

WrestleMania in front of no crowd is a reminder that fans matter

 sports.yahoo.com/wrestlemania-in-front-of-no-crowd-is-a-reminder-that-fans-matter-023445087.html

The signs said this was WrestleMania. The pay-per-view order (\$34.99) said this was WrestleMania. Rob Gronkowski, serving as host, declared that it was WrestleMania. So did Stephanie McMahon, who noted pre-fight the company was there to offer a “distraction” to the country.

And, indeed, over the course of three hours Saturday night, a lot of familiar WrestleMania faces appeared — Paul Heyman, Goldberg, The Undertaker. They offered the kind of distraction that’s made pro wrestling so enduringly popular.

Yet this wasn’t quite WrestleMania. The WWE tried. Give them that much credit. The action was good, the athletes incredible, the efforts complete.

In a vacuum, it was WrestleMania. The problem was the vacuum.

No fans. No atmosphere. No electricity.

The extravaganza is usually held in a jammed football stadium (this one was set for Raymond James Stadium in Tampa Bay). It comes with waves of cheers, chants, signs and rowdiness. Now it was trying to exist in our coronavirus world.

The WWE was forced to stage the event in its Orlando performance center, basically a television studio with a ring in the middle. Its 18 scheduled fights were taped on March 25-26 and broadcast Saturday and Sunday (7 p.m. ET).

It wasn’t the same. How could it be? And perhaps that’s a sign of what’s to come if other sports return to empty bleachers.

Either way, for action-starved fans, that’s a deal they’ll take at this point. For wrestling, it allowed its spring main event to go off.

Better than nothing. Much better, actually. It may have been a slap in the face of social distancing efforts, but when did pro wrestling ever care about slaps in the face?

(Stephanie McMahon told Sports Illustrated that nobody was allowed to enter the performance center if “they have a temperature of over 100.4.” What precautions or health standards the WWE used in terms of post-match quarantining is unknown. We’re going to have to rely on the honor system in a sport where the rules are never followed because the ref is never looking).

All that aside, WrestleMania 36 was missing one of the chief characters, the fans, the one part of a scripted show that the promoters can’t control.

The wrestlers had no one to turn to or play off. There was no booing the heels and no cheering the favorites. There was no one to laugh at the jokes or react to the plot twists. A tag team ladder match felt particularly flat. Victories spurred no celebrations.

The wildest, most acrobatic, most devastating moves would be performed and ... just nothing. Or very little.

For the most hardcore wrestling fan, this was probably enough. The results matter, especially on a card this stacked.

For the more casual fan who might only occasionally tune in, this was lacking. Environment matters. Passion matters.

And there was just no way to duplicate it.

The effort was there. And then some.

The lights were bright. The walk-in music was the same. Gronk did all he could to play hype man, noting he was perfect to host a two-day event — “I know how to start a party on Saturday night and have it end 30 hours later.”

And at times the fights were as good as ever. The Sami Zayn-Daniel Bryan Intercontinental Championship bout (Zayn defended his belt) was brilliant. Likewise, the bitter Kevin Owens-Seth Rollins match (which actually turned into two) overcame the silence.

If anything, getting to clearly hear Rollins trash talk was a bonus.

“Come on, Kevin,” he shouted.

“You’re making this so easy for me, Kevin,” he taunted.

“I told you what happens when the lights are the brightest,” he declared. “I become a god.”

Pretty good stuff.

(Of course, Rollins wasn’t saying too much after Owens smacked him a couple of times with the ringside bell and then leaped off a huge WrestleMania display and crashed them through the announcer’s table.)

Unfortunately, not all of the matches could measure up. The WWE tried to overcome the lack of fans by staging a “Boneyard Match” between The Undertaker and AJ Styles in some field somewhere. It looked more like a low-budget, overly-edited action movie than a wrestling match though.

It was hit or miss all night.

In the middle of the sports and entertainment desert of the coronavirus, it was as good as it could be. Sunday will likely be more of the same, nine more fights featuring Brock Lesnar, Charlotte Flair, John Cena, Randy Orton and more.

It should be some good fun but also a clear reminder.

Fans matter.