

Wrestling with fame

■ Mickie James spent nearly two years trying to move up to wrestling's big leagues.

BY JEFFREY LUTZ
Eagle correspondent

Mickie James had been in the professional wrestling big leagues for only six months when she found herself on the industry's biggest stage.

Promoted to World Wrestling Entertainment in October 2005, James was put into a story line feud with Trish Stratus, then the biggest female star in WWE.

The rivalry culminated in a match at WrestleMania 22 in April 2006, where James won the women's championship at the company's flagship event.

James, 30, is now a five-time Women's Champion, though she loses the title tonight on taped television. She'll be in Wichita on Tuesday for a television taping of WWE SmackDown, which airs on MyNetworkTV at 7 p.m. Fridays.

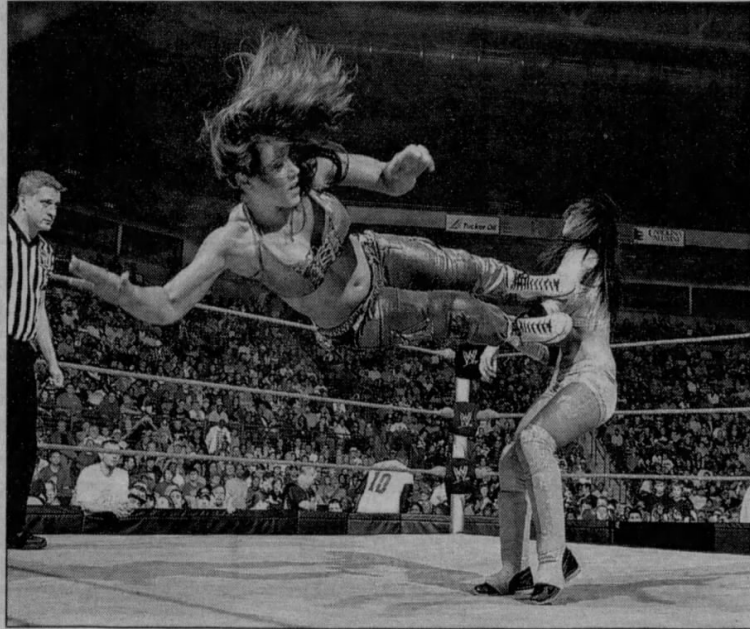
"It was my very first WrestleMania, my mom is in the front row, and I'm just flying by the seat of my pants," James said in a telephone interview last week. "You know what you're doing, but you get lost in that moment. In that 10 minutes out there in front of those people, you totally lose yourself."

James took a traditional route to WWE, deciding to give pro wrestling a try after high school in 1999 and making a two-hour commute from Virginia to train twice a week in Washington, D.C.

She wrestled on the independent level and in smaller organizations before being signed by WWE in early 2004. She was placed in Ohio Valley Wrestling, WWE's developmental territory, where she spent nearly two years.

"It's just trying to make a name for yourself," James said. "You're out there, you're busting your butt and working every day. You're trying to wrestle better people and move higher up to be successful. The ultimate goal was always to be in the WWE and be where I am, because this is the pinnacle."

James debuted as a fan of Stratus', but James' character became obsessed and the story line became controversial with



Courtesy photo

Mickie James, left, is a five-time wrestling Women's Champion. She and World Wrestling Entertainment will perform at the Intrust Bank Arena on Tuesday.

If you go WWE SMACKDOWN

What: World Wrestling Entertainment

Where: Intrust Bank Arena, 500 E. Waterman

When: 6:30 p.m. Tuesday

How much: Tickets \$17-\$62 at arena box office or Select-A-Seat outlets. Charge by phone, 316-755-SEAT, online at www.selectaseat.com.

James' character vying for attention from Stratus.

James has been part of several contentious angles, including one this year in which villains Michelle McCool and Layla physically and verbally attacked James because of her weight, calling her "Piggie James."

The story line was criticized by fans

because James is not overweight and because WWE markets itself as a PG product aimed toward children.

"Everyone was probably picked on at some point in their lives," James said. "So it really touches people's heartstrings. Everyone knows how that feels or can relate to that in some way. People can become involved in that because they can feel it."

As WWE nears WrestleMania 26 — in Glendale, Ariz., on March 28 — James is venturing outside wrestling. She released a country music single, "Are You With Me," earlier this month, with her album "Strangers & Angels" scheduled to be released on March 23.

While James is excited about her foray into a new level of show business, her passion lies with wrestling.

"I love wrestling," James said. "That's what I do, that's who I am. I'm an athlete. I think (music) is just a different part of me. It's not just Mickie James the wrestler who you see every Friday night, it's a little piece of the other side, the part you wouldn't know about me."