



POW!

THE LEAGUE OF **LADY** **WRESTLERS**

Uncovering feminism in an unlikely place
By Kayla Callaghan

Photos: Benjamin Freedman

This page: Dirty Ol' Maude. Opposite page (clockwise from top left):
Barbara Shalala, Big Jody Mufferaw, Shreeka, and Dyke Master 3000.





BAM!



RRROOOAR



Various wrestlers take to the ring at the Dawson City LOLW Grudge Match this past summer.

They're hairy, brash, and unapologetic—they're the League of Lady Wrestlers (LOLW) and exactly the kind of women you want to hang out with. Originally created with hilarity in mind, LOLW explores the cross-section of sport and performance art to celebrate feminine identities. Now, three years later, with successful events in both Dawson City and Toronto, the LOLW has evolved into a beast that is far more complex.

It began as an idea brewing in Aubyn O'Grady's mind while she was living in what's been called the "Hobo Mansion," a two-storey Dawson City dwelling that's falling apart at the seams but held together by those, like O'Grady, who love it. A stack of her roommate's wrestling VHS tapes inspired the idea for a scrappy wrestling match in downtown Dawson—fitting, considering the town is a place where the definition of home can range from an off-grid cabin to a cave. When a funding proposal was denied, the wrestling idea became too expensive and was pushed to the backburner.

Then in the summer of 2013, with her return to school in Toronto looming, O'Grady felt an urgent need to put the LOLW in motion. The Hobo Mansion would be the perfect venue for the backyard brawl. Situated on a field next to a dredge pond, the environment creates a quasi-natural amphitheatre. As for wrestlers, during O'Grady's four years in Dawson she surrounded herself with a group of amazing, supportive women, so finding participants was an easy task.

Andrea Leigh Pelletier was on board with the idea the day she met O'Grady. They met volunteering at Dawson's Palace Grand Theatre, and later that evening O'Grady revealed her wrestling vision over drinks. Not long after that, Pelletier's wrestling alter ego, "Shreeka, The Dredge Pond Siren" was born. A witchy woman ruined by failing to find love and gold, Shreeka sold her soul to the devil for warmth and, in her wildness, stopped speaking and now only screams.

"You know when you're growing up, especially as a little girl, and there's all these things you're told not to do?" Pelletier says. "Don't be too loud, don't be disruptive, look nice, be polite." Shreeka became her outlet to be rude, hairy, and wild.

Margaret Bowes knows O'Grady from summers spent in Dawson. Her first wrestling persona, "Barbara Shalala," was a cold yoga instructor from your nightmares, which reflected Bowes' abundant amount of energy and frustration with gym and yoga culture at that time.

In many respects, the characters have little to do with wrestling and a lot to do with overthrowing traditional gender stereotypes. "[They're] more so to do with some aspect of our personalities that is not always celebrated," Bowes explains.

O'Grady's alter ego is "Big Jody Mufferaw," who sports plaid, leather gloves, fur, and a painted-on black eye. Stemming from her youth in the Ottawa Valley, O'Grady based Big Jody Mufferaw off the legend of Big Joe Mufferaw, a gin-drinking lumberjack who rode on the back of a giant bullfrog in a Stompin' Tom Connors' song.

"I'll have a Mufferaw moment," she says. "I'll be walking down the sidewalk and if I think someone is taking up too much space, I'll just bulk up—like make my shoulders as wide as possible—and just ram into them."

The characters do carry a lot of crude baggage that can be shocking when you're ringside. "I saw my mom at the very back with both hands clutching her forehead and her mouth hanging open," Bowes says of the first Toronto show, the Hogtown

Throwdown, in 2014. "[My mom] said, 'This is so dense, every single match is so dense.' And I was like, 'What do you mean, Mom?' She said, 'Every sort of issue in women's lives is being addressed in every single match.'"

Humour has been an integral part of the league since the beginning, and it has opened the door for feminism. As Bowes says, the LOLW is "casual feminism in the most disgusting, vile, and empowering way possible."

Dawsonite Jonathan Ostrander called the shots from the ring as the announcer for the first two Hobo Showdown events, in Dawson, and the Hogtown Throwdown. He says he notices the audience isn't made up of just your average, open-minded Dawsonite. Crowds are made up of tourists, miners, and people expecting mudwrestling. Then, prepared or not, they receive a lesson in what it means for female performers to be entertaining without having to be sexy.

Ostrander describes a moment from the very first LOLW match. The DIY ring was constructed from landfill tires and pink duct tape. Fireworks went off as he awarded the golden Diva Cup (a nod to the Canadian brand of female menstrual cups) to Mufferaw. "The crowd was going nuts, and it was a beautiful, beautiful sight," he says.

Dawson's supportive arts community provides the perfect breeding ground for the LOLW, with the added ability to get away with more both logistically and politically. In 2013, during the Riverside Arts Festival, O'Grady easily drummed up attention for the league's first event by handing out simple pamphlets featuring a photo of "Dirty Ol' Maude" (April Bartlett's gunslinging, whiskey-chugging persona). Dawson also attracts adventurous, independent, freethinking people—the kind of people needed to keep the LOLW going.

When the show moved to Toronto with O'Grady, Pelletier, Bowes, and Bartlett, the reality of how the concept must change became apparent. Toronto requires a lot more preparation, including renting a ring and securing a venue, liquor licenses, and insurance. By necessity, the Toronto performances are more polished and organized, yet carry that backyard-brawl spirit from its Dawson beginnings.

Although O'Grady spearheads the league, it's a team that make each performance possible. Pelletier now co-runs the Dawson City LOLW with friend Yasmine Renaud. "At the end of the day, I don't think any of us have the audacity to believe we could do it alone," she says. "And behind every strong female collective there are some pretty supportive male voices. We're pretty lucky in Dawson that we have a lot of really supportive men helping out."

Of course, none of it would be possible without an audience. "We put on this show [with] 14 women who aren't performers, and we entertain the hell out of people," O'Grady says. "And the thing I love about wrestling is the audience is implicit. They are kind of like the third character in the ring."

The LOLW is now entering its fourth season with events in Dawson and Toronto, and another sister league in Montreal. And as it continues to grow, the league is challenged to push more boundaries. Undoubtedly, as each performance gathers more press attention, these women will find innovative and hilarious ways to defy expectations. **Y**