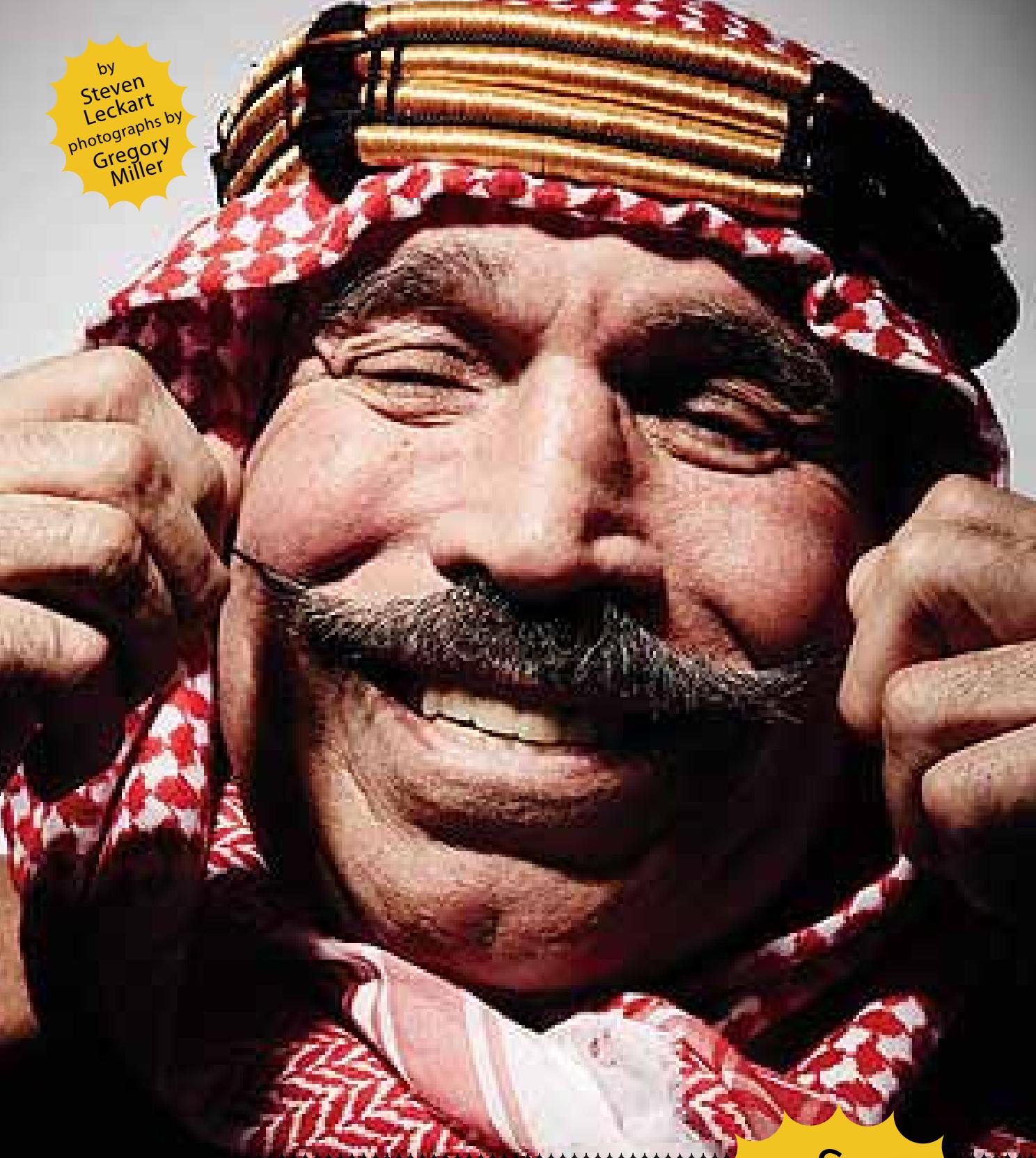




THE IRON

THE WWF LEGEND HAS BECOME RENOWNED FOR HIS HILARIOUS TWITTER TAKEDOWNS OF CELEBRITIES
NOW, ON THE EVE OF THE RELEASE OF A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT HIS SPECTACULAR RISE, FALL, AND COME

by
Steven
Leckart
photographs by
Gregory
Miller



SHEIK

Says,
"Go F**K
Yourself!"

(F**K THE BIEBER!), RIVALS (F**K THE HULK HOGAN!), AND EVEN COUNTRIES (F**K THE NORTH KOREA!).
BACK, WE WENT TO THE SHEIK'S HOUSE TO GET TO KNOW THE MAN BEHIND THE SNARLING MUSTACHE.



"WAKE THE FUCK UP, JABRONI!" shouts the Iron Sheik. It's lunchtime at his manager's house in Toronto, and the Sheik is working. We're at a kitchen table littered with plates of Persian food, a pack of Camel Filters, four empty cans of Coors Light, one bottle of Glenrothes whisky, and a gold-plated microphone.

To the Sheik's right, a twentysomething computer programmer adjusts the mike. To the Sheik's left, Brutus "the Barber" Beefcake, a 6'4" ex-wrestler, passes the time rolling a joint and occasionally interrupting the Sheik's takes. The sound bites are being recorded for a smartphone app called the Iron Sheik Alarm Clock. If you watched his merciless ringside rants in the 1980s or more recently heard his uncensored tirades on *The Howard Stern Show*, in person the Sheik is somehow even more deafening. A hefty, thick-necked 72-year-old with a heavy Middle Eastern accent, he speaks with a booming, syncopated cadence that suggests he needs both anger management training and a hearing aid.

"Monday? FUCK THE MONDAY!"

"Good morning, YOU FUCKING JABRONI!"

"Download my app OR GO FUCK YOURSELF!"

These lines are fed to the Sheik by his managers, a pair of 34-year-old identical Persian twins named Page and Jian Magen, who have recently revitalized the Sheik's career. The app is their idea—as is the Sheik's trip to Toronto: In the span of 96 hours, he'll be honored/lambasted at two comedy roasts headlined by

Gilbert Gottfried; he'll sign hundreds of head shots and pose for photos at two VIP meet-and-greets; he'll shoot a spec TV commercial for Bud Light in which he arm-wrestles a blonde actress in a pizza parlor; he'll film his final interview for the documentary *Iranian Legend: The Iron Sheik Story*, which premieres next month; he'll storm Mayor Rob Ford's office in Toronto and hijack a gaggle of TV news crews. Video of him insulting the politician—"The man eats a cheeseburger and smokes crack!!!"—will go viral.

Which brings us to the Sheik's Twitter account. What started as a shits-and-giggles experiment has introduced the Iron Sheik to an audience beyond wrestling. Today getting heckled by @the_Iron_sheik has become, in some strange way, a testament to a celebrity's relevance. No one is off-limits. Nothing is sacred.

"Adam Levine biggest douchebag cocksucker no good piece of shit..."

"Kim and Kanye get married same excitement as dead dog get raped by Michael Bolton sister"

"hello @MileyCyrus twerk my balls or i break your neck"

With more than 360,000 followers, his comeback is pretty remarkable.

"Save it for later!" Jian says as the Sheik pours more whiskey.

"You trying to insult the legend?!" barks the Sheik, unleashing a grin that exposes his Chiclet-size chompers. "You think I can't handle it?!"

"Just sip it," pleads Jian, before telling me, "It's gonna be a wild night. Fun for Sheik. Fun for fans. Crazy for us."



HOSSEIN KHOSROW ALI VAZIRI

left Iran because he feared he was going to be murdered. In 1968 the 26-year-old Vaziri was an Olympic hopeful being mentored by Gholamreza Takhti, the top dog in freestyle wrestling, Iran's national sport. Takhti, a stout middle-weight with a jet-black pompadour, had won Olympic gold in 1956. Inspired by his hero, Vaziri would wake up at 4 A.M. to run in the mountains near Tehran. Eventually, he told himself, he too would be a champion.

"Kim and Kanye get married same excitement as dead dog get raped by Michael Bolton sister."

One day the phone rang—Takhti was being rushed to the hospital. When Vaziri arrived, he was sent to the cemetery. As Takhti's body was washed on a stone altar, Vaziri stood there and wept.

Takhti's death was declared a suicide, but many suspected his democratic leanings had put the wrestler in the crosshairs of the SAVAK, Iran's secret police, who were infamous for torture and executions. "They tell me, 'If you don't want to be like him,'" Vaziri recalls, "better don't say nothing."

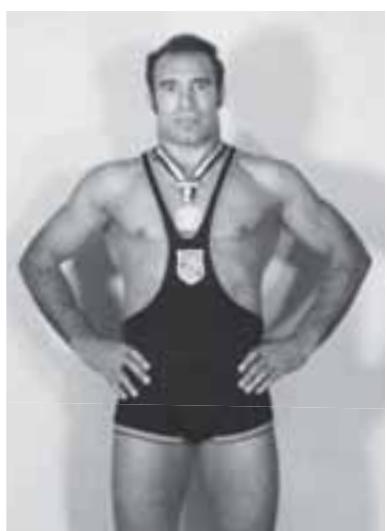
Vaziri hopped a plane to New York, then Minnesota, where the U.S. Olympic wrestling coach hired him as an assistant to the University of Minnesota team. Vaziri spoke only Farsi. He learned English by watching *The Tonight Show* and *Sesame Street*. With Vaziri's help, the Minnesota Amateur Wrestling Club won three consecutive AAU championships. In 1971 Vaziri himself won AAU gold; his medal was presented to him by Muhammad Ali. The following year Vaziri traveled to the Munich Olympics but couldn't compete: He had a green card but not U.S. citizenship, so he sat on the bench as an assistant coach.

Back in Minneapolis, Vaziri had been following the American Wrestling Association on TV. "I say, 'Wow, this is different than my wrestling,'" says Vaziri. "It look like entertainment." Between coaching and working as a welder, he was broke. "I saw lot of professional wrestlers drive Cadillac," he says. "And I said, 'Wow! I'm a real all-American gold medal, and I don't drive Cadillac.'"

In 1973 Vaziri attended the AWA training camp beside

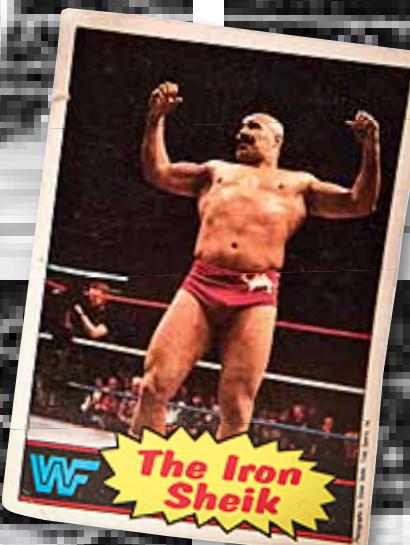
future star Ric Flair. Three years later it all clicked.

RIGHT
The Iron Sheik in his Georgia den.
BETWEEN
His early days in Iran as a champion wrestler.





The
IRON SHEIK
vs.
Bob
Backlund



The
IRON SHEIK
vs.
hulk
hogan



ABOVE

At the height of the Sheik's career, WWF marketed him with trading cards like this. Can't you just hear the angry fourth graders tearing them up as he battled Bob Backlund and Hulk Hogan?

AWA. Gagne's wife suggested the name the Iron Sheik. He shaved his head and grew the lustrous lip caterpillar he's had ever since.

Then in 1979 came the hostage crisis in Iran. "It was just the right time to establish my gimmick to be the real baddest, baddest wrestler in the universe," says Vaziri. "I had the most heat of any human being!" While 52 Americans were held captive for 444 days, Vaziri continued taunting crowds and flying the Iranian flag. He rode the wave to Madison Square Garden, where in 1983 he defeated WWF champ Bob Backlund. Four weeks later the Iron Sheik lost his belt to an up-and-comer named Hulk Hogan. "He was the springboard for Hulkamania," says Hogan. "From his face, his mustache, the boots, the tights that said Iran on them, the way he talked...everything was on the money."

As the Cold War heightened, so too did the Sheik's profile. Teamed with "Russian" wrestler Nikolai Volkoff, the Sheik would yell, "Iran No. 1! Russia No. 1! U.S.A...." and spit. Crowds went ape-shit. Vaziri had transformed himself into the most hated man in wrestling. There were Iron Sheik action figures, T-shirts, trading cards, and posters. Vaziri enjoyed his fame. Maybe too much.

heels (bad guys). "I want to be a villain," Vaziri told his boss, Verne Gagne, the legendary trainer and owner of

The Sheik was arraigned. Duggan posted bond. Somehow they made it to their match, but it didn't matter. Word was out: Wrestling, the bust revealed, is so fake even fierce rivals party together.

"I PAY MY DUES AND IT COST ME million million dollars," declares Vaziri, sitting beside a stack of Iron Sheik headshots and a Sharpie.

The "it" that cost him millions is May 26, 1987—the day the Iron Sheik and his "nemesis," Hacksaw Jim Duggan, were pulled over by a New Jersey state trooper. Never mind that they'd been drinking a six-pack of St. Pauli Girl. Or that Duggan had five or six joints under his seat. As Duggan recounts in his autobiography, the troopers found two grams of cocaine in the Sheik's "manpurse" and another gram in his wallet.

WWF chairman Vince McMahon fired them both. The Sheik picked up a contract with the World Championship Wrestling for a couple hundred thousand dollars—a fraction of his WWF salary. His wife nearly left him. He attended rehab and cleaned up for a month before his old habits crept back.

Before coming to America, Vaziri was a devout Muslim who didn't drink alcohol, let alone touch drugs. All that changed when he became a pro wrestler. "The boys said, 'Sheik, have one beer with us.' I try to be social," recalls Vaziri. "If I didn't become wrestler, I probably didn't have that problem."

Sheik and the boys would wrestle 300 nights a year, and blowing off steam was the norm. "You're a celebrity. You're

a star. And everywhere we go, they're waiting," Vaziri says of fans eager to party with the Sheik. "Sometimes I say no. Sometimes I say yes."

Ultimately it was wrestler Junkyard Dog who introduced Vaziri to crack. "He my friend. But he no perfect," says Vaziri. He tried rehab again in 2000 and stayed sober for six months.

By 2001 pro wrestling was in ruins. McMahon had purchased WCW, his biggest competitor, effectively seizing a monopoly. "When Vince had everybody by the balls," says Beefcake, "he began squeezing the pay down more and more." (McMahon declined to comment.)

"It's the only job I've done my whole life," says Vaziri. "It's hard to all of sudden give up or quit."



IN 1982 FOUR-YEAR-OLD TWINS

Page and Jian Magen were watching wrestling when suddenly a man's voice swearing in Farsi startled their mom.

"That's your daddy's friend!" she yelled. The boys' father and Vaziri had bonded when they were teen hopefuls; their father was once Iran's national Ping-Pong champion. When Vaziri moved to America, they lost touch.

Eventually the boys met the Iron Sheik when he wrestled at Toronto's 16,485-capacity Maple Leaf Gardens. Backstage the Sheik introduced his "nephews" to his coworkers: Andre the Giant! Macho Man! King Kong Bundy!

From then on, whenever the Sheik wrestled in Toronto, the twins attended.

Afterward he'd accompany them home, where their mother prepared a colossal Persian feast. Over the next four years, Sheik brought a rotating cast of dinner guests to the Magens', including Nikolai Volkoff, Jake "the Snake" Roberts, and Greg "the Hammer" Valentine.

"We didn't get that it was an act!" laughs Page. "This was a part of our national pride, which is also a mind-fuck because the white kids are like, 'Fuck him, he's a murderer!'"

When their mom heard about the Sheik's arrest, she put her foot down. "Don't see him again!" she declared. Fast-forward to 1998, when the brothers (then 19-year-old party promoters) spotted a flyer for an independent wrestling show. When the twins arrived, they couldn't believe their eyes. Inside a rundown bar, 86 people were watching the Iron Sheik battle Abdullah the Butcher in a brawl as bloody as a scene from the Mickey Rourke film *The Wrestler*.

As the years passed, Vaziri's physical injuries started taking a toll. He self-medicated. He appeared on *The Jerry Springer Show*, then joined Howard Stern's "Wack Pack," where his uncensored rants made him a fan favorite.

In 2006 the twins traveled to Vaziri's home outside Atlanta to work on a film about the Sheik. A few years prior one of his daughters had been murdered by

"F**k you! I sell out Madison Square Garden! Don't you tell me what I can do!"

her boyfriend. Vaziri was devastated. "He was in a dark place," recalls Jian.

Then, in 2009, two things happened:

1. The Sheik quit hard drugs cold turkey. "I stopped the bad stuff. I'm not interested anymore," explains Vaziri.

2. The twins created the Sheik's Twitter account, which has led to #team-sheikie T-shirts, mustache necklaces, and baby onesies. For \$30 he'll verbally bash anyone you want on Twitter. (The twins tweet for the Sheik. "He's never turned on a computer in his life!" says Jian.)

"He's built like a Studebaker. He'll go for a long time, but not forever," says Page. "I want to find a way to make the Sheik live on. It's got to live forever."



ON MY LAST EVENING WITH THE
Iron Sheik, we all pile into a black Yukon and drive to a 526-capacity bar in Hamilton, Ontario, an hour southwest of Toronto. The Sheik rides shotgun, chastising our driver while the radio blasts the Clash's "Rock the Casbah."

After we pull into the parking lot, an excited fan passes by and offers the legend a joint. Page forbids it.

"Fuck you! I sell out Madison Square Garden! Don't you tell me what I can do!" the Sheik yells, deadpan.

"You think Lady Gaga does that?! Or Jay Z?! You can't do that!" Page protests.

"Unbelievable!" shouts Sheik.

Sometimes it's hard to tell where Vaziri ends and the Sheik begins.

"He just lives it, 24 hours a day," says Hogan. "He'll work that gimmick till the wheels fall off. It keeps him alive."

Earlier that day, while Brutus Beefcake is taking a nap on the couch, Vaziri asks me to help him prep for the roast. He grabs my arm, and we amble gingerly down the hall into Jian's den, where the Sheik sleeps on a blowup mattress. I hand Vaziri his black slacks: waist size 52. I guide his arms into the sleeves of a blue dress shirt, then a black sport coat. I drape two medals over his head—Vaziri's 1971 AAU gold and the Sheik's 2005 WWE Hall of Fame award—and then straighten his headdress. He takes out a toothbrush and vigorously brushes his mustache before twisting both ends with his fingers.

"I love you forever, bubba," he says.

That night in Hamilton, 100 fans take turns professing the same to Sheik. "Tonight is the best night of my life. I got to meet you. You are a true legend," one wasted dude slurs. It's heartwarming. That said, it's also pleasing to watch the world's greatest heel and Twitter F-bomber get a taste of his own medicine during both Canadian roasts.

"The Sheik's life has been no fucking picnic. Don't be fooled by that tablecloth on his head," says Jesse Joyce, who wrote Seth MacFarlane's jokes for the 85th Academy Awards.

"He was gonna be the Ayatollah in *The Wrestler*, but he snorted all his lines," teases comedian Mike Lawrence.

"We're roasting him tonight and cremating him together in a month," smirks Tony Hinchcliffe, staff writer for *The Comedy Central Roast of James Franco*.

Sheik retorts, enraged...but not upset.

"You can go FUCK YOURSELF!" he shouts, before turning to the crowd and smiling. "Gimme a HELL, YEAH!"

SHEIK HAPPENS

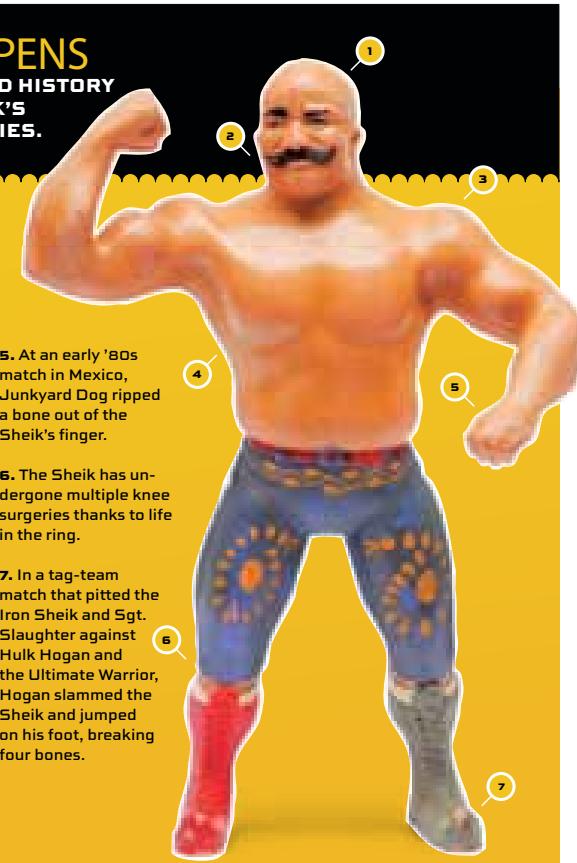
A (VERY) ABRIDGED HISTORY OF THE IRON SHEIK'S WRESTLING INJURIES.

1. During Wrestle-Mania 1 at Madison Square Garden, Mike Rotunda dropped Sheik onto the concrete, giving him a serious concussion.

2. "Mr. Wonderful" Paul Orndorff knocked out two of his teeth.

3. Multiple dislocations of his shoulder, including one in Japan, when Andre the Giant sat on him.

4. At a match in Seattle, Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka leaped from the top of a steel cage, landing on the Sheik and breaking five of his ribs. The Sheik was left coughing up blood.



5. At an early '80s match in Mexico, Junkyard Dog ripped a bone out of the Sheik's finger.

6. The Sheik has undergone multiple knee surgeries thanks to life in the ring.

7. In a tag-team match that pitted the Iron Sheik and Sgt. Slaughter against Hulk Hogan and the Ultimate Warrior, Hogan slammed the Sheik and jumped on his foot, breaking four bones.