

TAG-TEAMING

with his alter

About once a month, Charles Jones, a Unionville High School graduate, puts on tights and steps into the ring as "Rockin' Ronny," a title-shot contender in the East Coast Wrestling Association

By Dan Harvey Staff Writer

Talk about yer Godless acts! Of all the gutless, underhanded Commie-pinko, Pearl Harbor maneuvers to perpetrate!

While Charles Jones, 24, had his back turned, the "Russian Bear" came off the top rope, fists filled with thick chain, and brought heavy metal thunder down on his rockin' head.

And we're not talking about just any Russian bear; this was none other than the infamous Ivan Koloff himself.

Yes, that Ivan Koloff: bearded with shoe-brush bristles and bald as the tip of a nuclear warhead; brows furrowed by latitudinal scars that, like inverted braille, tell the story of 30 years of spilled blood staining ring canvas; a cannon-barrel-chested man who wrestled the heavyweight belt from the hands of "Living Legend" Bruno Sammartino.

Yet, that's the kind of roughneck Jones chooses to associate with when assuming his alternative identity as "Rockin' Ronny" — ring warrior, protagonist of the proletariat; a high-kicking, body-dropping champion of the good cause.

And make no mistake: "Rockin' Ronny" isn't an imaginative figment dreamt up by a passive Walter Mitty-type. That chain *really* came down on Jones's

head as he stood near the edge of a "squared circle." Koloff fell with the force of a 280-pound man coming off the top ring rope — brandishing the iron weapon — and the links *really* made impact with Jones's scalp — a molar-grinding collision of steel and skullbone.

So, how did this easy-going, former Doe Run resident find himself in such bad company. Split personality, perhaps?

Well, there is a sense of a "dual persona" at work.

And it involves all concerned. Consider: After the match, "Rockin' Ronny" makes his way out of the ring, then down the aisle past frenzied fans and, finally, back into the dressing room — the same quarters where the evil Ivan makes his retreat after his dastardly deed. When Jones/Ronny gets backstage, the first one to confront him is none other than his attacker. But all the "Russian Bear" is concerned about now is his victim's welfare.

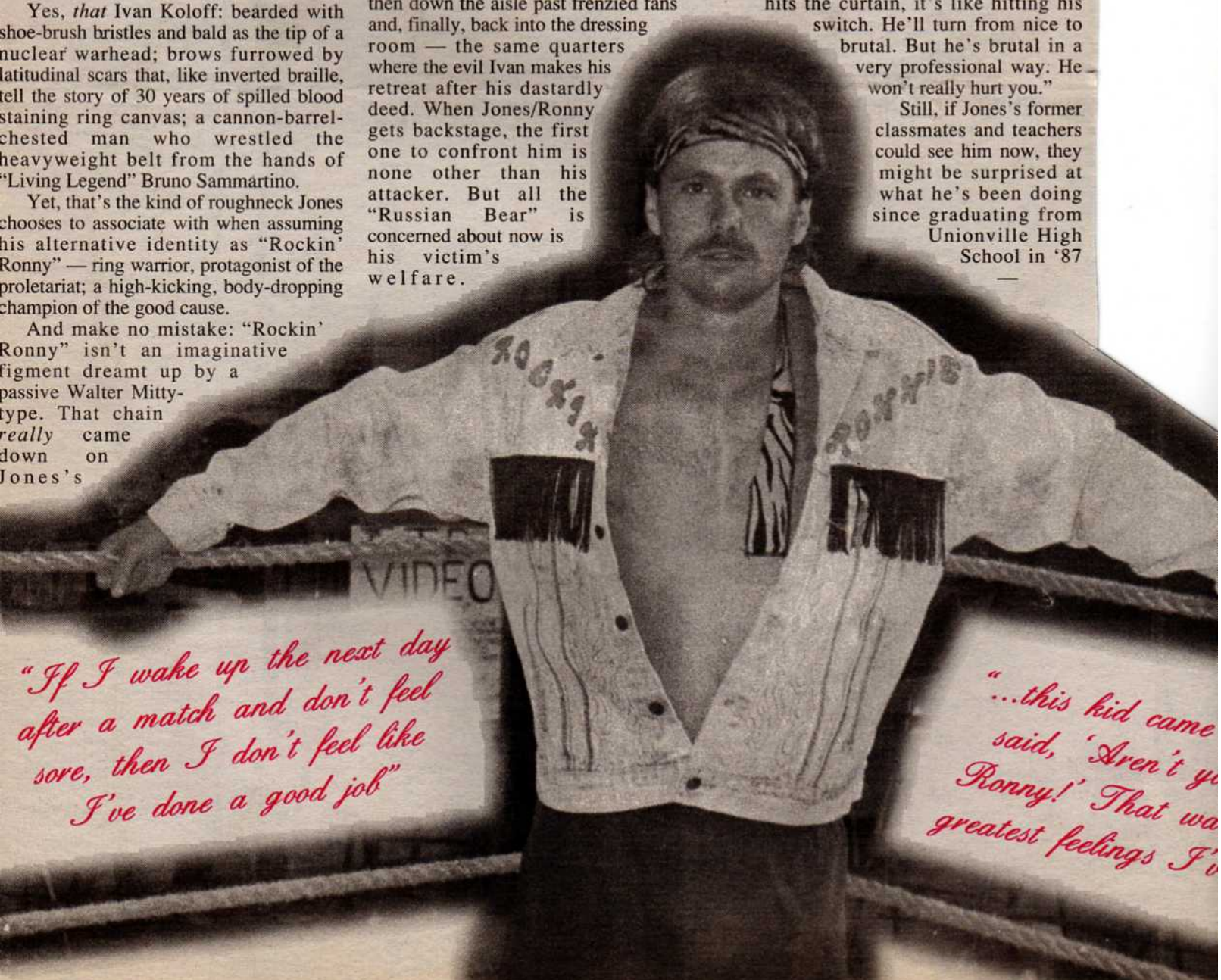
Once out of the spotlight, Koloff lapses back into his actual voice, a speech pattern laced with a heavy Canadian accent.

Canadian?

And Koloff asks, with sincerity, if Jones/Ronny is hurt. But all is okay. You see, Koloff knows exactly how to hit a fellow wrestler with a chain, knows just where to place the blow to avoid pain and injury. He's a veteran, a professional; seemingly ham-fisted, yet very precise.

"He's one of the most professional guys I've ever met," said Jones. "And he's also one of the nicest. But as soon as he hits the curtain, it's like hitting his switch. He'll turn from nice to brutal. But he's brutal in a very professional way. He won't really hurt you."

Still, if Jones's former classmates and teachers could see him now, they might be surprised at what he's been doing since graduating from Unionville High School in '87



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"...this kid came said, 'Aren't you Ronny!' That was the greatest feelings I've

But, actually, his ring exploits are only a sideline for him. Jones — Chuck, to his friends — has a day job in construction with Dupont Merck. He only assumes his alter-ego about once a month, sort of like a werewolf on the occasion of a full moon. Jones is what is called a “semiprofessional wrestler,” as opposed to the “professional wrestler” of cable television notoriety.

He belongs to a Delaware outfit called the East Coast Wrestling Association, an organization that serves a two-fold purpose. It’s main function is to promote charity wrestling shows in the Delaware Valley, with all proceeds serving humanitarian causes. But, for some wrestlers, it’s a springboard into the world of big-time professional wrestling — you know, the WWF, “Wrestlemania,” all of that. It’s a sort of what the minor leagues are to baseball’s major league.

The athletes involved in the association can be classified into two categories. In one group are the members who have no professional aspirations, but just want to serve a good cause while having a good time. They include bankers, teachers, policemen — people from all walks of life. They wrestle about 10 to 12 times a year (like Jones), and only for the organization.

On the other side, you have ambitious

get, and with other organizations, too. They're the ones who grew up watching wrestling on television during the '70s and wanted nothing more than to emulate their idols. They remain focused on the ring; wrestling is their career.

Also making occasional appearances in the promotions are grizzled ring veterans like Koloff — or Captain Lou Albano, Abdullah the Butcher, other familiar names.

The association was created by former wrestler Jim Kettner, who stages the productions and recruits likely ring prospects. Jones got involved when Kettner's brother happened to spot him horsing around with some friends and suggested he might try out for the ECWA. Jones was intrigued by the idea, and that led to his "audition."

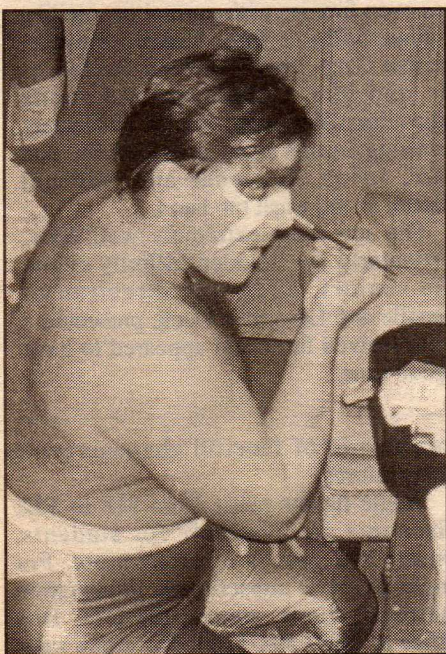
"Jim asked me to do a few moves — body slams, dropkicks, stuff like that," recalled Jones. "And he liked the way I executed the moves."

And that led to Jones's training period. Kettner never lets a wrestler enter the ring without proper, rigorous preparation.

"He took me under his wing in a student-teacher relationship," said Jones. "And he's an excellent teacher."

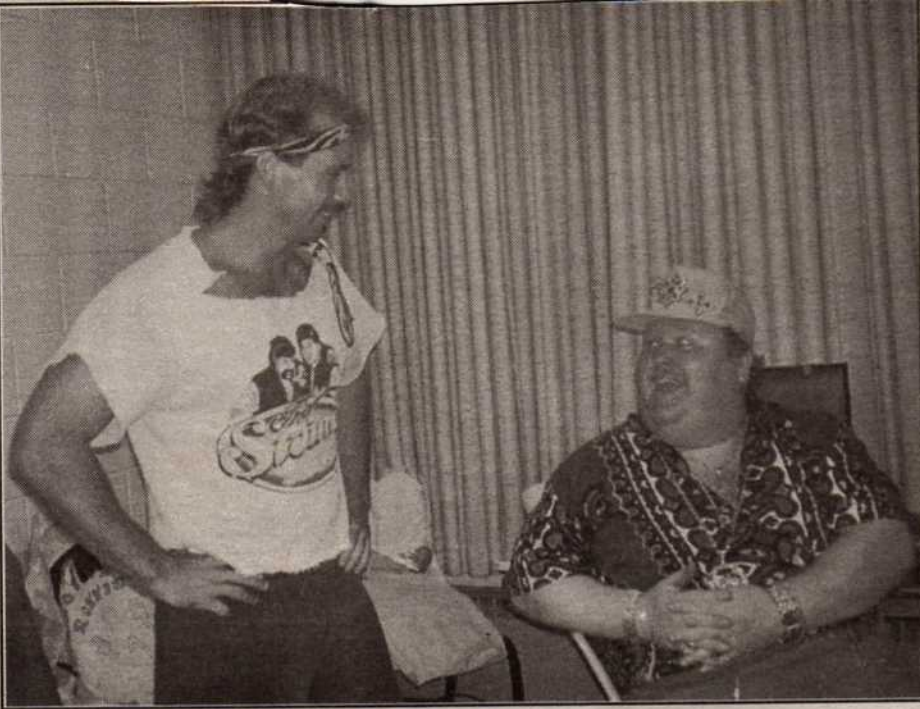
An ECWA wrestler has to be of a rugged bent. Though this style of wrestling is often advertised as a "sports exhibition" — staged entertainment, in other words — the matches involve full body contact, as well as acrobatics.

"Some of us do some really



A fellow wrestler applies his "personality" before a match.

Photo by Dan Harvey



Rockin' Ronny (Chuck Jones) chats with a notorious manager backstage while waiting his turn to wrestle at a recent ECWA show. Photo by Dan Harvey

spectacular moves, like the back-body drop," said Jones. "That's a maneuver where a wrestler can fly eight or nine feet into the air and come down on the mat. It's very acrobatic. And it's also very dangerous, if you don't know how to do it right. You could easily break your neck or back. But when you do it right, it can be a lot of fun. And the crowd really reacts to it. You'll hear them oooh and ahhhh."

Though the ECWA wrestlers aren't in a win-or-lose situation, they really appear fiercely combative, like they're playing for keeps.

"The competitiveness is there, in a wrestler's ability to be able to make the moves in front of a crowd, to make it all look real," said Jones.

And that's what makes each match a tough enterprise, as it involves driven men compelled to excel in a physical occupation. They're not there to prance about; they aim to give an audience a show — one that's as realistic as possible. A performance is a prideful thing for a wrestler, and whoever is cast as his opponent on a given night better measure up. A wrestler must learn how to give pain, as well as take it. For instance, whenever Jones goes up against "The Superstar" — a frequent ECWA opponent — he knows he's in for a grueling night.

"The Superstar hits hard," said Jones. "Many of my toughest matches have been against him."

That suits Jones just fine. As far as

he's concerned, the harder the match, the better he'll look.

"If I wake up the next day after a match and don't feel sore, then I don't feel like I've done a good job," he said.

What it all comes down to is acting and reacting. The harder you hit — and the harder you are hit — then the more real it's going to appear.

"If they hit me, I'm going to react," said Jones. "And if I don't get hit hard, then I'm not going to react well. I'm not that good an actor, so it's better that I get hit hard. Wrestling is acting, and another wrestler can make you look good."

But Jones said the wrestlers don't just flail away at each other with wild abandon, nor do they aim the kind of devastating punch that boxers deliver — the kind that rocks the brain pan, shredding spongy cerebrum with calcium splinters. Wrestlers have to know "how to hit." That's why someone like Ivan Koloff can smack someone on the head with a chain without drawing blood.

"The hits won't hurt," said Jones. "You never hit someone straight — like on the nose or the chin or the eyes. You always go for certain hard parts of the head, or parts of the body that are thick and hard, like the chest."

Being in superb condition helps. Just like athletes involved in conventional sports, wrestlers have to work out regularly. Even though he only goes into a ring once a month, Jones still runs and hits the weights four or five times a week.

"If you're not in shape, you're just not going to make it through a match," said Jones. "And it's not just being in aerobic condition. There's so much more to wrestling than that."

Other taxing elements are involved in a match — like the ultimately strength-sapping adrenaline rush evoked by the

rear of pain and injury, as well as the pressure of being called on to perform before a crowd, as a wrestler's required to behave in an entirely uninhibited fashion. Any sense of personal decorum and reserve must be abandoned.

"Before my first 10 matches, I always felt like I was going to throw up," said Jones. "I'm serious. It's very nerve-racking."

But the wrestlers are very supportive of each other; the veterans encourage the novices. In the dressing room before a typical ECWA show — where the bad guys and good guys *do* commingle, where amateurs and professionals rub deltoids — there's a sense of camaraderie that, no doubt, comes from the their shared sense of charitable purpose, as well as the fellowship that promoter Kettner has instilled in his stable.

Before a recent show, Cliff Wright, a 350-pounder who wrestles under the name of "Boogie Woogie Brown," said of Kettner, "For us, he's a father, brother and damn good friend. Without him, 'Boogie-Woogie Brown' wouldn't exist.

Neither would the multitude of other strange characters. The dressing room is a Fellini-esque scene: Opponents (with scripts in hand) rehearse moves together; a man with Schwarzenegger pecs applies greasepaint to his face; a studious-looking man removes his glasses, then dons a fearsome-looking head mask; "managers" walk about dressed in garish clothing. All assume the personas — bad or good — Kettner envisioned for them.

Because of his blond hair and All-American looks, Jones was a natural to become one of the good guys — or "babyfaces," as they're called in the trade. Kettner came up with the name "Rockin' Ronny," then they developed the character.

"Jim puts you through an interview process, to determine if you're happy with the way the character's developing," said Jones. "And I like the 'Rockin' Ronny' character. I like being a 'fan favorite.' I like signing the autographs for the kids."

Enjoying the activity as he does, and being surrounded by career aspirants, does the dream of turning professional ever cross his mind?

"I'd love to be a big-time pro," Jones admitted, but he said it would take him away from his wife Donna and their 18-month-old daughter, Amanda, for too long.

"The guys who do it are constantly in airports, hotels, different towns and cities," he said. "There's so much traveling. It's hotel after hotel. I've got a family. I don't want to leave them."

He said the local recognition he receives is enough to satisfy him.

"I was at the state fair last summer," he recalled, "and this kid came up to me and said, 'Aren't you Rockin' Ronny!' That was one of the greatest feelings I've ever had."