

Monday Night Raw – March 24, 1997: Bret's Magnum Opus

Monday Night Raw

Date: March 24, 1997

Location: Metro Center, Rockford, Illinois

Attendance: 7,557

Commentators: Jim Ross, Vince McMahon, Jerry Lawler

Wrestlemania has passed and we have a new savior in the form of Steve Austin. Last night, in one of the most famous (and best) matches of all time, Austin turned face for the first time and refused to give up to the Sharpshooter, eventually passing out from the pain. This made Austin the superstar he was destined to be and kicked off one of the best stretches the company has ever had. Let's get to it.

Opening sequence.

After a quick recap of last night, we're told Mankind is the #1 contender. Why you ask? Well I ask as well but there's no explanation given. Just go with it.

Tag Team Titles: Headbangers vs. Owen Hart/British Bulldog

The Headbangers won a fourway match last night to earn this shot. Owen spins out of Mosh's wristlock to start and dragon screw leg whips him down. Off to the Bulldog vs. Thrasher with Davey taking over and dropping Owen into a splash for two. The Legion of Doom, also named #1 contenders without much of a reason, are in the back and say they want the belts.

Vince asks about the kitchen sink Hawk brought in last night and Hawk says he didn't like the stainless steel. It takes a lot to make a line like that work but Hawk somehow pulls it off. Mosh gets delayed suplexed for no cover but it's quickly off to Thrasher for an elbow to the jaw and a chinlock. Back up and Bulldog runs into Owen by mistake as the issues continue. Hart actually walks out and we take a break. Back with the Headbangers getting two off something like a Trash Compactor on the

Bulldog.

More stomping has him in trouble but a double DDT finally puts the Headbangers down. Owen comes in to speed things up but tags Bulldog back in just a few seconds later. The champs tag again just a few seconds later as you can see the issues growing. Owen missile dropkicks Thrasher for two and there's the Sharpshooter but Mosh makes the save. Bulldog sneaks in for the powerslam but Owen doesn't want the pin that way. As they argue, Bulldog shoves the referee down for the DQ.

Rating: C. This took its time getting going but the challengers could have been any given warm bodies. It's another part of the big story in the company and it's going to get even better very soon. I'm not sure why the Headbangers were as over as they were but I never quite got their appeal. The DQ ending makes sense here too as the champs fighting is now costing them a match. That's called building a story and when done right, it's as good as wrestling gets.

The champs get in a fight post match until referees have to break it up. Owen gets the mic and says he's the real star of the team and wants a European Title shot. Bulldog says he beat him in Berlin for the title and he'll beat him again next week because he carries this team. Oh yeah this is about to get awesome in a hurry.

Mankind is sitting in the boiler room and says Paul Bearer is gone for reasons not explained. He needs his family and begs Uncle Paul to come back. Don't make him find you Paul. Bray Wyatt reminds me more of this Mankind every day and that's a very good thing.

Bart Gunn vs. HHH

Before the match, Bret Hart pops up on screen and says this was supposed to be his time but Vince McMahon keeps taking it away. Vince says that can't happen if there's more of the language he used last week and Bret is granted the time later tonight. Feeling out process to start and Bart nails a shoulder block before getting a lesson chopped into him in the corner.

A gorilla press puts HHH down but he avoids an elbow drop as this isn't

the most thrilling match in the world. Instead they switch it up to show a split screen with Goldust next to Marlena's chair, talking about how hard it was to see her hurt last night. Next week, he's coming for his revenge. See how simple these stories are? It's all about the delivery and the execution of those stories and it made for some incredible television. Lawler is already into the movie title puns as HHH beats up Bart Gunn like he's HHH and his opponent is Bart Gunn.

An elbow gets two on Gunn but he comes back with a powerslam as Vince previews later in the night to try and keep the fans awake. Chyna low bridges Gunn to the floor (with Bart being enough of a gentleman to fall before Chyna touched the ropes) and posts him, setting up the Pedigree for the pin.

Rating: D. Yeah what else are you expecting here? At the end of the day, it's Bart Gunn vs. HHH in a seven minute match that was more about Chyna than anything else. It's not a good match and it's not anything interesting, but that was the case for the midcard at times. They were still trying to figure this part out, and HHH was still in a weird place.

Slammys recap with Todd Pettengill singing for some reason. This was back when it was something like an awards show instead of whatever they are now.

Maniaco/Hysterio/Abismo Negro vs. Venum/Super Nova/Discovery

I only know two of these guys and I'm at Vince's mercy to tell me who is who. We cut to Bret not thirty seconds into the match to complain about not getting his time. To be fair, he really should be on there than this nothing match. We're finally told that Venum backflips into the ring but eats a spinwheel kick from Hysteria. A headscissors puts Hysteria down and a headscissors does the same.

Hysteria goes up top but gets dropkicked to the floor, only to have him avoid a Venum dive. I think Abismo Negro comes in to chop Discovery but Discovery botches a springboard wristdrag. The announcers aren't giving us anything but house show ads at this point so I'm completely lost. Everything breaks down and they unleash the dives with Venum botching a handspring kick into let's say Nova, but Nova missile dropkicks Negro.

Back up and a bad looking top rope hurricanrana is enough to pin Maniaco.

Rating: D+. The high flying was passable but nothing more than that. However, this was the worst commentary I've ever seen. The announcers clearly had no idea who the wrestlers were and didn't care enough to find out. I mean, you can't put "Nova wears blue" on a piece of paper in front of you? The match was nothing special, but my goodness the commentary was a disaster.

Earlier today, before the fans came in, Rocky Johnson and Rocky Maivia were sitting in the empty arena with the younger one being glad his father was there to help save him last night as a surprise. The dad promises to never interfere again.

Flash Funk vs. Brooklyn Brawler

Honky Tonk Man is on commentary again and seems to hate everything about Funk. The Brawler jumps him to start and hammers away with that incredibly successful offense of his. Funk comes back with right hands and a kind of reverse t-bone suplex to send Brawler outside. A nice dive takes Brawler down again and the 450 is good for the pin.

Rating: D-. The Brooklyn Brawler is getting TV time in 1997. Is there any doubt as to why this show is such a mess at this point? I mean, these matches are just there as a way for the announcers to hype up stuff later on, which isn't exactly the same as setting up Sting vs. Hogan for later in the year.

Ken Shamrock says he stopped the match last night because Austin was unconscious. Somehow this takes about two minutes, mainly because Vince won't stop asking him questions after Shamrock said why he stopped it. That kind of answers everything Vince wants to know but he keeps asking the same question in different ways. Shamrock doesn't like Austin but he respects him after that performance.

Hour #2 begins.

Here's Bret for his much requested interview time. He takes the mic from JR and sends him to the corner before apologizing to his fans all over

Europe, Japan, the Far and Middle East and of course Canada for his actions last night. However, he certainly does not apologize to the fans here in America because they won't cheer for him no matter how hard he tries or how hard he wins.

The fans' reactions make him feel like he lost to a gutless creep like Steve Austin. Bret brings up the loss last year to Shawn, who screwed him out of the World Title with the overtime of the Iron Man match. He was watching the show from Canada and said the company needs a hero. Vince is shown looking very uncomfortable. Bret brings up Shawn posing in a girly magazine (Playgirl) but calls it a gay magazine for a line that would get him fired today.

Then he came back and fought Steve Austin and Sid but Shawn cost him the title. No one cared though because Shawn is the golden boy. All Bret had to do then was win the Royal Rumble, which was fine with him. He went in the Rumble and won but Austin came back in and was declared the winner. A better man would have quit and gone home, but that's not what he did. Instead he has Monsoon and McMahon begging him to stick around and they came up with this idea called the Final Four for the Wrestlemania title shot.

Ok fine, but then Shawn bailed out of the title shot because of a fake knee injury. Bret won the title by beating three guys in one night, but that STILL wasn't enough because he had to defend the title the next night on Raw. That was fine too because he doesn't run away and claim a fake injury. Sid was in the Sharpshooter but the fans booed Bret anyway. Then Austin came in and hit him in the head with a steel chair, but that's acceptable in America.

The fans said Bret cried to Monsoon for a match with Austin so he was given a submission match, plus a World Title match against Sid inside a steel cage. Well Bret had that won too but Austin and Undertaker cost him the title again. That left him with one thing on his mind: giving Austin the beating that he deserved.

Bret gave Austin the beating of his life but the fans STILL booed him. He's proven himself every single time in the WWF and tried to be

everything the fans want, but they don't understand what it means to have some poise and class. You would rather cheer for Charles Manson and O.J. Simpson because no one glorifies criminals like Americans. Everywhere else around the world, the fans still believe in him and have some respect. It's clear to him now that no American fan respects him, but the fact is he doesn't respect them either. They're done from here on in.

This brings out Shawn Michaels to say that no one knows more than him that it takes divine intervention to get that belt off of Bret (inside reference #1). It's not his fault that he chooses to live an open life and it doesn't make Bret the better man. As far as Austin is concerned, Shawn was there last night and Austin never gave up. Even Bret has to admit that Austin is tough. Shawn isn't ready to fight tonight and he's fine with not being the #1 guy. He isn't obsessed with this like Bret, the "Mark Man" (inside reference #1).

These fans have the right to cheer or boo anyone they want because there's a thing in America called the First Amendment, which means they can do whatever they want without repercussion, even if Bret doesn't like it. Shawn says Bret can love America or leave it so Bret tells him to get out. They stare each other down and Shawn says he isn't good with authority. Oh by the way: how did Bret know he was in that magazine? "You just had to flip through the pages didn't you?"

That's enough for Bret as he kicks out the bad knee and puts him in the Figure Four around the post to make Shawn scream in pain. The fans chant for Shamrock but get Vince himself coming over to try and break the hold. That works as well as you would think so Sid comes out to chase Bret away and finally get him off Shawn as we go to a break and not a minute too soon as I need a chance to breathe that was one of the best segments I've ever seen.

Bret is so perfect for this character for a lot of reasons, but there's one above all others: he's built himself up so well over the years and been such a quiet guy most of the time that when you finally see something else, it makes the whole eruption so different. Bret let out every bit of frustration and anger he's built up over a year and it creates a real divide among people who loved Bret and agree with

everything, and the others who don't like having words put in their mouth and see Bret's actions as that of a whiny coward who doesn't have his precious title anymore.

You can also see a lot of CM Punk's Pipe Bomb in this tirade as just like Punk, Bret turned his back on the people after doing everything he said over the years and complaining about a lack of respect. The idea of having no one left to trust made Bret the company's top heel and really signaled a changing of the guard. Bret is instantly back at the top of the company and has a set of feuds ready for him.

On top of all that, Bret's delivery can't be overlooked. People never give him enough credit for his promo abilities and I think that's due to him not being the most emotional guy in the world. He isn't funny most of the time and he doesn't show a ton of emotion, but he gets his point across very well and makes you listen to him. It's similar to an Arn Anderson who broke things down to the most basic levels but kept you paying attention because you could understand every thing he said. Absolutely incredible stuff here and worth going out of your way to find.

Rocky Maivia vs. Leif Cassidy

Non-title and joined in progress after a break with the two fighting on the floor. Maivia hits a dive off the apron into a cross body as Bret comes out again. Hart sits in on commentary and says he's opened his eyes. Cassidy gets two off something we didn't see, but we do see Shawn being helped out of the building with a big bandage around his knee. The champ avoids a frog splash, hits the Maivia Hurricane and wins with the high cross body in a backdrop for Bret's latest tirade against America on commentary.

Bret decks Maivia and leaves.

Savio Vega vs. Ahmed Johnson

Ahmed starts fast but misses a charge into the post. The Nation (minus an injured Faarooq) is standing on the stage as Vega stomps and chokes a lot. The fans aren't really into this one and can you blame them after what they've seen? More choking ensues as there's just nothing to talk

about in this match.

A horrible looking atomic drop from Johnson gives him control and they fall out to the floor as we take a break. Back with Johnson hitting a delayed suplex and a top rope flip dive (Johnson was a FREAK) but missing a big elbow. Vega's sleeper eats up more time but Ahmed fights up and hits a Rock Bottom of all things. A spinebuster brings the Nation in for the DQ.

Rating: D-. REALLY dull match here to fill in some time near the end of the show but Johnson's offense, while sloppy, was kind of mind blowing. Vega was nearing the end of his limited usefulness here and it's no surprise that the Nation would be changed soon after this. Boring match.

After chasing them off with a 2x4, Ahmed issues a challenge to the Nation for a match at In Your House where the Nation is gone if he wins. This took me about five minutes to understand, despite it only lasting thirty seconds.

Paul Bearer doesn't want to talk.

Here's Undertaker to close the show. Yeah remember him? The new World Champion? He welcomes the Creatures to the dark days of this company because this title belongs to them and he'll be the knight that fights anyone who opposes them. Undertaker thanks Sid for the match last night and promises him a rematch when it's Sid's time. This reign will be longer than his first because he'll stay sharp with opponents like Mankind. The Mandible Claw can stop anyone, but here's Bearer before Undertaker can keep going. Mankind pops up on screen to shout for his Uncle Paul but the show goes off the air before much is said.

Overall Rating: C+. It takes quite the promo segment to turn this horrible night of wrestling into a show that has me drooling to see more. Bret was on the roll of a lifetime here and the upcoming stories are going to be even better. Austin is coming back next week and there's almost no way this isn't going to be incredible. Unfortunately the rest of the show pretty much sucked, with almost nothing interesting going on and a bunch of time being wasted until Bret could come back out and do more. The midcard was coming, but it wasn't there yet.

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