

From Chapter 12: 'I travel alone,' said Giant Haystacks

Max Crabtree: The big fella? Oh God, He's a bad'n. He's a profound liar, let's start with that. A big horrible man. I started him, but he won't tell you that. I was running the King's Hall, Belle Vue, and an old-time wrestler called Billy Graham brought him down. He was working on a club door. In those days he weighed about twenty-six stone. Looked quite tidy. Then he blew himself up, and at one time he was about forty-eight stone. A great guy, but born a liar.

Brian Dixon: Haystacks started with me very early on, before all the other big names came over. We needed a giant. I gave him the name Haystack Colhoun. I'd seen the name in an American magazine. Then we came up with Haystacks. It seemed fitting at the time. People got sick of him, but they'd still come and see him. He's such a huge man – people are mesmerised by him.

Simon Garfield: The first time I saw Haystacks in the ring was in 1992 at Tunbridge Wells. He was in against Franz Schumann, a dashing Austrian thirty stones lighter.

'Wrestling,' Haystacks announced before the contest, 'is the only way to release my pent-up feelings without being prosecuted.'

I found Franz Schumann shaking gently backstage. When I asked him how he felt, he said 'I'm Confident.'

The master of ceremonies – as always at these heavyweight contests – was a tiny, weedy man in a bow-tie. He introduced Schumann as funereal music played in the background. The Austrian waved his arms in the air, as if to say, 'These are my arms. I may never use them again.'

Then Haystacks entered, to the tune of 'Two Tribes (Go To War)'. All the other wrestlers who had appeared earlier on the bill had leapt into the ring with great enthusiasm, as if to say, 'I'm ready for action!' Not Haystacks. Haystacks had a chair supplied so he could climb up and heave himself into the arena. Once there, he leaned back on the three ropes to check they could hold him.

The crowd started to shout obscenities. This angered Haystacks, and led him to complain to the referee that there was too much noise. Several minutes passed, with no wrestling. At one stage Haystacks began the complex manoeuvre that would lever his body out of the ring towards an early shower. Finally someone with a microphone warned Haystacks that unless he started wrestling he'd be disqualified.

Haystacks then hurled himself at a startled Schumann. He lifted him up by his throat, and threw him against a corner post. After many postings, Schumann slumped to the floor and tried to crawl away. Haystacks reached outside for the timekeeper's bell, tossed it in his hands, at which point the audience started yelling, 'No! No!' Haystacks glanced at the crowd contemptuously and hit his opponent with the bell. Then I think he got too confident and turned away. The crowd cheered as Schumann arose, grabbed the bell himself and hit Haystacks on the back. Haystacks let out a slight groan. When he turned round he wasn't pleased at all.

Haystacks picked Schumann up, looked at the audience and wrapped the little Austrian in a cocoon of fear as he slammed him onto the canvas. The Austrian didn't move, and the referee counted him out. He was still lying flat out long after Haystacks had returned to his dressing room. In the end the officials rolled him under the bottom rope, and he staggered back with a blue face. Then he showered and went to the bar and told Austrian jokes.

Robbie Brookside: Haystacks can be brutal, and he'll always do enough to win, but he's not cruel. He's a complex man, much cleverer than you might think. I had a serious conversation with him about religion. It was a long car journey, and I had to keep talking so that he wouldn't fall asleep at the wheel. Normally I ask him to tell me the story of how he met Paul McCartney, which he loves, and which normally takes an hour. We've talked about South Africa and Northern Ireland. On this occasion the conversation turned to God. I mentioned that I distrusted all religion, and would rather worship a football team – they might lose, but at least you can see them. Luke took great offence. He said he was a deeply religious man, and that he wouldn't wrestle on a Sunday, and that he goes to mass whenever he can.

He used to be known as Luke McMasters. He's got about a hundred 'real names'. He likes it if I call him Louis.

Max Crabtree: Big Luke? Don't ever, *ever* travel with him. My God... I know Rita well too, his wife. He's been an asset to the job. Wrestling has to have bizarre characters, it's got to have giants.

It's worth £5 just to see him try to get in the ring. When he used to wear the fur jacket and made his grand entrance... that was him. He earned his money then. Now he covers himself up too much. Actually he's spoilt himself. He wants to be liked. But I said to him, 'Martin,' – that's his name, actually – 'Martin, you're a big, big fat man...' he was enormous. You don't see guys like him every day.

He wasn't always a nice person. He's a bit of a morose type of guy. He's on his guard all the time. Anybody who sees him in the street, the first thing they say is, 'Giant Haystacks – God, you are as fat as what I thought you were.' They always get, 'Eff-off!'

Dave Soulman Bond: I've travelled with him, and he talks about his wife and kids and his Irish background. I fought him over here and in Beirut. The bouts didn't last very long, because if he stands on you, you know about it. He's a big man and he can hit you, and he can get very angry. I was his tag partner a few times, and he even got angry with me then.

Once he was being interviewed by a reporter on TV and he was asked what he liked to do in the ring most. Haystacks said, 'I like to throw people down, then bellyflop.' The reporter asked to see just the first part, and so Haystacks picked him up, and slammed him against the canvas, went 'URRRGGGHHH!!!' and the reporter just groaned and rolled off, and that was the end of the interview.

But Haystacks is a quiet guy. Gentle. He thinks a lot.

Giant Haystacks: I haven't been weighed in a while – what's the point? My weight is not a problem, not when you get used to it. I come from a family of giants; my grandfather was seven foot five. I've been wrestling since 1967,

since I was thirteen. I've tried to give it up several times to concentrate on my own businesses, but I've always returned when a promoter pleaded with me. I've wrestled all over the world – China, Japan, Western Samoa, Africa. High-profile people are personal friends of mine. I'm an honorary citizen of Zimbabwe, and that can open a lot of doors.

Unknown to the public, Big Daddy and myself go to hospitals and do charity work. This year a dying child whose last wish was to come to the wrestling spent the evening with me. The following day he died.

I like to drive wherever I can. The car is my thinking place – I work it all out there, away from the wife and children. I'm a total loner. I travel alone, I wrestle alone. I look after myself. I don't need friends.

I've got a BMW and a four-wheel-drive Toyota Land Cruiser. 120,000 miles a year is nothing. I like driving to Austria for the ten-week championship, making a holiday of it, walking and fishing in the mountains between the bouts. I could fly, but these short-haul flights are the shits. I'm not comfortable on a plane, too much hassle fucking messing about, excuse the language. Short-haul there's no first class, it's all one. Not that I want to be in first class, you just get a little bit more room. I always book the seats at the back of an aircraft and ask them to keep one spare beside me. But I always end up next to one little old lady smoking away, and she's knackered, ain't she? So then you get aggravation – 'Aren't you this Giant fellow?'

Simon Garfield: The second time I met him was in a dressing room at Croydon. He was seated, his fat folded over a sunken plastic chair, and the sweat in his beard glistened like sequins. He had just spent ten minutes pounding a smaller man against a post. He placed a towel over his legs, and began to change under it, like you see people do on the beach. He tugged off his tattered country yokel outfit, which was tight to highlight his bulk, and pulled on a loose blue tracksuit.

He said that all he was looking for was justice. This was in reference to an event many years before, the removal of British Wrestling from television in December 1988. Haystacks ran the scenario over his head once more, but he still couldn't grasp its logic.

Giant Haystacks: What it boils down to is this. A guy called Greg Dyke took over *World of Sport*... he never played a sport in his life... he put on fucking silly darts, things like that, but he took off the wrestling. A lot of people were very disappointed. They ran opinion polls and there were ten million people who wanted wrestling back on. There's sixty million people in this country entitled to their wrestling. They are entitled to it, do you understand?

If we weren't living in such a democratic society, I'd have gone up and broke his neck. Unfortunately we've got laws of the land that don't entitle me to do that. I just don't think he had the moral right to stop all that enjoyment for so many. Instead of wrestling they put on these violent movies showing debauchery and murder. The damage to society that does...

When Paul was in the Mull of Kintyre he was quite an enthusiastic artist. He'd watched me on TV, and drew me in as one of the main characters for a video. Then 20th Century Fox wanted to get involved and made a full-length film, and Paul approached me himself and said he wanted me to play a part in the movie. In the end I played two parts. The main character was called Big Bob, a character that Paul had met in the States years before, a shady record dealer, a

living-on-your-own-wits kind of character. I played a Dickensian scene, and modern day. We were quite close, Paul and I. He would sit with me on and off the set. He used to watch the wrestling regularly. He came to see me many times when I wrestled in Sussex. He used to bring his son.

Max Crabtree: Haystacks is just a windbag. Stand on me, let's keep a spade a spade: I know the big fellow well. In the end, the ITV controller did his job, a personal thing. He decided he didn't like wrestling. That's all right. I probably don't like dog racing.

This Dyke got inundated with letters. Of course we didn't do anything to stop that. Naturally whenever we were presenting wrestling, we got the MC to say that if you're not happy that it's come off, write to this bastard. This got his back up more than ever. I had an arrangement that I used to get the ratings of how we were doing on that period on a Saturday. Our competitor was BBC *Grandstand*, and we were always a million viewers in front of it.

They scrubbed *World of Sport* first, but because wrestling was still enjoying good viewing figures, decided to keep us on. But it lost the momentum, because it would be on at one o'clock, and then half-two. But it still didn't matter what they had on BBC, whether it was the Oxford-Cambridge boat race or a rugby union international, wrestling still had a following. But taking us off completely, well the way they did that was just too sudden.

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