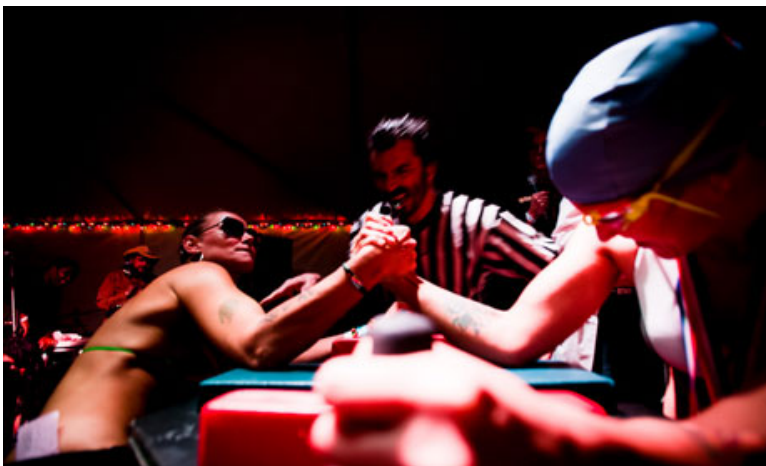


Welcome to the world of women's arm wrestling

The Collective of Lady Arm Wrestlers compete for fun, funds and empowerment

Matt Davis
guardian.co.uk, Friday 30 December 2011 14.00 GMT



Mendy St. Ours and Michaux Hood arm wrestling at a CLAW event in Charlottesville, under the pseudonyms "Tropical Depression" and "Jock B(Itch)" with referee Jude Silveira. Picture: Billy Hunt.

Ladies' arm wrestling is difficult to categorize: an evening could be described equally as radical performance art, a burlesque variation on amateur boxing, or as a riot grrrl fundraiser with a costume competition attached. At a ladies arm wrestling "Superbrawl" event in New Orleans recently, for example, there were women in leotards, nuns' outfits, with moustaches, with blackened teeth, flexing their muscles. There were also a few women actually arm wrestling.

The organisation began in Charlottesville, Va. in 2007, and there are now seven official leagues and three apprentice leagues around the United States. The national Collective of Lady Arm Wrestlers, or CLAW U.S.A., clawusa.org is in discussions to start new chapters in Holland and Ireland, and the first ladies arm wrestling world championship is set to take place in Virginia in June, 2012. As yet, there are no plans include the sport in the next Olympics.

CLAW is a grassroots movement with a mission to empower women. By turns dead serious and playfully theatrical, the various leagues have raised more than \$100,000 for local charities supporting women over the last four years.

One beneficiary of CLAW's generosity is a Hudson Valley nonprofit called the Ulster County Crime Victims Board, that provides clothing and cab fare for rape and assault victims when they leave hospital. Victims' clothes are routinely cut off and taken into

evidence, and some women have been sent home from hospitals in scrubs and paper slippers. Other CLAW beneficiaries around the country include a rock camp for girls, and nonprofits furnishing computers for kids, and books to prisoners.

Actor and entrepreneur Jennifer Tidwell co-founded CLAW in Charlottesville, the year after the death of her husband. Deciding she wanted to devote herself to putting on more arts events like the two large scale carnivals she was already involved with, Tidwell knew she could gather at least 40 people together to perform in an arts event, and that she liked arm wrestling and creating new personae for herself, but that was all.

"I've always, as a joke, arm wrestled women to settle petty grievances," Tidwell said. "It's so ridiculously aggressive. I remember arm wrestling a woman at a clothing swap in 1990 for a pair of striped tights. But I have absolutely no ownership over what the league has become. I just shared this idea with people and trusted them, and it's become bigger than I could ever have imagined."

Thanks to the organizational support of some like-minded women, Tidwell was soon arm wrestling in front of enthusiastic crowds of hundreds, wearing a Nascar jumpsuit and sporting the wrestling name "C'Ville Knieval," in poetic homage to both her beloved town of Charlottesville and the motorcycle stuntman Evel Knieval.

"I'd ride a pogo stick through the crowd and deliberately do crazy things to make myself fall down," Tidwell says. She would wrestle other characters such as "The Homewrecker," a bisexual woman wearing a construction hard hat "out to steal your husband and your wife," or "Tragedy Ann," a macabre variation on the ubiquitous American toy Raggedy Ann, with the same red hair and peanut dress, except made up with a pouty face, instead of smiling.

Apart from engaging enthusiastic audiences, the theatricality of the wrestling characters serves another important purpose, said Cathy Harding, media coordinator for CLAW, who now works for the Columbia Journalism Review but wrestled in Charlottesville under the pseudonym "The Punctuator," handing out red pens to the crowd when she was editor in chief of the C-Ville Weekly, an alternative weekly paper.

"A lot of the women involved in CLAW don't have much space for play in their lives, and this is about reclaiming that opportunity," Harding said.

So there is Bridezilla, a pregnant zombie bride who specializes in going into labor in the middle of her matches. And a genetics PhD student soft-spoken, by day, who showed up at the first bout in North Carolina under the pseudonym Ze Monsta with a team of male nurses in scrubs to hold chains and restrain her, and didn't stop screaming, growling, or drop out of character for the entire night, said that chapter's organizer, Diana Barden.

"She also had one female nurse with a two-foot long tranquilizer needle to inject her, whenever she got belligerent on stage," Barden said.

Karie Miller, a theater performer, hosts meetings of CLAW's Chicago chapter under the pseudonym Rockke L. Squelch. While Miller has always felt self-conscious about being six feet tall, Squelch rocks platform shoes.

"I don't feel like I have to apologize for my height anymore," Miller said. "I'm like 6'6"

by the time I've put the outfit on, and it's fun to be even larger and exploit that height. That feeling carries over from the character into my everyday life."

Miller, with both bachelors and masters degrees in acting, felt compelled to develop a complex and entirely fictional backstory for Squelch, which includes once being a mail order bride for a man named Bill Devereaux, living for a while with Devereaux's wife Florida, and eventually, taking up women's "upper body sports" to get over the rage and powerlessness she experienced as a result of her treatment at the hands of the Devereauxs. "You can probably tell I've thought a lot about this," Miller said.

Other characters in the Chicago chapter include "Cutting Edge," whose entire persona pays homage to an obscure 1992 movie about ice-skating, and "Lil' Sister Shotgun," who wrestles in a dirty t-shirt and jeans, with "matching" greasy hair.

"This is a 360 degree theatrical experience," Miller said. "The match itself is really not the important thing, it's about the atmosphere, about the crowd becoming part of the experience."

At another event in New Orleans recently, the crowd went crazy, sweating profusely as they called out "bribes" to the wrestlers in sweltering heat, at an event in the back yard of a bar in the shadow of the Interstate 10 freeway. For \$50, the crowd could bring back a previously disqualified wrestler. For \$80, a member of the crowd could choose her opponent from the available wrestlers, and for \$100, the crowd could blindfold the arm referee for 10 seconds.

"Our chapter is among the more raucous of the bunch," said Erin McBurney, studying for a masters degree in social work at Southern University at New Orleans, who also serves as the "butt referee" for the New Orleans chapter of CLAW, making sure that the wrestlers keep "one cheek on the chair, and two feet on the floor," at all times.

In the era of social networking, CLAW has spread across America. Chapters have sprung up in the Hudson Valley, Washington D.C., Chicago, New Orleans and elsewhere, sometimes through simple word-of-mouth, while the D.C. chapter was started after four people read an article about the Charlottesville league in the Washington Post in early 2010, and got together via Facebook.

Even though the chapters are all unique with their own quirks, there is a strong structure to the national organization. And while the arm wrestling itself is only for people identifying as women, there is room in CLAW's ranks for supportive men. Patrick McClintock, for example, is the only man on the organization's national board, and at 64, he's an unrepentant hippie who got involved with the Washington D.C. chapter because he happened to also be involved with the American Legion there, and had keys to a venue that could seat 200.

"I'm an old feminist, you know," McClintock said. "And I love it. It's a great sport, the people are terrific and the women are totally incredible. A lot of times people approach politics from the point of view of struggle, but it should be fun."

McClintock's friend Andrea Kavanagh is still trying to decide whether to modify her "Amy Smackhouse" character, following the death of her namesake, the singer Amy Winehouse, from alcohol abuse. Kavanagh stalks events with a bottle of Jack Daniels and a cigarette and is "drunk, obnoxious, and nasty," Kavanagh said.

Almost everyone involved with CLAW said the odd douchebag occasionally shows up at CLAW events, to leech over the women in their sexy outfits. But the majority of such men, and they are almost always men, are shut down quickly. And then there are those who are initially drawn to the electricity of seeing women in costume, but who leave CLAW events with a new understanding of women's empowerment, almost by accident.

"They're not necessarily having an intellectual response," Harding said. "But it's incredibly transgressive, in some ways, that we're able to use people's excitement about scary women in costumes to make a point about empowerment. They're not being duped. There's just some wonderful, unexpected merging there of base instincts with higher order values in a way that only a theatrical event makes possible."

The CLAW world championship will take place on June 16, 2012, at the Jefferson Theater in Charlottesville, Va.

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