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The First Tee's

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Flying High

with Brunswick Air

It's Time to Get

Beach Body Ready



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spring 2011

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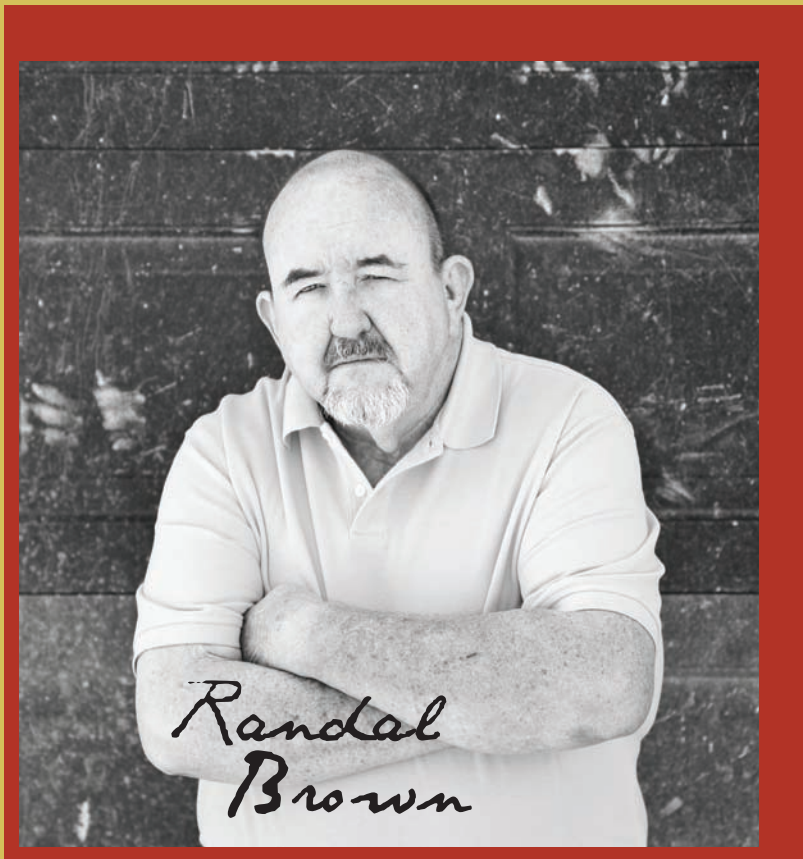
A RINGSIDE SEAT



RANDAL BROWN'S LIFE OF WRESTLING

STORY BY BILLY JASON FRYE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEITH KETCHUM



Randal Brown's voice is as big as his personality, which is saying a lot. He's a natural showman and storyteller and he keeps you hanging on every word. The former professional wrestler, corporate operations consultant, television cable company owner and self-proclaimed hell raiser has enough stories to talk for days. He's retired from the ring and mellowed out, but he hasn't slowed down. Now the 60-year-old makes what many call the finest wrestling rings in the world — right here in Shallotte.

"When I was a kid, back in Nashville, Tennessee, I liked to do two things — fight and raise a little hell — and I was good at both of them," Brown says. "I think the only thing that kept me out of prison was wrestling."

At age 14, Brown was admittedly out of control. He spent every night out until two or three in the morning, drinking, carousing and fighting. His escapades became too much for his mother and she presented him with an ultimatum — live by our rules or live on your own. If he struck out on his own, his mother said, he had to manage his grades, find honest work and stay out of trouble or he came back home. He left and moved into the back room of a pool hall owned by a friend.

Brown found work, but only part of it — his share of each rack of balls sold — was honest. The other half was hustling players and gambling. He maintained his grades and kept his head down, but he still needed something to fill the wild void inside him.





Above: Though now retired from professional wrestling, Randal Brown continues to work in the sport, operating a thriving wrestling-supply business in Shallotte.

Around this time Brown began working out at a gym frequented by several wrestlers on Nashville's regional circuit. He'd seen many of these men on television and attended their shows a few times, but to be in the same gym with them was another thing. He worked hard to make himself noticed, and one day Tojo Yamamoto, a notorious heel, invited Brown to train with him. Brown jumped at the chance.

In wrestling Brown found the mixture of aggression, athletic output and mayhem that he craved. Football was too slow, basketball wasn't physical enough, but wrestling, wrestling was just right for a big, mouthy kid who loved to fight.

"Tojo introduced me to some guys that I couldn't whip," Brown says. "I was hooked. I had to learn to wrestle. I had to win."

Brown trained three days a week for six months, learned the routines and begged for the opportunity to get into the ring. One day he got his shot.

At a taping for a television spot promoting a match that night, one member of a tag-team duo was too

drunk to go on camera. Yamamoto put in Brown to take his place. That night at the match the wrestler was still unable to fight, so Yamamoto ordered Brown to take the guy's spot on the card, but under no circumstance was he to go into the ring. His tag-team partner would do all the wrestling.

"A couple of minutes into the match, my partner sprained his ankle, crawled back to the corner and tagged me in," Brown says. "I was nervous, but I did what we had practiced. It was a little faster, but it was the same moves, the same routine. After the match Tojo told me I did a good job."

So good, in fact, that he and the mostly sobered drunk went on to wrestle as tag-team partners on the card later that night. Yamamoto was so impressed by Brown's performances, he extended the invitation to wrestle on any card. And that's how 14-year-old Randal Brown became a professional wrestler.

Between wrestling and hustling pool Brown earned enough money to buy the pool hall, but his mother still wanted him to find honest work. When he was 17, just a few months after his high

school graduation, his mother died and Brown stepped out of wrestling and pool hustling to carry out her wishes. Needing a change of scenery, he said goodbye to his wrestling buddies, sold the pool hall and moved to Georgia.

"I hustled this kid from Georgia Tech at pool and he paid me with a check," Brown says. "I'd never seen a check but I knew I had to go to the bank to cash it and I did. At the bank I saw a sign for night shift workers. I applied and got the job."

Brown worked nights in the bank setting up their computer system and performing data processing. He showed an aptitude for it and for the next few years, he traveled Georgia setting up similar systems for banks and moonlighting as a wrestler. Soon enough the career roles reversed and wrestling took the top spot. Brown was now a member of The Assassins tag team.

For the next 15 years, Brown wrestled as an Assassin, but the toll his lifestyle was taking on his body and his marriages — two, both ending in divorce — was too much. As Brown watched his friends and his idols grow

older and slower, he vowed he'd step out of the ring for good when his time came.

In 1985 Brown heard his final bell as a professional wrestler when his opponent called for a move he could not do — a backdrop that would send him flipping and flying over his opponent to land flat on his back in the center of the ring.

"I couldn't do the backdrop, and after the match ended I apologized to him," Brown says. "But I thanked him for showing me that it was time to go."

After retiring from the ring, Brown moved on to the promotions side of wrestling, setting up shows and cards in town after town. It kept him active in the sport he loved, but he grew frustrated at how much time he was wasting setting up and tearing down the ring. His friend Bobby Burt, a mechanic and welder, offered to build him a ring that would set up quickly. Brown gave him money for materials, and a few days later he called; the ring was done.

"It was beautiful," Brown says. "It set up in 40 minutes and tore down in 20. My old ring took three hours to set up and an hour to break down, so this was a Godsend."

Brown used the new ring at his next show. It was a hit, and word spread through wrestlers and promoters. They sold three rings that first year.

Over the next few years, Brown built and sold rings himself, keeping the operation small and manageable, while still working as a promoter. In the early 1980s, a fallout with his partner over business dealings with comedian Andy Kauffman (in his infamous feud with wrestling Jerry "The King" Lawler) led Brown to retire from wrestling and ring building and to reassess his life.

Soon Brown felt the itch to work again and began taking consulting jobs at a variety of Atlanta corporations. He began dabbling in wrestling, this time on the television side with promotions like Superstars of Wrestling. Eventually he wound up helping his friend Peter Mallory with his company that provided a low power broadcast station in La Grange, Georgia, and cable service in Brunswick County, North Carolina.

Cable outages in the Holden Beach area brought Brown here on a troubleshooting mission. In a few months he had solved most of the problems — chief among them being Mallory's embezzling business partner — and increased cable television subscriptions. He bought a stake in Brunswick Cable, merged it with Tryon Cable and sold to a larger group.

Brown stayed on as a transitional consultant and began



Right: At Matt Burns Construction in Shallotte, Brown builds wrestling rings that are regarded by wrestling superstars as the best in the world.

putting roots down in the Brunswick County area, buying a house, then a partnership in a bar. After the consultation job ended, Brown stayed, built the bar, bought out his partner and eventually sold it.

Through all of this, wrestling was far from his mind. Then he met Ben Throckmorton, a budding wrestling promoter looking for help. Brown connected Throckmorton with his buddy Ted Allen, and they started promoting wrestling shows.

At one of these shows, Allen's old ring broke, then it broke again at the second show. Brown offered to build them a ring and deliver it for their third show.

At that third show a wrestler from Burlington, North Carolina, was on the card. After the match he told Brown that it was the best ring he'd ever been in and asked if he could put Brown in contact with his boss at Highspots.com, an online wrestling paraphernalia retailer. A few days later, a representative from Highspots called and ordered a ring. Brown built the ring, canvass, apron, ropes and turnbuckle pads and delivered it to Burlington.

Highspots was so impressed with the ring, they asked Brown if they could work out a distribution deal — they'd market and sell the rings, he'd build

and deliver them.

"Honestly, I never thought anything would come of it and I was happy that they'd paid for one ring," Brown says. "But a few days later they called with three ring orders and delivery to Virginia, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. That's when I thought we might be on to something."

Brown was in the ring-building business again. He calls his business Matt Burns Construction.

"For eight years we sold an unbelievable number of rings," Brown says. "Then we had a hard time finding canvasses and someone to sew them."

Brown began making his own canvasses, ring aprons and turnbuckle covers. Highspots sold them, and Brown's business expanded. Then Highspots called with a problem — their supplier of wrestling costumes, masks, knee pads and elbow pads couldn't keep up with orders. They wanted to know if Brown would be interested in taking on the overflow. He did, and the business grew again.

Today, Randal Brown's wrestling days are over and he hasn't stepped in a ring other than to inspect it in years. He's proud of his long career as a wrestler, promoter and now supplier of the finest rings in the world. His pride shows in the quality products he makes

at his workshop in Shallotte. Everyone from World Wrestling Entertainment to TNA to regionally televised organizations to small-town promotions use his rings, canvasses and crowd barriers. The superstars of today's wrestling world — like HHH — wear Brown's knee pads, elbow pads, masks and costumes. Read the reviews of his rings on Highspots.com, and you'll find wrestlers and promoters again and again calling it the best in the world.

Although wrestling was his first love, Brown has a new one. After two unsuccessful marriages that gave him three children he loves very much, he's ready to settle down again and plans to marry his fiancé, Debbie, in July.

"I never thought I'd be in love with anyone, but I am," Brown says. "I'm head over heels for Debbie."

Looking back, Brown says his life has all worked out for the best.

"You know, I lived a hard life," says Brown. "I've got a plastic hip and a steel knee, my nose has been broken eight or ten times, I've got scars, aches and pains, all from wrestling, but if it would bring me to this place where I am now — a successful business in the industry I love, three great kids and a wonderful fiancé — then I'd do it all again in a heartbeat." ■

Below: Brown also distributes wrestling costumes, masks, knee pads and elbow pads to the world's wrestlers.

