

Penny Banner Passes Away

Contributed by Chris Yandek
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I was informed today by one of my friends in the professional wrestling industry that the great Penny Banner had passed away last night at her daughter's home in North Carolina. She was one of the founding pioneers of women's wrestling, and the first ever AWA Women's Champion. We did two interviews. The first one is the one below in text from June of 2001. The second one is from August of 2004 from my radio program. In 2004, she published her book *Banner Days*, which is the best look at the beginning of women's wrestling. Penny Banner lived life to the fullest whether it was traveling the territories or dating Elvis Presley. She was a friend and an enthusiastic woman. I kept in contact with her over the years because I always loved her energy. She always appreciated all the support. Penny was 73 years old.

Listen to the second interview with Penny Banner from my August 8, 2004 radio program. <http://thesportsinterview.com/mp3/PennyBanner.mp3> Read for my first interview with Penny Banner from June of 2001 below.

CY: How did you get into wrestling first off?

PB: "Well it was like 1954 and I am from St. Louis and what I was doing at that time was playing governess. I took care of 3 children. In the evening when the daddy would come home from work he had a basement with a gym downstairs and we started working out together. So he had me doing sit ups and I was up to like two hundred sit ups every other day, and in the evening when he would come home from work. I had this job in this lounge restaurant and as I was working, this one patron says to the owner, 'Who is that new girl you have there waiting on tables?'. He said, 'Ohh you better be careful. She can do two hundred sit ups.' Back then, that was something in 1954. And I did win his twenty dollars that he bet me I could not do two hundred sit ups and low and behold, he knew Sam Muschick, the owner of the NWA Wrestling Alliance and that is really how I got into wrestling."

CY: What was wrestling school like?

PB: "It was kinda like.. remember I had never been outside of St.Louis. I was just a South St.Louis City girl, full of country. They took me to Alhafs Gym, and I saw these girls drop-kicking medicine balls, doing flips and falling backwards. I knew what the falling backwards was cause I was teaching judo at the Youth Center in St.Louis. I had to learn how to fall forward and fall backward without hurting myself. They were doing that very thing. When I was there, nothing really too much impressed me. I just thought, 'I am not staying in this place. I got a free ride. I will go on and be happy.' Then Billy Wolfe said, 'Penny, why don't you get in the ring with a couple of these new girls that are in training and you know just kind of spar around with them?' I said, 'sure ok, cause Mag my uncle when he would come home from work, he would always get in this Referee's position and Mag was like 6'4", must have weighed 210 pounds. We would keep balance like Referees position, so I did it with these girls. Anyway I took them down and I beat them and Billy Wolfe said when the professionals come in off the road, that is when I want you to wrestle them in the ring and I said ok. So when the professionals came in, they rode me but could not pin me. So that is what that was like."

CY: Tell me about your first match.

PB: "It was against Kathy Branch and she was one the girls in training there in Columbus, Ohio and the town was Masery, Ohio. Neither one of us had any shoes. One of the great girl wrestlers, Hella Waldick, had a hysterectomy or something and she was laid up and Billy Wolfe told me where she lived and told me to ask her to go ask her to borrow her shoes so I borrowed her shoes. Kathy Branch did not have any shoes and when they called my name out, my name was Mary Anne Kasteky. That was really a joke when they tried to do that, hearing all the nice easy names people had back then. I got through that and when I picked Kathy Branch up I slammed her. She had no shoes on and I broke her ankle and ended up beating her. Kathy Branch by the way is still alive. I just saw her at the Cauliflower Alley Club in Las Vegas back in February, she looks good."

CY: You look up to any women wrestler?

PB: "I was in a wrestling match before I ever saw a Women's wrestling match. I had no one I could look up to. I do know I looked up to June Byers cause I began wrestling in July of 1954, and in August of 1954 June Byers and Mildrid Berk had their big championship match in Atlanta, Georgia. June Byers beat Mildrie Berk.. there is a lot of controversy about that. I don't know what actually happened but June Beat Mildrid in the first fall and Mildrie would not come back for the second fall. So June won the title and Mildrie went off to California. I never laid eyes on Mildrie but I did get to meet June Byers. You know, I was this new girl just starting out and women's wrestling ends up being such a plus for me to have all that behind me because they put me on the road with June Byers every match they could. Well, she beat the life out of me for three years but when you talk about respect I have nothing but respect for the late June Byers, and to this day I respect her. She died two years ago."

CY: What was it like wrestling the Fabulous Moolah?

PB: "Wrestling Moolah compared to wrestling June Byers... there really was no comparison. Moolah likes to play around in the ring. She likes to play with the referee, yell at the audience, and if you come after her, she likes to jump out of the ring. She has been around a really long time, longer then I had ever been around. Then she had the Wrestling School. Her husband did, Buddy Lee, down in Columbia and she knows a lot of dirty tricks. I thought I knew a lot of dirty tricks, she knew them all, so she was not really a lot of competition. She is just a farce compared to June Byers."

CY: What did it feel like winning the AWA Women's World Championship?

PB: "Now that was a real thrill. I got married in April of 1959. It was a battle royale, and I was so nervous. I think there were eight girls, and I could only remember four of their names and I was the victor. They gave me the first AWA Women's World Championship, and since then, many have held it, including Madusa and Sharie Martel."

CY: Most memorable moment outside of the ring?

PB: "Well, I was in Nashville, Tennessee. There was this guy named Bevil Bevis. He had the biggest old crush on me, and I told him I could not go to the movies with him that weekend cause I was gonna be in St. Louis. He said that Elvis would be in town the next weekend and that he knew him personally, and he told me he would get me a ticket. So I drove on to St. Louis. I gave them my phone number and sure enough, they said, "come down and pick up a pass" so I got my pass and the ticket was way up in the balcony. Then four policemen came up to me and said, "Are you Penny Banner?" and I said "Yes I am why?" "We have looked all over for you. Elvis wants to meet you. We need to take you backstage right now.. come." So I got up and went down the steps as I was trying to get backstage. So when I got backstage, he was standing in the hall before he got on stage. It was almost time for him to go on so I leaned up against one wall. He smiled at me, I smiled at him. So after he performed, he came back to the dressing room. I never did see him before, and he asked me to come to a party at the Chase Hotel afterwards. That was most memorable cause he said he would come see me everytime I was in town. He was on the road and I was on road, and he said everytime I was in Memphis he would come see me. So sure enough, I got to Memphis and get a note from George Kline. He was the radio announcer there, and he said, "Elvis Presley wants you to come to the Mansion after your match" and so I went to the Mansion, met all the Jordanaires, and had a really good time. There were four other times, five dates in three years. We were not boyfriend/girlfriend. We were just good friends. We necked a lot; he was a good kisser. Then, he went to the service and the last date I had with him was the week he went in to service. I never saw him again and of course I got married and he got married so that was my most memorable time."

CY: What do you think of wrestling today?

PB: "The survival of the whole era of wrestling today, I think they're a big farce. I think they are nothing but a soap opera, and I don't watch it. I wish it would go back to the way it was before he took over and made a monopoly out of wrestling. It used to be there were territories. People used to go to wrestle and there were like one hundred girl wrestlers and thousands of guy wrestlers. Now just the chosen few get to go on this chosen program, read their scripts, and go out and do their chosen act. Why do people of the United States watch that and pay their money to see it? They know they have read a script, and they know what they're doing what they're told to do. It's ridiculous. I am speaking generally about wrestling; the men are great athletes. The women who call themselves wrestlers, they were models or body builders. Back in my day you had to wrestle, be athletic. You had to be sure nothing came out of your bathing suit. You could not have false finger nails, could not have hair falls. You know, you just could not do any of that. You know we never heard of having implants and now most or all the girls have their implants, and you can't wrestle like that. They are basically T and A. There are great schools like the PGWA, ECWA, NWA, USA Championship Wrestling and the WLW. They are legitimate schools, training legitimate girls to be legitimate women wrestlers, and they know how to wrestle and they go out there and show their ability. It is a shame that all the promoters that are trying to bring back the classic wrestling, which so many fans that email me asking "Will wrestling go back to the way it was?" say, "Well, once your at the top, there is no where else to go but down." These are local promoters who put on these shows. The people wanna see wrestling and people don't come out cause they're not stars like the ones they do see putting on these soap operas. If these promoters stuck it out, they would go back to the old way of wrestling as putting some meat back into it. There are about twenty-nine to thirty women wrestlers from my time still alive and if any of the fans are interested possibly, they can email me and to all of them I talk to they say they just never watch it. I really do try to watch wrestling but just cannot. I am speaking as the survivor of the big times. I have heard Harley Race has a good wrestling school, Killer Kowalski has a wrestling school and Hogan is starting a promotion. I hope people like them keep the class up."

PB: Any Last Comments?

CY: "Thank you and to all the fans and Chris, I love Miami. I had some great matches down in Miami thanks again."