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Jews in the ring: brawn over brain

By ELISA BIRNBAUM
Special to The CJN

I have vivid memories of Sunday afternoons at my grandparents' duplex in Montreal. While my grandmother busied herself with the sounds and smells of baked goods and the occasional plea for me to eat more, my grandfather would bask in the glare of the TV, captivated by the sounds and smells of a different nature: wrestling.

Armed with an overflowing plate of hot, freshly made oatmeal cookies, I would sit myself down on the couch, as close to my zaide as possible. Close enough to take it all in – from the primal sounds of mean-looking men in strange outfits to my grandfather's animated facial expressions and the occasional colourful and unrepeatable Yiddishisms he'd shout at the screen.

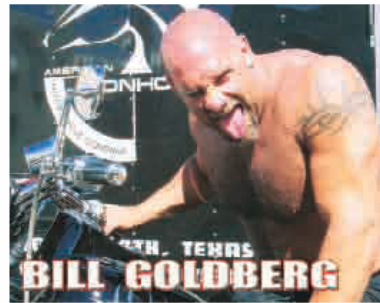
Yet, the spectacle on TV was always less fascinating to me than the spell wrestling had cast on my zaide and others like him. In a religion dominated by scholars, scientists and other heady sorts, I wondered how this purely corporeal event entered the Jewish

home. While few wrestlers at that time were Jewish, I was enchanted with stories my grandfather recounted about similarly angry men who, once upon a time, earned the naches of their Jewish mothers. In fact, according to Eddy Portnoy, a noted scholar of Jewish popular culture in pre-World War II eastern Europe and North America, wrestling has played a significant role in Jewish social history.

Speaking recently at an event sponsored by the Polish-Jewish Heritage Foundation of Canada, Portnoy said the 1920s saw a number of prominent Jewish wrestlers put that stereotype of the bookish Jew to the test. In Poland, for example, grapplers with names like Max Krauser and Zelig Pashov, or the Jewish Hercules, were as common as their Polish-sounding counterparts. Since wrestlers at that time relied on their ethnic affiliations to establish a fan base, Jews found themselves figuring prominently not only as sportsmen but also as enthusiastic audience members.

But, stated Portnoy, a professor of history

at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the national element of Jewish fandom befuddled Jewish intelligentsia, who found themselves asking, "shouldn't scholars and sci-



tists be the ones who inspire the masses?" Nevertheless, while intellectuals deemed wrestling the antithesis of "Jewishness," fans couldn't get enough, often becoming frenzied in support of their Jewish heroes. Portnoy explained this phenomenon by saying that wrestling gave Jews a unique opportunity to engage in short-lived and relatively safe public displays of pride in the face of a majority culture. Moreover, he added, "wrestling proved to be more gratifying and immediate than any of the abstract national, political and religious movements that offered to provide Jews with a way of dealing with their role as second-class citizens."

With ethnic identity playing such an integral role in cultivating a fan base, claiming one's "Jewishness" certainly had its benefits. Some non-Jewish wrestlers placed Stars of David on their trunks – a common practice for Jewish wrestlers – and used Jewish names, hoping to ride the coattail of Jewish adulation. Others, such as Pashov, found himself having to prove his "Jewishness" in the wake of contradictory evidence. The situation became so dire that Pashov's own mother was ushered into Warsaw carrying with her documentation to substantiate the wrestler's true ethnicity, much to the delight of the crowds.

Jews also sought out the "Jewishness" of wrestlers even when it wasn't there. In 1925, fans contested the ethnicity of one Leon Pinyetski – a Pole known for his expert use of the full nelson – saying he had a Jewish nose and ate kugel on Saturday.

The Jewish invasion of wrestling went beyond athletes and fans. When the sport's popularity in Europe was eclipsed by boxing in the 1930s, some wrestlers were shipped to North America by Warsaw-born promoter Jacob Pfefer. Known as the "Plotter from Pinsk" and the "Smirker from Smolensk," for nearly 50 years Pfefer played a major role in the world of wrestling. Recognized as having introduced the grotesque to the wrestling

arena, Pfefer boasted a roster of grapplers with handlebar mustaches, shaved heads and tattoos. Thanks to this Plotter from Pinsk, the world was introduced to "Blimp" Levy, a former fat man at a sideshow in Coney Island. Weighing 625 pounds – yet known to be extremely nimble – Levy said wrestling kept him slim, a comment considered less ironic when, years after retiring, he was found dead in an Alabama trailer park weighing more than 900 pounds.

Blimp Levy aside, most Jewish wrestlers were known less for their physical grandeur and more for their speed and agility. Take Abe (Hebrew Hercules) Coleman, the "Jewish Tarzan." After emigrating from Poland to Winnipeg in 1923, he soon moved to New York where, all of five foot three inches tall, but weighing 200 pounds, he established a reputation as a major wrestling contender. Coleman, who recently died at the age of 101, was allegedly responsible for inventing the "drop kick," after observing kangaroos in Australia engaging in a similar move.

One of the last of the "old time" wrestlers still alive today is Rafael (Rasslin' Rabbi) Halperin. After immigrating to Palestine from Vienna, he studied in yeshiva with the Chazon Ish but was later brought to the United States. It was there where he enjoyed immense popularity as a wrestler, all the while refusing to fight on the Sabbath. In the 1960s, he returned to Israel and become a rabbi and a successful businessman.

With Halperin out of the ring, the glory days of Jewish wrestling seem to have waned, though Barry Horowitz and Ric Drasin gained respectable acclaim in the 1970s and '80s, while "Macho Man" Randy Savage has a Jewish mother.

Portnoy attributes this reality to the emergence of a stronger Jewish middle class. "Middle class interests are perceived as leaning more toward 'refined sports,'" he offered. Nevertheless, few can forget the hubbub over William Scott (Bill) Goldberg who graced the wrestling stages from 1997 to 2004. Known especially for his unique entrance, the wrestler from Texas was ushered to his matches by police escort, while adoring fans chanted, "Goldberg, Goldberg."

Though Goldberg's Jewishness didn't hold the same resonance that a grappler's ethnicity held in the past, I can't help but wonder if today's Jewish wrestlers were somehow influenced by the stream of Jews who entered the ring before them. Jews who – in the vein of Samson and David – chose brawn over brain to elicit victory. Jewish social history would not be complete without a mention of these athletes who broke down barriers and stereotypes and of the Jewish fans who cheered them on. Fans like my zaide whose afternoon choice of escapism remains a cherished memory today.

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