

MEAN GENE OKERLUND

Inducted by JJ Dillon

His voice is unmistakable. Familiar and warmly comforting to any wrestling fan, his dulcet tones helped launch some of the most memorable interviews in the history of professional wrestling.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's "Mean" Gene Okerlund!

He started his career in wrestling in Minnesota as the announcer for the American Wrestling Alliance in the late 1960s. One fateful night, when the show's regular announcer was off, Verne Gagne asked Gene to sit in; soon thereafter, Okerlund had a full-time gig. Gagne's show was very bare bones, making the announcer's position a crucial one in helping move the show along.

"(It) was very crude television production—kind of a raw product. We had a very small TV studio which housed about 200 people, and we had no more than one or two cameras. And also the venues we played in back in the old days were different. We performed in high school gyms, and smoky national guard armories. But you know what? It became effective, and I think a lot of it had to do with the interviews."

In 1983, Gene was offered a spot with Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Federation. Hesitant at first to give up his life in Minnesota, his intrigue in McMahon's vision of the industry's future outweighed any doubts that he may have had.

"I was reluctant to leave (the AWA)," he recalled. "I also had an advertising and marketing business in downtown Minneapolis, with 40 or 45 people working for me, and things were going good. But Vince McMahon is a very persuasive individual."

Okerlund became the lead announcer for the WWF, a globally-recognized figure, ever clad in a tuxedo and bow tie, holding the microphone for the most famous names ever to cut a promo. During the "Rock and Wrestling" heydays of the mid-'80s, it was a guarantee that Hulk Hogan would begin an interview with the immortal line, "Well, you know, Mean Gene ..." before launching into a tirade against his opponent for the night. Okerlund is quick to credit Hogan for helping make him a household name.

"Certainly, I rode on the coat-tails of Hulk Hogan. If he was going to

talk, I was going to be there holding the microphone.”

Okerlund was a staple at all of the company’s shows back then, traveling on the road with the wrestlers and living life out of hotel rooms nearly 300 days a year. He always considered his role as one that was important, notwithstanding the fact that he didn’t wrestle.

“I looked at myself as a support member to this team. I would try to make the transitions from the interviews to the issues to the big storylines, like the glue that held the (show) together.”

Gene’s tenure with the WWF came to an end in 1993 when he left for rival WCW during the industry’s Monday Night wars. Though he spent eight years with WCW, it was a welcome homecoming in 2001, when WCW was bought out by Vince McMahon. Okerlund was glad to be once again working for the WWF. Picking up where he left off, Okerlund was named as the host of WWE Confidential, and has been a key figure on many other WWE shows on the WWE Network.

As well, his name and face are behind the Mean Gene’s Burgers and Mean Gene’s Pizza food franchises.

— Bob Kapur