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AUCTIONEERS

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## Wrestler "Killer" Kowalski's Estate, Down for the Count

by Jeanne Schinto



TAC Auctions Inc., Saugus, Massachusetts

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He and his colleagues in trunks were a staple of 1950's television that mystified me as a kid. Were those guys serious? Did it actually hurt when one flipped the other up in the air and onto the mat with a great big thud, then stomped on his solar plexus? In truth, the cartoonish figures—part Three Stooges, part stuntmen—who executed the scoop slam, drop-kick, diving foot stomp, flying knee drop, and the like were entertainers as well as athletes. And when the estate of Walter "Killer" Kowalski (1926-2008) was sold by TAC Auctions in Saugus, Massachusetts, on August 11, many of his wrestling brethren came out for it.

Auctioneer Tonya A. Cameron, TAC's owner, identified Triple H, a former world wrestling heavyweight champion and protégé of the Killer, as the biggest spender of the day. Bidding on the Internet, the man who goes by the shortened form of an earlier stage name, Hunter Hearst Helmsley, paid \$5100 (including buyer's premium) for his mentor's aquamarine ring robe with Killer's name written in silver sequins on the back. He also took his blue-leather wrestling boots, photos, and other memorabilia.



This signed studio portrait of Killer Kowalski went to Triple H on the Internet at \$180.



Killer's aquamarine velvet robe, with "Wladek Kowalski" written in silver sequins on the back, was the top lot of the auction, selling to Triple H on the Internet for \$5100. The robe is datable to the 1950's before Killer changed his name to Walter. His wrestling boots in blue leather, approximately size 14, sold to Triple H for \$780.

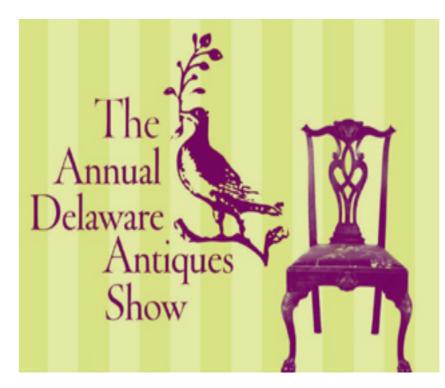
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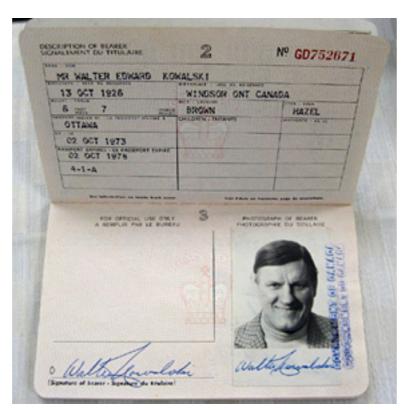


"Triple H admired Mister Kowalski very much and continued a relationship with the family through the years," said Cameron.

Richard Byrne, another student of Killer, as well as his sometime opponent, was an underbidder on several major lots. The owner of the Superstar Pro-Wrestling school in Malden, Massachusetts, Byrne went to the podium and gave a tribute to Killer before the auction began.

"It was an interesting crowd," said Cameron of the live audience that included Kowalski family members as well as curiosity seekers. "A lot of my regular clients weren't there, but a lot of new faces were. It's not the norm to attend a wrestler's auction."

She laughed. "Many of the wrestlers had never been to an auction before. They were intrigued, very energetic, and open to whatever was coming down the pike."



Three of Killer Kowalski's passports (one shown) sold to an Internet bidder for \$480.



In one of the YouTube.com clips, Killer appears to be wearing this navy blue ring robe. It sold to Triple H for \$1044.

Cameron's sales typically consist

of decorative arts and antiques consigned by less-heralded estates, but this was not the first celebrity auction that she has staged. A few years ago, she sold the estate of descendants of Khalil Gibran, author of *The Prophet*. ("After the Bible, *The Prophet* is one of the world's most-read books," she said.) She was also among the first to be called to auction the contents of area churches and their rectories when they started closing. She said she considers Killer Kowalski an inspirational figure too.

The idea that Killer was an inspiration may initially seem strange. But there's always a good guy and a bad guy in wrestling matches of the sort that Killer engaged in, in which the outcome is predetermined. The fact that Killer was always cast as the villain—i.e., "heel" in wrestler's lingo didn't make him any less of a cautionary tale-teller than the hero—i.e., "babyface" or "face" for short.

"He created a character. It was a battle of good and evil," said Cameron, "and isn't that what Christianity is all about?"

Edward Wladyslaw Kowalski was born in Windsor, Ontario, to immigrant Polish parents on October 13, 1926. He worked in an auto plant with his father before turning to professional wrestling in 1947. By then, he had grown to 6'7" and weighed 250 pounds.

In January 1953 Kowalski was involved in the first professional wrestling match to be televised in Canada. He became a TV celebrity in the early days of the medium. In 1954 the Killer nickname was born. It happened because of a fight at the Montreal Forum between him and a wrestler from Fairbanks, Alaska, named Yukon Eric.

As part of the routine, Kowalski knee-dropped Yukon Eric, severing a piece of his ear in the process. It was an accident. Besides, the ear was already cauliflowered. As Kowalski told the *Chicago Tribune* in 1989, "I was leaping off the rope, and Yukon Eric...moved at the last second. I thought I missed, but all of a sudden, something went rolling across the ring."

It only got worse. When Kowalski visited Yukon Eric in the hospital, he took one look at him with his head wrapped up like a mummy's and started laughing. Yukon Eric laughed too. But the next day, newspaper headlines read, "Kowalski Visits Yukon in the Hospital and Laughs." Kowalski recalled to the *Tribune* reporter that when he climbed into the ring that night, the crowd called out, "You animal, you killer." The name Killer stuck.

His reputation as a heel grew when he perfected a move dubbed "The Claw," in which he would make his hand into a claw, then grab the lower part of an opponent's stomach area and apply pressure. (Other claw holds squeeze the opponent's skull or shoulder.) He appeared to be disemboweling his opponent. Was it real or fake? Don't ask. Australian TV talk-show host Don Lane regretted goading Killer about faking. Kowalski applied The Claw to Lane and again made headlines.

But the Killer was by all accounts a gentleman outside of the ring. (Compare "gentleman" to "mark," an insider term used to describe a wrestler who doesn't know how to separate his "gimmick" from real life.) As Cameron put it, he was "a generous and sensitive giant" who did not drink or smoke. He wouldn't even ride in a car with anyone who smoked, she said his family members told her. And, unusual in wrestling circles, he was a vegetarian.

He was also a bachelor until he was nearly 80. On June 19, 2006, he married the former Theresa Ferrioli, just a few years his junior. ("It's never too late to find your soulmate," said Cameron.) Theresa and Killer lived in a house in Malden, set up high on a hill with a view of Boston and filled it with collections they acquired separately and together.

The house has been sold now to pay for Mrs. Kowalski's medical care, said Cameron. The auction's proceeds will do the same.

When Kowalski retired in 1977, after some 6000 fights, he opened Killer Kowalski's Professional Wrestling School in various locations around the

Boston area, including Salem, Somerville, and Malden. (Said one, who remembers the Somerville school, "Walter was a sweet guy, who opened a school for kids on Temple Street in Winter Hill and was a well-liked member of the community. I saw him 'rassle' a hundred times. Back when we were kids, everyone tried out The Claw on each other. It never worked for us.")

In 2003 Kowalski sold his school, and it relocated to North Andover (it is now part of the New England Pro Wrestling Academy). He still taught classes there, nearly to the end.

He died on August 30, 2008, but lives on, on YouTube.com. I highly recommend the clip called "The Top Ten Moves of Walter 'Killer' Kowalski." It includes "The Airplane Spin," in which he takes his opponent by the feet and legs and twirls him around and around before letting go. All are clearly farcical performances; yet they are acrobatic, almost balletic, requiring strength, flexibility, agility, and timing, not to mention dramatic flair. There's a moral at the end of every match. Either the face wins or the heel wins by cheating. Not a thing to be proud of, as the gentle giant would have been the first to tell you.

Besides the wrestling items, the approximately 350-lot sale included the couple's Limoges and Wedgwood, their glass collection, Asian art, a bombé chest, jewelry, and a Rolex Perpetual Oyster wristwatch. The watch went to a floor bidder at \$1404. There were also Killer's cameras and flight logbook.

"He was something of a modern-day Renaissance man," said Cameron, alluding to his serious interest in photography, flying, and poetry. One of his poems, "I Am a Pro Wrestler," was reprinted in the program handed out at his funeral:

"I had a dream, I pursued my dream/ I am humble, but I am confident/ I am kind, but this is not a weakness it's my strength/ I believe in myself. I am 'great' or I don't belong here/ I will train hard, my skills will be tested/ but I won't give up./ I will help my peers with encouragement./ I will not criticize or discourage others./ I will always show respect to others who have paved my way./ I will remain open to suggestions at all times./ I want to learn./ I had a dream, the dream came true./ Thank you, GOD,/ I am proud to be a pro wrestler."

For more information, phone (781) 233-0006 or see the Web site (www.tacauctioneers.com).

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