

South Philadelphia's "Hitman" Tony Stetson Comes Out of Retirement for the TWA Pro Wrestling Reunion Show on October 24th in South Jersey



**"Hitman" Tony Stetson
circa 1988
(PHOTO: Joe Zanolle)**

In pro wrestling, retirements can be over in a matter of weeks. It is almost a given that when someone retires, you can count on seeing them again at some point. There are always exceptions, but most wrestlers can not seem to stay out of the ring if they are at all physically capable.

One person who thought for sure that his retirement was permanent was **Tony Stetson**.

Stetson was one of the founding fathers of the **Tri-State Wrestling Alliance (TWA)** in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The TWA, which was the creation of Joel Goodhart, was built on the feuds of **Stetson vs. Johnny Hot Body** and **Larry Winters vs. D.C. Drake**. Stetson helped usher in a new era in the Philadelphia wrestling market with the TWA and later with Eastern/Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW). But those accomplishments came at a high price.

Stetson, now 50 years old, recounts a laundry list of injuries, "I've had both knees completely torn, four tears in each of my shoulders, broken noses, fractured ribs, and concussions." The wrestling chapter in Stetson's life came to an end when his doctors told him he needed both knees replaced and to never step in the ring again. "At that point in my life, that was the straw that broke the camel's back," Stetson laments. However, "the Hitman" learned over the years that the physical pain he endured paled in comparison to the pain of walking away from his life's passion.

Stetson recalls his debut match. "It was at a World Wrestling Federation (WWF) – now World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) – television taping against the late Bam Bam Bigelow on December 9, 1985 in Poughkeepsie, New York. It was unreal, to finally realize my dream, and in the biggest wrestling company in history!" Stetson's match with Bigelow- who coincidentally was a fellow graduate of Larry Sharpe's Monster Factory wrestling school in New Jersey – was the first of many appearances in the WWF. In those appearances, Stetson learned a lot about the business of pro wrestling. One was getting yourself noticed. The dark hair was dyed blonde, and Stetson found a new identity for himself. "I first started under my real name, Tony (Anthony) Matteo. Then I heard color commentator Bruno Sammartino repeatedly mispronounce my name. I figured if a fellow Italian-American could not pronounce my name, I better come up with something catchy, that was easier to pronounce." Tony Stetson was born.

After working WWF TVs, a long list of independent promotions, and traveling the world, Stetson found himself in a series of matches with someone he had a great chemistry with, fellow South Philadelphian **Johnny Hot Body**. Stetson vs. Hot Body became a known



In classic TWA action, Stetson was willing to do whatever it took to defeat his archrival, Johnny Hot Body, as Referee John Finegan tries to restore order. Stetson is one of a select few who ushered in a new hardcore style into the Philadelphia wrestling market.
(PHOTO: Joe Zanolle)

commodity on the Northeast wrestling circuit, as a plethora of wrestling promotions booked the pair to bring their feud to their wrestling promotion. When Goodhart started up the TWA, it didn't take him long to pick up on this and he booked the pair. The feud though almost did not happen in the TWA, as in the debut of their match against one another, Hot Body had some difficulties, and Goodhart was ready to switch gears and start Stetson in a program with Jules Strongbow. Fate though had other plans. Goodhart at the time was hosting his Rasslin' Radio AM radio program in Philadelphia and it served as a companion to his TWA shows. Before Goodhart could pull the trigger on

Strongbow and Stetson, Goodhart's radio program was flooded with callers wanting more Stetson vs. Hot Body, and Goodhart wisely obliged.

After the TWA folded in 1992 due to financial woes, the pieces of the promotion were picked up by a TWA financial backer and local Philadelphia businessman and pawnbroker, Tod Gordon. TWA was dead, and Eastern Championship Wrestling (ECW) was born. While Stetson enjoyed a good position in the new company with booker Eddie Gilbert, things began to change when Gilbert was replaced by Paul Heyman (Paul E. Dangerously) after only a short time in charge.

"Things changed when Paul came in," Stetson said. "At the time, Hot Body and I had in storyline mended fences and were now tag champs, and Paul was ready to break us up and proceed with Stetson-Hot Body II." Their feud was on tap to be a featured program, but things took a wrong turn. "Unfortunately, Johnny had problems with management, and he parted ways with the company. There was a point when Johnny returned and it looked like things were about to resume between the two of us, but it wasn't meant to be. Some of the issues between Johnny and the office re-emerged and he left the company for a second time."

With the departure of Hot Body for the second time came more bad news for Stetson. The office informed "the Hitman" that they had no ideas for him and he began to fall out of favor for a reason to this day he cannot explain or understand. Suddenly, the company that Stetson helped build, turned sour on "the Hitman." "That company was built on the blood and sacrifice of guys like me, but wrestling promoters can be fickle...unfortunately *that's the business*," Stetson philosophized. Still, the entire turn of events left Stetson bitter and depressed.

Following his departure from ECW in the mid-1990s, Stetson continued to work as a very sought after talent on the independent circuit. However, as the years passed, the injuries and the physical and mental wear began to accumulate on Stetson.

By the late 1990s, Stetson found himself embroiled in the second big feud of his career with **Breaker Morant**. The Central Wrestling Coalition (CWC) hosted their matches for several years in South Philadelphia as the two battled over the CWC Title. Although a lot of physical damage had been done to Stetson's body by this point, it was his matches with Morant that took a toll and resulted in the most painful and severe of all his injuries, his knees.

"I am very honest with myself," Stetson stated. "Everybody gets older and injuries mount. I've never been under the delusion that I could avoid retirement forever, but my issues with Morant went beyond the normal scope of this business." Stetson continued, "When Morant came along, he was a lot younger than I, and he had no respect for the veterans before him. But it goes deeper than that. Morant was the type of guy who it was not enough for him to be successful, but he would intentionally go too far, and try to injure people unnecessarily."

While Stetson's last match was not against Morant (it was in a three way tag team match in August 2002 versus the team of Joey Matthews & Christina York with Alexis Laree and the team of Mark Smart & Greg Spitz), the punishment that he endured in the Morant feud is what Morant claims to have put Stetson into retirement.

With his wrestling journey in the wake, Stetson worked on rehabbing the damage to his body and enjoyed his life with his wife and three children. Stetson walked away with a sense of accomplishment, but without a sense of closure. He never went near a wrestling ring again.

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Seven years later, in August 2009, it was announced that a TWA Reunion show would be taking place in October 2009. However, it was not Goodhart resurrecting the brand, but rather, a former TWA roster member Michel Bruno (Mike Tartaglia). As fate would have it, Bruno formed a tag team of "the Hitmen" with Stetson in the TWA days.

When Stetson caught wind of the Reunion Show, he was unmoved, being content with his life outside of the ring. Then the phone call came. "At first I told Mike Bruno that I didn't think I had anything left in me and I was just thankful that I could basically walk. But then, the more I thought about it, and the more Mike kept asking me, I knew that if I didn't do this Reunion Show, I would regret it for the rest of my life."

Stetson continued, "The Reunion Show has given me NEW LIFE. I never would have thought that after 2002 I would ever step back in the ring again. The desire was always there but I only could hear what the doctors were telling me. Being away from the ring left a void inside of me. Don't get me wrong, I have a full life with an INCREDIBLE WIFE and 3 AMAZING CHILDREN, but the wrestler inside of me was put to sleep and I thought he would never wake again."

This return to the ring has affected Stetson in a very profound way. “I have accepted a new challenge in my life, and a journey that will be long and hard. I have grabbed onto one word that means so much to me that it has become a part of my life, and how I live my life each and everyday...that word is ‘BELIEVE.’ Even if no one else believes in you or thinks that the journey that you are on is stupid, foolish, crazy, etc, the only thing that really matters to me is that I BELIEVE. And no matter what happens when this is all said and done, I know I won't have to ask myself ‘what if?’ I also know that above everything else, I am setting an example for three very special kids of mine and that is no matter how hard or long a road my be, never give up, always reach for your dream and no matter what...ALWAYS ‘BELIEVE’!!!”

Knowing Stetson's new attitude and frame of mind, it is not surprising that he requested to wrestle Breaker Morant in his first match back from retirement. But Stetson says that this match is not about revenge on Morant for saddling him with some serious knee injuries, rather it is about redemption.

But for Morant, things have not changed much. When reached for comment, Morant had this to say, “If Stetson wants to make a pathetic attempt at a comeback and embarrass himself in front of a bunch of his family, friends, and fans, that's his business. But if he thinks for one second that he's going to pull a rabbit out of a hat and some how get a win over me, then he must be older than I thought as senility must be setting in. I won't think twice about going right for these knees and sending ‘the Hitman’ packing with his tail between his legs for good.”

Regardless, Stetson is up for the challenge. He has been training, getting ring time, and also been preparing in a very unlikely way. Stetson is working as a wrestling consultant for a pro wrestling play, “The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity,” being produced by the Philadelphia InterAct Theatre Company. For Stetson, passing on his knowledge is helping him prepare for his own return in the ring.

The TWA Reunion on Oct 24 will have even more significance in that October 2009 marks the one year anniversary of the death of his very good friend and former wrestling manager Gianni Corleone , a/k/a The Godfather, a/k/a The Equalizer (Johnny Monzo). Stetson has dedicated this comeback match to the memory of his dear friend.

“A new era is starting and just like the TWA back in the day, I want to be there from the start to the end. I may be 50, and I am older, but I am smarter too! My desire is back, the drive is back and most of all...THE WRESTLER IN ME IS BACK!!!”

- Joe Zanolle
TWA Events

Please come out to see “Hitman” Tony Stetson come out of retirement as he faces Break Morant at the **Tri-State Wrestling Alliance (TWA) Reunion Show, October 24, 2009 at the Flyers Skate Zone in Voorhees, New Jersey.** Doors open at 6:30 PM and bell time is 7:30 PM.

Also scheduled to appear are Al Snow with Head, Steve Corino w/ Rob Dimension, Buddy Landel, Glen Osbourne, Larry Winters, D.C. Drake, Michael Bruno, and many more!!! Card is subject to change.

Ticket prices are \$12.00 ringside and \$10.00 general admission.

For more information on the **TWA**, events, tickets, directions, and advertising/sponsorship inquiries please visit

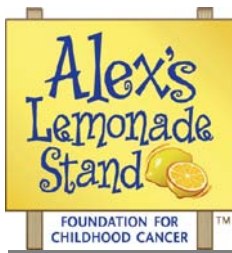
<http://www.twaprowrestling.com>,

email tristatewrestlingalliance@yahoo.com ,

or call 856-232-9332 (Hair By DeZign).

Also, please visit the **TWA Memories Page**, where some of the classic TWA roster members share their thoughts on their time with the TWA and their thoughts on the upcoming reunion show. Check it out here

<http://www.twaprowrestling.com/classicmemories.html>.



A portion of the proceeds go to **ALEX'S LEMONADE STAND FOUNDATION**, a charity that works for a cure to childhood cancer. We will also have a lemonade stand the night of the event collecting donations for ALEX'S LEMONADE. Even if you cannot attend the live event, you can also visit our TWA Event page on the ALEX'S LEMONADE web page and make a donation on-line at <http://www.alexlemonade.org/stands/19069>.

PLEASE MAKE SURE YOU CLICK THE LEMON DONATE ICON MID-PAGE ON THE RIGHT-HAND SIDE SO THAT YOUR DONATION GOES TOWARD OUR FUNDRAISING GOAL.

Go see the *Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity*, a production of the Interact Theatre Company, at the Adrienne, 2030 Samson Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Performance dates are October 23, 2009 to November 22, 2009. Call 215-568-8079 or visit <http://www.interacttheatre.org/2009-2010-feature-1.html>.