

Punk has grip on wrestling title

■ Phil Brooks, otherwise known as CM Punk, owns the ECW championship.

BY JEFFREY LUTZ
The Wichita Eagle

The title of Extreme Championship Wrestling champion doesn't mean as much as it used to.

During much of the 1990s, ECW had a strong cult following and was known for its brutal matches in front of crazed fans in small arenas.



Jeffrey Lutz still sleeps with one of his stuffed WWE Legion of Doom dolls. He promises to grow out of it eventually. Reach him at or jlutz@wichitaagle.com

After the company went out of business in 2001, World Wrestling Entertainment purchased the name and video library. A few successful ECW pay-per-views prompted WWE in June 2006 to establish ECW as its third brand, joining RAW and Smackdown.

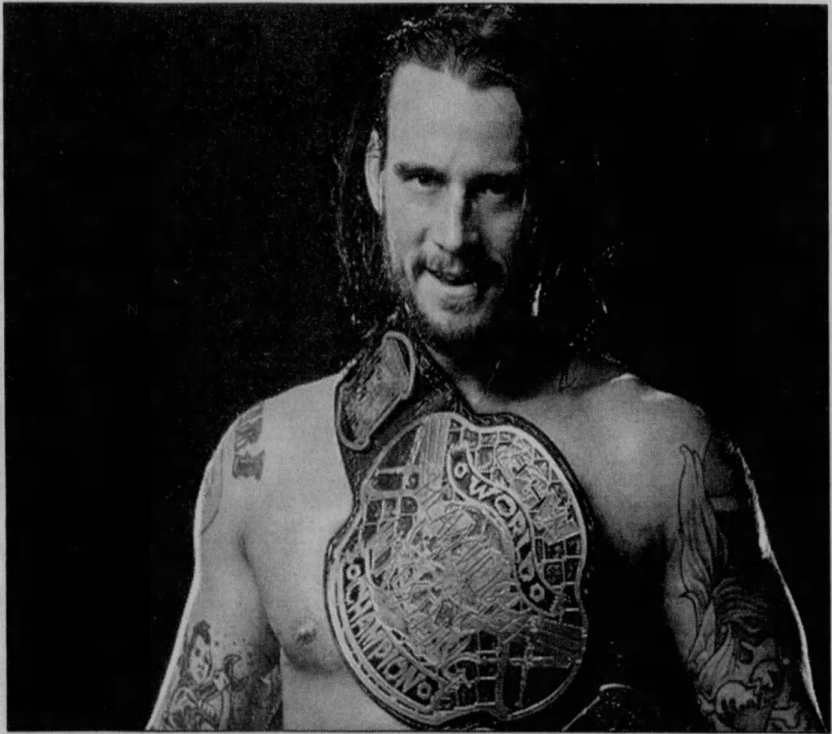
The new ECW is a watered-down version of the old hard-core organization and is watched, on the SciFi Channel, by the fewest viewers of WWE's three shows. Its champion, CM Punk, views that as his way to stand out.

"I've got a decent spot, I'm at all the pay-per-views defending my title," said Punk, whose real name is Phil Brooks. "But I do feel that ECW is a little bit of the redheaded stepchild of WWE. But that's not all negative, either. I actually embrace that."

Punk travels to Wichita on Tuesday, when WWE will tape an edition of Smackdown to air Friday night on the CW network, followed by a live ECW taping at the Kansas Coliseum.

Punk, 28, has dyed jet-black hair and several tattoos, most notably the Pepsi logo near his left shoulder. He isn't the hulking figure one thinks of when imagining a typical professional wrestler.

He has been wrestling for a decade, starting out by performing for independent pro-



Courtesy of WWE

On Tuesday in Wichita CM Punk is taping an edition of Smackdown that will air Friday night on the CW network.

motors in tiny gymnasiums. He got the name CM when he was part of a tag team called the Chick Magnets.

WWE normally doesn't afford opportunities to independent wrestlers because the company prefers to hire and train less advanced performers to fit its mold. But Punk was too good to turn down.

"I'm hungry and more passionate than anybody I know about this business," he said. "For me to stand out, I don't think it was hard. I never take 'No' for an answer, and this is the only thing I've ever wanted to do my entire life."

Punk sports an "X" on the tape around both hands. It signifies the "Straight Edge" lifestyle he promotes, one whose followers reject drugs and alcohol.

After WWE star Chris Benoit was found to have killed his wife and son before committing suicide in June, large amounts of human growth hormone were found in his home. That led to a revision of WWE's drug policy and no fewer than 12 suspensions since.

Punk says he abstains from drugs, but understands how he can be viewed in a negative light because of the actions of his co-workers.

"You're going to get sensationalized bad publicity regardless of what it is," he said. "I think the easiest way to stay out of it is to stay clean. I don't think I get mucked in with all the other stuff; if anything else it's just the opposite."

"I'm a guy you can look at and say that the stereotype of a wrestler isn't true."

CMPUNK

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