

High school graduate turns pro wrestler

By Rob Burns
The Associated Press

ABERDEEN, Wash. — At 5-foot-8 and 185 pounds, Brian Danielson doesn't look like a professional wrestler. You wouldn't think it possible that someone his size could excel in a big man's profession.

But nine months ago, after graduating from Aberdeen High School, Danielson left his home in Central Park, near Aberdeen, for San Antonio, Texas, to pursue pro wrestling fame and glory.

After three months of training at the Shawn Michaels Wrestling Academy and two months of performing for the Texas Wrestling Alliance, the 18-year-old earned a month-long trip to Japan to hone his skills against some of the best grapplers in the world in December.

The experience paid off. On Feb. 8, Danielson fulfilled a life-long dream to perform for the World Wrestling Federation by wrestling in a four-man tryout in Austin prior to a WWF Smackdown! taping.

Three days later, the four wrestlers were offered developmental contracts by the WWF, and they signed them during a ceremony at a TWA show.

There aren't too many 1999 high school graduates who can say that they're in the beginning of their careers, earned a trip to Japan after seven months and signed a contract with a major sports entertainment company.

But then, you couldn't tell that from Brian, either, whose humble, yet high-key, personality deflects a lot of the praise and stature a trip and promotion like that gains.

"There's a reason why I wear a mask — I like my privacy and sometimes, as a wrestler, it's hard to keep that," he said, smiling. "I want my own private life. It's not bad in San Antonio and I'm pretty thankful for wearing it."

Brian and his academy classmate Lance McNart, a fellow 18-year-old who is 6-foot-5, 250 pounds, were a tag team during the Japan trip. Frontier Martial-Arts Wrestling (FMW), the organization that hosted the two wrestlers, didn't know how good or bad the two would be.

So to minimize mistakes and, possibly a bad match or two, FMW put them together as a tag team throughout the tour.

After several shows and wins over established FMW teams, the pair proved themselves worthy of a return trip to Japan this spring for another two-week run.

"Lance is a big guy and he was picked for his size and ability," Danielson said. "The first time I was power-bombed, where you're picked up and slammed onto your back, was from Lance. Normally, when a big guy picks you up to power-bomb you, they'll throw you. Lance doesn't. He'll drive you straight into the mat, which makes it better."

"You're up in the air and once

you hit the mat, all of the air leaves you. You don't want to kick out after one of Lance's power-bombs."

After arriving in Tokyo after Thanksgiving, the tag team got their first taste of a major wrestling promotion. The pair hung out backstage at a FMW pay-per-view event and attended a press conference with Michaels and FMW President Shouchi Arai. Danielson showed up as his ring persona, the babyface hero "The American Dragon."

"You see a raised hand, you look and 'snap', you look and 'snap'," Danielson added. "We just stood behind everyone and we got our pictures taken every time we looked around. I had my mask on the entire time. It was a strange experience."

For the first week in Tokyo, the two trained at FMW's dojo. They worked on how to wrestle with people who don't speak their language, along with cardiovascular exercises.

Danielson also learned how the Japanese wrestlers trained for their matches.

Japanese wrestlers, just like their American counterparts, rely upon spontaneous moves, nothing choreographed or planned ahead of time. During his three-month stint at the Michaels Academy, Danielson was taught how to perform and "bump" every known wrestling move and sell it during the match. "Everything you do in the ring is spon-

aneous," Danielson said. "It's hard to explain, but you have to know all of the moves and how to take them. When it's choreographed, you lose a lot of the realism. You want to make it look as real as possible."

Danielson added to his repertoire of moves with the minor-league promotion TWA, learning how to tell a story in the ring in front of a crowd and improving his cardiovascular conditioning with 10- to 15-minute matches.

On Dec. 1, the pair entered the FMW ring for the first time, winning a tag team match against Ricky Fuji and Ishiara when Danielson pinned Ishiara. Two days later, the team faced the recently dethroned tag team champions, Oya and Kuroda.

Danielson and McNart lost the match, but the memory of the event is a little foggy to the former Bobcat. Trying to perform an Asai Moonsault, which is a backflip off the second rope to the outside of the ring, Danielson slipped on the plastic casing on the ropes and crashed 10 feet to the floor on the back of his neck.

"For the first time in my life, I blacked out," he said. "In Japan, they have casing on the ropes, which we don't have in the U.S."

Trying to do the move, my toes slipped and I got no rotation. The next thing I remembered I was back in the ring. Kuroda was lightly tapping me with his foot, which resembled a stomp, and the referee was telling me to

"touch, touch."

"I got up and tagged Lance and the crowd went nuts that I was still alive."

Later on in the match, I did the move again. I wasn't thinking clearly at the time."

Danielson, a life-long wrestling fan, began taking seriously his dreams of a pro wrestling career as a junior at Aberdeen. After applying to wrestling schools in Florida, the former Bobcat junior varsity football player was accepted into Michael's school for the July 1999 session.

"Originally, I wasn't sure about the school because it sounded fishy," Brian said. "I called the number and the school helped set up the whole thing — a place to live, a part-time job."

They made it really easy for me to come down here and as easy as it can be to be a pro wrestler."

After working through the school's grueling three-month program, Michaels, a former WWF Champion and the school's main instructor, chose Danielson, along with McNart, to represent the school in Japan.

The team returned home Dec. 15 and now Danielson is back in San Antonio preparing for upcoming TWA shows and his first stints with the WWF, possibly with WWF announcer Jerry "The King" Lawler's promotion, Memphis, Tenn., Championship Wrestling.

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