SHOUTS FOR BRUNO

By Bill Pyda
ike a lot of middle-aged Pittsburghers, I grew up watching “Studio Wrestling.”
Bill Cardille, Ringside Rosie, and Bruno Sammartino were part of my extended family in the 1960s and early ’70s. I was a believer, and I took what they said and did quite seriously. But if there was a bigger supporter, I’d have to say it was my grandfather. To us, the matches were by no means a put on; they were real, as real as our sentiments.

I realize now that my grandpa and I must have looked ridiculous the way we set up shop inside our living room. We had a routine: at least twice during each broadcast, our old Zenith TV would act up and I’d run outside to adjust the antenna. I’d twist the pole while grandpa used his cane to give me signals. Once the screen had settled, grandpa would give me the sign and I’d hustle to get back to my perch on the couch. Usually I’d have to take a detour so that I could grab a cold beer from inside the ice-box. We watched and we drank and we got all worked up. True, dedicated fans, steadfast enthusiasts, we certainly were. To my partner and me, “Studio Wrestling” time was quality time.

I consider myself truly privileged because I watched World Wrestling Federation matches during Bruno Sammartino’s championship years. In 1963, Sammartino took the WWF heavyweight belt away from Buddy Rogers in a match that lasted just 48 seconds, and he defended it against all worthy challengers. Many an opponent came charging in, completely determined, all the more confident, certain they’d make Sammartino’s belt their own. They went away without it. Believe me, I saw some mean looking contenders: Dr. Bill Miller, the fighting veterinarian from Michigan; Haystack Calhoon, the 640 lb. farmer who wore a horseshoe pendant around his neck; Hangman Crabmire, the dirty trickster who concealed a minimum of three shoelaces inside his trunks; and without question, the most notorious of them all, Killer Kowalski, the maniacal torturer who claimed he’d never leave home because his mother made the best stuffed cabbage.

Sammartino’s finishing hold was his patented bear hug. Haystack Calhoon, with his 70-some inch waist, was the only wrestler the champ couldn’t use it on. Bruno’s arms just weren’t long enough. So he wore the fat man down, kept him moving until he became weak and vulnerable, then toppled him over and pinned him. Either alone or with a trusty partner, Bruno consistently came out on top. He was a clean wrestler who never gave in. He was a champion who unfailingly let his fans know how much he appreciated their support. He was my hero, and I backed him ’til the end.

I was a mere youngster, probably in second or third grade, when I became a wrestling devotee. My old grandpa, a retired coal miner, was the person responsible for getting me started. Every Saturday afternoon, we’d eat our supper early and by 5 p.m., we’d be in the living room sitting on the couch with the TV set tuned to channel 11, WIIC, Pittsburgh, Sammartino’s hometown. We lived 20 miles outside the city, but we had a long antenna and our reception was excellent. “Studio Wrestling” was hosted by Bill Cardille, and he and Bruno were friends. Grandpa was also fond of this announcer, and to grandpa, Bruno’s wrestling abilities were unparalleled.

Sammartino had a score of fellow wrestlers who were close to him. Whenever one of them got into a jam — which they often did — grandpa would start cursing in both English and Russian (his native language) while shaking his cane at the TV screen.
The old man would work himself into a frenzy, then just when it appeared that all was lost, that it was time to give up hope and turn off the TV, Sammartino would heroically burst onto the scene and rescue his ally. After witnessing this, grandpa would let out a sigh, sink back in his seat, and reach for his beer. Half the time he'd discover that in his excitement, he'd somehow knocked over the bottle and that he was in need of another. That's where I came in. My job was to fetch a cold one, open it, and hand it to him. He'd hand it back, allowing me to have the first couple of swallows.

Sammartino had other fans amongst the lay people; I can't leave out Ringside Rosie, a portly woman well past 50 who'd sit in the first row every Saturday afternoon. Rosie always wore some kind of gaudy hat decorated with plastic fruit, plus she carried this enormous handbag from which she'd pull plucked chickens or baby rattles. She'd wave these articles at the wrestlers she despised while calling them pansies, wimps, and cowards. Bill Cardille never once interviewed Rosie. Never had to. The woman yelled so loud that at a distance of 30 feet, the microphone always picked up whatever she had to say. Rosie scorned a multitude of wrestlers but was wholeheartedly devoted to Bruno and his cronies. Grandpa and I adored Rosie.

It's difficult to say who the most formidable of the challengers might have been. The techniques, even the wrestlers themselves, were much different back then. Gorilla Monsoon, for example, was not the well-mannered, nattily dressed commentator he is today. Back then, Monsoon was nothing but a brash, insulting, underhanded rule breaker, a man who'd go to any measures to attain Sammartino's coveted belt. Although the big man had numerous opportunities, he never succeeded.

Neither did George "The Animal" Steel, another grappler who went from bad to good. He had a tremendous amount of hair all over his body, even up and down his back, but none on his head. It must be noted that George, who these days just grunts and occasionally utters a few one syllable words, used to actually speak, sometimes in complete sentences. True, "The Animal" was less than articulate, and he'd grab hold of the microphone only to start chewing it.

There was also Professor Toro Tanaka, the 300 lb. Oriental who went through some mystic chant and sprinkled salt on the canvas before the start of each match. Tanaka had mastered this highly
scientific sleeper hold no wrestler could shake off — except of course Bruno Sammartino.

Rounding off the list we had Baron Miguel Sicluna, wearing size 16EEE wrestling boots and hailing from the Isle of Malta.

Sammartino didn’t wrestle before the television audience every single week. He did, however, come out during each broadcast and do an interview with Bill Cardille. The title belt holder would discuss his next scheduled match, comment on how hard he’d been training, and point out how competent and qualified he judged his soon-to-be opponent. Mr. Sammartino always presented himself in a sincere, business-like manner during these interviews. All his fans, grandpa and myself included, greatly respected him for his commitment to professionalism.

I can still vividly recall certain episodes. One afternoon we watched Sammartino’s trusted Native American friend, Chief J. Strongbow, get whopped by Ernie Ladd and Waldo Von Eric. The situation looked bleak. Strongbow was on the receiving end of some malicious eye gouging, body slamming, trampling, and pummeling. If this weren’t enough, Crusher Staziak, another hit-em-below-the-belt sleazeball, threw a folding chair into the ring, then followed it in and started bashing it against the Chief’s forehead while Ladd and Von Erik held him at his knees. Then the crusher got hold of Strongbow’s war bonnet and, between chair thuds, he’d pluck some feathers and throw them at the Native American’s bleeding head. Bill Cardille kept repeating, “Pandemonium’s broken loose!” Ringside Rosie entered the picture, reaching into her handbag. She brought out what appeared to be a tomahawk, then tossed it into the ring and yelled for Chief Strongbow to start taking scalps.

The camera focused on that tomahawk, lying there inside the squared circle. The Chief, badly hurt, crawling on his hands and knees, started moving toward it. But it was slow going for the disgraced Comanche. The focus widened so that we could see the three wrongdoers as they stood by joking, pointing, back slapping, taunting the fallen warrior. Finally it appeared that the tomahawk was within the Chief’s grasp, that he’d be able to pick it up and give those three a taste of their own. Well, at least that’s what would have happened if Ernie Ladd hadn’t decided to strut on over, grab Strongbow by his trunks, and pull him back a few feet. Ladd had himself a good laugh while the Chief resumed his crawl. The fans meanwhile had taken up the chant, “Bruno, Bruno, Bruno….” They picked up momentum, chanting faster and louder while adding some foot stomping.

Grandpa and I were on the edge of our seats. I glanced to check out the grip the old man had on his cane. As I anticipated, his knuckles were white, indicating that he couldn’t be holding it any tighter and that he was on the verge of one of his late Saturday afternoon diatribes. I looked at the TV screen, only to see that the situation hadn’t improved. The call was out for the champion, but where could he be? Grandpa started up with his curses and condemnations. Next came his cane flailing, immediately followed by his knock-the-bottle-over-and-soak-the-rug routine. I was also in motion — up on my feet, in sync with the crowd, shouting for Bruno. Again Cardille’s voice came over the microphone: he said in all his years of hosting “Studio Wrestling,” he’d never seen anything so cruel, so sad, so tragic.

But then, oh yes, that magic moment — our champion, wearing a blazer, dress pants, white shirt and tie came charging down the aisle. Accompanying him was Hurricane Hunt, another gentleman wrestler renowned for his quickness. Sammartino was pumped, the crowd was going wild, and grandpa was all red in the face. Save-the-day Bruno quickly shed the formal wear; then he and Hunt started bouncing those twerps off the ropes. Chief Strongbow miraculously regained his strength and joined in.
Grandpa's mood had greatly improved. He was still red in the face, though now he was smiling. You couldn't find a person more dedicated to the champion Sammartino, though I did wonder why the old man never drank Iron City. He preferred Duquesne. I headed for the kitchen to get a cold one out of the icebox.

The Batman was Sammartino’s first tag team partner. Together they did all right, but it soon became apparent that Bruno needed a partner with more wrestling ability. So the belt holder and the masked man from Gotham City parted company (though they still remained close friends), and Sammartino hooked up with his “cousin,” Dominic Denucci.

With Denucci at his side, Sammartino attained yet another championship belt. Mr. Bruno Sammartino, the undisputed WWF title belt holder and now also co-holder of the tag team belt — talk about a remarkable achievement! Sammartino had a 56-inch chest with biceps people compared to telephone poles. He also had the signs of battle which proved that he’d struggled to get this far: cauliflower ears, a forehead badly scarred, and a nose humped and crooked from being broken again and again. Denucci, another 260-pound Italian, also had his share of scars, though his nose didn’t appear to have ever been broken. It was just oversized.

The two cousins took on any contenders who showed they were worthy. They beat them all, quite handily. The tag team champs didn’t have any real difficulties until they went up against the Sicilians, Tony Altimore and Lou Albano. Now these two guys, the Sicilians, were a couple of roughhousers whose minds were set on seizing those belts. They stated it with clarity: whatever was necessary they were willing to do.

Do keep in mind that at this time Lou Albano was nothing like he is today. These were the old days, years before Albano was referred to as Captain Lou, the sport’s number one promoter and organizer of various charity drives. In this earlier era, Albano was an overconfident, overweight, loudmouthed bully. What’s worse, the guy was enamored with himself. This fat, repulsive braggart was his own ideal. Couldn’t have been more content.

I’ll never forget one interview he and Altimore did with Bill Cardille to plug their upcoming challenge match at Madison Square Garden. The Sicilians stood there puffing on cigars and blowing smoke in Cardille’s face. Cardille waved his hand to clear the air and asked if they wished to share their thoughts with the viewers.
“Piece a cake,” Albano said. “We’ll murder ’em for sure.”

“That’s right,” Altimoré added. “First we’ll break their legs, then we’ll break their arms.”

Albano butted in and said that after their defeat, Sammartino and his big-nosed cousin would be leaving the country because of shame and humiliation.

“Is that a fact?” Cardille commented. “I thought perhaps there’d be some kind of kinship between the two of you and your opponents, seeing as how they’re from Italy and you guys are from Sicily.”

“Ha!” Altimoré shouted.

Albano agreed, right after he flicked his cigar ashes on Cardille’s shoes. Then he remarked, “Yeah, I know the town those clowns are from. We used to go over there to buy our horses. And listen, lemme tell ya somethin’, those old nags weren’t worth....”

The TV screen cut to a commercial. The match itself wasn’t televised, but we did hear about it the following week when the Sicilians again came out for an interview. Albano was on crutches, and Altimoré had his arm in a sling and a large bandage wrapped around his head. They were not wearing the belts. The contenders, guaranteeing victory, came away from the title match the losers. Yet they were still vocal. They said they was robbed!

Grandpa had nothing but contempt for those two. He turned to me and asked if I ever got into fights with the other boys at school.

“Sometimes,” I told him.
I KNEW THAT BRUNO HAD TO HAVE A WEAK SPOT; THERE HAD TO BE SOME WAY ANOTHER WRESTLER COULD GET TO HIM. DON'T GET ME WRONG. I WASN'T HOPING FOR IT. I WAS JUST BEING HONEST WITH MYSELF.

He appeared interested. "So you do a little fighting, huh? Well, the next time you get into it with one of those other boys, kick 'em where it hurts. That'll fix 'em."

He nodded his head and sent me for a beer.

Sammartino appeared to be invincible. If anything, he was getting stronger with age. Grandpa, along with the rest of the crowd, was convinced that the champ could hold onto his title forever. I, however, started to see things in a different light. In spite of my age and general lack of mature awareness, I had this feeling that Sammartino's reign would some day come to an end. So I began to watch for signs. Of course I kept this to myself, because grandpa would have whacked me with his cane if he even suspected that I'd dared to doubt the great one. I knew that Bruno had to have a weak spot; there had to be some way another wrestler could get to him. Don't get me wrong. I wasn't hoping for it. I was just being honest with myself. Some day, somehow, Bruno Sammartino would be referred to as the ex-champion.

Onto the scene tramped Ivan Koloff, the growling Russian bear. One look and you knew this massive human being was a menace, a genuine threat. Koloff was all Russian, complete with a thick accent, a tattoo of a hammer and sickle on his biceps, and a thorough vocal denouncement of everything American. Koloff said that our country was garbage and that he'd prove it by stripping Sammartino of his belt.

As expected, the fans booed and jeered and called Ivan Koloff a low-life communist. They'd heard dozens of hollow claims about how Sammartino would lose his title. Why should this one be any different? Grandpa jumped right on the bandwagon. The way he saw it, Koloff was nothing but an overinflated Russian windbag. The old man was ashamed that he and Koloff were both Russian by birth.

As for me, I didn't have much to say. I just sat back and watched these two powerhouses go at it. And that they most certainly did. The Koloff/Sammartino matches take up several chapters in the annals of wrestling history. Sometimes bloody, usually brutal, and always vocal, these matches, though hard to stomach, were never dull. The two wrestlers were equally matched in size, strength, and technique. Neither man was exceptionally tall, but both were broad-shouldered and thick-muscled. Koloff, like Sammartino, relied on the bear hug, a total power hold. We watched as both men applied it. Sammartino consistently came out on top. He was able to break Koloff's bear hug while the Russian was unable to break his.

Was Sammartino the stronger of the two? Grandpa certainly thought so. But I didn't. I could see that our champion, the hometown favorite, had Bill Cardille, Ringside Rosie, a slew of nice guy wrestlers, and 99.9 percent of the fans all on his side, all right there for him. Koloff, the unpopular — make that detested — funny-talking foreigner, had hardly any support. Oh sure, he could count on the likes of Bruiser Broady or the Mongolian Stomper or others of their ilk to throw in a few licks to help him out when he was
down, but such assistance didn’t count for much. No, Koloff was a Russian wrestling on non-Russian soil. Unlike Sammartino, he lacked the sentiment which would have provided the edge he needed to win the crucial match. We would have had a new champion had they been wrestling in Kiev instead of Pittsburgh.

The Koloff matches more than hinted that the living legend was vulnerable. I started to keep a close eye on grandpa; I thought perhaps he might lean toward my way of thinking. But no sir — I was wrong. The old man was adamant; as long as he watched professional wrestling, Bruno Sammartino would remain on top.

But picture this: a 6-foot-5 blond-headed behemoth with a loud yet witty mouth, accompanied by his manager, the retired wrestler Flashy Freddy Blassie, whose mouth was even louder. Ladies and gentlemen, please allow me to present Mr. Billy Graham.

Superstar Billy Graham, the man with the power, the man of the hour, had made it to Pittsburgh. Like so many wrestlers still around, the Billy Graham of this earlier era had an altogether different persona. Here we had the savage and relentless Billy Graham. This was long before his shaved head, martial arts phase, long before he’d been injured so badly that he had to quit wrestling and take up color commentating. Yesteryear’s television audience was seeing the Superstar in his prime as he went through pose downs and boasted incessantly in rhymes and phrases taken from Muhammad Ali. Graham appeared more capable than any wrestler who preceded him.

My discerning eyes took in the details — along with the facts. Though Sammartino still had all his strength, he’d lost some of his stamina. The signs were there: no longer could he so easily dominate the entire match’s tone and tempo. Yes, he’d come through, he’d bounce back, but only because he rested up by lagging on the ropes. Then he’d resort to raw muscle, which no wrestler could match — until now.

Sammartino, like all men at some point in their lives inevitably do, had reached his peak, his apex, and was on the decline.
I realized this and so did Billy Graham. But while I made a point of keeping it to myself, the Superstar and his mouthpiece Freddy Blassie went public with it.

"Pencil necked geeks! Every last one a ya." These were Flashy Freddy's exact words. "Ain't nothin' in this town worth squat. I repeat, nothin', except for me and my protegé here. Look around and all I see are pencil necked geeks!"

Blassie claimed that until just recently he'd been out in Hollywood partying with the big stars. While on an outing at Muscle Beach, he hooked up with the Superstar and right away something clicked. Both men sensed it immediately; the chemistry was strong. They bonded, and together they knew they'd go all the way.

Now they were in Pittsburgh and in a big hurry to get hold of the title belt so that they could take it back to the West Coast. Graham had signed a picture deal with a major studio, and all those involved were anxious to get started. Blassie was also acting as the Superstar's agent.

"Ain't no pencil necked geeks in Hollywood," Blassie added.

I don't think grandpa quite knew what to make of Flashy Freddy and his latest find. The sight and sound of this duo seemed to confuse him. He still insisted that no one could pin the champion, but his voice had lost some of its passionate edge. Plus he started giving me funny looks. I think grandpa was finally starting to catch on. He was realizing that I didn't have his faith, that I believed Sammartino could somehow be beaten. The old man didn't actually speak up and say what was on his mind. But about every third round, he'd get up off the couch and go for his own beer. I had to wonder.

Billy Graham went on to prove, in front of the whole television audience, that he could break Sammartino's bear hug. Here's how it happened: the Superstar was in a preliminary match annihilating some nobody. Graham toyed with the slug for 10 minutes, decided to pin him, nonchalantly did so, then started to leave the ring. Just as he was climbing through the ropes, Ringside Rosie, carrying an oversized doll made in Graham's likeness, came into the picture.

Rosie stopped and shouted, "This is what Bruno's going to do to you, Mr. Superstar!"

She proceeded to yank off the doll's head; then she threw the head at Graham and the rest of it to the floor. Next she laughed, just before she began kicking at the decapitated plaything.

Graham's first impulse was to go after the old woman. But after taking several steps in her direction, he appeared to reconsider. He climbed back into the ring and began venting his hostility on the luckless sap he'd just pinned. It was easy to see that Graham was out of control. He laid into the guy with body slams, pile drivers, kidney punches, and turnbuckle twisters.

Freddy Blassie, adorned in sunglasses, a beret, a velour smoking jacket, and a half dozen gold chains, climbed up onto the outside of the ring apron and started giving instructions while laughing and clapping his hands. He'd turn to face the crowd as he mimicked whatever illegal tactic the Superstar was employing. Flashy Freddy looked to be thoroughly enjoying the show.

The fans thought otherwise. Low murmurs turned to shouts, and the shouts were, of course, for Bruno. The momentum picked up, along with some hand clapping and foot stomping.

Freddy Blassie shook his fist as he bellowed, "Get down here if you're man enough, Sammartino!"

Then he appeared. All by himself. Our champion, dressed in wrestling trunks and ready for action, came barrelling down that aisle. Graham used his foot to roll the chump he was pulverizing out of the ring and onto the floor. That human chew toy had served his purpose.

The scene now consisted of Graham and Sammartino, face to face. The arena went silent. Even Freddy Blassie had shut his yap. Both wrestlers had scowls on their faces. They locked fingers in a test of strength, neither one able to gain an advantage. It became a standoff. The tension mounted, but still nothing happened. Finally Graham ended it by kicking Sammartino in the stomach. The champion came back, looking angrier than ever, got the Superstar in a bear hug, applied the pressure, and waited for the submission.

Which never came.

His biceps bulging, Billy Graham slowly stripped Sammartino's arms from around his waist. Talk about seeing something incredible and hard to believe. No wrestler had ever performed such a feat. Everyone who witnessed it was flabbergasted. Trying
to cover his embarrassment, Sammartino went at the challenger with a stiff arm followed by a figure-four leg lock. But Graham must have been smelling blood — or the championship belt — because he took it all without caving in. The contest quickly turned into a street brawl, and it didn’t let up until seven other wrestlers climbed into the ring and tore them apart. The match ended in disqualification.

Graham and Sammartino went off in opposite directions. In less than a minute, however, Graham, accompanied by his manager, came back. The two were all smiles. Bill Cardille approached them and asked how they were doing.

“Grrreat!” Blasie said in a loud, booming voice. Superstar Graham struck a few muscle poses, then recited a brief poem:

Bruno Sammartino, you float like a butterfly
And sting like a bee,
But now you’ve found trouble,
Now you’ve found me.

The twosome had a long, exaggerated laugh, shook hands, then walked off in the direction of the locker room.

Looking glum, Cardille shook his head and said that he was having trouble believing what he’d witnessed, what he’d seen Billy Graham do to the champion. The TV camera panned the crowd, but stopped when it came to Ringside Rosie sitting there in the front row. The woman was in tears.

They wrestled two more times; the second time, Graham did what many considered to be the undoable: holding Sammartino’s shoulders to the mat and walking away with the title. Two weeks later, Bruno and cousin Dominic lost their tag team belts to the Hell’s Angels.

The old man and I weren’t getting along when the belts changed hands. He blamed me for Sammartino’s downfall. My grandfather was no dimwit; he knew I’d been keeping something from him. To him, I was a turncoat, a traitor. He stopped short of making accusations, but only because he couldn’t figure out how I’d gone about doing it. He showed his anger by hardly speaking to me, by giving up on wrestling, and by not offering me any of his beer.

I continued watching the broadcasts, but grandpa kept his distance. He said he was too busy. He never had anything to do, but he was still too busy. I’d hear him as he noisily made his way through the kitchen to get a beer out of the icebox. Then he’d give the kitchen door a good hard slam as he stepped onto the porch.

A new wrestler, a young guy named Bob Backlund, came onto the scene. This baby-faced rookie showed much promise, and I sensed he’d go far. I told grandpa about him and encouraged the old man to check him out. Grandpa told me to take a hike. He said he was still busy and that he’d continue to be busy until Sammartino regained the belts — the championship belts, the ones that I’d stolen.

Bill Pyda was raised in the small coal mining town of Santiago, near Pittsburgh International Airport. His mother still lives in the same house his grandfather bought in 1916, when he came to Santiago to work in the mines. Bill teaches English at CCAC and Waynesburg College, and is a bricklayer during summers.