

INSIDE RADIO

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“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

Trash Talker Turns Thought Provoking

by Mike Kinosian, Personality Editor

You get it if you:

- > Went to the now dearly departed Boston Garden to see the Celtics, Bruins and Bruno Sammartino.
- > Anxiously waited in line to watch the late “Classy” Freddie Blassie at Los Angeles’ famed Olympic Auditorium.
- > Are aware what “The Pedigree,” “Rock Bottom,” “Stone Cold Stunner” and “Five-Star Frog Splash” have in common and that the “(Lou) Thesz Press” has nothing to do with publishing.
- > Can reel off every member of the Von Erich clan to appear at Dallas’ Sportatorium.
- > Know James George Janos’ much more acknowledged handle. (Jessie Ventura).
- > Recognize the common thread of “Cactus Jack,” “Mankind” and “Dude Love.” (Characters made famous by Mick Foley).
- > Know the other Memphis celebrity successfully holding “The King” moniker. (Jerry Lawler).
- > Can identify the Carolinas icon who frequently spews that he’s a “limousine ridin’, jet plane flyin’, kiss stealin’, wheelin’ dealin’ son-of-a-gun. (Ric Flair).
- > Are able to differentiate subtle nuances that existed among the WWE (formerly the WWF and WWWF), WCW and EWC, and can identify how each was impacted by consolidation.
- > Understand that Vincent Kennedy McMahon is one of the greatest promotion titans in American history (and radio executives can truly learn from his promotion and marketing genius).

Sports Entertainment: A Survivor

Still condescendingly called “wrasslin” by some but “Sports Entertainment” by aforementioned World Wrestling Entertainment kingpin Vince McMahon, the above referenced “it” is professional wrestling.

Continued snickers notwithstanding, the WWE remains a juggernaut that boasts lucrative television contracts with Spike TV and UPN; extremely healthy attendance in its frequent house shows; and robust monthly Pay-Per-View receipts.

Cleveland’s Gund Arena was the site of “The Survivor Series,” the promotion’s most recent PPV (11/14/2004) where WWE champion John Bradshaw Layfield successfully defended his title belt against fellow Texan “Booker T” – Houston’s Booker Huffman.

Shattering Stereotypes

All this is relevant in our world because Layfield, who appears each Thursday night on UPN as part of WWE’s “SmackDown!”, is one of Talk Radio Network’s newest on-air hosts.

Many contemporary “sports entertainers” like Dwayne Johnson (“The Rock”), Mick Foley and Layfield are shattering longstanding inaccurate “dumb wrestler” stereotypes.

Carried by nearly 50 affiliates, the live Saturday morning (9-11am, ET) TRN program that Layfield fronts was launched in early summer (2004) and is the realization of something the imposing, six foot seven inch/290 pounder has wanted to do for quite some time. “I really enjoy Talk radio and told my agent I’d love to do it,” remarks Layfield, who authored “Have More Money Now: A Commonsense Approach to Financial Management” (July 2003) and was a frequent CNBC and FOX financial contributor. “I’ve done a lot of radio interviews and guest-hosted for our WWE web cast.”

Avoiding Boredom

A meeting was arranged with TRN CEO Mark Masters and the wrestler with the 2003 personal financial portfolio that increased a healthy 37% was awarded a weekend slot. “I fly so much and with nothing else to do on a plane,” he remarks, “I have a chance to do tons of reading.”

Quite pleased with the reaction to his first foray in radio, Layfield says Masters and Executive Producer Bart Silvers have been tremendous coaches. “They’ve taken me through this incubation process and it’s really been exciting. We had a bunch of hot topics during election week and picked up some new listeners.”

There’s a very concerted effort to make the show different each week. “One thing I learned from wrestling is that, if you start doing the same stuff over and over, it gets boring to you and the fans start seeing it as well,” comments Layfield, whose dreaded “Clothesline From Hell” has absolutely nothing to do with how to dry apparel. “I’m into what I’m doing and don’t want to repeat what was on the

previous week's show. I still talk about finances and what stocks I'd buy in a particular week, but if people want to talk about politics or entertainment, that's what [we'll discuss]."

Familiar Face

At least one guest generally appears each week and many times, it's fetching FOX News talent Meredith Whitney, who also happens to be the host's fiancée. "We met about 18 months ago on one of her shows," Layfield explains. "She's a lot of fun and gives the woman's perspective. I let the show morph into what it wants to become that day."

Over-preparation, however, remains a self-admitted weakness. "I'm horrible about that and probably have [enough information to fill] six hours," Layfield jokes. "But I'm so scared I'll run out of material. I have [many] interesting facts that I sprinkle in between topics. If someone is willing to spend two hours – or even 15 minutes – of their time listening, I feel I have a responsibility to give them something worthy of [that investment]. My name's on the show and I take that very seriously. I'm extremely honored that someone would care enough to listen."

Growing up in the country, the WWE champ didn't have nearly as many radio choices as are available to him nowadays, but remembers rising early every Saturday morning for a very specific purpose. "I wanted to find out what the No. 1 song was on the Casey Kasem and Dick Clark countdown shows," he recalls. "My friends and I would actually sit down and write down the songs. We thought that was so neat; it was groundbreaking stuff to us."

It was there in central west Texas where Layfield also became interested in financial matters. The fascination with that particular subject made perfect sense, since his father was a banker and a CEO the last 25 years of his working life. "Oil money and cattle were good, but then it kind of went south," Layfield says. "I heard financial talk all the time when I was growing up."

Financial Waste

In addition to spending one year with Al Davis' Los Angeles Raiders, the Abilene Christian College graduate played two years of pro football in the World League Of American Football. The league disbanded for several years and is now NFL Europe. "I loved every minute of it," Layfield comments of the latter experience. "It was a total meritocracy. You got bonuses for playing a certain number of snaps per game; for starting; and offensive linemen got bonuses if they led the league in fewest number of QB sacks. The fans were really into it and it was a fun team atmosphere."

As soon as Layfield made some money, however, he did what so many other young athletes do when landing in that situation. "I blew every penny of it," he states with regret. "I

thought to myself I had made – at least financially – a terrible waste of my life."

There was regret and remorse, but not necessarily a deep state of depression. "I took one on the chin and had to figure out what to do," he realistically recounts. "It wasn't [about depression] – I was flat broke. I hadn't planned on not playing. Looking back, I don't know what I was thinking, but realized I had to figure out what to do."

Multiple Personalities

A one-year junior college coaching assignment followed before Layfield moved to wrestling hotbed Minnesota, where he trained with 1980 Greco Roman World Wrestling Champion Brad Rheingans. "He was the best," Layfield enthusiastically states. "But I had this stigma because I played Division II football. They'd [stare] at me and think this guy looks good, but they also wondered how good the competition was. I didn't want to make that mistake in wrestling. I sought out Brad, who was – and still is – recognized as the best trainer of wrestlers."

Tough, dues-paying years followed for the then mid-20s Layfield, but it didn't take long for him to work his way up from smaller organizations to what is universally accepted as the major leagues – the WWF/WWE.

Consistent with the nature of the profession, there were frequent identity changes along the way, including such aliases as John Hawk, Justin Hawk Bradshaw and Blackjack Bradshaw.

The most recent incarnations were simply "Bradshaw," under which he enjoyed phenomenal title success and fan popularity with his Acolyte Protection Agency tag-team partner Ron Simmons (a.k.a. Farooq) and his present "JBL" handle. "It was just the two of us being [ourselves] and I've never had more fun than doing those [APA] skits," proclaims Layfield, who – as a child – faithfully watched pro wrestling with his grandfather every Saturday night. "[Ron] and I have been best friends for a long time and he's going to be the best man at my wedding in February. I've been a wrestling fan all my life. Being part of a business that I always wanted to be involved in has been a lot of fun."

Wounded Road Warrior

Understandably thrilled that his wrestling career was more than taking shape, the previous bitter financial experience was still in the back of Layfield's mind, giving him added impetus to write a book. "A lot of these books were just horrible," he declares. "They were boring and didn't speak to the average person. It occurred to me to write a financial book that reads more like a narrative than a manual. I actually got the idea from 'The Wealthy Barber,' where they wrote a fictitious story and used it to teach financial lessons."

My idea was to do something similar by taking wrestling stories and juxtapose financial insight. At first, I assumed people knew what I was thinking. It took me forever to write, but I've gotten better."

Especially when reaching the pinnacle that is the WWE, wrestlers are exceptionally conditioned athletes and don't have the luxury of enjoying an off-season.

Typically found in a gym somewhere in America every day, Layfield travels four to six days each week and last year crossed the three million-mile-mark on American Airlines alone.

Inventory of maladies includes hearing loss in his right ear from a kick to the head and a torn bicep that results in a limited range of arm motion. "I've had a pool cue put all the way through my cheek," notes Layfield, who currently has about a dozen stitches in his head. "It took several hours of plastic surgery to get [the pool cue] out of my face. I've had a broken nose and all my front teeth are fake. I'm banged up but actually feel decent right now."

There are also disc problems in his lower back; he's had knee surgeries; and has suffered a broken ankle. When people ask how he endures wrestling's infamous and obligatory chair shots, Layfield jokingly quips, "It's easy: You just close your eyes and hope you wake up when you hit the ground."

No Mercy From The Undertaker

When Layfield first came into the then-WWF, he faced wrestling icon "The Undertaker" immediately following the sports' signature event – WrestleMania. "I remember standing in the ring when that purple haze came out and he started walking [toward the ring]," Layfield notes of yet another fellow Texan and multi-time WWF/WWE champion, 42-year-old Mark Calloway. "I thought to myself I didn't belong in the same ring with this guy. I was sure I was going to be fired when the match was over. But mainly because of him, it turned out okay."

The two earlier this year headlined the "No Mercy" PPV, which Layfield cites as a career milestone. "He and I have always been close friends and to be able to actually put in a good 30 minutes with him is something I'll never forget. There's only one Undertaker and he's been a main event guy since day one. I've always said he's the cornerstone of our company – he's that good."

Benevolent Bad Guy

A longtime fan favorite or "baby-face" in wrestling parlance, Layfield recently swerved his on-air character and is now a "heel."

Even so, he's relentless in being one of wrestling's best ambassadors and hardest workers away from the ring. Over and above his duties as this year's Co-Chairman of

"SmackDown! The Vote," no one in the WWE does more for the USO and our troops. "We recently did a benefit at the Sun Dome/Tampa for a bunch of wounded soldiers," he reports. "General Tommy Franks was there and we were able to raise a lot of money."

This will be Layfield's fourth Christmas overseas and third in either Afghanistan or Iraq. "Those guys are so grateful that we're there to say hello, but I tell them it's the other way around. It's really an eye-opener. I wish every American could see what those guys do in that desert and how hard they work to keep us safe."

Last Christmas' "SmackDown!" broadcast from Iraq was one of 2003's most compelling television broadcasts. "At one point, Black Hawk helicopters were flying in the back and you could hear mortar rounds going off," recounts Layfield. "There were all these soldiers sitting on tanks waving flags. That was the greatest thing I've ever done in my wrestling career and we're going to do it again this year."

Life Beyond The Mat

Facial hair and Layfield's longtime rough-around-the-edges look have disappeared and have been replaced with a clean-shaven image that features very unconventional ring garb – a suit and tie.

Although his on-air character is now a hated villain, Layfield in real life remains genuinely soft-spoken and modest. "I never expected this run as world champion," he whispers with deep humility. "I thought I'd be a tag team guy. But about seven months ago, we had a lot of injuries and they needed someone to step up. Fortunately, I was the one who was able to fill the void."

Having observed his 38th birthday this past Monday (11/29/2004), Layfield imagines retirement from the ring is only several years away. "When I realize I can't keep up with the young guys, I'll step back," he acknowledges. "I then hope to go into a weekday talk radio show and let that be my main focus. That's what I'm trying to get ready for now. I want to develop where I'm good enough to do it on a daily basis. When I'm done wrestling, I want to step right into this without missing a beat. Then I plan on doing radio for a long time."



WHO: John Bradshaw Layfield

WHAT: "The John Bradshaw Layfield Show"

WHERE: Talk Radio Network

WHEN: Saturday 9 – 11am (ET)

HOW LONG: Since early summer 2004

HOW MANY AFFILIATES: Approximately 50