

SPOTLIGHT: BUCK ROBLEY (an excerpt from the unreleased 1977-1979 Heart of America Almanac)

Wrestling needs great athletes but it also needs outcasts from society who need a release & a way to pay for beer so they turned to wrestling to fight people for money. Folks with the aura of "if not for pro-wrestling, this guy would be in jail"

-@elliottswrstlin on X/Twitter

In wrestling, it is sometimes difficult to separate the real person from the character they portrayed in the ring and on television. Wrestlers typically created an exaggerated version of their true selves, and there are many instances of the lines between fiction and reality blurring over time (simply look at men like Hulk Hogan and Ric Flair in their post-wrestling lives). While only a little is known about the pre-wrestling life of Buck Robley, it's safe to say that if anyone was ever born to play the role of a sleazy professional wrestler/manager, it was him.

Phillip Thompson Robley played basketball and football at Frankfort High School in Indiana (where the athletic teams were nicknamed the Hot Dogs). He also competed in track & field and was the Treasurer of his Freshman class. In November 1961, a 16-year-old Robley broke his pelvic bone when "a car in which he was riding went out of control and turned over".



Robley as a high school sophomore

Less than two years later, Robley found himself in Carroll County Jail, charged with assault. Robley and twelve other Frankfort youths had been involved in an altercation with eight youths from the nearby town of Flora, with guns reportedly being involved in the fracas, said to have been "over a girl".

Six days later, on September 25, 1963, Robley and two other males were caught in a "jail break plot", where a sheriff discovered a knife and "other things" possessed by the three men while in jail. Seemingly headed down a bad path, Robley joined the U.S. Army the following month, likely as part of an arrangement to avoid jail time. He completed basic training at Fort Knox, KY and was assigned to the 7th Infantry Division in Korea in March of 1964. The division's primary role from 1953 to 1971 was to defend the Korean Demilitarized Zone, which had been created at the end of the Korean War.

It's unknown how long Robley actually served overseas, but his professional wrestling career began in the summer of 1968, when he worked for Gulf Coast Championship Wrestling using the ring name of Phil Robley. Brief stints in Georgia, Louisiana, and Florida followed, and in July 1969 he started a ten-month run for Jim Crockett Promotions. He had brief tours of Japan and the Maritimes in southeastern Canada before debuting in Western States Sports, the Amarillo-based territory run by Dory Funk Sr., in the summer of 1970. Amarillo was where *Buck Robley* was born, in more ways than one.

His first documented match using the ring name of Buck Robley was on July 19, 1970, in Albuquerque. According to Percival A. Friend, referee Ken Farber came up with the nickname "Yellow Belly" for Robley after he had spilled some mustard onto his stomach in the dressing room. That nickname would become a common taunt from fans for much of his career, and Buck egged it on by wearing a shirt that

said, “Don’t Call Me Yellow”. In March of 1971, Robley broke his arm (and also – according to some reports – his leg), putting him out of action for several months. Upon his return, he managed the heel team of Bobby Hart & Lorenzo Parente, his first foray into managing but certainly not his last. This may also have been the time where he first started wearing an arm brace, another gimmick he would run with for much of his career (with it of course being used as a weapon from time to time).

Robley spent the next few years bouncing around Florida, West Texas, and Jim Crockett Promotions. He also went to Stampede Wrestling in Calgary for a few months in late 1973. The following spring, he began an almost three-year long run for LeRoy McGuirk’s territory based in Oklahoma & Louisiana. The wrestler/manager would add one more job title to his résumé while working for McGuirk – booker.

Bill Watts had left McGuirk’s territory early in 1973 to work (as both wrestler and booker) in Georgia and Florida, with perennial World Junior Heavyweight champion Danny Hodge leaving in December. The territory had done steady, if unspectacular, business in the 1960s with Hodge as the focal point and saw an uptick in the early 1970s with Watts and other notable heavyweights such as Dusty Rhodes, Waldo Von Erich, and The Spoiler added to the mix. McGuirk brought Rip Tyler in to book for the promotion towards the end of 1973. By most accounts this was a low point at the box office for the territory. Tyler was replaced as booker by Robley, and Buck’s feud with Ken Mantell was a focal point of the territory in 1974, stabilizing things until Watts and Hodge returned the following year. Watts took over the role of booker upon his return, keeping heat magnet Robley around and having him not only wrestle, but also manage a few of the top heels. In the ring, Buck was kept strong for much of 1976, winning the U.S. Tag Team titles with Bob Slaughter early in the year, teaming with Andre the Giant on the first-ever wrestling card at the Superdome in New Orleans, and feuding with area mainstay Bob Sweetan.

In February 1977, Robley left McGuirk’s territory to come to Heart of America. Here, he would wear the three hats he had become comfortable with: wrestler, manager, and booker. For most of the next two years, Robley and his “Army” of heels would be the focal point of the in-ring doings throughout the region. Buck took to calling himself Colonel Buck Robley, another character trait he would use at other times over the course of his wrestling career.

The rotating cast of members of Buck Robley’s Army during that time featured himself, Bobby Jagers, Randy Tyler, Sweetan, Crusher Blackwell, Alexis Smirnoff, the Blue Yankee (Curtis Smith), Bruiser Brody, Tank Patton, and Jesse Ventura.

At various times, members of the Army held the promotion’s Heavyweight title (Sweetan, Smirnoff, and Robley) and the Tag Team titles (Jagers & Tyler, Robley & Blackwell, Sweetan & Smirnoff, Robley & Blue Yankee, and Patton & Ventura). In fact, from May 1977 through December 1978, Army members held at least one of the two championships about 83% of the time.

Robley followed a pretty basic formula as booker: the heel stable using the numbers game and breaking the rules to win matches and/or hold on to titles. He did add a twist at times: when heels who were in the Army were about to leave the territory, they’d often turn against the group and, in particular, Robley.

The first member to “defect” from Robley’s Army was Crusher Blackwell. Robley & Blackwell lost a match to Mike George & Scott Casey on 12/1/77 in Kansas City, KS. Eight days later in St. Joseph, MO, George & Casey beat Blackwell & Bob Sweetan after “Blackwell and his manager Colonel Robley exchanged blows.” Six days later, back in Kansas City, Robley defeated Blackwell when Crusher was disqualified for hitting the referee. Blackwell left the territory after that bout to work for Jim Crockett, though he would return briefly the following summer for a few more matches with Robley (with Buck winning the blowoff match in Kansas City).

Alexis Smirnoff had been a member of Robley’s Army for just over four months before his falling out with the Colonel. It most likely happened during a tag team match on 5/11/78 in Kansas City, when Robley & Smirnoff lost to Ken Lucas & Kevin Sullivan. The following week, the two faced off in a singles match that saw both men disqualified, leading to a “fence match” on 5/25 that saw Robley victorious. They also had singles matches in several other cities on the circuit before Smirnoff left at the end of May, going to Japan for a tour with IWE and then to Northern California to work for Roy Shire.

While Bruiser Brody didn’t appear to actually turn against the Army, he did flip from being a heel to a babyface during his time here in the late 1970s. Brody ran roughshod over competition for a few months as a member of the Army in the second half of 1978. When Andre the Giant came in for a week in November, he was booked against Brody five times (with at least one match going to a double disqualification). High profile matches against NWA World Heavyweight champion Harley Race and Dick the Bruiser followed. Brody teamed with Robley in a losing effort to Bob Brown & Bob Sweetan on 12/14/78 in Kansas City before leaving the territory shortly thereafter. He then made several appearances in the territory in 1979, this time as a babyface. He typically was brought in to work some of the Thursday night house shows in Kansas City, and on 3/8/79 he teamed with Andre the Giant in what is one of only three documented instances of the two teaming up.

The longest-tenured member of the Army, Bob Sweetan, finally had enough of Buck in the fall of 1978. The specifics of their breakup are unclear, but on 10/12/78 in Kansas City, Sweetan lost a match to Doug Gilbert and then subbed for Tank Patton, teaming with Jesse Ventura and going to a “no-decision” against Brian Blair & Bob Brown (who was subbing for Paul Orndorff). The following night in St. Joseph he was advertised to team with Robley against Orndorff & Blair. Robley, however, wrestled earlier in the night, defeating Tom Andrews, and Sweetan teamed with Jack Evans in a losing effort against Orndorff & Blair. Reading all of this, it seems likely that there were significant “shenanigans” in Kansas City that included a falling out between Robley & Sweetan, with the two then perhaps “refusing” to team up the following night. Sweetan spent about two weeks wrestling in Texas and Louisiana before returning here, this time on the babyface side of the roster. He feuded with Robley, mostly in singles bouts but also taking part in several tag matches against members of the Army, often teaming with his long-time rival Bob Brown. On 12/7/78 in Kansas City, Sweetan defeated Robley in a Texas death match. Stipulation matches followed in other cities, including a chain match in Wichita, a lights out match in Hutchinson, and Texas death matches in Fort Scott, Des Moines, and Topeka. Robley being vanquished at the hands of Sweetan was a proverbial death blow to his Army, and he left Heart of America and returned to McGuirk’s territory just before Christmas. In an interesting footnote, Sweetan turned back heel shortly after Robley left, resuming his bitter feud with Bob Brown just a few weeks later.

After Bill Watts split from LeRoy McGuirk in September 1979 and formed Mid-South Wrestling, Robley was an important figure in the territory on-and-off for the next several years, as a wrestler, as a manager, and as a booker (while Watts always had final say on angles, Robley was one of many “idea men” Watts employed in the Mid-South years who often wore the title of booker). In December 1979, babyface Robley was attacked by two fresh young heels, Michael Hayes & Terry Gordy as the Freebirds. The Junkyard Dog, who had spent a few months wrestling as a heel, surprisingly came to Robley’s aid. They feuded with the ‘Birds for several months, building to one of the most memorable angles in wrestling history, when Michael Hayes “blinded” JYD by throwing “hair removal cream” into his eyes.

Robley’s in-ring schedule slowly tapered off in the first half of the 1980s, though he could still be found managing and/or booking in smaller promotions across the south for a few years after. His last documented match was on 7/31/88 in Marietta, GA, where he teamed with the Moondog (Larry Latham) to defeat Mr. Wrestling II (Johnny Walker) & the Bullet (*allegedly* Bob Armstrong). It is not only possible but also quite likely that he had more than a few matches after that date, as historical records of independent wrestling in the late 1980s and early 1990s are woefully incomplete.

Phillip “Buck” Robley passed away on 5/28/2013 in Little Rock, AR due to congestive heart failure.

