

The Absolutely True Autobiography of Tony Rinaldi, the Man Who Changed Pro Wrestling Forever

Chapter 6: 1982

The morning after my father's funeral, I called Billy Chen into the office and told him to get Winston Hamilton on the line. Chen was my father's best friend and right-hand man for twenty-five years, and he just stared at me with this hangdog expression like he couldn't believe I was asking him to work less than twenty-four hours after burying the old man.

"He was my father, goddamn it. Now get me Hamilton." I pressed the phone to my ear and waited. "Winston," I said, "how's Minneapolis, pal? This is Tony Rinaldi from the World Wrestling Alliance."

"Tony?" He paused. "I'm sorry about your daddy. He loved the business more than anybody."

"Yeah. Thanks, pal." I kicked my feet up over the desk. "But I'm actually calling about you. So your father went ahead and made you champ, huh? Congratulations! Long overdue. How's the run going? Word in New York is attendance's in the shitter."

Another long pause. We both knew he was under contract with the AWA for another four years. "What's this about, Tony?"

"I want a meeting with you, your wife, and Metalhead. Tonight."

"Where? Here?"

Chen waved his arms and shook his head no, no, no.

"Absolutely, pal," I said. "The jet's gassed up, and we already made reservations tonight at . . . Murray's, right? Ric Flair's favorite steakhouse?"

"Tony, you ribbing me?"

"Absolutely not, pal. I got Billy 'The Loudmouth' Chen with me right now dying to see you. Figured this would be a great time to touch base and finally meet the Mrs. I hear Maria has an aptitude for the business. That right, Winston? But your father's not keen on using her as a manager?"

One of my cardinal rules of negotiation is to always highlight the personal. Anyone who claims business is only business is either stupid or

a liar. We're dumb sacks of meat who make decisions based on personal bullshit a hundred times out of a hundred.

"OK," Winston finally said. "We'll see you at Murray's tonight."

I hung up and grinned at Chen, the best damn manager I'd ever seen. Pass him a mic and march him to the center of the ring in Madison Square Garden and that bastard lit up the place, spit flying like a Southern preacher. But in his private life, Billy "The Loudmouth" Chen was quiet and thoughtful to a fault. He sighed and said, "I'll arrange the jet and make the dinner reservations."

"Goddamn right you will, pal. Goddamn right."



So right about now is when my third biographer is essentially forcing me at gunpoint to tell you a little bit more about my relationship with my father and the whole state of the business by '82. Why I have to listen to some pencil-neck writer from Binghamton is beyond me, but listen up, Gordie Mancini, I can fire your ass just like I fired the others, so don't you dare edit this goddamn gold out.¹

Reader, you may have noticed that perhaps I breezed over my childhood at the start of this very fine biography that only cost you a cool \$7.99. In the pro wrestling business, we have a saying: the only thing that matters is what you're about to do. OK. I just made that up, but it's true. Nobody cares about how well you drew² in Albuquerque three years ago. Can you pack them to the rafters in Utica tonight? If not, crawl the fuck back to your wife and kids, pal. Why should I begin my biography with my childhood when my real life, what I consider to be my true life, started when I entered the wrestling business at the tender age of eighteen? But fine. I'll give in to goddamn Gordie Mancini this one time. I mean, the man's published a coming-of-age sci-fi novel! What a prestigious writer! He must know what he's doing, right, folks?

I was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania, on August 24, 1945, three months after the Allies won World War II. My mother, this frail, quiet bird, told me my daddy died gunning down Nazis, and the two of us lived in the bad part of town called the Plot. It flooded every year and everybody's basement reeked of mold. She remarried when I was seven. A drunken Irish miner who beat the shit out of us every time the Steelers lost even though Pittsburgh was five hours west on I-80. I crippled him with a crowbar when I was seventeen, and the next year I won a football

¹ Mr. Rinaldi threatened to breach contract if we didn't include this rant. —GM

² This is an old carnival term for earning money. If a show sold out, credit usually went to the wrestlers in the main event, i.e. Winston Hamilton really drew the sellout in Minneapolis. —GM

scholarship to Rutgers. The night before I skipped town for good, my mother told me the truth about my father.³

She drove me to the Glider Diner, just me and her, and you people have to understand this was bigtime for little old Tony Rinaldi and his dear old ma. We didn't go out to eat very often, and never without that crippled Irishman. "Tony," Mama said, big fat tears rimming her eyes, "goddamn it, there's something I never told you."

"What the fuck is it, Ma?"

She didn't even own a hanky, so she had to blow her nose in a diner napkin like a goddamn peasant. "Your daddy didn't die gunning down Nazis in the great Second World War!"

"Ma!" I shouted. "How can this be?"

"His name is Michael Rinaldi. You used to watch him on the TV set. He runs the World Wrestling Alliance out in evil New York City."

Well, readers, I'll be honest with you. I didn't think too much of Michael Rinaldi right then. No, sir. A daddy who died sniping fascists in the Hürtgen Forest? That's something to puff your chest over. A man who ignored me my whole life and ran a fake fighting ring for drunken immigrants fresh off the boat in Manhattan? No thank you. I'd watched his program growing up. Had seen and maybe even enjoyed wrestlers like Iron Thompson and the Garbanzos and, yes, even Billy "The Loudmouth" Chen before he blew out his damn knees and pivoted to manager full-time. But there was no time for fake fighting when you had a drunken Irish coal miner rampaging through the trailer like a goddamn bull!

So, off I go to Rutgers, and everything is fantastic, pal, just fantastic, but I have to admit my natural curiosity got the better of me. It's one of my greatest assets. Don't edit this out, Gordie. Rutgers is less than an hour from New York, so I rode the train to the Garden and watched NWA champion Larry "The Bruiser" Pilsner square off with WWA champ Veteran Vinnie Valentine. In those days, the entire American wrestling business was broken up into twelve territories under the National Wrestling Alliance banner. The owners of all the territories

³ Very little of this can be verified. Goliath Publishing has been unable to produce a birth certificate for anyone named Tony Rinaldi born in Scranton, Pennsylvania in 1945, and we assume this is a stage name meant to match his father's and that much of Mr. Rinaldi's biography presented here is either embellished or completely falsified. What we know for sure is he grew up in the northeastern coal region of Pennsylvania in the late-'40s and '50s under a woman of very modest means and that he didn't meet his father until he was eighteen, after he won a football scholarship to Rutgers. Whether or not Mr. Rinaldi knew his father's identity growing up is questionable, but, based on his father's unpublished autobiography, Michael Rinaldi knew he had a son but never tried to contact him. -GM

voted on the next NWA champion, and then the champ would travel from promotion to promotion getting the local talent over.⁴ Everybody collectively profited, and nobody ever went rogue or stole talent from another promotion or invaded another territory. My father and his generation lived by a code of honor, just like the mafia. I didn't know any of that then, though. I was just a pimply kid from Scranton gawking in the rafters with my Cracker Jacks.

I watched Pilsner and Valentine fight sixty goddamn minutes to a no-contest, and the crowd just ate it up, hooting and hollering, cursing Pilsner when he showboated, pleading with Vinnie not to submit to the dreaded Carolina Chokehold. There's a lot of talk these days about how I outed the business for what it is: a work, not a shoot.⁵ But the truth is: everybody other than the kids knew something was up. How could you not with the flashy entrances and the drama of it all and the way the boys would go ten, twenty seconds without even trying to attack each other? Sure, maybe some inbreds down in West Virginia thought it was real, but in Madison Square Garden, everybody was in on the gag, but they all played their roles—the wrestlers, refs, ring announcers, even the thousands of us in the crowd. There's something magic about that. And there's something goddamn stupid about that. It really intrigued me.

After the show, I snuck backstage and told my father who I was. "Tony," he said, "I respected you enough to leave you the hell alone. I wish you showed me the same courtesy, but since you're here, grab a fucking broom, pal." He offered me a part-time gig selling autographed glossies of the wrestlers, and I worked my way up the ladder for twenty years all the way to VP. On his deathbed, he made everyone leave the room but me and offered to sell me the WWA for half-a-million dollars.⁶ He needed the cash for his legitimate kids. They played violin or something and wanted nothing to do with the business. "Tony," he said, "be grateful I'm even allowing you the opportunity to buy the business. Never forget you're the bastard." Then he died of lung cancer. He never told me he loved me if that's what you jackals are after. Is that enough, Gordie Mancini? Does that explain my relationship to my father now?⁷

⁴ An old carnival term for making a wrestler popular with the crowd. —GM

⁵ More old carnival terms. A work means faked, while a shoot means legitimate. For example, a boxing match is a shoot, while pro wrestling is a work. —GM

⁶ What Mr. Rinaldi has refused to explain in his writing is that his wife, a rich debutante from Connecticut and daughter of a railroad tycoon, helped fund his purchase of the WWA. Mr. Rinaldi met his wife at Rutgers shortly after seeing his father for the first time in New York, and, since 1983, she's served as the VP of the World Wrestling Alliance. Unfortunately, due to her high-level appointment in the Trump administration, Mr. Rinaldi insists that we not use her name in the book or ever reference her more than this single time. I, Gordie Mancini, would like it known that I fought this editorial decision tooth and nail. —GM

⁷ Firsthand accounts of Tony Rinaldi's relationship with his father are difficult to



I snuck the private jet through during my father's cancer. He never appreciated glitz and glamor and believed pro wrestling was low-class entertainment and only our heels⁸ should appear rich or high-falutin'. But I saw the writing on the walls and wanted to push pro wrestling into the neon lights of the 1980s. My father never got it, and neither did Loudmouth, not at first. He sulked on that jet en route to Minneapolis with the glummiest expression I'd ever seen. You would have thought his father up and croaked, goddamn it.⁹

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I took a leak, then came back and snuck up behind Loudmouth all quiet and fucking grabbed him in a chokehold. I handled the business sides of things and announced matches for our TV show on Saturdays,¹⁰ but I loved working out with the boys

ascertain. Michael Rinaldi's best friend and Tony Rinaldi's right-hand man, Billy "The Loudmouth" Chen, told Dingo Blue in a 2013 YouTube shoot interview that "they were always cold with each other. Never had a warm relationship. Michael treated me like his son even though we were the same age, and Tony treated me like his father. He didn't even go to the funeral. Went to Buzzer's in Long Island and drank half the bar." But, in Sheriff Justice's biography, *Justice Comes to Town*, Justice wrote, "And this goes without saying, my friends, but nobody in this business was more broken up about Mikey Rinaldi's passing than his son. They'd spent two decades working side by side. That changes a man. At the funeral, I saw Tony hidden in the shadows bawling his eyes out like a kid. It was the only time I ever saw him vulnerable." –GM

⁸ An old carnival term for villain. A hero is a babyface, baby, or face. – GM

⁹ Rumors and innuendo abound that Billy "The Loudmouth" Chen and Michael Rinaldi engaged in a long-term romantic relationship that was a somewhat open secret among the wrestlers backstage. Although no concrete evidence exists minus shoot interviews and biographies from secondhand sources, Michael Rinaldi left the deed to a small beachside property in Martha's Vineyard to Chen in his will. In private letters to the Soul Brother obtained after his death, Rinaldi wrote that his house on the Vineyard was "the only place in the world where I feel like I'm not playing a character." Chen never wrote a will, so, after his death from liver failure in 2016, the deed turned over to the banks. –GM

¹⁰ The original World Wrestling Alliance television program, *Saturday Superstars*, is one of the first examples of how radically Tony Rinaldi's vision of pro wrestling differed from his father's and the rest of the NWA's. Most wrestling programs of the 1970s were low-budget affairs focused on gritty workers, long in-ring matches, and the occasional short interview. Often, they resembled public access programs more than anything on the major networks. But when Tony Rinaldi took over *Saturday Superstars* in 1980 after his father's health began to decline, he immediately upped the production values with flashy lights and rock music. The gritty workers were replaced by cartoony characters like Sheriff Justice, Uncle Sam, and the Taxman, and few matches lasted longer than five or six minutes, that time now dedicated to interviews with wrestlers and the occasional musician or actor who appealed to kids and teenagers. Between 1972 and 1981, *Saturday Superstars* only aired in the northeast, but after Michael Rinaldi's

and had the pythons to prove it. We all horsed around backstage, but this time Loudmouth was pissed. He could turn truly angry. I'd seen it. When fans shouted racial slurs at him, he would leap into the crowd and throw a jab that would knock down a drunk before you could even blink. In the jet, Loudmouth tossed me into the aisle and potatoed¹¹ me three times in the gut. I got my licks in though. Don't you worry about old Tony Rinaldi, goddamn it. But the stewardess? She just stood there holding our glasses of merlot with this shocked look on her face. I think she's the only reason we stopped.

"What's your fucking problem, Loudmouth?" I asked when I returned to my seat.

He looked out the window. "You know exactly what my problem is."

"What? A guy can't treat his buddy to a quick trip to Minneapolis? Don't we deserve it? We work hard."

He snatched both glasses from the stewardess and gulped them down like water. "This isn't the way we do business, Tony."

"No," I said. "This isn't the way my father did business. This is the way we're doing business moving forward, pal."

"Your father believes . . . believed in the territory system. No poaching. No invading. When a talent turns stale, send him to a new territory where he's fresh. Everyone profits." Loudmouth finally met my eyes. "They're going to kick you out of the NWA if you steal Minnesota's champion mid-contract. Come on, Tony. Winston Hamilton works for his dad."¹²

I stared at my loafers, the very same I'd worn to my father's funeral. We didn't speak for the rest of the flight.



Everybody knew about Murray's in Minneapolis on account of Ric Flair. He grew up in the 'burbs and basically banged and boozed the entire state dry before his seventeenth birthday. It was an old-style chop house with style and grace, white linens, candles, shrimp cocktails, the kind of pizzazz that impressed wrestlers who spent most of their lives on the road, driving from one shit town to the next, living out of Ramada Inns off the highway and eating McDonald's. Loudmouth and I arrived thirty minutes early, another one of my business philosophies. Always be early

death in 1982, Tony Rinaldi immediately pushed for syndication and national expansion. To directly compete with other territories' wrestling shows, he needed talent their fans already knew. Hence, his quest for Winston Hamilton and other main eventers like him. -GM

¹¹ An old carnival term for a shoot punch instead of a worked punch. -GM

¹² Knuckles Hamilton was a legendary Minnesotan wrestler who purchased the AWA territory after his retirement in 1977. As owner, Knuckles immediately pushed his son Winston as the heir apparent to the Minnesota territory. -GM