

# Ringmaster



As an Internet junkie,  
I helped murder  
wrestling's  
mystique.

No wonder  
Bob Leonard  
doesn't like me.

by Dan Yates

PHOTO BY ART JONES

**B**ob Leonard emerges from the dressing room like a wounded soldier: one foot in front of the other. In professional wrestling, grand entrances are often paramount to a performer's success, but Leonard's walk to the ring is decisively more methodical and low key — partly because he's the ring announcer, partly because this is a small independent show in front of some one hundred people, and partly because he's sixty-six years old.

In a beige jacket and pants that don't quite match and a red shirt — no tie — Leonard is dressed for the part. Classy, but not too classy. He knows his audience and he knows his job. As he walks, he remains stone faced, eyes locked, looking straight ahead. Ignoring the cheers and cries from the crowd, he makes his way around the ring that's been set up in the middle of Regina's German Club hall. Looking down from alpine murals on the walls, lederhosen-clad men mark his progress as he makes his way up the stairs, bending to step between the ropes. His legs stutter briefly, toying with the idea of betraying him, of getting caught in the ropes. Then, rigidly, they hoist him up and over.

In the ring, Leonard lifts the microphone to his mouth and his voice slips into deep authoritarian, voice-of-God mode. With the same introduction he gives at every show, he goes to work.

"Welcome to High Impact Wrestling!"

**A** fifty-one year veteran of the business, Leonard has made this walk hundreds of times — first under the banner Stampede Wrestling and, later, the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). Leonard comes from the old school of professional wrestling. In his day, the business was not only structured differently, but the attitudes toward it were far less pedestrian.

When Leonard attended his first Stampede Wrestling show in the spring of 1956, there wasn't just one promotion and broadcasting machine like today's World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), formerly the WWF. Rather, there were dozens of promoters, each running individual territories. Regina happened to fall into the Western Canadian territory, operated out of Calgary by the legendary Hart family.

The weekly Stampede Wrestling shows held in Regina's old Exhibition Auditorium, along with the televised Maple Leaf Wrestling out of Toronto, were

the only options for Regina wrestling fans of the 1950s. As a fifteen-year-old, Leonard saw Maple Leaf Wrestling on TV and started attending the Stampede shows, but did so through different eyes than most. He was neither oblivious to the realities of the product, nor did he look down on it for being "fake." Almost immediately, he recognized wrestling as entertainment. He fell under the spell of its characters, its fury, its mystique — a mystique protected by what was then truly a closed door society. Separating those outside of the business from those inside was *kayfabe* — wrestling jargon for a kind of Orwellian double speak that prevented wrestling insiders from revealing the business was an elaborate ruse, in the same way that magicians don't reveal their tricks.

With this divide, it's a rather noteworthy accomplishment that a fifteen-year-old kid could make his way backstage. The size and structure of a small town played to Leonard's advantage. Leonard started cadging rides to the matches from Dr. Howard Reid, the local boxing and wrestling commissioner, who happened to live down the street. Through Reid, Leonard got to meet a few of the wrestlers and things started happening. First, he got a gig writing for a small, short-lived wrestling magazine out of North Bay, Ontario. Later he took up writing for wrestling's 'Bible', *The Ring*, a New York-based magazine. He started interviewing wrestlers and got to know the local promoters like Stu Hart. In the wrestling business, it's all who you know — and in Stampede Wrestling, Stu Hart was easily the best guy to know.

Throughout the Sixties, Leonard stayed involved with the weekly shows in Regina, helping promote events and arrange media appearances. He photographed matches and co-promoted shows in towns outside Stampede's regular circuit. In 1964 he fell into the role of ring announcer and became the most prominent and visible face of professional wrestling in Regina for the next four decades.

As Leonard took on a bigger role in the Stampede shows, the wrestling business entered its Golden Age. In the 1970s, western Canada saw performances by now legendary National Wrestling

**A truly  
closed door society.**

Alliance (NWA) World Champions Harley Race, Jack Briscoe, and Dory and Terry Funk — names and faces my generation knows only through books and videotape.

The glory days of the Seventies, the territory system, and, indeed, Stampede Wrestling had long passed when I first became aware of wrestling, waking my eight-year-old self to watch World Championship Wrestling (WCW) Saturday mornings in 1993. By then, two national promotions

had emerged. Vince McMahon had taken his WWF and extended its reach by gaining national TV time and buying out other promotions. As well, the Ted Turner-backed WCW

took what was left of the NWA — a former collection of territories who shared a world champion — and began broadcasting on Turner-owned stations.

Stampede Wrestling survived a 1984 purchase attempt by McMahon, but paled next to the bigger and glitzier transnational products. In Regina, the weekly Exhibition Auditorium shows gave way to bi-weekly and, later, monthly events before they ceased altogether. Stampede folded for good in 1989.

Meanwhile, Leonard got a taste of the WWF glam. In 1987 he took a job promoting WWF events in Saskatchewan and Alberta. At one show in Calgary he introduced American wrestler Hulk Hogan to 20,000 screaming fans. When the relationship with the WWF ended in 1993 — on the WWF's terms — and with no Stampede Wrestling in town, Bob took a step away from the business.

"Maybe it was time," he later reflected. "Part of me said, 'Yeah it'd be nice to be involved if we could go back to an old week-by-week promotion,' but those days are over. That's reality."

**I**t was the end of one era and the start of another, one that was somehow less magical. In the late 1990s, fuelled by new popularity and mainstream stars like Steve Austin and The Rock, wrestling boomed — and I got hooked. What had previously been a passing interest became religious devotion in my teenage years. It was also when I first got a computer and joined an emerging online

community of wrestling fanatics — a community that casually tore down the closed doors that had kept wrestling's inner workings hidden from outsiders for generations.

Online I learned that good guys are called "faces" and the bad guys "heels." And that shows are written by "bookers" and storylines are called "angles." When a wrestler hits the mat, he takes a "bump" and big bumps are called "spots." When a wrestler bleeds, he's "bladed" or "juiced."

Then, with the advent of Internet video technology, things got even more interesting. I learned of Japanese Puroreso and watched Jushin Liger and the Great Sasuke. I saw old footage of American wrestlers before they were stars. I saw the Canadian born and future WWF Champion 'Pegasus Kid', Chris Benoit — who was later found dead with his family in an apparent murder suicide — win the 1994 J-Cup. Bravely, I sat through a stomach wrenching International Wrestling Alliance (IWA) King of the Death Match bout where Cactus Jack and Terry Funk took turns throwing each other onto explosives in a match billed as a "barbed-wire rope, barbed-wire and C4 board, time-bomb death match." I also tuned into Mexican Lucha Libre and saw masked men performing manoeuvres never thought possible by their bulkier American counterparts.

And — thanks to satellite television — I became educated in independent wrestling that aired odd hours of the night on American local stations. The image of New Jack taking a cheese grater to Spike Dudley's forehead on an episode of ECW-TV was unforgettable.

I was a wrestling nerd. However, I was also a wrestling snob — one that had grown incredibly disenchanted. Bored with what I felt was a lame, watered down, and monopolized American product, my love of professional wrestling declined and eventually disappeared by 2003.

That is, until, my interest was born anew by High Impact Wrestling (HIW) — a small, local promotion running monthly shows in a sub-par Regina venue. I first came across High Impact in the fall of 2005. Reluctant at first, I eventually became a regular at the shows. The action was close, and the reaction from the wrestlers to the crowd immediate, a refreshing change from the Internet. For a spectator it was remarkably rewarding. In short, it was good, cheap, and ridiculous

**"Those days are over.  
That's reality."**

unadulterated fun. This is also where I noticed Leonard — a figure I recognized from a Stampede Wrestling show I'd attended years back. He was still around, a silver-haired presence in the ring.

Demolishing what little remained of those closed doors, I called Leonard — he was in the phonebook — and asked him to lunch. To my surprise, he obliged.

Our meeting begins hesitantly. Leonard is trying to feel me out. He wants to know what I know. Twenty years ago — maybe even ten years ago — we couldn't have this conversation. Those closed doors would have prevented it. His small eyes peer at me, an image exaggerated by his brow, which droops down at the far corner of each eye. Away from the bright lights of the ring, I can see for the first time that his goatee is yellowed by several decades of smoking, and that his face is worn with deep lines. He's getting old, but he's confident and strong.

For lunch, Leonard sports a brown suede jacket, a gold chain and an honest to goodness Cosby sweater. It's beige with variously coloured vertical stripes of different knits. Some twist and turn. Some are straight. It's three dimensional and it's puzzling.

I begin by asking, "So how did you get started in wrestling?"

This one question sparks a near two-and-a-half hour conversation. We talk about everything. Regina. Wrestling. His work as a writer, ring announcer, wrestling promoter, and photographer. His 'day job' working for the Saskatchewan government for thirty years. We talk about Stampede Wrestling. The storied troubles of the Hart family. Even Terrible Ted the Wrestling Bear comes up at one point.

Twice Leonard's eyes moisten: once, when discussing the tragic death of Owen Hart, and once more when speaking of his upcoming induction into the Cauliflower Alley Club Hall of Fame, an



PHOTO BY ART JONES

**Leonard is  
still hungry.**



PHOTO BY MATT JONES

association of former wrestling insiders. He speaks strongly and passionately. Wrestling — often dismissed as a staged and trashy spectacle — is something that exists at the very core of his being. He loves it.

We never acknowledge it and Leonard never says it, but Leonard doesn't like me. It's nothing personal. Simply, it's what I represent to professional wrestling. I'm a relatively new breed of wrestling fan — a "smark" — halfway between those inside the industry that are "smart" to its workings and the outsiders, or "marks." I wisened up by reading online. Leonard became smart through a much more difficult, longer process. Those doors were a lot harder to open.

In a way, the generation of wrestling fans I represent was the final nail in the coffin that killed the old system. What had previously been held dear and secret by wrestling insiders became common knowledge and often fodder for a new generation of bookers to exploit for new, radical, post-modern angles.

"Back in the days of Stampede people were a lot more serious about what they saw in the ring — perhaps more accepting of it. I think they would get a higher level of excitement," Leonard tells me. "Part of that is the product of working in a smaller arena — they're closer to the action and they identify with the guys. It's sort of a natural thing."

Like many from the old school, Leonard theorizes wrestling will return, in some shape or

form, to something resembling the old territory system. It has to for the quality of the product, the livelihood of the wrestlers and the fun of the fans. As a wrestling fan you feel bad for Leonard — he's still hungry. He's seen his beloved sport dramatically change. The showmanship, the mystique and the awe have disappeared. The old crew and the wrestlers — friends who felt like family — have all gone their separate ways. In its place is HIW's smaller crowds and less polished product.

However, Regina is a wrestling town. In a small prairie centre marred by western apathy and mediocre sports franchises, professional wrestling has managed to find a devoted following. While most independent promotions in North America struggle to attract fifty people, Regina's HIW has a regular following of over one hundred. In eight years, the promotion has gone from a handful of shows a year to one every month. Recently they've added a new lighting and PA system. It's hard to say what local wrestling is becoming, or what it can become, but it's growing. Regardless of HIW's future, Leonard will still be there with a microphone in hand, surrounded by an excited crowd, that single light above the ring shining down.

At tonight's show, he introduces us to our first match: Jumping Joe versus Danny Duggan. The wrestlers enter the ring and take to their corners as Leonard steps out of the spotlight. He walks down the steps and takes a seat at a ringside table. A jack of all trades, he's also the timekeeper. Sitting down, he picks up a hammer and rings the bell. 🐉