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AND NOW THERE IS ONLY ONE. TO LIVE THROUGH THE HORRIFIC CYCLE OF SUICIDE AND TRAGEDY THAT WIPED OUT THE OTHER FIVE, KEVIN VON ERICH HAS RELIED ON THE STRANGE CODE OF THE PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING WORLD HIS FAMILY ONCE RULED: WHAT'S REAL IS NEVER CERTAIN, AND WHAT'S FAKE IS NEVER, EVER TALKED ABOUT.

by JOHN SPONG

OCTOBER 2005



IN THE SUMMER OF 1983, the center of the pro wrestling universe, in terms of time and space, was indisputably Friday night, Dallas, Texas, in a white, corrugated-tin coliseum called the Sportatorium. Grandfathered out of city building codes thanks to the political connections of Fritz Von Erich, the imperious don who ran Texas wrestling, it stood defiantly—exposed wiring, iffy plumbing, no AC—in an increasingly sketchy area near where Industrial Boulevard runs under Interstate 35. At one time it had housed the Big D Jamboree radio broadcasts, and Elvis Presley played there in 1955. But even then the stage was a converted ring. The Sportatorium was a wrestling arena, and the frenzy that greeted the King seemed sleepy compared with the bedlam wrought in the eighties when Fritz's three golden-boy sons, Kevin, David, and Kerry, would stride into battle.

The matches were taped every other week for the Von Erichs' internationally syndicated show, *World Class Championship Wrestling*, and on TV days, producer Mickey Grant and his team would be the first in. They'd park their \$450,000 network-caliber production truck outside the old barn, while inside crew ran cables, set up cameras, and miked the ring. In the Sportatorium lobby, concession stand workers stocked a state fair menu—cotton candy, popcorn, corn dogs, Jack's Famous French Fries, and sodas—and then undertook the all-important count of the beer: Three thousand cans of Bud, Schlitz, and Coors, something for everybody, that would later be poured into plastic cups so they'd do less damage when hurled to the ring.

Fritz would show up in the late afternoon. In his mid-fifties, he was still built like that piece of lumber that Buford Pusser clubbed hillbilly mob bosses with in *Walking Tall*: long, blond, solid, and unforgiving, with jug ears and a foghorn voice. He jumped into the ring on occasion, sometimes in the aid of his boys and sometimes to fight his own matches, but most Friday nights he'd just work a little color commentary with announcer *Bill Mercer, the former Dallas Cowboys broadcaster who was the voice of World Class.*

The card started at eight o'clock, and the doors opened at seven, but fans got



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in line as early as five. It was not a traditional wrestling crowd. Beat-up pickup trucks shared the parking lot with Mercedes, Lincolns, and Cadillacs, and scalpers walked between them selling \$12 tickets for upwards of \$50. As the crowd grew, Grant would seek fans who made good TV, smartly dressed professionals or smiling females, to fill the front rows.

There were all manner of females. Junior high girls who wrote about the Von Erichs in their diaries, high school girls with photos taped up in their lockers, young moms wanting out of the house, recently reborn divorcées, even grandmothers. **Of the 3,700 people who'd fill a sold-out Sportatorium, fully 70 percent were female.**

It was Von Erich beefcake that they came to see. Kevin was 26, the barefooted acrobat with a comic book superhero's body, who did things in the ring no one had ever seen. He could fly off a turnbuckle, land with his legs in a scissors hold around an opponent's waist, and hold himself there, his body parallel to the ground. He was like a buck knife thrown and sticking in a tree. David, 25, was a tall, redheaded cowboy and the trio's true leader. His mind worked like his dad's, and he was the best technical wrestler and talker on the mike. But Kerry, 23, was by far the fans' favorite. With long blond hair, green eyes, and a body cut like a stone pyramid stood on its tip, he looked like Conan the Barbarian, but bigger. (So much bigger, in fact, that **Arnold Schwarzenegger, who played Conan on-screen, once refused to be photographed shirtless with Kerry.**) And he had a brilliant streak of dumb-jock charm. One night, he was spotted in a dressing room putting black shoe polish on his feet before a televised match. His dad had forbidden him to use Kevin's barefoot gimmick, and Kerry hoped that by painting his feet black, Fritz wouldn't notice.

After spending the afternoon playing video games, they'd sneak in a Sportatorium back door around seven to dress in their dad's cavernous office upstairs. They'd do short warm-ups around Fritz's desk, muscle-against-muscle stuff, with one brother trying to do curls while another pressed down on his hands. Their two younger brothers would always pop in. Mike was nineteen and a dead ringer for David but fresh out of Lake Dallas High School, where shoulder injuries had kept him from playing sports after the tenth grade. Thirteen-year-old Chris was the baby, the brother who didn't look like a Von Erich. Treatment for chronic asthma had left him stunted and round. He stood a puffy five feet five. The five of them were one another's best friends, the three overgrown kids who were hooked on the fans' adulation and the two younger brothers who looked on with envy.

The boys would head downstairs to the main dressing room a little before showtime. The scene was surreal: a good-sized room with wood panels, some benches, and eighteen or so huge men in Speedos, some playing cards, others oiling their bodies, doing push-ups, or receiving injections of painkillers into aching joints. All of them were slipping into personas that matched their ring names: Bruiser Brody, Abdullah the Butcher, the Great Kabuki, King Kong Bundy, Gorgeous Jimmy Garvin, and the Von Erichs' mortal enemies, the Fabulous Freebirds—Southern-fried muscleheads Michael Hayes, Terry Gordy, and Buddy Roberts.

There was a TV in the dressing room to monitor the ring, but the wrestlers didn't need it to sense the crowd building; motorists on the highway could hear the noise in their cars. About an hour into the taping, the house lights would go down, and the darkness would be dotted by the cherry tips of hundreds of lit cigarettes.

There were two doors into the arena from the dressing room, so that opponents appeared to enter the ring from different rooms. When Lynyrd Skynyrd started blaring, the Freebirds came first, strutting through a shower



of beer cups, spare change, small batteries, and boos.

Then the razor-sharp guitar of Ted Nugent's "Stranglehold" would blast overhead, and the room would erupt. When drums threw the song into gear half a minute later, a Von Erich kicked open the good guys' door and began the procession to the ring. Fans poured from the stands as if someone had yelled "Fire!" Circled by bodyguards, the boys still needed five solid minutes to negotiate the fifteen yards to the ring. Little kids screamed for their autographs, grown men slapped their backs, and women would hand them flowers and kiss them on the mouth, pat their rears and grasp at their fronts.

When they'd reach the ring, Kevin would grab the top rope and throw himself over, then run to a corner, jump flat-footed to the top turnbuckle, and balance there, soaking in the crowd. Kerry would climb through the ropes and stand in the middle of the ring, staring down the Freebirds and waiting for direction from David, who, at six seven, stepped over the ropes, barking instructions. As loud as Nugent was playing, by the time the lights were back up, you couldn't hear the music over the shrieking girls. The Von Erichs looked as if they owned not just Dallas but the world.

But of course, if you know anything of the Von Erichs, you know they owned nothing for long. The next February, David died suddenly in a hotel room in Japan. Then, in April 1987, Mike killed himself with sleeping pills. Four and a half years later, Chris followed suit with a pistol shot to the head. And a year and a half after that, Kerry shot himself through the heart.

KEVIN IS THE ONLY ONE OF FRITZ'S SONS who is alive today. He's 48 and living on 137 acres near Lake Dallas, not far from the spread where he grew up with his brothers. He goes by Adkisson now, the family's real name. But though he retired ten years ago, he's still a Von Erich.

He made his living in a sport that most people realize is staged, but his body shows very real wear and tear. His toes no longer face the same direction, the effect of twenty years of fighting barefoot against two- and three-hundred-pound men. Still typically shoeless, he points to a scar on his right foot, a trophy from a dropkick to the mouth of Freebird Buddy Roberts. "That U shape is the dental chart of Buddy's top row of teeth. I opened up my foot all the way to the bone." He lost two back teeth of his own, dislocated every finger, and had the back of his head opened in a match at the Cotton Bowl, when Gentleman Chris Adams misjudged a full swing with a folding metal chair. There were three knee surgeries, so many concussions that he hears a constant, high-pitched ringing in his ears, and enough damage to his lower back that he sits in a hot tub for half an hour most mornings to loosen it up. When you see him walk today, you sense that he's been through the wringer. He still keeps on the balls of his feet—he'll always be an athlete—but rather than looking ready to pounce, he moves like someone who's been pounced on.

"I remember Kamala [the Ugandan Giant] going for the big splash off that third turnbuckle one night *onto me*. I'm lying there with guys stretching out my arms and legs, and when he landed, I felt like a tube of toothpaste. If wrestling were fake, I wish someone had told me."

But the reality of wrestling, as Kevin learned it from Fritz, was that no one ever discussed whether it was real. For all the weird pretense—the unnatural bodies, the ring histrionics, the shady dealings that historically made up the business—there was an unwritten code that ruled in that world: kayfabe. It was like the Mafia's law of omerta, akin to a vow of silence, and it was born, like American wrestling itself, on the old carny trails. When carnival performers were traveling, they'd phone home collect from "Kay Fabian." Whoever answered would refuse the charges but know that Dad or Mom had made the next town. In the twenties, when wrestling left the highways to set

up regional offices to run the sport—independent businesses called territories or promotions—the modified term “kayfabe” went with it. It was the rule that kept fans from learning what was really going on. If two wrestlers were talking and a third person walked up, one wrestler might quietly mention kayfabe; the other then knew that the newcomer was not smartened up to the game. Think of kayfabe as wrestling’s curtain, and remember that nothing was as important as keeping it closed. Or, as one longtime wrestling writer described it, think of kayfabe as quasi—pig latin for “fake.”

When I asked Kevin to explain kayfabe, he said it means simply “Shut up.” It wasn’t immediately clear if he intended a definition or an instruction. But while he wouldn’t discuss kayfabe as a concept, he did give an example. “Way back in my dad’s day, they were fighting in Canada, where this cop was a local celebrity. So the cop was going to be put in a match. Some bad guys were going to beat up the good guy, and the cop would step in. But he got nervous waiting for his spot. When the bad guys came down, he panicked and started hitting them with a blackjack and knocking them out. Guys were hitting the ground like flies. That’s kayfabe.”

That may be kayfabe, but it’s also very much Kevin, and when he describes the theatrics, you catch yourself wondering what part of the story is real. He took me one day to meet his mother, Doris, a small, 72-year-old woman with a bright smile who lives near downtown Dallas. They talked a lot about Fritz, about his strong Christian faith and early career. They went on at length about a match he’d fought in New York. Heavyweight boxing champ Rocky Marciano was serving as celebrity referee, and before the match started, he attacked Fritz. Though the crowd likely assumed it was part of the act, Kevin and Doris said it was without warning or reason.

“So Dad kicked his butt,” said Kevin.

“He did,” added Doris. “There’s no boxer who can beat a wrestler. Marciano thought he’d make a little name for himself.”

“After the match, Dad took care of him in the dressing room.”

“Well,” said Doris, “he took pretty good care of him in the ring too.”

Then there’s the subject of his brothers. When they come up, Kevin talks about the 32 gallons of milk delivered weekly to the house when they were kids and the 40 pork chops Doris would cook them for dinner. His stories end with bee stings, milk spills, and trips to the emergency room. But a lot of awful history has washed over Kevin, and reaching through the murk for *Family Circus* scenes has helped keep him afloat. In a strange way, though, it also pinpoints the tragedy. Everybody who knew the Von Erichs says they all were good boys. But there’s always an addendum: They did have their demons. And when it came time to address them, the Von Erichs concentrated on what the world saw outside the curtain.

WHEN DORIS JUANITA SMITH MARRIED JACK ADKISSON in 1950—he was a Southern Methodist University football player and not yet known as Fritz—the plan was to have just two kids. Jack Junior was born in Dallas, in 1952, and the Adkissons hoped to complete things with a sister named Jill. Doris and Jack would raise Jack and Jill, and the storybook life would be under way.

But they’d have to wait five years before any more children came, and the next was a second son, Kevin, followed fourteen months later by another one, David. By then Jack Senior had started to wrestle, and his persona, the vicious Nazi heel Fritz Von Erich, had been born as well. While Doris raised

the boys in a trailer in Niagara Falls, Fritz toured the northeast United States and Canada. It was the sport's black and white, postwar period, and, Gorgeous George aside, it was violence that filled arenas more than theatrics. Fritz fit the bill, six feet four and a thick 260 pounds, with unexpected quickness for a man his size. But the key was his unbeatable finishing hold, the dreaded Iron Claw. He'd clamp his blond right bear paw onto a good guy's forehead and squeeze until blood poured down Fritz's arm and onto the mat. He quickly became a top draw and practically lived on the road.

He was in Cleveland in the winter of 1959 when his family got its first taste of real-world fragility. Six-year-old Jackie was walking home from playing with friends when he started to run his hand along a neighbor's trailer. A wire had shorted out underneath, and the outside wall was juiced. Jackie was knocked unconscious, and he fell facedown into a puddle of melting snow and drowned.

It was an event many marriages wouldn't survive, and Fritz and Doris each blamed themselves. *If I'd only been home...If I'd kept Jackie inside...* In *Fritz Von Erich: Master of the Iron Claw*, an as-told-to biography written by Ron Mullinax that came out this year, Fritz explained where he put the guilt. "I just started blaming the entire wrestling business for the death of my oldest boy...I started to look forward to climbing back into that squared circle and going after one of the guys who I held personally responsible for all my bad luck. I got such a bad reputation for being overly aggressive in the ring that some wrestlers even turned down matches with me."

Doris had to deal with it back at home. "After you lose the first one," she said, "there is that nagging fear you'll lose another. You not only believe it can happen to you, you know it's going to almost. It's a horrible thing to live with, and I became very protective of the boys."

By 1962 the family was back in Dallas and Kerry had been born. Fritz had bought into the Dallas promotion, and by making himself the star and bringing in friends he'd fought up North, business took off. Fritz purchased real estate around Lake Dallas and, in 1964, just before Mike's birth, moved the family to a 15-acre place near Corinth that Fritz would later grow into a 150-acre cattle ranch. It was a perfect place for the boys, with wide-open fields where they could play football and hunt. The lack of neighbor kids was never an issue. The boys were a self-contained unit, as Fritz had raised them to be. And when one of them got out of line, put a rock through a window or some other stunt, Fritz would line them up and demand a confession. When none came, he'd ask the innocents to hand over the culprit. When no one spoke up, Fritz would whip them all with a leather strap. He was proud to see them acting like men.

In 1967 Fritz "turned baby face" and became one of the good guys. He'd brought in a barely reformed Chicago hood, Playboy Gary Hart, to run the promotion's booking, and a big part of the job was creating personas for the wrestlers. Hart also fought, as a carpetbagging heel detested by Dallas fans, and it made sense for the business to make Fritz the hometown hero. "Although it got me in a lot of trouble with Fritz," says Hart now, in his small Arlington apartment, his accent sounding as if he just walked off Halstead Street, "I went on TV and told fans the truth. I said, 'He's not a German! His name is Jack Adkisson, he went to SMU, and his daddy was a thief!'"

It worked, not least because fans were also seeing Fritz the proud papa. Chris completed the family in 1969, and Sportatorium crowds got to watch the boys grow up. When each boy hit puberty, Fritz would send him into a weight room he'd created in a barn on the ranch. Their after-school workouts stretched for up to three and a half hours a day, even during football season, and they'd often do roadwork in the morning. Fritz devised the regimen. There was the

torture rack, a row of dumbbells that ran from two and a half pounds to fifty, and the routine was to do a short set of curls with each weight, from lightest to heaviest and back again. They did push-ups with their feet elevated, steadily increasing the height of their feet until they were almost flush against a wall, their bodies perpendicular to the floor. For balance, they'd run across the top of a wood fence and catch football passes. According to an old friend of Kerry's, to toughen them up, Fritz would tie them together by their feet, hang them from a beam, and have them fight upside down.

The legend is that Fritz did all this to prepare them for the ring, and wrestling has always been a father-son trade. But Kevin says their goal was simply to become athletes. They achieved it. The oldest boys were all over Dallas' sports pages with all-district honors or better in football, basketball, and track. David, Kevin, and Kerry each got full athletic scholarships to Texas colleges. But during summer break, they wrestled for Fritz. The money was easy and the fans already loved them. One by one, they decided to make wrestling their career.

"A LOT OF PEOPLE DON'T WANT to ask me about my brothers," says Kevin Von Erich now, stretching out sideways in an overstuffed chair in his den, the wall behind him covered with framed photos of the brothers as young men in the ring, kids on motorcycles, and best friends carrying shotguns to the duck blind. "They think it will make me sad. The truth is, people like me, and you can't help but like someone who likes you."

That last phrase is one he uses repeatedly. He still enjoys being a Von Erich, in no small part because it still matters to a large number of people. This summer he was flown to Israel to tape a role in a prime-time soap opera. He played himself. While there, he was featured on several news shows and had an hour-long visit with former prime minister Shimon Peres. They talked about the way sports could bring Israeli and Palestinian children together. The tragedies they discussed were related to war.

But mostly his existence is quiet. When I first met him this spring, we drove to see his small herd of Black Angus cattle and the rest of his place. He stopped by a bowed old post oak that he, David, and Kerry once chopped limbs off of with hatchets. Then he talked about another nearby tree where he said he and Kerry once impaled David on a low branch during a game of football. But he talked just as much about his own kids. He and his wife, Pam, have been married 27 years, and they have two daughters, Kristen and Jill, aged 21 and 19, and two boys, Ross and Marshall, aged 17 and 12. They all still live at home, along with Kristen's husband and their 6-month-old daughter. They are a startlingly attractive group of people.

He sits squarely now at the center of that family. He's admittedly overprotective, and he speaks in life lessons to all of his family. He answers potential crises with "Look, today can be a good day or a bad day. You make the choice now." Or "You know what kind of person has accidents? The kind of person who has close calls." Or, quoting his father, "Pay the price the other guy isn't willing to pay."

When Fritz died, in 1997, he left nothing for Kerry's ex-wife or two daughters, instead giving everything to Kevin, to the tune of about \$3.5 million after taxes in cash, stocks, real estate, and the *World Class* video archive. Kevin now spends his days working on deals for the properties and has had discussions with World Wrestling Entertainment head Vince McMahon about licensing the old *World Class* tapes to the WWE's 24-hour wrestling classics channel. The Von Erichs would be a top draw. Kevin said they also discussed the possibility that Ross will wrestle someday for the WWE.

But for now Ross's focus is football, as it once was for Kevin, who dreamed

only of the NFL until knee problems turned him to wrestling. Ross is shy and polite, with his mom's dark hair and eyes. At five eleven, he's not as tall as his dad but has his dad's chiseled physique and speed. He's starting at defensive end this fall as a junior at Denton Ryan High School, and it's on the subject of football that he and his dad bond. I rode with the two of them to Ross' spring scrimmage, and if you ever went to lunch in high school on game day with football players, you know exactly what it was like. Kevin asked Ross to find him a piece of paper in the backseat.

"What do you need it for?" asked Ross.

"I'm bleeding."

"Dad, why are you always bleeding?"

"I scratched my arm with my fingernail."

"Why?"

"I don't know, son. For fun?"

"Man, Dad, seriously. That's what happens when you peel off a scab."

"I didn't peel it off for any mean reason. Come on. Nobody's going to say, 'You know, Ross, I would have liked you, but your dad's a bleeder.'"

The talk eventually shifted to ground they could share.

"Keep your head up, son."

"Keep my head up?"

"Yeah, don't let it get down too low."

"Oh, like literally."

"Yeah."

"Well, they're putting a tight end over me now."

"Good. Kick his butt. Give him the worst day of his life."

"The tight ends are big, Dad. Bigger than me."

"Well, Ross, use your strength to stand him up, and all he'll be is in the way. Raise him up, go titty to titty, and it'll give you time to look in the backfield and see which way they're coming."

"I know, Dad."

"I know you do, buddy."

FRITZ'S PROMOTION HAD ALWAYS MADE MONEY, but his empire was built by his boys. A Von Erich was a fact-and-fiction collage of loyalty to true family, steadfast regard for playing by the rules, and absolute certainty that right beget might. When they lost, it was the result of some underhanded trick, and when they won, they gave credit to their faith in Jesus Christ. Fans all over the state ate the act up, in big wrestling cities like Houston and San Antonio and in every little town they could get to on weekly tours around Texas.

And they happened to be the prototype for a new kind of wrestler. No more would the ring be the domain of lumbering ex-football players who locked onto each other for half an hour of grappling. The boys introduced the world to wrestlers built like Greek gods, to high-flying aerial moves and rock and roll ring entrances. Then, in 1980, they started the *World Class* show, an even bigger step forward. Wrestling shows had always been broadcast with just two static cameras, one long shot, one medium. But Mickey Grant had worked on boxing shows for Don King, and he brought that experience to the Sportatorium. He used up to six cameras, including handheld ones on the ring apron. He put mikes in the turnbuckles and under the mat. And he started taping short segments away from the action, vignettes that fleshed out wrestlers' personas and gave backgrounds on the feuds. It was the birth of modern televised wrestling, and the old guard, Fritz included, did not like it. They worried it would give away too many secrets. But Grant and Bill Mercer persuaded Fritz to try. It was an immediate success.

After the Freebirds got to Dallas, in late 1982, all of the pieces were in place, and the promotion became the most successful in the country, grossing more than \$11 million a year. The *World Class* show was the second-ranked syndicated program in America, behind only *Soul Train*, and it showed on eighty stations in the U.S. and in 23 countries. It aired in prime time on Saturday nights in Japan, where *All Japan Wrestling* didn't come on until late at night. Back home, Dallas Cowboys players started begging out of autograph sessions at events where the Von Erichs would appear because the lines for the wrestlers outstretched their own. Legend has it that when Japanese tourists rode in Dallas taxis, the most requested destinations were Southfork and the Sportatorium, and there was said to be a lull in the fighting in Lebanon when the Von Erichs were on television.

The *World Class* success made an impression on an upstart Vince McMahon, who was preparing to take over the Connecticut-based Northeast territory from his ailing father. The wrestling world knew he intended big changes, that he would drop the kayfabe charade to escape the regulatory fees and drug policies that state athletic commissions imposed on real contests, like boxing. Then he'd hook his World Wrestling Federation—now known as World Wrestling Entertainment—up with a national cable network and stretch his territory across the country, creating a sort of major league for wrestling. But he'd need major-league talent, and Dallas was where that talent lay.

In the fall of 1984, McMahon met with Fritz. Details are sketchy—McMahon would not return calls for comment, and Fritz died in 1997—but the story goes that McMahon came to Dallas pitching a merger. Skeptics who knew the two say that the egos involved make such a scenario unthinkable. And, in fact, no merger took place. McMahon kept his WWF billions to himself. But the story from Fritz's former employees is that Fritz turned McMahon down, that he was too loyal to the system to create a promotion that would put his friends out of business. And Fritz believed that his own promotion would outlast McMahon's.

His confidence seemed well placed; his boys were wrestling's first rock stars. But when they were out of the ring and in towns where Fritz couldn't see them, they started acting like it. They had women clawing at their hotel room doors wherever they stayed. The boys advanced from trusty painkillers to far more glamorous drugs. They started enjoying a life that would have worn Aerosmith out. It wasn't consistent with their white-knight image, but when they occasionally got caught, the image didn't suffer. Instead, it bailed them out. In June 1983 Kerry was arrested at DFW airport on the way home from Mexico. In a supremely boneheaded move, he'd taken a picture of his new wife while they were going through customs, something frequent international travelers, as Kerry was, know better than to do. He was

wearing a karate outfit. Newspaper reports said he was carrying hundreds of pills and a small bag of unidentified powder. But he was convicted of only a misdemeanor possession of marijuana. Friends concluded that Fritz had pulled some strings at the courthouse. Fans believed Kerry had been set up by the Freebirds.

Then, in February 1984, just a few months before he was scheduled to win the world championship belt, David died suddenly on a tour in Japan. Newspaper reports ran the family's version of the death: An autopsy had found acute enteritis, and David's intestines had burst while he was sleeping. But when the wrestlers who'd discovered the body got back to the States, word quickly spread that he'd been found with a bottle of Crown Royal in one hand and a bottle of the sleeping pill Placidyl in the other. Whether the truth lay in one version or the other, or somewhere in between, was never determined.

Nearly four thousand fans attended David's funeral service in Denton, many of them listening on speakers set up outside the church. A who's who of wrestlers was there, although the Von Erichs' ring enemies paid their respects from afar. "We were told not to go by the front office," said Gorgeous Jimmy Garvin, the unofficial fourth Freebird. "And given those circumstances, I don't care if you're my best friend. If you're dead and you're my opponent, I'm not going. That's kayfabe."

FINGERS POINT IN A LOT of directions when people try to understand the rest of the Von Erich story. The favorite explanation is that Fritz drove the boys too hard. Fritz himself blamed a "Von Erich curse." Some friends talk about a suicide cycle, how when one family member takes his own life, it becomes a viable alternative for the family members who are left. Some want to blame wrestling itself. They hold up the rash of wrestlers who died young in the late eighties and early nineties. As part of that theory, some wonder about steroids, which Kerry and Chris were known to have used heavily. One family friend talked about pain-pill addiction, wrestling's main dirty secret. The injuries that nagged wrestlers as they traveled from town to town made painkillers a necessity, or at least a very hot commodity. Doctors wrote them prescriptions as readily as wrestlers signed autographs. Kevin says pain pills are like fish hooks: "They look harmless, but they have little barbs, and it's easy to get hooked." They played a role in the deaths of each of the boys but Jackie.

Surely all these things contributed to who the Von Erichs were. But it was when that reality collided with the boys' saintly image that dealing with the real world became too much to bear. They were billed as unbeatable, all-American, born-again kids. There wasn't much room for being merely human.

A week after David's funeral, Fritz and his sons taped an interview for a special memorial episode of *World Class*. Sitting quietly with his sons in a shady spot by the lake, Fritz announced that Kerry would take David's place in the upcoming title match and win the championship in honor of Dave. And he said the duty of filling David's boots would fall to Mike. "That was an ugly part," says Kevin. "Kerry and I did not want to get in the ring. We were mourning David's death. But it was a family business, and Dad was the business manager."

Mike was the brother who'd never wanted to wrestle. He and Chris were so much younger that they had grown up as their own entity. Mike was a mama's boy and fairly unnerved when, at age five, he was introduced to baby brother Chris. According to Doris, she cured that by ignoring the baby when she brought him home. She told Mike that no one wanted Chris, so Mike took it upon himself to become Chris's protector. As the two entered their teens, they grew even closer, tied together in part by their failure to imitate their

brothers' athletic success. Mike took up guitar, and Chris played drums and drew Native American scenes. But they did enjoy the Von Erich fame. With Kerry as their role model, they both took advantage of the drugs and female attention that trickled their way.

But neither would ever think of letting the family down, and having beefed up to a respectable 190 pounds, Mike soon assumed the third spot on the Von Erich bill. But friends say he never looked comfortable in the ring, nor with the fact that he won nearly every match. And his body couldn't take the punishment. His old shoulder problems returned, and in the summer of 1985 he had to have surgery in Dallas. The procedure seemed to go fine, but a couple days later he returned to the hospital with toxic shock syndrome. His temperature soared to 107, he suffered major organ failure, and in short time, he lost 40 pounds. Although doctors told the family to say their good-byes, somehow he survived.

He was back in the ring just nine months later, in July 1986, but was never the same. He was awkward and unbalanced, and Kevin says that just as Mike realized he could no longer wrestle, he was telling himself he could not give up. He slipped in and out of dark depressions and started drinking heavily and taking lots of pills. Barbiturates, Valium, Placidyl. One night he was arrested for DWI. Another, he flew into a rage, destroyed a man's car with his hands, feet, and elbows, and was arrested again. In April 1987 he was picked up for driving under the influence once more, and he was carrying a bottle of pills. When he was released the next morning, he left a note in his apartment apologizing for embarrassing the family and drove out to a spot on Lake Dallas where he'd played as a kid. He climbed into a sleeping bag and took enough Placidyl to ensure he'd never wake up. But to the last minute he still looked out for Chris. In his note he insisted that Chris inherit his scuba gear, and in one of the swim fins, Mike had left a bag of Placidyl for Chris to take when he was ready to get out.

By then the promotion was starting to falter. Kerry had been out of commission for more than a year. In April 1986, wearing nothing but a pair of silk track shorts, he'd driven his motorcycle into the back of a police car, all but severing his right foot. When he tried to wrestle that Christmas, he reinjured it so badly it had to be removed, though the family hid the amputation from fans until he died.

The crowds weren't showing in their earlier numbers. Now when the Von Erichs booked Reunion Arena, a 17,000-seat venue they'd sold out three times in 1983, they were lucky to fill 5,000 seats. Fans had soured on the negative press and on Fritz's introduction of long-lost cousin Lance, an Arlington boy who fans knew wasn't a real Von Erich. Adding more pressure, McMahon's WWF was picking up steam, working the *World Class* blueprint to make guys like Hulk Hogan national stars.

In 1988 Fritz turned the promotion over to Kevin and Kerry, who was wrestling now on a prosthetic foot. But they developed reputations for no-showing matches. There were widespread rumors that they both had serious drug problems, although Kevin denies that that was true of himself. In 1989 Kerry took his still sizable drawing power and went to fight for McMahon, and the Dallas promotion was absorbed by the Memphis territory.

That left Kevin and Chris to carry the banner in Texas. Chris had always wanted to wrestle, and now the family needed it. But his chances were never realistic. He had built up his body with weight lifting and growth hormones, but he couldn't grow taller, and his bones were brittle from his asthma medicine. He worked a few matches, but, according to Kevin, after Chris broke his elbow on a throwaway move, a doctor told him that his body would not hold up in the ring. Chris realized he would always be remembered as the

Von Erich who couldn't wrestle. In September 1991 he shot himself in the head.

By then Kerry was a mess. Wrestling on the fake foot caused him constant pain, and the combination of painkillers and partying had left him so strung out he often couldn't talk. He would even show up at the weight room incoherent. He lost his house and left the WWF to enter the Betty Ford Center. He'd try rehab for his drug problem at least twice, but treatment never worked. And he could no longer charm his way off the hook.

In September 1992 he received ten years' probation for a series of prescription forgeries. He was on his own—his wife had divorced him and taken custody of their daughters—and though he said he was clean, four months later he was picked up for possession of cocaine. On the morning of February 17, he was indicted, and he was certain that the next day, when he was to appear before the judge overseeing his probation, he'd be sent to prison. His attorney assured him that that wouldn't happen, but Kerry was convinced it would. That afternoon, he went to his dad's house and found the .44 Magnum he'd given Fritz for Christmas two years before. Then, after hugging his dad and telling him he had some thinking to do, he drove into the woods, sat against a tree, and put a single bullet through his heart.

Gary Hart, who worked on and off for Fritz for nearly twenty years, had as close a view of the saga as anyone not named Adkisson. Five times Fritz hired him, and four times he was fired. Their last conversation came as Hart was finally quitting. It was after Kerry's foot had been amputated, when the promotion was foundering and the WWF was starting to supplant the old regional scheme.

"I asked the other guys to leave the room, because Fritz and I were getting pretty heated. And I told him, 'Fritz, this isn't the Houston promotion coming after us. This is Vince McMahon. And we're more interested in protecting our image than protecting our business. We've got to come totally clean. The only credibility we have is to make Kerry an icon, someone who's doing something that's never been done before. Have him stand up and say, 'Hey. I f—ed up. But I've paid the toll and I'm going to overcome it. I see little kids in wheelchairs and blind people that learn to travel with dogs, and I'm gonna do it too.' That will soften the hearts of the people who have backed away and make them give us one more chance.'

"But Fritz thought that would show weakness. I really believed that with all of the death and drugs and suicide, the rumors and untrue stories were going to become fact."

THE DAY AFTER ROSS' SCRIMMAGE, Kevin took me to see Doris. She lives in a Swiss Avenue mansion, whole worlds away from the apartments and trailers where she babied Jackie and Kevin while Fritz was on the road. She said that to make those places livable you had to scrape before you scrubbed. We sat comfortably in a sun-drenched sitting room. Between quotations of Scripture and drags on her Salems—Doris smokes cigarettes like kids pop M&M's—she presented nothing of the shrinking violet you would have thought Fritz required.

She'd divorced him after Chris died. They were living on a ranch outside Tyler then, in a 10,000-square-foot house that she had designed. But they had rooms on different floors of their dream home. She said that in the kitchen there was a cartoon she had stuck on the fridge that showed a man with a cup of coffee sitting at a table and a woman staring at him. The caption read "I thought you were up; the birds had stopped singing."

After their split and then Kerry's death, they grew even further apart. In July

1997 Fritz suffered a stroke, and doctors discovered that cancer had filled most of his body. Doris saw him before he died, less than two months later, as did Kevin and a few old friends. But he spent most of his time with Mullinax, recounting the stories that constitute *Master of the Iron Claw*. In the book Fritz describes how each of his boys asked him to let him start wrestling and the pain that he felt when each of them died. But it's also filled with details of near-death experiences in the ring, some his own and others the victims of his feared Iron Claw. To the end, he never broke kayfabe.

When Kevin and I sat down with Doris, she muted the volume on a financial news show and sounded like a broker herself while discussing her stocks. But when she and Kevin started reminiscing about the boys, her tone softened and her cadence slowed, and Kevin's changed too.

"I remember one night," she began, "it was freezing cold. Mike was leaving the Sportatorium after a match, and when he got outside, this man came up to him and said, 'Do you see that woman over there? She was just beaten by her husband and has no place to go.' When the man left, Mike approached her. He said, 'You don't know me, but I want you to have this.' And he gave her all the money that he had. Then he said, 'Call a taxi, get yourself a hotel room for tonight, and in the morning I want you to look in the directory and call one of those battered-woman shelters.' And then he took his coat off and gave it to her."

"You know, Mom, Kerry was like that too, and so was David," added Kevin.

"And so were you. When Kevin saw somebody that needed money, he would pretend to drop it—"

"A lot of people won't take money," said Kevin.

"Yes, they're too proud. So he would say, 'Excuse me, is this yours?'"

"Ah, Mom."

"Well, Kevin, I'm just telling the truth."

"I'll take my reward in heaven," said Kevin. "I wish I'd done it more."

I WAS BACK AT KEVIN'S house a couple months later, on a day in July that Kevin said would have been David's forty-seventh birthday. It was the end of the day, and while Pam was trying to figure out what to feed the family for dinner, Kevin and I finally talked directly about what happened to his brothers.

"Mike should have never been a wrestler. He should have been off somewhere playing his guitar.

"I loved Chris, but I wasn't around him that much. When I was, every word out of his mouth was a put-down, of other people and himself. So I spent a lot of time correcting him, trying to motivate him, and he made me out to look like Ward Cleaver. But somebody had to say 'ten hup.'"

"Kerry wasn't addicted to any one drug. He liked *drugs*. It wasn't that he liked coke or ice or meth. He just liked that life of parties and drugs."

Then we got around to Jackie and David. "I don't remember being told anything when Jackie died, just that he was in heaven. It's almost like God protects children from grief. I'm sure I did plenty of playing that day, even though my brother was gone. It's not like losing brothers when you get older. With David, it was like a really low kick, terrible. To this day I'm not over that.

Every death after it was just ‘Oh, this again.’ Losing David—that one kind of burned down the mission, you know?”

It’s the kind of history that’s hard even to hear. But Kevin discussed it as if it was just part of life.

He said he had been the one who’d discovered Chris’s body. Fritz and Doris had found a suicide note in Chris’s room and, doubting he meant it, sent Kevin to talk to him. He found Chris lying on top of the highest hill on the East Texas ranch, near a place where Chris kept arrowheads he’d found.

“I thought, ‘Oh, man, he’s taken a bunch of pills or something.’ So I put my hand behind him to lift him up and said, ‘Come on, Chris. Stand up, walk around.’ My thumb went into his head. You could’ve put a coffee cup in that hole. There was no doubt—”

Just then, Kevin’s daughter Jill spoke. She’d been standing in the hallway, and neither Kevin nor I had seen her.

“Wow,” she said. “I’ve never heard that story.”

“Well, baby,” said Kevin, “it’s not one you tell at the dinner table.”

Jill walked off. Kevin continued.

“That’s where I got the joke I tell that the last thing that crossed Chris’s mind before he died was my thumb. I know that sounds horrible. I’m sure I sound like a nutty guy right now. But I guarantee you that at one time, there were five more just like me. That’s the way we deal with grief. It keeps you from being a victim.

“I wouldn’t want anyone to feel sorry for me. What am I doing today? I watch Ross play football; my kids call and tell me they love me; my investments do well. I have a good life, and I’m planning on having a lot more. When people say, ‘How do you do it?’ the answer is pretty simple, really. If you don’t have any choice, then it’s easy to deal with. What else are you going to do? Just drop dead and sink into the ground like rain?”

That night, Kevin had one shot of Crown Royal in honor of Dave, as he does every February 10 and July 22. Then he went to bed.

The next day he got up and went about his business and life, like that’s just what you do.

For the story behind this story, read our interview with associate editor [John Spong](#).

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