

Muhammad Ali Passes Away At 74

I usually don't comment on celebrity deaths but this one has a big wrestling connection. In addition to refereeing the main event of Wrestlemania I, there's the Boxer vs. Wrestler match in 1976 which was kind of a forerunner to MMA. On top of that though there's the showmanship. Yeah he got a lot of it from Gorgeous George, but Ali brought it into the mainstream and made it something special. He was the greatest of all time and his influence will be felt for a long time to come.

Wrestler of the Day – March 15: Iron Sheik

AH! Today Wrestler of the Day #1! All other Wrestler of the Day! Bah phooey! It's Iron Sheik.

Sheik was born in Iran and was an Olympic wrestler as well as a guard for the Shah of Iran. He would head to America and become a professional wrestler under the tutelage of Verne Gagne. Sheik started as Great Hossein Arab and did some stuff for the WWF back in the 70s. Here he is challenging for a Japanese title in Madison Square Garden on December 17, 1979.

NWF Title: Antonio Inoki vs. Great Hossein

This is like the Japanese tag titles earlier with the NWF Title being the primary title for NJPW in the early days.

Hossein is more commonly known as the Iron Sheik and I'll be referring to him as such here out of instinct. Sheik does his anti-American thing which is more or less verbatim as to what he would use in his more famous character. Inoki is completely dominating here as Sheik can't even land a punch or anything close to it.

Inoki throws on the weakest armbars I can remember in a long time and Sheik gets his first offense in with a slam that gets him absolutely nowhere. He throws on a leg lock but Vince says this isn't a submission hold for no apparent reason. Holy crap the heel is taking over a bit, albeit with incredibly generic offense. The fans think Iran sucks.

Well that offense didn't last long as here comes Inoki again. Sheik actually hits a dropkick and not a bad one at that. He goes for an abdominal stretch which looks like some screwed up way of trying to humble Inoki. I've always wondered about that and why he's so obsessed with the idea of it. Vince says this has been even which is ridiculous but whatever. Inoki gets a nice sunset flip into a modified Sharpshooter in a nice combination.

Inoki tries to take the boot off of Sheik because it might be loaded up. I never got this part of Sheik but whatever. He gets it off and Sheik is in a boot and a sock. The boot is loaded with something apparently. Inoki is busted open from a shot with it. And then the enziguri ends it. Sheik hits him with the boot again afterwards.

Rating: C-. Not horrible I guess but at fifteen minutes this was WAY too long. It was just a step away from being a squash which in a long title match is never a good thing at all. It's cool seeing guys this famous when they weren't incredibly well known yet though but dang fifteen minutes of them is just too much.

Here's another match from the same arena soon thereafter, on January 21,

1980.

The Great Hossein Arab vs. Larry Zbyszko

This is called the third bout and it's right after the previous one on my list. Arab is much more famous as The Iron Sheik. Sheik tries to take it to the mat but Larry escapes to a stalemate. Larry speeds things up and sends Sheik to the floor where he gets very ticked off. Back in an elbow misses and Sheik is even madder. I sense a humbling. Larry hooks a headlock and pounds away with right hands. The fans are way into this.

Back to the headlock and things speed way up with a crisscross. Sheik hits a pair of leapfrogs but gets caught in the headlock again. Sheik has finally had enough and blasts Larry in the face, but a knee drop misses and it's back to Zbyszko. There's an abdominal stretch but Sheik reverses into one of his own but that gets reversed as well. Sheik sends him into the corner and backdrops him for two.

We finally get to the heel control portion of this but it ends just as quickly in a Zbyszko sunset flip. They collide and both of them go down. Sheik gets up first with a suplex but he can't cover immediately so it only gets two. Another suplex is countered into a small package which gets two for Larry, as does a slam. Sheik loads up one of the boots but Larry trips him down and goes after it. That somehow gets two but Sheik kicks him onto the ref. That's not enough for him so he drops an elbow on the referee for the DQ.

Rating: C-. It's amazing what charisma can do for you. This was only a little bit better of a match than the previous one, but the charisma the two guys have made me want to see them fight which is what made things work better here. Sheik getting more and more disgruntled until he snapped worked a lot better for a story than "I'll hit you a lot." Larry would turn heel on Sammartino the very next day.

Sheik would earn a shot at Bob Backlund's WWF Title on the day after Christmas of 1984 in MSG.

The Iron Sheik is an Iranian wrestling champion who had a habit of swinging Persian clubs before his matches. He would often challenge his opponent to swing the clubs as well and Backlund was no exception. In doing so a few days before the match, Backlund had been jumped by the Sheik who injured Bob's ribs and shoulder, putting him at a disadvantage coming into the match. Backlund is in a singlet here instead of his usual trunks. Sheik jumps the champion to start and chokes Backlund with the strap from Backlund's singlet.

The challenger cranks on Backlund's shoulder which apparently was hurt in the attack as well. Sheik is already dripping with sweat only a minute and a half into the match. Backlund sends him into the ropes but gets shouldered down for his efforts. Back to the armbar for a LONG time before it's off to a bow and arrow to mix things up a bit. Backlund finally kicks him off and hits a headbutt to the ribs followed by a headknocker. A kind of swinging neckbreaker by Bob puts both guys down.

Sheik hooks an abdominal stretch on the mat which transitions into a surfboard hold. Backlund fights back with a right hand but the ribs are hurting him a lot. A kick to Sheik's head staggers him a bit but Backlund can't slam him. Sheik hooks the arms again and drives a knee into the champion's back to keep Bob in trouble again. The hold stays on for a good while with all of Backlund's attempts at countering falling short.

Sheik takes it to the mat to no avail but Backlund can't hook a backslide. An elbow drop misses Backlund though but he can't hook his rolling cradle. Sheik hooks his camel clutch out of nowhere and Backlund is in big trouble. After only a few seconds, Backlund's manager Arnold Skaaland throws in the towel, which is the same as a submission and gives the Sheik the title.

Rating: D. This was a rather boring match with Backlund having almost no

offense at all. This is just a step ahead of what is known in wrestling as a squash, with one guy getting in almost no offense whatsoever. Having the towel thrown in was a way to save Backlund's status as a top man because he didn't submit and the blame can be placed on Skaaland, who would be gone soon after this anyway.

Sheik shocked the world by winning the title. Here's a rare title defense from January 21, 1984 in Philadelphia.

WWF World Title: Iron Sheik vs. Tito Santana

Santana is one of those guys that unfortunately I won't get to talk about that much in here because he very rarely received title shots. One report I've seen said that this was one of only two world title shots he received in over ten years with the company and I can't imagine it's much higher than that. Given how talented he was in the ring (multiple time Intercontinental and Tag Team Champion as well as being in the WWE Hall of Fame), that's rather surprising.

Tito jumps Sheik to start and clotheslines him with the Sheik's own turban. Santana is a house of fire and knocks the Sheik to the floor with a clothesline. Back in and the champion is knocked straight to the floor by another atomic drop. The Sheik takes a walk for a bit before heading back inside for more punishment. Tito grabs a headlock to take the Sheik down to the mat where the champion is in trouble.

Sheik fights up but Tito easily switches over to a front facelock to keep control. Back to a headlock by Santana as Sheik is in big trouble. The Iron one fights up but gets taken down by a shoulder block. A hiptoss puts him down as well but Sheik goes to the eyes to take control for the first time. The champion pounds away at Santana's head and neck but misses a running flip senton (basically a front flip attack) to give Santana a breather.

Tito grabs a suplex but dazes himself in the process. A splash hits the

Sheik's boots though and Tito is in trouble again. Sheik puts on an abdominal stretch but Tito quickly makes the rope. A clothesline puts Tito down for two but he comes back with a sunset flip for two of his own. Tito small packages him for two more before punching the champion in the face. A pair of dropkicks send Sheik to the floor so the champion picks up a chair. He slides it back inside but the referee stands on it so Sheik can't use it. The champ shoves the referee down just as Tito hits his flying forearm finisher, earning a DQ in the process.

Rating: D+. This took time to get going but Santana was the right choice for a match like this. He knew how to time a comeback so that the crowd would respond best to it, making the chance at a title change seem like a real possibility. That's where a guy like Tito was most valuable; he wasn't likely to win the world title at any time in his career, but you could put him in a spot like this where you needed a challenger and get solid results out of him.

Then this happened two days later.

WWF World Title: Hulk Hogan vs. Iron Sheik

This is it. This is the match that changes EVERYTHING. Sheik beat Backlund only a month earlier and Backlund is too injured to get his rematch here, so Hulk gets the shot instead. The place goes NUTS for Hogan's entrance for the first of many occasions. This is Hogan's return to the Garden after about three years. After being bored all night, the place is going nuts just from hearing the beginning of Hogan's entrance with "From Venice Beach, California."

The bell rings and Hogan CHARGES at him in the corner before Sheik can even get his robe off. A clothesline with the robe takes down the champion and it's all Hulk so far. Another big clothesline puts Sheik down before Hulk easily picks him up for a choke. Hulk, ever the hero, spits on Sheik to a huge ovation. Big boot gets two so Hulk hits a pair of elbows for two. Hulk FINALLY screws up by missing a running elbow in

the corner and Sheik takes over.

The champion stomps away with those curled boots of his. I guess it's a Middle East thing. A backbreaker puts Hogan down but he easily powers out at one. Off to a Boston Crab but Hulk powers out after about ten seconds. Sheik can't get anything going here long term. A gutwrench suplex gets two for Sheik and puts on the camel clutch that won the title. Hulk casually wags his fingers no and he powers out of the hold in less than thirty seconds. Hogan picks Sheik up, rams him into the buckle, drops the big leg, and as Gorilla puts it, Hulkamania is here.

Rating: A+. This was exactly what it was supposed to be as Hogan squashed Sheik here, basically selling nothing and escaping Sheik's best move before beating him in less than six minutes. Look at this card: even the opener was a minute longer than this match. Hogan DOMINATED the champion here and left no doubt about who was better. After this, everything became about flash than substance, and for people who complain about it, let it go already. The change is over and it's never going back. Absolutely perfect here.

We'll shift gears now and look at Sheik getting a rematch with Santana, this time for Tito's Intercontinental Title. From February 18, 1984 in Philadelphia.

Intercontinental Title: Tito Santana vs. Iron Sheik

Tito is defending if that's not clear. Sheik is immediately stalling on the floor before mixing it up by stalling in the ring. He easily takes Tito down a few times with some nice amateur moves before slamming the champion down on his back. Some hard shots to the back have Tito in trouble and Sheik yells a lot. Tito grabs a small package for two before kicking Sheik in the ribs a few times.

Sheik gets in a kick of his own and sticks his chest out to the crowd. Tito counters a suplex into one of his own but the champ can't follow up.

A camel clutch attempt is countered with right hands to the ribs but Sheik grabs a Boston crab. Tito powers out with a pushup and gets all fired up. The bald guy bows down in fear but Santana hammers away on him instead. A dropkick and airplane spin have the Sheik in trouble but they tumble out to the floor. They hammer away on each other until it's a double countout.

Rating: C-. This was one of those matches that worked better for the live crowd than a TV one. Most of the match was spent with big gestures from the two of them and the people ate it up. Sheik was a great heel but without the camel clutch there was only so much that could be done here.

About a year later Sheik would hook up with Nikolai Volkoff in a tag team which should have been called the Iron Curtain. They fought the US Express at the first Wrestlemania for the Tag Team Titles.

Tag Titles: US Express vs. Nikolai Volkoff/Iron Sheik

The Express is Barry Windham and Mike Rotundo and they're defending tonight. A little trivia for you: the song Real American was originally used for the two of them but Hogan wound up using it instead. The heels do their whole Russian national anthem and Iran/Russia #1 deal before the match. Rotundo and Sheik start things off with the Iranian hooking a headlock. A dropkick puts Sheik down and Mike grabs a headlock.

Off to Barry who avoids double teaming and causes the challengers to collide. Back to Rotundo to work over Nikolai with an elbow drop getting two. Windham comes in off the top with a shot to the arm and Rotundo does the same thing. Sheik suplexes Mike down for two as the foreigners take over. Nikolai drops him throat first across the throat and the USA chant starts up.

A sunset flip gets a quick two for Mike but it's back to Sheik for an abdominal stretch. That doesn't last long though as Mike hiptosses out of it and it's off to Barry via the hot tag. The bulldog (Barry's finisher

at the time) takes Volkoff out as everything breaks down. In the melee, Sheik hits Windham in the back with the cane for the pin and the titles.

Rating: C. This was a better match than we've seen so far with the fans getting way into the whole USA vs. foreigners thing. The title change was there only so something historic could happen and the Express got the belts back about two and a half months later. They would split soon after that with both guys heading to the NWA.

Sheik would also be in the first match ever on Saturday Night's Main Event in a six man tag.

Iron Sheik/Nikolai Volkoff/George Steele vs. Mike Rotunda/Barry Windham/Ricky Steamboat

That's quite the face tag team. This was on the SNME DVD (greatDVD that should certainly be picked up if you can find it. Awesome stuff on it) as an extra. Blassie is with the heels and Albano is with the faces. The two foreigners had taken the tag titles from the US Express at Wrestlemania for a token tag title change.

About a year prior to this, the US Express had been using Real American for their theme music. That went to Hogan of course and here they use Born in the USA by Bruce Springsteen which works like a charm for them as it's perfect. We start with Windham and Steele which is an odd matchup if there ever has been one.

Sheik was hitting the end of whatever usefulness that he had at this point. Rotundo would soon head to WCW and become a member of the Varsity Club, ending in an awesome moment with Rick Steiner taking the TV Title from him after months of being talked down to by him. Wow what a tangent that was.

Oh and he's more commonly known as I.R.S. Oddly enough the faces dominate early on. We go to commercial with the faces

dominating. We begin the awesome SNME tradition of not having action during commercials so we don't have to be all confused about how we got to a point during a break.

Wow there are four hall of fame wrestlers in here and two on the floor. That's rather impressive, especially considering that the two that aren't in there are two of the three most talented. Steele comes in and his teammates abandon him, allowing Windham to get a quick rollup for the pin. Steele eats a turnbuckle and the tag champions beat him up. That doesn't last long as Albano comes in to calm him down and Steele is a face.

Rating: C-. Eh this was fine. It wasn't meant to be anything special other than a way to get Steele out of the dark side, but the heel offense consisted of about four Volkoff punches and other than that it was a complete squash. I don't get why it was so one sided, but it did its job and wasn't bad at all so for the first match in show history this was perfectly fine.

Another big deal in 1985 was the Wrestling Classic. Here's Sheik's first round match.

First Round: Junkyard Dog vs. Iron Sheik

I like JYD's song. It's just old school personified. Sheik jumps him as it's still playing though, which in a bit of a comedic moment is how Sheik's former partner lost earlier in the night. Sheik is freaking ripped. Somehow, Dog is more limited than Putski was earlier. He hits nothing but punches and headbutts. Eventually he goes down though and Sheik gets the clutch on him. Jesse says no one has ever gotten out of this. You know, other than Hogan in the match that changed wrestling forever but that didn't mean as much as this did of course. It's also the sloppiest camel clutch this side of Sid Vicious. Dang it's bad.

Dog gets out of it kind of as Sheik argues with the referee. In an even dumber ending than before, a headbutt gets the pin. What? He used two of them before and didn't even knock Sheik down but here that's enough to get a clean pin? Come on now guys at least give us some consistency! Why couldn't one of these two have gotten hurt early? I hate booking like this. It's more or less saying the lazier you are, the stronger you'll get pushed. That's great business wouldn't you say?

Rating: F-. Where do I begin? Let's see: the moves were limited and sloppy, the thing lasted three whole minutes which I'll never get back, and the ending made zero sense. What kind of a grade did you expect here? The crowd went nuts for the Dog though and that's likely why he went on to win the tournament.

We'll look at one more Iron Curtain match because that was a big time for Sheik. From Boston on August 9, 1986.

Iron Sheik/Nikolai Volkoff vs. Hart Foundation

In Boston here and this would be heel vs. heel. The Harts are the faces by default and get cheered as a result. They also break up the Russian national anthem to really ensure their cheers. Even Gorilla acknowledges that no one cheers the Harts most of the time. The Harts clear the ring and eventually we start with Bret vs. Nikolai. Off to Sheik before anything happens.

Bret sends him to the floor pretty easily as the Harts are in desperate need of a better team than this to face. Sheik gets him in the heel (I guess) corner but he misses a boot so Volkoff gets knocked down. Nikolai does get up to break up the middle rope elbow and Neidhart is shoved away. Sheik can take over now and brings in Nikolai who gets caught in a sunset flip which the referee misses.

The team that should have been called the Iron Curtain uses

the classic basic heel moves to control as Sheik runs through his array of offense: abdominal stretch, gutwrench suplex and camel clutch, the final of which is broken up by Jim. Bret blocks some suplexes and it's off to Neidhart. Jim cleans house with a bunch of dropkicks but Sheik breaks up a cover. Everything breaks down and Sheik pulls Neidhart's leg to break up a slam and Volkoff falls on top for the pin.

Rating: D. Bad match and it's not the right pairing for the Harts at all. They're much better against the speed teams and since there was at least one for them to fight in the Killer Bees, I'm assuming there's something up here. Not much of a match and pretty short, but the Harts did what they could. It just didn't work all that well.

Sheik would stick around for another few years without accomplishing anything of note. After jumping around the AWA, WWC and NWA without doing anything interesting (save for getting squashed by Sting on PPV), it was back to the WWF to capitalize on the Gulf War. This is from Wrestling Challenge on June 30, 1991 with Sheik portraying Colonel Mustafa.

Colonel Mustafa vs. Jerry Stevens

The first part of the match is spent on an inset interview with Mustafa and his superior General Adnan. Stevens gets suplexed down as the announcers plug a trivia game on Hulk Hogan's 900 number. A belly to back suplex sets up the camel clutch to give Mustafa the win.

The evil trio (Adnan, Mustafa and the now evil Sgt. Slaughter) would have their biggest match in the main event of Summerslam 1991: a handicap match against Hulk Hogan/Ultimate Warrior.

Ultimate Warrior/Hulk Hogan vs. Sgt. Slaughter/Colonel Mustafa/General Adnan

Sid Justice is guest referee and Hogan is WWF Champion. Hogan and

Slaughter get things going but the Sarge wants to stall. Slaughter pounds on him in the corner but gets caught between the right hands of both superheroes. Off to Warrior for a clothesline followed by a double big boot to put Slaughter down again. A clothesline gets two for Hogan and it's back to Warrior. This is completely one sided so far. Hogan comes back in with a middle rope ax handle for two.

Sid breaks up some choking in the corner and the distraction lets Slaughter get in some shots on Hogan. Adnan, an old manager, comes in to rake Hogan's back and slowly pound away in the corner. Off to Mustafa (Iron Sheik) for the gutwrench suplex and the camel clutch but Warrior makes the save. Slaughter comes back in to choke away in the corner and send Hogan into Sid for a staredown. Sarge jumps the distracted Hogan and stomps away on the back.

Warrior breaks up a top rope something by Slaughter, allowing for the hot tag to the painted one. Warrior cleans house on Slaughter but runs into Sid for another staredown. Back to Mustafa who gets caught in a suplex but Slaughter blocks a tag. Slaughter puts Warrior in a chinlock, only to have the Ultimate One fight up and clothesline Sarge down. There's the hot tag to Hogan as Hogan chases the lackeys to the back with a chair. More on that later as Hogan throws powder in Slaughter's face and drops the leg to win.

Rating: D+. I'm not a fan of this one as the match was never in doubt at all, but above that the Iraq War had been over for six months so the interest in the feud was done long ago. Nothing to see here but the fans reacted pretty well to it. This would have been better as a house show main event instead of the main event of Summerslam. If nothing else there was a match around this time on a Coliseum Video with Slaughter/Mustafa/Undertaker against the superheroes. Wouldn't that make a much better main event here?

Slaughter would turn face soon after this, setting up a feud with Mustafa. They would captain teams at the 1991 Survivor Series.

Team Mustafa vs. Team Slaughter

Colonel Mustafa, Berzerker, Skinner, Hercules

Sgt. Slaughter, Tito Santana, Jim Duggan, Texas Tornado

A lot of these guys are on their way out. Hercules would be in WCW by May, Tornado would job to the stars until leaving in July as would Mustafa (Iron Sheik), and the rest of the guys would do nothing of note for the rest of their time in the company. Kerry (Tornado) looks high as a kite and almost falls off the apron getting into the ring. This is pretty recently after Slaughter's face turn as he was a heel at Summerslam. This isn't exactly the most talent laden match ever and the only feud is Slaughter vs. Mustafa.

Tito and Skinner start with Santana taking over with a headlock. There's the flying forearm out of nowhere and Skinner hits the floor without a cover. Off to Berzerker vs. Tornado which would work a lot better down in Dallas. Berzerker (a crazy viking who tried to stab Undertaker with a sword) misses a dropkick and it's off to Mustafa. After some very brief offense, Kerry tumbles to his corner and brings in Duggan to face Hercules, which was in the first ever match at Survivor Series.

Duggan gets taken down by double and triple teaming and it's off to Mustafa. He loads up his curled boots (it's a Sheik thing) and does nothing with them. Thanks for wasting our time with that. Duggan pounds away and backdrops Mustafa down before the hot tag to Slaughter. The big showdown is an atomic drop and a clothesline to Mustafa for the elimination.

Berzerker comes in with some clotheslines and a kick to the fat gut of Slaughter. A boot to Slaughter's face puts him down and it's off to Hercules for some two counts. Back to the viking who gets crotched on the top rope and kicked in the legs. Off to Duggan who clotheslines Berzerker to the floor and backdrops him back there a few seconds later. Tornado

comes in and pounds away on him before it's off to Hercules again. Tito gets a blind tag and hits a forearm to the back of the head (El Paso Del Muerte) for the pin and the elimination.

Skinner, the guy that owned now former developmental program FCW, comes in as it's 4-2. When you have Skinner and Berzerker as your only guys left, the team is in big trouble. A blind tag brings in Slaughter who rolls up Skinner for the elimination. Slaughter whips Berzerker into Duggan's clothesline for the elimination and the win.

Rating: F. The match sucked, it was never in doubt, and the biggest deal on the heel team was Skinner, who would get an IC Title shot soon after this. What a horrible match and one of the most worthless ones in the history of the show so far, which is covering quite a bit of ground. Nothing to see here at all.

We'll wrap it up with a handicap match in MSG on December 29, 1991.

General Adnan/Colonel Mustafa vs. Sgt. Slaughter

The winner gets to raise their own country's flag. Mustafa (Iron Sheik) sings the Iraqi national anthem. No tagging required here I don't think. Nope none at all. They jump Slaughter to start and use his bullet belt to work Slaughter over. Adnan goes outside which apparently he doesn't have to do but does anyway. Most odd indeed.

Sheik gets a shot to Slaughter's throat with something but the referee is distracted. Slaughter gets a clothesline to take over to almost no reaction. Adnan comes in as this needs to end soon due to the high level of suck in the evil foreigners. Slaughter rams them into each other and clotheslines Adnan for the pin to end it even though he wasn't legal I don't think.

Rating: D. Quick but barely long enough to call it a full match. It's pretty bad and thankfully this angle/feud ended

soon after this as the time for this thing went on way too long. Nothing special at all here and it was boring and bad on top of all that. Sarge was back though, even though he would be gone relatively soon.

Iron Sheik started out as an awesome wrestler with a great look and gimmick but time caught up with him in the late 80s. After that it was just living off of his past glory for a few years before he basically went nuts and wanted to, ahem, humble various wrestlers. Look up what that means for yourself. Anyway, Sheik is a very underrated talent that you should look into more if you only remember him for getting beaten up by Hulk Hogan.

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