

Ring Leader

Openly gay pro wrestler takes pains to promote tolerance

Everybody knows professional sports are way behind the curve in welcoming openly gay athletes. WNBA star Sheryl Swoopes and a handful of tennis and golf players are the only queers who have been brave enough to come out before retiring.

Aaron Nelson, a 22-year-old from Vancouver, Wash., is another athlete who's challenging the system—and in a particularly scary arena: the violent, testosterone-driven world of pro wrestling. Hey, if an ex-wrestler can get elected as governor of Minnesota, anything is possible.

Nelson, who came out in his sophomore year at Mountain View High School, got into wrestling when he was 18, attending a rigorous weeklong training camp in Florida with former world champ Dory Funk.

"It was a lot of paying your dues," he says. "The way it works in traditional wrestling is you come to the training class and you just have the hell beat out of you to see if you can take it, and then you actually get to start learning how to put a match together."

Even though most people consider pro wrestling to be the Milli Vanilli of sports, Nelson insists it's much harder than one might think.

"There's a lot more that goes into it than just showmanship," he says. "There's so much athleticism required that people don't see. A large majority of the population would call it fake, but when you have somebody who's 6-foot-5 pick you up over their head and slam you, there's nothing fake about that."

Although the matches aren't scripted, the wrestlers know in advance who's going to win. The rest of the performance is left up to their improvisational imagination.

"The whole point is to make the show look as real as possible without hurting anybody," Nelson says. "You're giving your opponent your body; you have to trust them with it. A lot of people took liberties on me and took that for granted, and they didn't protect me."

In fact, Nelson adds, past bouts have left him coughing up blood with swollen eyes. "I was getting



Jim's Closet
BY JIM RADOSTA

pretty banged up. Some of the guys...were pretty rough with me in the ring, which caused a lot of problems with my back and my knee."

While his body heals, Nelson is working on the sidelines at a school run by longtime local wrestlers Buddy Rose and Ed Wiskoski. He helps new students learn the basics as well as "match psychology," a fancy term for putting together a performance, making it believable and convincing the fans to love you or hate you.

Nelson says his character, Cameron Star, is likable. "I've never played the heel or the bad guy, as a casual fan might say. There's just something invigorating about having that many people get behind you and root for you."


Nelson describes his alter ego as "a Hawaiian guy with hints toward homosexuality." He'll occasionally surprise his opponent with a playful grope to get a rise out of the crowd.

"I received a great reaction every time I performed," he says. "It's just addicting, and any other wrestler will tell you that. You can try to walk away from it—I've tried before—but once it gets in your blood, it's hard to walk away. You have 500 people screaming your name. It's an indescribable rush. It's better than alcohol or drugs or sex or a combination of the three!"

Most wrestlers are paid based on the number of tickets sold. Nelson, who has a day job at a university housing department, says he can pull in up to 100 bucks a night. But in order to make a living as a pro wrestler, he plans on taking his act to Hawaii, California or the East Coast.

"I'm hoping this year that maybe I can expand myself to go outside of the Oregon and Washington area," he says. "Portland isn't the hotbed of wrestling that it was in the '80s."

Although he's never encountered any direct homophobia in the wrestling scene, Nelson suspects he's hit a "glass ceiling" locally because the word has spread that he's gay. Still, he has no plans to hide his sexuality to further his career.

"I don't want to be the only out athlete when I know that there are so many more that are afraid to come out," he says. "I'm hoping to be kind of a pioneer for other athletes, not necessarily just in the wrestling arena but...in other professional sports who are afraid that that's going to hinder them.... Maybe eventually that won't be as much of a problem, or maybe it will expand some people's tolerance. At the end of the day, if I could've helped somebody with that, then it would've been worth it regardless." 

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Aaron Nelson (inset) gets all choked up while performing as Cameron Star.

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