

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

Smith, Kenneth — Oral History Interview

July 24, 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: Kenneth Smith
Wrestling name: Kaden Sade
Date of birth: [REDACTED] 1994
Current residence: Smyrna, Tennessee

Interviewer: Delainey Bowers
Indexer: Delainey Bowers

Interview format: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this interview was conducted remotely via Skype, a web-based VoIP platform. Poor connectivity issues cause several drops in the interview audio. Smith was at his home in Smyrna, Tennessee while Bowers recorded the interview at her place of residence in Somerset, Kentucky.

Date of interview: July 24, 2020

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

Abstract: Kenneth Smith, whose wrestling name is Kaden Sade, has worked as an independent professional wrestler throughout the south for the last 11 years. In this oral history, Smith discusses his experiences as a person of color in a predominantly white industry, how he builds and maintains relationships with fans, and how he strikes a balance between his personal and professional pursuits.

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[00:00:00] Brief introduction; Kenneth Smith (“Kaden Sade”) describes basic personal background information including his date of birth, his hometown of Nashville, Tennessee and his current place of residence in Smyrna, Tennessee. Smith shares the story behind choosing his wrestling name.

[00:02:44] Smith describes his own personal connection to the world of professional wrestling. Smith’s father introduced him to televised wrestling programs, most notably WWE SmackDown. Smith was particularly drawn to WWE wrestler Rey Mysterio due to his flamboyant costuming and relatively small stature. “Rey Mysterio was my idol.” In the early stages of his career, Smith was told to “tone down” his highly stylized footwork and flashy presentation.

[00:04:50] Smith charts the history of his professional wrestling career. He tells a story of meeting Rey Mysterio at a gas station. Mysterio, who was unmasked at the time, gave Smith a bracelet, which he still has today. Mysterio offered Smith advice on how to become a pro wrestler. Smith continues to use this advice as motivation and inspiration to better his athletic performance. One of Smith’s goals is to have a match with Rey Mysterio before he retires.

[00:08:07] Smith explains how he was able to find a point of entry into the local indie wrestling scene. Smith’s older cousin was an indie wrestler at a promotion near Smith’s hometown. Smith and his family attend a live show, and Smith’s mom was initially hesitant to let her 15 year old son become a wrestler at such a young age. Eventually she agreed to let her son train, and Smith began attending sessions at a nearby building. “I only trained legitimately for three months, and then I had my first match.” Smith clarifies training “legitimately” as learning the foundations of the sport (e.g. run the ropes, holds, how to work a match).

He also briefly touches on the differences between approaches to training found in the south and those found in the north. Smith believes his performance style is a blend between slower, more methodical maneuvers and highflying acrobatics. He sustained several injuries at the beginning of his career as a result of his lack of training. Smith believes his physical appearance led promoters to believe he was ready to wrestle before he actually felt comfortable doing so.

[00:13:48] Smith describes the evolution of his in-ring persona, especially as it relates to wrestling gear. He recently had nearly \$1,000-worth of gear stolen. Smith feels like Kaden Sade is a natural extension of his own personality. “If you’re seeing Kaden Sade, you’re pretty much just seeing Kenneth.” Smith often wrestles as the “babyface” (i.e. the “good guy”), and he values authenticity. He mentions that modern audiences have a difficult time connecting with babyfaces because they feel unrelatable or robotic. “At the end of the day, I look at it like I’m doing a job.” Smith respects engaging with fans in spite of his gimmick.

[00:17:26] Smith clarifies the differences between highly-stylized televised wrestling shows and independent promotions. He mentions the time constraints related to televised programs and how it affects the pacing of matches. Smith offers an example of wrestling for a local television station.

Smith also discusses whether the industry should remain a secret or whether fans appreciate a level of transparency. Smith advocates for protecting the business but only to a certain extent.

[00:20:53] Smith explores what makes southern audiences unique. “I can feel an energy level with the fans kinda change as I’ve gotten older.” Audiences are more comfortable with being aggressive towards older wrestlers. Smith talks about racist chants and insults hurled at wrestlers of color. “And then here comes little kid me, and everyone changes that hatred.” Smith provides an example of how northern crowds react differently to overt displays of racism or homophobia. “I’ve been called every name in the book since I’ve gotten older.” While Smith is appreciative that southern audiences are willing to pay money to watch him perform, he prefers wrestling up north.

Smith examines the whitewashing of the wrestling industry. He shares additional stories of times he has experienced, and been witness to, racism throughout his career. One story centers on a noose being used as part of a finishing move. Smith sees the “favoritism” exhibited by promotions.

[00:29:05] Smith outlines a typical show day from start to finish. “Man, it’s kind of like a little ritual for me.” Smith prefers to be alone in order to mentally prepare for the night ahead. He talks about the importance of being in a safe headspace as a means to avoid injury, which could negatively affect his family. Smith explains the physical toll wrestling has taken on his body. “Thinking about what I’m going to do, how I’m going to do it. Execution. Just figuring out what the overall show is gonna be like.” He rarely eats on show days. Once the event begins, Smith goes on “autopilot,” which lasts until he arrives home.

Smith describes his inner dialogue during a match. “When that music hits, you gotta walk out of that curtain.” He notes that he tries not to focus on the crowd, but he can “hear the atmosphere and energy.” Smith can only see his opponent and no one else.

[00:34:50] Smith goes into the value of the locker room environment. Veterans offer advice on how to hone wrestling skills. Smith usually finds the locker room too chaotic and removes himself from the space until his match begins. “Once I perform, then that’s when I hang out in the locker room, start chattin’, you know? Lettin’ everything...get loose again.” He also warns against the danger of locker politics and “locker room drama.”

[00:36:25] Smith speaks about how he chooses to build relationships with fans both in and out of the ring. “How can I talk to people without them feeling like, ‘This dude is just wanting to talk to me for my money.’” Smith feels like a large number of wrestlers aren’t concerned with engaging with fans. Smith values humility and works hard to build connections with fans at his merchandise table.

[00:40:08] Smith addresses the necessity of building a brand around his Kaden Sade character. “Building a brand is very important because that’s your income.” He shares how the coronavirus pandemic has affected his ability to book shows. “A lot of shows just want to use you and abuse you.” Having an established brand can help a wrestler negotiate a higher payout. “I know my

physical talent, and I know what I can bring to your show.” Merchandise as supplemental income.

Smith discusses how he finds a balance between his personal and professional life and how his family feels about his wrestling pursuits. Smith’s fiance is supportive of his dreams. “Now that she’s put the spotlight on me, I’ll take it and run with it for you.” Smith’s day job also affords him the opportunity to pursue his passions. He rejects the idea that you can’t have a family and also be a successful professional wrestler.

[00:45:17] Smith describes the challenges of maintaining an engaging social media presence. Social media can be detrimental to a wrestler’s career. He checks older social media posts regularly to delete things that may be controversial. Posts are mainly wrestling, nutrition, and exercise related.

[00:46:52] Smith reminisces on some of his stronger matches and those he used as learning opportunities. His “hottest match” was a “scramble match” at Freelance Wrestling in Chicago, Illinois. All of Smith’s opponents were considerably more skilled than he was. “In the south, I feel like a big, gigantic shark in a fishbowl.” Smith enjoys improving his techniques by wrestling outside his comfort zone. “I don’t really pay attention to my worst matches.”

[00:50:52] Smith shares his thoughts on where he believes his wrestling career is headed. Earning a contract with All Elite Wrestling (AEW) feels possible to Smith. “When I watch it, there’s so much young talent on there that are getting opportunities.” He jokes that he has been doing acrobatic stunts for the last 11 years. “People want viral for some reason.” Promoters overlooking talent for wrestlers that are marketable. Smith talks about practical steps he can take to achieve his dream. He fears “the boys” are scouting for talent (i.e. instances of nepotism), which limits opportunities for those who have “raw ability.”

[00:56:31] Smith gives advice to those interested in becoming professional wrestlers. Smith stresses athletic ability and finding quality trainers. Few reputable trainers in the south. “Keep your ears open, mouth shut.” Accept any and all job opportunities. “Invest in you so you can have a good future later in your life. All you gotta do is wrestle.”

[01:00:28] Closing remarks. Smith lists his social media handles.

[01:01:15] End of interview