



## 1 THE BEGINNING TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2014—10:06 A.M.

*This is a sight no one was supposed to see. Be it by fortune or the bureaucratic design of WWE brass, all signs suggested WWE Superstar Daniel Bryan would surface at WrestleMania 30 in a memorably competitive match yet in a far less marquee position than the main event bout for the WWE World Heavyweight Championship. He'd have been a contender for show-stealer but not positioned to make history, just a midshow blip on the radar of fans around the world during the thirtieth edition of WWE's grandest event.*

*Instead, Bryan is emerging from a private car parked at the mouth of New York City's Hard Rock Cafe. He's about to make a grand entrance into not just this morning's press event but what will be the most significant week in his career.*

*That signature beard is unmistakable, though the crisp suit he's wearing—a rarity—feels only slightly "Bryanized" by the shade of his shimmering maroon tie. Cameras flash, and members of the press squeeze in tight to capture a modest, five-foot-eight former vegan who quite quickly stirs a supportive reaction from a notoriously opinionated Big Apple crowd.*

*"Yes! Yes! Yes!" A simple, direct, and infectious string of words serves as entrance music for Bryan as he crosses the red carpet and pauses beneath a telltale marquee beaming WRESTLEMANIA 30 in its LED glow. The synchronized*

## YES!

*"Yes!" chants drown out the late-morning Manhattan traffic in Times Square, and Bryan joins the throng for a brief, impromptu rally of sorts.*

*At this moment, Bryan stands a mere dozen blocks from the site of the inaugural WrestleMania, which emanated from world-famous Madison Square Garden almost three decades ago. Then, Vince McMahon's first major event was the symbolic underdog looking to sink its teeth into pop culture and create a worldwide phenomenon. It's fitting that Daniel Bryan's own fifteen-year journey to the main event of the "Show of Shows," WrestleMania, makes this all-important stop in the heart of New York City.*

*Bryan's forged his share of memories in this metropolis, yet this day is different. This is the beginning of a week even he perhaps never believed he'd live. On his Road to WrestleMania, this moment marks the final steps toward his ultimate destination: the WWE World Heavyweight Championship match at the biggest WrestleMania ever.*

*There's the ring within which he'll compete, and then there are the lingering visions of the ring he'll slide onto his fiancée's finger in eleven days. Bryan's experiencing the most significant moment in his professional career, but in his personal life, he's in the middle of wedding-day preparations with WWE Diva Brie Bella. A beloved couple in the eyes of adoring fans around the globe, "Branial" is still negotiating table assignments for their nuptial celebration while readying themselves to compete at WWE's Show of Shows. There can be no more meaningful month—week, really—than this if you're Aberdeen, Washington's bearded son.*

*In Bryan's case, in mere days, thirty years of WrestleMania culminate simultaneously with a squared-circle Manifest Destiny, a "Yes!" Movement. On that day, a fairy tale unfolds for Daniel Bryan, and the so-called Face of WWE stands to become a bit more bewhiskered.*

WWE recently asked many of their successful Superstars to take a personality inventory. In theory, these tests are able to assess personal qualities, such as sociability, prudence, and interpersonal sensitivity. The idea is that different professions require different personal characteristics, but these sorts of analytics had never been done with professional wrestlers. If WWE could find out the personality traits of their

## DANIEL BRYAN

most successful Superstars, perhaps when they were recruiting, it would give them more information about the likelihood of a new signee being successful. I was one of the many people chosen to take the test.

The test involved reading many different statements and then indicating if the statement was true or false. For example, one statement would be: "I would want to be a professional race car driver." My answer: "False. I would not want to be a professional race car driver." Another example: "I rarely lose my temper." My answer: "True." Stuff like that. You respond to hundreds of those types of statements and voilà! Therein are your personality traits. In theory.

I actually enjoyed taking the test and was interested to hear the results. The next day I met with a woman to talk about them. Everything was done on a percentile basis, and as we went over the results, she became more and more baffled. In all the primary markers except one (learning approach, for which I was in the eighty-fourth percentile), I scored low. And I mean *very* low. For interpersonal sensitivity, I was in the bottom eleventh percentile. For the adjustment category, the bottom ninth percentile. Sociability, bottom third. But the one that really puzzled her was my score for ambition, which was the lowest she had ever seen in her history of administering this kind of testing and data. I was in the bottom one percentile.

She asked me how I had managed to be so successful given that I seem to have no drive, few social skills, and an inherent apathy toward most of the ideas our modern business culture seems to find so important.

"I have no idea," I said. "I just love to wrestle. The success has come mostly by luck."

My "lack of ambition" must have been a part of my personality even from my inception, because I stayed in the womb for over ten months. When my wife, Bri,\* heard the story, she said it explained me perfectly. She could just imagine me being completely satisfied sitting there with an umbilical cord for a feeding tube, being

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\*In text, Daniel Bryan refers to his wife, Brianna, as Bri, who is known to WWE fans as Brie Bella.

## YES!

constantly fed and warm and never wanting to come out. When they finally induced my mother, one can imagine how painful it must have been. My mom, Betty, was a small woman, and when I, Bryan Lloyd Danielson, finally decided to come out on May 22, 1981, I was more than ten pounds. Looking back at the pictures today, I'm the fattest baby I've ever seen. More importantly, I seem to always be smiling. It doesn't take much to make me happy.

My mother has told me I was very quiet. I spent a lot of time on my own because I wasn't overly social, which is essentially the same as now. My father, Donald "Buddy" Danielson, remembered me being



easygoing but also having a really stubborn side. My dad's most consistent example of this involved cookies, which could be my favorite food group. He always talked about this time I was reaching for a cookie and he told me no. I reached again and my dad slapped my hand, then again said no. I started crying but

continued reaching for the cookie. Each time my dad would lightly slap my hand, and each time I would cry a little harder, relentlessly reaching for the cookie. Telling the story, he howled with laughter but never did say whether he eventually gave me the cookie.

As a young child, I had a tendency to follow my older sister, Billie Sue, around everywhere. Our relationship growing up is probably why, even today, she remains very nurturing and protective of me. Billie Sue was—and is—so much more social than I am. I just followed her around, happy as a clam, and listened to whatever she said. I picked up on whatever she did. For example, when I first learned to talk, I didn't have a stutter, but my sister did. As I spoke more and more, I started to stutter as well. Billie Sue grew out of her speech issue way before I grew out of mine, which probably wasn't until I was nearly twelve years old.



## 2 “YES!” CONFERENCE TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2014—11:16 A.M.

*Twelve hours and two hundred miles earlier, a kendo-stick-carrying Daniel Bryan appeared on WWE Monday Night Raw to ferociously batter one of the game’s most successful stars: Triple H, his WrestleMania opponent and thirteen-time world champion. Engulfed by Manhattan bustle, Bryan now prepares to share a stage with his foil—plus the likes of Hulk Hogan, John Cena, and Batista—at the final press conference before sports-entertainment’s annual spectacle.*

*WWE production staff members in headsets scurry through halls behind a stage at the Hard Rock Cafe while media start to fill seats for the official WrestleMania 30 press conference. In a quieter nook, Bryan decompresses with his Bella bride-to-be, Brie. Minutes before the live event kicks off, the could-be WWE World Heavyweight Champion feels the self-imposed pressure of speaking in front of the NYC media. According to Bryan, he pressed his suit in his hotel room until 4 A.M. because he is “pretty bad” at ironing, obsessing over creases and seams while tackling the anxiety of this public address.*

*“That stuff makes me more nervous than wrestling in front of seventy thousand people,” Bryan reveals. “I am comfortable wrestling. I have fun*

## YES!

*wrestling. You put me in some spandex in front of a group of people, I'm a hundred percent fine. You put me in a suit in a room of fifty press people and I get really nervous."*

*Anxious or not, you wouldn't know it when Daniel Bryan hits the podium. He picks up on the theme of "dreams," first discussed by Triple H, who's already spoken immediately prior to his bearded rival. Bryan's dream becomes incredible reality at WrestleMania 30, and he is ripe with gratitude toward the WWE Universe—those who have supported him up to this moment.*

*"I'm here because of the people," he says to the crowd in attendance. "They would not let their voices be denied."*

*The speech is impassioned, and there is much "Yes!"-ing, only to be eclipsed by an uncomfortable photo op (confrontation, more so) with Triple H, Batista, and Randy Orton—the three men Bryan will potentially kick, twist, and propel himself toward through the ropes at high speeds days later. Photographers get the shot as Bryan and his fellow performers share a pose that definitively represents this year's 'Mania. He's the focus. It's his path warmed by the spotlights.*

*Bryan walks away from the platform with the relief of a well-delivered statement, although he's still shaking off the remnant feelings about his previous press conference address around WWE's second-biggest annual extravaganza.*

*"I felt like SummerSlam was a fail," Bryan admits about his first-time press event speech months before. "This, I feel I did very well. It's always good to do something that puts you out of your comfort zone and you improve at it."*

*Bryan's next stop is New Orleans, and his Road to WrestleMania is about to switch from turf to sky. He, his lady fair, and a bevy of fellow Superstars exit Midtown en route to La Guardia Airport for a 3:30 P.M. departure to "NOLA."*

*Checked in and comfortably waiting, the bearded Superstar sits with his suit jacket across his lap and Brie immediately beside him. The flight looks to be star-studded; a glance around the waiting space spies six WWE Divas, three 400-plus-pound giants (Big Show, Mark Henry, and the*

## DANIEL BRYAN

*Great Khali), and even the man holding the prize Bryan's fought his entire life to wear: WWE World Heavyweight Champion Randy Orton. Suddenly the airline seating area resembles an arena locker room.*

*There's a unique mellow about the talent congregated outside the plane gate, following such an important event. It's a brief calm before the WrestleMania-week storm into which they're about to fly. The flight boards, and Bryan, his fiancée, and the other extraordinary passengers embark on their voyage to destiny. The next time they set foot on the ground, they'll have arrived at the home of the Show of Shows.*

A good six months before I started my professional wrestling career, I was a senior sitting in an English class where we were all reading our essays aloud. The teacher, Dr. Carter, liked arranging our desks in a U-shape around the room, so we didn't have to go to the front of the class. Stand up, read your essay, immediately sit down—that was all we had to do. I was terrified.

Some people thrive when they're being looked at and feed off the energy from being put in the spotlight. Not me. I hated it. Ever since I was a kid I've been shy. Personality is an incredible, fascinating thing. We are all born with certain tendencies and predilections in terms of the sorts of things we enjoy. Some of it's nature, some of it's nurture, but it's one of life's many amazing mysteries. We are all unique.

Watching my sister's children grow up, I marvel at how different they both are and how they got that way. She and I are equally different. For one, I don't think she ever had a problem speaking in front of people. Even now, she seems to do it with the utmost ease. At my wedding rehearsal, I put her on the spot. Not because I wanted to, but mostly because I am pretty much clueless on how any sort of practical thing works, including weddings and all the surrounding mayhem. I learned a little late that, apparently, a family member of the bride and one of the groom are supposed to welcome the new person into the family with a speech and a gift. I had no idea!

So three minutes before she'd go up to do it, I told my sister she

## YES!

needed to make a speech welcoming my wonderful bride-to-be into our family. This was not only in front of about thirty people—most of whom she barely knew—but also in front of a reality-TV camera crew filming the whole shindig for E!’s *Total Divas* . . . meaning it could be seen by well over a million people.

Billie Sue gave me kind of an exasperated look, asked my best man, Evan, for some advice, and then went on to speak. She did it with perfect poise and was funny, sweet, and, in her own way, elegant. Simply stated, she nailed it. Not only did she nail it, she was also aware of this gift-giving custom and gave my wife a clam-digging shovel to welcome her to our family. If roles were reversed, I probably would have thrown up, even after years of experience going out and doing interviews in front of strangers in, essentially, my underwear.

Before those years of experience, I was even worse. Sitting there in the U in senior English class, I was the fifth one in line to read my essay. I watched, one by one, as each person stood up, spoke—some better than others, but all of them decent—then sat down. Each time someone finished, the feeling of dread only got stronger.

*It’s not so hard*, I kept telling myself. *Just get through it*. By the time Dr. Carter called my name, I was full of anxiety, moist with sweat, and, frankly, scared to death. I actually started off fine; I sped right through the first paragraph, sacrificing the maximum effect of my essay’s message to wrap up quicker, which I thought was the way to go, given how I was feeling. Starting with paragraph two, I began to stutter, a problem I’d had since I was a small child. Becoming keenly aware of all the eyes looking at me, I read on, and the stuttering only got worse and worse. I paused, tried to start again, paused, tried to start again. By this point I was messing up ever other word—my sweat beading heavily from my forehead—and I was shaking. Finally I just stopped.

After a long pause, I looked to Dr. Carter and sheepishly explained that I didn’t think I could continue. I couldn’t do it. He allowed me to take my seat back in the comfort of the U, and, horrified, I sat



## DANIEL BRYAN

down so the next student could take his turn. I never finished reading my essay, and I was the only one who didn't make it through. I was incredibly embarrassed.

I felt a similar unease years later when seven of my peers and I stood nervously on the WWE set as we were about to debut on the new television show *WWE NXT*. The eight of us were called "Rookies," though at that point I had been wrestling for ten years. None of us knew what to expect that night. We hadn't been told anything prior to standing there, ready to be seen on live WWE programming. About three minutes before showtime, a producer came in and told us one of the WWE Pros was going to come on set and speak. We were to react accordingly.

Another producer screamed out, "Going live in fifteen seconds!" Then, "Five, four . . ." The final three numbers were counted down by the motion of his hand. Suddenly the camera was panning over us and music was playing throughout the arena. The Miz, who was my assigned Pro, walked onto the set. He eyed each of us up and down, turned to the camera with his back facing me, and said, "Daniel Bryan, come here." I stepped forward.

The Miz started talking, but I could barely focus on what he was saying. I heard the words "Internet darling" and "a star in the minor leagues" and could only assume he was talking about me. He asked me if I thought I was ready, and ironically enough, my first word in WWE was "Yes."

Miz continued, "One thing you have to learn in WWE is you have to expect anything. So right now, I want you to go to the ring and I want you to introduce yourself. Tell everybody exactly who you are. I want you to show personality. I want you to show charisma. I want you to give these people a reason to watch you every Tuesday night." He rambled on for a little longer, then added, "Oh, and have a good catchphrase."

During the ten years prior to my NXT debut, I had garnered a reputation for being a very skilled wrestler. But I had also garnered a reputation for not having a whole lot of charisma or verbal skills.



## YES!

My “character,” if you could call it that, was essentially just me, and I could be as understated or as over-the-top as I wanted to be. For the most part, if I had nothing to say or didn’t want to say anything, nobody could make me. Otherwise, since I lack a natural inclination for lighting up the microphone, if I was going to do an interview, I typically would ensure I had plenty of time to prepare.

Needless to say, having to do a live in-ring interview on no topic whatsoever with no time to prepare was not how I envisioned making my television debut. And I hated catchphrases.

It feels like an eternity walking to the ring in WWE when no one knows who you are. WWE fans tend to be very hard on people they don’t see as “stars,” and I could hear the groan when I came out to the Miz’s entrance music. In the ring, I did my best to stay confident, or at least appear that way. By the time the ring announcer handed me the microphone, I still had no idea what I was going to say. I ended up thanking the fans for being so accepting even though the Miz was my Pro, and I told them I wished my Pro had been my true mentor, William Regal. From there, I basically babbled on about NXT for another thirty seconds. Losing my train of thought and seeing the crowd lose their patience, I started to worry. Luckily, Miz’s music hit and out he came. Thank goodness. (Yes, I really said that.)

Miz immediately started ragging on me—well deservedly, I might add. He asked where my personality was; where was my charisma? We bantered back and forth until he finally asked me for a catchphrase. As soon as he asked, something I had just heard in my grappling class immediately came to mind. I told him if we were to ever step in the ring and fight, he would only have two options: He would either “tap or snap.” It wasn’t the best catchphrase in the world, and I actually couldn’t use it because someone owned the rights to it, but it was enough for me to get through the interview and get a decent reaction. In response, Miz slapped me in the face and left me standing in the ring to end the segment.

Not exactly a home run, more like a solid single. I knew I needed to keep working on talking, but I considered this a success, especially

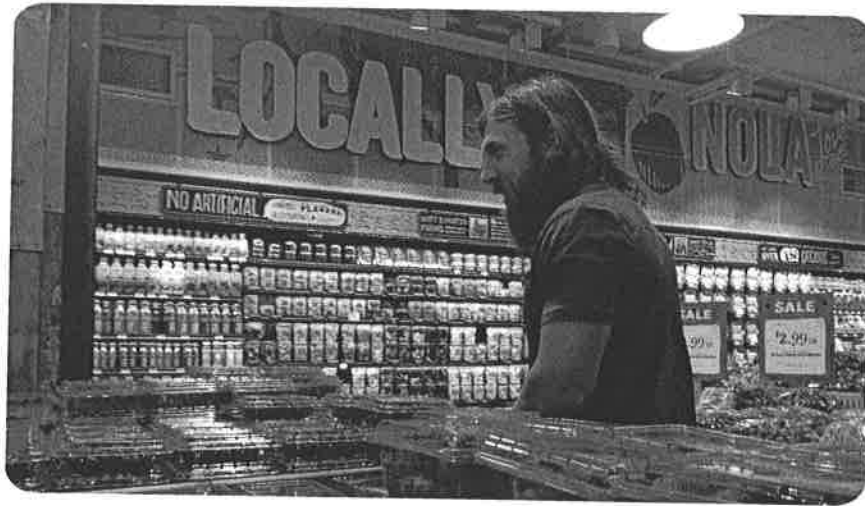
## DANIEL BRYAN

given I had no idea what was coming. And that's one of the reasons NXT was the most unusual wrestling experience of my career: A huge part of it was unscripted, and none of the show's Rookies knew what was going on. I didn't know Miz was going to come out and save the interview, and I definitely didn't know he was going to strike me at the end. Miz is self-admittedly not the toughest guy in the world, and much later on, he confessed to me that he was mildly concerned I was going to fight him for the slap.

The rest of the episode played to my strengths, and I wrestled Chris Jericho, who was the World Heavyweight Champion at the time, in the main event of the show. Chris is a true pro, and even though the match was only five minutes and I lost, he made me look like a star. After the match, Miz started beating me up, and again I had no idea he was going to do it. Neither did he, apparently, as the instruction was sent to him from the producers through the referee in the ring. Despite the confusion and the chaos, it had been a decent debut. Yet it all went downhill from there.







### 3 “MAKIN’ GROCERIES” TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2014—7:18 P.M.

*The sun’s only starting to drop when the wheels of the plane hit the New Orleans tarmac just a little after 6 P.M. If you’ve stood on a stage for a live streamed press conference for your organization’s greatest event ever, it’s already been a long day, made to feel longer with a three-and-a-half-hour flight (though easily a short skip for someone who’s made a weekend trip out of Japan). There is no jet lag to record as camera crews capture Bryan and Brie’s arrival and airport traipsing, before their ride to their hotel in NOLA’s French Quarter.*

*Championships. Relationships. Nutrition. Daniel Bryan has his priorities. This is what delivers WWE’s “Yes!” Man to the familiar storefront of the Whole Foods Market in Mid-City almost immediately after getting into town. He and Brie check into their hotel room, then split: Brie to an appearance, Bryan off to grocery shop—“makin’ groceries,” as New Orleans jargon goes. It’s a common ritual for Bryan, whose weekend road routine usually includes arriving in a city on a Friday, then finding the nearest organic market and stocking up for several days of travel.*

*“Nutrient density is important to me,” he explains. “Our schedule is brutal. Trying to replenish all that is just vital. You can’t always trust stores*



## YES!

*to cook super healthy. I'd rather have a protein shake and fresh fruit and veggies than a crappy chicken salad from a fast-food restaurant." He summarizes, "It's nice to have nutrient-dense food ready whenever you need it."*

*The produce lane is a different aisle than most WWE television viewers are used to seeing Daniel Bryan walk. He pushes a half-cart and carefully selects a serious amount of produce—vibrant carrots, greens, seven apples, seven bananas, multiple bottles of fresh juices—while fulfilling an unofficial shopping list for himself and his fiancée. He stops only to thoroughly check packages for ingredient listings and to sign an autograph for a fellow shopper/fan on top of a raspberry container sitting in his cart. Somehow, this is all routine.*

*"I've been doing almost all the shopping for us," Bryan says, explaining that his soon-to-be-spouse's erratic schedule has increased since the advent of the Total Divas reality series. "But I'm not as good of a shopper as Brie," he candidly admits. "I tend to overspend."*

*Bryan floats from section to section, seeking several days' worth of sustenance. A squared-circle Superstar who used to carry small packets of pumpkin seeds in his jacket pockets, the "Yes!" Man is known among his peers and fan base for his unique diet. In May 2013, Bryan developed an intolerance to soy that led to him abandon veganism. But as his shopping progresses into the dessert aisle, it becomes apparent how much he still enjoys a good vegan sweet treat. Bryan raves about avocado-based mousse with carob chips, but he's on the hunt for a specific peanut butter cookie for Brie. He ultimately settles for Uncle Eddie's chocolate walnut flavor, which you can expect the couple will share.*

*"I have a very bad sweet tooth, but I manage it. I manage it with these healthy treats," he coyly remarks.*

*This specific store location—which happens to boast a message of wholesome-food accessibility in this particular NOLA neighborhood—appeals not only to Bryan's dietary needs but also to the principles and values instilled since birth in the natural sprawl of Aberdeen. In brief, this is his kind of place, right down to the earthy scent in the air.*

## DANIEL BRYAN

*Bryan greets a cashier, pays, then heads back to the hotel to wait for his soon-returning fiancée. He's gone from suit to T-shirt, from a stage at the epicenter of New York City to the frozen food section of a grocery store in Louisiana. Now, as he stands holding brown paper shopping bags while he waits for an elevator in the lobby of the Roosevelt Hotel, Bryan involuntarily reminds you, by the sight of him, that he is everything a top WWE champion has never resembled. Yet in a matter of days he plans on raising up the most-coveted golden symbols in sports entertainment for the most emphatic "Yes!" succession yet.*

*The elevator dings, the doors close, and his first night in New Orleans quickly vanishes as WrestleMania Sunday takes one step closer.*

It's often said you don't choose who you fall in love with, which I believe to be true. I also believe you don't choose *what* you fall in love with. Sometimes things just grab hold of your imagination and never let go—and that's been my experience with professional wrestling. My introduction to wrestling is one of my earliest memories, and I've loved it ever since.

I say "one of" and not "the" earliest memory because my earliest memory involves me burning my butt. After every bath at my Grandpa Austin's house, Billie Sue and I would wrap ourselves in towels and go stand by his wood-burning stove to dry off. In the cold Washington weather, the heat was always nice. One day around age four, I got a little too close and burned my little butt cheeks on the stove—so bad that each cheek blistered. More so than the actual burning, the most vivid memory is the pain I felt each time I'd sit on the toilet. I'm lucky I don't have scars, especially since I spend so much time on broadcast television in trunks. There have also been quite a few live crowds who have seen my derriere. How would parents explain those scars to their kids?

"If I show you, you have to promise not to tell anybody," whispered the new kid in class. It had been Abe's first day as a student at Aberdeen's Central Park Elementary School, but he had already



## YES!

made friends. At the end of the school day, Abe was being chased around a table by my best friend, Warren, as he sang, “La cucaracha, la cucaracha! Please don’t hit me in the butt.” He and Warren came back to my house that same afternoon.

We found ourselves in my bedroom huddling around Abe’s backpack. Warren and I were anxious and excited about what Abe was about to show us. Abe looked from side to side as if he suspected someone was watching us while he slowly unzipped his backpack. He double-checked to make sure we weren’t going to tell anybody before he reached in and pulled out a stack of magazines. Wrestling magazines. Abe handed us each a magazine, and I pored over the pictures. Men with enormous muscles in ridiculous outfits fought equally ridiculous men. There were giants, midgets, Indians, cowboys, Russians, men with face paint and spikes—I had never seen anything like it! It was magic. Warren quickly lost interest, but I couldn’t stop flipping through the pages. I convinced Abe to let me borrow a few of the magazines, and it was through their worn pages that I became hooked on wrestling.

It wasn’t long before my parents found me reading the magazines that I was supposed to keep secret. Hiding things has never been my forte. Fortunately, I had nothing to worry about. Despite not being wrestling fans themselves, my parents weren’t upset. They actually liked the fact that I was trying to read. Plus, they saw that it made me happy.

Before I knew it, my parents started bringing me home wrestling magazines when they saw a new one come out. Slowly but surely, I became a better reader, which was important because I missed a lot of school.

I have a lot of harebrained hypotheses, most of which are too idiotic to be printed. Ask Nigel McGuinness about my thoughts on the evolution of penis size. But this one idiot hypothesis mildly pertains to this story, so here goes nothing.

It is my belief that due to modern medicine, humans have stopped evolving in a way that produces healthier adults. I say this because



## DANIEL BRYAN

many children who two hundred years ago would have died are now living to successfully reproduce. They thus pass on their genetic deficiencies to their children, who then pass them on to their children, and so on and so forth. I am one of those children: sick my entire childhood and even still often sick as an adult. Without modern medicine, I would have surely passed before I could procreate. Who knows, I still might. Regardless, I affectionately refer to myself as a defect.

Bri is also a defect. I will let her explain her own defectiveness in her own book, should she choose to write one. Before we started dating, I pointed this out to her, and also told her it would be genetically irresponsible for either of us to have children as it would weaken the evolution of humans going forward. What we should be doing as a species is breeding intelligent superathletes, like having John Cena make babies with Jackie Joyner-Kersey. It became our little joke, both of us being defects. And we will, at some point, try our best with the de-evolution of our species.

My persistent illness started with viral asthma, and, as we later found out, I was allergic to grass and trees and almost all animal hair—which didn't stop me from trying to sleep with my beagle Millie nearly every night. Oftentimes I would wake up with my eyes swollen nearly shut. After my allergies were discovered, I began getting weekly injections (easily up to 150 shots), which helped to a degree. Still, whenever I was outside or playing sports, grass would get the better of me. I ended up getting quite a few upper respiratory infections, and there would be times I would miss a week or two of school at a time. One December, I missed nearly the entire month leading up to Christmas break. Missing so much school, I suspect, made me even less social, but on the flip side, I became comfortable entertaining myself and developing my interests.

I still always managed good grades, mostly because school came relatively easy to me. Math seemed like a fun little puzzle for me to figure out, and I enjoyed reading. That pretty much covers elementary education.



## YES!

Being out sick all the time, I never learned to swim properly because lessons were during school. I can't freestyle, backstroke, side-stroke. None of that. I never advanced further than beginner level. But if doggy paddling and treading water were in the Olympics, I might have a shot because I spent so much time practicing while everyone else learned how to actually swim.

Other than swimming, being sick didn't stop me from doing much. Despite my grass allergies, I was always playing sports, mostly because I love being outside. At different points, I played just about everything—soccer, football, baseball, and basketball. I ran track, did cross-country, wrestled, and even tried golf one summer with some clubs borrowed from a friend.

I played every sport and wasn't good at any of them. I never had the mentality necessary to be good at sports. They were just games to me and relatively unimportant; it was hard for me to care about winning and losing. As long as there wasn't too much pressure, I had fun. That's why I loved practice. Some people hated drilling, and they saw practice as work. I saw it as being able to play against my friends, with no pressure. I liked the drills in almost every sport because it was fun for me to see functional improvement.

A good example of my athletic mindset was how much I enjoyed track. Even though I only did track for a couple of seasons, it was my favorite because there were so many events to participate in. I did shot put, threw the javelin, and ran a variety of distance races from the 100-meter to the 3,200, plus I tested my skill with the discus and all the jumping events. Again, I tried everything and was rotten at everything—especially the pole vault, which I loved. Really, what's not to love? You run with a stick and use it to jump as high as you can and then land on a big fluffy pad. The thing is, I'm not a huge fan of heights, so I would practice and practice and practice, because it was fun, but never cleared anything past eight feet. People can high-jump eight feet.

My only real accomplishment in athletics was being named MVP of the C squad my sophomore year in basketball. At least, I like to

## DANIEL BRYAN

tell people I was the MVP. The award I got was actually a Coach's Award for hard work, and all of the good sophomores played on varsity or JV. I suppose it's not much of an accomplishment after all.

My love of sports turned into a love of sports cards, even though I tended to look at them more as an investment than as a hobby. My generation of kids was the first to save their sports cards because they'd be worth money someday. Back then, I thought my sister was stupid for saving her money instead of buying cards like I did. I believed the cards were going to appreciate in value, unlike my sister's savings, which she just kept in her bedroom, accruing absolutely no interest.

It was predominantly baseball cards at first, then expanded to basketball cards and football cards. I even had some wrestling cards. Interestingly (or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it), I didn't ever like the Michael Jordan types. I ended up collecting a lot of players who were good but not necessarily stars. In baseball, instead of liking Ken Griffey Jr.—who was on the Seattle Mariners and whose cards were always worth a lot—I liked Roberto Alomar and Paul Molitor. I figured, “Oh, Paul Molitor's so good. When people realize how good he is, his card is going to be worth money.” Sometimes I'd trade a card of Frank Thomas—who was huge at the time—for a couple of Roberto Alomars. Even though I wasn't great at understanding the real value of sports cards, my first attempt at being an entrepreneur involved trying to sell the cards with my friend Scott.

During the summer—weather permitting—we would set up a table outside of my house, organize our cards all businessmanlike,



Bryan with his “World Champion” dog, Asparagus, 2007



## YES!

and tape up a sign out front that read **BASEBALL CARDS FOR SALE**. There was never a ton of traffic on our street, and usually our only “customers” were kids who didn’t have any money so would end up playing football or Wiffle ball in the front yard.

After one summer, Scott and I combined all the money we saved, which was a total of \$40. In our heads, this must’ve seemed like a million dollars, because we were convinced we’d be able to start this trading card empire with that cash. We only ended up being able to pay for a single box of Leaf baseball cards, which was a disappointment.

Still, I continued collecting cards until I was fourteen, and I kept them in the attic in case they’d be worth something someday. They’re not. Unfortunately, sports cards of that time—much like the comic books I also still have—were so mass-produced that there’s no scarcity, and they’re worth *less* than when I collected them in the ’80s and ’90s. It turns out my sister made the better decision after all. That’s where a functional understanding of economics would have really served me well.

Just like the wrestling magazines helped out my reading, sports cards served a purpose as well. There are all sorts of statistics on the backs of the cards, and I was hell-bent on figuring out what they all meant. Figuring out things like batting averages and field goal percentages gave me a better understanding of division, percentages, and decimal points, and it made math seem fun rather than a bore. Plus, looking up the value of cards in the pricing magazines helped when it came time to find things in the dictionary or scan reference materials in the library. Education can be fun if framed in the right way.

Selling sports cards wasn’t the only way I tried to make money as a kid. After my parents’ divorce, we didn’t have much money. My mom didn’t have any sort of college degree and was having a hard time finding a job, so when Billie Sue and I were old enough—around ten or eleven—we each got paper routes. Every day, rain or shine, a big stack of newspapers would get dropped off at our house and we’d hop on our bikes to go deliver them. Like most other things, I turned

## DANIEL BRYAN

it into a game and it didn't really even feel like work, though we also had to go door to door and collect people's payments at the end of the month, which I was not good at.

In theory, for each of our paper routes we were supposed to net around \$100 a month. We'd give about half of what we collected back to the *Daily World* and be able to keep the other half. Of that, my mom would let us keep a small portion, and the rest would go into the family budget, our savings, and tithing to the church. Unfortunately, our salary didn't always work out that way.

I have always had an irrational fear of asking people for money, possibly because we had so little of it. Even something as simple as going to collect \$7.25 a month from people who had signed up for the service somehow terrified me. Around the fifteenth of each month, we were supposed to start collecting, and we had about a week to get it all in. Although I was vigilant in getting people their papers on a daily basis, I was less so when it came time to collect. At first it didn't seem like a big deal, but then I would encounter customers who seemed bothered or angry when I came to the door asking them for their payment, especially if they owed more than a single month.

Sometimes when you went collecting, people wouldn't be home, so if you tried to collect a couple of times in a month and missed them each time, you would just get both months' payment the following month. There was one house that I had missed for a couple of payments in a row, which wasn't so unusual because there is a lot of shift work in town. By the time I finally reached them, they owed for four months, around \$30. The guy exploded on me when he found out how much he owed, and somehow I felt I was in the wrong. I became even more hesitant to collect after that moment.

Soon after, if there were people who owed more than two months, I just stopped collecting from them altogether. There were also some houses I was already skipping because their homes would creep me out. It got so bad that one month when it came time to send *Daily World* their money, we actually owed them more than I had collected.



## YES!

My mom was beside herself and didn't understand what had happened. We were already struggling, and then what was intended to be a source of income turned into a debt. After that, I started doing a little bit better, but we still never made as much as we should have because I simply hated collecting.

As soon as my sister turned sixteen, she got a job at McDonald's, and when I turned fifteen, she was able to help get me a job there, too. At that age, all I was supposed to do was work a couple of hours a week doing the mopping, sweeping, and removal of garbage. One day, they were shorthanded in the kitchen because someone didn't show up. They showed me how to cook the burgers on these mini trays, and it wasn't hard; I did it and I became very efficient at it.

I must've done a good job, because shortly thereafter they put me in the kitchen for every shift, even though I wasn't supposed to be, and I was working more than twenty hours a week (the limit for my age in Washington state at the time). I think they just forgot how old I was. It became my duty to get the meat tray filled, and I never did the mopping and that stuff again.

Long prior to my years in the workforce, my passion for wrestling deepened when I discovered I could actually watch it on television. We didn't watch much TV and didn't have cable, so the thought had previously never occurred to me. Suddenly the characters that I read about in magazines had sprung to life. Seeing the Ultimate Warrior lift a grown man above his head and drop him to the mat for a press slam was even more impressive than it looked in the pictures. A photo of someone standing on the top rope was no match for watching the grace, movement, and destruction of a "Macho Man" Randy Savage elbow drop.

Since I had no concept of television programming, I'd flip through the channels every time I'd turn on the TV, in hopes of catching some form of wrestling. It took me some time (I can be a slow learner), but I finally realized that it came on every Saturday morning.

I was the sole wrestling fan in the family, but the only time I remember anybody in the house getting annoyed with my fandom was

## DANIEL BRYAN

during the NFL play-offs. It seemed to me that football season was my dad's favorite time of the year. He loved watching football and the Seattle Seahawks, our hometown team, whom he'd followed since their first season in 1976. Most years they were pretty bad, but in 1988 the Seahawks won their division for the very first time and were play-off bound. The game was on a Saturday against the Cincinnati Bengals, and all week my dad had talked about watching it, but I insisted on watching wrestling.

I must have been arguing relentlessly to watch my Saturday morning show, because my dad, usually as patient as could be, was finally exasperated. "The play-offs only happen for a couple weeks a year and the Seahawks are playing," he said. "Wrestling is on *every single week!*" I eventually gave in but was disappointed because the British Bulldogs were wrestling that day. (I loved Davey Boy Smith and Dynamite Kid—not so much because Dynamite was one of the most revolutionary performers of all time as because I thought their dog, Matilda, was so cute.)

At first my friend Abe was the only other kid I knew who was really into wrestling. When I would occasionally go over to his house, we'd play with the giant rubber LJN Toys action figures. It seemed like he had all of them—not just the popular wrestlers like Hulk Hogan and Jake "the Snake" Roberts, but even some of the more obscure characters like Special Delivery Jones and Outback Jack. Plus, he had two rings, so we could each make them fight. Before long, though, Abe lost interest in wrestling, and it just became my own little thing for a while.

It wasn't until I was in middle school that I found other kids who liked wrestling, too. The biggest development was when I found out that my friends Tony Sajec, Schuyler Parker, and John Manio had created their own wrestling league, which they called Backyard Championship Wrestling (BCW), despite most of the action taking place indoors. Sometimes they'd wrestle each other, but most of the matches involved Big Bad Brown, a giant teddy bear who was also their champion. At some point, they invited me and my friend Evan



## YES!

Aho over, and it became a regular thing. Eventually, Big Bad Brown retired and our wrestling evolved into something else entirely. At first it was at Tony's house (where Big Bad Brown resided), and we'd just kind of wrestle on the floor. Soon we moved the fun to my house, and by the end of high school, my best friends were the guys who would watch wrestling pay-per-views at my place regularly. It was Mike Dove and his brother Jake, Evan and his younger brother Kristof, Tony, Schuyler, and John. The first WWE show I ordered was the Royal Rumble in 1996. Then we got WrestleMania XII, which had the epic main event Iron Man Match between Bret "Hit Man" Hart and Shawn Michaels.

Before the shows started, we'd clear everything out of our family room and lay out a mattress on the floor, thus transforming the room into the BCW Arena. The corners of the room were the turnbuckles, the walls were the ropes we'd bounce off of, and the couch was the top rope in case we wanted to do a Macho Man elbow drop or something.

If you've been a wrestling fan for an extended period of time, you've probably either seen or heard of Mick Foley's backyard wrestling adventures, particularly the moment in which he jumped off the top of his house. Our wrestling was different. Sometimes we would actually try to seriously learn the moves we'd seen on TV, but more often we would just be goofing off. My friend Schulyer was Hip Skip, whose character never stopped running for twenty-four hours straight. He would come running from down the street, open the sliding glass door, run in, do a match, then run back out. There was also El Bate, a wrestler in a Batman mask who'd often appear in videos we'd make for our Spanish class (despite *el bate* actually meaning "baseball bat," not anything to do with Batman).

I liked to think that because we weren't doing the crazier stuff, what we were doing was safe. The truth is, it wasn't, which is why WWE now does all those videos telling people to not try it at home. And since it was my house and I seriously wanted to be a pro wrestler, I was constantly practicing things I thought I might need to know, like backflips off the couch. We did it all on a mattress, so we



## DANIEL BRYAN

never thought of landing on someone as dangerous. We only looked at the jumping, twisting, and backflipping as the dangerous part. Unfortunately, one time, I jumped off my couch for a twisting senton and landed back-first directly on Kristof's face, breaking his jaw. He had to have his jaw wired shut and was only able to eat through a straw for weeks.

I didn't want anything to stop our wrestling, so I never told my mom what happened. We had already been given a warning after cracking the drywall in the corner that we used as a turnbuckle, and I thought something as serious as this injury would end our wrestling for good. My mom didn't find out until much later when she was talking to Kristof's mother, Pam, who had been very cool about the incident. When Pam made mention of Kristof's broken jaw, my mom was like, "Wait—what?!"

Luckily, despite my injuring him, Kristof remains my friend to this day. He and Evan and Mike were all groomsmen in my wedding, almost two decades later. Kristof still tells me that at some point he's going to break my jaw in return. Whenever I see him, he always asks, "Is it now?"

Other than wrestling with my friends and working, I was relatively antisocial and completely content to stay at home. As you can imagine, that made me a real hit with the ladies. I only really dated one girl in school, during a period when I lived with my dad in Castle Rock, Washington, about an hour and a half away from Aberdeen. Her name was Becky; she was a senior and I was a junior. I think she just liked me because I was new and Castle Rock was a small town. We went to movies or out to eat, and even went to her senior prom together. After one of these events, we would end up in her parents' basement making out on the couch. One night, during a particularly long makeout session, Becky was on top of me, and in the heat of the moment, she whispered into my ear, "Be gentle." I laughed so hard that I accidentally threw her off the couch. Despite my subsequent calls, we never went out again, and soon she was dating a college guy with a unibrow. So it goes.



## YES!

My hometown of Aberdeen, Washington, is a blue-collar town filled with good, hardworking people. It's built on the timber industry, and there are signs all over that say WORKING FORESTS = WORKING FAMILIES. Unfortunately, when logging is down, a lot of people get laid off. At one point, Aberdeen had the highest tavern-per-person ratio in the state, or at least that was the rumor. It also rains, on average, over eighty inches a year. (The year I graduated, for example, it rained a hundred days in a row.) Nirvana's Kurt Cobain is probably our most famous resident. I'm not sure if it's related, but Aberdeen has a relatively high number of suicides every year.

The rain always comforted me as a kid. Even in the winter, I would leave my window open because I liked the sound of the raindrops as I went to sleep, and I liked the room being really cold, with me really warm underneath my blankets. Looking back, I realize how much I love the rain, and I recognize that without all that water, you can't have all that green.

Our house was next to a big sprawl of woods in a suburb of Aberdeen called Central Park. It was basically just our place, the people next door, and a large parcel of wooded area we called Oscar's Creek, named after one of the neighbor's Labradors who loved to play in that spot. I remember rope swings over ravines—even with my fear of heights—and essentially growing up around all the trees. Being around living things like trees, plants, and ferns is what I prefer, and being raised in this environment is definitely what made me love nature.

Sometimes my dad took us fishing, and I hated it. He told me that fish don't feel any pain, but I didn't believe it. Catching a fish is a very violent affair. I always put myself in the position of the fish; I envision me spotting a cookie, eating the cookie, then suddenly getting hooked by the mouth, dragged across the street, dumped in some water, and forced to stay under the water until I die—exactly what happens to a fish, but the opposite. Years after our fishing trips, I still have this (awesome) picture of me, my sister, and my dad, hold-

## DANIEL BRYAN

ing two fish. He's smiling. My sister's smiling. And there I am, looking at the fish, horrified.



Bryan, his sister, Billie Sue, and father, Buddy, make peanut butter balls

Writing about my father is the most difficult part of this book. I love my father. All of him. My mom says to this day that in the absence of alcohol, my dad was the best man she's ever known. She says that still, over twenty years after their divorce. But then there's the other side. Addiction is a terrible thing, and one with which my family has a long history. My father was the youngest of six children, all of whom either had alcohol or drug problems, or were complete teetotalers. My dad battled with alcohol addiction his entire life.

I related to my dad better than I did to anybody else. Billie Sue says it's because we're exactly the same, minus the alcohol. I always take that as a compliment because he was smart, kind, and funny. He was genuinely sympathetic toward people. And most importantly, he always made sure we knew we were loved.

My parents were high school sweethearts who married relatively young (my mom was twenty, my dad nineteen). My mom waitressed



## YES!

to help put my dad through school as he got his engineering tech degree, but once he graduated, he went to work in the logging industry as a log scaler, measuring and grading the cut trees. My dad loved the outdoors and loved logging, which, unfortunately, isn't the most stable job in the world. Shortly after I was born, we moved to Vernal, Utah, where my dad had gotten a different position that was supposedly going to be a little more steady.

According to my aunt and uncle, my dad always had an issue with alcohol, but my mom first noticed it when we lived in Utah. We were only there for six months before we moved to Albany, Oregon, so my dad could pursue scaling again, and then back to Aberdeen. During all that time, my dad was caught in an addiction cycle. He'd be in and out of alcohol programs, which brought times of sobriety—three weeks, six weeks sometimes—then it would start again. Sometimes he left for days at a time, and my mom would be worried sick. I really didn't notice any of it, though, because my mom protected my sister and me from seeing him when he was drunk. I remember we'd always be put in the back bedroom of the house to watch *Pete's Dragon* or *Mary Poppins*, and occasionally we would hear yelling over the sounds of the TV.

My dad's drinking got substantially worse when his father died of emphysema and then, a year later, his mom died of cancer. After that, my parents were pretty much divorced, although I don't remember the exact timing of it. My mom and my sister don't either. It's strange how there can be such collective forgetfulness.

All of that said, my dad was still a very loving father. The only reason I bring up his drinking is because it helps explain why I don't drink and never have. When kids started drinking, I immediately saw it as a negative and not cool at all.

Though they were separated, we would still go over and see him all the time. My dad played catch with me, came to my sporting events when he wasn't working, and took us camping. We went to my dad's house on Christmas Eve, and he played Santa until we got old enough to know it was him. On Christmas morning, we'd wake

## DANIEL BRYAN

up, eat cinnamon rolls my mom made on our wood stove, then open presents (including perhaps my favorite Christmas present, a set of thirty RF Media VHS tapes of all the Extreme Championship Wrestling house shows).

One of the things I especially loved doing with him was going clam-digging. In the Pacific Northwest, we have razor clams, a meaty shellfish that can grow up to six inches long. To find them, you look for little indentions in the sand and pound your shovel next to them. If a hole starts bubbling, it's a clam hole. Then all you have to do is start digging, and if you're fast enough and get your arm into the hole, you can grab the clam before he digs away—and they are *fast* diggers. My dad was great at it since he'd been doing it ever since he was young. He'd dig some, then people-watch some; dig some more, then people-watch some more. It's kind of the way I've always approached life.

As a kid, I was never very good at clam-digging, but I loved playing in the sand. The older I got, the better I got, yet my dad was always much better than I ever was. I still tend to break the clam's shell when I'm digging. After getting our limits of fifteen clams per person, we'd go back home, and within a day or two we'd be having fried razor clams for dinner, which has always been one of my favorites.

Something I always appreciated about each of my parents is that neither ever talked bad about the other. I'm sure after the divorce they each wanted to, but they never did. Eventually my dad married a wonderful woman named Darby, who stood by him through thick and thin. She has a terrific sense of humor and treated Billie Sue and me great whenever we'd come over. We'd play cards or watch Seahawks games, and even if we were doing nothing, we still had a good time.

My parents' divorce was very hard on my mother because she'd been a stay-at-home mom. She didn't have much more than a high school education and had done a lot of waiting tables until my sister and I were born. My mom didn't know what to do, as there were



## YES!

very few jobs in Aberdeen that would pay a woman with no education and limited job skills, who hadn't worked in years, enough money to support a family. But my mom wouldn't give up. She started by volunteering at the Satsop nuclear power plant, giving tours and such. She worked so hard that they hired her, but the power plant was never fully completed, and after a couple of years, my mom was laid off. My sister and I never heard a complaint from her about any of it. Soon she started going to the community college, even though she had to take some classes that didn't even count for credits toward her degree, just so she could catch up. My mom worked hard while back in school, and on top of that, she worked two jobs, each at a different department store. And she never—to use a wrestling term—“sold” being tired to us. Looking back, I will never know how she did it, because she was always there to pick us up from our various practices, she always came to our games, and she made us every meal. (We never ate out.) I can't imagine how she had enough hours in the day.

My mom worked her butt off and graduated with her bachelor's degree in 1999, a few days before I graduated from high school. She went on to get her master's degree in counseling psychology, and she's worked in that field, helping people, ever since. My mom also remarried—although well after I started to wrestle. Her husband is a terrific, smart man named Jim, and they live together to this day.