

Wrestling legends Ric Flair
and Gordon Solie
photo courtesy Gene Gordon
©Scooter Lesley

Mecca of the Squared Circle

by Tedd Webb

“His face is a crimson mask”—just one example of a phrase coined by legendary wrestling play-by-play czar Gordon Solie, a man who held a pivotal role in promoting the mass appeal of Florida wrestling. Watching Championship Wrestling from Florida was a staple of life for many Floridians. The fans were both overt and closeted, but they all knew the flashy moves and big finishes.

CWF became a top-rated statewide soap opera for the unwashed masses from the early 1950s to the late '80s. Stars such as Eddie & Mike Graham, The Great Malenko, Buddy Colt, Jack & Jerry Brisco, Dory & Terry Funk, and Kurt & Karl Von Brauner, accompanied by their manager “Gentleman” Saul Weingroff, comprised the main attraction for a circus made up of high flyers and strongmen, heels and baby faces—and we were the stunned audience.

Cowboy Luttrall drove the shows' success. In the 1940s, his challenge of Joe Lewis to a boxer vs. wrestler match became his claim to fame. Lewis won, but Cowboy made a name for himself. The rest is history.

Luttrall had an eye for talent, he quickly recruited legends such as Eddie Graham and his “brother” Dr. Jerry Graham, Hans Schmidt, Buddy “Killer” Austin, Ray Villmer, and one of the most hated combos in the history of the game—Kurt & Karl Von Brauner, the German Twins. World War II was not far removed from the memories of those attending the shows at venues such as Tampa's Fort Homer Hesterly Armory. The sight of the bald-headed German duo and their weasel manager Weingroff drew instant heat. Cowboy would pair the current most popular “good guys” every Tuesday night against the European menaces. The twins usually won, with help, of course, from Weingroff. Saul would distract the refs or slip the boys a “foreign object” to use on the baby faces.

Using his uncanny sense of what turned the crowd rabid, Cowboy made sure he delivered. In addition to the Von Brauners, Luttrall featured the Russian tag team of Nikolai and Boris Volkoff, and many Asians such as Hiro Matsuda, Tojo Yamamoto, and Duke Keomuka to stir the pot and create, as Gordon Solie described, “pandemonium.”

The real success of CWF has to be laid at Gordon's feet. This Minnesota native gave the show credibility. His vocabulary far exceeded the range of most of his fans, but they quickly learned about physiology. I still remember the first time I heard “the pre-frontal lobe.” I knew this guy was brilliant. Gordon's dead-pan delivery when interviewing the wrestling stars, particularly the rowdy bad guys, gave the show the reach it needed to be a big hit statewide.

Solie was aided by bleached-blond good guy Graham, a fan favorite deluxe. Graham made his finishing hold, the “figure-four leg lock,” a household phrase in Florida. I remember kids at school applying Graham's signature hold during recess.

In 1960, a near riot had to be quelled by Tampa's finest. The Fire Marshall upset about 3,000 angry fans

waiting outside the Armory when he stopped allowing entrance into the sold out “death match” between the Von Brauners and the Volkoffs. The fans knew wrestling was “fake” for the most part, but they were sure this matchup of authority vs. fanatic was for real—another great tribute to Gordon Solie’s ability to sell the game as a real-life alternative to the Cold War.

The Great Malenko, another fantastic character in those days, was the creation of the late Larry Simon. Malenko was brilliant; perhaps the best heel ever to wrestle in Florida. He knew how to generate fervor and got plenty of it in return, often having to dodge bottles and chairs when exiting the ring after winning a match by less-than-noble means.

The Malenko era did not last long enough; a real life falling out with Eddie Graham caused him to leave the game. He stayed in Tampa and started a wrestling school to rival that of Matsuda, who was very close to Graham, and part owner of CWF. Now, Malenko’s youngest son, Dean, works in the WWE for Vince McMahon.

The premiere hotbed of professional wrestling in America, Florida drew as many sold out crowds as the old NWA did from the 1950s through the ’80s. Characters like “The Missouri Mauler” Rocky Hamilton, Bob Orton Sr., Dusty Rhodes, Dick Murdoch, Bobby Duncum, and Playboy Gary Hart kept the turnstiles clicking.

Dusty Rhodes redefined the game in the mid ’70s, becoming a hit like no other before him. He was the Cassius Clay, the Gorgeous George, of that time. He could preach, sing and do everything for which the wrestling culture begged.

Robinson High School pumped out pros like a wrestling mill. Mike Graham, Steve Keirn, Mike McCord—later to be known as Austin Idol—and, of course, Hollywood Hulk Hogan, all attended the school. Hogan, then known as Terry Bollea, was a prodigy of Matsuda’s school. Jack and Jerry Brisco discovered the Hulk as a tall, lanky bass player in a band performing at Tampa’s Peanut Gallery Lounge.

Abdullah the Butcher, Jos Leduc and Charlie Laye—who made his reputation as a top-notch referee and who somehow never saw the bad guys pulling hair or choking their opponents—all made CWF their home. Another ref, Stu Schwartz, never took much gruff from the bad guys and earned the handle of “tough, but fair minded” from Gordon Solie.

The history of this never-ending soap is filled with a memorable cast of characters, such as: Barry Windham, Black Jack Mulligan, and Sputnik and Rocket Monroe. Don’t forget Paul Jones, the Southern Heavyweight Champion who once, in a fit of anger, threw his title belt from the Gandy Bridge into Tampa Bay.

Also a nice addition to the wrestling menu were Bob Backlund, Bob Roop, Bob Armstrong, Buddy Rogers, Joe Scarpa, Joe Scarpello, Tiger Jack Vansky, Nick & Jerry Kozak, the Canadian Sensations, Bill Dromo, Cowboy Bill Watts, Rico and Tito Carreon, Chris Taylor, Bubba Douglas, Zorro, and Hans Mortier.

Gene Kiniski, the NWA Heavyweight Champ, lost his title to Dory Funk Jr. in Tampa. Funk always would sell out the arena and really garnered attention when he defended the belt against a local favorite, soon-to-be-champ Jack Brisco.

Who could forget Harley Race in his many battles? Race was a six-time champ in the NWA. I always wondered what happened the six times he lost the belt.

Dick Steinborn, son of legend Milo Steinborn, was a short-lived fan favorite. The Orlando native often teamed with Eddie Graham to battle the Von Brauners, losing on TV because of Sal Weingroff’s antics and setting the stage for the match “this coming Tuesday night at The Armory.”

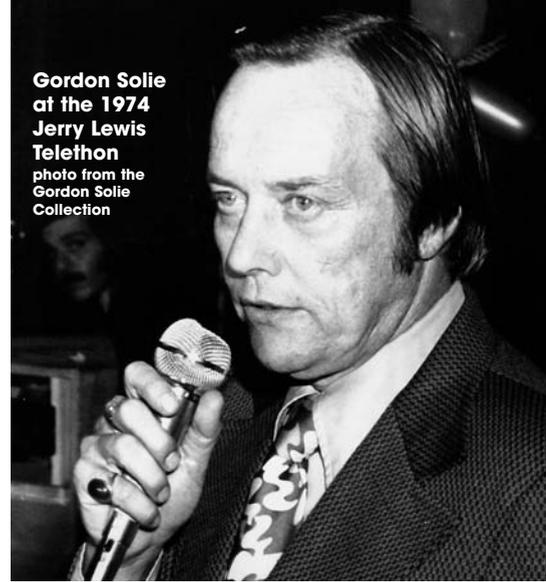
The show maintained its dominance for such an extended period because of some of the “freaks” who would visit—Andre The Giant, Haystacks Calhoun and Bobo Brazil, to name a few. This is where Gordon Solie was at his very best. He promoted upcoming events featuring the “freaks,” just like the greatest ringmasters.

Men weren’t the only ones selling tickets; the women made their mark on the circus, too. Ella Waldek, The Fabulous Moollah, Penny Banner, Vivian Vachon and others were featured many times during the summer months as an extra-added feature. Midget wrestlers were another promotional bonanza for the Luttral cartel.

Foreigners such as the Fabulous Kangaroos, Argentina Rocca and Vittorio Apollo added some exotic spice to an already explosive mix.

The list continues with a legion of warriors making Florida the “Mecca of the squared circle.” Dick Slater, Don Muraco, Johnny & Greg Valentine, Yukon Eric, Tony Marino, Thor Hagen, Superstar Billy Graham, The Mighty Yankees, The

Gordon Solie at the 1974 Jerry Lewis Telethon
photo from the Gordon Solie Collection



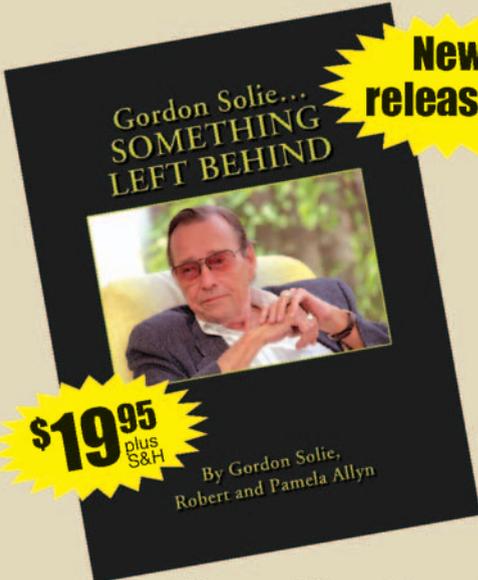
Medics, Wild Red Berry, Lenny Montana as the Zebra Kid, Classie Freddie Blaisse, Tarzan Tyler, Stan Hansen, Corsica Jean, Ox Baker, Kevin Sullivan, Mike Rotundo, Sir Oliver Humperdink and The Hollywood Blondes, James J. Dillon, Ricky and Sam Steamboat, George Scott, Rocky Johnson (the father of “The Rock”), Bugsy McGraw, Bobby Shane, and The Buffalo Bomber Don Curtis were all soldiers in the war waged among the giants.

Speaking of Curtis, one night in Tampa he asked for volunteers from the audience to demonstrate the effects of the “sleeper hold.” I immediately volunteered. He put his python-like grip on my neck, and I was snoozing in seconds. When it came time to wake me up, I acted like I could not come out of it. Even though this was before the litigious era, there were some worried people in the front office. They never demonstrated the hold again.

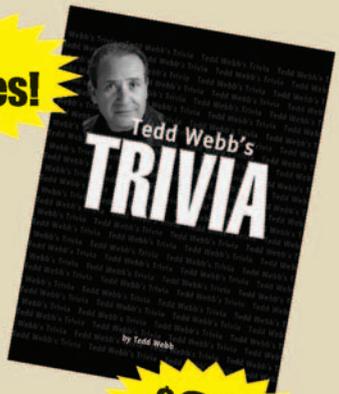
Southern rock was at its peak, and the promoters did not miss a beat—enter The Fabulous Freebirds. Jimmy Garvin, Michael Hayes and Terry Gordy rode the Lynyrd Skynyrd-sounding name to great success. Garvin is now a commercial airline pilot.

Lou Thez, Red & Lou Bastien, Mr. Wrestling Tim Woods, Tony Charles, The Assassins, Tony Nero, The Kentuckians, Tiger Conway Jr., Thunderbolt Patterson, Harry Smith, Rick Rude, Silento Rodriquez, Sailor Art Thomas, Ron Fuller, Terry Gibbs, The Von Stroheims, The Great Mephisto, Wahoo MacDaniel, Ray Candy, Percy Pringle, Reggie Parks, Rene Goulet—do you remember?

Many ask what the difference is between today’s format and the mat wars of the past. It is very simple—the old guys actually could wrestle, and these new guys have no clue. It’s all about high spots today,



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there is no rhyme nor reason for what they do; they merely deliver wall-to-wall action. The senior wrestlers were storytellers; it was a game of angles.

Today, it is sex sold on screen, not wrestling. Some of the legends must be rolling over in their graves viewing the current product. *Please Don't Call it Wrestling* is a book written by the former Golden Gladiator Ron Hill. Years ahead of the curve, he saw it coming before McMahon turned the WWE into something other than what his father and others established years before. McMahon is making zillions, but he killed the "territories," and made the WWE the lone wolf—no competition, no minor leagues to train up-and-coming stars.

George Scott tried to revive old-school wrestling back in 1990, but to no avail. The scene had changed forever. Not many were paying to see a "test of strength" or an "armbar takedown." The fans wanted nothing but high spots, and that is what they were getting, brief little four- or five-minute matches. Gone were the 60-minute time-limit classics staged by Brisco and Funk, by Nature Boy Buddy Rogers and Pat O'Connor. Gone was wrestling as we knew it.

However, classic Ric Flair survived and is still appearing from time to time. Flair is a single rose among many thorns. His style shows the experience of knowing angles and how to promote an upcoming event ... Hall of Famer, no doubt.

The wrestling experience in Florida during the "golden era" was the best ever produced. Professionals who cared about their craft gave us the greatest show on Earth. These men traveled from Miami to Jacksonville, often performing twice a day for little money. They lined up car pools to save for their families, but we never knew it when we saw them on the tube. Little did we know some of these men were taking bumps for as little as \$25 per night. There was no health insurance, no guarantees, just a chance to perform their trade. Guys, ladies—thank you for the many memories.

More than 60 stars of today and yesteryear will appear Jan. 28-30, 2005, at Tampa's DoubleTree Hotel. The convention is promoted by the industry's very own Bill Apter and Diamond Dallas Page. The event will feature multiple signings by many of the scheduled stars, two Q&A sessions, plus a live wrestling card Saturday evening for VIP ticket holders.

Scheduled to appear are Bruno Sammartino, Roddy Piper, Terry and Dory Funk Jr., Kevin Von Erich, Bill Watts, Abdullah the Butcher, Harley Race, Jimmy Garvin, Cowboy Bob Orton Jr., Paul Jones, Masked Superstar (Bill Eadie), Buggy McGraw, Jimmy Valiant, Malia Hosaka, Oliver Humperdink, Mike Graham, Jack Brisco, Rocky Johnson, and many others.

VIP tickets range from \$249-\$290; two-day pass is \$109; single-day pass is \$79. For more information, call (813) 879-4800. To purchase tickets, visit www.wrestlereunion.com.