

**BIG  
DADDY**  
**VERSUS**  
**GIANT  
HAYSTACKS**

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**A Super Heavyweight Story**

STEVEN BELL



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## Prologue

A SUMMER Bank Holiday at a seaside town was still prime fayre for the Joint Promotions wrestling roadshow. Six years had passed since the Wembley showdown, and business may not have been what it was then, but a visit to see the wrestling remained a family staple for locals and holidaymakers alike. All promoter Max Crabtree needed was his older brother's sobriquet atop the bill. As always, he had it.

As Britain's only surviving complete circus building, Great Yarmouth's Hippodrome has a grand and historic facade; with ornate detailing on traditional red brickwork, the architecture is as Edwardian as it comes.

A warm breeze caused the loosening corners of the large advertising posters to flap lightly. Pasted to the boards outside, the posters detailed the evening's entertainment. From any kind of distance, the only visible letters were the bold black ones at the top – 'BIG DADDY'. As Daddy's opponent-in-chief for several years already, the name 'Giant Haystacks' would normally take equal billing, but the real-life Martin Ruane didn't work on Sundays due to his devout Catholicism. Whenever he was missing, Max was forced to replace his perennial position in the main event with a heavyweight 'heel' (villain) from his roster. This was one such evening – and a fateful one.

Inside, patrons young and old sat on the rich, velvety red seats that surrounded the central ring. Empty seats were sparse, suggesting the 2,000 capacity was close to made. They were all there to see the same routine most had seen before, and it started in earnest when The Seekers' 'We Shall Not Be Moved' boomed out of the speaker system. A grinning Big Daddy emerged from behind the curtain seconds later, waving his sparkly top hat.

This main event itself said a lot about the current state of British wrestling. Shirley Crabtree was 56 years old, 30 stone in weight and terribly immobile. With his shock of hair – fading slightly from

its blond pomp – sequinned hat and robe, friendly face and bright coloured leotard stretched over his massive girth, he had been British wrestling’s main attraction for more than a decade now.

His tag partner was billed as ‘Greg Valentine’. In reality, his name was Steve Crabtree – nephew of Shirley and Max. But with the family’s stocky physique and blond hair strong in him, Max had chosen to have him ape the blond American wrestler, a former World Wrestling Federation (WWF) Intercontinental and Tag Team champion.

In the villainous corner stood another imitator, ‘King Kendo’, a knock-off of the ageing Samurai legend Kendo Nagasaki. It was part of Max’s desperate attempt to hold on to the glory days, when simply booking a prime Haystacks, Daddy or Nagasaki guaranteed a sell-out crowd. His partner was ‘King Kong Kirk’. Malcolm Kirk was 51 years old, and his bulk and build bore more than a passing resemblance to his old mate and pantomime foe, Shirley. The pair went back 35 years, having played rugby league against each other as youngsters – Shirley for Halifax, Mal for his own local team, Featherstone Rovers. Unlike Shirley, Mal ultimately made a professional career out of the sport. In his 30s, like other retiring rugby players, he turned to wrestling. It was Max and Shirley, independently promoting events in clubs around their hometown of Halifax in the 1960s, who had given Mal his first booking. With a shaved head and a menacing grimace, he had been deployed as a villainous foil for the ‘babyface’, or hero. Over the course of his career, that had perennially been Big Daddy.

Kirk had been travelling the length and breadth of the country for 20 years and had been on the wrong side of ‘Big Daddy’s Splash’ and subsequent pinfall loss hundreds of times. He had also travelled the world, wrestling the likes of ‘Sergeant Slaughter’ Bob Remus, André the Giant and Bret ‘Hitman’ Hart.

‘King Kong Kirk was one of the greatest wrestlers I ever worked with,’ Hart now says.

But Mal was still only getting paid £25 per night from Max’s notoriously tight pockets – although that was raised by £5 when he did the ‘job’ for Shirley. He had intended to quit and planned to run a quiet local pub in Featherstone, West Yorkshire.

The best-two-out-of-three-falls match followed the same script that most Big Daddy matches had for ten years. Within seconds of

Daddy's introduction to the action, he had a fall on the scoreboard. The crowd was happy. But the unhappy villains threatened to walk out unless Daddy tagged in his less formidable partner. 'Valentine', on this occasion, bravely agreed but then had to absorb the relentless punishment of the two bullies – eventually submitting to equalise the score. All looked lost as the venomous onslaught continued. He desperately tried to tag the rotund veteran back in, with the crowd willing him to do so. Eventually, and inevitably, with one last desperate effort, his hand tapped the chubby fingers of Big Daddy. The crowd erupted as Shirley whipped Mal from one side of the ring to the other. Combined, they were 107 years old and well over 50 stone in weight. Mal charged back, only for he who 'shall not be moved' to stand firm with a body check that, as always, flattened the antagonist. As sure as night follows day, Shirley dove atop his stricken foe with his 'Splashdown'. The referee crouched to the mat and counted to three. It was over, and the dancing could begin. But after acknowledging the crowd to three of the four sides of the ring, Shirley noticed that Mal hadn't moved – he would usually have rolled out under the bottom rope by now to give Shirley the moment. Moreover, he was turning a nasty shade of blue. Shirley indicated to the referee and a staff member on the outside that there was a problem, which soon became clear to the crowd. The pantomime celebrations were replaced with concerned silence. The head of the Slovanic pole act that regularly appeared at the venue was in attendance, and he quickly climbed into the ring to assist, as did a doctor who had been seated in the front row, as the small group of semi-trained first aiders worked Mal's giant chest. They were eventually joined in the ring by a crew from St John Ambulance. They all failed to revive him.