



Steve Simpson ('Nikita Koloff') played offensive and defensive line for the Robbinsdale Robins.

When Robbinsdale Ruled the Wrestling World

By Andrew Berg

<http://www.rosterresource.com/wrestling-when-robbinsdale-ruled-the-wrestling-world/>

The Hart Dungeon. The WCW Power Plant. The West Texas State football team. There are numerous hotbeds of professional wrestling talent and success around North America, but one of the unlikeliest catalysts gave rise to perhaps the most impressive list of professional wrestlers to ever come out of one area.

In a three year span, Robbinsdale High School in the suburbs of Minneapolis produced Curt "Mr. Perfect" Hennig, "Ravishing" Rick Rude, Tom Zenk, Dean "Battle Kat" Peters, "The Berzerker" John Nord, Nikita Koloff, and Barry Darsow (alternately known as Krusher Kruschev, Demolition Smash, and the Repo

Man). That's not to mention Verne and Greg Gagne and Gene Okerlund, who graduated from the same high school years earlier. Mere miles away, neighboring Cooper High School produced "Mean" Mike Enos and Wayne "Beau Beverley" Bloom around the same time.

Jerry MacFarlane was a gymnastics teacher at Robbinsdale High School in the 1970s, which placed him about as far away from the cultural archetype of a professional wrestler in that era. While he did not have roots in the wrestling business, what he did have was a connection to a renowned bodybuilding gym nearby, named simply The Gym. With the respect of a group of teenagers in the mid-'70s, he transferred his interest in weightlifting and bodybuilding to several of the more athletic students from the high school, including the group that would later go on to become successful professional wrestlers.

Naturally, no individual factor could single-handedly produce so many pro wrestling success stories simultaneously - there had to be a perfect storm of circumstances to line up at just the right time. The true



Above. Varsity Football. Back Row: K. Korman, S. Benner, D. Halls, D. Marco, S. Simpson, C. Perkins, J. Markeson, R. Schroeder, D. Horvath, R. Dahinder, J. Lien, S. Sylte, J. Blanske, R. Brown, P. Hayek, C. Cooper, T. Dee, T. Anderson, J. Leiviska, D. Reed, R. Rood; Front Row: R. Hase, R. Thour, N. Johnson, B. Carlson, S. Behling, T. Kuusisto, J. Yungner, M. Houck, P. May, R. Sonnenfeld.

Rick Rood (number 85) in the top right, second row.

story is a complicated network of personal connections, athletic achievement, and plain dumb luck. But those circumstances started to coalesce long before any of the future wrestlers set foot in a ring.

Robbinsdale High School

Likely the most famous alumnus in the history of Robbinsdale High School is Verne Gagne. After he graduated, Gagne won two NCAA wrestling titles at the University of Minnesota and served as an alternate on the 1948 U.S. Olympic team. Gagne took his amateur achievements to the professional wrestling world and immediately became one of the biggest stars in the country. When he got stuck in a power struggle between promoters who were split between whether he or Lou Thesz should carry the NWA Title, Gagne took a version of the belt back to Minnesota to launch his own promotion. Thus was born the American Wrestling Association.

With the AWA still in a position of national prominence in the 1970s, it is no surprise that wrestling was popular in its home base of Minnesota.

Even so, the athletes at Robbinsdale High School were more interested in football than wrestling. As Nikita Koloff explained, "I just wanted to get a helmet and some shoulder pads and knock somebody's block off. I didn't need to grab sweaty guys for an audience of 12 people."

Curt Hennig, with his father Larry "The Axe" Hennig starring in the AWA, joined the wrestling team, but the rest of the athletes who would go on to careers in grappling had no interest in the sport at the time. Koloff went on to say that, "None of the other guys even talked about it. Nobody ever said, 'I can't wait to be a pro wrestler one day.' It wasn't even on the radar."

With football as a priority over wrestling, it would take time before this group learned the fundamentals that would be necessary to become champions in professional wrestling. In spite of the inexperience, their shared interest in body building provided one of the building blocks to a wrestling career.

Shared acquaintance Jim Younger ran The Gym and brought powerlifters and bodybuilders from across the

Midwest to the area for elite training. Many of the Robbinsdale football players developed an interest in weight lifting as part of their football training and carried it beyond their playing careers. The strapping physiques certainly would not guarantee success in the ring, but they would eventually catch the eye of a trainer who helped a large portion of them get a foot in the door of the wrestling world.

Eddie Sharkey

Eddie Sharkey was a grizzled former professional wrestler by the time he crossed paths with several recent Robbinsdale graduates. Sharkey had come up on the carnival circuit (in an odd twist, Sharkey was “smartened up” about the wrestling business by the actor who would go on to play Luca Brasi in *The Godfather*) in the Midwest and wrestled in the AWA through the 1960s. He was not a major star, but he was established enough to feud with the legendary Danny Hodge when he was in the territory. By the 1970s, Sharkey had a falling out with Gagne that caused him to leave the AWA and it appeared that he was done with professional wrestling.

In the late ‘70s, Sharkey was tending bar in a Minneapolis watering hole known as Gramma B’s. He noticed that a few of the bouncers at the bar had more youth, hunger, and size than the usual bar toughs. One of the bouncers, Joe Laurinaitis, asked Sharkey to train him to be a professional wrestler. Laurinaitis and his friend Mike Hegstrand- both of whom grew up in the Minneapolis area - joined Richard Rood and Barry Darsow in training with Sharkey. He realized he had something special on his hands and soon launched his own wrestling promotion with the Road Warriors Animal and Hawk, Ravishing Rick Rude, Demolition Smash on the roster.

Sharkey himself was surprised that he got back into wrestling, let alone that he found such success with this group. “I had quit wrestling for about 10 years. I just walked away from it. I felt sick of it. I was just totally burned out. Then I came back because of the Road Warriors. I put them in the business, and they brought me back. So we all helped each other,” Sharkey said in an interview. While the development might have been unexpected, Sharkey made the most of it.

Sharkey did not stop with those four. He continued to train wrestling prospects from the Minneapolis area, including Curt Hennig, Brady Boone, Tom Zenk, and John “The Berzerker” Nord from that era of Robbinsdale graduates. In the following years, Sharkey also trained and helped launch the careers of Jerry Lynn, X-Pac, the Steiner Brothers, and the aforementioned Enos and Bloom. Sharkey has remained active and even helped train modern wrestlers like Austin Aries, Erick Rowan, and ODB.

One reason that Sharkey had so much success breaking young wrestlers into the business was that he had a pipeline to a national promotion in his backyard. Although he was not as close with Verne Gagne as he had once been, he was able to refer many of his best wrestlers to Gagne and most of them spent at least some time in the AWA.

Despite the disagreements between Gagne and Sharkey, Gagne became an important figure in the development of many of the wrestlers, as well. As Tom Zenk recalled in an interview with Marcus Madison of *WrestlingEye*, “Verne Gagne told me when I was starting out ‘you should get down on your knees and thank God there is such a thing as a work’. Because, once they let you in on the con, it was all money for nothing.” Hennig and Rude, in particular, made national names for themselves in the AWA in its waning years before they went on to even greater success with the WWF and WCW.

Nikita Koloff’s Strange Path to Stardom

Contrary to popular belief, not all of the wrestlers who came out of Robbinsdale High School were trained by Sharkey. In fact, not all of them were trained to be professional wrestlers at all. Nikita Koloff had such a unique and interesting introduction to the wrestling business that it warrants a retelling of its own.

Although Koloff came through high school with several of the wrestlers who already started to train with Sharkey, he never worked with Sharkey personally. Koloff was working out for a pro football tryout when he got a call from football buddy Road Warrior Animal, who had started working for Jim Crockett in the Southeast.

Although Koloff (then Scott Simpson) had no wrestling training, Don Kernodle and Sergeant Slaughter came up with the idea to pair a new wrestler with Ivan Koloff and Kernodle's team. When Koloff called Crockett to discuss the job, "I told him that I had never been in a wrestling ring and had no training. He didn't bat an eye and told me to be in his office with my head shaved bald on June 4. That was our whole conversation."

Koloff shaved his head, picked up some tights and boots from Animal, and showed up in Charlotte. Ivan Koloff taught him some extremely basic wrestling holds and helped him come up with the name Nikita Koloff. He stood mute in the background of several pre-taped interviews, but the next night in Raleigh, he wrestled and won his first match. One day into his wrestling career, he had a win under his belt. From there, Ivan Koloff and Kernodle taught him the basics on the road until he knew enough to wrestle full matches. He went on to win the NWA United States Title, all without any formal wrestling training.

Not only did Koloff quickly pick up the in-ring portion of his job, he became one of the strictest protectors of the business outside of it. He legally changed his name to Nikita Koloff and refused to speak English in public in places where it might expose his character.

When the rest of the wrestlers would hit the bars, he would stay in. "They thought I was weird because I would go back to my room, eat a can of tuna and an apple, and watch TV for the rest of the night," Koloff said. Much like his unique introduction to the business, Koloff left on his own terms. He retired at 33, two years before his self-imposed deadline of 35, rather than rehabilitating some serious injuries. After his retirement, he went to what he calls "the polar opposite end of the world" and became an evangelical Christian minister.

Robbinsdale Legacy

The list of names to come out of Robbinsdale High School is impressive in its own right, but the accomplishments they compiled are staggering. Rude won world championships in the WCW and WCCW. In the WWF, he won the Intercontinental Title and headlined SummerSlam 1990 with the Ultimate Warrior.

Hennig won the AWA's version of the world title and enjoyed prominent runs as the secondary champion in both the WWF and WCW on his way to a WWE Hall of Fame Induction.

Darsow won a variety of championships around the country, but achieved his greatest fame as a member of three-time WWF Tag Team Champion Demolition, which still holds the record for longest tag team title reign. Koloff had a notable run with the NWA U.S. Title and several other minor belts. Zenk and Boone held various titles around the country [including WCW, Montreal and the Pacific North West] and Nord won Pro Wrestling Illustrated's Rookie of the Year Award.

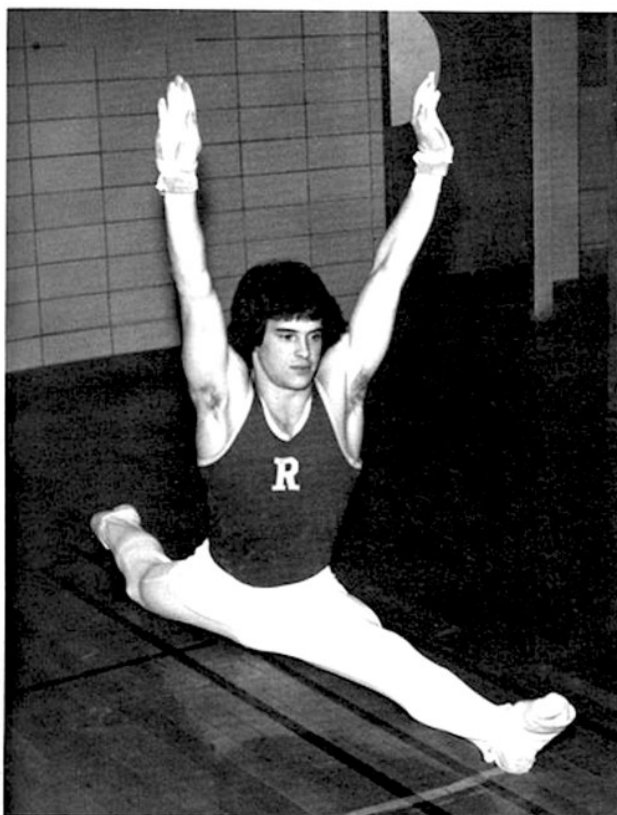
Incidentally, several of the wrestlers crossed paths as their careers developed. Darsow played a character named Krusher Kruschev alongside Koloff and the other "Russians" in Jim Crockett's territory. They also overlapped in Crockett's promotion with Zenk, who arrived shortly after them. Rude and Hennig paralleled one another in sequential WWF runs as long-running heel champions with the Intercontinental Title.

As Darsow explained, it was not uncommon to cross paths traveling around the country, "we all went to different places, and then we would see each other once in a while at the airport or if we were on the same card in some towns. It was pretty exciting to see each other because we were all good friends."

Altogether, it was a collection of talent like no other group in the world. The football team at West Texas St. has produced a number of great professional wrestlers- Tully Blanchard, Ted Dibiase, Bruiser Brody, Stan Hansen, the Funk brothers, Tito Santana, Dusty Rhodes, and Barry Windham - but all of those wrestlers chose to attend the school. Moreover, wrestling schools like the Power Plant or the Monster Factory get credit for producing championship wrestlers, but the shock is tempered by the fact that it is their job.

At first glance, the circumstances in Robbinsdale seem very random. The football team, the bodybuilding, the

Below. Leading the team to a successful season, Senior Captain Dean Peters shows excellent flexibility while doing splits on floor exercise.



Above. Not wanting to mar the wood finish, John Nord carefully adjusts a hinge on his cabinet.

(left) Dean Peters ("Brady Boone") Senior Captain, Robbinsdale Gymnastics Team; (right) John Nord ("The Barbarian") in woodwork class at Robbinsdale High and as No. 63, front row, below.

Below. Junior Varsity Football. Back Row: D. Johnson, E. Johnson, J. Bergsten, J. Innes, T. Cahlander, T. Thour, R. Gomez, B. Gryniowski, C. Johnson, D. Wold
Second Row: R. Rehberg, S. Schmidt, R. Windsperger, T. Smith, T. House, J. Jones, M. Fern, J. Lepinski, J. Rygg, B. Kiffe; Front Row: P. Stenzel, R. Peltier, M. Noack, D. Leeds, D. Schultz, J. Nord, T. Koelfgen, M. Thompson, N. Hall, D. Butler.



connection to Larry Hennig, the association with Eddie Sharkey, the pipeline to the AWA, and a tremendous amount of natural talent were all independently essential to the overwhelming success. The odds of that ever happening again are extremely slim. As Koloff explained, “I just don’t see how the situation could ever be repeated with the group all coming from the same place. Plus, without territories now, it makes it even harder to come up. They aren’t going to bring seven guys in from the same high school to the same training facility at one time.”

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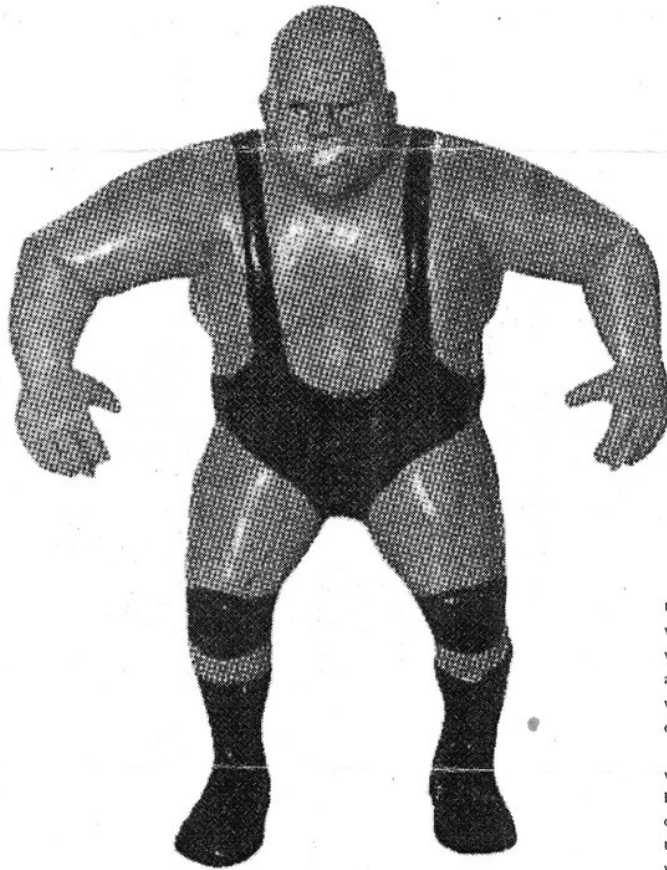
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THE RISE AND FALL MINNESOTA PRO



BY RAY WHEBEE, JR.

The day to day world of pro wrestling is very weird, to say the least. I've been involved in the sport as a writer, announcer, booker, broadcaster, promoter, agent, TV producer, commissioner, coach, mentor, and referee and sold hot dogs at matches. I've promoted huge fundraisers (Wrestle for Shelter I-VII) and flops (at First Avenue when the wrestling ring crew never showed up). Through all that, I've learned a few things about wrestling that are best summed up by a few quotes from others involved in wrestling. Wrestler Tom Zenk: "The wrestlers . . . the boys are the biggest marks of all. They hate the fans for liking them because everything about them is fake. Even the muscles, thanks to steroids." Ricky Rice: "There's a whole lot more to life than wrestling." Sheik Adnan Al-Kassie: "Anyone can be a wrestler. Few can wrestle." Ed Sharkey: "Never try to fool the fans."

Wrestling has a long history, probably as long as human history, but here in the United States, it wasn't until the turn of the last century that boxing and wrestling both became legal, organized and promoted sports. Exactly when wrestling shifted from "real" to "worked" is arguable. Some wrestlers want folks to believe everything they see on TV is

pulse of the twin cities

real, while others openly admit to being involved in "athletic contests" that do, in fact, have predetermined outcomes. For much of the 20th century, the fans and public battled over that point.

Throughout the '20s, '30s and '40s, almost every major city had a wrestling office that recognized one major world champion. Lou Thesz bridged the gap of the bygone era where bets could be made on honest outcomes to the '50s and '60s, when wrestling was on TV and the outcomes were less important than the show — or, to say it differently,

the outcomes were part of the show; a smaller part of the show than the characters and plots. Thesz was known as a "shooter" (one who could stretch a match out if needed) and drew big crowds wherever he battled. He is most noted for being one of the National Wrestling Alliance's most successful champions. Wherever he performed — New York, Chicago, L.A. — an appearance by him guaranteed huge crowds.

When pro wrestling met with the modern era — and TV — it was a marriage made in heaven. Technology in the '50s was primi-

tive by today's standards, but the pro wrestling ring was an ideal setting for TV. Pro wrestling (and boxing) were easy to produce and became a favorite of programmers everywhere. Almost seven days a week viewers could watch action in the ring.

But it was no longer just wrestling; TV wanted a little more: some theatrics. Said Bruce Hart, a wrestler and promoter and son of the legendary Stu Hart (who once battled a tiger on TV), "It was a grand time to be a wrestler. Every city had an office and the boys were paid quite well. With TV things went from back alley 'shoots' (real fights) of the early 1900s to showmanship. Every office had a wrestling cowboy, Indian, German whacko, and so on. Every city ran their own territory built around a local hero."

The Twin Cities was fortunate to have its own Vern Gagne as its hero. Gagne was a player on the Golden Gophers football and wrestling teams of the '40s. He was a great athlete and was also a "shooter." The 190 pound All-American campaigned throughout the United States in the '50s and put together a won-loss record as good as anyone else's. He was the main event at Soldiers Field, Madison Square Garden, St. Louis' Kiel Auditorium,

L AND RISE OF THE WRESTLING SCENE

Frisco's Cow Palace and wherever he competed. By the late '50s, he thought he deserved to be the world champion, but the NWA powers were happy with Thesz. Thus, Gagne and Wally Karbo did the next best thing: they bought the Upper Midwest territory from the Stecher family, hooked up with local television, and Gagne made himself the new world champion. At about the same time, there was a major uprising on the East Coast, where promoters were high on Buddy Rogers.

Wars began, territories were divided and promoters chose their sides. By the '60s, Gagne's American Wrestling Association

ruled mid-America; the World Wide Wrestling Federation, which was partly led by Vince McMahon Sr., took over the prosperous East Coast region; and the National Wrestling Association had the rest. There were three organizations, three world champions, and from that time on, rarely would wrestlers from different organizations interact. Overexposure and the bickering led to wrestling losing national TV programming, but local stations seemed to love the fun. Local wrestling programs were everywhere.

By the mid-'60s, the three champs — Thesz (NWA), Gagne (AWA) and Bruno

Sammartino (WWWF) — established themselves as major stars. Each territory had a core of fan favorites, but when a wrestler no longer drew in one territory, he simply packed up and moved to another. Wrestlers could stay "fresh" by not competing on national TV, so these local circuits found more wrestlers making more money than at any other time. "The '60s and '70s were very good times for the boys," recalls former wrestler turned trainer/promoter Eddie Sharkey. "Work was plentiful and the pay was good. I was blessed. I started wrestling in the carnivals, wrestling tough guys out of the crowds who bet they

could last 10 minutes with you. Eventually, I got to be a main-eventer in my own home town. In those days it was rare that a guy could work regularly at home and the AWA really was the place to be."

Gorgeous George Wagner has been credited with pushing wrestling's showmanship to a new level back in the '50s. His routine was to fuss over his recently permed golden locks, hand out golden bobby pins and roses to adoring (?) fans. Through this shtick, he became one of the sports true villains. Muhammad Ali once appeared on a TV program (when he was Cassius Clay) with



from Pulse of the Twin Cities

Gorgeous George in the late '50s. He said as a teenager he was overwhelmed with Wagner's tricks and from that day forward vowed never to be silenced. The talented Ali learned early the importance of such showmanship.

Wagner's gimmicks and bravado were tame by the '70s, and he has long been forgotten. Needless to say, by today's standards of size, athleticism, power and improvisational skills, the Gagnes, Theszes and Wagners would not be too successful in the sport. Now,

as Vince McMahon Jr. of the World Wrestling Federation says, to be a wrestler today, you have to be "a live

the Hulk. The St. Paul Civic Center became "the house that Hulk built" to wrestling fans. At times, televised closed-circuit matches featuring Hogan were shown in the adjoining St. Paul Auditorium.

Then in a flash it was over. Some say Gagne could have kept Hogan around a few more years if he had paid him a mere \$500 more for a 1983 Christmas card. Others say Vince McMahon Jr.'s desire to make what is now the WWF a world power could not be stopped. McMahon raided the talent coast to coast. Hogan was the first to defect. He brought with him a psycho who once beat on John Stossel's head for using the F-word (fake), and an announcer and Hogan croney Gene Okerlund. Eventually, near-

Billington, who marvelled fans as The Dynamite Kid.

And Gagne fought this. Sharkey, who earlier trained WWF champions Bob Backlund, Jesse The Body Ventura, Ravishing Rick Rude, Nord the Barbarian, and the Road Warriors among countless others, joined forces.

"The Road Warriors were the hottest tag team in history," recalled Sharkey. "They were my guys. I'll never forget I walked into the Market BBQ and met Scott Norton (world arm wrestling champion), Al Blake, Barry Darson, Rick Rude, Mike (Road Warrior Hawk) Hegstrand, Joe (Road Warrior Animal) and a few other guys and I didn't see millions but billions." While his students then made millions wrestling from Japan to Puerto Rico and from Florida to Canada, he chose to remain behind and run a wrestling camp and be a referee for the sinking AWA.

"Biggest mistake I made in my life," Sharkey admitted. "But how did I know? The Warriors were hot beyond anyone's dreams. I thought it'd be fun to referee their matches and knew they'd pack them in. I was a family man, ran a local wrestling school, and things seemed to be looking up. So when the WWF called and offered me a full-time referee position, I politely declined. I thought I'd be OK here."

among tape traders and Web nuts.

In 1985 Sharkey founded Pro Wrestling America. When the PWA began, it was the "outlaw" group: rebels, renegades and rogues. "The wrestling was bold, pushed the envelope, and embodied the rebel spirit in all of us," said Karch. "And the characters that emerged were something else. We had talent like Ricky Rice, Derrick Dukes, Johnny Love, the Sheik, The Baron, Andy Big Bear, the late Larry Cameron, and then there were the likes of King Tut, The Blooze Man or J.D. The Animal Trainer with his pet monkey Verne."

The PWA never became widely supported, but it was not for a lack of trying. There was the WWTC's Wrestling Radio show, the annual Wrestle for Shelter bashes, and Karch's Saturday Night Ringside.

SNR was part of a wrestling block on Channel 23. It aired for several years, garnished top ratings and offered local stars the opportunity to showcase their talents. But then the station dropped wrestling for religious programming.

Most of the '90s belonged to the PWA. Monthly shows brought fans from everywhere to see the action. Some were shown at Ropers. Among the regulars at Ropers were the Batson Brothers of the Mighty Mofos, Matt Potts, Bad Street Donnie and his Loose Railers and

media people like Dark Star and Patrick Reusse.

Said former Pioneer Press writer Kristian Pope, "The

PWA was extreme before the WWF dreamed of it and before ECW was born."

(ECW, Extreme Championship Wrestling, is an ultra-violent group seen on Pay Per View, on which local star Jerry Lynn is often seen.) Guys gave career performances. I'll never forget the feuds between Ricky Rice, Jerry Lynn and the Lightning Kid."

Ropers no longer exists. SNR has been put to rest and two of the PWA's strongmen have passed away: Ravishing Rick Rude and lethal Larry Cameron. Over 100 wrestlers live in the immediate area and another 35 or so in Wisconsin. There are regular cards at the Main Event bar, weekly events in other locations promoted by The Sheik. The West St. Paul Armory has regular wrestling cards. The Bloomington Armory might host events soon, and the First Avenue cards are always a blast. It's a fragmented scene in spite of the large number of wrestlers living here now.

The place to be is the WWF these days. McMahon is a billionaire and every wrestler has had the chance to become a millionaire. Many of them are.

And don't forget: One WWF alumnus may even become president. The script just hasn't been written yet. ☐

adventure/action series hero or villain."

Yet the Gopher alum carried championships in the AWA throughout the '70s and used most of the '80s for a comeback and retirement and comeback tour.

Many Midwesterners relish memories of the Gagnes, Baron Von Raschke, the Sheik, Superstar Billy Graham, Mad Dog Vachon, Bobby The Brain Heenan, The High Fliers (Jim Brunzell and Greg Gagne) and countless other AWA wrestlers and announcers. Marty O'Neil was the dean of local announcers, and former Minnesota Twins slugger Kent Hrbek honors the late O'Neil with an annual bowling tournament/fundraiser named after him.

From 1960-1985, Gagne's AWA ruled the Midwest. It carried most of the sports' biggest names at one time or another and had a core of locals — Nick Bockwinkel, Sheik Kassie, the Baron, Buck Zumhofe, Mad Dog, etc. — whose bodies never seemed to wear out and could always put on a great show. During the weekdays, they performed before sellouts in high school gyms throughout the area, and on weekends they would sell out major arenas from California to Winnipeg.

Things were good for everyone in the AWA and Gagne brought home the area's first major world title. TV ratings were solid, the money was good and Midwest wrestling fans were able to see the best wrestling in the sports history. Then when Sylvester Stallone produced Rocky, he hit a home run. And when struggling grappler Terry Bollea, now better known as Hulk Hogan, appeared in Rocky III, he hit a grand slam. As Rocky III was being released, the Twin Cities was the first market to be infected with Hulkamania. After that, crowds didn't walk but ran to see

ly the entire AWA roster headed to New York. Jesse Ventura, Jim Brunzell, Rick Martel, Tito Santana, Sgt. Slaughter, Bobby "The Brain" Heenan and others hit the road. Eventually, even the elderly Mad Dog, Crusher and Baron joined the crew.

McMahon reportedly offered most promoters large sums to sell their territories to the WWF. Most relinquished. Stu Hart of Calgary's Stampede Promotions did not. He reportedly received nearly \$1 million from McMahon to buy the Stampede Promotions. Canadian fans, however, were loyal to the Harts and at the time weren't willing to pay their hard earned change to an outsider. So apparently McMahon gave Hart the territory back and hired his sons Bret the Hit Man and the late Owen (who died in the WWF ring after a paratrooping maneuver failed) and his sons-in-law Davy Boy Smith, Jim Anvil Neidhart and Smith's "cousin" Tom

Tom Zenk, a former Mr. Minnesota who competed for the AWA, the WCW and the WWF has said over the years that the Gagnes basically couldn't see the writing on the wall. "They had it all and lost it. Why? Because Verne was hard headed? Because son Greg never would turn heel and go against the fans? Who cares? Didn't they know it's a loss? Everyone does. I had a five-year-old come up to me and say I know you. You're Tom Zenk. The guy in the Can-Am Connection who has to lose because his partner won't. A five-year-old kid!! He knew. But the Gagnes? Maybe they didn't know."

Zenk and Rick Martel held the WWF tag team championship belts in the early '90s. He left the WWF after a famed and storied "contract dispute" and is still a popular figure

