikato, to “smash that stuck-up bitch”.

The Young Nats use a Chekov’s gun piece of storytelling, introducing a new but highly unlikely Samoan strongman character to their group early in the night. He returns in Burns and Daniels’ main event to thwart the youngster’s seemingly secure bid for the NZ Heavyweight title, leaving the Young Nats to revel in the boos and “you suck” chants.



The Bushwhackers in their prime

The audience is a mixture of families, guys primed for a big night out and some die hard middle aged Bushwhacker fans. While the social media landscape means that local organisations like IPW need not necessarily require a TV deal to reach their hardcore fans, it would still be a quite a throwback to when wrestling ruled the airwaves in NZ. In a promising move, Māori TV last week announced plans to screen WWE programming free to air for the first time since the Bushwhackers were in the big time.

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Daniels has no specific goals with his career, but is looking to try his luck in the Australian scene. Shaw says he's determined to be part of any televised IPW show, while Burns is excited about the storyline possibilities of the real life National Party leadership scramble. He has, of course, announced the position for himself and is prepared to defend it against anyone (including Judith "Crusher" Collins) in the ring.

"Pro wrestling is like a drug," says Daniels before heading off to get changed. "It's adrenaline ... it's everything we live for."