

getting in the action

by Mark Irwin

Basically, *Blood and Guts* is about a wrestling troupe: one gigantic black wrestler, two midgets, an aging fighter whose image has shifted from "Pretty Boy" to "Heel" in order to hold some box office appeal, his "long-suffering, all-trusting" lady and their "hard-bitten, worldly-wise" manager. An assortment of clichés perhaps, but when a new young beginner joins their ranks, a chain of events starts to grow and snowball in and around six heavy fight scenes and finally ends in triumph.

The film takes place in cheap hotels, bars, locker rooms, arenas, on the road — all with the look and feel of small town, scraping bottom, circuit wrestling sleaze. However, with a great range of dramatic events scripted, the elements that concerned me the most were the fight scenes. They were the physical and emotional high points of the film and they had to work.

We began with a definite plus. The two leading men (William Smith and Brian Clarke) were both eager to do their own stunts. Duane McLean and "Rotten Reggie" Love were structuring each fight so that the moves had athletic credibility yet allowed the struggle to turn, for example, against the here, then he could slip out of it, then be subdued, then reverse it and so on. Without using doubles, we knew we could get as close to the action as we needed.

And it was the first fight scene that demonstrated to me just how close was too close. We were in the Shamrock Boys Club in Hamilton, home of Bull Johnson (the "big daddy" of wrestling coaches) and his two sons, Randy and Dan. Brian was quite literally about to learn the ropes from "The Invisible Man" (Vincent Bright) in his first taste of professional pugilism. While the director Paul Lynch and I watched their run through, we mentally compared the scene with a boxing match — two men standing and punching each other until one falls down. Very simple, straightforward coverage, except that our sport was wrestling — two men throwing each other in the air, bouncing off ropes, kicking, jumping, body slamming, elbow smashing, eye gouging, face stomping. In other words, organized mayhem.

Mark Irwin, Toronto cameraman, has been DOP of many feature films including "Starship Invasions" and "Blood and Guts".

So the question was: How do we cover this? Do we play it safe and square like T.V.? Do we handhold inside the ring? Do we shoot telephoto and stay back more? In the end we decided on a healthy combination of all three. We played wide shots, tracking behind cheering fans while they threw popcorn bags and verbal abuse. We shot high angles corner to corner to gain more depth and perspective. We covered telephoto with my first assistant Robin Miller playing the focus strictly by eye, while I madly followed the lunging, diving bodies all over the ring. And finally, after three rounds of matching coverage, I got my chance to climb into the ring and "participate".

What we didn't have at this point was a Steadicam, budgets being what they are, but I didn't care. A Steadicam is like holding a TV camera at arm's length while wearing a fibreglass jacket. It takes up a fair bit of room and in the rather crowded confines of an 18'x18' ring, I wanted to be as inconspicuous as possible. Instead, I used a Flexi-mount which is very snug, very light and, to be honest, very cheap. Originally designed for helicopter use, it suspends the camera on counterbalancing springs and lets everything more or less float.

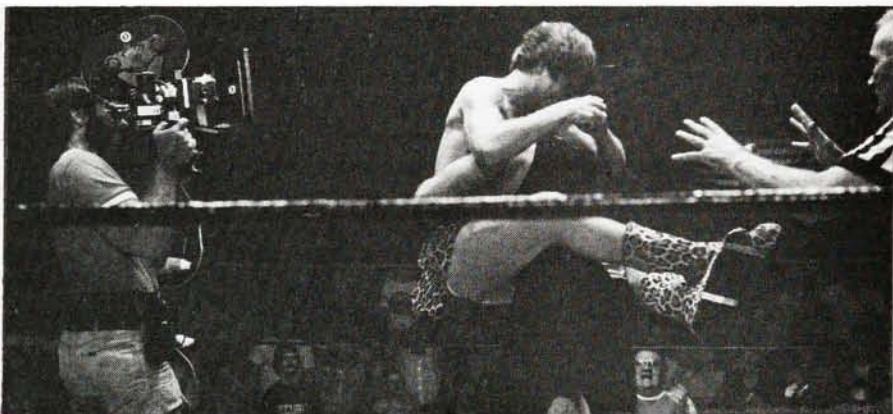
So there I was, more or less floating around the canvas while Vince and

hundred extras could hope to fill. Lighting the ring was no problem — gaffer Jock Brandis constructed a grid from his famous light beams and hung four aluminum 2K softlights from it. Then he hoisted it above the canvas with pulleys. But with the extras positioned around the ring, we barely covered the center of the arena. Even with our pool of light, it felt very lonely, very empty...

So we brought out the smoke machine and let it run wild. The difference was amazing. The pool of light became a steamy cone of atmosphere, the darker audience was filled with a misty grey presence and the shadows took on a milky black ambience that felt... full. With appropriate sound effects and cutaways, the fight scenes now had enough presence to do a Muhammad Ali rematch justice.

As for the audio side of things, sound mixer Bryan Day had at least five mikes coming into his stereo Nagra, the most death defying task was in the hands of boom man Tom Mather who was crouched underneath the canvas, following the thuds and crunches. With only three inches headroom, he assured us that wrestling was just as exciting from below as above.

For the big climax scene we used two cameras to save time and blood-



Mark Irwin gets in close as the live audience responds to the fight

Brian went at it like beasts unchained. By now I was ready for all their moves and could judge when to step aside and when to stay in close. My fellow participants, however, going round four under the lights, began to fall back and forth into the realm of human error and, more than once, my camera and cranium were jolted down to my retinae. But, we got it all in the end.

The Shamrock Boys Club was only the beginning. We staged five more fights in hockey arenas in Brantford, Paris and the tiny town of Ayr. Unlike the Boys Club, however, these were all enormous with seventy-foot ceilings and more room than our two

shed. All the matches were very real, very vicious fights; no bite-him-in-the-kneecap antics. We staged the bouts every weekend to draw the most extras and to allow the actors to recover from the torn ligaments and bruises of the week before.

Also, the "no doubles" approach was contagious; both Micheline Lanctot and Henry Beckman volunteered their bodies for a grisly fistfight in the pouring rain. In fact, Micheline was thrown onto the gravel and punched into submission four takes in a row. Looking back, the film is not as ultraviolent as it sounds, but I can still think of no better title than — *Blood and Guts*.