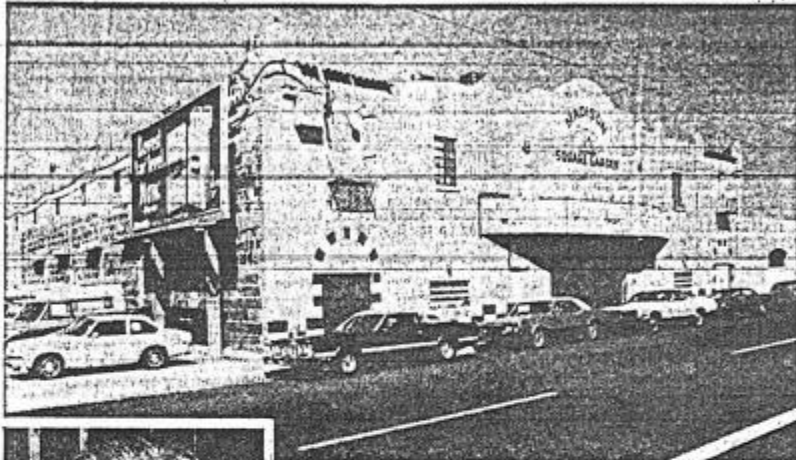


# Memories of Madison Square: Cheers, jeers and Gorgeous George

The Arizona Republic (Section M, Page 1)

women's  
Forum

By CAROL SOWERS



When I drive past the old Phoenix Madison Square Garden peering silently on Seventh Avenue and Grand, it makes me think of a treasured chunk of my childhood.

It was inside that once proudly pink building that the wonders of the world of professional wrestling were revealed to me. That was in the '30s when raving fans paid 60 cents to \$1.10 to jam inside the hot, leaving building in hopes of seeing their hero, wrestling champ, Lou Thesz, smash his opponent or watch the scholarly Wild Red Berry pulverize Iron Mike Mazurki.

Those were the days when the blinking marquee out front announced the appearance of wrestlers like Bobo Brazil, Nature Boy, Don Arnold, Hardboiled Hardy, Tokyo Joe, and Jim Landos, one-time owner of the Garden who was heralded as the greatest wrestler in the world.

It was from a spot high above the mats in the balcony that I saw the carefully coiffed Gorgeous George, regally clad in purple, striding down the aisle flinging golden bobby pins to hissing fans.

We went to the Garden because my 5-foot-3 mother loved every minute of the matches. I can still see her, garbed in her faithful gabardine dress, shepherding my father, my two sisters, and me to the stifling balcony, ripe with the odors of popcorn and sweat, to await the grapplers.

When the action started on the mats, hers started upstairs. First she grasped my father's elbow with one hand and began pounding on his shoulder with her other fist. I was never sure why she did it, but I noticed the pummeling was always accompanied by her advice to the referee to stop the hair-pulling and eye-gouging going on beneath his nose. If my father's aching arm ever helped call attention to such illegal tactics, the wrestlers never seemed appropriately appreciative to me.

We don't go to the Garden anymore.

Today it is uncomfortably quiet, starkly empty. The wrestlers, boxers, revivalists, dancers, and show people who once lured fans there are gone. The blown trash and empty beer bottles crowded against it look more like grave markers than litter.

But there are people who remember the Garden in its glory. There is Paavo Ketonen, a still active boxing promoter whose classic cauliflower ears and lingering scars are unmistakable monuments to his days as a professional wrestler.

Ketonen has a special love for the Garden as it was. He almost owned it once. That was in the '40s when he had just lost a championship match in Los Angeles and discovered that bouncing off a wrestling mat was a tough way to make a living. So he decided to promote bouts so other guys could do it.

"The bumps and bruises started to hurt already so I quit and decided to promote. I came here to buy the building (the Garden)," he said in rich tones warmed by his Finnish accent.

But other promoters got wind of the deal and when Ketonen got "greetings from Uncle Sam," wrestling great Jim Londos bought the 1926-vintage building for \$35,000 from the estate of Dr. Joseph Lentz.

So instead of owning and operating his own sports arena, Ketonen drifted to the Northwest. Occasionally he returned to Phoenix where he ran into Monte LaDue, the "Mad Frenchman" who made a name for himself by bringing the "big stars" to the Garden. LaDue, a former wrestler and referee, was made Garden promoter in 1959.

LaDue and Ketonen, who chide themselves for not seeing each other more often, met again recently to harvest wacky wrestling memories over lunch.

Ketonen, unwrapping a cigar and settling his muscular frame into his chair, lamented, "All the old characters of wrestling are gone. Nobody has any imagination anymore."

Ketonen calls the wrestlers' magic a product of imagination. LaDue says it was showmanship. Whatever it was, it kept fans like my mother coming to the Garden for years.

If the wrestlers had an act, if the outcome of the match was predictable, it was because the fans liked it that way. There was the flamboyant Lord Carlton who outside the ring dressed as an English dandy complete with monocle. There was Nature Boy Buddy Rodgers draped in sequins, and Indians in full headdress. Grapplers came in cutoffs and cowboy boots, turbans, and tank tops.

One of the best of the show men was Gorgeous George, who wore long curls and embroidered jackets long before the hippies discovered hair and flowers.

"I knew him before he was Gorgeous George," Ketonen recalled, with a growl of approval for the late wrestling blond bombshell. "He was George Wagner, a hell of a wrestler."

"I was the first one to wrestle him as Gorgeous George," Ketonen continued, eager to recount the story of how George got his ring name. "See Tony Morelli — this real mean guy — saw George with his blond hair, but that was before the fancy jackets and all that. And Morelli said, 'Jeze, George, you really look gorgeous tonight. And that's how it started.'"

Continued on Page M-4

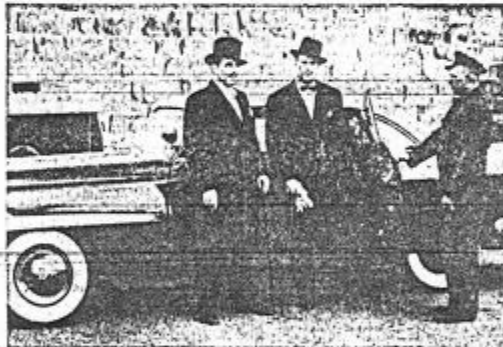


Monte LaDue: "A wrestler can make the fans laugh or cry."



Paavo Ketonen: "All the old characters of wrestling are gone."

Madison Square Garden in retirement stands as a monument to the jeering, sweating fans who crowded ringside in the 1950's and 1960's to watch the heroes and villains of professional wrestling.



Lord Carlton, who doffed wrestling trunks for formal attire outside the ring.



Gorgeous George passes out his famous "Georgie pins" to fans.



Wild Red Berry out of the ring cast himself as a scholar.

More about

# Cheers, jeers and Gorgeous George

Continued from Page M-1

"That was Monday and Friday I wrestled him. He told the ring announcer, 'You better announce me as Gorgeous George, the Toast of the Coast,' Ketonen spat out between laughs.

"Boy, he really started making a haul," LaDue added with a grin. "He got more hair, more money, more he had an ACT."

In those days, the wrestler's image was as treasured as his secret hold. Even when George was trounced by hard times, he was faithful to the fan's picture of him.

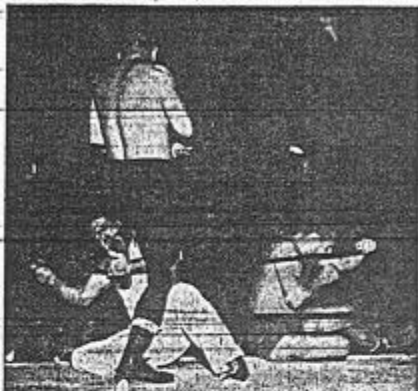
"I saw him in L.A. once," Ketonen recalled proudly. "He was tapped out. He didn't have a nickel but he still drove a pink Cadillac."

"SO WHO would come to see him if he looked like a bum?" LaDue asked with a shrug. "It's a make believe world. A wrestler can make the fans cry or laugh. The bumps are the same. You might as well have people there to watch."

One of the masters at making the fans laugh, the pair said, was Yukon Jake, a rough-around-the-edges character who looked as if he'd chopped his way out of the Canadian woods.

"Talk about characters," Ketonen said, jerking a cigar from his mouth to make way for the laugh. "He was great for creating his own publicity."

Once they said, Jake rolled into town in an ancient car with skunk and bobcat skins dangling from it and a panther pelt nailed to the side. A pair of trousers wound around the axle made it look as if he'd run over somebody on his way in.



Referee Monte LaDue got a little of the action whether he wanted it or not during a match in Tucson.



Excitable fans boo a wrestler out of Madison Square Garden.



Brightly sequined, Buddy Rogers, better known as Nature Boy, strikes a dramatic pose for his admirer.

"The crowd followed him all the way in," Ketonen said with a grin.

**ANOTHER TIME** Jake doffed his overalls and did his roadwork in long underwear with the button up back flap. And once he drew a crowd by convincing them he was going to find oil in a vacant lot.

"Boy, he was a character," Ketonen repeated as LaDue chuckled in the background.

Ketonen was known for masterminding some crowd-drawing characters himself. Two of those were the "Gorky Brothers," supposedly Russians who arrived in the states just in time to let propellers here pound out the fan's fear of the Cold War of the 60s. Although the pair was neither Russian nor related, they drew crowds. And if the outcome of their matches was predictable, their grins and grunts were real, Ketonen said.

**REFERRING TO** his own latissimus, Ketonen asked belligerently, "You don't think I was born like this do you? I had a skull fracture, broken ribs and arms."

Pulling the skin down around his eyes he revealed a deep gash and announced, "Red Berry gave me that one."

"That Red Berry, he was so tight he wouldn't give you the time of day," LaDue offered. Then he listed his own injuries.

"I've had 15 teeth knocked out—one at a time," he said evenly.

Sometimes the injuries led to tragedy like the night in the Phoenix Garden when LaDue refereed a match and watched Big Jim Wright catch a powerful jab from his opponent's elbow. He slumped to the mat and died.

"THE CROWD holler-ed fake. But I knew he was dead. He was done, that one," he recalled.

Now Ketonen and LaDue talk about wrestling's demise in Phoenix with a sense of sadness.

"Ahh," LaDue growled, "they started getting

burns in there after I left."

"That's what killed it," Ketonen agreed.

The decaying Garden itself discouraged fans, LaDue said. Rats scampered over the floor, holes marred the walls, the cooling never quite worked.

"After a while I could

hardly stand to take my wife down there," he said.

**NOW AFTER** more than 50 years of embracing boxers, dancers, revivalists and the grunting grapplers, the Garden has sighed and reluctantly retired.

"I can still feel the heat

of the balcony but I don't remember the rats or the holes in the walls. I can see the wrestler's tein spilling onto the red spattered mats. I can hear my father's wisecracks about his aching shoulder, and see my mother in galatrine scooting us up to our seats.

And I miss it.

## Teen pregnancies blamed on ignorance

**WASHINGTON (AP)** — Ignorance is still a major factor in thousands of teenage pregnancies despite the availability of sex information through school courses and other sources, a family counselor-researcher has said.

Parents bear some of the blame for sharing too little information with their children or treating human sexuality as a topic that should be kept secret or even for misinforming their children with stories that do not explain how the human body actually works, said Dr. Sel Gordon.

It is time for parents to consider the consequences of uninformed or misinformed adolescents for "Young people are going to have sex whether we like it or not and even whether they like it or not," Gordon said.

He estimated that half of the teenagers in the United States will have sexual relations before they leave high school.

Gordon is director of the Institute for Family Research and Education at Syracuse, N.Y., as well as director of Syracuse University's marriage and family counseling program.

He spoke at a discussion session sponsored by a House subcommittee on census and population.

Gordon said research has shown that "The earlier young people start with sexual experimentation, the less they are likely to know about their sexuality."

"Parents say 'If we tell them (teenagers) about birth control, they'll become promiscuous,'" Gordon said. He added, "The risk of knowledge is better than the risk of ignorance."



Big Jim Wright met his death in the Phoenix Madison Square Garden.

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