



## Chatting with an Awesome ECW champ

By [JOHN POWELL](#) --  
SLAM! Wrestling



Mike Awesome, the 6-foot-6, 292-pound ECW World Heavyweight Champion is a monster, muscling grapplers around the ring as if they were rag dolls yet...get this...as a tall, skinny youngster he didn't make the high school football team.

Hard to believe, isn't it?

Everyone has a series of turning points in their existence. Events such as finding that one true love, the birth of a child, securing that dream job, the death of someone close, can change who we are and what we want out of life. Being shut out of that high school football team shifted Awesome's thinking forever more. It strengthened his resolve to be the absolute best at whatever career he chose. Though he went on to enroll in the accounting program at Hillsborough Community College, Awesome (whose real name is Mike Alphonso) quickly traded in crunching numbers for crunching skulls as a living. But not without some planning first.

"I've always been interested in wrestling and I have a cousin who is in wrestling. We decided that we were going to go for it so I dropped out of college and started a small business because I knew I was going to have to have an income while I was struggling to become a wrestler. I started working out and building my body up," Awesome told

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Fans may be surprised to learn that the cousin Awesome is referring to is former WCW nWo member, Horace Boulder -- the nephew of wrestling icon, Hulk Hogan. Trading tales of Horace's superstar uncle, Awesome and Boulder hung out as kids dreaming of their rise to fame in the pro wrestling business. Awesome is still very close to his childhood friend, strongly defending his poor showing in WCW. Awesome blames the fed's bookers not his pal who is presently recovering from reconstructive knee surgery while still under contract.

"I wouldn't mind seeing Horace Hogan in ECW because he wrestled in FMW (Frontier Martial Arts Wrestling) for at least six years right alongside me. Horace knows what hardcore and extreme is all about and WCW is doing nothing but holding him back!".

As he rambled down that long road to superstardom, Awesome has had fate smile on him on more than one occasion. As if he has his own personal guardian angel looking out for him, Awesome has an uncanny knack for being in the right place at the right time. In 1988, he met up with Steve Keirn (formerly of the Fabulous Ones tag team). Keirn told him about his wrestling school in Tampa, Florida. Awesome signed up, put his nose to the grindstone and learned the basic skills.

One year later, Awesome had his first big break. The tag team of Awesome and Bret "The Bubble Gum Kid" Sawyer were defeated by the Star Riders in Orlando, Florida. Compared to what he would of been bringing home as an accountant, Awesome was making next to nothing as a pro wrestler. To this day, he speaks fondly of the support his family gave him during those tough times.

"They were one hundred percent behind me and I was totally surprised by it. I thought it would be a problem but they felt the passion I had," said the proud husband and father of a three-year-old son and two-month-old daughter.

Making ends meet was such a hardship that Awesome seriously thought about packing it in. Then, fate smiled on him again. Awesome struck up a conversation with promoter Billy Max at an indie show. Max liked what he saw and offered him a spot in a Japan show relinquished by Big Al Green when he opted to sign with WCW. Little did Awesome know that his bold decision to accept Max's proposal to wrestle in The Land Of The Rising Sun would set the stage for bigger and better things.

In the rowdy FMW promotion, Awesome became G - The Gladiator. He wrestled hard. He worked hard. There was no slacking off...ever. If he were to so much as let his guard down temporally, someone else would be sure to snatch his spot. As with everything else, the Japanese are intensely proud about their pro wrestling. If you can't perform up to a certain level, if you don't show signs of steady progress, your suitcase is packed and waiting for you at the airport. Cutting all the coolest promos in the world won't save your hide as it might in North America. The heat was on. Awesome could either sink or swim. He chose to paddle like a madman learning as much as he possibly could.

"Not only has it always been important to me to better myself, it had to be that way. If you didn't constantly improve yourself in Japan, they shipped you back to the United States. I kept learning more and doing more because I wanted my career to continue," said Awesome citing Wing Kanemura, Hayabusa, Atsushi Onita, Sabu, Cactus Jack (Mick Foley) and Jimmy Del Ray as his greatest opponents and teachers too.

Of all the gifted superstars, it is [Terry Funk](#) whom Awesome is most proud to have worked with. "I've faced him. I've tagged with him. I've held belts with him. We were part of a team in Japan for over a year," he recalled. "I admire the guy for his abilities, even to this day."

In FMW, Awesome was feared for his size and strength. He captured the World Brass Knuckles Tag Team Championship twice, the World Street Fight Six-Man Tag Team Championship and the Independent World Heavyweight Title. [Masato Tanaka](#), his arch nemesis, took that belt from Awesome touching off a bitter feud that continues to this day in ECW.

"I just can't seem to get away from Masato Tanaka," said Awesome with a touch of hatred and grudging respect. "He was a thorn in my foot in Japan because everyone knows he stole away belts I had. I come over here to the States, I start making a name for myself and what's does he do? He comes over here and challenges me for my belt. Tanaka is definitely at the top of my list of guys that I love to destroy."

Awesome's consistency and notoriety in FMW and All Japan Pro Wrestling caught the attention of Extreme Championship Wrestling frontman, Paul Heyman. Heyman booked Awesome sporadically on pay-per-view appearances against his rival Masato Tanaka. The filler-type matches received such praise that Awesome could not be overlooked any longer. He and Tanaka were brought in as part of a three way battle against the WWF-bound [Taz](#) for the ECW World Heavyweight Title at last year's Anarchy Rulz pay-per-view. When the smoke cleared, Awesome was the new champ and had a new manager in "Judge" Jeff Jones. It was Awesome's breakthrough moment.

"It was a great feeling because it was the first time in the United States that I have ever done something of

such magnitude as winning a World Championship title. To win it from somebody like Taz, a great technician in the ring, a very solid wrestler, was great! Though, I would have preferred if it had just been me and Taz for the title," said Awesome.

Since winning the ECW World Title, Awesome has been in somewhat of a holding pattern. He has had the push but not the mainstream exposure as other champs in competing federations have had. They act as company spokesmen embodying what the federation is all about while Awesome has not been granted that on-air role. This has lead some to view him as an interim champion holding onto the belt until ECW's long-term plans are established. As fans have seen, that's about to change. Storylines are being built around Awesome and the well-spoken behemoth is getting his share of interview time as well.

"When I came into ECW I wasn't exactly sure which direction I was going to go with my character," he explained. "Now that I am seeing what's going on with the organization, I know the direction I am going to take. You'll be seeing that on television in the near future. I have already started cutting promos and I think my character is going to be evolving in ECW fairly shortly."

Signed to an undisclosed, permanent contract, Awesome is proud to be associated with ECW. An underdog promotion that is slowly closing the gap between it and the traditional Big Two. There are major plans for Awesome in the works though he is keeping himself grounded by not sitting back and basking in the glory that is the ECW World Heavyweight Championship. Hard work and self improvement remain a high priority.

"I'm just going to keep doing what I do best and that's giving everything I've got," he said.

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