

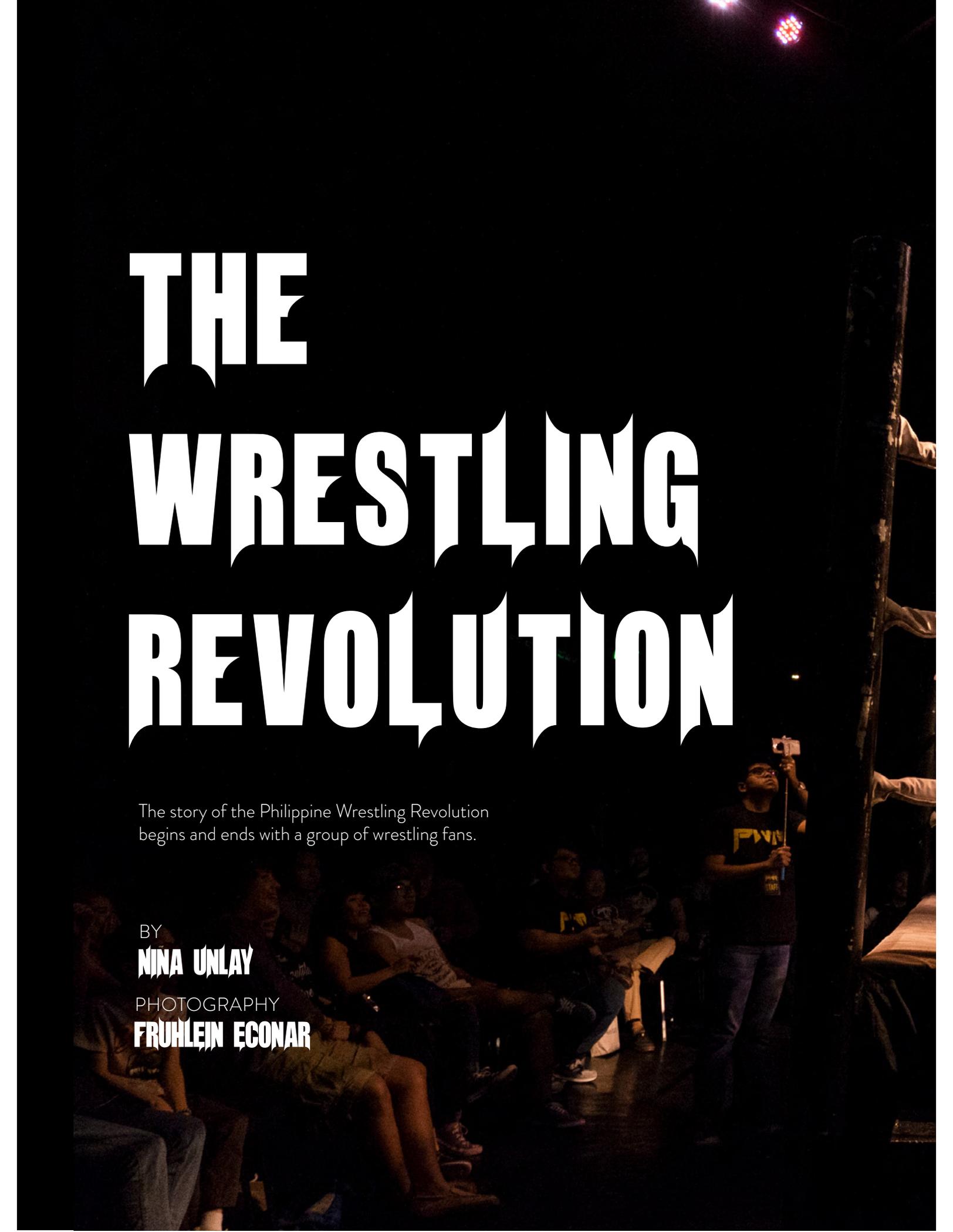
- VOLUME FOUR 2017 -

# GRID

*"Those who are easily shocked should be shocked more often." - Mae West*



THE FRINGE ISSUE  
*- Destinations and Stories from the Peripheries -*



# THE WRESTLING REVOLUTION

The story of the Philippine Wrestling Revolution begins and ends with a group of wrestling fans.

BY

**NINA UNLAY**

PHOTOGRAPHY

**FRUHLIN ECONAR**



## HERE'S THE THING ABOUT PRO WRESTLING: YOU'RE EITHER ON THE BANDWAGON OR YOU AREN'T.

Like pineapples on pizza, sugar in coffee, or Peter Pan. If you're not a believer, you might just be the enemy.

And every believer has heard the enemy touting the catchphrase: *Wrestling isn't real anyway.*

This was the opening line of the speech I heard from my parents over and over again when I was a little girl, echoing every reasonable person in the world, right before they'd turn the television off. Somewhere in my child's mind, I knew they were right. In the real world, human beings don't just leap off steel ladders and into tables, or chokeslam their enemies in fits of rage—but who cared? In 2016, a Foot Locker Week of Greatness commercial featured two guys saying the new sneakers were so good they couldn't believe they were real. John Cena passes by and says, "You don't need to believe something is real to enjoy it!"

Good enough. I put my disbelief away, turned on the television, and thoroughly enjoyed Eddie Guerrero and John "Bradshaw" Layfield, a favorite rivalry at the time, go at it on WWE over and over again. Of course there were always going to be bad spots and cheesy storylines that were difficult to digest, and thus made wrestling less real.

But it would become real again the day Eddie Guerrero died. It became real when Rey Mysterio took his mask off for him and put his face in his hands during his tribute. But the line started getting fuzzy once more when Eddie Guerrero's wife, Vicky Guerrero, started to wrestle, and worked some odd scripts with haphazard acting skills. Things got weird.

But I looked the other way. That's what wrestling fans do. Because at the end of the day, it's a thin line between weird and awesome.

So even when the Philippine Wrestling Revolution came about and held their first show in 2014, it wasn't until much later that people like myself got looped in on the hype. There hadn't been a successful pro wrestling



promotion in the Philippines in years. The last big account of local pro wrestling actually took to the television screen: There was a show called *Pinoy Wrestling* that launched in 1989. It stopped airing soon after launch, and Manila went on to assume that wrestling in the Philippines was going to be a no-show, nothing more than a cheap gimmick, if anything.

There isn't much information left to salvage regarding *Pinoy Wrestling*, aside from digital clips of the old episodes that have recently been uploaded to YouTube (less than a year ago, and, coincidentally, around the time that the PWR started picking up heat), so it's hard to say why exactly it never picked up. Aired before I was born, I don't know the people or the characters under the over-the-top monikers (Joe Pogi, Max Buwaya, The Bakal Boys, to name a few). I don't find myself invested in their stories. I can't.





PWR holds their weekly training sessions at Fitplus Gym in Parañaque. All new wrestlers have to undergo the bootcamp before joining the roster.



That's the other thing about pro wrestling: You need to know it, and love it, in order to believe in it. Otherwise, it's just dudes in costumes. Give it a good story, and it becomes something else.

There are other local promotions currently in the rasslin' scene, like the Manila Wrestling Federation and the more recently founded Art of War. But unlike the PWR, Art of War sells itself on a hardlined stance towards wrestling, which prides itself on technical fundamentals, and less with the gimmicks. They align themselves with the hashtags #LEGIT and #WRESTLINGISREAL.

In any case, I heard the PWR hype before I saw it, and while they don't shy away from the technical, they are not afraid of the theatricalities: fighters in the ring taking form in all odd Pinoy archetypes. Hacienderos, telemarketers, rap battles. Weird? Or awesome?

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE RING, amidst six other wrestlers, is a man wearing red pants, red underwear, and a salakot atop





his head. But he has his hands on his hips, chest pumped out, like it was the most ordinary thing in the world. And in the PWR, it might as well be.

I've walked right into the segment of their bootcamp where they are training to cut promos—giving interviews, trash talking, hyping the crowd up... a vital aspect of wrestling. Someone is yelling in the background as the others surround the ring. The smell of sweat and excitement is thick.

It's a Sunday, regular training day. There are roughly 20 hopefuls, working the ropes of a worn-out ring in a small fitness gym. But the ring itself is leaps and bounds better than where the PWR first started three years ago, training in an open-air boxing gym owned by the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Essentially, it was an open-air box made of cement and plywood, hidden behind tarpaulin (which, of course,

they were happy to throw themselves around in).

It was in May 2014 that the PWR had its first show called Revolution Now for friends and family. In September, they put on their first show for everyone else. Over a hundred people came. Today, they fill up to roughly 400 seats a show.

The bootcamp is a mandatory step towards joining the official PWR roster, graduation determined by the heads of training. Apart from rolling around in the ring, the bootcampers cut promos, booing and cheering each other on, steeling themselves to do what they're ultimately meant to: sell a show to an audience.

"Don't break," Red Ollero, the man with the red pants, says over and over again as the bootcampers stifle reactions and laughs. Don't break character.

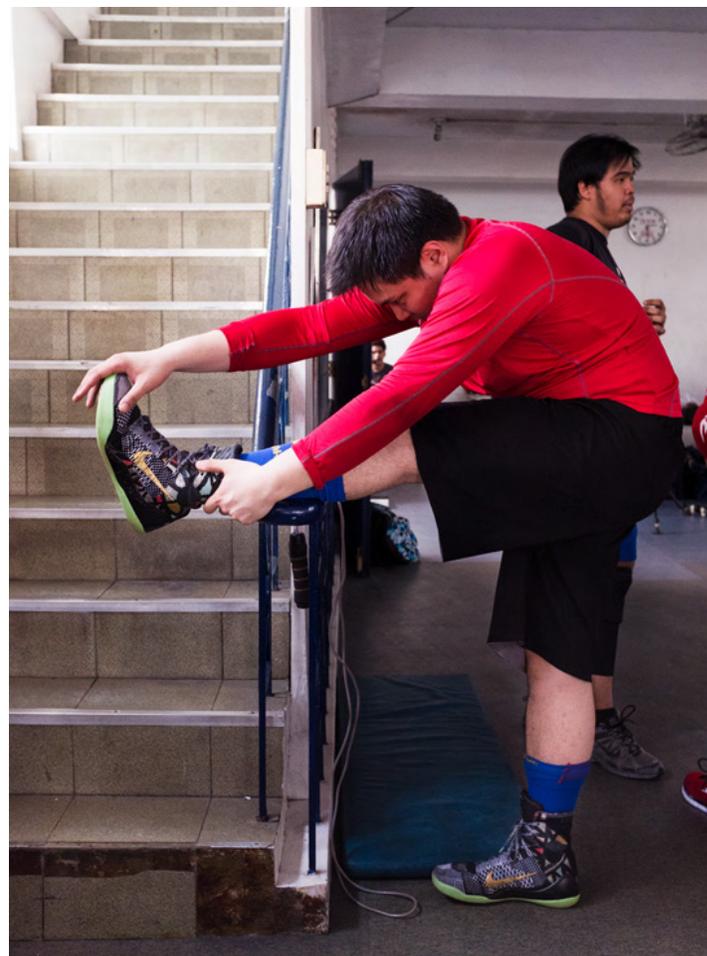
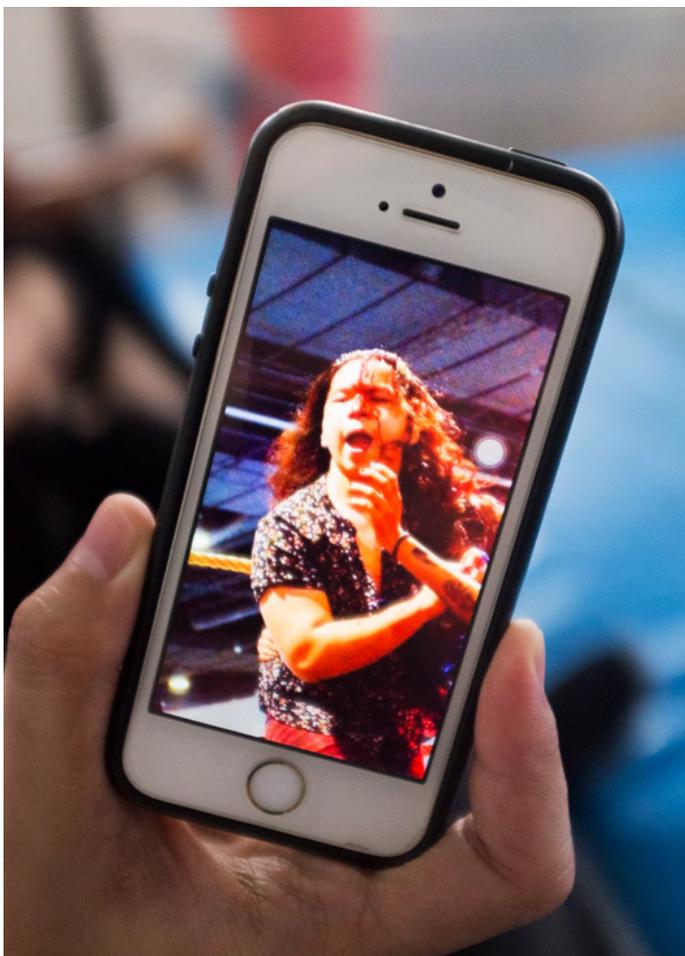
"Wrestling still has a fourth wall," he says. "The audience isn't there. It's called

the 'kayfabe', the realm in which the wrestling story exists. [I could be] a bad guy in the kayfabe but in real life, I'm not."

In the ring, Red is known as Roderick Mahaba (a name which, he later says, he wishes he had given a little more thought to), the overenthusiastic, possibly inappropriate Pinoy loverboy, head of the "Basted Club" and self-proclaimed "King of Schlong Style." During his wrestling debut, he pumped himself up by putting his hands together to form a heart as the crowd chanted "puso!"

But at the moment, he's the guy holding the clipboard. Head of character training, he is calling the shots. "Kung duwag ka, maging duwag ka," he tells one of the wrestlers cutting a promo. "Kung mayabang ka, maging mayabang ka!"

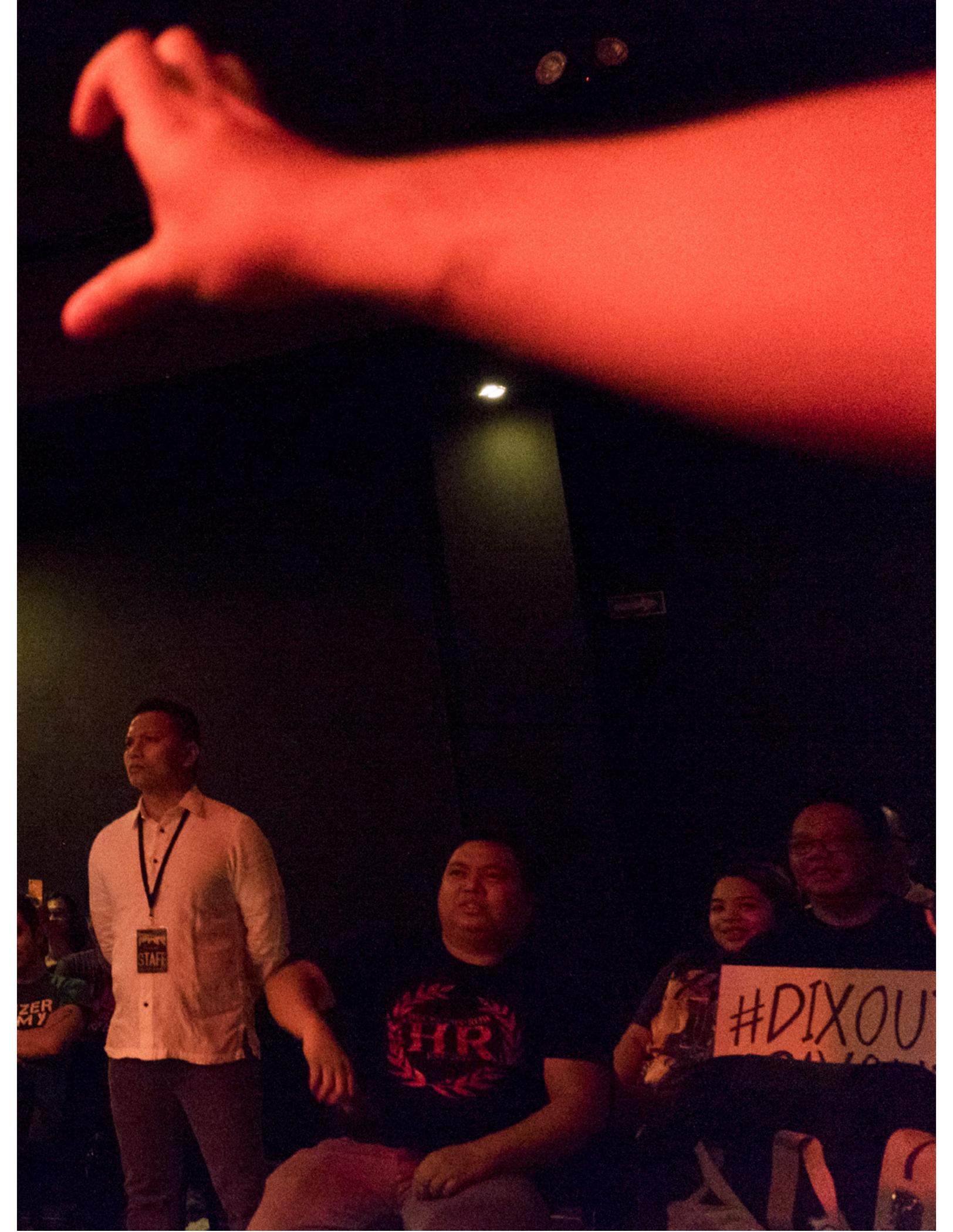
Red also happens to be a comedian. If you ask him, wrestling is an art form. And if you watch this or any group of





Rederick Mahaba's signature: putting his hands together (or in this case, joining up with a fan's hand) to form a heart as the crowd chants "puso!"







**This page:** Ouel Babasa, Creative Director of PWR

**Opposite page (clockwise):**

The Network; Crystal; Punk Dolls;

Chris Panzer; Trabajador Tres; The Apocalypse

bootcampers, there's no reason not to believe him. Most of these newbies don't look like what you'd expect a wrestler to look like. This ring isn't filled with martial artists, or gym buffs. They don't look like the kind of fighters you'd expect. Just regular, sweaty guys and girls, hard at work. You can tell that on most days, they are office workers, call center agents, freelance creatives, the people sitting in front of the PlayStation for hours playing WWE Smackdown vs. Raw.

In fact, on a separate occasion, I caught the lot of them in a video game café, crowding around the TV screen, remaking themselves as wrestlers through Smackdown vs. Raw's customization settings. They jeered at each other loudly, just as they do when they're cutting promos, pushing buttons, shouting, "Wrestling isn't real anyway!" An old joke.

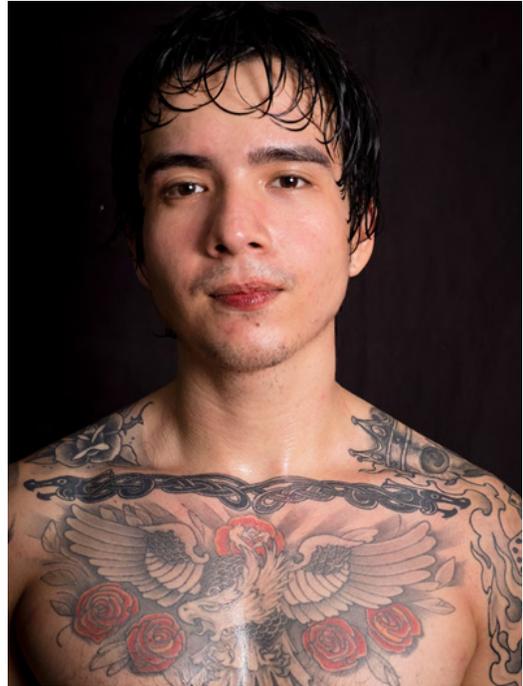
SITTING IN FRONT OF THE TV SCREEN IN AWE of WWE is the invisible string that holds the current PWR roster together. This is a group of lifelong fans.

"All throughout my life, I knew about wrestling. I mean, I love wrestling. During college, I was looking for a wrestling school, and there was nothing here. Wala. There was amateur wrestling, the Wrestling Association of the Philippines, but that's not the [same]. I was working full-time when I found out about PWR. But I thought... I'm going to do this. No matter what, I'm gonna do this."

Or so Mark Javellana tells me, while looking very much like a regular dude dressed in a short-sleeved polo after a hard day's work in his regular nine-to-five.

"We like to make fun of ourselves," Mark says. "One of our wrestlers is a short 4'11" guy [named] Trian Dela Torre. He banks on being a midget and he makes fun of himself for it. [Our audience] gravitates towards someone who's funny enough to make fun of himself. That's... basically PWR. Maliban doon, we can wrestle. I think right now what's happening is that people come to get a laugh, but after the laugh is over, they stay for the wrestling."

Mark is a member of the first batch of PWR wrestlers, now the head of technical training. Before him, it was Bombay Suarez. But in the beginning,



there was just a stack of instructional DVDs from the 2000s and a group of amateurs teaching themselves, hurting themselves in the process. “Mark has a saying,” says Vintendo, one of the more seasoned wrestlers. “If you train, it’ll hurt. If you don’t train, it’ll hurt *a lot*.”

Fortunately, as the PWR gained traction, they also found help. In the form of training from international wrestlers like So Sai King, Billy Suede, Chilly Willy, and Kai Katana. They’ve even earned a talent-scouting trip by the WWE.

It’s been no small investment—blood, sweat, pain, and even cash. At the bootcamp, some of the wrestlers are wearing t-shirts with their own names or taglines on them, merchandise that they fund themselves. “Most of the guys here are longtime fans,” Red says. “There’s no money in it. Money can’t be your motivation. The guys here break their backs for their passion. Some of them have never performed before. They even have stage fright.”

But on Sundays, they wrestle. Part of Red’s job is to help the trainees figure out who they want to be on stage—and in wrestling, who you want to be on stage often takes a huge part of who you are. Some, like Ralph Imabayashi and John Sebastian, opt to retain their own names, and most aspects of

their personalities. For Mark—who is “The Senyorito” Jake de Leon, and has arguably been called the greatest all-around pro wrestler in the Philippines—it started from his desire to be the heel, the bad guy. “I really wanted to be a heel; a rich heel. Like, I wanted to pay people to do push-ups with me inside the ring and then kick their hands,” he laughs. “My family actually owns a hacienda sa Bacolod, so I’m a true son of a haciendero. It’s easier for a lot of wrestlers to have something that’s close to home. So that’s what I did.”

But sometimes the crowd takes the wrestlers in a different direction—when Jake de Leon comes out to shake the hands of everyone in the front row, they love it. He’s become one of the main faces of the PWR.

“I think [our success] can be attributed to the “smark” crowd here,” Mark says. “‘Smark’ is a play between ‘smart’ and ‘mark’. If you’re a mark, you’re a pure wrestling fan, you don’t know [or believe] it’s fake. If you’re a smart guy, you know it’s fake. But if you’re a smark, you know it’s fake but you enjoy. The big smark crowd in the Philippines, they choose to support us because not only are we like an avenue for their wrestling fix, but they also want to see us grow. We really thank them for that, we try to keep getting better. After that first night... that’s when we



realized this group of fans [were] hardcore, and whatever we do, just make sure they have fun.”

On training day, watching them cheer and push one another, it’s hard to believe the crowd could have more fun than the wrestlers. But come show time, the moment the entrance music hits, the crowd comes alive. Never matter the venue or the numbers, they are jeering and pushing just as much as the wrestlers.

So what is it? Is it the showmanship? The theatricality? The shock value of seeing a dinosaur on stage? Is it the result of years and years of hard work? Or could it be that the PWR has somehow nurtured the very thin line between the wrestling fanatics in the audience and the ones on stage?

“In my opinion—and I’ve also heard this from the people who have trained us—the [audience] knows that Filipinos are natural showmen,” Mark tells me. “Our crowd kind of lives through us. We’re living their dream and they want to see us live that dream. Other than liking us, they like people living the dream that they want to achieve.”

In the ring, it’s hard to spot him through the lens of Jake de Leon. He’s become a charismatic, topless dude sporting

**“THAT’S THE OTHER THING ABOUT PRO WRESTLING: YOU NEED TO LOVE IT IN ORDER TO BELIEVE IN IT.”**

yellow and black pants, running in to the time of his own music, back to shaking the hands of every man and woman in the audience, like he knows them all personally. He clammers up the ring and climbs the ropes. The crowd cheers. He raises his hands, pointing to the air.

It is one of his signature moves. But this time I think I actually spot a bit of Mark underneath, signs of him in the cocky smile, signaling with satisfaction to the audience: Yup. We made it, boys. 🌐







**"THE 'KAYFABE' IS THE REALM  
IN WHICH THE WRESTLING  
STORY EXISTS."**



