



Photo by Jim Marks

"Come on back into the ring. It's okay, I won't hurt you," coaxes the Assassin (above), his crossed fingers hidden behind his back. Spectators of all ages (left) love the shenanigans and live action of Eugene pro wrestling.

ty and elsewhere, has diminished in the last three years from record-breaking crowds to dwindling revenue at the gate.

This is not to say the sport has lost its appeal. Wrestling, Owen said, is more popular right now than ever. However, increased cable television coverage has grabbed the front-row fan and put him or her in the living room.

"We're having the same problem as football, baseball and basketball," said Owen. "It is killing all sporting events at the gate."

The local sellout crowds of 500 two years ago lately have dwindled to 250.

"Cable TV was hurting for entertainment, so they went for the highest form of entertainment," said Owen, throwing his hands into the air. "People can sit at home the whole weekend and watch it on TV for free."

Big Time wrestling's Northwest circuit includes Eugene on Friday night, and on Saturdays it's matches in Portland and a weekly date with television station KPTV. During the week, they hit every little town in Oregon and Washington.

Despite the cable problem, which Owen believes will end as soon as "their ratings start drop-

ping," the Eugene fans that do come out have the enthusiasm of 10 times their number.

"Eugene has the greatest fans around," said Owen. "They pay a lot for a seat, so they can sit there and raise all the hell they want."

...

The Assassin stands outside, cooling off and drinking a Coke.

Dressed in a sport shirt and jeans, he does not look like the frenzied, hyperventilating brute who literally threw two men out of the ring just 15 minutes

earlier.

He has changed his mask, the token of his nickname. No one has ever seen his face. Nor do they know his real name or where he came from. And I am not about to ask him.

"All wrestling fans are the same," Assassin said. "The most loyal ones stand behind their favorite wrestler — especially if he's the toughest. The fans hated me at one time, but they are getting behind me now."

Assassin passed up profes-

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