

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.**

**Over the years, a lot of listeners have asked me to do an episode about professional wrestling. I was skeptical. I didn't watch wrestling as a kid. And if I did an episode about wrestling, I couldn't figure out what the fantasy element would be, except the fact it's all staged.**

**But I finally decided to look into whether there had been any supernatural wrestling characters. That's when I discovered The Undertaker.**

**The Undertaker is supposed to be undead. He dresses like a Western gunslinger with a wide brimmed hat and a long coat. His hair is usually super long and stringy, although once he had a Mohawk. He always has dark make-up around his eyes, making him look both pissed off, and deeply haunted.**

**He sometimes appears out of nowhere like a ghost. At times, he's shot lightning out of his hands and flown down to the ring on giant bat wings. He could rise up from inside the ring and drag his opponents down into hell, or throw them into coffins. And he's been hugely popular for almost 30 years.**

**So I emailed my assistant producer, Stephanie, and I asked if she knew about this guy. And the reaction I got was like if someone had said to me, "I just discovered comic books. Have you ever heard of Batman?"**

**So, I did not know you were a big wrestling fan. Have you always been a fan of The Undertaker?**

STEPHANIE: Oh, absolutely. Right from the start. Like, I remember when he was introduced, I remember the first episode of WWE when he was introduced, it was this character on like anything you've ever seen and it was something that no one was expecting either. And his face, he's got this face that's very expressive that conveys more than any Mike work he could possibly ever do. And I was really drawn to that. I mean, you have this person or this character, this thing that's supposed to be like a cross between the dead, the undead. You're not really sure. But he still is such a great technical wrestler. He's still really great at selling the match. You know, one of his move is the tombstone and it's basically a pile driver.

***Wait, what's a pile driver?***

STEPHANIE: It's a move where you, you pick up your opponent, you have them upside down. So you completely flip them upside down and they're there in front of you. You're supposed to draw. It looks like you're driving their head into the mat. And so then what I'll do is he'll do the pile driver, he'll do the tombstone, and then they fall over and then he takes their hands and he crosses them over their chest, kind of like, you know, when you're in a coffin. And then he puts his hands over their hands and stares the audience down. It's really intimidating. It's really awesome. That's usually his finishing move too. And it's like when they know, like the announcers will get really excited. "He's going for the tombstone! He's going for the tombstone!" That's how you know he's about to finish it.

**The Undertaker's career is really fascinating as I kept digging deeper, I kept thinking about two questions. Why was he such a big hit? And why has he stuck around for so long?**

**Wrestling has changed so much in the last 30 years. His character is like an anachronism from a totally different era. I mean, there are wrestlers today that were born when The Undertaker was already going strong. And a lot of the wrestlers he started out with retired a long time ago.**

**So I wanted to figure out, what is the secret to his appeal? I'm tell you about what I've discovered. And let me know if I have understood the essence of this legendary character.**

**Just in case some of my listeners know as little about wrestling as I did, before getting to The Undertaker, I want to introduce a vocabulary word that you'll hear a lot of people use in this episode: kayfabe.**

**Kayfabe is basically an old carnival term for the appearance of a reality that you're trying to get your audience to accept.**

**Chad Dundas is a sports journalist, who says people that are not wrestling fans often misunderstand the nature of kayfabe. Especially:**

CHAD: The notion that professional wrestling fans are rubes somehow that they're marks, that they've been taken in by this carnival performance and I don't know if that was ever true, you know if you rewind the tape to the late 1800s or early 1900s, there was a time when wrestling was rigged and still presenting itself as a legitimate athletic competition. But it didn't take very long for people to

figure out it's not real. I mean even if you look at the wrestling results of the late 19 teens, you see people working gimmicks like The Masked Marvel. I think that audiences even at that time to see these characters and frankly see that the athletic performance that they were doing and recognize, this doesn't actually look like a real fight. We've seen a fight before, I've seen boxing, I've seen wrestling, legitimate amateur wrestling, and this doesn't look like that, these people are doing something different.

**Still, wrestlers and promoters went to huge lengths to keep up the appearance of kayfabe – especially for the kids in the audience.**

**Charles Westmoreland is a professor at Delta State in Mississippi, who studies the history of wrestling.**

CHUCK: When the promotions were traveling from town to town. The good guys or the baby faces, they travel with the good guys. The heels stayed with the heels. We don't want to see two guys that supposedly hate each other showing up at a bar or restaurant after the laughing and having a good time and sharing drinks.

**Sometimes the baby faces and the heels would not even practice their matches together in case someone accidentally saw them.**

CHUCK: Wrestlers over the years did a lot to maintain their commitment to Kayfabe. Dusty Roads for example, was famous for even when he was around his children, if he was supposedly injured, that when he was around his kids, he would wear a cast.

**By the way, Dusty Rhodes is a wrestler who debuted in the '60s, and continued wrestling for decades.**

CHAD: You didn't want your kid to go to school and say, my Dad's not really hurt. He's home all weekend, and he's fine. You wanted your kid to go to school and by like this terrible person really messed my Dad up and I'm mad at him, and the other kids would get mad at him, and all their parents take them to the wrestling show that weekend

**And this is Christopher Stacey, a professor at LSU in Alexandria, Louisiana. He says the real art of kayfabe happens inside the ring.**

CHRIS: Everybody knows wrestling is, I'm not going to say the word fake, don't use the F word -- choreographed! Right? In order to be a successful worker in this business, you had to know how to do the wrestling moves, how to execute the wrestling moves, working with your partner. But most important, here's most important -- you don't want to hurt your partner and you don't want to hurt yourself, but you have to make it appear that you're in a shoot or a real fight. That's not easy to do.

CHAD: They can teach you how to fall down in a way that hurts the least, but you're still falling down. You get hit in the head with a folding chair; you still get hit in the head with a folding chair. You know the physical damage of wrestling is real. The long-term side effects of that are very real.

**And all this bring me back to The Undertaker because he walks the line of kayfabe in a way that no wrestler has done before, and may ever do again.**

**Mark Calaway, who plays The Undertaker, is a huge guy – even for a wrestler. He's 6'10" 300 pounds. But he is really agile, and fast. He was tagged right away as a rising star in the 1980s.**

**He started out wrestling in regional territories near Texas, where he's from. Wrestling used to be very decentralized, but The World Wrestling Federation or the WWF started up gobbling up every regional circuit. And cable TV was a new phenomenon that could make wrestling go national. And eventually they changed their name to the WWE – World Wrestling Entertainment. And you'll hear people use WWF and WWE interchangeably but they're the same thing.**

**Small-time wrestling was gritty, but the WWF was cartoonish in the 1980s. Almost every wrestler there had a gimmick. And gimmick is not a pejorative term. That's what you call your persona. The goal was to create fictional characters out of real people that they could sell as action figures.**

**In 1990, Mark Calaway gets hired by Vince McMahon who ran the WWF and the McMahon family still runs the WWE today. And apparently, Vince McMahan just assigned Mark Calaway this character of The Undertaker – who was loosely based on Clint Eastwoods character from High Plains Drifter. It was like Calaway was an actor who got a part he didn't know he was auditioning for.**

**And when it came to creating characters, there was a lot of throwing spaghetti at the wall. If a gimmick didn't work, they'd re-introduce the same wrestler as a different character and pretend the other character didn't exist.**

CLIP UNDERTAKER ENTRANCE.

**In fact, when The Undertaker debuted, Christopher Stacey didn't think this character was going to last.**

CHRIS: I remember watching him on TV and looking at his gimmick and thinking, this is pretty stupid. This is a dumb gimmick. It's foolish! It's cartoonish! Is he zombie? Is he a monster, is he Frankenstein or is he an undertaker? Is he supposed to be alive? Is he dead?

**Although Chad Dundas was intrigued. At the time, the WWF was dominated Hulk Hogan and guys like him.**

CHAD: Hulk Hogan comes out to real American and he's pretending to play the championship belt like a guitar, and he's over the top and very boisterous. The Undertaker is the exact opposite of that. He has this very cold feeling, very subdued entrance, where his theme music is spooky organ music and he comes out wearing a long length duster, and a wide brimmed hat, and it takes him seemingly 15 minutes to get down the ring because he walks as slow as he possibly can.

**Seriously, his entrance is such a slow burn, the other wrestlers don't know what to do except stand there the ring, waiting for him to get there.**

CHAD: It all leads to this crescendo of him coming up the steps of the ring, and raising his arms in time with the lights in the arena coming on so it goes from dark to bright. He gets in the ring, he whips off the duster, he takes off the hat, and you finally get your first look at this enormous human and you know, it's really a masterpiece, I can't say enough about how the high concept character of The Undertaker could've been terrible, and could've gone off the rails immediately and could've been tossed in the junk heap of horrible wrestling gimmicks.

**And here's another reason why The Undertaker shouldn't have worked: he is supposed to be imperious to pain because he's undead. So wrestlers**

**would give him everything they got, and he would appear completely unfazed.**

CHAD: It's easy to imagine they brought in this essentially young kid who had been involved with wrestling before but not a big star and they give him this gimmick that is impervious to pain, one of the big parts of it is he doesn't sell anyone else's moves, and according to the old school code of wrestling, that would be a big time no-no. You know if you were out there in the ring with a grizzled veteran who had paid his dues, and you weren't making him look good in front of the crowd, he would probably pop you one for real.

**And when The Undertaker would seem to get knocked out, one of his signature moves was to rise up slowly like a vampire rising from a coffin.**

**After only a year, he wins the championship. He defeats Hulk Hogan. That was a huge shock for the fans. It's not like when Michael Jordan joined the NBA and he puts all these veterans to shame because he's about to become the greatest player of all time. The head office is dictating this storyline that The Undertaker will win all these matches and shoot right to the top. There should've been much resentment against him. Wrestlers are encouraged to have huge egos. But everyone agreed to this storyline.**

**Christopher Stacey has a theory why. In real life, Mark Calaway was the opposite of The Undertaker. He was a peacemaker who could settle disputes among wrestlers behind the scenes.**

CHRIS: Taker has an impeccable reputation with his colleagues, which really is kind of rare in the wrestling business. If you listen to your share of shooter interviews or you know, it's this guy buried that guy, and this guy wouldn't go over. I mean, if there was any resentment I don't think anybody would've made that known.

**And here is reason number three why The Undertaker shouldn't have worked. He didn't talk, at least not at first. Boasting about yourself is the way wrestlers promote themselves.**

CHRIS: As Dusty Rhodes said, they can talk the people into the building. The Undertaker could not talk, but they knew he had all the other stuff. So what do you do with a wrestler who has a good gimmick, who has the size and he could work? You pair them with somebody who can talk!

**So they gave him a sidekick, a fake manager played by William Alvin Mooney, who was actually a real wrestling manager. The character was called Paul Bearer – like a pallbearer, but with the first name was Paul. And looked like a lost member of the Addams Family.**

CHAD: The Undertaker has been his ward, he was the guardian of The Undertaker who had orphaned early in his life by this terrible fire that had killed his parents. And Paul Bearer is, as they like to do with a wrestling manager, is the exact physical opposite of The Undertaker. He's a short guy, pretty rotund, depending on what era of The Undertaker, he would either have his face painted ghostly white, or would just have this ever-present sheen of suntan going on.

**And in their promos, Paul Bearer sounded like he is literally high on fear and euphoria thinking about all the damage his protégée will inflict.**

*PAUL BEARER: It won't be long, Brett Hart! It won't be long before you walk down the historic aisle of Madison Square Garden and meet my Undertaker!*

**And here is where the Undertaker finally did talk, a little bit, sounding like a Clint Eastwood zombie.**

*UNDERTAKER: You asked for the secrets of the dark side....*

CHAD: And one of the more supernatural elements of that whole storyline and one of the things they did with The Undertaker and his relationship with Paul Bearer and it's frankly a very WWE thing to do is they had Paul Bearer equipped with this large golden urn that he would carry around. He would hold it in front of himself like a sacred chalice, and he would bring it down to the ring and the implication was the urn had some kind of magical sway over The Undertaker and that The Undertaker was for lack of a better word was controlled by the urn, or would follow the urn and Paul Bearer used that sometimes to control what would otherwise uncontrollable force in the ring.

CLIP: PAUL BEARER HOLDING URN DURING A MATCH

CHAD: And some of that stuff got over the top and I remember during the mid '90s, the urn became just like outlandishly huge, you know enormous flowerpot sized golden urn, and at one point the top came off and it cast this bright light over the arena.

***So Stephanie, did you love that storyline?***

STEPHANIE: Yeah. So, at one point the implication was the urn carried the ashes of The Undertaker's dead brother who allegedly died in the fire. His name was Kane.

***The fire in the funeral home that that killed The Undertaker's parents?***

STEPHANIE: Exactly. So both the parents and Kane, his brother were supposed to have been dead. And part of the storyline was it turned out that he wasn't dead. And he actually started the fire and he didn't, he made it out, but he was deformed. So he had this, he wore this mask for part of the time.

***And so Kane appears as another wrestler?***

STEPHANIE: Yeah. So there's a storyline where it comes out where all of a sudden canes shows up and the first time that The Undertaker's sees Kane, the look of sheer shock on, on The Undertakers faces priceless. Like, well, he looks like he's seen a ghost because that's exactly what he's seeing. And so at first he's relieved and he's happy to see his brother, but his brother's really angry at him and there's all this animosity and hatred and the first match that they actually fight against each other. You can see that The Undertaker struggling because this is his brother who thought he lost, but now he's got to fight him. And that's actually a little heartbreaking. And then at one point, Paul Bearer switches sides and he starts managing Kane.

***It's funny because like I paid no attention to wrestling. And so when I find out about this stuff, like I, everyone talks about the Hell in a Cell cage match who's against Mankind,***

STEPHANIE: Mick Foley, right.

***Who to me looks like an office temper gone crazy***

STEPHANIE: Or survived the Zombie apocalypse.

***Yeah. Like he's got like this disheveled light, like he's got like a white button down shirt and a tie, but he then looks like he went crazy and ate half the staff and they had to put a Hannibal Lecter mask on him.***

STEPHANIE: Exactly. Yeah. That's kind of the persona. Like he's so crazy that he has this mask on him or he's going to bite someone or he's going to attack someone.

***So this happened like 1998, and, these are such like historic events in the history of the WWF that as I learn about these things, I'm like, what was I doing in 1998? Why was I so unaware that one of the most important matches of all time and happened? When you were watching this, did it feel like almost like the MCU, like was this the equivalent of like Infinity War or Endgame coming out when these huge epic matches were happening?***

STEPHANIE: Yeah, so, um, that particular Hell in a Cell, the thing you have to know about Mick Foley is he doesn't care about if he really gets physically hurt, he puts everything into his performance. So does The Undertaker slash Mark Calloway and the two of them are great together wrestling. Uh, you can tell that there's this really good comradely between them. They work really well together and that match, there was like no holds barred at one point there at the top of a -- it is a cell. It's like a big cage cell, a steel cage that's over the ring. And Mick Foley, Mankind, climbs to the top of said cage and Mark Calaway, The Undertaker comes up with them. And you can remember The Undertaker is six foot 10. So he's at the top of this, this cage with Mankind and he just literally throws Mankind down and he falls like through a table. But the great thing about it is the reaction that Mankind gives, he actually smiles. So there's blood all over him. I think there was, it looked like a tooth was missing and he smiling. So that makes him look even more batshit crazy. But that entire match from start to finish was so physical and so well done and it's probably still one of my favorite matches.

**So they figured out the formula to make The Undertaker work. But he should not have lasted.**

**In the late '90s, the WWF was facing massive competition from a wrestling network that Ted Turner was bankrolling called the WCW. They went head-to-head on Monday nights. There was a lot of concern wrestlers were going to jump ship in either direction. Also, the WCW was much grittier and less cartoonish than the WWF. And so to compete, the WWF became more like the WCW in that regard – they even rebranded it The Attitude era.**

**Everyone is basically playing an exaggerated version of themselves to the point where you don't know what's real – which is a perfect evolution for kayfabe. But not perfect for The Undertaker.**

**So they re-cast him The American Badass, who wore sunglasses and a bandana, and rode into the ring on a motorcycle. This was supposed to be the quote "real" Mark Calaway. Even his contract negotiations with Vince McMahon became part of his storyline.**

*BIKER: You're going to pay me tons of money to kick your sorry ass!*

**So Stephanie, as a fan of the undertaker, was that weird to see him turn into the American Badass biker character?**

STEPHANIE: Uh, yeah, it was, it was quite a change. Um, the thing is Mark Calaway actually is -- he's a biker. He loves motorcycles. So it kind of lent itself to the authenticity of the character. I still liked him, but not nearly as much as the undertaker. It seemed a little more forced to me.

***That's ironic that it seemed more forced than him playing -- than him being a little more like himself.***

STEPHANIE: It seemed a little bit more forced and it's not that he was not good on the mic because he was so, there was elements of his real life in there, but for me, it still rang a little false. I still liked him and I still followed him.

***So the character of The Deadman as they called The Undertaker, seemed to be dead at the moment.***

STEPHANIE: Yeah.

***But he rises again and he takes off for a wrestling again. That's just in a moment.***

**So The Deadman character is dead, right? Except The Undertaker rises the dead — again – and takes over wrestling again. That's a break.**

**BREAK**

**It seems like the fans were really divided on The American Biker character. Some people thought it was a great change of pace, but there was a building demand for The Undertaker. So they brought him back, not as a horror movie villain but more of an anti-hero or a dark hero. And when the fans heard that gong and the lights went out:**

CHUCK: It's electric. It gets the same reaction today that it did in 1998 which is a remarkable, and shows you how he's been able to maintain that, that continuity of popularity, but also, but also the gimmick and the persona.

**And Charles Westmoreland thinks The Undertaker was tapping into a powerful sense of nostalgia.**

CHUCK: There's a good deal of dissatisfaction with the WWE right now on, on many different levels. The quality of the product, there is growing awareness of how wrestlers are treated as workers -- there is this nostalgia that things were, things were, you know, better back in the good old days.

**And The Undertaker could bridge that gap between generations.**

**Also they re-focused his storyline on the idea that he had never lost at Wrestlemania, which is the championship of wrestling. And they branded it as The Streak. That turned out to be a subtler way of expressing his supernatural abilities. Chad Dundas says they didn't need lightening shooting from his hands anymore, or a magic urn.**

CHAD: The character at this point stands on its own, you don't need a lot of theatrics you had in the past, and there's a great strength frankly in leaving some of that stuff behind because if you don't do the supernatural bells and whistles that The Undertaker was known for a long time, if you leave those behind for a certain stretch of his career, eventually you bring one of those supernatural elements back in and it makes a larger impact.

**The Streak storyline lasted 21 championships until he finally lost in 2014, to Brock Lesnar, who had come from traditional wrestling and other sports, so he was playing just a version of himself.**

CHAD: My understanding, and I could be wrong about this is that Brock was supposed to go over, Brock was supposed to win that match but they had to cut it short because Calaway got injured, I think he got a concussion. That could've been a disaster, and in some ways it was a little bit of an anti-climax, the end of that match was sudden and didn't seem like it went as it was scripted, it didn't seem like it went as it was supposed to go, like it almost enhanced the surprise even more. Everybody has seen those famous crowd reaction shots of people who can't believe the streak is broken and The Undertaker lost at Wrestlemania and some of it is because the match didn't reach what seemed like it a natural climax.

CLIP: ANNOUNCERS CAN'T BELIEVE STREAK IS ENDING

***So like Mark Calaway is standing there, knowing he's been injured and really should go to a hospital, but at that moment at that moment my character has lost so I really sell it in a way he normally sells it, and afterward soon I should go to a hospital and get check out – I mean that's what kind of amazing to me.***

CHAD: Right, and that's part of the business that's real, most of these people, men and women, who are doing these performances are legitimately super tough. You know there are two adages of professional wrestling that apply to that. One is the old cliché that the show must go on, and the other much darker

adage of wrestling which I believe originated with Roddy Piper, or a promoter who told Roddy Piper, look if you're going to die, kid. Just die in the ring.

**Wow.**

CHAD: So you can see that in a performance like Calaway, you get a concussion, but he's going to have the stick to it-ness, the professionalism to do the best he can to complete his job, to complete his mission and to put on the intended show for the fans.

**And now there's a new meta story, which *may be* the final reason why The Undertaker can not last. There's a real tension in a character that is supposed to be undead and virtually unbeatable, and a performer who is 54 years old. Mark Calaway sustained multiple injuries and he's gone through 17 surgeries.**

**And there are some older wrestlers who come back because they couldn't afford health insurance and that's sad. But that's not the case with Mark Calaway. He's there because he wants to be – because he's good at reading a room, and he can tell the audience wants him there, they still can hear that gong and go crazy when the lights go out.**

**But at the same time, they're very aware of how old he is, and Charles Westmoreland has been wondering how this will end.**

CHUCK: He's going to be around in the ring periodically, I would imagine for the next couple of years. Where they go there with him – that's anyone's guess. In the past it was a transition phase where a wrestler could go into the broadcast booth, perhaps they would go into managing, but we're, we're not in the days of, you know, the days of managers being major characters are gone. But I don't see him giving up wrestling anytime soon to be honest.

**And clearly there are more stories to tell about The Undertaker.**

CHUCK: All elements of fantasy come down to wrestling with the human experience. And at the heart of that is conflict.

**And The Undertaker has literally been wrestling with his own demons – whether it's issues of family reconciliation, vengeance, pride and mortality.**

CHUCK: There was this this great piece written, uh, back in the 50s by the French philosopher Roland Bartz who said that wrestling is all about, is all about

justice. It's all about the pursuit of justice and how we as human beings, navigate this conflict between good and evil, and the shades of grey when there's not always a clearly defined good and evil.

**And these struggles are playing out in real time for the characters, the performers and the audience. That is a hell of a show.**

**Stephanie, did we do justice to – I want to call him ‘Taker, but I don’t think I’ve earned the right, I think only true fans can call him ‘Taker, but did we do justice to The Undertaker.**

***So Stephanie did we do justice to – I don’t think I could call him ‘Taker, that’s for true fans, but did we do justice to The Undertakers?***

STEPHANIE: I think so and it’s funny when you talk about doing justice, you’re talking to someone who has several bobble heads, a Christ ornament and more than one Funko Pop of The Undertaker so for me to say you’ve done justice to him is a real seal of approval.

***Aw, thanks!***

STEPHANIE: You’re welcome!

**That is it for this week, thank you for listening. Next episode, we’re going to explore another wrestling culture – Lucha Libre.**

**Special thanks to Christopher Stacey, Charles Westmoreland and Chad Dundas who actually wrote a graphic novel – commissioned by the WWE -- that explored the backstory of The Undertaker, and how his brother killed their parents and became his mortal enemy.**

**There’s a link to it in the episode notes. You can like the show on Facebook, I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. I have a slideshow of The Undertaker at various points in his career on the Imaginary Worlds Instagram page. The show’s website is imaginary worlds podcast dot org. And if you want to get the full back catalog of over 100 Imaginary Worlds episodes, subscribe to Stitcher Premium. You’ll get your first 30 days of binging for free if you use the promo code Imaginary.**