

Let's get ready to rumble:

By: Ben Mook May 11, 2006

Original Story: <http://thedailyrecord.com/2006/05/11/lets-get-ready-to-rumble-2/>

For the last 25 years, Jim Hardwick has helped his customers fulfill their financial dreams.

Now, at 44-years old, Hardwick has given up his day job as a financial advisor to fulfill his own dream of running a regional professional wrestling league.

Hardwick founded the Eastern Wrestling Alliance, or EWA, three years ago after spending 12 years moonlighting as a wrestler and manager himself, under names such as “Mr. Bling” and “Jimmy Christian.”

This week, Hardwick took his boldest step yet when he gave up his job as a financial advisor to run and promote the EWA full-time.

“I finally decided to get out there and do it as a full-time job. I’ve been in and around this sport for a long time, and now I want to make a living out of it,” Hardwick said. “I couldn’t do that and keep working 50 to 60 hours a week with my day job.”

Hardwick hopes his blend of wrestling savvy and a focus on “family-friendly” entertainment — heavy on action and personality and light on profanity and scantily clad women — will help him grow the league into a regional powerhouse.

Hardwick hopes to increase attendance at league events from current levels of around 300 per show to something closer to 500.

Setting the stage

Hardwick set the stage for the transition in January when he gave the league a central, year-round location. EWA maintains headquarters, holds many of its events and houses its wrestling school inside one-half of a former Valu Food grocery store in Baltimore County’s Essex community.

Having a central location has cut down on the league’s cost to put on events because Hardwick can keep his wrestling rings up year-round. Previously, EWA would pay to rent a venue for the evening and then pay additional fees to break down and transport the rings, all of which ate into the league’s bottom line.

Making the transition to full-time, though, has consumed not only time but a significant amount of capital for Hardwick. His biggest expense so far has been purchasing the league’s pair of wrestling rings used both for paid events and by the wrestling school.

The rings are essentially custom-made, complete with ropes and turnbuckles. A complete wrestling ring can cost from \$8,000 to \$10,000 each. Throw in a big-screen monitor for trash-talking wrestlers to goad the audience, and a booming sound system to set the mood, and Hardwick said it can cost upward of \$30,000 to run the league annually.

That might be small potatoes next to the millions that go into running the nationwide professional leagues, like World Wrestling Entertainment, but it is a lot to Hardwick who has bankrolled the EWA since its founding.

For now, the league's main source of revenue is its wrestling school — dubbed "The House of Pain." The school, like the league, has been around for three years.

The gym and the school are still a work in progress. Even the old Valu Food sign still hangs on the exterior. Inside, minus the aisles, the facility has a distinct warehouse feel to it with high exposed ceilings and row upon row of fluorescent lights. The league splits half of the space with The Body Factory gym.

Despite appearances, from 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. on weekdays, the EWA half of the building is alive with the sounds and smells of wrestlers honing their ring skills. Even on a cool night, the atmosphere inside is a mix of stale air, sweat and the continuous sound of wrestlers bouncing, or being bounced, off the shock-absorbing ring floor.

As the only full-time wrestling school in the Baltimore metropolitan area, Hardwick said he gets not only students, but journeymen wrestlers already in the industry who pop in to work out and brush up their skills in between meets.

Some of the students even make exhausting commutes for their chance to break into the business. Teddy Venables, a 19-year-old who works days for a boat dealer on the Eastern Shore, makes the three-hour roundtrip three times a week from Easton just to practice.

"This is what I've always wanted to do," Venables said. "I just wish I had learned about the school earlier. I would have started as early as I could have."

Students at the House of Pain pay roughly \$2,500 a year to learn the basics in hopes of landing a shot to appear at a show. Almost all of the students have been lifelong fans of the sport, and now want to emulate their heroes by going into the business themselves.

Sean Daugherty, of Towson, is one of those students who wants to break into the business he has loved since childhood. When not in the ring, the 20-year-old holds down two jobs — one of them managing a busy fast-food restaurant.

"This is something I've wanted to do for years and years," Daugherty said. "I've been a fan of wrestling since I was about three years old. I've always been around it and now I have a chance to actually do it myself."

The school is not an all-male facility, with a small contingent of female wrestlers like Amanda Shields filling out the ranks. Shields, a petite 18-year-old high school student during the day, came to the sport in an off-handed way. She said a friend introduced her to the school and after seeing how it operated, she decided to give it a try and is now training in hopes of appearing at a meet.

Surprisingly physical

Shields echoed many of the students when she said she was surprised at how physical the sport really is.

"It's not easy. This is definitely not for just anyone off the streets," she said. "It hurts, don't believe it when people say it's fake."

Hardwick agreed, and said most prospects come to him knowing only what they see on television and do not realize how much work and pain goes into training.

“It hurts,” Hardwick said, “I call it ‘brutal fun.’ It might be choreographed, but getting hit with a steel chair or bodyslammed on the ring still hurts.”

He said he has turned down more than 50 potential students when they were unable to pass the mandatory tryout. Prospective students go through a workout and a sampling of what they will experience in the ring before EWA lets them sign on.

Most people don’t even make it through the tryout,” Hardwick said. “There are a lot of people who think they know everything about wrestling, but don’t. I don’t make anybody do anything I haven’t, but there’s a lot of pain involved that people don’t realize and just being a big guy isn’t always enough.”

Stepping in

The prospects study with the goal to further their career by eventually stepping into the ring as a showcase wrestler. The students augment the regional and national talent pool of wrestlers the EWA uses to fill out the card during their once-a-month shows.

Hardwick and his trainers get a first-hand look at how good the prospective wrestlers are and, even more importantly, how they mesh with the league’s philosophy of putting big egos in the backseat. “I’m looking for the best talent. The goal is always to put people in the seats,” Hardwick said. “It’s not about who’s the biggest or strongest, or who has the biggest ego — it’s about entertainment.”

What sends people to their feet and keeps them coming back are strong characters, Hardwick said. In his experience, the best wrestlers polarize the audience, eliciting hatred or affection. Hardwick said he will always remember one time when he injured his back during a match and had to be taken out of the ring on a stretcher to a waiting ambulance.

“It’s rewarding when you see people screaming at you,” Hardwick said. “There I was getting hauled out to the ambulance and there were 300 or 400 people yelling, ‘you suck.’ That’s how I knew I was doing my job.”

Hardwick is going to need wrestlers who can work the crowd as he looks to increase attendance and double the number of events he holds monthly. Now that he can devote all of his time to the league, Hardwick said he plans to aggressively promote the league, work on compelling story lines and bring in big name talent to supplement the EWA stable of wrestlers.

“I’ve been in and around this sport for 12 years now,” Hardwick said. “Now is the time for me to really get this going, promote the league and start increasing the audiences. This thing is just going to grow from here.”