

## Entertainment &amp; Sports

## Real Life Davids vs. Goliaths

By Janice C. Simpson, 24 June 2001

**When amateurs take on the *American Gladiators*, it makes for a TV show, toys and—who knows?—maybe even a movie.**

We don't know about Elvis, but Walter Mitty lives. You can find him poised atop a 7-ft. platform swinging a big stick at a muscle-bound giant with a name like Laser or Nitro. Or swooping through the air on a bungee cord 15 ft. above the ground, trying to master a kind of aerial basketball. Sounds like Mitty's fantasies have got a little outrageous? Obviously, you haven't seen *American Gladiators*, the syndicated television show on which ordinary, albeit very physically fit, people compete in athletic events against a squad of professional male and female athletes and body builders.

A wacky hybrid of sporting event, game show and Roman circus, *American Gladiators* has developed a strong cult following among both adults (who root for the amateur challengers) and kids (who cheer on the cartoonlike gladiators). Ratings have nearly doubled since the show debuted two years ago, making it one of the top five weekly hours currently in syndication. Says gladiator Dan Clark, better known as Nitro: "For the spellers, you've got *Wheel of Fortune*; for the guys who go shopping, you've got *The Price Is Right*; for the athlete, you've got *American Gladiators*."

This month the gladiators are hitting the road for a 100-city cross-country tour in which local jocks will have a chance to take on the titans. "The main attraction of *Gladiators* is that you can come down and be in the show," says Michael Horton, who portrays the gladiator team leader Gemini.

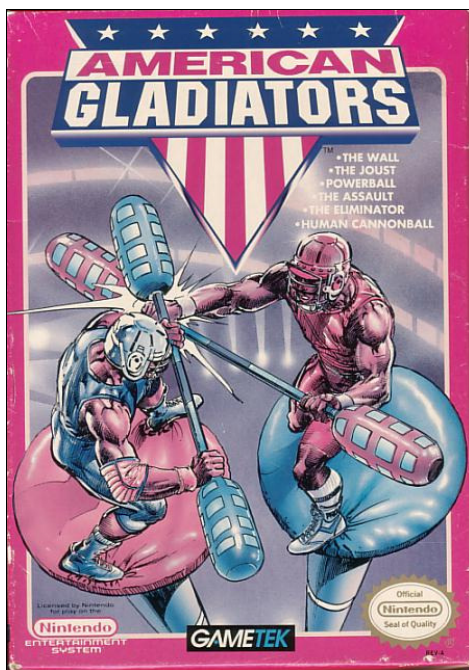
"We give the everyday blue-collar person who's kept himself or herself in shape a chance to show what he or she can do." So far, 25,000 have tried out for the television show, and legions more are expected to compete for a slot in the live contests. Just as on the television show, competitors will try to win points by completing tasks such as scaling a 30-ft. wall in 60 sec., while the gladiators try to thwart their efforts.

Only the strongest survive. The very first round of the tryouts, in which men are required to do 25 pull-ups, and women eight, in 30 sec., eliminates up to 90% of all challengers. The field is further winnowed by subsequent requirements: running the 40-yd. dash in under 6 sec., winning a one-on-one game of tug-of-war, and playing a round of Powerball, a brutal version of tag.

The Top Ten point winners to emerge from the national tour will meet in Atlantic City next May to compete for \$50,000 in prizes.

But the major attraction seems to be the chance for the average guy or gal to be more than an armchair athlete. "I've always been pretty athletic, but competition is new to me," says Joseph Mauro, 25, a Brooklyn baker who made it through the trials in New York City. "I'm excited about this because I want to meet those guys in the ring."

Kids love the gladiators because their shows are like real-life video games with living heroes. "I like the way the gladiators make it seem so easy," says Braxton Winston, 8, a Brooklyn fan who watches the TV show with his brother Brandon, 7. The boys' mother Stella is in favour, too. "I like them liking the gladiators," she says.



“They’re good role models. They don’t do drugs, they eat the right foods, they take pride in their bodies. They give the children something to strive for.”

Merchandisers are racing to cash in on what is shaping up as the next pop-culture craze after the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. A Nintendo video-game version of *Gladiators* is being readied for release this month. Topps is planning to come out with trading cards of the 10 gladiators. Newhall Merchandising Concepts, Inc., is whipping up American *Gladiators Juniors* vitamins for young gladiator wannabes°. And Mattel is introducing a line of toys that includes miniature gladiator action figures and small-scale models of events such as the obstacle course, known as the Eliminator. In Hollywood fevered brains are at work, of course, trying to think of a way to develop an animated cartoon series and a movie from all this. “We haven’t figured out how to do that yet,” confesses Samuel Goldwyn Jr., whose company owns the rights to the show. “Just guys in gladiator suits solving crimes won’t do it.”

The idea for these latter-day gladiatorial games originated with ironworkers in Erie, Pa. “I wanted a workingman’s Olympics,” says Dann Carr, a five-time national arm-wrestling champ, who created the contests 20 years ago as entertainment for the annual Erie Iron Workers Union picnic, “but I never thought it would take off like it did.”

In 1983 Carr asked his buddy Johnny Ferraro, a one-time Elvis impersonator and a relentless° promoter, to help him turn the games into a charity benefit to raise money for a local youth centre. When 3,000 people showed up for the event, Ferraro recognised the mass-appeal potential and took the idea to Hollywood. “This was real-life Rocky,” he says. It took five years and scores of rejections before the Goldwyn company finally agreed to develop a television series.

The pilot was a disaster. Actors were recruited to play the gladiators and were directed to adopt fake personalities. The costumes were tacky°, and the overall style was uncomfortably close to the campiness of pro wrestling. “It was a schlock° job,” says Ferraro. “Out of a diamond, they gave you a piece of coal.”

The concept was reworked to focus on the David-and-Goliath aspects of the com-

petition. New gladiators with backgrounds as professional football players and Olympic competitors were hired. The costumes were redesigned for a sportier look. And, most important, both gladiators and contenders were directed to play for real. “It’s now pure competition,” says Horton, a former lineman° with the Philadelphia Eagles and Boston Patriots who is the only one of the gladiators from the original pilot still with the show. The authenticity of the competition is driven home by the injuries among gladiators as well as contenders. “We’ve had broken collar bones, torn up knees and neck damage,” says Horton.

Critics initially dismissed the show as “crash television.” But viewers liked what they saw: good-looking people, fast action and high drama. Nowadays the producers keep the show fresh by regularly adding new games emphasizing agility and tenacity° over brute strength. Sports magazine-style features, such as locker-room interviews with the gladiators and taped profiles of the contenders°, have been incorporated for a more upscale look.

Behind the scenes, a delighted Ferraro has trimmed his sideburns° and got out of the Elvis business so that he can devote all his energy to *Gladiators*. “Danny and me have invented the nuclear bomb,” he says. “And now it’s exploding.”

[<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,155734,00.html>]  
(11 February 2007)

## Vocabulary

poised = set  
to swoop = to fly downwards quickly to attack sb/sth  
albeit = although  
wacky = funny and amusing in a slightly crazy way  
syndication (syndicated) = *überregionale Verbreitung durch mehrere Medien*  
jock(ey) = sportsman  
slot = (*here*) an opportunity for sb in a programme  
to thwart = to defeat  
to winnow = to separate sb out  
tug-of-war = to pull a rope  
tag (*BrE also tig*) = a children’s game in which one child chases the others and tries to touch one of them  
guy/gal = boy, man/girl, woman  
wannabe = a person who behaves, dresses, etc. like sb famous because they want to be like them  
relentless = refusing to give up or be less strict  
tacky = cheap, badly made and/or lacking in taste  
schlock = things that are cheap and of poor quality  
lineman = a player in the front line of an American football team  
tenacity = persistence  
contender = competitor  
sideburns = [pl.] hair that grows down the sides of a man’s face in front of his ears