

**Gimmicks, Gold, and Gushers**  
The Occupational Folklife of Independent Professional Wrestlers

**Gray, Ryan — Oral History Interview**

June 18, 2020

Delainey Bowers

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## **Background Information**

**Name of interviewee:** Ryan Gray

**Wrestling name:** Ryan Dookie

**Date of birth:** [REDACTED] 1985

**Current residence:** Corbin, Kentucky

**Interviewer:** Delainey Bowers

**Indexer:** Delainey Bowers

**Interview format:** Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this interview was conducted remotely via Zencast, a web-based VoIP podcasting platform. Gray was at his home in Corbin, Kentucky, while Bowers recorded the interview at her place of residence in Somerset, Kentucky.

**Date of interview:** June 18, 2020

**Keywords:** Professional wrestling, independent professional wrestling, wrestlers, sports, athletes, entertainment, wrestling promoters, wrestling promotions, wrestling matches, Kentucky, Tennessee, Appalachia

**Abstract:** Ryan Gray, whose wrestling name is Ryan Dookie, has worked as an independent professional wrestler throughout central Appalachia for nearly two decades. In this oral history, he describes the trajectory of his career, the longstanding traditions practiced within the industry, and where he believes the world of indie pro wrestling is headed.

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[00:00:00] Brief introduction; Ryan Gray (“Ryan Dookie,” “Dookie”) describes basic personal background information including his date of birth, his hometown of Barbourville, Kentucky, and his current place of residence in Corbin, Kentucky.

[00:01:32] Gray details his love of wrestling from an early age and shares how he chose his professional wrestling name, “Ryan Dookie.” Gray credits the advice given by WWE professional wrestler Mick Foley in his book *Have a Nice Day: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks* (1999) as the foundation for his wrestling name. Foley’s aspirational in-ring name was “Dude Love,” the smooth talking ladies’ man he dreamed of becoming; however, Foley knew “he couldn’t be the ultimate version of himself when he first started off.” Similarly, Gray chose a name that was “still catchy” but could be changed when he became famous. “Dookie” refers to Gray’s favorite album by rock band Green Day. Gray lists other wrestling names he considered.

[00:03:36] Gray talks about his own personal connection to professional wrestling. He became “hooked at a young age” and shares memories of watching brawls between “Macho Man” Randy Savage and Jake “The Snake” Roberts on television. As he got older, Gray’s father took him to Smoky Mountain Wrestling shows when the promotion traveled to Barbourville. Gray discusses the “profound impact” Smoky Mountain Wrestling had on his life with its “real life superhero connotation” (e.g. good vs. evil). He recalls a memory about writing and performing a speech for his 4H Club about becoming a pro wrestler, which earned him titles at the regional and state level. This speech also helped lay the foundation for public speaking in the wrestling ring and for cutting video promos.

[00:06:30] Gray recounts his own journey towards becoming a professional wrestler. Starting at the age of 15, he began training in a front yard ring where he learned “what not to do.” Gray’s first official match was in a gravel parking lot in front of a pay lake in Williamsburg, Kentucky. He remembers very little from the match except wanting to do a move known as “The Spear.” The match was unsuccessful, and Gray mentions being injured. He touches on the various styles of indie wrestling (e.g. “back yard,” “outlaw”) and the breakdown of “territories” throughout the region.

Gray offers a brief history of the Kentucky Boxing and Wrestling Commission (KBWC), the authority responsible for granting wrestling licensures, and its impact on combat sports throughout the state. He describes the process involved with applying for a license (e.g. routine physical, photographs, monetary fees) and how it varies from state to state.

[00:15:12] Gray returns to talking about the trajectory of his career after his first match at 15 years old. “The sky was the limit...I knew something was gonna happen, and it didn’t.” The KBWC revoked Gray’s license because he was underage, which forced him to wrestle in Tennessee for the following 3 years until he turned 18 years old. He reflects on having to clean his room and wash dishes for his allowance that ultimately paid for training sessions. “Ten dollars for gas and ten dollars for the guy that was training me.” Gray shares memories of older wrestlers who offered training advice during the early stages of his career. He defines the term

“psychology” within the context of wrestling and provides examples of “good” psychology versus “bad” psychology. Understanding psychology helps maintain the illusion of pro wrestling, adds to the suspension of disbelief.

[00:20:16] Gray outlines a typical show night from start to finish. He talks about how his phone is constantly ringing off the hook (e.g. promoters checking to see if he’s still on to wrestle, other wrestlers needing rides, etc.). His gear has been washed and dried, his bag is organized, and he heads out on the road. Gray travels to the show, shakes everybody’s hand, stretches in the ring, and goes over the show card with the promoter. He discusses the match with his opponent, gets dressed, and then he’ll “wait it out.” “First one to get dressed, and the last one to get undressed.”

Gray observes how the car ride to wrestling shows is understood to be a “sacred space.” Made sure to ride with wrestlers who had a lot of experiences, advice, and insights to share. The importance of swapping stories, telling jokes, and listening to music. Gray comments on how younger wrestlers don’t take advantage of these car rides anymore. Recalls trips made with another wrestler, Matt Sigmon, across Kentucky and Tennessee.

[00:25:28] Gray details how in-ring matches are structured (planning “step by step” or conveying an overall story arc) and what factors have to be taken into account to call a quality match. He warns of the dangers of overplanning and how the audience’s reaction influences the direction of the match. Gray breaks down calling a match into three parts: an open (a series of moves or holds that put the “babyface,” or “good guy,” in a positive light), the heat (the “heel,” or “bad guy,” takes over the entire match), and the finish (end of the match). He analyzes the relationship between the wrestler and the audience and how it differs depending on whether he’s a “face” or a “heel.” Engaging the audience to bring them into his energy. Gray’s mood affects spectator mood.

[00:29:43] Gray highlights a handful of more memorable promotions he’s worked, including Ring of Honor, Pro Wrestling Freedom, Next Generation Wrestling, and KAPOW! Gray states that he’s “never, ever satisfied with a match.” He “hates” every single one of them and focuses on what he did wrong or what he could have done better. Describes his match with Jordan Kage at Pro Wrestling Revolution where the match was “planned A to Z,” which turned out to be “phenomenal.” Gray also mentions a match where he choked a man with his bare hands because he “wouldn’t listen” to Gray. He describes his frustration and how he often questions why he’s in the business.

[00:36:38] Gray defines common wrestling terms including “babyface,” “getting over,” “mark,” “goof,” and “iggy;” however, Gray also notes that these terms are “quickly dying” because training schools are no longer teaching them. He charts the history of the language used by pro wrestlers and its connections to carnival workers. Gray comments that this vocabulary was developed with the express purpose of being used to communicate in the ring so the audience wouldn’t understand. He also describes wrestling moves such as “suplex,” “body slam,” “hip toss,” “arm drag,” “drop kick,” and others. “Kayfabe,” another carnival word, means “fake” or “to keep a secret” in regards “to keeping pro wrestling a closed-circle group of people.” This creates an environment where fans aren’t aware that the matches are predetermined.

[00:41:09] Gray reflects on how people react when they discover he's a pro wrestler. "Oh, a lot of people don't believe me." He describes how his physical appearance subverts traditional wrestler expectations held by both fans and other wrestlers. Gray transitions into speaking about common misconceptions and stereotypes related to indie wrestling.

[00:43:21] The interview turns towards how indie wrestling has changed over the course of the last 20 years. Gray mentions that he was born in 1985, an "in between generational baby," which also coincides with every time "someone new enters pro wrestling." He talks about being on the tail end of the "old guard" (e.g. "Close that door! Protect kayfabe!") and witnessing younger wrestlers who "always call spots." Calls attention to everyone being on their phone in the locker room. Gray muses that he's "become jaded" about the industry.

[00:47:44] Gray talks about building and maintaining a "brand" through social media as a way to get noticed and booked by promoters across the country. Gray says that he "doesn't care" and that he's "too old" to worry about becoming a viral sensation. He would rather do things for fun and enjoy the stories he picks up along the way. Gray points out that posting to social media every day "kills the mystique" of the business. Pro wrestlers hinder their character when they share images that contradict the foundation of their in-ring persona.

Gray discusses how being a pro wrestler impacts his family life and other relationships. "Well, my wife hates it." He also touches on his son's reaction, grandson's reaction, and mother's reaction to his wrestling career.

[00:51:28] Gray offers advice to new trainees and those interested in pursuing a pro wrestling career: "First and foremost, decide if you want to have a family or you don't." Gray also underscores the tremendous sacrifices that need to be made in order to become a successful athlete (e.g. missing weddings, birthdays, funerals, family reunions, etc.) Encourages people to finish college or vocational school degree in case pro wrestling career doesn't work out as planned. There is little money to be made at the independent level. Reliable transportation is key. Learn negotiation skills. Get in the gym, eat right, find a quality sleep regimen, and stay away from vices. Invest in quality gear.

[00:55:08] Looking towards the future, Gray believes that indie pro wrestling will "die off in a way we never thought." Pro wrestling as a cultural staple, but current trends point to it as a "soap opera television product" with more emphasis placed on drama rather than sportsmanship. Gray wants a resurgence of "actual pro wrestling" sans "crazy flips" and "shooting off the ropes." Would prefer moves and holds similar to the UFC or NAGA competition. He suggests that whatever happens on the WWE is eventually mirrored in smaller indie promotions (e.g. copying gimmicks, storylines, angles, etc.)

[00:59:09] Gray touches on how he has been shaped, personally and professionally, by living in central Appalachia. "The best time to run a wrestling show in Kentucky is the first of the month" meaning promoters know fans, who otherwise live on fixed-incomes, will have an influx of cash from government assistance. He touches on regional demographics and how that influences

wrestling crowds. Pro wrestling as a release from blue collar lives. “Appalachia is influential to me because I know the types of people who come to those shows.”

[01:02:55] Closing remarks. Gray “can’t thank pro wrestling enough.” An outlet of expression, ability to work through issues in his life. “Pure bliss.” The challenges of chasing a dream. Gray feels a sense of pride in connecting with the audience. “Get out of this town. Go somewhere else and make money.”

[01:07:31] End of interview