

My Life In Wrestling: With A Little Help From My Friends

By Gary Hart

with Philip Varriale

**NOTE: Thanks to whoever spent the time to write
this whole book out, I formatted it and put it in a PDF
just to help reading. Hopefully this book will one day be reproduced again! - ben.**

Dedication

To all the wrestling fans who supported me over the years.

To all the wrestlers I managed and booked.

To all my young boys who died too soon.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Foreword

My life changed forever the day that this young, arrogant, quick-talking wrestler was introduced to me as my manager. I was as green as grass in the wrestling business, and had no clue how Gary Hart would affect my wrestling career.

Our mentor was Burt Ruby, a promoter in Michigan. There were wrestlers like “Leaping” Larry Chene, Ricky Cortez, Lou Klein, Ivan Kalmikoff, Gino Brito, Lord Anthony Landsdown (Johnny Powers,) The Great Mephisto, Mr. Kleen (Ernie Bemis,) and many other great wrestlers to work with. Bert’s territory was our training ground, and both of us listened to everything he said.

There is much more to the wrestling business than what goes on under the lights in the ring, and Gary Hart was very quick to catch on. He was a master heat-getter on the microphone and at ringside, and it wasn’t long before Gary learned how to manipulate with the best of them.

I wore a mask, went to the ring in a cap and gown, and wrestled as The Student, while Gary wore dark suits that really made his blond hair stand out.

With Gary Hart’s leadership, it took us a month before we were headlining the main events in all of Burt Ruby’s towns. We wrestled five nights a week, as well as three television matches and a house show every Saturday.

We did all kinds of angles. When Gary was banned from the arena, a beautiful blond showed up at ringside, jumped up on the apron, and hit Larry Chene with her purse that had a brick in it.

A riot started when the fans realized “she” was Gary Hart.

I realized we were doing pretty well the day that Gary Hart showed up in front of my home with his first car. Gary was now a big shot, and had a brand new, white, Chevy Impala convertible. He was so proud, and I was happy for him. We took off for a show in Lansing, Michigan, with the top down, and I noticed that Gary was driving a bit erratically. All of a sudden, he lost control of the car, and we were in a field. I screamed, “What were you trying to do - kill us???”

Gary got this funny look on his face and said, “Well, Jim, you teach drivers-ed, don’t you?”

Gary had never driven a car before! However, he could talk, and somehow, bought this car without a driver’s license. After three weeks of teaching him how to parallel park by his place in Detroit, Gary could drive – but his new car was pretty beat up.

It was almost as dangerous going to the ring with Gary Hart, because he would do anything to get heat. Whether he was saying terrible things about an opponent’s wife, or calling

the audience every name in the book, I was always standing on the apron ready to help him if needed.

At one show in Grand Rapids, Michigan, three fans had heart attacks and died during our match. The next week during our TV interview, Gary boasted, "We killed three fans last week, but that's OK, none of them were ringsiders."

Eventually, Gary and I had the opportunity to work in a much larger venue: The Cobo Arena. However, we were working in the shadow of the promoter, The Sheik, and it was becoming obvious that it was time for us to move on to bigger and better things.

I chose to continue teaching and coaching full-time, and start wrestling in Pittsburgh on a part-time basis. Gary went on to become one of the greatest managers, bookers, and television producers in the wrestling business.

My experience of learning the wrestling business with Gary paid off big time as I became George "The Animal" Steele, and Gary Hart will always have a special place in my heart.

Thanks, Gary.

Yours from the beach,

Jim Myers

Chapter 1: Chicago

If someone would have asked me to write this book ten years ago, there's no way I could have done it. I came into the business at a time when kayfabe was the Holy Grail, and for over thirty years I would not talk about the business to anyone that wasn't a part of it. Over the past few years I've softened, and can now openly talk about how wrestling is manipulated - but it was a long process that I had to go through. When I sat down to write this book, I knew I would have to be as open, honest, candid, and upfront as I could possibly be about my career, and I stayed true to that. I'm very comfortable with everything that's in here, because it's all factual and it comes from my heart. I also don't mind if people speak ill of me after reading this, because as long as the truth of what happened is out there, then I'm happy. Here's my story...

Every summer, I went to stay with my favorite uncle, affectionately known as Uncle Butterball, for two months. He lived in the country, and for a kid from the streets of Chicago like I was, it was a great experience. I was ten when I was first introduced to professional wrestling by him in the summer of 1952. He was a big fan, and together we would watch televised wrestling that came from the Chase Hotel out of St. Louis, Missouri. I was awestruck by wrestlers like Pat O'Connor, Rip Hawk, "Wild" Bill Longson, Sonny Myers, Lou Thesz, and Dick Hutton - and in no time at all, I became a huge fan, myself.

When I returned to Chicago, I discovered that wrestling was also on TV there. In addition to the local Chicago wrestling promotion, we had wrestling from the Hollywood Legion Stadium in California. It was sponsored by Tafon, which is "No Fat" spelled backwards. One of the top stars of that organization was Jules Strongbow, a big Indian wrestler. I recall him taking Tafon in an attempt to lose weight, and each week on television, they would weigh him. Besides Strongbow, the California wrestling show also featured Danny McShain, "Wild" Red Berry, and "Classy" Freddie Blassie.

During my teens, I was a big swimmer. I loved it so much and was so good at it that I actually became a competitive swimmer, joining the Chicago Youth Organization, and participating in swim meets at the Y. When I was 16 years old, I was in a swimming competition in Fox Lake, Illinois, and I met someone who would change the course of my life: Billy Goetz.

Billy was a wrestling star in the Chicago market, and he just happened to have a house on the lake where we were having our swim meet. As soon as I saw Billy, I recognized him because he was the Midwest Heavyweight Champion, and was very recognizable from his TV appearances. I went over and introduced myself to him and told him I watched him on TV. After chatting a bit, he asked me if I had ever been to the wrestling matches live. When I said that I hadn't, he told me to come to the Marigold Arena that Friday night at 5:00 p.m., and he would get me in.

That was the first time I ever went to the live matches - and I totally fell in love with wrestling. After a while, Billy got me a job at the Marigold Arena. I worked with a guy named Roland, who was the custodian of the building. He had been a wrestler, but had gotten injured, so Fred Kohler, the local promoter, gave him a job. Billy would also train a few guys how to

wrestle, so I started pestering him to train me, as well. During the summer of 1958, Billy told me to come to the arena every Saturday at 8:00 a.m. so we could wrestle for an hour-and-a-half. The best part was that, because of my job, if the ring was left up during the week, I could go to the Marigold and work out with Roland.

In addition to my job at the Marigold, I had a part-time job working at the riding academy in Lincoln Park. Horses would be rented out for people to ride through the park, and my job would be to go find the people who were late bringing the horses back to the stable. Working two jobs was not a big deal for me, though, because I always had a solid work ethic. During my youth, my mother managed different restaurants, and I would often work in the restaurants alongside her.

Because of my job at the Marigold, I got to see all of the matches there for free – whether it be wrestling on Friday nights or boxing on Wednesday nights. I went in and out of the arena freely, while fans and wanna-be wrestlers and boxers would stand at the back of the arena trying to get in. The wanna-be's would have their bags with them in case a wrestler or boxer didn't show up, in the hopes that they would be asked to fill in, while the fans would be there hoping to catch a glimpse of the "stars."

One of the wrestling fans that I met there introduced himself to me, and told me his name was Sam Casino. I figured that he wanted to get to know me because through me, he could get into the "inner sanctum" of the wrestling world, but even after I explained to him that I was only training to be a wrestler, he still wanted to be my friend. He even told me that he owned a boxing and wrestling club, and assured me that I could train there anytime I wanted.

We soon became friends, and eventually, Sam offered me yet another part-time job – this one on Mondays and Thursdays. In addition to running his gym, he was in charge of picking up the change from all of the machines in town: Slot machines, cigarette machines, shuffleboard machines, gum machines...if a coin went in it, Sam collected the money from it, and he offered me \$75 a day to assist him on those trips. After one run with Sam, we could have seven-hundred pounds of change, which we would take back to his club and unload. In the beginning, I really didn't know what I was getting involved in. All I knew was that Sam was a nice guy who gave me a job two days a week picking up coins, and sometimes packages of cash. One day I asked him, "Why do some people give us coins and some give us cash?"

Sam was quiet for a minute, and then responded, "You don't want to know."

I knew right then that something bad was going on, and shouldn't have continued working for him, but I did. Sam and I spent a lot of time at his club, and since he had beds and a kitchen there, I would often stay all night. One night, a truck pulled up behind the club and Sam asked me to help him unload it. That started to happen more frequently, and over time, we unloaded televisions, suits, coats, radios, watches...you name it. If there was a truck, Sam's friends would find it, bring it to his club, and we would unload it.

After Sam got to know me and realized that I was a straight-up guy, he told me that he ran a crew for the Chicago crime syndicate. Basically, he was into loan sharking and stealing

stuff out of the back of a truck, and his club was just a front for his fencing operation. One of the reasons he trusted me with potentially damaging information like that was because we were both involved in businesses that had to be protected. In those days, wrestlers had to kayfabe everything. It was beaten into our brains: Don't talk to anyone about anything. As I was training for the business, I abided by that, and if somebody tried to play smart with me and act like wrestling was fixed, I would act dumb. To smarten someone up would be the kiss of death, because if you squealed on the business, you could get your arms or legs broken by one of the wrestlers, and you would never be allowed to wrestle again. Basically, back then, the wrestling business was just like the mob. People involved with both of those businesses had to know how to keep a secret.

Even though I knew it was wrong, the money was good, and as time went by, I became seriously involved with organized crime. On a few occasions while making our pickups, Sam would warn me that there might be trouble, and though I never saw anybody get killed, I did see Sam get violent when someone owed him money. On more than one occasion, when we stopped at a bar, Sam would go into the coat room, get a metal coat hanger, go up behind a guy sitting on the barstool, slap the coat hanger over his head, jerk him off the bar, and drag him out of the building. I saw him kick the crap out of people as cops drove by without stopping, and I also saw him beat people up with pool cues. I hit a few people with pool cues myself back then - but I was never the aggressor. It's just that sometimes situations can get out of hand - and it becomes every man for himself.

During this time in which I was getting indoctrinated into organized crime, I was continuing my training with Billy at the Marigold. Billy told me from the beginning that he would teach me holds, but that he wouldn't put any pressure on them. He simply wanted to show me the moves. Occasionally, he would tighten up and show me how I could seriously hurt somebody, and whatever joint it was - the wrist, elbow, shoulder, knee, ankle, or head - I felt it immediately. He would make it very clear that he didn't want me to use pressure, and just wanted me to go through the motions when I wrestled. He also emphasized that when throwing forearms or punches, I should stay away from the ears, eyes, nose, and throat. A couple of times during training, my head would get busted open, or my eye or nose would get bloody, and I got that the hardway. That taught me early on that when your opponent places you somewhere, don't move, or it will throw off whatever he is planning on doing to you.

At night, I would hang out at Sam's club and show the guys the holds that Billy was teaching me. There were some old shooters and hookers like Lou Talaber and Ruffy Silverstein at the club who liked to take guys and stretch them, so everyone preferred working out with me instead - because I wouldn't hurt them. I wasn't exactly what you would call a "wrestler's wrestler," but I knew the moves, and by practicing holds on the guys at Sam's club, I really improved my technique. I actually improved so much that Billy asked me if I had been working out somewhere else. In reality, I only had one day a week to work out with Billy, so his curiosity was understandable. When I told him that I had been spending time at Sam Casino's gym, Billy told me that I should stay away from that place, because he felt I had a future in wrestling, and by hanging out with Sam, I could end up in jail. I assured Billy that I would never do anything illegal - although I wasn't being honest with him.

The only other wrestler I knew that was involved with Sam and his crew was a guy named Wayne Bok. He was a wrestler in the Chicago area, and he also worked as muscle for the Chicago outfit. One night, when I arrived to the Marigold, Billy told me that Wayne had been killed. After telling me that, he added, “The people that you’ve been hanging around with beat him to death in the warehouse district, and if you’re not careful, they’ll do it to you, too.”

Once again, I assured him, “Billy, I’m not as involved as you think I am.”

Even though I was, I loved Billy and respected him so much that I hid the truth from him. I also hid it from my family and my friends, and with the exception of a few people, this is the first time I’ve ever opened up about the organized crime portion of my life. I should add that back then, I never looked at myself as someone who would continue doing that for a living, though, because I knew I was going to be a professional wrestler. I simply saw my work for Sam as a means to support me until what I chose to do for a living would support me. That was the way I looked at it, and I never considered becoming a career mobster.

One night I went to the matches at the Marigold Arena, and there was a fan sitting near me who was clutching a 2x4. As hated Russian Nicolai Volkoff – who was actually a guy named Steve Gob – was heading up the aisle after his match, the guy ran at him and was obviously going to hit him, so I tackled him to the ground. The cops grabbed me and brought me back to the dressing room, but Nicolai recognized me as the one who helped him, and told them to let me go. The following week, during my training session with Billy, Nicolai just happened to drop by. When he saw me he couldn’t believe it, and told Billy what I had done and what a good kid I was.

There was another young guy that Billy was training to be a wrestler, and his name was Paul Christy. At the time, Paul was a competitive bodybuilder, and he and I wrestled each other a lot. For a while, Paul and I actually lived on the second floor of Billy’s wrestling gym, and we became very close. Paul was a Chicago boy, and while he never got involved with gangsters like I did, he would hang out with con men and run all kinds of scams, such as selling memberships to non-existent gyms. Paul was a real scam artist, but I felt that was wrong because he was ripping off individual people, whereas I was just a “strong arm guy” collecting money from people who had borrowed and refused to pay back. So even though I really liked Paul, I stayed away from his scams and didn’t get involved in that at all. And I don’t want to make him sound like a bad guy – because he wasn’t. It’s just that when people grow up on the streets, they develop their own little ways of getting by. Paul was a great wrestler, and if he would have left the city, he could have had a great career, but he preferred the hustle life in Chicago.

At the time, Billy was the matchmaker for Chicago promoter Fred Kohler, and after fourteen months of training, he felt I was ready for my debut match. I was 6’4” and 235 pounds, and while I didn’t have a muscleman body, I had a solid swimmer’s build, because I did a lot of swimming, bike riding, pushups, Hindu squats, and running in the park to stay fit. I was never the kind of guy who was constantly hitting the gym, but in my time, very few wrestlers did. As soon as I was told that I was going to have my first match, I started thinking about my ring name. My real name is Gary Richard Williams, but I didn’t think that would cut it, and I wanted a name

that would fit on a marquee easily. Gary had four letters, so I kept my first name and came up with a four-letter last name: Hart.

I always liked the name Hart. My Uncle Buck was in the Marine Corps with a guy named Hart Key, and Hart saved my uncle's life at the Chosen Reservoir during the Korean War in 1950. My uncle always referred to Hart Key as "the man who saved my life," and I always remembered and liked that name. It even meant so much to me that when I was 16 years old, I got a tattoo of a heart on my arm. Not only did the name Hart mean something to me personally, and not only was it a great marquee name, but I also realized that if I used that name, I could put hearts on my boots, tights, and jacket as a little gimmick. It was perfect, so I told Billy that I wanted to be called Gary Hart.

Billy liked my idea, but tweaked it a bit to Hurricane Heart. He also wanted me to dye my hair blonde and bill me as being from Orlando, Florida. Even though it wasn't what I originally hoped for - whatever Billy wanted was fine with me. My debut match took place on Thursday, May 5, 1960, when I wrestled Sailor White in Beloit, Wisconsin. I guess I did well, because Billy booked me for the next night against Tony Shepherd at the Marigold Arena. Both times, I wrestled to a fifteen-minute draw, and I wasn't nervous at all. Billy started booking me regularly after that, and even gave me a slight push.

In those days, if you weren't in your 30's or 40's, promoters wouldn't look at you as a serious wrestler. For a booker to put an 18-year-old on TV and give him a push was something that just did not happen, but thanks to Billy, I became one of the first young wrestlers ever to get great exposure. As a mid-card heel, I immediately started wrestling guys like Billy Goelz, Johnny Gilbert, and Bobby Managoff throughout Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Iowa. Things were going great, until I was booked against Zack Malkov. We wrestled four times, and every time we wrestled, he hurt me one way or another. He didn't hurt me to the point where I couldn't wrestle - but he did hurt me to the point that the pain was intense. Believe it or not, even after having several matches, I still wasn't completely smart. After a particularly harsh match with Zack, I found Billy and asked, "Why is it that when I work with you, Johnny, or Bobby, everything is so nice, but when I work with Zack, I always end up getting hurt?"

"Go talk to Zack," Billy suggested. "Tell him what you just told me, and ask him what you're doing wrong."

I followed Billy's advice and found Zack, asking, "Mr. Malkov, I'm wondering something. When I wrestle with you, I keep getting hurt. Am I messing up or something?"

"Kid, you're doing fine," he chuckled. "Don't worry about it."

I guess he felt bad and was amused by my naiveté, because whenever we wrestled after that, he loosened up on me. Zack wouldn't be unique in that regard, though. I eventually started going up against guys that had been wrestling since the 1930's. In those cases, I was a teenager, my opponents were in their late forties, and they weren't all that willing to help a young kid like me. There was a lot of jealousy and resentment. They never offered advice, and they got a kick out of stretching and pounding me, trying to give me cauliflower ears, stepping on my hands, and

bending my joints. It was their way of taking out their anxieties because their career was coming to an end, while mine was just beginning.

Even though I understood their mindset, it was trying on me, because there was nothing I could do. If I tried to wrestle them back, they would hurt me, so as the new kid in town, I took the hazing like a man, and after my experience with Zack, simply kept my mouth shut. Billy tried to keep me away from people who he thought might deliberately hurt me, but he couldn't protect me from everyone. And when I did get injured in the ring, Billy expected me to handle it like a pro and go on with the match.

There was another wrestler named Jules "Speedy" LaRance, who was a tough old hooker and a shooter in his late 50's. One night, Speedy and I were booked together, so I asked Billy what he wanted us to do. Billy suggested I talk to Speedy about it, so he could tell me what he wanted. I walked over to him as he was tying up his shoes, and chirped, "Hi Speedy! We're working together tonight! What do you want to do?"

"Who the hell are you to call me Speedy?" He growled. "My name is Mr. LaRance."

My heart was thumping in my chest as I went back to Billy stammering, "I just went over and asked Speedy..."

"You called him Speedy?!?" He gasped. "You should never call him Speedy!!"

Billy had me scared to death, but Speedy quickly came over laughing, telling me I could call him by his nickname. That was the first rib ever pulled on me.

Even though I was making \$25 a night as a wrestler, I was making so much money with my side job in the mob that I was able to afford a suite of rooms at the Chateau Hotel. I was living like a star, and once I started appearing on TV, Sam really enjoyed hanging out with me. He especially liked to be seen with me in restaurants and bars because he saw me as a celebrity. In those days, being on TV was really special. It's not like today where seemingly everyone is on television. Back then, you really had to be somebody. Keep in mind that I was just an underneath wrestler, but in Sam's eyes, since I was on TV, I was the same as Buddy Rogers or Johnny Valentine. He didn't understand that there was a pecking order in wrestling – but being compared to Buddy and Johnny was fine by me, because they were the best of the best. They were my idols, and whenever I was on a card with them, I didn't waste any time sitting around the dressing room. If Buddy or Johnny were in the ring, I was out there watching them. They were the guys who really inspired me, and I spent a lot of time studying them.

Angelo Poffo and Bronko Lubitch had been a successful team in the 1950's, but when they split up, Angelo started looking for a new partner. One night, after a match at the Marigold, I walked into the dressing room, and there stood Angelo, Buddy Rogers, and Johnny Kace. Angelo commented on my match, telling me I was pretty good in the ring, and that I had a lot to offer. I appreciated that, but didn't pay too much attention to it. Of course, if Buddy Rogers had said it, I would have pissed myself. A few weeks later, we were in Madison, Wisconsin, and it was Angelo and I against Billy Goetz and Johnny Gilbert. Angelo and I just clicked that night, so