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ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Washington, DC 20515-6115

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July 31, 2007

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Mr. Vincent K. McMahon
Chairman
World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc.
1241 East Main Street
Stamford, Connecticut 06902

Dear Mr. McMahon:

We are writing to request information regarding the response of World Wrestling Entertainment Inc. (WWE) to the allegations of pervasive use of steroids by its performers. In the aftermath of the tragic death of Mr. Chris Benoit and his family, allegations have surfaced that Benoit's doctor may have prescribed steroids, without medicinal purpose, to Benoit and other WWE talent. Illegal steroid use in professional sports has gained plenty of attention, but the record suggests that the problem is most pervasive and deadly in pro wrestling, an unregulated form of entertainment that is watched on TV and in arenas by an estimated 20 million fans a week, including children. See, e.g., attached USA TODAY investigative report, "High death rate lingers behind fun façade of pro wrestling."

As Chairman and Ranking Member, respectively, of the Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, the subcommittee with jurisdiction over sports-related matters, we are monitoring this situation very closely. We appreciate the need for the WWE to have adequate time to investigate and address the very serious allegations surrounding the Benoit tragedy, and we request a briefing on this matter at the earliest appropriate time. We also are considering a hearing on this matter, and whether there is a need for Federal regulation to protect the health and safety of the wrestlers. In the 109th Congress, the subcommittee held a hearing on "Steroids in Sports: Cheating the System and Gambling Your Health," and reported legislation, H.R. 1862, the Drug Free Sports Act.

While we appreciate that WWE implemented its Talent Wellness Program (Program) in February 2006, the specifics of the Program are unclear, particularly regarding performance-enhancing substances. Accordingly, we respectfully request that you provide the Subcommittee by close of business on August 15, 2007, with a copy of the Program, as well as any other relevant records detailing the specifics of the Program as well as WWE's implementation and

Mr. Vincent K. McMahon
Page 2

interpretation thereof. Records include memoranda, correspondence, and electronic communications. Please also describe any and all actions that WWE has taken – either within the Program or outside the Program – to detect and prevent steroid use in the wake of the Benoit tragedy. Additional information, including the aggregate number of random tests conducted in each month of this year, would assist the Subcommittee in its review, and we request that you provide that information, as well. We understand that this problem is not limited to the WWE, we therefore will be sending similar information requests to other wrestling leagues.

Should you wish to discuss this matter further, please do not hesitate to contact us, or have your staff contact Christian Tomatsu Fjeld or Consuela Washington of the Majority Committee staff at (202) 225-2927 or Brian McCullough or Will Carty of the Minority Committee staff at (202) 225-3641.

Sincerely,



Bobby L. Rush
Chairman
Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade,
and Consumer Protection



Cliff Stearns
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade,
and Consumer Protection

Attachment

cc: The Honorable John D. Dingell, Chairman
Committee on Energy and Commerce

The Honorable Joe Barton, Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce

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High death rate lingers behind fun facade of pro wrestling

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By Jon Swartz, USA TODAY

Mike "Road Warrior Hawk" Hegstrand died from an enlarged heart caused by high blood pressure at 46. Mike "Crash Holly" Lockwood died from what a medical examiner ruled a suicide at 32. A lethal combination of painkillers was found in his system.



Former pro wrestler Del Wilkes shed his mask after a career that lasted 12 years.

By Todd Bennett for USA TODAY

Mike Lozanski died from what his family says was a lung infection at 35. His relatives are awaiting an autopsy report.

All died in the last five months. All were professional wrestlers with bulging muscles on sculpted bodies. The deaths received little notice beyond obituaries in small newspapers and on wrestling Web sites, typical of the fringe status of the \$500 million industry.

Yet their deaths underscore the troubling fact that despite some attempts to clean up an industry sold on size, stamina and theatrics, wrestlers die young at a staggering rate. Since 1997, about 1,000 wrestlers 45 and younger have worked on pro wrestling circuits worldwide, wrestling officials estimate.

USA TODAY's examination of medical documents, autopsies and police reports, along with interviews with family members and news accounts, shows that at least 65 wrestlers died in that time, 25 from heart attacks or other coronary problems — an extraordinarily high rate for people that young, medical officials say. Many had enlarged hearts.

Illegal steroid use in professional sports has gained plenty of attention: President Bush in his State of the Union address in January urged athletes and professional sports leagues to stop steroid use, and a federal grand jury has been investigating Bay Area Laboratory Co-Operative.

However, it is pro wrestling where the problem appears to be the most pervasive and deadly. In five of the 25 deaths, medical examiners concluded that steroids might have played a role. Excessive steroid use can lead to an enlarged heart. In 12 others, examiners in medical reports cited evidence of use of painkillers, cocaine and other drugs.

The widespread use of drugs and the deaths associated with it raise questions about a largely unregulated business that is watched on TV and in arenas by an estimated 20 million fans a week, including children. Those fans will tune in Sunday for the industry's biggest event, WrestleMania XX.

Fifteen current and former wrestlers interviewed by USA TODAY say they willingly bulked up on anabolic

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No



steroids, which they call "juice," to look the part and took pain pills so they could perform four to five nights a week despite injuries. Some admit to use of human-growth hormones, a muscle-building compound even more powerful and dangerous than steroids. And many say they used recreational drugs.

"I experienced what we in the profession call the silent scream" of pain, drugs and loneliness, says wrestling legend "Rowdy" Roddy Piper, 49, who has been in the business more than 30 years. "You're in your hotel room. You're banged up, numb and alone. You don't want to go downstairs to the bar or restaurant. The walls are breathing. You don't want to talk. Panic sets in and you start weeping. It's something all of us go through."

Scott "Raven" Levy, 39, says he used steroids and more than 200 pain pills daily before he kicked the habit a few years ago. "It's part of the job," Levy says. "If you want to be a wrestler, you have to be a big guy, and you have to perform in pain. If you choose to do neither, pick another profession."

The costs are high. Wrestlers have death rates about seven times higher than the general U.S. population, says Keith Pinckard, a medical examiner in Dallas who has followed wrestling fatalities. They are 12 times more likely to die from heart disease than other Americans 25 to 44, he adds. And USA TODAY research shows that wrestlers are about 20 times more likely to die before 45 than are pro football players, another profession that's exceptionally hard on the body.

Some wrestlers bet among themselves on who will die next, says Mike Lano, a former wrestling manager and promoter.

Steroids-ingrained culture

Unlike amateur wrestling, which is a competitive sport in high school and college, pro wrestling combines sports, stunts and storytelling. The results are scripted.

Pro wrestling does not test for performance-enhancing drugs such as steroids. Nor are they banned by wrestling organizations as they are in pro football, basketball and baseball.

That is one reason, wrestlers and industry watchers say, that use of steroids and other drugs in pro wrestling has gone largely unchecked. It also has been ingrained in the culture for decades. Several of wrestling's biggest names, including Hulk Hogan and former Minnesota governor Jesse "The Body" Ventura, years ago acknowledged using bodybuilding drugs.

"There was a joke: If you did not test positive for steroids, you were fired," former wrestler and broadcaster Bruno Sammartino told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in 1991.

"That's a cop-out," says Vince McMahon, head of wrestling's biggest organization, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). "These guys took steroids because they wanted to.



Del Wilkes, during his stint with the WWF wrestling as "The Patriot."

"Because we are the most visible organization, we get the black eye," adds McMahon, noting that only two of the 65 deceased wrestlers died while working for his company. "It is alarming whenever young people pass away from these insidious causes, but you can't help someone if they don't want to help themselves."

Piper says he lived on a steady diet of muscle builders and painkillers for more than two decades.

The amateur boxer and wrestler left home in Canada at 13. A promoter noticed his "mean streak" and paid him \$25 to fight the legendary Larry "The Axe" Hennig in Winnipeg. Piper made a

lasting impression with his entrance: Clad in a kilt, he ambled to the ring as his bagpipe band played. Hennig pinned the 15-year-old in 10 seconds, the shortest of Piper's 7,000 matches, but Piper quickly was assigned to shows in Kansas City, Montreal and Texas.

Soon Piper had become one of the industry's best-known villains. By the mid-1980s, he was the foil to Hogan, the WWF's golden boy. Wrestling had become a pop-culture phenomenon. Both moonlighted as movie and TV stars, had their own action figures and hobnobbed with celebrities.

Even so, Piper never forgot what he heard as a penniless teenager. "A promoter said to me, 'If you die, kid, die in the ring. It's good for business.'"

A 'rock god' lifestyle

Despite, or because of, its testosterone-fueled danger, wrestling attracts mostly young men to a circuslike life built on outsized personalities, "ripped" bodies and death-defying stunts. Newcomers dive headfirst into the rough-and-tumble profession. Current and former wrestlers interviewed say they live on the edge and see few career options. Only a handful of stars have more than a high school education. During a typical 15-minute match, combatants exchange choreographed body slams and punches. Some leap from top ropes onto cement surfaces outside the ring.

In more physical "hard-core" matches, wrestlers are smashed through tables, whacked in the head with steel chairs and punctured with barbed wire and tacks. Those antics are not fake. "Wrestling is sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll because we have a rock god kind of thing going," Levy says.

Top performers make more than \$1 million annually. Millions of youngsters pine to become the next Mick Foley. He parlayed death-defying stunts — he plunged more than 20 feet from steel cages and was frequently bloodied — into a multimillion-dollar wrestling career. He has since written books on wrestling that made the USA TODAY best-seller list.

But for every star, scores of others toil in obscurity at run-down gyms. "Strongman" Johnny Perry, 30, who died of cocaine intoxication in North Carolina in 2002, moonlighted as a repo man. Curtis Parker, 28, accidentally killed in practice in St. Louis in 2002, also worked at a Jack in the Box.

Some, like Hegstrand, fade from being headliners at sold-out football stadiums — as he was in the early and mid-1990s — to performing at high school gyms and armories. For nearly two decades, Hegstrand — a hulking figure with wrecking-ball biceps who died in October — freely admitted he indulged in hard living. Though he didn't specify what he took, he made it clear that pro wrestling was fraught with steroids, pain pills and recreational drugs. Then came the sobering news: Years of excess had created a tear in his heart.

"I'd put just about everything (drugs) in me that was humanly possible during my wrestling career," Hegstrand told wrestling radio talk-show host Lano in April 2003.

Hegstrand spent his last few years barnstorming in wrestler-turned-evangelist Ted DiBiase's "Heart of David Ministry" promotion. When he died, traces of marijuana were found in his body, according to his autopsy report.

Others, like Lozanski, wrestle despite serious injuries. More than 18 months after he took a nasty fall that damaged his lungs during a match, Lozanski traversed North America, wrestling for small promotions. He died unexpectedly in his sleep in December.

"That's the nature of the business," says Chris Lozanski, 31, Mike's brother and a former wrestler. "Mike felt he had to keep working. I left the business because I want to see my 11-month-old son grow up," he says.

Since he could walk, Lockwood wanted to be a wrestler. What the 5-foot-8 Lockwood lacked in height, he made up for in determination and tireless training, his mother, Barbara, says. "Everyone laughed when this kid said he would make it, but he did."

Lockwood won more than 20 titles in the WWE and a cult following from 1998 to 2003.

With fame came sacrifices. Lockwood was in constant pain and began using prescription painkillers 18 months ago. He also gained noticeable bulk and was irritable — two signs of steroid use. But when Barbara asked, her son denied using them.

Lockwood was released from his WWE contract after five years on July 1 because it did not have "further plans for his character," the WWE said in a statement.

He was about to move back to California, where he planned to reunite with his high school sweetheart and their 7-year-old daughter. He planned to perform in Japan and train young wrestlers. "He was on his way home, but he didn't make it," Barbara says. Lockwood died in November in Florida. He was 32. A medical examiner ruled it a suicide from an overdose of painkillers. But Barbara thinks it was an accident. "Mike had too much to live for," she says.

Wrestling on trial

When anabolic steroids were cast as a controlled substance in 1991, federal law made purchases and possession of them illegal except for medical purposes. Two grand jury investigations shortly thereafter resulted in admissions of steroid abuse by a handful of big wrestling names and the 1991 conviction of a urologist, George Zahorian of Harrisburg, Pa.

He was convicted of 12 counts of selling steroids and painkillers to a body builder and several WWF performers, including Piper (whose real name is Roderick Toombs) and Hogan (Terry Bollea).

"The doctor had shopping bags with our names on them that were filled with steroids and prescription drugs," Piper says.

Shortly thereafter McMahon was indicted. But he was acquitted of charges of conspiring to distribute steroids to wrestlers.

The probes led to stringent drug testing in the WWF, but only for a few years. A few stars were suspended for flunking tests. By late 1996 the program was scrapped because of the expense — and other wrestling organizations didn't test or were lax in enforcement, the WWF said at the time.

Jerry McDevitt, the outside legal counsel for McMahon's wrestling organization, contends testing "just doesn't work" because wrestlers can fake urine tests or use designer steroids that are undetectable. "Anybody who wants to beat it can beat it. The only ones who are caught are stupid," he says.

Last year, the WWE — the WWF changed its name to World Wrestling Entertainment after a copyright dispute with the World Wildlife Fund in 2002 — let go star performer Jeff Hardy for refusing to undergo drug rehab treatment. Within weeks, several wrestling organizations lined up to hire him.

Major promoters say the industry has moved on from its "Wild, Wild West" days of the late 1980s.

Young wrestlers take better care of themselves. "The new guys play PlayStation in their hotel rooms," wrestler Sean Waltman, 31, says.

WWE, the largest wrestling organization in North America with 125 wrestlers, says it tests for recreational drugs if there is probable cause. If a wrestler refuses rehab, he is booted. It has cut weekly performances to three or four, down from about five in the mid-1990s. And it has improved training techniques to minimize injuries.

"Steroids and painkillers (aren't) a professional choice but a lifestyle," says WWE wrestler John Cena, 26, who at 6-1 and 240 pounds is the size he was when he played college football. "I've learned to play in pain. If it's a serious enough injury, I take time off."

McMahon says he requires only that his wrestlers are in shape, not that they're "the size of monsters," as many were in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. "We're not looking for bodybuilders," he says.

The No. 2 wrestling employer, NWA-TNA, is considering mandatory drug testing. In November it began offering medical coverage for injuries inside and outside the ring to its 35 contracted wrestlers — the first time a pro wrestling organization has done so. It is considering medical and dental coverage.

But such reforms help only those wrestling for the top two organizations, leaving hundreds of wrestlers largely working under the same conditions as years ago.

Not much has changed on the regulatory front, either. Attempts by wrestlers to unionize have flopped. They have no player associations, as do football, basketball and baseball players.

In most states, oversight of pro wrestling is left to local athletic commissions. They usually have lenient prematch requirements. In New York, for example, performers are subject to little more than a blood-pressure test.

"No one is standing up. Either they don't know what's going on or they're terrified of being blacklisted," says wrestling journalist Dave Meltzer, echoing the sentiment of others.

For now the only one standing up seems to be Piper. He says he forfeited hundreds of thousands of dollars in potential earnings because his outspokenness about rampant steroid and drug use got him fired from the WWE in June.

The WWE denies Piper's allegations. It says the two were unable to negotiate a contract.

Piper doesn't allow any of his four children to watch wrestling — or harbor dreams of being a wrestler. He is sober, living on a 12 1/2-acre spread near Portland, Ore. He is hardly down on his luck. He's been in 26 movies, such as *They Live*, and TV's *The Love Boat* and *The Mulletts* since 1978. He has agreed to appear in the movie *Fish in a Barrel* with Burt Reynolds.

Yet he clings to hopes of another big payday in wrestling. He suggests he and McMahon take their feud over Piper's dismissal to the airwaves.

"It would be great reality TV: two strong personalities going at it over a topical issue," he says, wistfully. "Maybe we could save lives in the process."

Contributing: Thomas Ankner, Darryl Haralson

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