

## **The Many Faces of Foley: A Journey of Discovery and Influence on Professional Wrestling**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Though the academic community often looks down on professional wrestling, there are examples in which the medium allows for elaborate and complex storytelling rivaling other forms of literature. During the 1990s, due to the constant blurring of the lines between reality and fiction within the world of wrestling and the increasingly intelligent audience that consumed the product, performers were forced to adapt to a more realistic style integrating their actual life events and personality into their on-screen personas. One sports entertainer of note was Mick Foley, who crafted three splintered characters he portrayed amongst numerous promotions. Each had their own trajectory and were representative of separate aspects of his own psyche. Cactus Jack was a brutally violent version of Foley hungry to succeed by any means necessary, Mankind was a Gothic personification of Foley's insecurities, and Dude Love was an out-of-date projection of an adolescent Foley's ideal, confident hero. Throughout Foley's career he pioneered a new style of sports entertainment, set a new precedent for character development, and redefined physical expectations for what a performer could be. Mick Foley has since gone on to become a *New York Times* bestselling author, an advocate for the charity RAINN, a spoken word performer, and a Santa Claus portrayer.

**Keywords:** Mick Foley, Mankind, Cactus Jack, Dude Love, professional wrestling, World Wrestling Federation, World Wrestling Entertainment, Attitude Era, sports entertainment, personas

*In wrestling, such characters and their progressing narratives remain closely, if not inextricably, tied to the performer themselves, defined by their personal idiosyncrasies of physicality and capacity to author in-ring narratives that are simultaneously varied and familiar. Wrestlers can never, in a sense 'start afresh' in their story-telling but are always tied up in their own progression of character storyline and personal ability. In this sense, wrestling 'identity' and its close correlation with in-ring 'ability' can be constructed, but it cannot necessarily be 'faked.' (MacFarlane 152)*

Though routinely dismissed and disregarded as lowbrow, lower class, crass entertainment, professional wrestling features unique in-ring storytelling and backstage segments that can be utilized for rich plot development and vivid characters who blur lines between reality and fiction. Screenwriter Max Landis claimed, "If you follow one character all the way through [their career] you can see this format allows the telling of interesting, diverse, compelling stories," ("Wrestling Isn't Wrestling"). The "Attitude Era" of the late 1990s—the industry's most commercially successful period—witnessed the World Wrestling Federation (WWF), World Championship Wrestling (WCW), and Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) battle for primetime ratings supremacy. This highly competitive atmosphere forced management to differentiate their product and dispense more creative control to performers, who in turn injected their own personalities into their on-screen counterparts.

Mick Foley, a notable sports entertainer of the Attitude Era, was employed within all three of the major companies and permitted to flesh out multiple personas alongside some of the most talented, and well-respected wrestlers in the business. Foley wrestled under three different characters: the unhinged "King of the Death Match" Cactus Jack, the tortured soul Mankind, and the dorky cool 70s hippie Dude Love. His extensions not only reflected his personality but served as a means of survival and longevity within his occupation. Each of the characters' on-screen arcs contributed to an overall narrative of reconciliation of Foley's fractured inner self through the catharsis of audience praise. Years of storylines converged for all three identities to be absorbed into a new, singular, real "Mick Foley" further obfuscating actual life and performance.

As a self-described "socially inept, amusement park-obsessed loser who has been ostracized by all but a few of his fellow wrestlers," Mick Foley did not fit the typical profile of conventional wrestlers who achieved popularity and success within the industry (Foley 343). Foley claimed he was "realistic enough to realize [he] was not somebody that a wrestling company was built around [but had his] own unique style [and was] able to blend it in with other people's styles [to] have a very good match with just about anybody," ("Monday Night War: Have A Nice Day!"). The selfless nature of his performance in the ring would prove to be one of his greatest strengths, as he was willing to sacrifice his body for the enjoyment of fans and integrity of the matches. Foley's high-impact and self-destructive feats were influential and emulated by an entire generation of up-and-coming wrestlers captivated by his verbal diatribes and idiosyncratic tone.

Though each of the "Three Faces of Foley," as they have come to be known, were extremely similar in their hardcore wrestling and even overall narrative progressions, they were unique in their mannerisms, attire, and approach to the spectacle that is sports entertainment. The final condensed Mick Foley form is one that could only be revealed after the cumulative experiences of each. Mick Foley's interactive storytelling spanning the Attitude Era forever changed the professional wrestling industry by piercing the illusion of established reality. Though retired from in-ring competition, Mick Foley pioneered a new style of sports entertainment, set a new precedent for character development, and redefined physical expectations for a professional wrestler.

## **"BANG, BANG!" CACTUS JACK**

At the beginning of Foley's career, "kayfabe," or the illusion sports entertainment was entirely real, was a closely guarded secret amongst performers. In order to keep the reputation of professional wrestling as a legitimate fight, older wrestlers who took to training the new generation would often withhold the knowledge of how to make maneuvers appear brutal while inflicting little damage. This was the case for Foley, who thought he would impress his mentor, Dominic DeNucci, by showing him his practiced forearm smash in stereo with a foot stomp to make it sound like a massive hit. Unimpressed by the lack of real impact, DeNucci told Foley "Kid, don't think that this is alla bullshit like you see on TV," (Foley 85).

Cactus Jack was the first professional name under which Foley wrestled, and the only moniker to journey through all three of the big companies, as well as the independent circuit. The origin of the name came from a one-off pseudonym his own father, Jack, used when playing a fantasy wrestling game with Mick during his childhood. It was seemingly plucked from Foley's subconscious when forced to choose an alias moments before his debut in 1983 (Foley 105).

Carefully curated, Cactus Jack's appearance set him apart from other wrestlers of the time. Though certain promoters encouraged a different, more traditional costume, Foley was adamant Cactus Jack should avoid athletic wear in favor for the same thing Foley normally wore. As he related in his 1999 memoir: "Didn't he get it? I thought as I looked at my sweats, suede fringe Indian boots, and red flannel. 'It's not the clothes, it's me'" (Foley 254).

In a later interview, Foley, under the guise of one of his other personas, would go on to say:

"I never wanted to be Cactus Jack...Cactus Jack was supposed to be around for three months. He stayed for eleven years. What made Cactus Jack different was that he just wanted it a little bit more. He was willing to go the extra length. He was willing to sleep in a filthy car in order to achieve his dreams. He was willing to forgo romantic relationships to be the best. He was somebody in an era of bodybuilder physiques who carved out his own niche, who said 'I'm gonna make it on my own style,' who said, 'No one else is gonna tell me what to do, I'm not going to dye my hair. I'm going to be exactly who I am, and I'm going to do it my way.'" (Foley 582)

The individuality aspect of Cactus Jack was important for Foley to maintain, and would prove to be a crucial component to the methodology of the character. Overcompensation for his unusual looks and abilities manifested in the Cactus Jack identity as a varied skill set of risky maneuvers and captivating, profound diatribes, which established an unpredictable dichotomy. The intricacies of Cactus Jack were honed in smaller promotions where Foley developed his craft. Cactus Jack was designed to be a "kind of rebel with an attitude" (Foley 112). Foley eventually found himself in a Dallas-based promotion, World Class Championship Wrestling, where the Cactus Jack character underwent a radical transformation. He understood the character to be "more mischievous than insane" but went in the latter direction and found immediate support from promoters (Foley 178). Adding to this unhinged element, Cactus Jack was billed as Cactus Jack Manson, in reference to the infamous serial killer Charles Manson, but quickly dropped the surname.

In his autobiography, *Have A Nice Day!: A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*, Foley admitted to using method-acting to more deeply understand the mentality of Cactus Jack, testing out his newly deranged persona in popular nightclubs of the Dallas area. There he "met a pretty, divorced mother of two named Valerie...as the nervous, paranoid, simple Cactus Jack and didn't really know how to tell her that I wasn't really like that guy she had met" (Foley 179). Though living life as Cactus Jack outside of the ring would prove to be a difficult task, Foley maintained his act for the entire duration of their several month long romantic relationship while he was within World Class Championship Wrestling, literally living the part both on-screen and off.

In 1991, Foley secured a position within Ted Turner's World Championship Wrestling, where his wild, reckless style created a sharp, chaotic contrast to the otherwise cartoony pre-existing heroes and villains. Cactus Jack turned heads and drew eyes by performing high-risk maneuvers on concrete, such as his trademark finisher of a flying elbow from the ring apron to the outside. Oftentimes, the damage inflicted on himself was far worse than it was his opponents, and his daredevil move-set combined with his disoriented rambling backstage interviews aligned him with some of the company's biggest villains, like Abdullah the Butcher (Foley 269).

In WCW, Foley received national exposure on a syndicated television program, and was able to gain experience in a major company. However, after being neglected and misused as a talent by the booking committee and writers, Foley left his lucrative position and sought out a more artistically rewarding, less financially secure, and physically demanding lifestyle in the independent promotions of America and Japan. It was during this period where he "had improved tremendously, gained valuable confidence, learned to work the mike, and had a much better idea of who I was in the ring and what I was trying to accomplish" (Foley 263). This expansion of the Cactus Jack character, and coming into his own as a performer, would lead him to ECW where he would have his most successful run under this identity.

Extreme Championship Wrestling operated out of Philadelphia and was managed by former WCW personality Paul Heyman (a.k.a. Paul E. Dangerously), who was willing to capitalize on the overlooked potential of Cactus Jack and give him a platform to push the character to new heights. ECW thrived on a niche market of bloodthirsty fans craving hardcore antics who knew and respected Cactus Jack's independent run overseas in Japan's International Wrestling Association. Prior to ECW, Cactus Jack participated in a series of grueling tournament bouts involving gratuitous and gory usage of barbed wire, exploding boards, ladders, chairs, and tables, which led to him being crowned the "King of the Deathmatch." With Cactus Jack's reputation preceding him, he was welcomed into ECW in 1994 with the immediate adoration of the audience.

However, as Cactus Jack became beloved by the fans, "Mick Foley's act was no longer unique" amidst ECW's "violent culture," and "having blended into his surroundings, Foley would need to find another way to stand out from the rest of the ECW roster" ("Monday Night War"). Paul Heyman would later explain, "Mick became a hardcore hero, but deep down Mick wanted something more. Mick wanted to do something that would have everyone talking," ("Monday Night War"). In need of reinvention in order to survive and thrive within the company, Foley would alter the Cactus Jack character from a universally accepted hero to a cowardly heel that denounced the brutal nature of ECW and begging to reclaim his former high-paying position within WCW. Foley described his process as systematically altering everything the audience enjoyed about him, including tying back his hair and putting on a series of self-described "boring" matches filled with rest holds ("Monday Night War"). This tweaking was out of necessity as there was already an abundance of other wrestlers fulfilling the niche, devil-may-care good guy role the Cactus Jack entity occupied. In order to stand out, he needed to change and stay one step ahead of fans.

Foley justified his turn in character in one of his most well-known promos describing a point within a recent match when he saw a spectator's sign: "Cane Dewey. Cane Dewey. Dewey Foley is a three-year-old little boy – you sick sons of bitches!" (Foley 464). ECW fans were known for being "smart" to the business of professional wrestling being an elaborate show and that the performers were not their actual characters in their everyday lives (*WWE Presents: The Rise and Fall of ECW*). However, in this blurring of the lines, Cactus Jack blamed the audience for dragging Dewey Foley, Mick Foley's actual son, into the fictional world. This forced Cactus Jack to turn his back on the rabid crowd lusty for authentic pain and united both Cactus Jack and Mick Foley as one entity. Through the diminishing borders of kayfabe, Foley's storytelling utilized this smart crowd's knowledge against them, fooling them into being unsure of what was actually part of the show. As an anti-hardcore hero, Mick Foley's ECW interpretation of Cactus Jack served as a perfect villain

for the times, and gained him enough recognition to be recruited to the WWF where he hatched his most celebrated face: Mankind.

### **"HAVE A NICE DAY!" MANKIND**

*Literature...presents a detailed account of mankind's chronic duality and incompleteness, as well as his attempts, which range from the noble to the ludicrous, to achieve integration (Zivkovic 122).*

Once in the World Wrestling Federation in 1996, Mick Foley reluctantly retired Cactus Jack to appease the desired creative direction of real-life owner and on-screen personality, Vince McMahon. A new identity was forged, originally named "Mason the Mutilator," "the idea that Vince had was to match Undertaker up with someone who could get inside his head and could threaten him mentally as well as physically" (Foley 497). The Undertaker was one of McMahon's most impressive creations behind-the-scenes and an established star for the WWF brand. Foley came prepared for his new role by suggesting several alterations to "Mason the Mutilator" before it ever made it on air. The inspired changes would develop into Mick Foley's most successful iteration.

Foley deemed the name to be too outlandish and cartoony, opting for the double entendre of "Mankind." As he explained to McMahon, he "could talk about the 'future of mankind' or 'destruction of mankind' and it would carry different meanings [or he] could also blame mankind as a people for creating Mankind as a person. Then [it would be unclear as to whether he was referring to himself] or making an indictment on the whole human race" (Foley 506). This type of nuance was a departure from less serious, kid-friendly wrestlers of the WWF like The Mountie, Repo Man, and Bastion Booger.

To further distance himself from other wrestlers, Foley requested "'separate entrance and exit music – no one's ever done that before. The entrance will be scary, but the exit will be beautiful'" for a desired effect of appearing completely at peace after destroying an opponent (Foley 504-5). A particular scene fed into the impetus for Mankind, from the 1994 film *The Silence of the Lambs* in which Hannibal Lecter viciously attacks two prison guards while haunting piano music plays (Foley 504). The sharp juxtaposition of action and atmosphere resonated with Foley, and inspired him for the remainder of his career to plan out significant moments in his matches to an unusual, offbeat soundtrack.

For weeks leading up to Mankind's debut, teasers played introducing the unsuspecting audience to a character they had never experienced anything like before. "The vignettes were filmed in front of a makeshift dungeon and featured me playing with rats and telling stories of piano playing, child abuse, neglect, and disfigurement. I had been reading books like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and was full of antisocial images" (Foley 518). The dark character was initially reminiscent of a brooding monster, dressed in tattered brown clothing and a leather mask with bolts, his hulking, hunched posture would rock back and forth whispering delusional gibberish and lashing out unpredictably, often squealing like a pig during attacks and ripping out his own hair.

The Undertaker, played by Mark Calaway, was a supernatural, unstoppable personification of Death-incarnate within the WWF. His already accomplished gimmick lent tremendous credibility with the relatively new Foley and would prove to be one of Mankind's greatest opponents. Mankind's in-ring debut also showed him using a new finishing move known as the Mandible Claw, which was less damaging to Foley's body and more theatrical than Cactus Jack's Flying Elbow. The Mandible Claw was done "'by pressing down with your two middle fingers on the nerves underneath the tongue, and pressing up with your thumb on the nerves running under the chin,'" which contributed a surreal strangeness to the character by the abrupt thrusting of his hand into an opponent's mouth (Foley 502).

The feud with the Undertaker would take place over many months with several specialty matches, including a Buried Alive match and a Boiler Room Brawl. The latter was built around “the psychology... that in ‘the [boiler]room,’ [Mankind] would have the advantage, because since Mankind’s Federation debut, he had been filmed inside the room, as if it were his lair” (Foley 549). The dark, dingy setting was filmed prior to an audience being in an arena, and was aired later without commentary, setting it apart from typical matches and adding a horrifying realism to the battle. Whereas Cactus Jack’s psychotic nature was built with excessive violence and legitimate brutality, likely due to the smaller scale productions he was involved with, Mankind’s threatening presence within the WWF ring was initially a more supernatural, larger than life, dramatic effort.

Attempting to flesh out the Mankind character by grounding him within the real world, an idea formed to air a series of interview segments over several weeks in which announcer Jim Ross sat with Mankind to reveal his origins. Foley rose to the occasion and formulated a way to add authenticity to the character:

I believed in Mankind and didn’t want anyone to see the real Mick Foley just yet. So I came up with a game plan. I would tell the real-life Mick Foley’s stories, and I would give Mick Foley’s opinions, but I would do it as Mankind. In actuality, the two weren’t that different, as in most cases the most successful gimmicks were simply an amplified extension of a certain part of the real-life personality. I guess in that case, Mankind was the insecure side of my personality; the side that had never quite felt accepted. It was that side that surfaced in the Jim Ross interview, and it surfaced in a way that was both funny and touching, and it changed the way people perceived and felt about Mankind. (Foley 577)

Following this, the audience sympathized with the character and by proxy Mick Foley, who had been addressed within the interview by his real name, completely breaking the kayfabe fourth wall. This was a historic moment for the WWF to acknowledge wrestlers were more than just the characters they played on TV and were real life humans existing outside of the ring. As the Attitude Era continued, this would continue to become one of the biggest shifts in storytelling within the industry where the lines between scripted and unscripted would consistently be pushed to their breaking point. Foley himself would go on to exploit this and usher about this change in the audience and performer relationship.

Also featured within these interview clips was a portion of one of Foley’s real homemade videos from college, in which he portrayed a smooth, suave hippie named Dude Love, who would later be brought in to the WWF as a way for Foley to live out his childhood ambitions and further align him with the increasingly captivated audience.

### **“OW! HAVE MERCY!” DUDE LOVE**

Capitalizing on Foley’s growing popularity, the WWF allowed him a chance to introduce a separate character from Mankind into the WWF continuity - one of the only times in which a performer was allowed to have two simultaneous personas. Growing up, Foley described himself as being a “shy, insecure, poorly dressed, weird guy, who also happened to be polite, kind, funny, and borderline not too-bad looking” (Foley 47). In a series of backyard videos filmed with friends in college, Foley explored his interest in professional wrestling and developed an alter ego named Dude Love, who was there to do and be all the things Foley felt he couldn’t (*The Life and Career of Mick Foley*).

In *The Loved One*: “Mick Foley” was his “character in the beginning, a tortured soul...Mick is without ambition” (Foley 67). But after finding purpose in the sport of professional wrestling, the fictional Mick Foley is transformed into the cool Dude Love. He was Foley’s “fantasy creation of what a man was

supposed to be...As the Dude [he could] be all of the things that Mick Foley never was – rich, successful,” and popular with women (Foley 57). This last aspect was especially important to him as a youth as he later recalled he “actually felt like a different guy when [he] put on the Dude’s ensemble of long brown wig, orange headband, mirrored shades, and pajama top” (Foley 57). Echoing a similar form of method-acting he would later employ with Cactus Jack, the young Foley often “would actually go out with my friends while dressed as the Dude” (Foley 57).

Using the Dude Love manifestation brought about feelings of self-confidence and a heightened sense of importance for Foley to communicate more effectively with the opposite sex and gain attention from peers. During a serendipitous occasion in which Foley screened *The Loved One* in front of his former high school’s auditorium, he saw “kids, most of whom [he] didn’t even know, cheering for a guy with a wig and long underwear” (Foley 82). For the first time, Foley felt as if he were more than “just a college punk with a pipe dream of being a wrestler” (Foley 82). In the footage, when Foley jumped from the roof of a friend’s house onto a crash pad of cardboard boxes and old mattresses, his stunt work garnered explosive applause from his first ever audience, reinforcing his desires to pursue professional wrestling as a career and way of life.

Within the later on screen narrative of the World Wrestling Federation, Mankind desperately attempted to align himself with the increasingly popular Stone Cold Steve Austin, an anti-hero who was just becoming one of the most successful wrestlers of all-time. Austin refused every offer of friendship the outsider Mankind presented, and “something just snapped within Mankind” (*The Life and Career of Mick Foley*). Much to the delight of the fans who were savvy to the childhood aspirations of Mick Foley, the character of Dude Love debuted to save Stone Cold from a beat down from the bad guys, winning the WWF Tag Team Championships in the process.

Living out his dreams of youth on screen was rewarding not just for Foley, but for the audience as well, who by this point, identified and connected with Foley as an overachieving underdog. The savagery of Cactus Jack and the darkness of Mankind were alleviated with the levity of Dude Love, showing a wide range of performance for Foley and further displaying his ability to adapt and survive:

I also took a look at the World Wrestling Federation roster and saw that it was filled with legitimate tough guys. The Dude, I decided, needed to be the antithesis of tough. He had the market cornered on ‘goofy’ and took full advantage. In everything the Dude took part in – from his ‘so bad it was good’ entrance video to developing the worst finish in the history of the business, the Dude embodied nerdyness [sic] and nincompoopery. The fans loved it. (Foley 599)

Dude Love had always been Foley’s goal for wrestling, and was even considered for his first ever match, but he claimed he “knew [he] didn’t have the experience or the talent to be the Dude just yet” and chose Cactus Jack until he “developed the poise to be the Dude” (Foley 105). After many years of wrestling under his belt, and venturing across dozens of different promotions, Foley finally achieved a perceived level of talent necessary for accurately portraying his cherished Dude Love persona. Armed with the brutal worldly exploits of Cactus Jack and breaking forth from the insecure shell of Mankind, Dude Love embodied Foley’s mental depiction of his perfect form.

When debuting in WCW, his frightening Cactus Jack shook up the bright, vibrant heroes of the roster, and a similar reception awaited him when he arrived in WWF as Mankind. Now, with the industry shifting to a point where the Attitude Era was in full effect, every character on screen had an edge to capitalize on the lewd and crude, anti-authority counterculture movement of the 1990s, popularized by television shows like *South Park*.

Dude Love served as an aesthetical counter to this overwhelming grittiness within the WWF. Foley’s fun-spirited portrayal was a total tonal shift from the psychotic monsters he previously inhabited. In a similar

move as his turn in ECW as Cactus Jack to stay a step ahead of audience expectations, and to portray a different version of the truth in his character, Foley acknowledged his usual outsider and out-of-touch lack of cool and donned a lighter gimmick more suitable of another time (Foley 592). This, of course, turned out to be a different form of popularity where it was a campy wink directly to the fans playing with Foley as an alternative from the dark rebels, like the Undertaker or “Stone Cold” Steve Austin. Dude Love was escorted to the ring by scantily clad flower child dancers, to the tune of a Bee Gees knock-off song, and had cheesy catchphrases printed on his tie-dye shirts.

While a younger Mick Foley once wished he “had possessed the Dude’s confidence and charisma,” this third mask sprung from the recesses of his past and became an unexpected success (Foley 110). During what Foley calls “The Summer of Love,” he “led a dual existence as Mankind and Dude Love – even to the point of appearing on the same show as both guys at different times. In a few matches... [Foley] started the match as the Dude, only to be beaten all the way up the aisle... Mankind would suddenly emerge and continue the battle” (Foley 592). The shifting back and forth between Mankind and Dude Love culminated in a strange scenario during a feud with Hunter Hearst Helmsley in which Cactus Jack would make his long-awaited debut into the WWF and all three of Foley’s alter egos would exist simultaneously.

### **THE THREE FACES OF FOLEY**

On the September 22, 1997, episode of Monday Night Raw, a “revolutionary backstage interview... let all of [Foley’s] personas decide which incarnation would compete in a Falls Count Anywhere Match” against Triple H/Hunter Hearst Helmsley (“Monday Night War”). Thanks to dated special effects, Dude Love interviewed Mankind in a similar fashion to the Mankind/Jim Ross segments, which had originally catapulted the character to success. Both Dude Love and Mankind agreed they were unfit to participate in such a hardcore style of match, and that there was instead someone better suited for the stipulations: Cactus Jack. Wielding a trash can, Cactus Jack proclaimed he was coming for Hunter, and then emerged from the entrance down the ramp as if he burst from the screen.

While initially resistant to the idea of bringing Cactus Jack into the WWF upon hiring Mick Foley, the “fans’ approval of Cactus Jack could not be ignored and Vince McMahon had grown to embrace all of his different personas” (“Monday Night War”). Occasionally, Mick Foley switched between Dude Love, Cactus Jack, and Mankind, sometimes multiple times on the same show and wrestling under all three different identities on the same night or even same match. Foley’s popularity waned over the next few months, as overexposure not only nearly ended his career from a health-standpoint, but also a character standpoint. Foley later reflected that “by asking our universe to accept a change from Mankind to Dude Love to Cactus Jack to Dude Love back to Mankind in what was a pretty short order, it kind of soured people” on his gimmicks (*The Life and Career of Mick Foley*).

To combat the stagnancy, Dude Love began a high profile feud in which he sold out on his hippie morals to become a corporate shill for Vince McMahon, hoping to attain the heavyweight championship. This backfired into an on-screen employment termination for Dude Love. Cactus Jack wrestled several more times and won the WWF Tag Team Championship with his former adversary from Japan and ECW, Terry Funk (who also interestingly and unexplainably chose to go under the masked alias of “Chainsaw Charlie”), before feeling like he was not getting the recognition he had earned and set out on retiring. Once again, Cactus Jack voiced Foley’s true feelings of frustration with the demands of fans and the growing popularity of the industry. Using this persona as an outlet, he spoke of his displeasure with the people in attendance for overlooking his sacrifices to the business:

And it’s funny, because when I came here two years ago I was Mankind, and there were people saying, ‘Why don’t you just be Cactus Jack?’ Then I came out in tie-dye and



some white boots and they said, 'Why don't you just be Cactus Jack?' Well, I gave you Cactus Jack. I gave you every goddamn bit of energy I had, and when I was lying there helpless, you chanted someone else's name...It's gonna be a long time before you see Cactus Jack in the ring again (Foley 631).

Mankind had last been seen six months earlier, as Foley spent all of his time embodying his earlier creations, and in an attempt to win over fans, Mankind was dusted off and brought back on screen (Foley 647). Unfortunately for Foley, the return was met with mediocre results, leaving him creatively floundering and directionless, especially after an unsuccessful attempt to align Mankind with the same corporate entities as Dude Love.

Mankind's revival brought him back to his roots with a somewhat rushed feud with the Undertaker, who had been the main opponent upon Foley's debut in the WWF years earlier. With a special stipulation of a Hell In A Cell at the 1998 King of the Ring pay-per-view, a 16-foot steel wire cage was placed over the ring with a roof, and Foley, feeling the pressure to top the original Cell match featuring the Undertaker and Shawn Michaels a year earlier, decided to put everything on the line. The match would go on to become a career defining performance, featuring Mankind being thrown off the top of the structure twice as well as implementing the use of steel stairs, chairs, and thumbtacks. An interesting detail to note is during the course of the battle, Mankind's mask was removed and remained off the duration of the night – marking the first of such an occasion. Though Foley lost the match, and received several life-altering injuries, he cemented his legacy within the industry and gave his career a much-needed resurrection.

"If you've only seen the falls and you haven't seen it unfold as a story watch it back again because it's powerful. It's powerful. In its own way it's beautiful when you see the lengths human beings were willing to get to get to that finish line. We may not have gotten there the way designed, but by god we got to the finish line. And I realized I was just a symbol for anyone that ever went the extra mile, who shed their blood, sweat, and tears to get to that finish line" (*20 Years of Hell*).

Facing off with the wrestling world's version of Death proved beyond any doubt Mankind was a survivor and captured the audience's approval more than ever. With years of injuries stacking up on Foley's body, he adapted the character away from the hardcore, high-impact stunt work and chose instead to let more of his own light-hearted personality seep through. Transitioning from Cactus Jack's extreme punishment on his opponents, and using the humorous approach as Dude Love in an otherwise stark roster filled with edgy and cool characters, Mankind morphed from a frightening, Gothic freak into a goofy, lovable comedic act.

Foley believed the character had endured an incredible amount and in the process endeared himself to the people, which made his character's transformation warranted (*The Life and Career of Mick Foley*). Venturing further into the comedy role, Foley would become rejuvenated in a way by the Mankind character:

I was feeling a lot like a battered and beaten man that time had left behind and was confused because of it. I decided to portray myself as a battered and beaten man that time had left behind and was confused because of it. I knew for a fact that many of our fans were not actually 'cool.' I gambled they would get into a character that likewise was not. I had already begun wearing a torn-up collared shirt and tie to the ring, and now I had my reason. The shirt and tie would represent my last remaining connection to the corporate world that had shunned me. In a sense, the outfit was my connection to Vince McMahon, who was the company's hottest heel, and was the perfect guy to play off of (Foley 669-70).

Serving as a foolish foil allowed Foley advancement within the company to work with some of the bigger names in a non-threatening role. In addition to pairing with Vince McMahon, the tyrannical owner, he also formed a tag team known as “The Rock N’ Sock Connection” with a reluctant partner and extremely popular rising star, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson.

Perhaps the greatest partnership to Mankind in his resurgence was a sock puppet creation called “Mr. Socko.” In a match, Foley would signal for his Mandible Claw finishing maneuver by pulling a white athletic gym sock with a crudely drawn face from his tights before stretching it over his hand. He would then grip his opponent with Mr. Socko, and perform the move as usual. Backstage interviews would feature Mankind using a high-pitched voice to give life to the sock sidekick, who captured the fans’ hearts; Foley would later explain, Mr. Socko made a bad match good and a good match great (Foley 680).

Though Mr. Socko came about from an improvised moment in a taped segment involving Vince McMahon, it was not the first time in Foley’s career that he implemented that particular article of clothing, albeit for different purposes:

Interestingly, four years before the invention of Mr. Socko, I was wearing a long tube sock on my right arm, as I was planning on doing the Cactus clothesline over the top of the barbed wire. I knew the possibility was strong of catching my arm on the wire as I went over, a possibility that could do massive amounts of injury to my skin, veins, and tendons as well. The sock, as it would later in my life, would protect me. (Foley 407)

Mr. Socko became an inseparable component to the Mankind character and distanced him even further from his original demented, boiler room dwelling outcast.

With Foley near the end of his career at the start of 2000, he had a brief return as Cactus Jack, creating a framed narrative to his professional life story. Ultimately, his last performances billed him not as Cactus Jack, or Dude Love, or even Mankind, but as Mick Foley. Retiring from a full-time schedule, Foley returned for an on screen role as Commissioner, and for one-off matches throughout the years as “Mick Foley.” This new on-screen Mick Foley was the closest representation to the real man. He wore clothing similar to Cactus Jack, acknowledged his past career by attaching the title of “Hardcore Legend” to his name (and even had multiple instances where he returned to his deathmatch-style), and embraced the goofiness of Mankind, the offbeat absurdism attitude of Dude Love.

Just as he stopped, the industry underwent a massive shift. ECW went bankrupt and was bought out by the WWF with WCW following shortly after. The WWF’s monopolization of the market led to an influx of talent and marked the end of the most popular and commercially successful period of time in professional wrestling history.

Foley earned the respect of the fans through many years of performing, and through several incarnations of beloved characters. Without the changes made to each one, his career might have ended multiple times. Similarly, professional wrestling evolved to fit with the growing understanding with the audience that the wrestlers were putting on a form of scripted entertainment. For Foley, it was only after acquiring the experiences as Cactus Jack, Mankind, and Dude Love that he was able to get past the otherness of Cactus Jack, grow beyond the insecurities of Mankind, and adapt to possess the confidence of Dude Love. In the process of chasing his dreams and earning a living, he managed to impact the business.

### **“THE HARDCORE LEGEND” MICK FOLEY**

*’It seems that as of late, I have been having trouble with my identity. But now with the gracious help of Vince McMahon, I have found out who I am. I am a speaker of four*

*languages. I am a student of American history and a reader of Greek tragedy. I am a leader of men and a lover of women, as well as the toughest S.O.B. in [the] World Wrestling Federation.'* (Foley, 641)

Through his long career, Foley not only pioneered a different style of sports-entertainment, but also set a new precedent for character development, and redefined physical expectations of what a performer should look like. It is only after obtaining these experiences and achieving adoration for each of his “Three Faces” that he revealed his true self to the audience, phasing out his colorful extensions and becoming an on screen version of the actual Mick Foley. The “Hardcore Legend” spawning after his regular career ended was an identity he would shamelessly promote his authorial works through with a wink and a smile, engaging in “cheap pops” by pandering to whatever city the local audience was from, and wearing shirts with cartoon characters or Christmas iconography. At the same time, this seemingly aloof jester could tap into something darker at a moment’s notice if antagonized, occasionally returning for matches rekindling his wilder days of barbed wire, thumbtacks, and flaming tables. Much like professional wrestling, Foley’s career was a variety act performance modified to fit whatever was best for the narrative at that specific point in time.

The real Mick Foley is a far tamer and well-adjusted individual than the overemphasized aspects of his personality that birthed the deranged Cactus Jack, the weird Mankind, and the goofy Dude Love. According to his official website, Foley has, on multiple occasions, produced New York Times Best-Selling literature, is a father of four (Huey, Dewey, Mickey, and Noelle), has clocked several hundred hours of service for the charity RAINN, which offers help to women survivors of rape and incest, and currently tours with a spoken word act when he is not portraying his latest doppelgänger: Santa Claus (“Bio.”). As a lifelong fanatic of Christmas, Foley has become an impersonator of Kris Kringle, a polar opposite to his legendary hardcore fame.

As screenwriter and professional wrestling fan Max Landis advocates, sports entertainment is a craft extending beyond the stereotype of oiled up bodybuilders grappling: “we love watching people grow, change, struggle...and when you watch wrestling that’s what you get...wrestling is melodrama, wrestling is mythology, wrestling is action, wrestling is comic books, the only thing wrestling isn’t is wrestling” (“Wrestling Isn’t Wrestling”). Without Foley embracing the changing expectations and understanding of the audience during the Attitude Era, professional wrestling might not have survived and would certainly not have endured in the way it has. Foley’s characters were complex and fully fleshed out with a wide range of emotion.

Mick Foley was a creator and author in a medium that is oftentimes dismissed as being shallow, and has on occasion, earned such judgment. However, the storied career and evolution of his three characters eventually condensing into a singular identity is a harrowing journey of violent reconciliation with inner-struggles of self-acceptance. Had he not have come along at the time he did, during the height of wrestling’s popularity, he himself admitted: “I don’t think I would have been pushed to constantly create, to better myself and push myself to make that connection with that audience. It definitely brought out the best in me,” (“Monday Night War”). In many ways, this competitive spirit for survival also brought out the best in wrestling entertainment.

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