

Wrestlemania XXXI Preview: Pre-Show: Andre the Giant Memorial Battle Royal

This one didn't take long.

This is on the pre-show this year and I can't say I'm surprised. The other day I saw someone say that this is just the same battle royal they had on the pre-show for years and he was exactly right. Yeah last year's was cool with Hogan endorsing it and Cesaro getting what should have been the star of a major push for him, but instead it would up being the catch all match for the people that couldn't get on the show anywhere else.

I won't bother listing off everyone in the match (only twenty this year, as it probably should be) but here are the names that matter: Miz, Mizdow, Kane, Big Show, Ryback, Mark Henry. Other than that everyone is a jobber or Hideo Itami making his main roster debut. The interesting thing is there's no spot for Sheamus, who I would have had winning the thing. However, now that he's not an option, it makes for a more wide open (or as wide as you can get with six guys as potential winners) field.

The only really interesting story for anyone in the match is between Miz and Mizdow, but the problem with FINALLY turning Mizdow here is if he doesn't win, what difference does it make? Unfortunately I have no faith in the writers to realize this so I don't think Miz or Mizdow goes over here.

Kane, Big Show and Mark Henry.....just no. Henry would be the best choice of the three and I think I've covered why I never want to see Big Show or Kane win a match again as long as they live. None of these guys need to win this though and there's no point in putting any of them over the younger guys. Let someone look good in eliminating them and leave it at that.

That brings us to the two people I could see winning. First and foremost, I really don't think Itami gets it. He comes off more like an entrant to

put in there so they don't have to put Neville or Balor in the match and have them lose before their callups in the very near future. Itami will probably get a kicking demonstration, but he isn't going to make it to the final three.

Therefore, I'm going with Ryback. He's been on a pretty good roll lately and they seem somewhat serious about making him into a big guy (see what I did there?) again. It doesn't help that I'm still a fan of the guy and would like to see him get as close back to where he was before the WE HAVE TO KEEP THE TITLE ON PUNK BECAUSE WE BOOK THINGS SEVEN MONTHS IN ADVANCE NOW booking cut his legs off. Something tells me I'm wrong on this, but it's more what I want to see than anything else.

Keep in mind that my pick instantly changes to Sheamus should he be in it, which wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. What would however be the worst thing in the world is if they don't do SOMETHING with Curtis Axel in this. I know he won't and shouldn't win, but have him do something to play up all the responses he's gotten since the Rumble. You have something there, so run with it, even if it's just a short sprint.

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NXT – March 25, 2015: They're

Nothing If Not Perceptive

NXT

Date: March 25, 2015

Location: Full Sail University, Winter Park, Florida

Commentators: Rich Brennan, Corey Graves

We're back home in Florida tonight with the main event being Kevin Owens defending the NXT Title against Finn Balor. This is the lower level main event that still has the potential to tear the house down if they're given enough time, which NXT is usually really good about doing. In addition to that, we have Sasha Banks defending the Women's Title against Alexa Bliss. Let's get to it.

We open with a recap of last week's road trip to Columbus for the first episode out of Florida.

Opening sequence.

Women's Title: Sasha Banks vs. Alexa Bliss

Sasha is defending after losing a non-title match via countout last week. Bliss grabs a quick rollup for two and a crucifix gets the same. More rollups get more near falls and Sasha is having trouble keeping up with Sasha early on. Bliss tries to jump over her in the corner but gets kicked in the ribs to finally slow things down. A running slap to a seated Bliss gets two and the double knees to the ribs in the corner get the same. Sasha shouts that Bliss isn't in her league but Bliss escapes the straitjacket choke into a small package for two.

The champ gets thrown out to the floor for a big crash. Back in and Bliss lands a slap of her own followed by some forearms before the Glitz Flip (moonsault into two knees to the chest) gets two more. The fans are WAY behind Bliss now which really does show both how good she is as a plucky face and how awesome Sasha is as a heel. Bliss takes time going up and gets slammed down, setting up the Bank Statement for the submission at 5:38.

Rating: C+. I seem to be the last person to notice it, but Sasha has gotten AWESOME in the last few months and is looking like the next big star of the Women's Division. I believe Sara Del Ray is training the girls down there and it might be time to bring her up to train the Divas, because I don't remember the last time these girls had a bad match. That's unthinkable for the main roster Divas.

Kevin Owens says Finn Balor made his mark by dressing up like a demon. Owens made his mark by debuting and becoming NXT Champion in two months. Bring the demon tonight because it won't matter. No one is taking this title from him and his family.

Video on Owens' short time in NXT and his quick rise to the top.

Emma comes up to Bayley in the back and says she told Bayley so. Bayley has been being too nice with the hugs and then she went out and lost to Becky Lynch. She needs to find her inner aggression because the NXT Universe will lie to her. Bayley doesn't but it and stands up to Emma, so the Aussie slaps her HARD in the face. Emma as the disenchanting main roster failure is an interesting new character and a logical progression for her.

Tyler Breeze doesn't like being asked what his next move is because it's a stupid question. After beating "Hideous" Itami last week, he wants to get the NXT Title and make it gorgeous. Itami comes up and says he beat Breeze too, so he wants 2/3 falls next week.

Wrestlemania card rundown.

Finn Balor video, showing him taking NXT by storm.

We look at Alex Riley getting beaten up by Owens last week.

Enzo, Cass and Carmella are in the back when Murphy and Blake come up to apologize to her. They bring her jewelry but the guys aren't impressed. Carmella wants to know why they never get her jewelry.

NXT Title: Finn Balor vs. Kevin Owens

Owens is defending and Balor isn't in the demon paint. We're ready to go

after some Big Match Intros and they have well over twenty minutes for the match not counting commercials. Kevin bails to the floor to start before getting back into the corner. It's a trap though as Balor shoves him back but eats a hard shot to the face. A headlock slows Balor down a bit and Kevin wants to know where the demon is now. He's a Dale Torborg fan? Finn gets up and scores with a nice dropkick as we take a break.

Back with Balor holding an armbar before a basement dropkick gets two. Owens drives him into the corner but uses the weakened arm to drive a shoulder into the ribs, only to further damage it. A Stunner over the top rope puts Balor down and Owens puts his boot on Finn's jaw. We hit the chinlock as this is clearly going like a long match instead of just running through the motions. Back up and Owens levels him with an elbow to the face but is good enough to hold the arm after, making it easier for Balor to kick out. Off to another chinlock as we take a second break.

Back with Owens driving his boot into Balor's ribs before putting on another chinlock with his knee in the back. This one doesn't last as long as Owens throws him to the floor and has an evil look on his face. The powerbomb onto the apron is countered with a backdrop and they head back inside with Owens catching him in something resembling White Noise for two. The backsplash gets the same and we hit the chinlock again. That's getting a bit repetitive which isn't something you often see in NXT.

Owens asks if Balor wants to stand back up and whips him hard into the buckle. A nice overhead belly to belly (with an even better face from Balor) gets two and we're back to the chinlock, earning a big ovation from the crowd. They're nothing if not perceptive. Back from another break with Finn making his comeback with forearms and a backdrop to put the champ on the floor. He follows Kevin out with a big flip dive and the top rope double stomp to the back for two in the ring.

The Pele drops Kevin again but Finn can't follow up. The Sling Blade sets up the reverse Impaler for two more and Balor is STUNNED. Owens avoids the running corner dropkick and Finn comes up holding his knee. The champ goes right after the injury with kicks and chop blocks before ramming it into the apron. A backsplash on the knee sets up a half crab but Balor crawls over for the rope. Balor escapes a powerbomb attempt and hits the

jumping double stomps to put both guys down.

Owens goes up but gets kicked in the head, only to counter Finn's superplex attempt into a spinning release fisherman's superplex (freaking SWEET) for two. Kevin can barely move so Finn kicks him in the head again, only to have the champ chop block him again. The Cannonball connects and Finn is almost out of it.

Owens wraps the bad leg around the ropes and hits a Cannonball onto the leg, but his third attempt only hits buckle. Finn hits a running dropkick (he really shouldn't be able to do that) and the Coup de Grace but his knee is too hurt to cover. That's more like it. Owens gets up and hits the pop up powerbomb to retain at 30:37.

Rating: B+. This took its time getting going and the first half had too much chinlockery, but once they got in a groove and had Balor messing up his leg, this was all gravy. Owens is ready for the main roster and Balor has been ready since before he set foot in NXT, but I'm very glad they're sticking around here and getting to put on awesome matches like this one. That arena is going to come unglued when Sami comes back to fight Owens again.

Overall Rating: B. Good episode this week as we wrap up the first half of this cycle and can move on to the next big batch of matches, perhaps with the next Takeover coming soon. This was a really fun night though and Balor showed how ready he is for the main roster. I wasn't completely thrilled with the main event at first but they made me care about it. That's one of the hardest things to do in wrestling and those two nailed it. Finally, I continue to love this crowd as they acknowledged the amount of chinlocks and applauded to let the guys know to mix it up a bit. How awesome is that?

Results

Sasha Banks b. Alexa Bliss – Bank Statement

Kevin Owens b. Finn Balor – Pop up powerbomb

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NXT – March 11, 2015: There's Always Next Week

NXT

Date: March 11, 2015

Location: Full Sail University, Winter Park, Florida

Commentators: Corey Graves, Tom Phillips, Jason Albert

Things are starting to pick up again in NXT as commentator Alex Riley is coming after NXT Champion Kevin Owens for bullying him on commentary recently. First up for Riley is CJ Parker, as Alex has to earn a shot at the champ. Other than that we're waiting on the return of Sami Zayn and the Finn Balor showdown with Owens for the title. In other words, no one likes Owens except the audience. Let's get to it.

Opening sequence.

Enzo Amore/Colin Cassady vs. Lucha Dragons

No Carmella this week. Enzo thinks the Dragons are more like the Geico Lizards. Cass: "Either save us 15% or more or get out of our way!" When I grow up, I want to be Enzo's beard. Enzo and Kalisto get things going as the fans duel between "GEICO LIZARDS!" and "FIFTEEN PERCENT!" Kalisto grabs an armbar to take Enzo down and it's quickly off to Cara, who slams his partner into a senton on Amore for two. The tag brings in Big Cass

who shows Cara how to throw your partner around.

Enzo comes back in but gets kicked away, allowing the hot tag to Kalisto as things speed up. The Dragons take over again as this is going longer than your average opening match on this show. Everything breaks down with Enzo and Cass going outside. Cass shoves his buddy away to take the double dive but is still able to break up the swanton from Cara. He does the smart thing by dragging Enzo over for the tag and the East River Crossing plants Kalisto, setting up a Rocket Launcher from Amore for the pin at 5:40.

Rating: C-. The match dragged a bit but you have to give Amore and Cass a win or two here and there to set up their title program down the line. Cass is big and strong enough to make up for Amore and they have great comedic chemistry together. Also, notice how much more into them the fans were without Carmella at ringside. NXT gets that logical thinking thing while it's totally lost on WWE.

Next week we see matches from NXT at the Arnold Sports Festival in Columbus, Ohio.

Video on Alex Riley.

Video on Kevin Owens' dominance.

Alexa Bliss vs. Carmella

Carmella throws her away from a headlock to start but Bliss grabs the arm to take over. Alexa misses a charge into the corner so Carmella just hammers her in the face. The fans aren't exactly interested in having Carmella out there. We hit the body scissors on Bliss before Carmella drives her back into the corner. This really isn't much to see so far. Bliss comes back with some forearm and a flip splash for two, followed by a spinning splash from the top (the Sparkle Splash) for the pin at 5:03.

Rating: D+. These two aren't exactly on Charlotte and Banks' level. The fans flat out do not like Carmella and it's definitely good to keep her apart from Enzo and Cass. Bliss isn't great but she's adorable and can

carry herself well enough in the ring. To be fair though, I never thought much of Sasha or Charlotte at first and they've turned out great.

Alex Riley gives a very serious speech about being stuck in a cage for two years and constantly being told "maybe next week kid." Owens talks about having a wife and kids but Riley's family is in that arena. It's time to fight for his family. Really good stuff from Riley here and I've always been a fan of his. I always thought it was a waste of his talents to put him behind a mic for so long but at least he's getting back in the ring now.

Breeze says this didn't have to get ugly with Itami. "Well you were involved so maybe it did have to get ugly."

CJ Parker vs. Alex Riley

Riley's entrance cuts off Parker complaining about the world. Riley is still in shape but his face makes him look a bit homeless. Parker's headlock doesn't get him very far as Riley comes back with a nice dropkick. The TKO is countered though and Parker lays in some left hands. The Third Eye is countered with a backdrop and Riley nails a hard clothesline. Something like John Morrison's flip neckbreaker puts Parker down again and a Blockbuster is good for the pin at 3:20.

Rating: C-. Not terrible here but Riley had some ring rust. That's the point of something like developmental but he needs to do some more before he's ready to make it onto the main roster. I'm hoping he uses the TKO again instead of a Blockbuster as a few people are using that one already.

Post match Kevin Owens comes out and calls Alex Riley the dumbest man in NXT. Riley gave up his commentary career just so Riley can destroy his in ring career too. Owens hasn't forgotten about Finn Balor either.

Tyler Breeze vs. Hideo Itami

Rematch from Rival. Breeze heads to the floor to start and says this won't be like last time. He does it a second time and the fans keep booing. Old style heat still works. Back in and Breeze drives Itami into

the corner for some shoulders to the ribs but Itami kicks him right to the floor. Itami throws him back inside for a running knee in the corner and the tornado DDT into a guillotine. He goes back up but gets crotched this time, giving Tyler his first real advantage.

The fans think Itami is gorgeous as Breeze drops a leg and puts on a chinlock. Back from a break with Itami punching Breeze away and hitting a top rope dropkick to put both guys down. A leg trip sends Breeze to the floor and a big kick gets two. Itami kicks him in the face but walks into the Supermodel Kick for two.

Breeze gets pulled face first into the post while trying to crotch Itami, setting up a top rope knee to the back of the head. Breeze gets up again though and Itami is getting mad. The fans call for the GTS but have to settle for a hard series of strikes instead. Itami misses a running dropkick in the corner though and the Beauty Shot is good for the pin on Hideo at 11:25.

Rating: B-. That's a surprising ending but I like it better than just giving Itami the pin. The problem with Breeze was that he kept putting people over and it stops meaning anything after so many times. This win gives him some credibility back and makes future wins over him mean more. In other words, it's trading in the short term for the long term, and that's rarely a bad thing.

Overall Rating: C+. This was solid enough for the most part and I really like that we're getting the short term stories instead of the major stuff every week. Riley vs. Owens isn't the biggest feud in the world, but it lets the anticipation for Owens vs. Balor and eventually Owens vs. Zayn build up instead of just blowing through them immediately. Another thing that NXT understands better than WWE is you don't have to get everything in by a certain date, at least not most of the time. Take the extra time, because as HHH said on Austin's podcast, there's always next week.

Results

Enzo Amore/Colin Cassady b. Lucha Dragons – Rocket Launcher to Kalisto

Alexa Bliss b. Carmella – Sparkle Splash

Alex Riley b. CJ Parker – Blockbuster

Tyler Breeze b. Hideo Itami – Beauty Shot

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NXT – February 25, 2015: It Had To Happen Eventually

NXT

Date: February 25, 2015

Location: Full Sail University, Winter Park, Florida

Commentators: Corey Graves, Alex Riley, Tom Phillips

We're still living in Kevin Owens' NXT as he shows no sign of letting up soon. Last week he ran through former NXT Champion Adrian Neville, clearing more of the path to get to his showdown with Finn Balor. Other than that, we have the potential split of Carmella from Enzo Amore and Colin Cassady, which might be well received by the NXT fans. Let's get to it.

Opening sequence.

Hideo Itami vs. Bull Dempsey

Dempsey elbows him in the face to start and drives another into Hideo's

chest. A chinlock doesn't last long as Itami fires off elbows of his own, followed by kicks to the leg. That's fine with Dempsey who hits a running Vader style splash for two to regain control. When all else fails, just have the big guy run someone over. Itami comes back with a quick series of strike and a running basement dropkick in the corner. A running kick to the face is enough to pin Dempsey at 2:50.

Tyler Breeze superkicks Itami as he leaves. He stops to take a picture though and Itami gets up to chase him away.

Video on The Brian Kendrick, who is making a return tonight like Rhyno did last week.

Lucha Dragons vs. Tye Dillinger/Jason Jordan

During Dillinger/Jordan's entrances, Solomon Crowe hacks the feed and says he'll be NXT Champion. Jordan drags Sin Cara into the corner but Kalisto is pulled in, only to get face planted for his efforts. Off to Dillinger for a mocking bow to Cara as the fans chant NO ME GUSTA ("I don't like it!") and a slam to Kalisto.

It's quickly back to Cara who quickly takes Dillinger into the Dragons' corner for a tag back to Kalisto. That's quite the fast exchange. Dillinger and Jordan (thank goodness for those letters on the trunks. To be fair I couldn't tell the Hardy Boys apart for years either) don't seem to agree on a tag so Tye tells him to relax. Cara slips over for a tag to Kalisto as things speed way up. Jordan drops to the floor and walks out on the match, allowing the Salida Del Sol and Swanton Bomb to pin Dillinger at 3:31.

Rating: D+. This was angle advancement but I'm getting a little bored with the Dragons. We saw them win and lose the titles and they're still basically the same team. Those belts have always been defined by heel teams so the Dragons never did much for me with the titles. Nothing much to see here, especially considering Jordan and Dillinger haven't meant anything in months.

Finn Balor is ready for Kendrick tonight and isn't looking ahead to Owens.

After a break, Dillinger demands Jordan come out here. He doesn't care whose match is next because he can whip that man too.

Baron Corbin vs. Tye Dillinger

End of Days, 17 seconds. Corbin needs to move up the ladder a bit now. Give him a feud against someone not named Dempsey.

Charlotte says the title is coming back where it belongs next week.

Breeze says Itami will soon be squashed in his trap.

Quick video on Sami Zayn in Abu Dhabi.

Bayley vs. Becky Lynch

The fans are split on who to cheer for but the Bayley fans boo at the Becky fans. Becky charges into an elbow in the corner but avoids a splash, setting up a pumphandle suplex for two on Bayley. A hair whip legdrop gets the same and we hit the chinlock. Bayley fights up and takes Becky outside for a baseball slide through the corner ala Sami's running DDT.

Back in and the aggression comes out of Bayley with some running corner elbows, complete with the tightening of the hair band (as usual, far more adorable than it should be). Bayley tweaks her arm but shoves Becky away and keeps going. A middle rope back elbow to the jaw gets two on Lynch. The Belly to Bayley is countered into a seated armbars out of nowhere and Bayley taps at 4:30.

Rating: C. As usual, this is miles ahead of the messes that the Divas usually put on. The Divas seem impressed when they manage a suplex. This was a four and a half minute match with different stages and even some psychology with the arm. It's so much better than listening to BRIE MODE or someone putting on lip gloss. You can still be a heel without makeup if that's believable.

Rhyno is back because he loves the intensity he sees here in NXT. It reminds him of the energy he has when he Gores people in half.

Jason Jordan did what he did and will give an explanation when he wants to.

Finn Balor vs. The Brian Kendrick

Owens is on commentary and says he'd love to face Balor anytime he'd like. Kendrick grabs a headlock to start but gets thrown off and dropkicked down. Brian claims an ankle injury but goldbricks to grab a small package for two. Back to the headlock on the mat but Balor kicks him off, sending Kendrick crawling away. It's even more goldbricking though as he grabs a hammerlock. Owens doesn't like something Riley says and leaves as Kendrick grabs another headlock.

Back from a break with Balor hitting a running forearm to the jaw to put Kendrick down. Finn charges into a boot to the jaw though and eats a tornado DDT for two. A kick to the chest drops Kendrick again though and the Sling Blade does the same. The top rope double stomp is good for the pin on Kendrick at 11:32.

Rating: C-. I like seeing Balor having a bit simpler match for a change but I've never been a fan of Kendrick. He's much more interesting on the mic than in the ring but it's continuing a cool idea of having people return to the show like this. Owens vs. Balor has real potential to tear the house down though and this was more build to that.

Post match Owens comes out and stares at Balor before throwing Riley over the announcers' desk. Balor stares him down from the ring and invites Owens to come fight him. The champ walks away to end the show.

Overall Rating: D+. This really didn't do it for me and was one of the weaker shows they've had in a long time. They're in a holding pattern until we get to Balor vs. Owens and then the big rematch with Owens vs. Zayn. Tonight's show felt like a filler episode but next week there's going to be a title match which NXT almost always does well. Not a bad show this week, but not one of their better episodes.

Results

Hideo Itami b. Bull Dempsey – Running boot to the face

Lucha Dragons b. Jason Jordan/Tye Dillinger – Swanton Bomb to Dillinger

Baron Corbin b. Tye Dillinger – End of Days

Becky Lynch b. Bayley – Seated armbar

Finn Balor b. The Brian Kendrick – Top rope double stomp

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NXT Takeover: Rival: Follow That, Wrestlemania

NXT Takeover: Rival

Date: February 10, 2015

Location: Full Sail University, Winter Park, Florida

Commentators: Rich Brennan, Corey Graves, Jason Albert

It's been less than two months since the last Takeover and NXT is starting to crank up the frequency of these specials. The main story coming in is fallout from last time as Kevin Owens is challenging former best friend Sami Zayn for the NXT Title after betraying new champion Zayn at the end of the last show. Let's get to it.

The opening video gives us a quick background of every major match.

Hideo Itami vs. Tyler Breeze

This was set up late last week after Itami lost in the semi-finals of the #1 contenders tournament and was attacked by Breeze. A blonde woman jumps Breeze during his entrance and is quickly dragged away. She was too good looking to be a real fan. Hideo misses a running kick to start but nails a clothesline out of the corner. A forearm knocks Breeze to the floor and Hideo dropkicks him out of the air. Tyler wakes up and goes after the knee to take over by ramming it into the apron and dropping some elbows. The knee is wrapped around the post and Breeze slaps on the Figure Four around the post as well.

Back in and Breeze puts on a unique submission hold which is kind of a Texas Cloverleaf/Figure Four/Sharpshooter combination. Itami gets to the ropes and tries the GTS, only to have Breeze escape and hit the Supermodel Kick for two. I guess selling doesn't translate to Japanese. Hideo starts Hulking Up and kicks Breeze in the head before firing off a series of them to the chest. He is nice enough to limp a bit after doing the offense with no issues. A running delayed dropkick in the corner and a running big boot to the face is enough to pin Breeze at 8:20.

Rating: B-. Entertaining match but the lack of selling got annoying in a hurry. It's also not a good sign that Hideo was right back to kicks only offense. Yeah he varies them up a bit, but they're all just kicks no matter how you look at it. Breeze is getting to the point where he puts over so many people that it's not meaning as much. Itami needed a win though and this was his biggest in a singles match to date.

Baron Corbin vs. Bull Dempsey

No DQ. Corbin charges at him to start and they fight on the floor with Dempsey hitting a suplex onto the ramp. He posts Baron as well and takes him inside, only to get caught in a spinebuster for two. Corbin charges him out to the floor where Bull runs him over again. Back in and the flying headbutt gets two on Corbin, sending a frustrated Dempsey outside for a chair. That takes a bit too long though and Corbin catches him in End of Days for the pin at 4:11.

Rating: C. Good brawl but my goodness let it be over now. These two

didn't need to fight again after the first two times but it kept going for the sake of having another match here. That's unlike NXT and I really hope it's nothing that becomes normal. At least the right guy won and they kept it short.

Tag Team Titles: Blake and Murphy vs. Lucha Dragons

Blake and Murphy beat the Dragons to win the belts a few weeks back and this is the rematch. They've also lost their first names during their title reign. Cara and Murphy get things going but it's very quickly off to Blake, who eats a spinning cross body. The champs take over and Kalisto gets the tag, only to botch a dive over the top.

Instead a victory roll gets two out of the corner before Cara slams Kalisto onto Murphy for the same. This match is kind of all over the place so far. Back to Blake as the champs take over with some fast tags and quick offense. Kalisto gets another hot tag and cleans house with his rolling kick to the head and low hurricanrana but Murphy counters the Salida Del Sol. A powerbomb gets two on Kalisto and they hit a pinfall reversal sequence until both partners make saves at the same time.

Cara rolls Blake into a powerbomb for two but Murphy rolls out for two of his own. It's quickly back to Murphy who can't roll out of the powerbomb as everything breaks down again. Kalisto is knocked off the apron and Murphy hits a running suplex on Cara, setting up a great looking frog splash from Blake to retain the titles at 7:28.

Rating: C. This was entertaining but kind of sloppy. They didn't really try for any kind of psychology but the champs looked smooth out there and the match worked well enough for what it was going for. Blake and Murphy are actually good champions and work well together, though I could use a big more to separate them. Still though, good enough stuff.

During the champs' celebration, we get the longest Solomon hack to date, complete with "Next week" coming up on screen.

Recap of the #1 contenders tournament, which quickly turns into a video on Neville vs. Balor. Both of them have worked hard to get here and they're ready to go through the other to get their shot at the title.

#1 Contenders Tournament Final: Finn Balor vs. Adrian Neville

Balor does his full on painted, crawling entrance. Neville runs him over to start and grabs a headlock on the mat. That's fine with Finn who rolls through and hits a basement dropkick to the face, sending Adrian rolling out to the floor. Back in and Finn runs him over again before slapping on a chinlock. Balor escapes and goes to the apron but gets dropkicked down while trying a springboard. This is a chess match so far. A delayed suplex gets two for Adrian and it's another chinlock.

Finn is out quicker this time though and he kicks Neville out to the floor for a huge flip dive. After taking a few moments to get up, Balor slowly stalks around the ring and hits a running dropkick to send Neville through the barricade. Back in and a top rope stomps to the back of the head gets two more for Balor and frustration is setting in. Neville wins a kick off but Finn scores with a Pele to put both guys down again.

Adrian is up first and muscles Finn over for a German suplex and now it's his turn to be frustrated. A middle rope Phoenix Splash gets two on Balor but he comes back with a Sling Blade to put Adrian down again. Finn's running clothesline turns Neville inside out and a reverse implant DDT gets two more. Neville scores with a pair of kicks to the head but the Red Arrow hits knees, allowing Finn to hook a small package for a VERY close two. I totally bought that as the finish. Now it's Balor going up for a top rope double stomp to the ribs for the pin and the title shot at 13:32.

Rating: A. Now THIS worked. Both guys were rocking the whole time and this was one heck of a back and forth showdown. Balor is being treated as the real deal and they're doing a great job of rocketing him up the card. This was a great war with some white hot near falls with both guys looking great and topping each other until Neville just couldn't get up anymore.

They shake hands post match.

Video on the four way Women's Title match which is a pretty simple idea: Charlotte has the belt, all three other girls want it, and they're willing to fight everyone to get it.

Women's Title: Charlotte vs. Becky Lynch vs. Bayley vs. Sasha Banks

Other than the main event, this is the match I've been looking forward to more than anything else, including Balor vs. Neville. It's a basic title feud but they've executed it so well that I want to see it. Consider that this is the company that also has the Bellas being pushed to Mars and back and you'll be even more astounded by that. It's a big brawl to start with Charlotte knocking both villains to the floor but getting rolled up for two.

Now it's Bayley getting double teamed with a double clothesline and then just being thrown into the corner. Banks and Lynch of course get into an argument over who should get the cover. Sasha turns her back on her partner though and gets launched with a kind of pumphandle throw. Lynch goes after Bayley's bad knee and puts on a kind of reverse figure four but Banks makes the save. Becky hits a missile dropkick to put Sasha down for two but it's Charlotte making the save.

The champ starts busting out neckbreakers for two each before getting in a slugout with Banks. Sasha gets the better of it and whips Charlotte into the ropes, only to have her spear Becky down. Bayley gets back in and catches Sasha in an assisted Codebreaker but Charlotte boots her in the face. Sasha sends Charlotte shoulder first into the post and drapes her over the middle rope. She puts Becky across the bottom rope for good measure and drives her knees into Charlotte's ribs to send her into Lynch for two on both of them.

Bayley throws Banks down and it's down to Bayley vs. Charlotte. A series of running elbows in the corner have Charlotte reeling and Bayley tightens the ponytail to make it serious. Bayley scores with a top rope hurricanrana and the Belly to Bayley but Becky pulls her out to the floor. That's too much for Bayley as she snaps on Lynch, only to have Sasha dive through the ropes to take both girls down.

The champ has a breather but screw that because she dives onto all three to put everyone down. Back in and Lynch hits an exploder suplex for two on Charlotte. Bayley breaks up something out of the corner and German suplexes Becky, setting up a super Belly to Bayley on Charlotte but Sasha

dives in for the save and a VERY closer near fall of her own. The Bank Statement goes on but Sasha lets go to kick Becky down. She slaps the hold on again before rolling Charlotte up in a crucifix for the pin and the title at 11:57.

Rating: A-. FOLLOW THAT BELLAS! I would have ended it with the stolen pin off the superplex but good grief these girls are awesome. These matches are always a highlight and it never ceases to amaze me how hard they blow the Divas out of the water. Actually check that. The NXT girls and the Divas don't belong in the same water. Awesome stuff here and the NXT girls continue to get more and more amazing every time.

Charlotte hugs the new champ post match but gets shoved away by the Boss.

We recap Zayn vs. Owens, which is all about jealousy from Owens. Sami won the belt at the last Takeover and Owens turned on him during the celebration. Owens has been there with Zayn the whole time but Sami was called up first. That title means a better life for Kevin's family and he'll do whatever it takes to win it. Sami just wants to hurt Owens no matter what it takes.

NXT Title: Kevin Owens vs. Sami Zayn

We get the tracking shots of both guys coming to the ring, which is a trend I'd love to see come back. After the big match intros, they stare each other down as the fans are mostly behind the champ. Owens bails to the floor to get inside Sami's head and we're in full on Zbyszko mode. Sami finally just dives over the top to take Owens down before throwing him inside for a beating. A hot shot breaks up Sami's momentum and the pro-dirty traitors strike up the FIGHT OWENS FIGHT chants.

Owens rips the skin off Sami's chest with a chop and Sami quickly loses a slugout. We hit the chinlock on the champ to get a breather before Kevin just grinds his forearm into Sami's jaw. Sami tries to fight up but gets dropped ribs first over the top rope for two. Back to the chinlock which makes sense as Kevin has been trying to grind Sami down. A hard belly to back suplex gets two and they head outside so Sami can be rammed into the apron.

The fans have switched up to KILL OWENS KILL as he takes the champ back inside to yell in his face. Owens also puts fists to his face before a gutbuster gets two. Sami jawbreaks out of the third chinlock as the announcers bring up Lesnar vs. Cena from Summerslam. That's not the longest stretch in the world. Sami fights back with some clotheslines, including a big one to send Kevin to the floor.

Now it's Owens going into the steps and getting his head taken off with a clothesline. Back in and Sami hits the Blue Thunder Bomb for two but the Helluva Kick is countered with a huge superkick. There's the Cannonball for two and the pumphandle driver onto the knee gets an even closer near fall. The popup powerbomb is countered with a dropkick and the Half and Half suplex gets two for the champ.

Kevin snaps the throat over the top rope but gets caught on the same rope, only to knock Sami down. He spits at the champ but his Swanton Bomb hits knees. The Exploder Suplex into the corner looks to set up the Helluva Kick but Owens bails to the floor. Owens can't hit the apron powerbomb so Sami hits the bouncing moonsault, only to have both guys bang their heads on the ramp. Sami can barely stand and staggers on the attempt at the Helluva Kick, allowing Owens to hit the popup powerbomb for an even closer two.

Owens just unloads with right hands to the head and the champ's eyes are glazed over. He pounds away in the ropes and keeps getting dragged away by the referee. The trainer comes out to check on Sami but Owens powerbombs Sami again. A second powerbomb has Sami out cold but he slowly rolls his shoulder up to keep this going. The trainer gets in the ring now, earning Zayn two more powerbombs. Kevin loads up a fifth in a row and the referee finally pulls him off to stop the match at 23:12, giving Owens the title.

Rating: A-. This was absolutely brutal and a great way to get the title off Zayn. Owens looks like a killer, but the key thing here is he could not pin Sami. This sets up a big time gimmick rematch as well as writes Sami off TV while he on the international tour during the next TV tapings. In other words, NXT has come up with a way to avoid their champion not being around for over a month of TV, because they're that

much smarter than WWE. Excellent stuff here with Sami looking like a warrior and Owens looking like the most awesome monster this side of Brock Lesnar.

Oh and next up: Owens vs. Balor.

A smiling Owens stands over Sami to end the show.

Overall Rating: A. Good grief. I mean just good freaking grief. How in the world does NXT manage to keep blowing away every bit of wrestling WWE can put out time after time? I'm not sure if any of the three big matches here were as good as the triple threat from the Rumble (and they likely weren't due to the stage the Rumble was on), but I'll take three awesome matches over one incredible triple threat any day.

Another outstanding show here with the wrestlers working themselves to the bone to make the whole thing work. There are stories, character development, great matches and hard work all around and there's no way that doesn't equal an excellent show. NXT is still on fire and shows no signs of slowing down with even more names on the way, like Crowe and that trio of amateur guys that have been getting rave reviews. Great stuff here and again, if this doesn't give you enough reason to buy the Network, I don't know what more you could ask for.

Results

Hideo Itami b. Tyler Breeze – Big boot

Baron Corbin b. Bull Dempsey – End of Days

Blake and Murphy b. Lucha Dragons – Frog splash to Cara

Finn Balor b. Adrian Neville – Top rope double stomp

Sasha Banks b. Charlotte, Becky Lynch and Bayley – Rollup to Charlotte

Kevin Owens b. Sami Zayn via referee stoppage

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NXT – February 4, 2015: The Short Form Build

NXT

Date: February 4, 2015

Location: Full Sail University, Winter Park, Florida

Commentators: Rich Brennan, Corey Graves, Alex Riley

It's the go home show for Takeover next week and the main stories are the tournament to crown a new #1 contender and making Zayn vs. Owens a title match at Owens' demand. Tonight we have two semi-final matches with Hideo Itami vs. Finn Balor and Adrian Neville vs. Baron Corbin with the winners facing each other next week. Let's get to it.

Opening sequence.

Emma vs. Carmella

The fans want Blue Pants but Carmella says she's back on the clearance rack. Enzo and Cass dance in the background while Carmella talks to a less than thrilled audience. Thankfully Cass does his spelling and the fans are right back. Carmella shouts at the guys and gets kicked down as we hit a brief catfight. Emma gets choked on the ropes and Carmella mocks her dancing while checking the nails. They fight out of the corner and the Dilemma has Carmella in even more trouble. Not that it matters as she trips Emma down and puts on that leg lock crossface for the submission at 1:52.

#1 Contenders Tournament Semi-Finals: Adrian Neville vs. Baron Corbin

Baron easily takes him back into the corner to start and Adrian looks at him with a realization that he might be in major trouble. A cross body doesn't work but some kicks to the ribs work a bit better. Neville hits a running dropkick but gets his head taken off by a right hand. Adrian rolls outside with his bell rung but Baron throws him right back inside to stomp away in the corner.

A big slam gets two on Neville but he dropkicks the knee out to send Baron into the buckle. Neville scores with a springboard dropkick to knock Baron outside but the springboard plancha is caught with ease and Baron drops him on the barricade. With Neville going back inside, Bull Dempsey comes out and posts Baron, setting up the Red Arrow for the pin at 5:27.

Rating: C. For once, I really don't like the booking here. They easily could have had the posting lead to a countout (Corbin barely beat the count back in) instead of a pin, but at least it wasn't clean. That being said, does ANYONE want to see Corbin vs. Dempsey again? As Riley said, what does Corbin have left to prove against him? The match was a decent power display from Corbin but I didn't like the ending and it hurt things a good bit.

Sami Zayn says Kevin Owens played this perfectly to get what he wants. Even Regal didn't see this coming and Regal has seen it all. All that matters now is Takeover next week and Sami is bringing everything he has. Of note here: Sami said the date of the show. That's such a lost little thing in WWE today. They always say "in X amount of weeks" or something other than just the date. Say the date of the show and get it in the fans' heads instead of just the name of the show so they'll know when it's there.

Corbin vs. Dempsey next week in a No DQ match.

Bayley vs. Becky Lynch

Bayley's music is very, very catchy. The fans aren't sure who they like better here but it seems to be Bayley with more support as she grabs an

armbar. Becky goes after Bayley's bad knee to take over and hits a nice snap suplex. Three straight legdrops get two but Bayley sends her outside.

Cue Sasha Banks as Bayley misses a charge into the post, allowing Lynch to kick at the knee again. A dragon screw leg whip looks to set up a leg lock but Bayley counters into a small package for two. I actually bought that as the pin. Bayley SNAPS and goes after Becky's leg before throwing her into a half crab, sending Lynch into the ropes. Sasha throws Becky back inside and the Belly to Bayley is good for the pin at 4:18.

Rating: C-. Neither girl is all that great in the ring but they're both capable of doing something passable enough to get through a ring. Lynch is far more attitude than in ring ability and there's nothing wrong with that. The four way next week has a lot of potential and while Banks winning probably makes the most sense, all four are options and that's one of the great things about NXT: it can be hard to predict sometimes, which is a very rare case in WWE.

Becky shoves Banks down as Charlotte comes out to watch.

Owens says of course it was a plan and Sami knew that's what was happening. Now he's going to take the NXT Title two months to the day of his debut.

We see a graphic for the next tournament match and the Solomon hacker screen comes up.

Blake and Murphy vs. Lucha Dragons for the Tag Team Titles next week.

Tyler Breeze is asked what his plans are now that he's out of the tournament. After calling that a stupid question, he says he's going to watch the rest of the tournament closely.

#1 Contenders Tournament Semi-Finals: Finn Balor vs. Hideo Itami

Neville is on commentary, which isn't something you see that often in NXT. The bell rings and the fans debut a new chant: "WE'RE NOT WORTHY!" They hit the mat to start for a nice wrestling sequence and the fans give the stalemate a big ovation. Fans: "BETTER THAN RAW!" Balor's chinlock

attempt is countered into an armbar as Graves brings up being Tag Team Champions with Neville for a nice bit of continuity. Finn scores with a dropkick and we take a break.

Back with Itami getting two and putting on a quickly broken chinlock. Balor rolls through into a hard basement dropkick for two before putting on an arm trap chinlock of his own. A pair of rollups get a pair of near falls on Itami before it's off to a chinlock. The announcers are basically interviewing Neville about what it means to be champion again and getting inside his head instead of just asking him generic questions and plugging Twitter. Hideo fights up and goes up top, only to get kicked in the head for two as we take another break.

Back again with Balor taking the skin off Hideo's chest with chops. A running knee in the corner has Balor in some quick trouble, followed by a top rope clothesline for two. The GTS is teased again but Balor escapes and they trade kicks to the head. They slug it out with Itami getting the better of it and hitting a running basement dropkick in the corner. Back up and Balor scores with a Sling Blade but he tweaked his knee on some of those kicks. It's good enough to dropkick Itami hard into the corner and the top rope double stomp is good enough to send Balor to Takeover at 17:58.

Rating: B. The ending was a bit abrupt but this was the kind of match both guys needed. They both held their own for a long match and it never got boring. Balor still looks better but the second that GTS finally hits, it's going to blow the roof off the place. The best part is you can't even say it's stealing anything because Punk took it from Itami in the first place. Really solid match here and Neville vs. Balor is going to rock.

Balor and Itami shake hands and Neville stares Finn down.

One last Owens vs. Zayn promo ends the show. Zayn should have seen this coming but Owens surprised him. They were the best of friends but then Owens got married and had a kid and things changed. Next week, Zayn is going to see what Owens is made of.

Overall Rating: B-. The earlier stuff hurt it a bit but the main event

brought the show up a good deal. More than anything else though, I want to see Takeover next week. The card is stacked and they've done a great job of building up the show in just a few weeks as opposed to the multiple months they usually have. Next week feels like new stuff crossed with an R-Evolution sequel, which is actually a cool feeling.

There are two things I want to bring up here here that continue to make NXT feel special. First of all is of course the crowd. That BETTER THAN RAW chant they started tonight kept up the feeling that the fans are having a great time every week at this show. How many times do you feel that fans coming to Raw are naturally excited to be there? It's like they show up and hope for a good show but don't expect much. When the NXT fans show up, it's time for a great show and they know it because NXT has earned that respect.

The other thing that stood out to me tonight is the commentary. Every week I have to spend the first half hour of the show figuring out who the commentary team is this week because they always rotate and it's hard to pin them down given how similar their voices are (save for Albert and Renee of course). For a long time that got on my nerves because I had to listen for them to say their first names, but the more I think about it, the more that's a good thing. The announcers are just faceless entities most of the time and that means the focus stays on the action and not on them. That's the polar opposite of WWE and it's so nice.

Results

Carmella b. Emma – Leg lock crossface

Adrian Neville b. Baron Corbin – Red Arrow

Bayley b. Becky Lynch – Belly to Bayley

Finn Balor b. Hideo Itami – Top rope double stomp

NXT – January 21, 2015: Strike While The Crowd Is Hot

NXT

Date: January 21, 2015

Location: Full Sail University, Winter Park, Florida

Commentators: Rich Brennan, Corey Graves, Jason Albert

Things are starting to pick up again in NXT with Kevin Owens making another appearance last week to lay out NXT Champion Sami Zayn after a successful title defense against Adrian Neville. These two are on a collision course and there's no way the match isn't going to be awesome. Let's get to it.

We open with a recap of Sami Zayn vs. Kevin Owens over the last few weeks. Neville promises revenge.

William Regal announces the next Takeover special for February 11. There will be a tournament for the #1 contendership starting tonight, as well as Charlotte defending against Sasha Banks. As usual, Regal keeps this quick as he was on screen less than a minute and announced a show, a tournament and a title match.

Opening sequence.

Sami Zayn vs. Tye Dillinger

Sami charges the ring and EXPLODES on Dillinger, knocking him to the floor before the bell rings. No match I'm assuming.

Zayn demands Owens get out here right now but he gets Regal instead. The champ says he isn't wrestling one more match unless it's against Owens so get him out here right now. Regal says he can't do that because Owens hasn't earned a title shot yet. Sami offers to make it non-title or whatever he has to do to get his hands on Owens. He won't explode out of respect for Regal, but he'll do whatever Regal asks him to get what he wants. Regal agrees and makes the showdown for Takeover.

Owens vs. Zayn at Takeover will be non-title.

Regal says Owens and Zayn will sign the contract next week.

#1 Contenders Tournament First Round: Curtis Axel vs. Finn Balor

I love how foreboding Balor's music is. Fans: "FINN'S GONNA KILL YOU!" Axel elbows him in the face to start so Balor knocks him to the floor for a big flip dive. Back in and Axel clotheslines him in the back of the head for two and nails a great looking dropkick. The fans keep it simple by telling Axel that he sucks.

We hit the chinlock before a running knee to the head gets two more. It's amazing how much easier Axel matches are to sit through when he doesn't have all the big expectations behind him. Heyman seems to have caused him more problems than good. Balor fights back up with the Pele and Sling Blade, followed by the top rope double stomp for the pin to advance at 4:55.

Rating: C-. Not much of a match here but Axel is fine for a generic heel. He has the skills to make a match work but all of the expectations put on him due to being associated with Heyman really brought him down. I liked his work in NXT (this one, not the old show) as McGillicutty and now he's just a more intense version of that character, meaning he's a lot easier to sit through. That being said, this was just a formality for Balor.

Here are the full tournament brackets.

Finn Balor

Curtis Axel

Adrian Neville

Tyson Kidd

Hideo Itami

Tyler Breeze

Baron Corbin

Bull Dempsey

Sasha Banks says Charlotte has no one to protect her tonight and it's time to win the title. She doesn't care if Devin has any more questions.

Bull Dempsey swears revenge next week.

Women's Title: Sasha Banks vs. Charlotte

They grapple to the mat to start with Charlotte getting the better of it but having to nail Becky in the face. Back in and Charlotte hammers away but Becky comes in for the DQ at 2:15. Not much of a match due to time.

Bayley comes in for the save but eventually picks up the title. Charlotte isn't cool with that and eats a Belly to Bayley. It doesn't seem like a heel turn as Bayley almost looks like she regretted it. It worked for Rick Steiner back in 1989 (albeit in a face turn) so why not here? Regal comes out and makes a fourway title match for Takeover.

Kevin Owens doesn't want to be interviewed and will say whatever he has to say to Sami's face next week.

Vaudevillains vs. Buddy Murphy/Wesley Blake

The Vaudevillains have been doing dinosaur training to make up for their recent losses, which apparently involves the Iron Sheik's Persian clubs. English misses a forearm to Murphy in the corner to start and eats a running forearm, only to take Buddy into the corner for a beating. Off to Gotch for a suplex for two and English hooks a chinlock. Murphy finally rolls over for the tag to Blake who gets a fast two off a powerslam with Gotch making the save. With the referee getting Gotch out of the ring, Murphy sneaks in a kick to the head, giving Blake the pin at 3:58.

Rating: D+. The match was nothing special but I really like the booking. Murphy and Blake have been around long enough that people are familiar with them and they've gotten close enough to picking up wins that this isn't a huge stretch. It gives the Dragons fresh challengers for the titles and keeps the cycle moving. That's one of NXT's strengths and something I really wish WWE would get better at. Keep the future challengers safe instead of squashing them, because you never know when

you might need them.

Tyler Breeze is ready to implement his plan to separate the gorgeous ones from the uggos.

Murphy and Blake say that wasn't an upset and want a title shot next week.

#1 Contenders Tournament First Round: Hideo Itami vs. Tyler Breeze

Marcus Louis is seen looking at Breeze from behind the stage during Tyler's entrance. Breeze avoids a big kick to start and wags a finger at Itami. Another kick misses and the fans call Breeze a TOTAL DIVA. Breeze suckers Itami in for a kick of his own before running into a knee to the ribs. Back up and Itami gets sent face first into the middle buckle and tossed out to the floor. A dropkick (noticing a theme here?) gets two for Breeze and a neckbreaker gets an even closer near fall as we take a break.

Back with Breeze holding a chinlock but Itami fights up with clotheslines and a tornado DDT necksnap. There's the top rope clothesline followed by a release fisherman's suplex for two on Breeze. Back up and Breeze blocks an O'Connor Roll and DRILLS Hideo with the Supermodel Kick for two.

Itami is shaken up in the corner so Breeze crawls onto his back for a kind of snap crucifix for a fall so near that the referee looked like he had to slow down for the kickout. Tyler shouts that this is about him but Itami screams at him. More kicks have Breeze rocked and the running dropkick in the corner sets up a running boot to the face for the pin at 14:24.

Rating: B-. I'm trying really hard to care about Itami and it's just not quite there. His offense has definitely gotten better but I really have no reason to care about him. There are a lot of guys who kick really hard and Itami hasn't shown he has much to differentiate himself from the pack. Breeze continues to live way beyond his gimmick and looks more and more comfortable every week.

Overall Rating: C+. This show was much more about moving things forward

than the wrestling itself. They're rushing to the next Takeover with only about six weeks since the last one, but with the main event they have set up, they would be crazy not to go with it right now. The rest of the card could be excellent with the fourway being wide open and the tournament having some potentially awesome finals. Another good show this week but in a different way.

Results

Finn Balor b. Curtis Axel – Top rope double stomp

Charlotte b. Sasha Banks via DQ when Becky Lynch interfered

Wesley Blake/Buddy Murphy b. Vaudevillains – Kick to the head

Hideo Itami b. Tyler Breeze – Running kick to the face

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NXT – January 8, 2015: I Want To Be A Sami Zaniac

NXT

Date: January 8, 2015

Location: Full Sail University, Winter Park, Florida

Commentators: Rich Brennan, Corey Graves, Alex Riley

One of the many things I like about this show is they set up something for next week almost every time. In this case, we have three things, ranging from Itami vs. Curtis Axel to the Vaudevillains getting their rematch from R-Evolution to the return of Sami Zayn for the first time since he was laid out by Owens. That sounds like a stacked show so let's get to it.

Opening sequence.

Here's the champ to get things going. Sami gets ready to talk but leaves the ring to go be with the crowd and hold up the title. A YOU DESERVE IT chant stops him again before he gets to talk about what this title means. In anyone else's hands, it means you're the best. In his hands though, it means you can do it your way and keep doing it how you want because the proof is right here.

He's going to hate himself for saying this, but this title isn't his. It belongs to both him and the fans. Everyone here is part of a band called Sami Zayn and the Zaniacs. The fans start the OLE chant and Sami loves that song. Takeover was the best night of his life, but it didn't end like he wanted it to. Owens cried on his shirt that night and then hurt Sami really bad. He may have hurt Sami, but the champ is right back here, ready to defend the title.

This brings out Adrian Neville who says they tore each other to pieces last time and Zayn was the better man. Neville saw a new Sami and he's now the champion so congratulations. Sami appreciates it and is pretty sure Neville is entitled to a rematch. This brings out William Regal to congratulate them on having such a great match at R-Evolution. There will indeed be a rematch and it takes place next week on the first Wednesday show.

The Vaudevillains can't wait to right the wrong from Takeover and prove their manliness.

Hideo Itami vs. Curtis Axel

Axel is trying to be the last real man in wrestling. At this point there are almost enough of those to make a stable. Itami scores with the

early kicks but Axel takes him into the corner and hits a series of clotheslines to the back of the head. A chinlock doesn't get Curtis anywhere but a knee to the jaw gets two. Axel throws Hideo down and asks who cares about Itami.

Curtis slaps on an armbar out of nowhere (no arm work so far into the match so let's ignore the neck work and go after the arm) but Hideo fights out and nails a clothesline of his own. Itami loads up a tornado DDT but instead jumps to the apron to snap Axel's throat across the top rope. The top rope clothesline is good for two but Axel tries the PerfectPlex. That goes nowhere so Itami snapmares him down and hits something like Trouble in Paradise to a kneeling Axel for the pin at 5:45.

Rating: C-. Not bad here and Hideo is starting to round into form as a singles guy. The clotheslines are a nice alternative to the kicks and it really opens up his offense quite a bit. It's also nice to see him finally have a finisher, even if it's the same move he does more often than any other. Axel as the new version of Tyson Kidd would be a fine role for him as he's talented in the ring but needs to reestablish himself after the last few years.

Tyson Kidd is getting ready in the back so Natalya tries to intercept Byron Saxton. A Total Divas interview is cut off by Kidd asking if she's taken care of the cats. Natalya goes off to feed them so Kidd can talk about how important it is to become NXT Champion. That means he can be the new face of NXT, right before he replaces Sarah McLachlan as the face of the ASPCA. Kidd loves all cats, except Grumpy Cat. Fact.

Video on Bull Dempsey vs. Baron Corbin, based on who can squash jobbers faster. They face off for the first time next week.

Sasha Banks vs. Alexa Bliss

This is due to Banks breaking Bliss' nose a few weeks back. Alexa grabs a quick sunset flip for two but has her headscissors countered into a faceplant. Banks takes her time trash talking but stops to blast Alexa with right hands to the face. She lays Bliss across the middle rope for a double knee to the ribs, setting up the Bank Statement for the submission

at 2:06.

Quick package on Neville vs. Zayn from R-Evolution.

Tyler Breeze vs. Chad Gable

Gable is an Olympic wrestler who has gotten rave reviews so far. Gable easily takes Breeze down to start and rides him with a front facelock. The fans are WAY into Chad to start as Graves won't confirm or deny that he runs Breeze's fan club. Breeze fights up and takes him down for a chinlock while throwing in some trash talk to the Uggo. Gable gets to his feet and throws on an armbar over the top rope ala Alberto Del Rio. He breaks at four and Breeze is TICKED, setting up the Beauty Shot for the pin at 2:37. Gable looked good out there in the limited time he had.

Finn Balor is looking forward to facing Tyson Kidd next week, but Kidd is going to need more than nine lives to survive. Fact. Simple, yet effective. Why is that so lost on the main show writers?

We see a still from Breeze's post match celebration, showing an ominous face peeking out from the curtain to look at him. It's not clear whose face it is.

Tag Team Titles: Lucha Dragons vs. Vaudevillains

Vaudevillains are challenging again after the Dragons pinned the illegal man at R-Evolution. Kalisto quickly springboards onto Gotch and pounds away with right hands before it's already off to Cara. Some kind of modified Gory Stretch has Gotch in trouble as Graves says these two might be equally strong. English comes in and says the titles are coming home with them tonight. He school boys Cara through the ropes and out to the floor for a nice move, but Kalisto sends both Vaudevillains to the floor for a big double dive.

We take a break and come back (after an announcement that Daniel Bryan will be in action on the first Thursday Smackdown) with Kalisto trying the big spinning wristlock, only to have English hold the ropes to send the masked man crashing down. Gotch gets two off a big belly to back before a double chop puts Kalisto down again.

English comes back in but gets rolled up for two, only to slap on a chinlock. Back up and Kalisto finally rolls over for the hot tag to Cara. Everything breaks down and Gotch kicks Cara in the head, only to be low bridged out to the floor. In what looked to be a botched finish, Cara lifts English up for a powerbomb and Kalisto adds a spinning clothesline to the back of the head to retain at 11:45.

Rating: C+. The match was fine but the ending really didn't look good. In theory it was supposed to be a clothesline to the front but it looked awkward instead of devastating. The Dragons need new opponents now, and thankfully NXT actually has some teams they could quickly build up into contenders. I'm not sure where the Vaudevillains go, but a refocus on the comedic stuff could be in order.

Overall Rating: C+. Not one of their stronger episodes here but they did a great job of setting up next week to look like something special. Sami's opening promo was excellent with a ton of emotion and it set up the rematch next week. I really like how NXT is able to wait things out and tease the big stuff, such as Owens showdown with Zayn. Not the match mind you but just those two in the same place at the same time. Instead of hot shotting to that, we're getting what should be a great match out of the way, instead of just jumping straight to it. WWE could learn from that, but the circumstances are a bit different up top.

Results

Hideo Itami b. Curtis Axel – Spinning kick to the head

Sasha Banks b. Alexa Bliss – Bank Statement

Tyler Breeze b. Chad Gable – Beauty Shot

Lucha Dragons b. Vaudevillains – Powerbomb/top rope clothesline combination to English

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NXT – January 1, 2015: The Anti-Raw

NXT

Date: January 1, 2015

Location: Full Sail University, Winter Park, Florida

Commentators: Rich Brennan, Renee Young, Corey Graves

We're starting a new year here and Sami Zayn is still on the shelf due to his attack at the hands of Kevin Owens. Last week was the Best of 2014 special with the only plot advancement being Charlotte defeating Sasha Banks in an R-Evolution rematch. I'm sure there will be other rematches in the future so let's get to it.

Opening sequence.

Lucha Dragons vs. Jason Jordan/Tye Dillinger

Non-title. Dillinger chops Kalisto up against the ropes to start so Kalisto comes back with a three bounce springboard armdrag. Off to Jordan who tries the different approach of a release fall away slam to put the champions in early trouble. Jordan mockingly bows to Cara on the apron to allow some cheating. Renee keeps talking about how pretty the villains are but still manages to be adorable. That takes talent.

Dillinger slams Kalisto down again and draws a nice Tye chant. Back up and Kalisto flips forward to escape a backdrop and the hot tag brings in

Cara. Everything breaks down and Kalisto takes Jordan out with a corkscrew dive, allowing Cara to hit a super victory roll for the pin on Dillinger at 3:07.

Rating: C. Standard pairing here but the match worked well enough. Dillinger and Jordan are fine for a pretty boy team with some nice technical skills. If nothing else they're much better in this role than as the second (and more talented) version of the American Males. The Dragons need some better competition though as this is getting a little repetitive.

The Vaudevillains come out and jump the champions post match.

CJ Parker is worried about facing Baron Corbin but Bull Dempsey comes in and tells him that taking down Corbin is for the better good. This sounded a bit like a bounty.

NXT moves back to Wednesdays in two weeks.

Enzo and Cass are here to introduce Carmella's opponent and the BLUE PANTS chant is just ridiculous. The guys give her an over the top entrance, complete with superlatives and a hummed theme song. Cass: "Inspired by Sami Zayn and straight from the discount rack!" Enzo: "Since we have last seen Blue Pants, she has met up with Steve and gotten a Blue's Clue."

Carmella vs. Blue Pants

Carmella runs her over and steps on Blue Pants's hair, thus freaking Renee out again. Enzo gets on the apron and....dances I think? The distraction lets Blue Pants grab a small package and BLUE PANTS WINS!!! Cass: "DUH-DUH-DA-DA!" Match ran 1:13.

This is another reason I love NXT: if this sort of reaction took place on Raw, WWE would make sure to either destroy Blue Pants and have people make stupid jokes about her or never bring her back in the first place. Here they give her a win to advance a story. The audience is happy, Blue Pants doesn't have to go anywhere else (though she could) and Carmella's story is advanced. What more can you ask for?

Carmella is mad at Enzo post match but Cass breaks it up.

Baron Corbin vs. CJ Parker

Parker's sign: "You can break my sign but you'll never break my spirit."

Fans: "BREAK HIS SPIRIT!" Bull Dempsey is at ringside and watches snake eyes and a big boot set up End of Days for the pin at 0:29.

Post match Corbin asks if Dempsey is going to stand there or if they're going to do this. Dempsey goes after him but referees quickly break it up.

Regal announces that Sami Zayn will be back next week. Curtis Axel comes in and says he's barging in on Regal's interview. The boss never got back to him, even though Axel is a former Intercontinental Champion who has beaten HHH and John Cena. That sounds good to Regal and he makes Axel vs. Itami next week. Regal just made an announcement and a match for next week. His total time on screen: 74 seconds.

Here's Charlotte for a chat. She's asked what her new challenge will be and the Blue Pants chant starts up. Charlotte tells the crowd to not chant while she's talking, even though she wasn't saying anything yet. NXT is revolutionizing women's wrestling but she's beaten Sasha Banks twice now. Cue Banks and Lynch to surround her but Natalya comes out for the save before anything happens. That was a very odd response to the fans from Charlotte when she's clearly been a face for at least a month now.

The Vaudevillains get their title rematch next week.

We get a video from Sami, who is home for the holidays but doesn't know what to say about what's happened to him. He worked so hard to win the NXT Title but he can only think about Kevin Owens. When he comes back he'll say everything to the fans and to Owens himself. This was shot with a handheld camera instead of a professional camera and it gave the video a much more realistic and gritty feel.

Kevin Owens sits down with Renee Young. He didn't steal anyone's moment because Sami got his big celebration. That's enough of the interview for

him though because he doesn't like being accused of things.

Hideo Itami/Finn Balor vs. Ascension

I know Balor's face paint (not here this time) got all the attention but I really like Hideo's gi inspired attire. They go at it immediately with the dream team taking over. Ascension bails before the seated corner dropkicks can connect until it settles down to Viktor vs. Balor. Finn charges into the corner with a running chop before it's off to Itami, who the fans are really excited to see.

Back to Finn for more forearms and chops before Itami drops a knee for two. We hit the chinlock on Viktor as a Hideo chant starts up. Finn does a nice jump over the ropes to avoid a charging Viktor before kicking Konnor off the apron. The distraction lets Viktor get in a big uppercut to knock Balor outside though as we take a break.

Balor fights out of a chinlock from Konnor but the Ascension uses their old school double team beatdown to keep him in trouble. It worked for the LOD and Demolition so why not here? Off to a reverse chinlock from Konnor for a bit before a big uppercut gets two. Finn gets spiked like a football to break up a hot tag attempt as the beating continues. Slugging it out with Viktor goes as well as you would expect it to go so it's back to Konnor to just hammer Balor in the head.

The Pele Kick finally gives Finn an opening and the double tag brings in Itami and Viktor as things speed up. Hideo snaps Viktor's neck across the top rope and scores with a top rope clothesline, only to walk into an STO for two. Itami teases the GTS again to another big reaction (and a GTS chant) but Konnor makes the save. Finn takes Konnor to the floor, leaving Itami to kick Viktor in the head for the pin at 16:15.

Rating: B-. I liked this one a bit more than the first match, even though I'm not sure why this match needed to exist. It's basically the same thing they did in the first match but with less hype. I still liked it a good deal though and it was more than enough for a TV main event. The reaction to Itami is a very good sign though as I don't remember people being into him like that since his debut. Also he was showing a more varied offense here and not just kicking all the time so he's growing in

the ring. Good signs all around.

Overall Rating: B. Story advancement, matches made for next week, everything moving. This show is the anti-Raw and it still gets more done in an hour than Raw can get done in three. Sami coming back to face Owens is going to be great and you can imagine how awesome their promos are going to be before setting up the big showdown. Really good and fun show this week that got a lot done in a little time.

Results

Lucha Dragons b. Tye Dillinger/Jason Jordan – Super victory roll to Dillinger

Blue Pants b. Carmella – Small package

Baron Corbin b. CJ Parker – End of Days

Hideo Itami/Finn Balor b. Ascension – Kick to Viktor's head

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2014 Awards News Story Of The Year

This one is a big easier to get through. I'm going to knock

out the stories that just don't measure up.

1. TNA thrown off SpikeTV, goes to Destination America.

At the end of the day, TNA just doesn't matter in the big picture. They've been the same default second biggest promotion in America for years now and they're such a tiny blip on the radar that this just doesn't mean much. Now they're going to have even fewer people watching their product which is likely to keep screwing up and not capitalizing on the talent they have. It's something you mention but it's just not a big deal due to how insignificant TNA really is.

2. WWE Network doesn't do that well.

No it hasn't, but again I'd like to point out that we're about nine months into something that is going to direct the company for like, ever. They're already getting it better and the numbers could go up over time. It's a story, but WAY too early to tell us much.

3. WWE signs Kenta, Steen and Devitt.

Much like the Network but in the other direction, it's hard to say what this means. It's a big splash and gets headlines, but we need to see what these guys are going to mean on the main roster.

Now we get to the big stories.

1. Ultimate Warrior Dies After Appearing On Raw.

It's not often in my life that I'm shocked by something, but this actually stunned me. I mean...he was there twenty four hours earlier and then HHH is breaking news that he's passed away. It capped off the perfect weekend to end someone's career, but my goodness this was jarring.

2. Daniel Bryan Needs Surgery.

I don't think anything else changed the entire landscape of wrestling as much as this did. Bryan was the guy and was going to be the focus of the company for the rest of the year and now he can't even get in the ring. It's going to be very interesting to see where he is when he gets back, because he's going to have to rebuild a lot of his career.

3. CM Punk.

I think we have a winner. At the end of the day, Punk walking out changed a lot (though not as much as Bryan) immediately. However, it's all the aftermath that has been the talk of the wrestling world this year. From Punk just leaving to the teasing of him coming back to the podcast to him signing with UFC (and doing the same thing that he criticized Rock and Lesnar for), nothing has meant more this year than the never ending saga of CM Punk. To put this in perspective, I turned on ESPN today and Punk was sitting there on Sportscenter in the middle of the afternoon. I don't remember Cena doing that, but Punk is right there doing it now. Punk is the story of the year and could be next year as well.