

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

Harnsberger, Daniel Adam — Oral History Interview

June 28, 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: Daniel Adam Harnsberger
Wrestling name: The Progressive Liberal Daniel Richards
Date of birth: [REDACTED], 1980
Current residence: Henrico, Virginia

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. Harnsberger was at his home in Henrico, Virginia while Bowers recorded the interview at her place of residence in Somerset, Kentucky.

Date of interview: June 28, 2020

Keywords: Professional wrestling, independent professional wrestling, wrestlers, sports, athletes, entertainment, politics, wrestling promoters, wrestling promotions, wrestling matches, Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia, Appalachian Mountain Wrestling, World Wrestling Entertainment, Appalachia

Abstract: Daniel Harnsberger, whose wrestling name is The Progressive Liberal Daniel Richards, garnered national attention with his politically-charged gimmick during the 2016 election cycle. In this oral history, Harnsberger discusses his deeply-rooted connections to the Appalachian region and how these ties have influenced his own wrestling career.

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[00:00:00] Brief introduction; Daniel Harnsberger (“The Progressive Liberal Daniel Richards”) describes basic personal background information including his date of birth, his hometown of Richmond, Virginia, and his current place of residence in Henrico, Virginia.

[00:01:35] Harnsberger details his interest in professional wrestling from an early age. He notes that while Richmond, Virginia was a “Jim Crockett territory” he also watched televised WWF events based out of New York. Harnsberger’s “first foray” into professional wrestling was Wrestlemania III featuring Hulk Hogan versus Andre the Giant. He describes himself as a devoted “Hulkamaniac.” Harnsberger was also the only athlete in his family.

[00:03:49] Harnsberger recounts his own journey towards becoming an independent professional wrestler. He talks about beginning his training in a “half burned-down old skating rink” in West Virginia where he trained for three months before having his first match in 2003. Training consisted of “learning how to ‘bump’ or fall,” holds, and maneuvers. “Learning how to put it together is a career-long process.” Harnsberger discusses influential mentors and their connections to regional “territories.” Famed wrestlers Scotty McKeever and Beau James played a role in Harnsberger’s in-ring education.

[00:06:51] Harnsberger shares his thoughts on the idea of “character creation.” “It comes across so much more authentic to the audience when it’s really just you.” He talks about his original persona, “Daniel Richards,” who was “just a guy” that lacked any real development. “The Progressive Liberal” was an idea Harnsberger had been crafting for a period of time and was unveiled as a response to Donald Trump’s presidential nomination. Harnsberger outlines the Progressive Liberal’s attitude, approach to wrestling, and how fans respond to his “liberal agenda.”

[00:10:20] Harnsberger talks about the challenges of building relationships with audience members based on divisive political differences. He believes that individuals living within the Appalachian region have “an aversion to outsiders” as well as a “persecution complex.” Harnsberger touches briefly on southern stereotypes and “built-in insecurities.” He theorizes this is why the Progressive Liberal is “so foreign” to wrestling fans throughout the Appalachias. Harnsberger also discusses fan interactions. “There’s no relationship, or there’s a very bad relationship.”

Similar to Appalachian stereotypes, Harnsberger addresses common misconceptions related to the world of indie pro wrestling. “...that wrestling is just a southern thing, but the fans are all over the world.” He also takes issue with the belief that wrestling is “fake.”

[00:16:25] Harnsberger provides an overview of a typical show day from start to finish. He recalls “making shots” throughout Kentucky, which oftentimes involved catching rides with other wrestlers. Harnsberger’s schedule consisted of multiple shows on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. “I just wanted to do business and then go home.” He comments on car rides as places of

learning, advice giving, story swapping, etc. “What happens in the ring is such a small percentage of the whole deal.”

[00:20:45] Harnsberger considers how individual matches are structured but refrains from divulging too many industry secrets. “At the end of the day, you’re trying to put something together that entertains the people and advances the storyline.” Planning matches is dependent upon opponents, but Harnsberger stresses the collaborative element. “There’s no match that’s exactly alike.” He praises the creativity process and touches briefly on a particular wrestling tradition.

[00:24:34] Harnsberger talks about his wrestling career before the coronavirus pandemic. Bodily injuries and ailments have been a determining factor in Harnsberger’s decision to be more selective with his wrestling engagements. “I was on borrowed time.” He took a break from wrestling between 2009 and 2014, and from 2014-2018 Harnsberger wrestled 10-12 shows a month. Degradation of wrestlers’ bodies and medical issues faced by aging wrestlers. He also talks about “freak injuries” in wrestling.

[00:28:20] Harnsberger ponders on the “most challenging” aspects of wrestling. The art of taking seemingly simplistic pieces and putting them together to create an engaging performance. He attempts to define “psychology” as it pertains to professional wrestling. “Doing things in a way that makes sense.” He provides examples of how psychology is used in the ring.

[00:31:59] Harnsberger evaluates the trajectory of his career path and how much more he could have accomplished. “I’m proud of that because my idea came to life...I thought it would have traction but not in the way it ended up doing.” He talks about a “last man standing” match from Appalachian Mountain Wrestling that was especially rewarding. He also shares the struggle of watching particularly painful matches, too. Harnsberger shares the high points throughout his career.

Parallels are drawn between Harnsberger’s current profession as a real estate agent and his experiences as an indie wrestler, especially as it pertains to building a brand via social media. “I’m sure I could have been better with social media.” He discusses his dislike of posting things for attention and engaging with fans on a more personal level.

[00:36:52] Harnsberger takes a retrospective look at changes in the world of pro wrestling over the course of the last two decades. He mentions that when he first started there was “a lot more emphasis on protecting the business.” The globalization of wrestling and the explosion of job opportunities. He notes an increase in talent and performance ability.

Harnsberger also reflects on how performing in the national spotlight affected his in-ring dynamic, especially as it pertains to wrestling outside the Appalachian region. “It made me branch out a lot more.” He also considers how well the Progressive Liberal would do during the 2020 election cycle. “The country’s still super polarized.” Harnsberger discusses how social issues on a national scale are reflected in independent promotions.

[00:45:50] Harnsberger offers advice to those interested in becoming indie pro wrestlers. “If you’re gonna do anything, treat it like a full-time job.” Exercise, watch newer and older matches, and “find something that makes you stand out.” He once again finds points of intersection between real estate and professional wrestling.

[00:48:06] Harnsberger concludes with several thoughts on the future of the Appalachian region. Healthcare, environmentalism, publicly-funded elections, protests, and other social issues are addressed. He also touches on current scandals within the wrestling industry.

[00:55:41] End of interview