

Prologue

When I was about five years old, I knew exactly what I wanted to be when I grew up. I told my parents, my brother, and anyone else who would listen. I wrote a letter to the CEO of the company, I prepared my uniform, and even practiced what I was going to do when I began working there.

First, let me paint a picture for you. Today I stand at an average 5'10" and weigh in at the super light-weight qualifying limit of 140 pounds. I was in the 10th percentile in weight from the day I was born. I come from a long line of pasty-white New Jerseyans who would rather eat bagels and pizza than go to the gym. I can't stand fights—I've never been in one in my life. If I were a hockey player, I would likely win the Lady Byng Trophy (player with the most sportsmanship and gentlemanly conduct). Combine all of this and my dream of becoming a *professional wrestler* seems just a little bit ridiculous, doesn't it?

You see, I am a child of the 80's and Hulk Hogan was everything little kids wanted to be back then. Twenty-first century Hulk Hogan got a bit more suspect. Of course, The Ultimate Warrior and Andre the Giant were pretty awesome, too, back then, but The Hulkster was my hero. I begged my mom to let me become a professional wrestler and she agreed, though I look back now with a bit of skepticism as to her confidence in me.



The Shooting Star had high aspirations of becoming the champ!

The wrestling career went through phases over my early school years, which also included hopes of being a magician, basketball player, carpenter, photographer, and snake handler (more on that last one later).

When I was about ten years old, wanting to be a wrestler was hot and heavy in my mind again. My parents allowed me to sign up for “real” wrestling lessons so I could see what it felt like getting my head bashed into a mat.

It doesn’t feel good. I promise.

I participated in my first tournament in my wrestling “career” after practicing for about two weeks. I wrestled in the 89-pound weight class. There were four ten-year-olds in my bracket and one of the kids did not show up. After I lost my opening match as a result of a pin with only

thirteen seconds to go, there was no one to wrestle in my second match. Long story short, I “earned” third place and got a neat little bronze medal that I held onto for many years.

I managed to throw out my shoulder during the match, and with that injury, I ended my illustrious wrestling career, or at least for the moment. I realized years later that while I may not be equipped to wrestle with 6’7” 300-pound monsters, I could incorporate my passion for professional wrestling into what would become my true career, teaching.

Teaching for many years in North Carolina, I learned that professional “rasslin” is quite popular with the Southern folk. Ric Flair—WOOOOOOOOOOO!—is a legend in the state, and I realized that many of my students (and their families) knew all about the current Superstars that are performing today. John Cena and The Rock are this generation’s Hulk Hogan. After a few years of seeing this pattern, I began to realize that I could hook my students by incorporating wrestling themes or phrases into my teaching.

For instance, there is a World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) Superstar named The Miz. Some of you reality television show connoisseurs may remember him as Mike Mizanin from MTV’s *The Real World*. When he was on the show, he had a split persona where he became this “Miz” character and would talk and act like a wrestler while around the others in the house. Years later, he was able to make his dream come true by becoming a professional wrestler in the WWE. He is known for his cockiness and ego, and he has a catchphrase that goes “I’m the Miz, and I’m AWESOME!” Now when he says awesome, it’s not just a spoken word, it is a proclamation of self-centeredness with passion and attitude.

I decided that since many of my students knew who he was, and his catchphrase is fun to say, I was going to incorporate this into my teaching. I explained to the students that when one of their classmates gives a stellar answer or demonstrates excellence, we would celebrate them with the AWESOME chant. For instance, if Shawl got a great answer, I would say to the class, “That’s Shawl, and he’s,” and the class would all come in to join me with “AWWWWESOME!”

While the catchphrases are fun, I wanted to have a symbol of awesomeness, as well, that my students could be proud of. In my social studies class, there was a strong emphasis on being able to argue and defend your stance when we learned about various issues. Each week, we would have formal debates on current event topics, such as troop withdrawal from war zones, legalization of gay marriage, ethical use of the internet, and many more.

After the students debated, I would award the “World Debate Champion” of the week. At Wal-Mart, they sell replica WWE Championship belts. The debate champion for that week was awarded the belt and was permitted to wear it the entire week around school. Many of them even wore it to physical education class! They would also get their picture on my wall of debate champions. When other students and staff saw a child wearing the belt after coming out of my class, they knew what it meant. As a result, that child was uplifted, celebrated, and congratulated on his or her accomplishment.



Imani posing with her Debate Championship.

The other thing I took away from watching these super-human athletes on television was their confidence and passion. When they go through the curtain, they are in front of thousands of people all looking at them. If these men and women simply walked to the ring like they were walking down the street, the crowd would not have a connection to them. If they did not have passion or charisma, they would not be believable. I see myself in a similar role when I teach. While it is only thirty students in front of me, rather than ten thousand fans, I believe that with the same energy and passion for what I am doing, I am engaging my students. Once they are hooked, teaching my content becomes much easier.

While I may not personally be able to step inside of a ring and wrestle the likes of John Cena and The Rock, I realized that I *could* bring ideas from the wrestling world into my classroom that would engage, celebrate, and uplift my students. And that to me is ... AWWWWWESOME!