



Stone Cold Stunner

The authors of a new book say Trump's connections to professional wrestling explain a lot about his politics

By **JASON DICK**

Donald Trump, the Republican nominee for president, has sponsored two Wrestlemanias, appeared on “Monday Night Raw” and shaved the head of Vince McMahon, the chief executive of the professional wrestling league WWE, in the ring at the April 1, 2007, Battle of the Billionaires. For that, and the other facets of his 25-year association with professional wrestling, Trump is in the WWE Hall of Fame.

And, like any good wrestler, Trump understands his role, and has used that understanding to improbably vault his way to the top ranks of politics. His success has baffled the political establishment, who cannot understand how someone who so relentlessly flouts convention keeps plugging away.

Chris Kelly, a contributing writer for VICE and the Washington Post, and Brandon Wetherbee, managing editor for Brightest Young Things and a correspondent for WGN Radio, are not baffled. Their new book, “The Donald: How Trump Turned Presidential Politics into Pro Wrestling,” explains the framework for Trump’s incredible run.

“The guiding principles of Trump’s campaign are not rooted in American politics, or business, or even reality TV: They are rooted in pro wrestling,” Kelly and Wetherbee write.

It traces Trump’s involvement in WWE wrestling and close friendship with McMahon, looks at the political success of other professional wrestlers, such as former Govs. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California and Jesse Ventura of Minnesota, who are also in the WWE Hall of Fame, and examines how Trump’s political endeavors reflect the wrestling world.

Central to these “guiding principles” is “heat,” or the attention the wrestling heel, and “villain,” or gains with insults and a blatant disregard of the rules, particularly when challenging a “face,” or hero.

In Trump’s case, this means picking fights with parents who have lost a son in war, disparaging Mexicans as “rapists,” pushing a ban on Muslim immigration, saying one of your opponents is ugly, or another’s father was involved in the Kennedy assassination, or that he’d like to hit a protester in the face.

“The political conventional wisdom says you shouldn’t be able to say shocking things and win, but pro wrestling shows that ‘shocking’ works — it sells tickets, pay-per-views and

merchandise,” Kelly and Wetherbee write.

The two also host a podcast on politics and wrestling called “Great American Bash.”

They discussed their book this month with CQ.

Q. You guys are wrestling fans living in a political city. At what point did you decide this book needed to be written?

Wetherbee: When he came in second in Iowa. We had accidentally been following this election, alongside every Wrestlemania, for odd reasons. And we had no idea when we began that Trump was even involved in wrestling, let alone was a major player.



Chris Kelly, left, and Brandon Wetherbee

Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call

We made so many connections, I don’t want to say conspiracy theories, but it looks like we’re the crazy people, with yarn on a tack board. But there’s no crazy, end-all, be-all conspiracy. These are all just things that happened.

Kelly: We had been joking about it. He was showing up in the ’80s and in the picture that everyone has seen, of Vince McMahon getting his head shaved, and so we knew there were some of these connections. But then when we started analyzing it through that prism of wrestling, then we started looking at his parallels with Vince McMahon and that’s when the connecting-the-dots sort of crystallized.

Q. There seems to be a real stigma attached to wrestling that’s not really there with other entertainers.

Kelly: I think it’s always been a carnival and sideshow act. The greatest period of popularity being the ’80s, when Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage were very cartoonish and low-culture. And again, when it pops up in the late ’90s, with The Rock and the main guy was the Bionic Redneck.

So it gets stigmatized as a low-culture, monster truck rally, NASCAR thing.

Wetherbee: There’s definitely a stigma. I don’t see any one way to change it. It’s kind of always going to be there.

Things like The Rock being the highest paid entertainer in 2016 kind of helps. Things like Arnold Schwarzenegger being a governor that people kind of liked, kind of helps.

But then you have Hulk Hogan, whose real persona is something most people really don’t like [and] tying it to Trump is going to make it low culture. But it’s really no different from the NFL. Dare to say, it’s safer than the NFL. And the exact same type of people like wrestling. If you look at the racial makeup of your average arena for wrestling fans, it’s not just a bunch of rednecks. It’s not just a bunch of white rubes.

Q. Is this why Trump’s success tends to mystify mainstream political pundits?

Kelly: I think that’s a big part of it. Because if you’re using the conventional wisdom of politics, these are the ways you do this and there are certain rules, obviously, and if he’s using, subconsciously or not, this other framework, getting attention this way, there’s a cognitive dissonance.

Wetherbee: I think at the end of the day, most every journalist I’ve talked to and political operative I’ve talked to doesn’t want to sully themselves attaching themselves to wrestling. Because they think it’s for a bunch of dummies.

That’s fine. These dummies are a billion-dollar company. And one of these dummies is the nominee for president. So, if you don’t want to pay attention, that’s perfectly fine, but you saw what happened. You see what’s happening now.

Q. You mention that his rallies take the form of wrestling events, with inciting violence and this jagged rhetoric about taking people out, and it seems at that point that some of the people in the crowd are not in on the joke. That they really are punching people and dragging them out.

Wetherbee: He’s going for his heat. And that could end poorly.

But also, I want to be very clear that, as someone who has attended very, very small wrestling events in JCCCs, and very, very big wrestling events in arenas, everyone in those places understands the theater. And I have seen no fights. And they’re very nice people.

Q. Is Hillary Clinton playing her part? Would they have wanted her to play her part like she is doing?

Wetherbee: Who’s ‘they’?

Q: The Trump people.



APRIL 1, 2007:
Trump shaves McMahon's head with help from wrestler Bobby Lashley.

Bill Pugliano/Getty Images

Wetherbee: Yeah, absolutely. Because she's full of nuance, and that's horrible. You've got to play to the cheap seats. You've got to get people in the third tier, to see you in the ring. That does not make sense at all when it comes to what she does.

She uses things like facts and feelings and those are bad things when it comes to this stuff.

The only thing that she should be doing when it comes to this space is take a page from Rowdy Roddy Piper.

Rowdy Roddy Piper was Hulk Hogan's main nemesis during the first part of the glory days of wrestling. My personal favorite. And he had a fake talk show called Piper's Pit. And his most famous line is, "Just when they think they've got the answers, I change the questions."

That's the only way she's going to win in these debates. Every time he says something horrible, she comes back with "What's Aleppo?" He comes back with something horrible, then she comes back with "Explain early childhood education." He comes out with something horrible, she's got to change his topic where it's a yes or no, right or wrong question. No nuance, no subtlety.

Just treat it like a teacher who's giving you a pop quiz. And there's only one right answer.

But, she's not going to do that because she's full of nuance and cares about people and doesn't want other people to feel dumb. But that's the only thing that's going to work.

Kelly: In the debates we saw, having a wider field benefited him, where he could come in and just do pot-shots. But the dynamic will change. He's never done a one-on-one debate yet.

Q: What do you estimate is the percentage of wrestling fans who recognize Trump as employing these tactics? Or is it something that just goes deeper? Is it something that hits them as 'Oh, he's a wrestler. He's playing the Donald Trump character that I've known in the past.' Do you think there is a conscious recognition by a lot of wrestling fans or is it just something they react to?

Wetherbee: That's a great question and I don't think people will answer it because I think a lot of people are closeted.

For example, Chuck Todd mentioned "Monday Night Raw." He's not talking about "Monday Night Raw" on "Meet the Press" a lot. But occasionally he'll throw in an analogy, which means he actually knows some of the stuff. I'm sure Chuck Todd knows. I don't see anybody else talking about "Monday Night Raw."

But based on the numbers, more people are watching that than anything else. So, I don't think that's answerable.

Kelly: I think there's different levels of it. I think wrestling fans do kind of internalize the tools of a wrestling star, a wrestling storyline, so I couldn't see why they wouldn't apply it to him, especially because he does have this deep connection.

Him, in the Battle of the Billionaires with Vince McMahon, that was one of the most popular wrestling events of all time. It's part of the canon.

They don't talk about that now. They have been pretty quiet about the association. But I think wrestling fans know. ■