

# Holy Headlock

Ted 'Million Dollar Man' DiBiase is back in the ring. Now instead of slamming bodies, he's working to save souls.

The 49-year-old is recreating the sights and sounds of the world he left behind a decade ago into a wrestling show centered around the gospel of Jesus Christ in parable form. The stage he sets at churches across America resembles one found at professional wrestling venues, with recognizable celebrities, cheering crowds and state-of-the-art technology.

The difference? Greed, machismo and sexuality are replaced by forgiveness, servanthood and family values.

DiBiase has taken the good from his combined 28-year career as a professional wrestler for the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) and manager and commentator for the World Championship Wrestling (WCW) to launch his own federation, the Power Wrestling Alliance (PWA).

"If you'd told me eight years ago that I would put up a ring in a church sanctuary and use it as an evangelism tool, I'd have said you're out of your mind," DiBiase says. "As the television product became less watchable, people approached me and said, 'I wish I could take my kids to some good, old-fashioned wrestling.' We have other Christian alternatives, so I thought, why not?"

DiBiase was destined to wrestle. His stepfather, wrestler "Iron Mike" DiBiase, began the tradition and had a strong influence on him as a child. His death in the ring when Ted was 15 didn't deter Ted's own career choice that began in 1975 at 21.

"The biggest wrestling match of my life was my struggle with God," he says. I kept trying to have a relationship based on my terms and my agenda." He prayed the sinner's prayer in 1987

after realizing he'd bought into the lie that a real man is the star athlete, the guy with big biceps and a big bank account.

"A genuine man is a man who is Christlike, and a man who is Christlike is a servant," he says.

A neck injury in 1993 forced DiBiase to forgo the physical side of the industry for managing and commentating roles which he performed until 1999.

Since then, he has taken on new roles outside of professional wrestling as a spokesperson for the Sunshine Foundation, an organization that grants wishes for critically ill children, and founder of Heart of David Ministries, for which he travels the world as a minister.

These days he can be found back in the ring, not as a wrestler, but as an evangelist.

In 1998, DiBiase put up his first ring in a Mississippi church parking lot. After the wrestling match, 60 teens responded to the gospel message. "I saw God giving me the opportunity to use the thing that I knew the most as the tool to reach the lost."

Five years and 20 events later, the ministry is carving out its place as a credible ministry tool. "For pastors who are skeptical, I would ask them: 'When is the last time you've seen 250 people saved on a Sunday morning?'"

That's the number of first-time decisions made for Christ during an event in January at the Free Chapel Worship Center in Gainesville, Georgia.

"I don't want to come and entertain Christians at church," DiBiase says, adding that to make the events successful, churchgoers must bring lost friends and take part in follow-up efforts.

Pastor Tommy Barnett had the PWA at his Phoenix First Assembly of God church. After DiBiase spoke, 1,500 people responded to the altar call.

While the tab for the event is picked up by the sponsoring church, the price tag varies according to budget and needs.

A typical event features three to four wrestling matches, testimonies by Christian wrestlers and a gospel presentation by DiBiase, who reprises his role as The Million Dollar Man by concluding wrestlers can't be bought because they've already been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Not all the wrestlers involved are Christians, but the number of those professing a faith is growing with the likes of Sting, Nikita Koloff, The Road Warriors, Eddie Guerrerro, Buff Bagwell and Greg "The Hammer" Valentine taking part.

"All of a sudden there's a whole card of wrestlers with name recognition who are saved," DiBiase says. "I want people to see servants of Jesus Christ, not ego-driven celebrities. We want to entertain people, but the only superstar at the end of the night is Jesus."

DiBiase says the fame he found in professional wrestling doesn't hold a candle to his calling as an evangelist.

"When you start sharing your heart and the gospel, and start seeing people humble themselves before a righteous God and realize God has used you as an instrument to make that happen, there's no bigger thrill in the world."

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Rhonda Sholar is a freelancer who wrestles every day with her 2-year-old son. For more information about the Power Wrestling Alliance, visit or call (601) 924-4871.