

back, and I ached all over. He told me, 'If you are going to be a wrestler, you got to learn to take it.'"⁵¹ The punishment continued and Herman never caved. He trusted the grizzled vet, and Grobmier smartened him up to all aspects of the business. Training lasted six weeks, and by the time they were finished, Herman was ready to take the plunge and have his first professional match.⁵² Notably, Charley Grip, the man who spiked Camden's attendance for wrestling during the 1930s, was another local influence for Herman Rohde during that time-frame.⁵³ As a promoter and businessman, Grip was always accessible to the youngsters looking for advice, and was seen as a mentor of sorts. Grip actually had lost his handle on the Camden promotion several years earlier, in 1938, having been a victim of wrestling politics.

The same wrestling politics were going to have a say in Rohde's pro debut, where and when it happened, and if at all. The industry was tightly controlled by various syndicates, and booking agents often exercised much more authority than promoters. In fact, promoters were entirely beholden to syndicate leaders because of the talent they managed. They could make or break promoters by either supplying or withholding headline wrestlers, and in some cases, they could refuse to provide performers at all. If they wanted to push someone out, they could help set up a cross-town promotion and book their box office attractions there instead. In Southern New Jersey, Grip was not the preferred promoter, and booking agent Rudy Dusek helped ensure brothers Frank and Ray Hanly survived the wrestling war and came out on top in Camden. The Hanlys were the local men on the ground running the day-to-day operations, but Dusek was the real power behind the territory.

The expansive Dusek circuit extended from New York City to Washington, D.C. and included Philadelphia and Baltimore. In addition to his leadership duties, Rudy was still an active wrestler and competed up and down the east coast. Like Grobmier, he was originally trained for the mat by Farmer Burns, and had engaged in grappling mayhem for 20 years. He also trained three of his brothers for pro wrestling, Emil, Ernie, and Joe Dusek, and collectively, they were billed as the notorious "Riot Squad." Grobmier had known Rudy for years and was a mainstay in Dusek-controlled towns. In Camden, over the prior months, he worked as a heel, and wrestled the likes of Gino Garibaldi, Tommy O'Toole, and Cowboy Luttrall. For Herman Rohde, Grobmier was his closest contact to Dusek, and it seems altogether likely that Fred would have connected the two, setting up Herman's initial booking.

However, Rohde told the story a different way. During an interview with the *Camden Courier-Post* in 1984, he claimed that he met Dusek while running on the beach in Atlantic City, and that led to his debut match.⁵⁴ As for who specifically handled the booking, Herman attributed that to Jess McMahon, a longtime force in both boxing and wrestling in the northeast.⁵⁵ McMahon worked for Dusek and assisted with most of the administrative tasks associated with the office. Once Herman was penciled in as a member of the Dusek troupe, McMahon established his first date, and this marked Herman's official introduction to the mat game. But the established history of wrestling has recorded his pro debut in a strange way, mostly because of a string of discrepancies that have perpetuated for decades. Only when

As an in-ring performer, Herman's abilities were diversifying and his matches were becoming more layered. Usually the underdog, he would garner immense support and carry the crowd toward a hot finish, only to miss a flying tackle or land awkwardly on the ropes, causing his defeat. His attitude was visible and changed as the story unfolded. At times, he'd bicker with the referee, and occasionally let the official have it, as he did in Washington, D.C. in May 1944. He had been fully engaged in a contest with his rival Don Evans when referee Babe Craddock interjected himself into the fracas. Upset by Craddock's actions, Rohde punched him, setting up a special "grudge" match for the next week, which "Dutch" won in seven minutes.⁸² His reactions, facial movements, and timing were improving exponentially, and regardless of the feud or the angle, he put forth one hundred per cent and maximized the return.

Facing Laverne Baxter in Baltimore in January 1945, his babyface persona was put to the test. In their 36-minute war, "very few of the known illegal tactics were missed" by the two combatants, according to the *Baltimore Sun*. They "fought, grappled, and scratched" throughout, and Baxter's arm was raised in victory after Rohde suffered a shoulder injury. Baxter targeted his weakened limb and forced Rohde to give up.⁸³ Rohde kept his popularity despite the rough stuff, and at times, he was as violent, if not more so, than his opponents. He continued to chase Babe Sharkey and the latter's heavyweight championship going into 1945, and they had a series of big matches in Washington, D.C. After a 60-minute draw on January 17, and then a Sharkey victory on February 7, the *Washington Evening Star* was still impressed by Rohde's cunning, and called him the "heir apparent" to the throne.⁸⁴

Fans were behind Rohde all the way. They were loud in their support following a win and similarly vocal in their objections to a sour finish. His Washington faithful actually tried to jump into the ring and help him against Don Evans on March 21, 1945.⁸⁵ Up against Joe Savoldi in Asbury Park on March 26, he demonstrated his wherewithal in defending himself against the dropkick by falling flat to the mat in a flash whenever Savoldi went for his patented move. Lending to the entertainment value of the bout, Savoldi did the same exact thing when Rohde went for the maneuver. The "bout turned into a roughhouse affair," and punches were flying in all directions. Following a collision in the middle of the ring, Savoldi regained his senses enough to pin "Dutch" and take the win.⁸⁶ In another "riotous" battle that went 30-minutes to a draw, Rohde went toe-to-toe with Michele Leone in Camden, and both men were "fouling at will." The *Camden Courier-Post* noted that "Rohde finished strong, dishing out as much punishment as he absorbed."⁸⁷

In March 1945, Rohde was examined by the U.S. Army for induction into the service, and this time around, he passed. He was given three weeks to report to Fort Dix, New Jersey, and it seemed that his wrestling career was going to be interrupted by the war, but he was granted an extension in early April, and fulfilled a handful of dates in familiar haunts.⁸⁸ He wrestled Emil Dusek in Camden on April 16, losing after missing a flying tackle and sailing through the ropes into the front row. The referee counted him out and "Dutch" was taken to the locker room area on a stretcher.⁸⁹ The next day, it was reported that Rohde was a patient at West Jersey Hospital with a serious

minutes to a draw in Houston. Longson won the first fall with a piledriver and Buddy tied things up in the second with his spread eagle hold. At the very end, with the clock ticking down, Longson was at the mercy of Buddy's aggressiveness, and the entire scenario was played out perfectly.²⁸

The Longson-Rogers feud was just beginning, that much was sure. Four days after his bout with Longson in Houston, Buddy wrestled the 200-pound champion, LeRoy McGuirk, in Dallas. For the match to be considered for the NWA world junior heavyweight title, Buddy had to drop weight, and newspaper reports claimed it was as much as 16-pounds.²⁹ Such a dramatic weight loss was probably exaggerated for the storyline, but nevertheless played a role in the third fall of the contest. With the match tied at one-fall apiece, Rogers had McGuirk in an airplane spin, hoping to finish his rival off, but succumbed to dizziness and fell to the canvas. McGuirk promptly pinned him to retain his crown.³⁰ The "dizziness" was attributed to his weight loss, but he was credited for giving the champ a tough bout, and rematches were planned.³¹ During the summer of 1945, Rogers saw a number of familiar faces arrive in the territory from back east; among them, Maurice LaChappelle, Don Evans, and Lou Plummer.

Life on the Houston circuit was arduous, but it was paying off. Rogers was making good money, gaining experience and networking, and relishing in his time off. The beaches of Galveston were a particular favorite of his, and the nightlife in and around Houston was plentiful. The Cotton Club and the Old Barn were exciting spots, and the dance scene at the Aragon Club never failed to entertain. Buddy enjoyed socializing, but in his personal life, he was accounted for. The 24-year-old was in a relationship with Ellen Marion Wyman, a talented former night club singer, three years his senior.³² The daughter of Finnish parents, Ellen grew up in Philadelphia on South Dover Street and attended three years of high school.³³ In the late 1930s, she gained regional fame as a vocalist and dancer, and performed in clubs in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. At some point prior to 1941, she was briefly married and gave birth to a son named Allin.³⁴

It is unclear as to when Ellen and Buddy met, but it could have occurred at any time between 1940 and 1945. Ellen, using the name, "Ella Wyman," performed in many South Jersey establishments, including the Penguin Club, Betty's Café, and Club Lido. She was advertised as a dancer at Murray's Inn in Haddonfield as late as April 1945, and soon departed for Texas when Buddy made his big move in May.³⁵ On Aug. 10, the couple was married in Houston, and received their official documentation from W.D. Miller, the Harris County Clerk.³⁶ That evening at the Coliseum, Buddy and his longtime foe, Don Evans, put on a wrestling clinic, and fans were on their feet screaming and cheering in response. Evans switched gears mid-match and began fouling, culminating in his disqualification and Buddy's victory.³⁷ Before the end of the month, Rogers lost his Texas title to Ted (King Kong) Cox in Houston, but regained it the following week on Sept. 7.³⁸

Emil and Ernie Dusek, newcomers in Texas during the month of September, were the last people Rogers wanted to see. The duo brought along a message to Morris Sigel from their brother Rudy, who insisted that Rogers owed them two months work for breaking a contract when he left earlier in the year.³⁹ Buddy disagreed, and was still sore about being manipulated and pushed

persuaded him to give it a shot.¹⁰ Louis soon went into secret training to learn the essentials of the profession with Rogers as his primary coach.¹¹ Buddy had faced off against a number of boxers, including Primo Carnera, Tony Galento, and Natie Brown, and understood the distinctive limitations that fighters characteristically brought to the wrestling ring. Interestingly, back in 1948, Rogers told a New York publication that he wanted to face then-champion Louis in a boxer versus wrestler contest. “I believe I could win that one,” Rogers declared.¹²

Rogers and Louis traveled and trained together during the weeks leading up to Joe’s mat debut, slated for March 16, 1956, in Washington, D.C.¹³ In addition to learning how to properly bump and safely maneuver around the ring, Louis attempted to lose weight and strengthen his conditioning. Joe admitted to being 240 pounds, but a sportswriter for the *Arizona Daily Star* noticed the “roll of fat” that protruded “over the top of his trunks” during an appearance the year prior.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Rogers successfully taught Louis “about six holds,” and on March 16, Joe knocked out Rocky Lee with two of his famous right crosses to officially begin his wrestling career.¹⁵ His match lasted about 11 minutes and the crowd of 4,179 at the Uline Arena was overjoyed by Louis’s performance.¹⁶ After the card, a journalist asked Louis if transitioning to a pro wrestler was undignified for a former boxing world heavyweight champion. “Who says so?” Louis asked, irritated by the question. “It’s an honest living. It’s not stealing.”¹⁷

In late March 1956, Rogers escaped the chilly north for a brief solo tour of Florida before being joined by Louis on April 2 in Tampa. Together, they began a grueling six-straight-night run of matches, which tested Joe’s aptitude and commitment to wrestling. He confessed that he was unsure of his future in the mat business, and the trip around the Florida circuit was going to help him make up his mind.¹⁸ It didn’t take long for Louis to realize that he disliked the traveling.¹⁹ Rushing out of an arena after a bout to catch a plane to the next city was a nerve-wracking task, and left little time for needed rest. Rogers was a busy man. He was in charge of booking Louis, working as his agent and ring mentor, and arranging for their transportation.²⁰ He also wrestled each night, battling the likes of Gino Garibaldi and Bob Langevin. But handling Louis was his principal job, and when something irregular surfaced, it was Buddy’s responsibility to smooth things over.

On the third night of their journey, controversy sparked up in St. Petersburg. Louis was so irked by the circumstances that he almost refused to perform. Rogers was on the spot as expected, but the matter was far beyond his control. The local promoter, Pat O’Hara, would only allow a white audience to attend his April 4 show at the Armory, claiming the facility was too small for a desegregated crowd. The main reason, it was stated, was because there wasn’t a separate rest room for whites and blacks.²¹ Louis was surprised and upset by the news and told Rogers, “I ain’t going on.” Rogers and *New York Post* sportswriter Milton Gross watched the former champ leave the dressing room. Buddy explained that it was the second time that day that they had encountered racial discrimination. At the Tampa airport after their arrival, they went inside for a bite to eat. Instead of putting Louis and Rogers amongst the public, they sat them in a secluded back room. Louis was disgusted and told Buddy, “[I] lost my appetite.”²²

And fortunately, the angle was in motion before Buddy's life entered crisis mode.

But to further sell the heat between the two wrestlers, Rogers appeared on TV and talked trash, just like old times. He instigated Bruno and his fan base, focusing on Sammartino's Italian background, and poked and prodded until he got the reaction he wanted.³² On camera, things initially started with Buddy flatly refusing to defend against Bruno, and fans saw right through that ruse. They knew Rogers was scared, and that Sammartino had his number. "I'll face him when I'm good and ready," the champion defiantly declared.³³ He threatened to ruin the Pittsburgh strongman "financially and physically," and refused to put his title on the line for anything less than \$25,000.³⁴ With his chance at the belt hanging in the balance, Sammartino made a bold move. "Sammartino is taking 50 per cent of the gate, and [personally] paying Rogers \$25,000," Garden promoter Walter Johnston announced. "We will have to sell out for Sammartino to make a couple of thousand dollars."³⁵

It was all part of the storyline, but it sold perfectly. The highly anticipated Rogers versus Sammartino contest was scheduled for May 17, 1963, and was promoted in the newspaper as early as May 3.³⁶ That gave McMahon two weeks to build upon the excitement. A man of the people, Sammartino carried heavy emotional support, and the Italian populace in the New York metropolitan area rallied to his side in record numbers.³⁷ He was friendly, humble, and during interviews, he would often speak Italian, connecting him to the audience on a personal level. Rogers still had enthusiastic fans, but the up-swell in popularity for Sammartino couldn't be ignored. For that reason, Buddy wanted an agreement from McMahon for a high-profile rematch with Bruno during the summer, under the presumption that he would regain his health. The money to be made from their feud was substantial and he didn't want to miss out. With a lot of rest and prescribed treatment, Rogers hoped to be back in position to win a rematch from Bruno by Aug..

Promises were made and Rogers was comfortable with their long-term plan. He worked on a strategy for his bout with Sammartino and fulfilled several mandatory appearances in Newark and Washington. On May 4 at the Newark Armory, he briefly fought with Johnny Barend, and then put his foe in the figure-four. Barend was immobilized and injured by the hold, ending their bout before the initial bell even rang.³⁸ Buddy's physical effort was minimal, and it's assumed a similarly abbreviated bout occurred at the Washington Coliseum on May 13 between Rogers and Bobo Brazil. Rogers was disqualified for refusing to release a hold in that contest.³⁹ In *The Ring* magazine, Nat Loubet acknowledged these short matches, and noted that the "Nature Boy" had experienced a "physical disability since late April or early May." He pointed out that his recent bouts each had been "completed in less than seventy seconds."⁴⁰

Vince McMahon was the master manipulator at the center of things. His dealings with Rogers, and then separately with Sammartino, were individually crafted to appease both men. It was a delicate operation, and Vince handled his star performers with care and immense skill. Years after the fact, Sammartino revealed his perspective of the May 1963 match with Rogers, and explained that he entered the ring to dethrone him, truly believing the