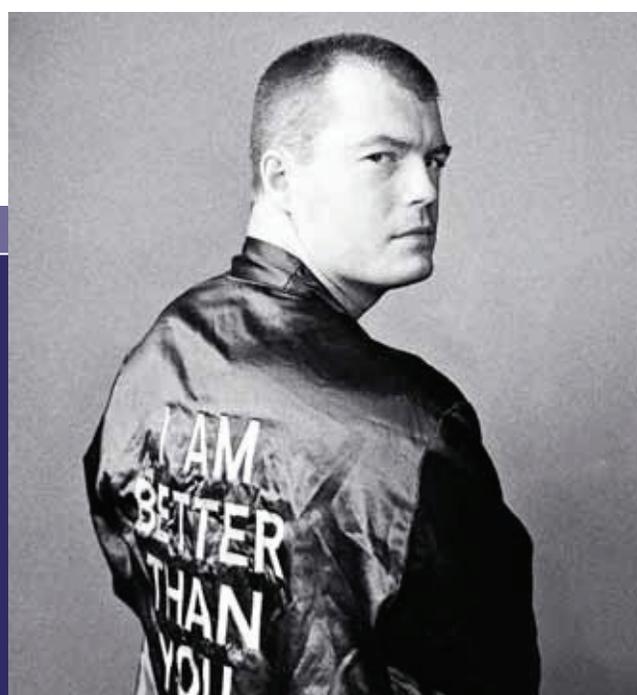


PETER SMITH
CLASS OF 1999

MEN *in tights*

by Milton Kiang



Most people would be happy to have a career in law. How about adding a stint as an award-winning filmmaker? Then add time as a criminal law university instructor. Oh, add another career as a heavy-weight champion pro-wrestler. Now, you're starting to get a picture of the multi-disciplined, multi-talented, multi-everything Peter Smith (a.k.a. "The Rocket" Randy Tyler to wrestling fans).

Standing at six-feet, four-inches, 240 pounds, Smith looms over my five-foot-nine frame, creating an imposing presence. His hand, the size of a bear claw, wraps completely around mine as we shake hands. After exchanging pleasantries, Smith turns out to be a regular guy—someone you'd like to have a beer with at the end of a work day.

Smith has an easy laugh, is articulate and focused, and speaks with confidence. We talk about what it was like to venture on the pro-wrestling circuit at the age of 17 and later attend UBC law school. While in law school, Smith won numerous scholarships and academic prizes, including the *Wesbrook Scholar Designation* and *Raymond Herbert Award*, to name but a few. When he graduated, he was at the top of his class.

We chat about clerking with Madame Justice Louise Arbour at the Supreme Court of Canada, and what led him to act in, and produce, a wrestling "mockumentary." (Think *Spinal Tap*, but about wrestling.) To date, Smith's film has won three international film awards.

Not bad for a 39-year-old former military brat who spent his formative years traveling from military base to military base across Canada. "Self-awareness is key," Smith says, more than once during our conversation at his downtown Vancouver office.

How did you get started in wrestling?

I was 17-years-old. I was in a high school, and it was my childhood dream to become a professional wrestler. When I was in grade 12, I took acting classes specifically to learn how to perform in front of an audience as a pro-wrestler.

I went to a pro-wrestling school in BC. You know the old *All-Star Wrestling* show on BCTV? They had a summer camp where they'd look for new talent. That particular summer, there were 30 guys that attended. They beat the living crap out of us for eight weeks, and by the end, there were only three of us standing. We all got contracts to go on the road for *All-Star Wrestling*.

What's the wrestling industry like?

The money isn't good. In local productions, you make between \$100 to \$200 a match and that's on the high end. At the lower end, some guys get \$30 to \$50. It's not lucrative. It's like acting: there are just a few guys making millions. Most wrestlers, even the ones you see in the big circuit, aren't making much at all. People stay in the business because they love it, or because they're waiting for that big break.

What made you decide to go to university?

When I was about 20 years old, I had an epiphany. I was wrestling full-time, six nights a week, and I was having a great time. I was in a match in Portland where I was tag team partners with Jimmy "The Fly" Snuka. He was a very popular guy, very well known. He's what I aspired to be in my wildest dreams. But he was at the end of his career: he was approaching his 40s and he'd finished his run with the WWF [now called WWE].

At this point, his body is breaking down, he's gotten a bit older, and he hadn't made a lot of money. So he's wrestling these smaller shows with me, and I was just starting out. There'd be 300 or 400 people at the match. We were making about \$300 a match, and he needed that money.

Jimmy had this look about him: he was kind of weathered, as if he didn't have much in the way of prospects. I remember him saying that without wrestling, there wasn't really much out there. There was this combination of fear and regret. He just looked worn out.

I was thinking, "If I'm successful, is this what it's going to be like for me?" Right then, I decided to get back to school. I've got to have something else.

You did exceptionally well in law school, you won loads of scholarships and academic prizes. What do you attribute your academic success to?

When it comes to school work versus "real-world" work, I don't know how good or bad I am, but I wouldn't place myself at the top ten percent of lawyers at Blakes or Debevoise [Smith's former law firm employers].

When it comes to school, I was always a bit of a savant. I always understood how to get a good grade in class. It has very little to do with being smart. I had an ability to focus on what was important in each class, and the ability to study maybe 20 percent of what other people were studying. I could always see people studying, and I'd think to myself, that's not going to be in the exam, that's not important.

People would ask, how do you know that? My skill set was to figure out what the professor was going to ask, and what was going to be important to them when it came to grading essays or exams.

Law school is a funny place. It can be intimidating. I remember during week one of UBC Law, I talked to someone who said they had spent eight hours in the library studying the night before. And I was like, "Studying what?!"

When you worked at a law firm, how did people react when you told them about your wrestling career?

I actually laboured about whether I should put wrestling in my resume. Law firms could take it in one of two ways: they could think I'm a total knucklehead, or they'll find it interesting and want to ask questions. I finally decided to put it in there, and man, the response was overwhelming.

The law firms weren't only interested in my wrestling background, it dominated interviews. I'd go into summer articles interviews, sit in front of a panel, and after a minute of pleasantries, they'd start asking me, "Is wrestling fake? How long have you been a wrestler?"

For an hour, we'd talk about pro-wrestling. And they'd offer me a job, based on my colourful tights and wrestling ability!

What was it like clerking at the Supreme Court of Canada? Did you ever watch the justices sit down to discuss cases?

No, that's not something the clerks did. The justices did that amongst themselves. But the clerks would get together and talk about a case. We'd have our debate, and this, I think, would affect the judges' debate.

The clerks' debates would affect what we put in our briefs, and the briefs would affect the judges—some more than others. Of course, the justices have their own views on certain matters.

The other cool thing about being a clerk was that we got to draft decisions. A judge would say, "This is what I think about the case, and this is why I'd allow the appeal. Why don't you take a crack at it?"

You'd go back and draft the decision, and sometimes—I won't say which cases—they'd look at it and say, "You nailed it." So now, you look at certain Supreme Court decisions, and say, "That's mine!"

You went on to make a comedy film called *Kayfabe*. Tell me about that.

Kayfabe is a wrestling term. It's hard to explain. It means to maintain an illusion. Let's say you and I were wrestlers: you're a good guy and I'm a bad guy, and we just had a feud in the ring. We're having a beer together, and we see a wrestling fan enter the bar.

I'd say "kayfabe" which means we'd have to separate so the fan doesn't see us together. You have to maintain the illusion. It's a warning word—you throw it out there to make sure you don't give away any secrets.

If there's one criticism about the movie, is that no one understands the term "kayfabe." If we had to do it all over again, we'd call it something like *Tights*.

What was the movie-making process like?

I made the movie with another lawyer named Mike Raven. He and I summered together at Blakes and we've been friends ever since. For years, we'd have a beer at the end of the week, and I'd tell him stories about wrestling on the road.

He found my stories mind-boggling. We'd always have a laugh, and we'd say this is great material for a story. People wouldn't believe that this stuff goes on—that we really should put a script together. So we did.

We went out and raised \$50,000, the total budget for the movie from start to finish. Then we booked eleven days of shooting.

We went out and hired a cinematographer, we hired a sound guy, and we surrounded ourselves with people who knew what they were doing—because we knew we didn't.

We knew we had a good story and we vaguely knew how we wanted to tell the story. But we were smart enough to know that we didn't know *how* to make a movie. So, over eleven days, we shot it. Somehow, by hook and by crook, we made good decisions.

What are your keys to success?

Once you decide to take a certain path, you have to follow through. One of the ways I make myself follow through, is to tell others I'm going to do it, and I go out to do it. When I decided to make *Kayfabe*, I told everyone I was going to do it. And if you don't, then you look like a horse's ass.

I'm not special, everyone has it in them. It requires sacrifice, self-awareness. You've got to recognize what you're good at. Like when we made the movie, we realized early on we weren't good filmmakers. Don't kid yourself: be realistic, understand your limitations.

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You've had so many different careers. What do you tell people when they ask about your line of work?

Good question! Right now, I run a TSX-mining company, so that's my primary focus. But funnily enough, years ago, when I was practicing law, and I was wrestling, I'd answer that question differently everyday.

Some days, people would ask me what I did, and I'd say, "I'm a wrestler, and I'm a lawyer on the side." Other days, I'd say, "I'm a lawyer, and a wrestler on the side." It kind of depended on how I was feeling about the law that day, maybe how many hours I had to bill that week. But I've never considered myself to be one or the other.

The negative side to that, you might say, is that I haven't had a whole lot of focus. And I think that's true. A lot of people I went to law school with, I see them now, and they're partners at law firms. But I'm not that. I'll never be a partner because I've chosen to do all these other things as well.

To be honest, I don't know at this stage of my life whether it was the right thing to do or not: choosing to focus on a lot of things, as opposed to one thing. I don't have any regrets. Is it going to come back to haunt me? I don't know. It's not like I have one career—I kind of have three or four careers.

I'm almost 40-years-old, and I still don't know what I want to focus on for the rest of my life. I still have 20 working-years left. ●