

There will be danger when wrestling with barbed wire and Eddie, aka Mike Becherer.

Due West



ENTERTAINMENT

“Y’ALL READY FOR WAR?” yells the MC. “Hell yeah,” the audience whoops back. “We’re gonna rumble” barks the MC again, as he whips the crowd into a frenzy. The referee enters the ring to a chorus of “Ref, you suck!” While Eli Surge—decked out in tin-foil—slips under the ropes and chants his mantra along with the audience: “Birds aren’t real, Birds aren’t real,” interspersed with “I hope he rips your head off” and “Put him in a body bag!” A row of kids wrapped in tin foil blankets hoot while

old timers decked in black leather holler, and hipsters rub shoulders with mothers wearing tin foil hats—this is Eli’s fan club. It’s a family affair tonight, and 365 Pro Wrestling is sold out at the White Eagle Polish Hall in Victoria.

High-flying Fun

Vancouver Island-based 365 Pro Wrestling brings thrills to fans in small venues all across British Columbia

BY JANE MUNDY

The ring is decorated with barbed wire (I touched it, it’s real), and more barbed wire is nailed to a scary plywood board next to a trash can. The ref announces the rules to the four wrestlers—you have to be pinned or submit in the ring, oth-

er than that there are no rules—and in a flash, Eddie Osbourne gets smashed onto the mat that shakes and sags on impact. I’m laughing and screaming at the same time, it’s like riding the roller coaster. Eddie gets slammed again and is somehow wedged under the barbed wire board. There is blood.

“Yeah, I was bleeding, it happens sometimes,” says Eddie, aka Mike Becherer, Victoria-based 365 Pro Wrestling’s owner and operator.

So wrestling isn’t all fake? “Just fall in the ring once... Sometimes we get a few broken

bones and concussions but we work hard to keep each other safe," says Mike. "We have to be in good shape and know how to take the falls, and you have to practice."

You also need charisma. "Wrestling is like theatre; we try to be bigger than life, and project that image to the back row," says Mike. "You could just get your opponent in a quick headlock but we draw it out so everyone can see, so our story is believable."

When female pro wrestler Rose struts onstage the crowd goes wild and the ring is littered with artificial roses. But she's the real deal. "Train with us for 30 minutes and then say it's fake," says Rose.

The audience throws their support behind her and good guys Haviko and Crofton, and dutifully boo the bad guys. Tonight, the most villainous are Devonshooter and Stein. "Crofton is the everyday man;

he goes to work and wrestles at night and people identify with him," Mike explains. "Haviko is a superhero with his cartoon mask and high-flying flips from the ropes, people love how he twirls his opponent and takes them down."

Mike started his wrestling career in high school. With his family's support he trained at a pro wrestling school in Ontario for two years—although his mum thought it was just a phase and kept his room. But Mike didn't move back home. He has been a pro wrestler for over 20 years and recently opened a wrestling school in Campbell River. Mike's parents are proud of him. "My parents are incredibly supportive and proud," says Rose, age 27. "Whenever possible they come to my events, wear my merchandise and show family and their friends my videos. They're really involved in my career and I'm very lucky."

Rose had never been to a live wrestling event before she started training with Mike/Eddie just one year ago. "Before I opened his door, I heard loud thumps on the mat and almost turned back—what was I getting myself into?" says Rose. "But ever since watching wrestling on TV as a kid I wanted to be in the ring. It was stupid to walk away. And getting out of your comfort zone was important to me so I took a deep breath and opened the door to six guys and Nicole, in full gear. I had never even worn knee pads."

Rose caught on fast, but she had to find the courage to endure three months of training that was "super scary" before her first match. "I got squished," she says, laughing. "Eddie won the match but he got booed and everyone cheered me except the little boys, because they love Eddie so much, and now see me as their evil big sister. That match

started my own fan base."

Some people who have never been to a live event might look down on female wrestling but for Rose and her female colleagues, it is empowering. Her persona is a feisty woman defending people who can't defend themselves. "It's about showing young girls—through my athletic skills—that they too can be fierce and at the same level as men," says Rose. Women and kids see her wrestle guys and win and they also see empowerment. "We have been taught that you have to be pretty and act a certain way to be accepted and succeed; we are scared to show our fierce spirit. But I'm not scared and I get to show my spirit in the ring."

Not everyone, however, is supportive. "Some venues I try to book will say wrestling is too violent, but in the same breath they will say it's fake. But it is definitely entertainment," ▶



Adventure in our backyard.

We have trails for days.
tourismquesnel.com

Mike quips. Like ancient theatre. Remember that scene in *Gladiator* when Russel Crowe's character Maximus yells, "Are You Not Entertained?" Sure, the audience loves that element of danger and *kind of* wants to see someone get hurt, but these guys are professionals and they excel at throwing insults at each other rather than punches.

"I didn't expect that level of showmanship—combining acrobatics, gymnastics and old-time carnival theatrics. And the creative costumes—they really get into it," says Robb Johnstone, age 59, after attending his first event. "I joined the audience's gasps, oohs and aahs as wrestlers dropped from 10 feet in the air and piled on top of each other. It's like Jackie Chan choreographed the show." Jakob Svorkdal, age 21,

is also a fan. "The interactive show, where audience and performers yell at each other, is terrific. Even my female friends enjoy yelling; everyone pretends it's real, but we all know the birds aren't real," says Svorkdal, laughing. "Eli has a good gimmick, he nails the comedy angle." (FYI, the tinfoil keeps 'them,' aka birds, from spying on us. That's one conspiracy theory put to good use.)

Why do British Columbians go bonkers for wrestling? You get to grab a bevvie, yell and scream and laugh your head off. "Pro wrestling is magic; you can be a kid again, get outside of yourself and no worries for a few hours," says Mike. I concur. A measly 20 bucks for more than three hours of the best live theatre in a small BC town is a great way to spend an evening. I'm hooked. ■



Above: Wrestler Eli Surge in his tin-foil costume. Below: Rose appeals to her fans.



Ladysmith Maritime Society's Future in Question



IN SEPTEMBER 2022, a new reconciliation agreement between Stz'uminus First Nation and British Columbia set out a plan that provides \$10 million over five years to support Stz'uminus-led remediation in areas of Ladysmith Harbour with the goal of supporting the nation's land acquisition and management plans within the harbour. Not long afterward, the Ladysmith Maritime Society (LMS), a non-profit organization that manages and operates Ladysmith Community Marina was informed by the Town of Ladysmith that they need to vacate the site and remove their infrastructure by the end of December 2023.

Richard Wiefelspuett, executive director of LMS, says the Ladysmith Maritime Society fully supports reconciliation and the transfer of the water lot (which has not yet occurred) to the Stz'uminus First Nation. He also believes the interests of all parties are best served with a strong working relationship between SFN and LMS. However, the society's current agreements to use the water lot and the town's current lease weren't set to expire until 2029, and a new operating arrangement between SFN's Coast Salish Development Corp. and the society has not yet been reached.

The complex but important work of reconciliation that includes LMS will be precedent setting. This is all the more reason to work through the process in a slow and methodical way, to ensure that everyone's rights are respected says Wiefelspuett.

The water lot in question has \$5 million worth of docks and other infrastructure, which have been added to over the years through donations and grants and worked on by volunteers. According to Wiefelspuett, it's also a thriving community hub; and is home to multiple liveaboards and provides annual and transient moorage to a wide range of locals and visitors. A recent open house hosted by the society attracted an estimated 800 people—and while LMS had few answers, their presentation reiterated their support of the water lot transfer and the hope that it can be done in a way that respects their rights as a society.

Stz'uminus First Nation chief John Elliot also met with Ladysmith Mayor Aaron Stone and Kelly Daniels, president of LMS to discuss the issues. Chief Elliot, who was recently re-elected along with a new council, says the nation needs more time to get caught up in order to get the right information out to the community.

Diane Selkirk