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WRESTLING

It's Acting, and It Takes Practice

 By ANNA HANKS
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AUSTIN, Tex., Aug. 4; It's a cast straight out of a professional wrestling story line. There is a 13-year-old boy who recently made his wrestling debut; the Bouncer with life-threatening illnesses; the shy herbalist who sports attitude in the ring; and a former architect now wrestling professionally in Japan.

All are part of the Capital of Texas Power Wrestling Academy, a wrestling school and federation here.

The academy is an example of independent wrestling today. In an industry dominated by the World Wrestling Federation, the independent circuit is the minor leagues, adult recreational leagues and community theater, all rolled into one. It is where new wrestlers get their start and where old wrestlers finish.

"There's no methodology in how to become a professional wrestler," said Mic Tierney, an architect now known as the Irish Assassin.

He said a wrestler could go overnight from a crowd of 75 in a small town to an audience of 20,000 in a nontelevised W.W.F. "dark match."

Given wrestling's popularity, these schools exist all across the country. At All Pro Wrestling in Hayward, Calif., which describes itself as America's premier wrestling school (seen in the documentary "Beyond the Mat"), training takes \$6,000 and two years. At Capital of Texas, training takes four to six months and costs \$2,000.

"You have to be good at your dramatic work," said George de la Isla, one of the school's founders, who teaches students to exaggerate the severity of bumps and falls.

While not every mother of a teen-age son would be happy seeing her boy flung about a ring by grown men, Linda Harvey sees wrestling school as the place for her son, Ryan Murley. "He's found a brotherhood," she said.

Last November, Ryan, 13, was doing badly in seventh grade, his relationship with his mother was tense and he was having trouble sleeping.

"He seemed kind of angry and frustrated," Harvey said.

Then Ryan saw a commercial for the Capital of Texas academy, and he has been training to be a wrestler ever since. Ryan's mother is pleased that her son is doing better in school and at home. "He talks to me," she said with a laugh.

"It's finally what I want to do with my life," said the 5-foot-3, brown-haired, still-in-braces Ryan, speaking in the wrestlers' dressing room before his public debut June 8 in Giddings, Tex., in a so-called battle royal, a fight with all wrestlers in the ring. "It's what I was put on this earth to do. To wrestle and entertain."

His wrestling persona is Loony Simpson, little brother of Russell (Psycho) Simpson, who wears institutional whites and carries a small doll. Simpson is one of four partners in Capital of Texas. The others are de la Isla, a Prince Lalani and The Mad/Happy Hawaiian, Ray Campos, a Papa Donn, and Bob Lagree, a Captain Safety.

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While Tierney, the trained architect who wrestles two weeks a month in Japan (for Battlearts on Samurai TV) is the federation's best-known wrestler, the Bouncer is perhaps its most inspiring.

The Bouncer, Kurt Gray, a former marine and investment banker who also worked on Wall Street, is a three-time lymphoma survivor and severe diabetic with an external insulin pump.

Four years ago, he needed 10 to 20 insulin shots a day, and was down to 150 pounds on his 6-3 frame. Often confined to a wheelchair, he could walk only with a cane. His doctor then put him on an insulin pump, which he removes only to wrestle, shower or swim.

"I consider it no less than a miracle that I am alive right now and doing this," said Gray, a good-guy wrestler whose shaved head, gold earrings, black wrestling outfits and 250 pounds make him look like a menacing Mr. Clean.

Then there is Char Revell, who by day is a mild-mannered, self-employed herbalist. In contrast, her ring persona, Char Starr, is assertive, sexily clad and heavily made up.

"I enjoy being able to step outside of myself for a couple of hours," said Revell, who describes wrestling as an outlet.

Capital of Texas is not the only wrestling federation in Austin. Its competition is the Southwest Wrestling Federation, which was established in 1999 by J. L. Murillo, 38. In a bitter story line straight out of professional wrestling, the federations don't like each other.

Years ago, de la Isla trained Murillo, who became frustrated after appearing in Capital of Texas shows. Murillo announced plans for a new federation that was intended to bring independent wrestling closer to the W.W.F.

"Do it right, do it like Vince McMahon" Murillo said in an oft-repeated statement, referring to the W.W.F.'s founder.

The S.W.W.F.'s first show was in February 2000, and it staged a show this spring at a local high school. But the school itself has been closed since February, and the S.W.W.F. has no further shows scheduled.

Murillo insists that his organization is not down for the count. Murillo, who proudly shows photographs of his school and videotapes of his shows, said that the S.W.W.F. is close to selecting a location to reopen the school, and its Web site is being redesigned. Murillo also said that his group has almost locked in a date for a show called "Summer Meltdown II," and a local disc jockey will soon be announced as the organization's commissioner.

Although many of the wrestlers dream of the W.W.F., not all will make it. Some may go on to wrestle in Mexico in the wild Lucha Libre (freestyle). Some will be asked to wrestle for other independent federations. Some will be invited to Korea and Japan. But mostly, they just want the chance to wrestle, whenever and wherever they can.

For Ryan Murley, the dream of going to the W.W.F. is strong. After getting his first taste of professional wrestling in Giddings, Ryan was ready for more. After the show, an upbeat Ryan was loading the ring into the truck for the trip home.

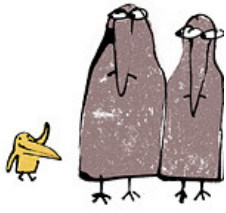
"This is making me want to do it more," he said about his debut.

Gray understood, and put it this way: "This is where it all begins. Everybody has to go to wrestling school someplace."

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