

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

Howard, James Colby — Oral History Interview

June 18, 2020

Delainey Bowers

This oral history interview was created in 2020 as part of the *Gimmicks, Gold, and Gushers: The Occupational Folklife of Independent Professional Wrestlers* project with funding from the Archie Green Fellowship provided by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

Background Information

Name of interviewee: James Colby Howard

Wrestling name: Crash Jaxon

Date of birth: [REDACTED], 1992

Current residence: Dayton, Ohio

Interviewer: Delainey Bowers

Indexer: Delainey Bowers

Interview format: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this interview was conducted remotely via Zencastr, a web-based VoIP podcasting platform. Howard was at his home in Dayton, Ohio, 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, social media, Kentucky, Ohio, Appalachia

Abstract: James Howard, whose wrestling name is Crash Jaxon, has worked as an independent professional wrestler since 2016. In this oral history, Howard charts the course of his career and offers an insider's perspective on how the indie circuit is adapting to meet the needs of a constantly changing market.

Index

[00:00:00] Brief introduction; James Colby Howard (“Crash Jaxon”) describes basic personal background information including his date of birth, his hometown of Lexington, Kentucky, and his current place of residence in Dayton, Ohio. Howard is a wrestling trainee at the OI4K Academy owned and operated by professional wrestlers Dave Crist and Sami Callihan.

[00:02:17] Howard discusses his earliest memories of watching professional wrestling events on television with members of his extended family. Monday night programs, such as WWF and WCW, and pay-per-view spots were used as a means of bonding. Howard is the first pro wrestler in his family and notes that other family members participated in “traditional” sports such as basketball and football. He describes what first attracted him to professional wrestling (“the pageantry,” “the big stadium,” “the flashy outfits”) and mentions wrestlers such as Ric Flair, Chris Jericho, and Eddie Guerrero who were both fashionable and influential. Howard also focuses on aspects of athleticism and competition.

[00:05:10] Howard outlines his journey towards becoming a pro wrestler. After a brief stint of playing football in college, Howard reached out to close friend Jordan Cobb (“Danny Allen”), who was also an independent professional wrestler, in order to learn how to break into the industry. Howard explains that the wrestling scene was not as “exclusive” as it had been in the past, which made it easier to find an entry point into the business. Howard attended his first live event at Bluegrass Championship Wrestling in Paintsville, Kentucky with Cobb who then introduced Howard to the owner and promoters. When he first began, Howard didn’t attend a conventional wrestling school but rather learned through on-the-job training (e.g. setting up and tearing down the ring).

In 2014, Howard was thrust into his first match against Michael Reed (“The Average White Guy Mike Winters”) after several other wrestlers cancelled their appearances. He provides a detailed description of his experience. “After that first match I had that itch like, ‘This is what I’m supposed to be doing. This is what I want to do.’”

Howard talks about his time spent traveling to promotions along the east coast and throughout the midwest. His ultimate goal is to become a full-time contracted television wrestler, which is why he moved from Kentucky to Ohio to attend OI4K Wrestling Academy.

[00:13:05] Howard talks about the process of developing his in-ring persona, Crash Jaxon. He describes the earliest stages of his career where he relied on borrowed gear. Howard initially wrestled under the moniker “The Golden Tank Rex Howard,” which was later changed to Crash Jaxon as the result of a brainstorming session. “Larger than life persona.” He also talks about saving money in order to buy quality wrestling gear (e.g. shorts, singlets, boots, knee pads, etc.) and the transformation of his character. “Now I look like a pro wrestler.”

Howard mentions traveling to a Ring of Honor try-out in Pennsylvania where he gained confidence in his wrestling abilities. He weighs the value of listening to advice from both

wrestling veterans and newcomers, especially in regards to appearance and performing in-ring. “Accentuate your pluses, and hide your minuses.”

[00:22:22] Howard differentiates between lessons learned at seminars and those learned at training schools. Seminars are more pointed while schools are comprehensive. OI4K addresses in-ring skills, social media, merchandising, gear, income and revenue streams, etc. Some seminars teach lessons based on the psychology of wrestling matches, character development, saving money while working on the road, etc. Topics are dependent upon those hosting the seminar. Howard speaks to how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the wrestling industry.

[00:25:35] Howard attempts to define the term “psychology” as it applies to wrestling. “...putting a match together and having it make sense. Would this make sense in the real world?” He touches on intergender wrestling and offers an example of a 5’2”, 112 pound female wrestler being unable to pick up a 5’10”, 280 pound male wrestler without any assistance. Relatedly, Howard draws connections between psychology and maintaining “kayfabe” and provides examples of so-called “feuds” he has had with other wrestlers. Kayfabe is dependent on individual promotions, running storylines, and social media engagement. “Everywhere you go fans are different.”

[00:32:11] He outlines the challenges of maintaining a social media account and “personal brand.” Howard stresses the need to post consistent content as a way to “stay relevant” and “keep the fans engaged.” He talks about various approaches to Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Patreon, and Twitter that have helped him become successful in building relationships with fans. Howard talks about his dedication to his weekly Twitch stream and how playing video games with other wrestlers helps to create—and further—brand exposure. “Being interactive helps build your brand.” He also discusses the best time to post photographs on social media and how he uses the algorithm to his advantage. Contracting agents use social media as a gauge for how marketable an up-and-coming wrestler could be.

[00:39:29] Howard walks listeners through a “typical show day” from beginning to end. Waking up, lifting, showering, preparing a gear and merch bag, arriving at the building, reviewing the card, planning the match, performing, receiving feedback, and heading home are all discussed in detail.

[00:46:44] Howard breaks down how matches are arranged. He addresses how promotion-based storylines often affect how matches are preplanned. Howard also touches on what he believes makes a “good match.” “The biggest thing is, ‘Were the fans entertained?’” Emotional investment is tantamount to creating and delivering quality performances. Howard provides several personal examples where he was able to manipulate audience reactions (e.g. booing, chanting obscenities, etc.) “The money is in the chase.”

[00:52:57] Howard points out stereotypes and misconceptions associated with indie pro wrestling. “Not everyone in wrestling is a great athlete.” Problems with quitting training before a wrestler is properly prepared. How many matches a wrestler has wrestled is valued more than how long a wrestler has been in the industry. “Just because you’ve been in the business a long

time doesn't mean you're a veteran." Howard cautions that not every wrestler has others' best interests at heart. "Be careful, and watch out for yourself."

[00:54:58] Howard lists his mentors including Dave Crist, Sammi Callihan, Madman Fulton, Trey Miguel, Zachary Wentz, and Desmond Xavier among others. IMPACT indie wrestler Moose has played a significant role over the course of Howard's career. He draws parallels between his own trajectory and that of Moose's. "I relate to him. He's relatable to me."

[00:57:51] Howard reflects on how the world of indie pro wrestling has changed over the course of the last 20 years. "It's changed a lot in just the last year and a half." Howard brings up styles of wrestling, the impact of social media, and the accessibility of wrestlers to their fans. He also mentions how wrestlers are becoming more athletic, which ultimately influences how matches are performed. Televised shows and streaming content are also responsible for shifts in indie wrestling. Oversaturation of the indie wrestling market provides multiple options for wrestling fans. "It's changed a lot, but it's changed for the good."

[01:01:54] Howard offers insight regarding the various styles of wrestling found throughout the indie scene. Slower-paced, less athleticism is referred to as the "Memphis style." Fewer jumps, less running. "Deathmatch wrestling" refers to excessive amounts of blood, the use of sharp objects, tables, barbed wire, etc. "Lucha libre" is finding a balance between high-intensity periods and slower resting periods. "British wrestling" or "chain wrestling" is also mentioned. Styles are dictated by "territories" or geographical regions.

[01:05:19] Howard shares how the Appalachian region has influenced his approach to wrestling. Growing up in a small town helped lay the foundation for being more personable and approachable. "Most wrestling fans use wrestling as an escape to get away from whatever bad stuff is going on in their life." Howard's attitude helps forge lasting relationships with fans. "I want people to know I'm a genuinely good person."

[01:09:45] Howard gives advice to those interested in becoming indie wrestlers. "You gotta be confident. Confidence is huge." "Don't be scared. You just have to do it." "Hit the gym!"

[01:14:27] End of interview