

Balls Mahoney Passes Away At 44

I'm sure you've heard about this by now. I never was a fan of the guy but 44 is too young for anyone.

2015 Awards: Wrestler of the Year

We'll wrap it up with the biggest one of the year.

We'll start with one of the last remaining worldwide talents in AJ Styles. The guy goes around the world and has great match after great match. He was a huge star in New Japan and fought almost anyone you could ask him to face. Styles has earned the WWE run he's about to get and 2015 was a big part of that.

You also have to consider Kevin Owens for how far he's come in just a year. People kind of forget that he made his WWE debut at the end of 2014 and was pinning John Cena about six months later. Couple that with a dominant performance against Sami Zayn and the Intercontinental Title and it's hard to argue anyone having a stronger debut year in a very long time.

Also out of NXT you have Bayley, who rose up from a good but not great NXT woman to the most over person in the hottest promotion in wrestling. Watch her come out on NXT and just take in how much the people love her. She's on a roll in the ring too and is a genuine character that young girls can get attached to. I honestly don't remember the last time that happened in wrestling and it's amazing to see it happen right before your eyes.

That leaves us with the main two options and we'll start with the younger. Seth Rollins threw in a legitimate surprise finish to Wrestlemania when he cashed in and went on to have one heck of an in ring year. Rollins' biggest problem came down to his horrible booking. There's only so much you can do when you're treated as HHH and Stephanie's kid and get stuck trying to carry Kane to a serious World Title match at a major show.

This is a situation where someone was doing the best with what they were given and Rollins did everything he could. It's not his fault that WWE doesn't know how to book a heel as anything but a coward or subservient to the Authority. Rollins did his best and it's clear that he's going to be a huge deal when he comes back (hopefully not being associated with HHH) with his knee all fixed up.

Finally, as always, there's John Cena. This was an odd year for Cena as he started off hot against Lesnar and Rollins, went into a very hit or miss feud with Rusev (more miss than hit unfortunately), how an awesome feud with Owens, disappeared for a few weeks due to his reality show, then had another hit or miss feud with Rollins (though it was much more the booking missing than the wrestlers). Then he came back for like five minutes but got hurt again and is out for the next several months.

However, there's a major weight in his favor and that's the US Open Challenge. This is what separated Cena from the rest of the pack all year as it was one awesome match after another with any and all comers. The question became who was going to walk through the curtain, making every week a big surprise. Some of them were better than others, but you knew you were going to get something special. This series of matches impressed even some of Cena's harshest critics as Cena just could not have a bad match during this thing. At the end of the day, good wrestling is more important than anything else and no one did that better week in and week out this year than Cena.

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2015 Awards: Match of the Year

This is one of the hardest ones to pick because it's one of the two biggest awards of the year.

We'll start over in Japan with Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Kota Ibushi in the WON Match of the Year. I didn't remember this being as awesome as it was but I gave it an A and you have to mention it after winning such a big award. Ibushi made this a war and came so close to the huge upset in a great story with great action but he just couldn't pull it off. Still great though.

Reigns vs. Lesnar from Wrestlemania was better than I was expecting as they just beat the tar out of each other for a long time until the big screwy ending. That ending is what holds it back for me as it turned into more of an angle than a match. What we got until that point was more than worth seeing though and it far exceeded most expectations. It's the main event of Wrestlemania so you have to at least give it a mention.

In another surprise, Kevin Owens pinned John Cena at Elimination Chamber. This was the big trading finishers showdown with both guys hitting each other with bigger and bigger shots to set up the big surprise finish with Owens winning. This was built up with weeks of great promos and then gave us a great match. What more can you ask for than that?

There's another match from outside WWE with Mil Muertes vs. Fenix in a Grave Consequences (casket) match. It's not the match of the year, but it runs away with the award for having no business being awesome but blowing the roof off the place. Casket matches are some of the goofiest gimmick matches you'll ever find but these two turned it into one of the most dramatic things I've seen in a very long time. Given how bad the gimmick was holding them back, this was a borderline miracle.

We'll go in reverse for a second and mention the Iron Man match at Takeover: Respect. It's not quite the first match but the ending with Bayley KICKING SASHA IN THE HEAD to win and Banks making Izzy cry were things of beauty. These two have mad chemistry together and the rematch even being near the level of the original is the highest praise.

That leaves us with the final two matches that everyone knew we were coming to. First up there's the amazing triple threat from the Royal Rumble with Brock Lesnar vs. John Cena vs. Seth Rollins. I rewatched this a few days ago and good night it was something to see. All three guys hit everything they could and the story of Lesnar having to be double teamed to leave the other two fighting was great stuff.

The things Lesnar was doing and was being put through by the challengers were awesome and the ending with Brock going Beast Mode to beat Rollins left me out of breath. This was the most action packed match of the year and the clubhouse leader for a very long time. It was going to take something special to come close to it and that's what we got about nine months later.

Women in wrestling get a lot of flack. They're treated as eye candy, sideshow acts, popcorn breaks and second class citizens who do some of the dumbest things imaginable. That's what makes the NXT women's division so much fun. Instead of being treated like morons, they're treated as serious competitors who happen to be women. The idea of a Women's Title match being the main event of a random week of TV doesn't even make NXT fans think twice these days and that's a really good sign.

That's what makes Bayley vs. Sasha Banks so important. This wasn't just a great match but it was also a great moment. The wrestling, the emotion

and the post match scene all wrapped this up into one of the greatest things I've seen as a wrestling fan. This was a moment for wrestling and had me losing my mind every single time, even though Bayley winning wasn't exactly a shock.

So that brings up the big debate that never ends in wrestling: action vs. emotion. The triple threat was non-stop insanity with one big spot after another. The women's match on the other hand was all about Bayley's journey from the goofy fangirl to the serious competitor who was the best in the company. However, it didn't have Brock Lesnar breaking stuff, including various people for twenty minutes.

I keep going back and forth on this but the more I think about that sequence with Sasha getting Bayley in the Bank Statement and stomping on her hand, only to have Bayley reverse it into a Bank Statement of her own, the more I have to go with the women. For my money, the hardest thing to do in wrestling is to convince fans that something they know is happening isn't going to happen. Like I said, Bayley was the obvious winner but they managed to convince me that it wasn't going to happen for that split second.

The thing is though the match kept going and had one heck of a finishing sequence with Bayley hitting a great looking reverse hurricanrana to knock Banks senseless. That's where the match got even better for me: Bayley had Banks beaten before the Bayley to Belly, which really just put her out of her misery. In other words, Bayley looked like the decisive winner instead of someone who happened to win. It felt like an actual changing of the guard and a moment, which is what it was supposed to be. Couple that with the Four Horsewomen post match stuff and this beats anything else in the year in a big milestone.

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2015 Awards: Best Major Show

This is always a big one.

We'll start up north with Takeover: Brooklyn which had one of the best one-two main events I've ever seen, though Bayley vs. Sasha still should have gone on last. The crowd helped this one a lot as everyone was losing their minds over what they were seeing. It's a great show and the real main event is probably the match of the year.

There's also Wrestle Kingdom IX which was the usual stacked New Japan card with one great match after another. The problem here though, as usual, is how long the show is. I really liked the action but they could have cut at least half an hour off. The show was shorter than usual but it still felt long, which isn't a good thing. This is way up there for the action alone.

Speaking of action we have Ultima Lucha, which combined to go three hours and had some great culminations to some awesome feuds and stories. Believe it or not it was probably the Vampiro match that stole the show with the old retired Vampiro going full on insane one last time before revealing that he had been Pentagon's master the whole time. The rest of the card is (mostly) awesome and it was a great cap to one of the biggest surprises I've ever seen with Lucha Underground.

Now we have one of the usual suspects in Wrestlemania. You can't have a

discussion of major shows without looking at the biggest show of the year and Wrestlemania was a shocking surprise. The thing is, people said that it probably wouldn't hold up as well on a second viewing and that wound up being the case as the redo dropped a little bit. The thing with Wrestlemania XXXI was how low people's expectations were coming in. Most people, including myself, thought the show looked like a disaster on paper but it wound up being a really strong outing.

Finally though, there's Takeover: London. I think the subtitle I used for this show sums it up better than anything else: what a great night of wrestling matches. The worst match on the card was totally fine (Crews vs. Corbin) and the next worse match received a strong B. NXT is the it promotion for a strong card with well built stories that pay off in the end and London might have been the strongest. Anytime you get a Sting vs. Vader story like they had in Bayley vs. Jax, you know you're in for a good night. This was my favorite big show of the year and I'm almost certain it's going to have the required staying power.

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2015 Awards: Rookie of the

Year

This might be the trickiest of all as you could say Sting is a rookie as he had his first WWE match in 2015. Since that could make things really complicated though, we'll go with people I consider rookies, meaning I might not consider some of your choices.

We'll start with someone outside WWE because I'm a WWE mark or something. ROH's Dalton Castle had debuted a few years earlier but changed his gimmick and debuted in the Top Prospect Tournament in the early part of the year. This turned into a great run for him as he became one of the more entertaining guys on the roster with a surprisingly strong offense and a great character. He's one of the people I enjoy most when watching ROH and his charisma alone will take him a long way.

Asuka is really kind of cheating as she's been wrestling for over ten years. However, she debuted in NXT and was instantly the second (at worst) woman on the roster. It's pretty clear Asuka vs. Bayley is coming at Takeover in Dallas and it should be one of the most awesome matches they've had....well since the last time Bayley had a big showdown match. This is a stretch but she's a rookie in WWE at least and that's close enough.

Speaking of rookie women in NXT, we have Nia Jax, who actually did debut in 2015. I know her character is limited and I still don't get why she and Eva Marie are teaming, but she played a perfect Vader to Bayley's Sting, which is really impressive given that she was debuting six months prior to that. I don't know how far she can go, but Nia is a great monster with a great look.

However, we finally have the runaway winner in Chad Gable. This is a guy who just gets it and was ready for the main roster about ten seconds after he debuted. Gable is the closest thing to another version of Kurt Angle as he went from the Olympics to the WWE where he's a comedic goon who was capable of out wrestling anyone. This guy could be something very special in the future and he's just fun to watch, especially when he's with Jason Jordan.

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2015 Awards: Feud of the Year

This is another one that doesn't have a lot of options this year but the top choices are good.

As usual, we'll knock out the honorable mentions first.

Brock vs. Undertaker had two good to awesome matches with a Match of the Year candidate inside the Cell. My big problem with this one is how it started up again. The Undertaker coming out and costing Brock the title didn't work for me as it took him a year and a half to come back and go after Brock with the World Champion getting sacrificed to set it up. That and the messy ending to their Summerslam match. It was such a disaster.

That's about it for the honorable mentions actually. Like I said, it's not the best year.

One of the two big ones is of course Kevin Owens vs. John Cena with the whole battle of different roads to get to the top level. This one was carried by the promos but Owens winning made the whole thing a huge success. I know a lot of people say that Owens losing the last two matches killed it, but Owens would win the Intercontinental Title later in the year and could easily be a main event player by the time

Summerslam rolls around. How much of that do you think is due to the first win over Cena?

The other option is Sasha Banks vs. Bayley, which just worked on every level. You had the perfect good vs. bad style with two awesome matches (I still swoon over that Bank Statement reversal) and it main evented a Takeover. That alone is remarkable and the fact that they brought Izzy into it and MADE HER CRY was one of the best heel moves I've seen in years.

Picking a winner here is splitting hairs, but I have to go with Owens vs. Cena, just due to the shock of that first win. Bayley winning was an amazing moment but it was also obvious from the second she got the title shot. The surprise of Owens pinning Cena in a great match on pay per view was such a stunning moment and is enough to pull this forward.

That being said, it's rather sad that there are so few feuds these days. Everything is about setting up a rubber match or for a title. It's so rare to see a good personal feud but when they work, they're as entertaining as anything wrestling can produce. Now why can't WWE produce more of them?

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2015 Wrestling Observer Newsletter Awards

They're out for the year and as usual I'll be taking a look at each one and giving my take on whether or not I think Meltzer (yes I know the fans vote on them and if you think most of them aren't just repeating what he says, you're missing the point) got it right. I'll just be listing the winners and any other names in the top three that merit a vote. Also keep in mind that I don't watch a ton of puro so my knowledge is limited. Also, this is a wrestling site, not an MMA site, even though some people seem to think they're the same thing. There are a lot of these so I'm just going to give a quick response to each.

Wrestler of the Year – AJ Styles

Uh.....yeah I can go with that I guess. I'd have taken Cena due to how great the US Open Challenge was but Styles didn't get a bad review all year and wrestled almost EVERYWHERE.

Most Outstanding Wrestler – AJ Styles

It's another year and again I ask: what's the difference between this and Wrestler of the Year?

Feud of the Year – Conor McGregor vs. Jose Aldo

Well at least they're not wasting time this year, though can you imagine a wrestling match that ended in 13 seconds being considered a great blowoff to a feud? The top wrestling feud was Bayley vs. Sasha Banks, which is either my first or second pick as well.

Tag Team of the Year – Young Bucks

Of course. Next.

Most Improved – Bayley

This isn't the easiest year to argue against. I don't think anyone can

argue that Bayley isn't better than she was last year as she's now the biggest star in NXT. I can go with this one again, even though it's not one I would have thought of.

Best on Interviews – Conor McGregor

Heyman was second and again that's fine, though I would have given it to Owens, who came in third.

Most Charismatic – Shinsuke Nakamura

Yep. No argument on that actually. The dude is a machine.

Best Technical Wrestler – Zack Sabre Jr.

I haven't seen him actually but I've heard nothing but rave reviews for him so this isn't surprising.

Best Brawler – Tomohiro Ishii

I saw his match at Wrestle Kingdom and it really wasn't brawling. Then again it was barely professional wrestling either so I'll go with a headscratch here. Brawling isn't really a thing these days in mainstream wrestling so this is a hard one to pick.

Best Flyer – Riccochet

Neville didn't even make the top three. Seriously?

Most Overrated – Kane

Who rates Kane highly in the first place? Reigns is second. This should of course be the Young Bucks.

Most Underrated – Cesaro

For years I've thought underrated and overrated should be changed to under/over utilized as it always seems like what they're going for. Cesaro is considered awesome but he's never pushed. That's not the same as being underrated, which would also seem to be the case with Kane being overrated.

Promotion of the Year – New Japan

If you didn't see this coming, you haven't been paying close enough attention. NXT isn't in the top three, though that could be considered part of WWE (also not in the top three).

Best Weekly TV Show – NXT

Yep, with Lucha Underground second. Dang it Meltzer give me something to get mad at you over!

Match of the Year – Shinsuke Nakamura vs. Kota Ibushi

You knew it would be something from New Japan, though to be fair I gave this an A. Bayley vs. Sasha from Brooklyn was third.

Rookie of the Year – Chad Gable

That's fine.

Best Non-Wrestler – Dario Cueto

Second is Paul Heyman and third is Xavier Woods. As in the guy that has already wrestled multiple times this year alone and is a Tag Team Champion. I get what they're going for here though.

Best Announcer – Mauro Ranallo

Again, no surprise here.

Worst Announcer – John Layfield

Second is Cole and third is Lawler. I'm fine with this....again.

Best Major Wrestling Show – Wrestle Kingdom IX

I didn't even have to look at the results. Wrestlemania was third, after UFC 189.

Worst Major Wrestling Show – TripleMania XXIII

This has been the running answer all year and I'm not surprised. Third

though was TLC, which really took me by surprise. If nothing else the three way ladder match alone would have carried it higher than third worst of the year.

Best Wrestling Maneuver – Styles Clash

Second was the Rainmaker (IT'S A FREAKING CLOTHESLINE!) and third is the Meltzer Driver, which has to be a joke instead of a real pick. The Clash is good but move of the year? As in the move that broke Yoshi Tatsu's neck? That's the best there is? Really?

Most Disgusting Promotional Tactic – WWE Using Reid Flair's Death in An Angle

Yeah this isn't surprising again. What is surprising is the Divas Revolution in second. Yeah it was stupid but disgusting?

Worst Match of the Year – Psycho Clowns vs. Villanos

Yep. Second is the Royal Rumble (which I rewatched a few days ago and yep) but third is Erick Rowan vs. Big Show in a stairs match....from 2014. Come on now man that's my thing.

Worst Feud of the Year – Team PCB vs. Team Bella vs. Team BAD

Yeah I think I can go with this. It's not so much that it was bad but more that it kept going for months and never went anywhere.

Worst Promotion of the Year – TNA

Can we just rename this the TNA Award? You would think after a nine year run it might be time.

Best Booker – Paul Levesque/Ryan Ward

As in the NXT bookers. I'm so glad that that promotion is getting the credit it deserves this year.

Promoter of the Year – Dana White

The first wrestling promoter is Takaaki Kidani of New Japan.

Worst Gimmick – Stardust

Well yeah, though I'm not sure how to define his gimmick. I'd have gone with Mex-America, which came in second.

This is more proof that this is a really weak year for awards. Everything has been pretty easy and there really isn't a lot that jumps off the page at me. It's really just been one predictable category after another and that can make for a lame awards season. At least NXT got the respect it deserves here which had me a bit worried coming in.

2015 Awards: News Story of the Year

Again, this one could depend on your definition of "news".

We'll get the two annual ones that still seem to surprise people out of the way first.

First of all, the Raw ratings bombed in the fall. I know they always do and yeah they were even worse this year, but then football season ended and the company started trying again, meaning the ratings went back up. This happens every year and I'm right there with you by saying it was never this bad, but this really does happen every year.

Second, TNA got thrown off another network and the audience continues to be dismal. This is what TNA is these days and until something major changes, it's not going to get any better no matter what happens.

Next up we have an actual surprise as Seth Rollins shredded every single piece of his knee and had to vacate the WWE World Title. This changed quite a few things depending on whose original plans you believe. Either way, Rollins being out changed quite a few things and potentially fast tracked Reigns toward the title. It was certainly shocking and changed a

lot and that's how news works in wrestling.

Now we get to the big theme of the year: it's a bad time for 80s legends.

We'll start with the surprise deaths of both Dusty Rhodes and Roddy Piper. These two were giants of wrestling and passed away less than two months apart. On their own these two are much more sad than anything else but back to back like that was quite the big hit.

We also have Jimmy Snuka's potential murder trial, but given that Snuka is 72 years old and potentially mentally unfit to stand trial, this might not lead anywhere. Still though, it's quite the surprise to actually see this story come up again after all these years.

Finally in this group, we have Hulk Hogan's racist rant. Now here's the thing: it was several years ago and came at one of the lowest points of Hogan's life. Most people, including myself, thinks this comes off like Hogan venting off a lot of steam rather than the way he actually thinks. That seems to be the general consensus from his co-workers over the years so it's something I can believe.

The thing to remember with Hogan though is he said something. He didn't break a law, he didn't hurt anyone physically and he didn't do anything other than sound stupid. People say this kind of nonsense every day and Hogan happens to be a celebrity who got caught on camera. It's stupid for sure, but not the worst thing in the world.

Overall though, there's something else that comes off as a major news story to me, which shouldn't surprise a lot of you: the continued expansion of NXT. Between the wild extension of the house shows, breaking boundaries with Bayley and Sasha Banks main eventing a Network special, bringing in a bunch of new talent and the sellouts almost everywhere they go, NXT has turned into something special that we haven't seen before. It's ROH all stars under the WWE banner and this looks like the future. If so, we're in for a very good time in the coming years.

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2015 Awards: Promo of the Year

This isn't the most in depth field in the world.

We'll start with the usual leader in Paul Heyman, who has two options here. These weren't exactly his best efforts, especially compared to last year, but they're still both solid options.

First up we have the post Wrestlemania promo with Heyman saying Brock will be getting his rematch that night instead of waiting any amount of time. This was all about the delivery that only Heyman can bring.

Second was GLORY GLORY BROCK LESNAR with Heyman breaking into song. There isn't much else to say about this one but sweet goodness it was catchy.

Since this is going to be a short list, I'll throw in Bray Wyatt bragging about being the new demon of WWE after kidnapping Undertaker and stealing his soul or whatever it was he did. Now of course this didn't lead anywhere but it was cool at the time with the thunder and lightning helping a lot.

With those out of the way, we're up to the real winner: Kevin Owens' debut promo against John Cena. I mean....dang man. Owens looked more comfortable in front of a main roster audience than anyone in years. His line of "You don't get to give me advice. I've been doing this longer

than you.” set the tone for his entire run and there was no looking back. The fact that he actually beat Cena in their showdown made this even better. Owens was instantly a player with this promo though and it was the best all year.

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2015 Awards: Moment of the Year

This one is always kind of hard to pick.

Again, we'll get through some of the easier ones first.

The Salida Del Sol through the ladder at TLC was amazing and one of the biggest high spots in a LONG time. Just...dang. It doesn't really have a long lasting impact but it was really cool and definitely deserves mentioning.

For a quick one, Brock Lesnar sitting up next to Undertaker and laughing at him, only to have Undertaker do the same. Again, didn't mean much but it was awesome at the time.

The Ronda Rousey appearance at Wrestlemania was great as well with the

great line of “She’s going to reach down your throat and play jump rope with your Fallopian tubes.” This would be a nearly runaway winner if Rousey had really hurt Stephanie but pesky contracts prevented it.

Shield reunited for all of thirty seconds. That’s more of a preview than an awesome moment though.

Now we’ll get down to the actual top choices.

First up was the Divas Revolution, which would have been even better had Stephanie not been involved. I get that she wanted to be involved because she’s Stephanie and has to be involved in something cool every time, but it was Paige’s story and should have gotten the moment to make the whole thing work.

Another major one is Seth Rollins cashing in Money in the Bank. This was a legitimate shocking moment and the big story that people remember from Wrestlemania. I don’t know if I’d put it at number one but it worked very well at the time, before WWE decided to make Rollins a worthless champion.

From the same show, there’s the NWO vs. DX. This was the Monday Night Wars in the span of fifteen minutes and I had a blast with it. Points off for the complete lack of continuity and HHH winning, but this was so much fun.

Then Bayley did a reverse super hurricanrana, gave Sasha Banks a Bayley to Belly and won the Women’s Title, followed by the Four Horsewomen posing in the ring one last time. Wrestling is all about emotion and that’s what you got here. This was as good as it got in 2015 and it’s going to be a long time before anything tops this.

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