

# **FOOD FIGHT**

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**MY PLANT-POWERED JOURNEY  
FROM THE BINGO HALLS TO THE BIG TIME**

**AUSTIN ARIES**

**WITH MIKE TULLY**

## CHAPTER 1

Wisconsin might well be the most meat-eating, dairy-loving place on earth.

You could probably say the same thing about the whole Midwest, or really about America in general. But Wisconsin—the place where I grew up—takes it to a whole different level. The entire culture seems to revolve around beer and bratwursts and cheese and sports and hunting and fishing.

Look at it this way: There are three pro sports teams in Wisconsin—the Green Bay Packers, the Milwaukee Brewers, and the Milwaukee Bucks.

Packers fans, as you probably know, are called “Cheeseheads.” They literally wear huge foam cheese hats. And by the way, the cheese-themed accessories aren’t limited to hats. There are cheese-shaped beer holders. There are cheese ties. There are cheese tiaras. You get the picture. People in Wisconsin actually buy and wear all that stuff.

Meanwhile, the highlight of every Brewers home game is not the \$6 beers or the “Brat-chos,” but when a bunch of guys dressed up as sausages race each other around the diamond with the crowd cheering on their favorite.

And then there are the Bucks, who are named after the animals that many in Wisconsin enjoy going out to kill, and then sticking on top of their cars.

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I grew up in Waukesha, a suburb west of Milwaukee, in what I would call a typical lower-middle class Midwestern family. My parents married young, and shortly after that they had me. I became the oldest of four kids—two boys and two girls.

We lived in a modest house. Old station wagons and Ford Tempos frequently occupied the driveway. Our wardrobe was mainly made up of generous hand-me-downs and the finest clothes Goodwill had to offer. For better or worse, the barber-shop we went to was called “Super Moms Cuts.” And let me tell you, some of those cuts were just *super*.

Money was always tight for my family. My parents pinched pennies and cut corners. Sometimes they robbed Peter to pay Paul. But we lived a basically normal life, and we had everything we needed.

My dad busted his ass to make sure we always had a roof over our head. We might have bought the generic cereal at the supermarket and drank the generic soda, but there was always enough to eat.

Mom did what she could to make sure the money got stretched as far as it could go. If we had spaghetti for dinner, she would always do that trick where you fill the empty container of meat sauce back up halfway with water and then dump that out into the pot, to really get the most out of the jar. It was a family of six trying to stretch a dollar to make sure everybody got fed.

I wouldn't say cooking was my mom's specialty. She wasn't awful, but it wasn't something she enjoyed, either. It was really just another job she had on top of all the other things she had to worry about. In addition to raising four kids of her own, she also worked a job at a daycare center to bring home extra money.

Mom was part of the generation where the microwave became a staple in every kitchen. The old world of June Cleaver spending all day whipping up a homemade chicken pot pie was replaced by moms like mine nuking a frozen, pre-packaged, some-kind-of-meat pot pie for 15 minutes.

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Cooking food from scratch used to be more of a necessity back in the old days. But by the time I was a kid, fast food, frozen pizzas, microwaveable entrées, and all that kind of stuff were taking over. Ready-to-eat foods made it easy—and cheap—for overworked parents on a tight budget to put food on the table.

Now compared to my father, my mom was an Iron Chef. My dad sometimes worked two jobs, so he wasn't pitching in a whole lot in the kitchen anyway. But if my mom ever got sick, or if dad had to cook for some reason, he was famous for grabbing whatever he found in the fridge and whatever vegetables he had grown in the garden and then throwing all that stuff in a pot. And that was dinner.

By the time the food was ready, you weren't always sure what the original ingredients might have been, but when it was dad's turn to cook, there wasn't a whole lot of negotiating at the dinner table. You knew to just shut up and dig in to dad's "stew."

Food-wise, I'd say it was a typical all-American upbringing for that time. On a weeknight, a family dinner might have been a couple of Jack's frozen pizzas and an iceberg lettuce salad with ranch, or maybe some boxed mac and cheese with hot dogs, or some burgers. Stuff like that.

Looking back, I'd say one of my all-time favorite foods as a kid was KFC. On the rare occasion that my family would go eat out, I loved getting some fried chicken and then washing that down with some Mountain Dew. In my world, that was a tasty score back then.

Another memorable treat was eating hot cakes and sausage at McDonald's. My Grandma Ginny and Grandpa Gerd, from my mom's side, lived three blocks from a McDonald's. In summertime, we'd always stop there for breakfast on our way over to go swimming.

Grandpa Gerd was a lieutenant in the armed forces. He jumped out of airplanes at night during World War II. As a kid, that sounded pretty crazy to me. It still does now, come to think of it.

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After raising four kids, Grandma Ginny went to work as a waitress at a place called Zorba's. She'd bring me rice pudding from work all the time. Rice, sugar, milk, sugar, raisins, sugar, and cinnamon. As a kid, how can you go wrong with that?

Other times, we'd be driving down the street with Grandpa Gerd and he'd make an abrupt right turn at Tallenger's, a little local soft-serve ice cream place.

"What's the naughty car doing?" he would ask as he argued with the car, pretending he couldn't control the steering wheel. That was one of grandpa's classic gags.

And then he'd pull in and we'd all get vanilla-chocolate swirl ice cream cones.

When it came to the stuff we ate, we were more or less like everyone else in the neighborhood. I imagine many people reading this can relate in one way or another. The word "organic" did not come up in our house. There were no debates about GMO versus non-GMO, or the dangers of saturated fats.

For at least the first 20 years of my life, I don't recall ever meeting anyone who identified as a vegetarian, much less as a vegan. If I did, obviously they didn't make a very strong impression on me, because I don't remember them.

My dad used to put too much salt on his food, which is probably what gave him high blood pressure later on. But, in our world, no one looked at that as a failure on his part, or thought he ate irresponsibly.

High blood pressure was a common problem. People just accepted that some people got high blood pressure. It was kind of like it wasn't your fault if your diet was dangerously high in sodium. People treated salt as if it was completely unavoidable—as if food somehow came off the farm that way.

It's kind of like the way people used to look at cigarettes. When I was growing up, both of my parents smoked. That wasn't unusual among my friends' parents, either. That's the way things were. As far as I can recall, no one really questioned it.

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That's the world I grew up in. That's where my story starts. Where I come from, no one took a really hard look at the food we were eating or asked if there might be a better way. People just accepted what they were given and ate the foods they were told they should eat.

That's the way people were in general where I grew up. Everyone tended to fall in line. No one really questioned what you're supposed to do with your life, either.

Other than wrestling, I can only ever remember having one career plan in mind. Way back when I was three years old or so, I got it in my head that when I grew up I might join the military. Grandpa Gerd was in WWII, my other grandfather had fought in the Korean War, and both my uncles on my mom's side went to Vietnam. So I thought I might follow in their footsteps someday.

I think becoming a soldier seemed like an attainable goal, since so many of my family members had gone down that path. That seemed like a trajectory I might already be on at that young age.

I had this yearbook with my uncles' Army pictures in it from back when they were in boot camp. I also had some old practice bullets and my grandpa's old practice grenade. G.I. Joe was big at the time, so I had all those toys, too. I used to take all my Army stuff in the backyard with me and camp out in a tent. My grandfather gave me the old trunk that had sat at the foot of his bed when he was in the service, and I dragged that into my room and kept all my Army stuff inside it. Playing with Army stuff was my big thing for probably about two years.

But then one Saturday morning, everything changed, the first time I saw AWA wrestling on TV.

Wrestling grabbed me instantly. The first AWA matches I ever saw must have been all the way back in '82 or '83. I remember watching Blackjack Lanza and Bobby Heenan versus Hulk Hogan in a cage, back when Hulk was still in the AWA, a year or so before Hulkamania exploded.

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(And yes, I do mean *that* Bobby Heenan. People probably remember him more as Bobby “The Brain” from a few years later. But not only was Bobby Heenan a great manager and commentator, he was tremendous in the ring, too.)

Wrestling became one of the things I had in common with my dad. I remember going down to the Mecca Arena as a kid and reaching over the guardrail and patting Jesse Ventura on the ass as he walked down the aisle on his way to the ring. My dad gave me a stern look for that one.

“Don’t ever reach over the guardrail,” he said. “If you touch the wrestlers, they can touch you back, and there’s nothing I can do about that.”

That’s when I learned that you don’t ever put your hands on a wrestler.

I also discovered the NWA. There were the Four Horsemen: Ric Flair, Arn Anderson, Ole Anderson, and Tully Blanchard. Then they kicked Ole out and brought in Barry Windham and then Lex Luger...and then, much later, Steve “Mongo” McMichael (although I’ve since tried to forget about that).

And then there were the Road Warriors. To this day, I can’t hear “Iron Man” by Black Sabbath and not picture those two beasts hitting the ring and beating the hell out of a couple of poor souls.

Out of Texas, there was World Class Championship Wrestling with the Von Erichs and the Freebirds, before this crazy guy named Cactus Jack showed up.

The WWE—then the WWF—was around then, too. I watched, of course. To me, it had a different feel, though. It was a little more over-the-top. You had Hulk Hogan saying prayers and eating vitamins. There was “Rowdy” Roddy Piper and his Hot Rod shirt and kilt. And then there was “The Barber,” always trying to cut everybody’s hair off.

And for some weird reason, there were always a lot of animals involved. “Birdman” Koko B. Ware had his parrot, Frankie. There

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were the British Bulldogs with their bulldog, Matilda, and then Jake “The Snake” Roberts had his python, Damien.

From the start, while I enjoyed the glitz and glamor of sports entertainment, I really gravitated to the dark and dingy presentation of rasslin.’ That’s what initially grabbed my imagination.

I also gravitated toward the smaller, more athletic guys, and the underdogs. Everyone loves Hulk Hogan, but deep down inside, most of us know we’ll never be him. It doesn’t matter how much heart you have; most people are just never going to be 6’6” and 300 pounds. But when they look at guys like Ricky Morton, the 1-2-3 Kid (later known as X-Pac), or even an Austin Aries, I think they can identify with that on a more personal level.

As a kid, I remember rooting for a guy named Jake “The Milkman” Milliman. He never won his matches but ended up getting a little cult following because of how well he played the underdog role. And then there were the Mulkey Brothers, who took an ass kicking so good that people started to get behind them. And after Jim Cornette mockingly coined the term “Mulkey Mania,” they lucked their way into their first ever victory and people went nuts!

Once I discovered wrestling, it quickly became an all-consuming passion for me. It was also a pretty good physical outlet for a very active little dude. I used to practice throwing dropkicks against an inner tube in my grandma’s pool. My aunt (who’s also my godmother) made me a big, boxy, fuzzy horse out of foam. The thing was three feet tall, and I practiced my moves on that thing all the time until I finally trashed it a couple years later.

As soon as the wrestling bug bit me, I started begging my parents for wrestling figures to play with. The first WWF action figures were those old rubber ones that were frozen in one pose. You couldn’t really do shit with those toys.

But then, around 1985, Remco came out with toys that were a lot closer to the action figures you see today. The arms and legs moved, which made them a lot more fun to play with. On my

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eighth birthday, my mom made me a birthday cake that looked like a wrestling ring, and there were Rick Martel and Baron von Raschke toys on top of the cake. Pretty much from then on, I was obsessed with getting my hands on as many wrestling figures as humanly possible.

My mom used to take me down to Kmart and put all the wrestling toys I wanted on layaway. Yes, layaway. A lot of people reading this probably don't even know what layaway means, since nowadays everyone has a credit card. But when I was a kid, that was how we bought a lot of stuff. Mom would make a down payment, and Kmart would hold the toys off the shelves and then give them to her once she finished paying for them.

Whenever new figures came out, my mom would grab them all for me and put them on layaway so they wouldn't sell out before she could afford to pay for them. Once they were paid off, she would take them home and hide all of them up in her bedroom closet.

That was a brilliant strategy on her part, because it gave her a lot of leverage with me. Mom knew that I knew that she had the toys, and she knew I was desperate to get my hands on them. Whenever I did a bunch of chores, or something else that was worthy of a little reward, she would take all the new toys out of her closet and let me pick which ones I wanted to open up.

I used to spend hours thinking about those action figures. Which one would I open next? On one hand, I could get the Midnight Riders. But I also really wanted that Carlos Colón and Abdullah the Butcher combination pack. Then again, if I got the Nick Bockwinkel and Ric Flair combo, I could make them a tag team, but I could also pit them against each other as rivals. When you're a little kid, these are critical decisions we're talking about.

Eventually, I created this massive collection. I'd say I had 50 or 60 of those things. I used to wrestle my guys against each other on top of my grandpa's old military trunk. One Christmas, I got the toy WWF ring. My mom had wrapped everything sepa-

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rately. I opened the ropes and the turnbuckles first and couldn't figure out what the hell it was. When I unwrapped the actual ring and realized what I had on my hands I started freaking out. But the funny thing was, after the novelty wore off, that ring couldn't compare to my Grandpa's trunk.

As the wrestling toys started piling up, slowly but surely the military stuff all got packed away—for good. Except that Army trunk, now filled with wrestlers, of course.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, I think I always had an interest in the business done behind the curtain in wrestling. When I had played with my Army stuff, I always pretended I was a soldier. But when I played wrestling, I never played as a wrestler. I always played as the guy controlling the wrestlers.

I started my own imaginary promotion. There was already the WWF and the NWA and the AWA and WCCW. So I called my promotion the CWA—The Classic Wrestling Association. I split all my toys up into good guys and bad guys and tag teams.

When my mom went shopping at Kmart, I would sit in the magazine section and read all the wrestling mags—*The Wrestler*, *Inside Wrestling*, *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*. The magazines had all the rankings of the major promotions, but then they'd also have a side column with all the smaller promotions. And in my head, I would pluck guys from the small promotions to come wrestle for the CWA.

I went to some pretty extreme lengths at times. If necessary, I would change an action figure's name and his gimmick and turn him into a whole new wrestler. If I had a Ric Flair figure, for example, I couldn't just keep him as Ric Flair, because everyone knew the "Nature Boy" wrestled in the NWA.

So I would get some paint and then color his hair and give him a moustache. Or I would turn his short tights into long tights, or maybe give him some face paint. My grandma was into sewing and she always had material lying around, so sometimes I would give my guys a whole new wardrobe.

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And I wasn't just limited to using my wrestler toys. The Remco-style wrestling toys weren't just more flexible and user-friendly than the old WWF figurines, they were also smaller—about five or six inches tall—which made them the same size as a bunch of other toys. And remember, this was a golden age of action figures. In addition to wrestlers and G.I. Joes, there was also He-Man and the ThunderCats. Stallone had some Rambo and Rocky figures. There were some Schwarzenegger ones, too. Hell, Chuck Norris even got in on the action. And then, of course, stores like Walgreens had generic rip-off versions of all the big toys.

Since these toys were all about the same size, I soon found out that certain heads and arms and legs were interchangeable with one another. Very quickly, the CWA had a wide variety of performers to choose from.

I turned Lion-O from the ThunderCats into a guy called “Big Red.” The ThunderCats toys were a little bigger than the other action figures, so Big Red was a “Mean” Mark Callous (AKA The Undertaker) kind of guy, with a great clothesline and a big boot to stick in his opponent's face.

I remember I had one guy I called “The Zodiac Warrior” and another one called “The Black Ninja.” Not necessarily the most original nicknames ever conceived. But then again, in my defense, I was pretty young.

Other than thinking about joining the military, way back when I was basically a toddler, I don't think I've ever wanted to do anything with my life but wrestle. So I would love to tell you that, ever since I was five years old, I was 100% committed to becoming a professional wrestler. But it wasn't until many years later that I set my mind to pursuing that dream.

When I was a kid, I don't think it ever dawned on me that I could actually become a wrestler myself and be up there in the ring like those guys I saw on TV and down at the Mecca. Sure, I loved watching wrestling and playing with my toys. But even if