

Greeks Left Their Mark on Pro Wrestling

By Steve Frangos

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From the early 1900's until the 1930's, Greeks dominated the sport of wrestling in North America. When wrestling was a legitimate sport, Jim Londos was the undefeated champion who was as recognized a national figure as Jack Dempsey.

No one knows how many Greek immigrants became professional wrestlers, but it is clearly documented that they quickly became a recognized and widely feared contingent. Those who know a little something about the very beginnings of Greek athletic competition in North America will find limiting this account to the early 1900's a mistake.

Greek strongmen were actively performing across the United States by the early 1880's. Theodore Costaky was typical of this era's strongman/wrestler. One brief New York Times' account "Greek George's Challenge" provides us more than enough information about this period, as well as the sensationalized showmanship which was already part of this sport.

"Tedory George Costaky, known in the sporting world as 'Greek George,' the wrestler, arrived from Boston yesterday and immediately posted \$100 for a match with any athlete at Greco-Roman or catch-as-catch-can style for a purse not to exceed \$500 a side. This offer, he said last evening, would stand until his match with Charles Green, the English champion, which is to take place per agreement within four weeks from January 21 at Philadelphia or Scranton. It is to be catch-as-catch-can, Lancashire rules, best two out of three falls, no holds barred, for the championship of the world. During his stay in the city, Greek George may possibly give an exhibition of horseback wrestling. He has been in the West and South since his last visit here, and had enough engagements to keep him in good form (February 4, 1889)."

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Others will contend that limiting this account to wrestlers whose principal fame was in the 1920's through the 1930's eliminates especially noted champions like Johnny (The Golden Greek) DePaulo (1932-97), George "The Zebra Man" Bollas, John and Chris Tolos, and many others.

Then again, other readers will rightfully contend that I do not trace the origins of Greeks in American wrestling directly from the carnival and circus midways as a misrepresentation of the documented facts.

But what particular individuals within the Greek American community may know of our collective past is one thing. What the general readership of the National Herald knows about Greek American history is quite another.

With no fully documented historical account of Greek immigrants and American wrestling, we are unfortunately forced to severely limit the scope of this account.

Various Internet listings of famous Greek sports figures have largely forgotten the vast majority of these once nationally and even internationally acclaimed athletes, but these professional Greek wrestlers often worked for decades. There were both regional performers and those who worked the national circuits. Not every man was a prize-winning belt holder, but all were seasoned, dedicated athletes who performed almost on a daily basis.

As even this limited listing attests to the fact that professional Greek wrestlers were once com-

manding figures in the world of American professional wrestling.

DAPPER DRESSER

LETHAL ADVERSARY

Steve Bartis, of Spartan origin, was billed as "The Greek Challenger." Bartis was a junior heavyweight with tremendous skill who was always a lethal adversary in the ring. Outside the ring, he was a dapper dresser.

Paul Bozell, another Spartan, was known as a big, strong and particularly mean wrestler, whose career peaked around 1932.

Nick Bozinis (died 1926) first became known as a wrestler in Elmira, New York and eventually made his way down to New York City. Weighing only 190 pounds, Bozinis regularly defeated wrestlers 40-50 pounds heavier than himself. At one point in his prime, Bozinis had difficulty securing matches, since there came a time when few professional wrestlers dared to meet him in the ring. He eventually opened a traveling carnival with James Stratas.

Kostas Davelis was a successful wrestler who fought for the Greek army during the Balkan Wars. After his professional career ended, Davelis became a referee.

In the 1920's, Bill Demetral, "The Greek Devil," was a top wrestler with brutal skill. Very early in his professional fighting career, Demetral curiously was also a professional boxer. Once retired from sports, he became a Chicago policeman.

Bill Demetrious, another Spartan-born wrestler, was known for his bar and chancery hold, which he developed into a powerful weapon within the ring.

Mike Dobrois, known as "The Slasher" and based in New York City, claimed that the females tattooed on his forearms were among his most notable fans.

Tom George, known as the "Greek Giant Killer," was killed in a plane crash while flying to Europe with five other wrestlers for a USO (United Service Organizations) exhibition tour during World War II.

Chris Jordan (died 1925), based in Birmingham, Alabama, was a star welterweight "open to anyone in his (weight) class," who regularly defeated many professionals who greatly outweighed him.

Gust Karras (1902-76) was a one-time national middleweight champion, performed in all the major arenas of Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska and Colorado from the early 1900's until his retirement from the sport sometime in the 1930's. Karras came to the United States when he was 14 and lived in Chicago before moving to Chillicothe, Missouri. After he retired, Karras became a very successful promoter, working out of St. Joseph, Missouri with wrestling interests extending into northwestern sections of that state.

As Bill Scott recalled in his 1961 column, "Wise Owl: Column Recalled," "Gust used to be a gallant wrestler of note himself. He had wrestled with the circus and carnivals for years before making it big on the pro circuit. Then sturdy and muscular, Karras was known as the 'Chillicothe Kewpie Dolly,' a tag hardly fitting, but one in keeping with the Runyanesque pattern which has been woven through his career."

Wrestling promoter Jack Pfefer

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always called Steve Karas, the "Original Karas." Pfefer's point was that, out of all the Greek wrestlers then appearing throughout the country with the last name "Karas," his wrestler was the first professional wrestler to enter the ring with that name. Steve Karas was based in Boston, and his career crested in the early 1930's.

Konstantinos Kerveras (Konstantinos Tsamopoulos, 1889-1970), "The Greek Lion" was a wrestler of national standing whose frequent triumphs appeared in the National Herald (see "Reclaiming a Greek Lion: The Story of Gus Kerveras," July 8, 2005 edition).

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John Kilonis, a one-time resident of Manchester, New Hampshire, was heavyweight champion in 1919.

George Kondilis was recognized as one of the great Greek wrestlers before Londos appeared on the scene. With his bushy mustache and vicious style of wrestling, Kondilis fit well into the "Mustache Pete" stereotype of Greek wrestlers before Londos' movie-star good looks displaced that imagery.

George Kotsonaros, "The Gorilla Man," was so named because he once appeared in a movie with that title. "Kots" was a very popular wrestler whose work in silent films

made him a rich man before the 1929 stock market crash took the majority of his wealth. He died in a car wreck in July 1933 at the age of 45.

Jim Londos (Christopher Theophilus) (1897 - August 19, 1975) was long cited as the most popular wrestling champion in the history of the sport. Known as the "Golden Greek of the Mat," many Greek Americans grew up hearing their parents and grandparents say, "drink your milk, if you want to grow up strong like Jim Londos."

John Maxos (1930-31), billed as the "Greek Hercules," was seen as the younger understudy of Jim Londos and the rightful heir to the title of national wrestling champion, a powerful, skilled wrestler who made a great deal of money and then retired to Greece, where he became a Greek Orthodox priest.

Prince Mihalakas, who wrestled in the mid-1930's, was not of royal blood, but he was definitely a member of the flashy showman school of wrestling.

Leo Papinnos wrestled in the 200-pound weight division in the 1930's, retiring to Council Bluffs, Iowa to run a night club sometime in the 1940's.

Jim Sarandos, known as "The Smiling Spartan," performed primarily in the 1930's, and was an especially strong draw in Boston.

George Tragos, an Olympic medal winner, was considered by many professional wrestlers to personify the "catch-as-catch-can" Greek wrestler. Aside from his career as a professional wrestler Tragos also worked with Tom Packs, the Greek wrestling promoter. Today, Tragos is perhaps best remem-

bered as the trainer of Lou Thesz, last of the true world-class catch-as-catch-can wrestling champions.

Demetrios Tofalos, another Olympic medal winner, was not only a professional wrestler in North America, but also a noted trainer and promoter. Tofalos spent time in vaudeville, and was a tireless promoter of amateur athletes among early Greek immigrants.

George Vassels, billed as the "Greek Idol" by his manager Jack Pfefer, was called "one of the brilliant Greeks of the Golden Days" of wrestling in the 1930's.

George Zaharias (Vetoyanis, 1908 - May 22, 1984) had a long and complex career not only as a wrestler, but also as a promoter. Known as "The Crying Greek from Cripple Creek," Zaharias also wrestled with his two brothers, Chris and Tom, and his nephew Babe, as "The Wrestling Outlaws."

Zaharias' career as a wrestler and promoter has been overshadowed by his marriage to Mildred Ella "Babe" Didriksen. Didriksen, the daughter of Norwegian immigrants who always used her married name, won the gold medal in track and field at the 1932 Olympics. George Zaharias' talent as a sports promoter has never been adequately considered in Babe Zaharias' rise as one of the first American female golf professionals.

This is only a partial listing of Greek wrestlers of the Golden Era. For those who have only seen the clowns of the current "spectacle" which is professional wrestling today, it is nearly impossible to understand the athletic skill these giants once exhibited all across North America.