

An Exploration of Deathmatch Wrestling and BDSM

18+

The CM Punk vs MJF dog collar match was my gateway drug to finding and enjoying deathmatch/hardcore pro wrestling. The collars, the chain clipped to both-joining them together, the two sweaty panting dudes increasingly covered in blood and red marks from the chain; it was all tailor made to press my buttons. It was the bloody, climactic match to a hate-sex hero-worship psychosexual feud between the two wrestlers. I had to see if there were any other matches just as enticing as that, and ended up diving into a rabbit hole that I still haven't made my way out of to this day.

When I went to my first in-person wrestling show, the main event was a dog collar match. It seems fated now, in retrospect. That was perhaps the most blood I've seen in real life, and I regret not getting a photo in the foyer with the winner, his collar still on, and chain in hand—crimson mask of blood still covering his face. I've been to every show that promotion has put on since.

Barbara Kruger hit the nail on the head with her 1981 work *Untitled (You Construct Intricate Rituals)*, which reads “you construct intricate rituals that allow you to touch the skin of other men”. If we understand from this that fighting can be a proxy for fucking, or at the very least homosocial closeness, then what kind of fucking would that dog collar match be? Not terribly vanilla, I'd bet.

However, despite not being your run-of-the-mill matches, the dog collar match is far from the violence of a standard deathmatch, which I will describe momentarily.

After my first encounter with hardcore wrestling, I became part of a group of mutuals online who shared the same BDSM lensed interest in deathmatches, which is where my fascination took off. To show the angle that some online approach watching deathmatches with, I'll give you a list of tags I've seen from my mutuals on relevant posts (see over page). Both these tags and the clips they were posted on helped grow the comparison in my mind. The most directly relevant is the *#blood pervert* tag one of my mutuals uses to organise their blog.

- ▶ #money shot (on a photo of a wrestler with blood on his face)
- ▶ #oh [REDACTED] you'd look so beautiful with my hands over your throat.
- ▶ #he looks pathetic #i can't NOT fuck him
- ▶ #i thought he had an insane hickey in this vid #then i realised it's probably from being chopped #either way. hot.
- ▶ #what a brat he wants to be a top so bad #bully him til he cries
- ▶ # [REDACTED] getting his cherry popped #who said that on a gif of a 19/20yo wrestler getting skewers jammed into his scalp
- ▶ #yum dot com (on a gif of a wrestler clinging to the ropes, blood dripping down his face)
- ▶ # [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] your dom is showing put it away or ill do something drastic
- ▶ #jesus.... #he is easily folded (thumbs up emoji)
- ▶ #would be a shame if he bled all over his white gear
- ▶ #ughgugjbb my bonerrr... #his waist. the tummy scars. his arms. (on a photo a deathmatch wrestler took of their scarred torso)
- ▶ #first gif Hand behind back On knees. Typical

- ▶ #the wide posture he always has on his knees is so good. slut.
- ▶ #men saying fuck while out of breath (dizzy emoji) #it always gets me
- ▶ #they for sure did evil degrading faggery with eachother
- ▶ #they r fucking and i am hard
- ▶ #can they STOP doing needle spots it does something to me.
- ▶ #the way the stapler drags down his chest. I could die actually #██████'s face just covered in blood and taking it.
- ▶ #personally love him kneeling and smiling like a freak while getting punched in the head #he's so not normal about it #and neither am i!!
- ▶ #oh my goodness let me help you with that (tongue emoji) on a photo of a wrestler with a crimson mask
- ▶ #the belting part was the highlight but this part also got to me tbh #he does kinda smile in the second gif #and i think its very hot when he smiles when he's in pain <3
- ▶ #it's not my fault that he's hot when he's in pain !!
- ▶ #he just takes it so well
- ▶ #love is stored in the deathmatch

In order to compare, we must first be on the same page when it comes to definitions.

Deathmatch wrestling (also known as hardcore wrestling) is an ultraviolent form of professional wrestling where usual rules of count outs and disqualifications don't apply. This often results with the use of 'weapons'; commonly tempered glass panes, fluorescent light tubes, barbed wire, gusset plates, thumbtacks, staple guns, ladders, chairs, doors, tables. Less common but still seen are cinderblocks, needles, fire, peelers, graters, etc. The prevalence of each of these varies depending on the country. For example, American hardcore wrestling involves the use of doors more often than other countries, whereas in Japan, affixing things (such as aluminium cans cut in half, or graters) to wooden boards for opponents to be sent through is more common. There are a variety of types of hardcore matches, such as the deathmatch, a no DQ (disqualification), or a street fight.

BDSM stands for Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Sadism and Masochism; some of the letters have multiple corresponding words. It's an umbrella term used by those with non-normative relationships to others and specific activities. It also covers subcultures like leather, rubberists, crossdressers; anyone who identifies with the acronym.

I think that the deathmatch is to pro wrestling what BDSM is to sex. It's a hardcore version with fun bits added in. The main crossover between deathmatches and BDSM is the power struggle (domination/submission), and sadomasochism. There are also other similarities in the importance of informed consent, care, creativity, aftercare, and respect.

‘Oh, but it’s pro wrestling, it’s fake,’ I hear you say. I get it. I come from a family of UFC enthusiasts, and even just the idea of pro wrestling has my dad and brother shaking their heads. My mother doesn’t want to be involved in this conversation. She won’t watch UFC and looked very concerned when I explained what my merch t-shirt was all about (it had art of a wrestler with darts through their cheeks on the front).

Richard Siken has put this best, in his usual beautiful, artful way. “It’s fake, but it’s not. It’s art, but it’s not. They’re pretending but it doesn’t matter because they’re actually doing it, exhausting themselves as the acting evaporates.” Sure, it’s rigged; they both know who’s winning, but they are still wrestling for twenty minutes straight, and that’s before you even bring deathmatch weapons into it, and they start bleeding.

Blading is the practice within pro wrestling of cutting one's forehead with a piece of razor blade they kept hidden in their wrist tape. This happens well into the match, the blood mixes with sweat and looks like there's a whole lot more than there really is. Even if they're faking starting to bleed from say, their head bouncing off the ring post, they're still cutting themselves open for it.

And that's not even to mention how in deathmatches, the wrestlers are actually doing it. You can't really fake one hundred tiny cuts in your back from going through a pane of glass or being dropped on a bundle of light tubes. There's no faking that.

There's no faking being slapped. The crack through the room from hand across chest is as real as it comes. The crack of a kendo stick or belt across a back can't be faked either.

I digress, you get my point; they are doing extreme, hardcore stuff. Some of the stuff is even directly taken from the kinds of things involved in BDSM scenes: belting, cutting, slapping, piercing, etc.

It goes even further than simply sharing acts. They are exposed to the public. There is a voyeuristic nature to the crowd, an exhibitionist nature to the performer. The 'scene' includes the audience. The direct interpersonal, internal element between the two wrestlers takes a backseat to the feedback of the crowd. Any humiliation comes from their reaction, and any praise also comes from them.

Roland Barthes puts this well in his book *The World of Wrestling*: "[Wrestling] is a display, it takes up the ancient myths of public suffering and humiliation: the cross and the pillory. It is as if the wrestler is crucified in broad daylight and in the sight of all."

There's something very human about watching others suffer. It's fascinating, it's entertaining, it's hard to look at but you want to look anyway. Voyeurism and exhibitionism take this to extremes, but in the context of wrestling, or any other theatre for that matter, they are accepted and expected.

Neither deathmatch wrestling (or any other wrestling) or BDSM can be practised properly without consent- it's integral to making sure no one's getting anything they don't want. The concepts of Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK) and Consensual Non Consent (CNC) originating in the BDSM scene are key to deathmatch wrestling. RACK advocates for all participants to be well informed of the risks of the activity, and having been informed, they are of sound mind to consent. CNC is its own kink, but dives deeper into the idea of consent in these situations. It is consenting prior to the activity to have things (discussed and agreed upon prior) done to you (Eg. being hit over the head with a stack of fluorescent light tubes) without your express consent in the moment.

RACK was coined to improve on Safe, Sane and Consensual (SSC), which didn't acknowledge the fact that much of kink is not particularly safe (there are ways of making it safer, but it is not inherently safe, that's kinda the point), and the negative connotations 'sane' has within that context (implying that other acts are insane).

Alongside the importance of consent, deathmatches and BDSM also share an importance of care, trust and respect. It's pretty hard, I imagine, wrestling in such dangerous circumstances (in a ring full of glass, being dropped from heights, going through barbed wire nets) against someone you know doesn't respect you, or someone you don't trust to keep you safe. Neither could exist in a safe-ish way without care, trust and respect.

Aftercare (though not always called that) is a built in part of the deathmatch wrestling experience. Even just as the bell's rung to finish the match, opponents will sometimes hug, or share a beer in the ring, especially if it's a special occasion like someone's first match in the country, or even just if they're good friends. Apart from this,

backstage there's more hugs, more beers, food, smokes outside, and of course a debrief with everyone else who's still hanging around, all before anyone even changes out of their gear or wipes the blood off. There is always, of course, medical attention should anyone need it, and wrestlers often speak fondly of having to both go to A&E together after a match.

I was reminded of this practice as I was reading this excerpt from Kyle Kingsbury's *A History of Leather at Pride*: “‘At Tiffany’s Restaurant, on West Fourth near Christopher Street,’ (just around the corner from Stonewall Inn) ‘you would find leathermen having a burger and fries at 7 a.m. after a night at The Saint and Mineshaft. Dressed in their leathers, black T-shirts wet and torn, they’d eat and listen to conversations by drag queens bragging and moaning about their lost loves of the night before....’” Community and camaraderie blossoms from having trust and respect, and caring for each other.

There is then, the question as to whether or not the wrestlers are actually sadists, masochists, or sadomasochists. In turn, there is the question of if it really matters. They are already pretending some things, but actually doing others. Does it really matter if it's explicitly sexual/a physical turn on for them?

The common understanding is that sadism and masochism are inherently sexual, and this is true, but, as with all things, I believe there is a bit of leeway around this. Non-sexual BDSM is a thing that people do.

In my mind this is put in a similar category to mortification of the flesh in Catholicism. This was no doubt my unknowing entry point to kink growing up. I felt things when I saw an image of a priest lying prostrate, arms out, face to the floor in front of the altar. The idea of penitent self flagellation made sense to me. When I read *The Da Vinci Code* I was drawn to Silas, with his strange look and his metal chain cilice.

The context of religion is the one thing setting these practices apart from BDSM. In both contexts, these activities are practiced for how they put you in a certain headspace, whether you call that prayer or subspace, the difference is negligible. The mental aspect can be more important to some than the sexual when it comes to BDSM, and not all scenes are focused on the sexual.

In Dean Symmonds' chapter *The Body Ecstatic: The Masochism of Devotion as seen in Ritual Possession*, in *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms*, he states: "In order to truly qualify as a masochist, one must like the pain. One must like both what the pain does—strengthens a relationship, represents a direct connection between sadist and masochist, proves one's strength—as well as the embodied physical experience of pain itself." In this way, there is not always a direct link between masochism and sexual gratification. One must simply like it.

I think the answer to my first question is both yes and no. The sport for sure draws a certain type of person in; you have to be willing to endure pain in order to inflict it, and vice versa. But there are always outliers in both directions.

Given all the above theories and ideas, it's worth examining how wrestlers themselves interact with each other and speak (indirectly) about the crossover between deathmatch wrestling and BDSM. The selection of wrestlers is no doubt a showcase of my favourites, and not a proper or fully representative sample size.

Both of the quotes below are from Jon Moxley an American wrestler known for his penchant for hardcore matches, still competing in them as he nears forty.

"I have to admit I'm getting a little sick of barbed wire, I'm getting a little sick of glass, I'm getting a little sick of the taste of my own blood... but deep down, I love every second of it. I want every second of it." "The bad news is, I got the shit kicked outta me. The good news is, I kinda liked it."

Those two are from promos; a monologue where a wrestler talks to the audience or a camera to further the storyline that the matches tell. They say little about him as an actual person, but show that the character he plays (as close or far as that may be from his actual self) is essentially a masochist.

“It was the perfect kind of forum to take out your aggressions on your opponent ... And even when you’re getting beaten up yourself, you know, bleeding and falling on glass and stuff like that, it’s almost a strange kind of like... it puts you at peace.”

I was reminded of this third quote when I was reading an academic article (which I have since misplaced) about the internal experiences of BDSM, from both dom and sub perspectives. The ‘puts you at peace’ thing was described there differently from either perspective but essentially the same; it gets you out of your head and gives you something to focus on, you just *do or feel* and that’s it.

I've seen this idea of *just feeling* across other wrestlers. Many equate feeling that pain with feeling alive; it's bright, it's hot, it breaks you out of the mundanity of daily life.

One of Atticus Cogar's (an American wrestler) factionmates told a story on the Iron-On Wrestling podcast: they were in the car on their way to a GCW show and Atticus had been tired and moody the whole day leading up to it, and said during the car ride, "Ugh. I need to bleed."

Kasai Jun, a 50-year-old Japanese deathmatch wrestler, was interviewed by Project DEATH, where he reflected on why he still wrestles deathmatches. He remarks that no-one feels just how alive they are in their daily life. "But in a life or death battle in a deathmatch ring, after you step down from that ring, that's exactly what you feel. 'Ahh, I'm alive. I'm so grateful to be alive.'"

Where the first quotes from Moxley are from promos, these are outside kayfabe (the canon of wrestling storylines); they're from the actual people, not their characters. They perhaps better inform us on the question of whether wrestlers are sadists, masochists, or sadomasochists. Though, it is not a question that can really be answered by anyone except deathmatch wrestlers themselves, and I have yet to go to a match or tournament and ask any.

The pain of a deathmatch seems to be, for both wrestlers, what can break them out of a rut. It's something they want, or perhaps need. In order for it to be something they need, they must, to an extent, like it as in Symmonds' definition previously. In my opinion most deathmatch wrestlers (distinct from wrestlers who have simply done a deathmatch or two across the entirety of their career) exist on a sliding scale of masochism. It'd be pretty hard for that to be your job (or one of your jobs), if you didn't like it at least a little.

Lastly, we have my favourite wrestler, the Deathmatch Prince himself, Drew Parker. He's Welsh and started doing hardcore stuff when he was 20. In 2019 he was part of an interview panel with other deathmatch wrestlers for TNT Extreme Wrestling, and had some rather insightful things to say in terms of what this essay is covering.

When the topic of the post-deathmatch shower was brought up, Drew said this (bearing in mind for this shower you've just had 1,000 tiny bits of glass dug out of your back): "I think that's the best bit, it feels-like it's on the border of like pain and pleasure of like-" The one who asked the question interjects; "no it's not," Drew replies adamantly, "It is, it is."

Later in the show the panel is reacting to a match, and on the screen, Drew gets choked. One of the other wrestlers asks him, "Do you like being choked, Drew?" "Yeah, I love it." "Have you tried the 'ole asphyxiwank?" "No, I'm too scared that I'll hang myself."

When talking about how parents reacted to starting doing more hardcore stuff, he says his mum's reaction was "Do you have to do the blood wrestling?", to which he replied "I mean I don't *have* to, I just enjoy it."

Now, because Drew is my favourite, I am no doubt going to be projecting a bit of myself, and what I want him to be, onto him. Despite this, I can't see past what I've just quoted him as saying, nor can I see past how enthused he is about deathmatch wrestling, how quick he is to smash light tubes over his own head, or how much he smiles when he's getting beaten up and doing the beating up during matches, not to mention when he begged for more when belted in a match against Atticus Cogar. All of that to say, I would not be terribly surprised if he was a masochist.

This leads me into my last point; that similarly to BDSM and leather communities, the deathmatch scene is both a community to all, and a lifestyle/subculture for some.

Wrestling itself is hard enough on the body, nevermind bringing weapons into it. Deathmatch wrestlers are often forced to retire earlier than they'd like simply because of physical wear & tear. For example, one of my favourites not yet mentioned is Thumbtack Jack, a German wrestler who had to retire from deathmatch wrestling in 2010 after fracturing his vertebrae in a botched move.

However, many want to keep doing it. In 2023, Drew announced his retirement from wrestling entirely, getting a proper job. However, he only lasted 10 months before he returned.

Announcing his comeback to wrestling and deathmatches on twitter (9 Jan 2024), he said, "One year ago today I started my 'forever' job which resulted in me dreading waking up every morning and rethinking my whole life." He came back with renewed passion and determination to improve the sport in the UK; he couldn't imagine going without it, despite the toll.

Deathmatch wrestling and BDSM have much in common, both in activities done, the culture around it, and the kinds of people they draw. I hope this essay has given a bit of an introduction and overview of the topic. No doubt there are other more in depth articles out there, but I thought I'd get my own thoughts out.

This exploration has prompted a few questions I do not have the expertise or time to answer. I will leave them to you to contemplate.

- If people do deathmatches and BDSM (both include many of the same activities) for similar reasons are the two not the same thing?

- How much does the context really change the meaning of activities? Kink demonstration shows are a thing, with a similar crowd dynamic.

- Can deathmatch wrestlers truly be considered masochists? If they are, why not just do BDSM, what about wrestling calls to them? Or is wrestling it's own, unacknowledged form of BDSM?

If you're the fanfiction reading type, I would recommend (if you have an account) reading on A03 sunsetflips' series *The Line Begins to Blur*. It touches on the relationship wrestlers have with pain, and the potential for kink there.

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