

I Want To Talk A Little Bit About Forcing Evolution In Wrestling

A few days ago, Hulk Hogan went on a big rant on Twitter about how TNA needs to fix a few problems and then it'll find the next evolution in wrestling or be the next evolution of wrestling or whatever nonsense Hulk was raving about this time. Anyway that's beside the point. For the life of me I can't remember where I saw this title at but it wasn't from me so don't credit me with it, but it said something about Hogan wanting to reinvent the wheel. This got me to thinking.

The term "the next evolution of wrestling" is thrown around a lot, be it EVOLVE focusing on wins/losses (isn't that how wrestling has always been?) or Wrestling Revolution Project with a beginning, middle and end to a season or ECW being extreme and counter culture or whatever. At the end of the day though, all you have there are gimmicks to distract you from the fact that you have a product that people aren't that interested in anymore. It's all about putting decorations on what is still wrestling.

This is where I think so many companies get lost. Hogan's comments and the title of that article are yet another example of someone looking for a quick fix to far more major problems. If you listen to Hogan, going live would solve 75% of TNA's problems (his words). How? All that means is you get to watch a flawed show live rather than on tape.

Now before I get on an anti-TNA rant, that's not what this is meant to be about. Goodness knows I could and already have gone on for months about some of the stupid stuff they've done and how they keep shooting themselves in the foot. What I want to get into here is how you don't need a gimmick or something

to hide the fact that you're a wrestling company. Over the years, this concept of wrestling evolving has only meant what are we disguising the wrestling as this week. Let's take a look at some examples of good and bad of this. We'll begin with celebrities. Let's flash back to the 2001 Royal Rumble.

Low Down, perhaps the dumbest idea ever, (D'lo Brown and Mosh as Arabs) argue with their manager about who should be in the Rumble. It doesn't matter as Drew Carey gets their spot. Now this is an important point. Let's compare this to WCW and David Arquette. Both Carey and David are about the same level of celebrity status and they're here to promote something that not a lot of people are going to watch anyway (Drew was there to promote a comedy PPV he was going to be on). What does the WWF do?

They replace a jobber in a match where he absolutely won't be missed. Think about it: what would Brown or Mosh do in the match? Hang around for about seven minutes and be destroyed by either Taker or Kane or someone like that. Would anyone really miss either of them being in there? Not in the slightest. Instead, you get a celebrity in the match where he might bring in a few fans to the show. See, that's how you use celebrities.

You put them in a place where they don't make a big difference at all, but they seem like they do. That's smart business. You give up a little something and while you likely won't get a big payoff, you might get a decent one. If not, you lost Mosh or D'Lo for one night. That's something you can live with and if nothing else, Drew gets publicity and you look like nice guys. Now on the other hand you have WCW, where a celebrity of about equal status was there trying to promote something.

What does WCW do? THEY MAKE HIM WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION, thereby making the wrestlers look pathetic, the title look like a joke, their PPV look like a bigger freak show than a pro wrestling show normally is, and more or less drive yet

another spike into their own coffin. Instead of having him do something stupid with Disco Inferno or something for like 5 minutes on Nitro, they said that this actor is on equal footing with the champions of the other major company at the time, which at that time would have been HHH. See why they went out of business so fast?

Another example of the same kind from WCW is in 1998. Actually let's start at Bash at the Beach 1997 with Hulk Hogan/Dennis Rodman vs. Luger/Giant. Rodman was there to show how widespread the NWO was and how popular Hogan was with celebrities or something. The match sucked, I'm sure you're not shocked. Flash forward to BATB 1998 and WCW thinks "since one basketball player worked wonders, TWO will be even better!" So they had DDP/Karl Malone vs. Rodman/Hogan. Malone did ok all things considered and was certainly trying. Rodman literally fell asleep in the corner. There were like four moves in ten minutes and it was just a mess.

The next month was Road Wild. WCW AGAIN used a celebrity in the main event in the form of Jay Leno. Yeah picture Jay Leno in a wrestling ring for a minute. I think you can figure out the level of quality out there. It was Page/Leno vs. Bischoff/Hogan and it was horrible. Again Leno was trying, but he had no business out there. The point is: these tag matches didn't mean anything and were there for a quick payoff. They didn't have intriguing stories going so they just threw money at people that the audience would know and hoped they were interested in the matches. Again, it becomes a way to get people watching because your wrestling sucks. It became more about the celebrities than what they were doing because the celebrities didn't advance anything.

A more modern example of the perils of this gimmick are the guest hosts of Monday Night Raw. They've toned it WAY down in the last year or so, but do you remember when they had people like Al Sharpton, Buzz Aldrin, ZZ Top, Dennis Miller, Johnny Damon, Jewel, Florence Henderson (I was at that show. My

goodness that was stupid) and Jon Lovitz? That's what I mean by a gimmick being completely overdone. It became too much of a focus and it started to hurt the show. Speaking of things that aren't interesting but are supposed to be realistic, let's get to point two.

Now let's move on with "shoots", with the quotation marks being there due to the fact that about 99% of them aren't real shoot comments and are scripted almost completely. For a bad example, let's look at the king of worked shoots: Vince Russo.

Russo LOVED him some shoots. Look back to the year 2000 in WCW during Russo's tenure and almost every PPV would have something like one in there (and yes that's an exaggeration for the commenters that like to say I'm exaggerating. I'm not perfect. Get over it.). Take for example New Blood Rising. Goldberg "stopped following the script" and walked out on a match, leaving Nash and Steiner to, and I'm quoting Schiavone with this, "improvise a new finish."

Now that's not a terrible idea on paper (parts of it are but that's beside the point) but there's one problem. Flash back with me to a month before that at Bash at the Beach 2000. Jeff Jarrett laid down for Hogan to win the title, followed by Russo coming out and going on a big rant about politics behind the scenes and all that jazz. This was about three months after the company had been rebooted and had everything reset, which was four months after Russo booked a rehash of Montreal at Starrcade, which was two months after Halloween Havoc where Hogan laid down for Sting in another "shoot" moment.

Shooting had become a gimmick rather than something that people were going to become interested in. That became more of the focus than the wrestling itself. It was about what the latest shoot was and the fallout of it until we got to the next shoot. People stopped buying into it and therefore stopped caring, making it mean nothing and killing the gimmick. During this time, the wrestling product suffers

because the focus is on the gimmick rather than the in ring product.

Now let's flash forward to 2011 and a guy I like to call CM Punk. One night at the end of Raw, CM Punk came out on the stage, sat down, and talked for almost ten minutes about how much he hated things in the WWE, and how he was being held back, and how much he didn't like John Cena, and all sorts of other things. This led to a very long debate about how much of it was real and how much of it was fake and was he really leaving or was he really signed and were we getting worked and all that stuff.

In other words, people were TALKING. The angle got people interested in what was going to happen next. Why was that? It's because this wasn't something you saw four times a year. It's something you hardly ever see, which is what gets people interested. Think about it in everyday life. What is going to get your attention more: a dozen of the same thing or one thing different from the rest? You're going to notice the outlier right? You notice the 6'6 blonde guy in bright yellow trunks that beats people in five minutes in a sea of guys that are 6'2 and in blue trunks right?

The other key point to this is what the shoot promo led to: it led to a wrestling match. Punk went on a rant about a lot of real life stuff, but everything he said led us to Chicago and Money in the Bank and a match with him vs. Cena. What got lost in the talk about the angle was that it just happened to occur before a pay per view and a main event that on paper would have been an ok draw. The shoot wasn't the focus of the show and the company. It was a tool to get us to MITB, where the wrestling would take over. It led to a match, not an angle.

To bring this back around to the opening idea, gimmicks in wrestling can be good things if done right. However there's one major thing to them: they need to be used to enhance the wrestling on a show. Actually make that two things: they also

need to be used sparingly. If you use the same ones over and over again they'll get stale and lose their effectiveness. Usually when you reach the point that you need gimmicks to get people to watch your show week after week, you've got more problems than you can fix.

As for the evolution of wrestling that Hogan talked about, it doesn't need to happen. Trying to change things as often as people have has rarely worked and it likely wouldn't work for TNA. Their product has a ton of problems already and simply adding something new to it isn't going to get people to start watching. It's another quick fix for problems that have been built up for a very long time. Think of wrestlers that are repackaged but are still the same guy but just in a different outfit. It might improve things for a few minutes, but then it's still the same guy out there and nothing has really changed. At the end of the day, the solution to a lot of problems is to have good wrestling matches, not some big elaborate gimmick change.