



Seven Year Itch. Muscular and sporting a platinum blond wig, he climbs the ropes, sprays perfume, taunts the crowd, and then gathers bottles of whiskey, vodka, and tequila and pours free shots into the eager mouths of front-row fans. Clouds of marijuana smoke hover in the air like a fine mist.

The next three hours are perfectly orchestrated chaos. Hoodslam combines the best of old-school wrestling: storylines, athleticism, performance art, pseudo-grudges, and pop culture. Over the evening, the wrestlers create crazy characters, like DrugzBunny (aka Kevin Michael Johnson), who storms on stage to shower himself in fake cocaine and takes down a longstanding opponent. The wrestlers do what they want—and hope the fans get caught up in it. On this night, as subplots, grudges, and performance art are acted out in drag, the crowd roars. It's definitely working.

Hoodslam's origins are humble. In October 2010, Sam Khandaghabadi began holding wrestling matches at the Victory Warehouse on San Pablo Avenue in Oakland. Khandaghabadi, a longtime wrestling fan, wanted to combine the best elements of wrestling while avoiding the worst. After initially drawing about 200 audience members to the bimonthly event with no entrance fee, the event spread via word of mouth, and the venue changed to a monthly event at the Oakland Metro Operahouse, which began charging for tickets. The popularity of Hoodslam only increased.

"Some of the best elements of wrestling is the

improvisation and the interaction and connection with the crowd," Khandaghabadi said. "It's this feeling that it's symbiotic, like you're doing something athletic and giving off energy, and they're reacting and giving off energy. It bounces back and forth and kind of feeds you to do more, which gets them to get more excited. It bounces back and forth until, all of a sudden ... you can't see it; it's like a fuckin' thunderstorm of thunder and electricity in the air."

To participate in Hoodslam, the path is long. One option is via Derek and Dustin Mehl's Stoner University, a wrestling training school operating out of the Victory Warehouse four nights a week. The brothers require a \$300 down payment and a \$100 membership fee and currently train about 15 dedicated wrestlers.

"It takes dedication and wanting it," Dustin Mehl said. "If you don't want it, if you're some Jimmy-come-lately and only come like once a week, it won't lead to anything. You've got to dedicate yourself to it."

For those who've worked, trained, and participated in Hoodslam, the model seems to be working fairly well.

"Here I'm treated just the same as everyone else; I'm one of the boys," said Britney Chenault, 25, of Sacramento. "I get put in the same matches. I am a female wrestler because that's my gender, but when it comes down to it, I'm a professional wrestler, and I wish to be treated just like everyone else. And they treat me that way."

"When I first started in the pro wrestling business, I was kind of miserable and was doing shows where we'd work our asses off and were told that it was a privilege to be in the ring," Anthony Rivera, 29, said. "Once we started this shit, we started making money and having the most fun and doing it every way possible that we wanted to do it."

Hoodslam draws dedicated fans, too. "Showing up hours in advance just to secure the second row was important to me, and it still is," said Josh Marcus, 37, of Oakland. "As for Hoodslam, its front of the line is filled with some pretty decent people who let you in. Walking into the Operahouse, the energy was crazy, and it wasn't long before a 300-pound wrestler dove out of the ring, and I knew Hoodslam was gold."

Hoodslam isn't for everyone: It's 21 and up, you'll be patted down for weapons and contraband by enormous security guards at the entrance, and there's enough secondhand marijuana smoke wafting through the air to defy belief. Still, for die-hard wrestling fans who want to see a show that's limited only by the imaginations of its performers, Hoodslam is as passionate, dirty, raunchy, and ridiculous as anything you'll ever come to love.

For more about Hoodslam at the Oakland Metro Operahouse, 630 Third St., Oakland, at 9 p.m. on the first Friday of every month, go to www.BirdsWillFall.com.

Photos by Pat Mazzera