



It's Good to Be the King...Sometimes

By Jerry Lawler

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The full story of one of wrestling's most colourful and outspoken personalities. An often controversial figure, Jerry 'The King' Lawler has been at the top of his profession both as a wrestler and most recently as a commentator for over 30 years. Holder of more than 90 regional or national titles over the course of his career, he is as well known for his feuds, both in and out of the ring, as he is for his achievements and his expertise. No stranger to the airwaves, he has hosted his own show both on radio and on television, and he is also a successful commercial artist whose work can be seen on several sites around his home city of Memphis. Outside the WWE arena perhaps his most famous dispute was with actor and comedian Andy Kaufman, a long-running conflict that at one point put Kaufman in hospital and culminated in a televised brawl on 'Late Night With David Letterman'. Now in a no-holds barred autobiography 'The King' is prepared to tell all both about his sometimes stormy career and about the backstage secrets of the WWE.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this surprisingly listless behind-the-scenes memoir, Lawler, a veteran wrestler and a commentator for WWE Raw, delivers the standard run-down of the show business behind the "sport": matches are tightly choreographed, trash-talking interviews are scripted and simmering wrestler feuds are plotted out months in advance by the same folks who concoct the sociopathic characters the wrestlers impersonate in the ring. The premise of the wrestler tell-all genre is that the making of wild spectacle is more interesting than the spectacle itself. That may be true, but in Lawler's telling the rollicking charlatanism of the wrestling world gets bogged down in aimless anecdotes, bad one-liners ("I wanted to ask a fan, "Who did your makeup? Bozo?") and unfunny practical jokes in which he douses people with water or spikes their food with laxative. A big Memphis celebrity, Lawler dutifully plugs a local vinyl siding companies and a few eateries ("Half a slab of pork ribs with slaw and beans is \$8.95" at Cozy Corner); and much of three late chapters is taken up with the Lawler's increasingly shameless post-divorce quest to scare up groupies. Wrestling fans and connoisseurs of kitsch will swoon over the many photos of big men in trunks and tights, but others may find it a chore to wade through this slackly written story.

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Chapter 1

Sunday, May 19, 2002. It's *Judgment Day* at the Gaylord Entertainment Center, Nashville, Tennessee. *Judgment Day* is a big-time WWE Pay-Per-View, broadcast all over the world, so all the *Raw* and *SmackDown!* stars are here. We've spent the last three weeks of television building up these matches. One of the featured bouts is Kurt Angle and Edge in a hair-versus-hair match. Meanwhile, suspended dramatically above the ring is the steel cage that Triple H and Chris Jericho will use for their hell-in-the-cell battle. But the big showpiece is Undertaker and the Hulk, who'll climax weeks of feuding in a match for the Undisputed WWE Championship.

The place is packed -- bulging with 18,000 fans -- and the King rejoices in the rousing welcome he gets from his loyal home-state subjects. Nashville was always my "home away from home," so to speak. Among the crowd is a bunch of Tennessee Titans football players like Kevin Dyson, Randall Godfrey, and the tackles Joe Salave'a and Adam Haayer. Haayer went to college in Minnesota with the latest and greatest beast in sports-entertainment, Brock Lesnar. WWE wrestling has always been popular among athletes. Whatever city we're in, if it has a professional sports team, there are usually some players at the show. Same goes for entertainers; I think they can all appreciate what we do. Wrestlers have to have what it takes to succeed in both those worlds.

This Sunday was the start of a big few days for me. I was doing the commentary on the PPV with my trusty compadre J.R. The next night, *Raw* was coming live from the Pyramid in the King's hometown of Memphis.

This was the deal. Pay-Per-View events from state-of-the-art facilities in front of 18,000 adoring fans. Live shows on national TV out of the biggest arena this side of the Superdome in New Orleans. The King has come a mighty long way in the thirty years since the greenhorn almost got himself killed in front of twenty-eight people in a busted-down movie theater in West Memphis, Arkansas. Of course, the kid who got thrown out of the ring wasn't the King yet, but Jerry Lawler certainly felt that bump well enough. Once he'd regained

consciousness.

It was natural for me to be thinking about my dim and distant wrestling past that particular weekend. For one thing, Vince and J.R. were busting my balls about remembering stories for my book. Look, I should say up front that I have not been blessed with a great memory. I barely remember what I had for breakfast, much less everything that's happened in my entire life. I think I need one of those jobs the Arnold Schwarzenegger character in *Total Recall* got. "Tell me what I remember again..." Like I could swear I never wrestled Mick Foley. I've seen him wrestle a million times and commentated on hundreds of his matches, but I don't remember ever actually wrestling him myself, but I'm told I had a match with Mankind at *King of the Ring* in 1997. I'm shown evidence of it, so I guess "it's true, it's true," as Kurt Angle might say.

But it's driving around this part of the Mid-South, routes like Memphis-to-Nashville and Memphis-to-Tupelo, that brings back a pile of memories for me. I've spent a big part of my adult life in cars, driving to and from shows in one place or another. When I first started in the business, I'd think nothing of driving five, six hundred miles to a match, often at insane speeds, and just as often up to no good along the way. I pass the spot on the road to Nashville where my great friend and manager Sam Bass was killed in 1976 and that whole crazy period is immediately right back with me.

In 1976, I'd only been in wrestling a few years but Jerry Lawler was already the King. A monarch has no need for modesty, so I'll say it: At that time, I was the biggest deal in the most important wrestling territory in the whole country. In a year, my partner and I would split from the established local promoter and I would get an ownership stake in the business in the Mid-South. I had the solid platform for a great career that's still going as strong as ever, both locally and nationally, following a short hiatus.

It's a real high-pressure job. For an event like *Judgment Day*, most of the wrestlers have a ten- or fifteen-minute match and they're done. Twenty minutes tops. J.R. and I have to go out and be up and try to be entertaining for the entire show. Our job is to keep everybody excited, every minute, for three straight hours. You have to further the story lines, keep the people informed, and get the matches and the individual wrestlers over. (In wrestling, putting someone "over" means to make them look good.) J.R. and I have a lot of responsibility. Punch the mute button one time and try to watch the show that way. I defy you to make it through one match.

On Pay-Per-View days, there's a production meeting where writers, agents, and the TV crew go over what will happen that particular night. It's all timed out to the second. The referees have earpieces so they can tell the guys, "You'll go home [finish the match] in the next minute." Vince McMahon personally oversees these production meetings. But I don't go to them.

That's always been a pet peeve of mine: I hate to rehearse. If anyone makes me do it, I'll never say the same thing live I did in rehearsal. I like to be spontaneous and say the first thing that pops into my mind, which isn't always a good idea. I don't even like to know what's planned for the show, much less rehearse what I'm going to say. I find it's more sincere if I am reacting honestly to what I see. That way, I'm experiencing the matches the same way the fans and people at home are. I've always thought that part of my success comes from the fact that I seem to say exactly what a lot of the fans are thinking, and that has to be spontaneous. J.R. certainly goes to the meetings. Everybody goes but me.

These production meetings are at eleven o'clock in the morning. They write the shows during the week, or sometimes as late as the night before, and change them two or three times before the meeting. And they also change the show two or three times after the meeting. One of the reasons I give for not going is that they rewrite the show so many times.

Truth of the matter is, I used to have to go to the production meetings. There was one meeting I was at where

they were talking about an angle -- plot twist -- with Undertaker back when he was this evil entity. (I miss that Undertaker, he was my favorite.) He had recently abducted Stephanie McMahon and he had several subjects that were creatures of the night around him. They'd gone to the ring and grabbed another wrestler, Midian, and they were going to induct him into Undertaker's circle and bring him over to the dark side.

In the production meeting, I was sitting beside Michael Cole, who was taking notes on everything. Vince was saying they were going to lay Midian out on a table and Undertaker was going to stand over him wearing his black hood chanting some evil spell. Undertaker and his acolytes were then going to levitate Midian, make him float in the air. A magician had shown them how to do that with a big metal arm you couldn't see lifting up Midian. Michael Cole and I looked at each other and said this was going to be neat.

Comes time to do the show and someone grabs Midian to prepare for the initiation and Michael and I are ready. But at some point in the day, the technical people found out that the levitation thing wasn't working properly for some reason, so it was decided not to even try it. Michael and I are at the ring and the dark ceremonial stuff is going on up on a stage some way away. Midian is on a table as we anticipated and Undertaker waves his arms over him, also as planned. Michael and I are calling the action, and Michael says, "Oh my gosh, King, look, he's levitating! He's floating in air!" I could see well enough to see that he wasn't moving at all. I looked at Michael and said, "What?" He said, "He's floating. Isn't he?" I said, "I don't think so."

Fortunately, that was *SmackDown!*, and it was being taped, which meant we could go back and add voice-overs, and do what we call a "fix." But had that been *Raw*, where the show is totally live, everybody would have looked like complete idiots. Well, at least Michael would have looked like a complete idiot. After the show, we went back and someone said, "Oh! We forgot to tell you guys. We threw out the levitation deal." That story has remained something I use in my argument against rehearsing. Too many things can go wrong if you're not doing it off the cuff.

At *Judgment Day 2002*, Edge won the hair match. He literally had more to lose and Kurt actually looked pretty good bald. This match allowed me to use some good hair jokes on Edge. "My cat's coughed up better-looking hair than Edge has. I've seen better-looking hair in my shower drain than Edge has." And, "What kind of shampoo do you think edge uses? Pennzoil or Quaker State?" I said Kurt would actually be doing Edge a favor by shaving off that straggly hair and letting Edge start over from scratch. To be honest with you, all the while J.R. and I were calling this match, I actually thought Kurt was going over and they really were going to shave Edge's head. I hadn't gone to the meeting, and I just thought that cutting Edge's hair would have been the cooler thing to do.

The hell-in-the-cell was very good, but nothing near the legendary match between Mick Foley and Undertaker in 1998, which was just unbelievable. It would be next to impossible to replicate the kind of bumps Foley took that day. Triple H and Jericho sacrificed their bodies in the match, and fortunately, neither one of them was injured. In fact, the worst casualty at *Judgment Day* was the referee Tim White. Triple H was running at Chris Jericho, and Jericho moved out of the way and the ref got nailed into the cage. It looked good, a big bump, and it seemed like he was really hurt. After the match we found out he was hurt. He had to be taken to the hospital with a dislocated shoulder that required surgery.

In the main event of *Judgment Day 2002*, Undertaker beat Hogan to become Undisputed Champion and Hogan made a long, emotional goodbye speech to the crowd. It left the fans wondering if this was the last time they'd see the immortal Hulk Hogan, but it promised good things for the next night, because at a *Raw* after a Pay-Per-View all sorts of new angles are usually set up leading to the next big showdown.

Because *Raw* was coming from Memphis, I became an unofficial branch of Ticketmaster for a couple of

days. It always happens, people you haven't heard from in years call the day of the event expecting me to get them great seats...and for free! This is another one of my pet peeves. When I'm out shopping or eating somewhere, I'm standing there to pay for something, and as I give the cashier my money, that same person will inevitably ask me, "Hey, King, you got any free wrestling tickets?" I usually say, "I didn't just get this burger for free, did I?"

It was a relief to get to the Pyramid to escape the phone calls from people wanting tickets. The Pyramid is a strange building. Acres and acres of stainless steel built Egyptian-style, right on the banks of the Mississippi. At one point, the city of Memphis thought it was going to get the rock 'n' roll Hall of Fame and they were going to put it in the little pointy end of the Pyramid on top of the arena. But the Hall went to the King's second-favorite city, Cleveland, so the top of the Pyramid is hollow.

There were far fewer people in the backstage area, both crew and wrestlers, than there had been in Nashville the night before because all the wrestlers who normally appear on *SmackDown!* had gone to Birmingham for a show, leaving just the *Raw* teams for Memphis. Before the fans were let in, I was in the empty arena as some of the guys warmed up. WWE security walks around the arena both ringside and backstage before the doors are open to head off overeager fans. There's always a few individuals who think they can get to a restricted area just by walking quickly and looking official. I saw a couple of guys in yellow T-shirts like the Pyramid staff wears walk in at the top of the stands. One of the WWE security guys shouted up, "Who are you with, concessions?"

"We don't do concessions," the guy shouted back. "We serve beer." Okay, this is Memphis.

It was a special thrill for the King to take his seat beside J.R. at the announcer's table that night. The fans chanted "Jer-ry, Jer-ry," and there were a bunch of signs: "*Raw* Is War but Lawler Is King, Welcome Home King of Memphis," and "Lawler Will You Marry Me?" (I didn't get a chance to check out who was holding that one. I hope it wasn't a guy.) There was also a sign that read, "Vince Sux Cock." How disgusting. I was embarrassed that a sign like this would appear in my hometown. I was about to go over there and talk to the person. "S-U-C-K-S, you half-wit, not S-U-X!" Don't people know how to spell these days? Anyway, before I could move, the sign was gone.

It turned out that Vince had a surprise for me -- Raven, who used to do the commentary for *Sunday Night Heat*, and is really a strange-looking freak with his dreadlocks, or whatever they are, sticking out all over his head -- joined J.R. and me to do a bit of color commentating of his own. The idea was that Raven would help out but he would be showing up the King, telling him how the TV should be done. He would piss me off to the extent that we'd have to settle it in the ring.

The viewers on TV just saw Raven show up and sit down next to me at the table, but we did a more elaborate setup from the ring for the live fans because they didn't get to hear any of what Raven was saying. It was stuff about me and Stacy and about my ability as a commentator. He actually seemed to object to the King's interest in puppies. I got to have my say and I was happy to conclude of Raven that "the last time I saw something like you, I flushed it."

Raven actually annoyed a lot of people that night, and they weren't all wrestling fans. Jerry Brisco, who's been in the business for years and who now works for Vince as an agent, told me that when Raven heard about the match, he went to Vince and said he didn't think he should get beat because he wanted to get back into wrestling full-time. Vince changed the finish to allow Raven to get counted out instead of getting pinned. This made a lot of people pretty hot. There's a hierarchy and a code. Someone tells you to do something, you go do it. The word spread quickly 'round the dressing room that Raven didn't want to do a job (get beat) for the King in the King's hometown. I know wrestlers who got hot too. X-Pac, for one, came

to me and said it would be an honor for him to put me over in my hometown. I appreciated that, but it didn't surprise me that Raven didn't want to get beat. A lot of guys think that it damages their character's reputation. It is no big deal to me because my character is now more a commentator than a wrestler.

We had the match. I took some bumps from Raven until I dropped my strap, which is the sign that the King has taken enough and means business. I slapped him 'round the ring and set up the original finish where I was going to do a fist-drop from the second rope, and then cover him for the one-two-three. But instead of waiting to get nailed and counted out, Raven jumped out of the ring as I was standing on the rope with my fist cocked, ready for the dive. It looked kinda goofy and was really anticlimactic, but, whatever, I've had matches finish in much stranger ways in Memphis. Plus I got the win anyway. Getting your hand raised after a match is all that matters, it don't matter how you did it.

SmackDown! tapes on Tuesdays and goes out on Thursday. For fans who haven't been to a live show, there are matches that go on before the TV cameras are running that are just for the benefit of the fans in the house. So they're called house matches or dark matches. I was booked to do a house match at the *SmackDown!* taping in Tupelo, Mississippi, the night after *Raw* in Memphis.

I drove down with my mom and my then girlfriend, Joni. I've wrestled in Tupelo many, many times, though never at the 10,000-seat arena they have now, the BankcorpSouth Center. I hadn't known who I was wrestling until I got to the arena. I learned that my opponent was Prince Albert, who I knew from his days wrestling in Memphis where he got started in the business. He was called Baldo then. He began getting all pierced and tattooed and he had this Prince Albert gimmick going. (Anyone who doesn't know should go ask someone what a Prince Albert is. It's quite an eye-opener. And also the word "gimmick" needs explaining. It can mean a wrestler's shtick. My "gimmick" is being the King. Or, it can be substituted for a body part. As in she kissed my gimmick and I kissed hers.) I like Albert a lot and we had a very good match. Albert had no problem putting me over, and I appreciated it. The fans in Tupelo gave me a rousing welcome like I hadn't heard in years.

My mom and Joni had been watching from the Pre-Tape Room, which is where they put together some of the vignettes and posed shots of the wrestlers used in the graphics before the matches. When I got back there, Hulk Hogan was in the room fixing himself a cup of coffee. Now Hulk and I go way, way back and I know him as Terry. I wanted to introduce Terry to my mom. Terry was great -- really gracious and friendly. He told my mom that her son had given him his first real break in the business. He recalled the time he had worked in the Mid-South Coliseum in Memphis almost thirty years before. At the time, he was an inexperienced, young wrestler and I had, in his words, "thrown him to the lions." It was very cool of Hulk to say those nice things about me to my mom.

My wrestling journey that began that day in West Memphis goes on. I want to share the stories of the King, and Jerry, if I can remember a few of them. They go right across the country and to many parts of the world. There are as many peaks and valleys as there are in the Dow Jones average. Success, fame, money, girls, car wrecks, lawsuits, divorce. It's good to be the King alright, but it's not always good to be the King.

There's only one place where my story of the journey can begin...

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