

Best of 2016: Match of the Year

Now we're at one of the big ones. All the stories, all the hype and all the talk doesn't mean much if the match at the end is worthless. That's where we've arrived: what is the best match of the year? As uninteresting as WWE has seemed, it's actually been a stacked year for big time matches and there are several to pick from. As usual these are in no particular order and only WWE matches will be considered. Also note that if a match isn't included, it's either because I didn't think it was as good or, far more simply, I didn't see it.

1. AJ Styles vs. John Cena – Summerslam

Let's get one of the big ones out of the way early on. This is the definition of the Big Match John fight with Cena coming back to face Styles one more time, only to actually get pinned clean. That's something that might happen to Cena once a year (twice at most) and for him to put Styles over was a huge deal. This is the match that made Styles into a main event player and broke the idea of Cena losing the first match but winning the rematch.

Above all else though, this was about the action. These two beat the heck out of each other for over twenty three minutes and it felt like the big match it was supposed to be. This was two top level stars at the top of their game fighting at one of the biggest shows of the year. While that happens a lot, this felt like they lived up to the hype, which is what you have to expect from people at their level.

2. Kota Ibushi vs. TJ Perkins – Cruiserweight Classic Finale

This is a simple idea: take a pair of talented guys and let them fly around the ring for the better part of fifteen minutes because they're some of the most talented cruiserweights in the world. Ibushi was one of the favorites to win the tournament from the start but Perkins gave him a real challenge, eventually beating him to advance to the finals and winning the tournament later in the night.

Instead of wasting time with generic moves and almost no characters, we had two guys who are talented and doing all kinds of things to

fire the crowd up. The crowd helped as well with the kind of people who wanted to see this style match and appreciate it far more than the average WWE fans. The lack of a story is fine because this was all about the action, which is the point of something like the Cruiserweight Classic.

3. Royal Rumble

Take thirty people, put them in a battle royal with timed intervals, the last man standing is the WWE World Champion. It's a very simple concept and something that even non-wrestling fans can easily understand. This was all about the World Title with defending champion Roman Reigns having to start the match because everything was rigged against him. This included the eventual winner Triple H coming in as a surprise entrant.

The match was all about the drama because there was always the chance that someone was going to be a surprise World Champion. The ending was a bit predictable but the mere chance was enough to make things more interesting. For once it wasn't about the title match down the road because it was all about the title then and there. It's a risky play but for once it actually worked, making up for the fact that it hadn't happened since 1992.

4. Sasha Banks vs. Charlotte – "Monday Night Raw" – July 25

This has easily been the greatest year for women's wrestling (at least on the main roster) and it would be criminal to not have at least one match from them on here. In this case, we'll go with the first post-Brand Split episode of "Monday Night Raw" when Charlotte FINALLY lost the title she had held (realistically) since October. Banks had been the most popular woman on the roster for a long time and the title change was long overdue, meaning the time was right on a major show like a landmark episode of "Monday Night Raw".

The fact that it was the main event of the show is an afterthought at this point and that's what's the most amazing part. Trish Stratus vs. Lita in the main event of "Monday Night Raw" was legendary and now these two are main eventing multiple times a year. It's also one of the best women's matches of the year because these two have amazing chemistry and it was excellent television watching them change the title here.

5. AJ Styles vs. Roman Reigns – Payback

Steve Austin called this one of the best WWE matches he's seen in years and that means it's at least worth a look. Styles won the title shot on the "Monday Night Raw" after "Wrestlemania XXXII" and wound up giving Reigns a run for his money. Sure it took the help of Luke Gallows and Karl Anderson but you don't need a newcomer giving the new champ a real test on his own just yet.

What followed was an outstanding power vs. speed match with Styles giving him everything he had and getting some insane near falls. Reigns eventually won with a spear and then won the rematch in the same fashion, but these matches made Styles feel like a major player. He was facing Cena soon after and then winning the Smackdown World Title. Sometimes it's all about that first match though and this one was a blast throughout.

6. DIY vs. Revival – Takeover: Toronto

Now we've got one of the frontrunners. If there's one thing NXT knows how to do, it's set up things from the beginning and move forward until you NEED to see the big ending finally take place. That's what we had here with DIY getting closer and closer to winning the NXT Tag Team Titles. It was finally set up for the big time NXT gimmick match: two out of three falls. That meant you could see extra wrestling and my goodness did they blow the roof off the place.

The match itself was some of the best wrestling NXT has ever put together with some of the hottest near falls I've ever seen. The ending was even better with DIY hooking a double submission to make Revival tap out at the exact same time because there was just nothing left for them to do. It's much more about putting everything together to tell a complete story with the challengers getting closer and closer until they FINALLY captured the titles because they were the better team. That's how wrestling is supposed to work and it was in one of the best matches of the year.

7. Sami Zayn vs. Kevin Owens – Battleground

If you have a feud between two very talented wrestlers, at some point one of them actually needs to win their share of the matches every now and then. That's been the problem for Zayn over the years as he very rarely actually beats Owens. It had to happen at some point though and that's what happened here. After all those major losses (and one win on a nothing "Monday Night Raw"), Zayn FINALLY

got to beat Owens on the big stage at "Battleground 2016".

Much like the DIY vs. Revival match, this was all about the story. The idea was that Owens was just flat out better than Zayn, who kept getting close but could never close the deal. That's what "Battleground 2016" was all about and the fact that it was billed as the final match between the two of them (of course it wasn't) made it feel like a huge moment. Zayn needed the win, so of course WWE then did a total of nothing with him after that and made Owens the Raw World Champion. But still, Zayn winning was a great moment and the natural chemistry between the two of them made it even better.

8. Team Smackdown Live vs. Team Monday Night Raw – Survivor Series

It was billed as the other main event of the show (along side FANTASY WARFARE) and my goodness did it manage to work well. This match lasted almost an hour, making it even longer than some Royal Rumbles. The eliminations took their time and the match was allowed to build up instead of being rushed along until we get to the big ones at the end, making it feel like an event instead of just a regular match.

The fact that it was the Wyatts being the sole survivors instead of Reigns and Seth Rollins made it even more important. For once, Bray Wyatt got a big win and looked like a star, which hopefully means something going forward. Unfortunately the match is almost entirely forgotten after the big main event became all anyone remembers from the show. That being said, we had a great match beforehand and it's worth looking at again.

9. Miz vs. Dolph Ziggler – No Mercy

Unlike several previous moments, this was all about drama instead of the action. While the wrestling was good, the idea that it was someone's career vs. a title made it seem important. Ziggler was on a downward spiral at this point and Miz looked better and better every week so the idea that Ziggler could win seemed like a long shot. It was such a long shot that the official preview for the following episode of "Smackdown Live" talked about Ziggler's exit from the company.

Ziggler of course won, but the fact that it was billed up as a match that he HAD to win was the key to the whole thing. Miz can talk his way into anything and he had us believing that Ziggler's whole life revolved around this one match. It told a great story and set up the

match as something that feels like it matters for a change instead of “eh we can just do the same thing next week.” Sure Ziggler dropped the title back a few weeks later but he won here, which is what mattered more than anything else.

10. Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Sami Zayn – Takeover: Dallas

Until DIY vs. Revival, this was the undisputed clubhouse leader for Match of the Year and it's still one of the most amazing things I've seen. I was lucky enough to be in the crowd for this show and I bought all the way into everything that happened throughout. This was all about beating the absolute heck out of each other with the winner being the one to survive. It was also Zayn's grand finale in NXT, which wasn't the biggest surprise when you consider he was in the Intercontinental Title match the next night.

This isn't a match that needs a lot of talking about because it was all about beating the heck out of each other and little more. Nakamura was the new kid on the block and Zayn was on his way to bigger and better things but we were lucky enough to get to see one of the hardest hitting brawls I've ever seen for the transition between eras. Absolutely incredible stuff and something truly special.

11. Cesaro vs. The Miz vs. Kevin Owens vs. Sami Zayn – Extreme Rules

We'll wrap it up with a forgotten classic as Miz defends the Intercontinental Title against three guys who probably should have been able to rip his head off without blinking an eye. What followed was a nearly twenty minute long match with all four more than working hard and getting in near fall after near fall. As you might expect, Miz wound up stealing the pin after someone else did the work and that's exactly what should have happened.

This was all about the action and the question of who was going to wind up with the title in the end. In other words, it made me wonder what might happen and I wanted to see what they were going to do at the end of the match. You don't see that happen in matches like these very often and it made the Intercontinental Title feel important for the first time in far too long.

12. The Final Deletion – Impact Wrestling – June 28

While there were better matches throughout the year, I don't think any of them came close to this one's level of creativity and shock

value. I know there were other, bigger versions of the same formula but the first one worked better than the rest. By the time we got to Tag Team Apocalypto or the Great War, a lot of this stuff had lost its steam. The first time we saw it though, it was some of the most creative stuff ever done on a wrestling show.

The Hardys really have put together something amazing and it worked so well as a total change of pace. It might not have had much to do with wrestling but there was a ring and a three count so I guess we can classify it as a match. This is more of a glorified honorable mention but it wouldn't be fair to leave it out.

That brings us to the winner and I don't like doing something like this but I have to give it a tie. I have to go with a combination of Zayn vs. Nakamura and DIY vs. Revival. No matter how many times I think about these two matches, I just can't find a way to pick between the two of them. DIY vs. Revival was a long term story but Nakamura vs. Zayn was the short term story that began and ended at the bells. Either of those can work to perfection and these two tied for Match of the Year.

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