



Ric Flair: To Be the Man (WWE)

By Ric Flair

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One of the biggest wrestling superstars of the past 20 years, and one of the greatest champions of all time, Ric Flair has carved out a legacy for himself that will never be surpassed. Born Richard Fliehr in Minneapolis, he made his professional wrestling debut in 1972, quickly rising to the top of the Mid-Atlantic region where he won the regional and tag-team titles as well as the US title. In 1975 however his career almost ended when he suffered a broken back, ironically in a plane crash, not in the ring. Showing incredible resilience, Flair returned to the ring within six months. Teaming up with Gregory Valentine, he won the NWA Tag Team Title, later winning the NWA Title by defeating 'The American Dream', Dusty Rhodes. Subsequently he entered the WWF and beat Randy 'The Macho Man' Savage for the WWF Heavyweight Title, only to return to the WCW with tremendous success. He is now back with WWE where he still competes at the same time as managing other stars, among them Triple H. Known as 'The Dirtiest Player in the Game', Ric Flair is one of the cagiest competitors ever to step into the ring. Outside the ring he is both flamboyant and outspoken, a personality who stands out even amongst the many larger-than-life stars of the WWE. His story is one that every WWE fan will want to read.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Keith Elliot Greenberg coauthored *Legends of Wrestling: Freddie Blassie -- Listen, You Pencil Neck Geeks* with wrestling icon "Classy" Freddie Blassie shortly before his death in 2003. A third-generation wrestling fan and senior writer for World Wrestling Entertainment publications, Greenberg is the author of more than thirty nonfiction children's books, and has written for *The New York Observer*, *USA Today* and *The European*, among others. He's also an award-winning television producer whose credits include *48 Hours*, *America's Most Wanted*, Court TV, VH-1, PBS, and The History Channel. He and his family live in Brooklyn, New York.

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Chapter One: Black Market Baby

I don't remember crying much as a kid. But that was a long time ago, before I left Minnesota for Charlotte, bleached my brown hair blond, and became "Nature Boy" Ric Flair. That's before I let my self-esteem depend on people with power in the wrestling business.

For the last fifteen years or so, I've been told that I'm the greatest professional wrestler who ever lived. Better than Frank Gotch or Lou Thesz, Bruno Sammartino or Verne Gagne, Gorgeous George or Hulk Hogan. Ric Flair can call himself a sixteen-time world champion. Ric Flair went on the road and wrestled every single day -- twice on Saturday, twice on Sunday, every birthday, every holiday, every anniversary -- for twenty straight years. I've spent more than thirty years of my life -- some days good, some bad--trying to prove to myself, to my peers, and to the fans who paid anywhere from five to five hundred dollars that I could be the best at what I chose to do for a living.

When you have no equal in professional wrestling, you have no equal in the sports world. Because -- despite what outsiders may think -- we are not ninjas or warriors. We are a special breed who can withstand pain, exhaustion, and injury without ever coming up for air. There is no off-season in our business, and we're the toughest athletes alive.

In the ring, I've always been at home. It's what lurks *outside* of it that scares me. For every legitimate punch I've ever taken to the head, every bone I've ever dislocated or every chair that's been bent across my spine, nothing can be as ruthless as the political sabotage inside the dressing room or promoter's office. While fans were saying that I could have a five-star match with anyone at any time, behind the scenes I'd be called an old piece of shit that didn't understand the public, couldn't read ratings, and deserved to be bankrupted along with my family.

These weren't things I heard once or twice; it went on for *years*. And after a while, it almost broke me. I felt myself losing the Ric Flair strut and, in many ways, my joy for life. When I came to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) in late 2001 after spending most of my career representing the competition, I didn't know if the wrestlers liked or respected me, or knew about my legacy. Hell, I began to wonder if I even had a legacy at all.

So that's why on May 19, 2003, at fifty-four years old, I was standing in the center of a ring in Greenville, South Carolina, in boots and trunks, crying like a little boy. The *Raw* TV cameras were off. This was something personal between myself, the "boys" -- as the members of our fraternity like to call each other --

and the fans.

"I went through a period where the Nature Boy wasn't the Nature Boy," I started, confessing to people who had watched me trade knife-edge chops with Wahoo McDaniel in 1976 after I came back from a plane crash; take Dusty Rhodes's bionic elbow in 1987 while my cohorts in the Four Horsemen circled the ring; and return in 1998 after my old company, World Championship Wrestling (WCW), tried to sue me out of my profession. Either these fans had been there personally, or their fathers had been there, or their grandfathers or great-grandfathers had told them about it. For nearly thirty-five years, it had been me and them. And when the tears came down my face, I was just letting it out to a group of people who, in some ways, knew me like a part of their families.

But the bad days were over, and here in Greenville, South Carolina, I finally saw it -- by the way the boys had hugged and honored me after my opponent, Triple H, carried me to one of the most satisfying matches of my career, and by the way the fans had stood and screamed and looked into my watery eyes, letting me know that, when the Nature Boy was in the ring, they'd never stopped believing.

"To be the man, you've gotta beat the man," I'd said so many times, taunting my opponents while I shoved my title into the camera. Well, I'd beaten myself, but now -- in *my* mind, at least -- I won back the crown. I was still "Slick Ric," "Space Mountain," "Secretariat in Disguise," a kiss-stealing, wheeling, dealing, jet-flying, limousine-riding son-of-a-gun.

This is my story. And, as I've proclaimed during many an interview, whether you like it, or whether you *don't* like it, learn to love it.

Wooooooooo!

My mother probably thought I was stillborn.

That's what they told a lot of the girls whose kids ended up with the Tennessee Children's Home Society in Memphis -- their babies were dead, and they just needed to sign a couple of papers. *Adoption* papers. Most of these girls were poor and uneducated. Some were even under sedation.

They had pulled the same scam on single mothers, promising that their kids would be kept in a nice, safe place until the girls could come and get them. A corrupt judge had been in on the whole scheme, taking away infants from people on public assistance. One woman in the Western State Hospital for the Insane had a new baby with a different inmate every year. When you handed her a pen, she'd sign anything.

Years later, *60 Minutes* would do an exposé on the case. Mary Tyler Moore would win an Emmy Award for her performance in *Stolen Babies*, a cable-TV movie about the scandal. But until the governor of Tennessee called for an investigation in 1950, five thousand children had been taken away and adopted by parents from all over the United States, including Joan Crawford (whose *Mommie Dearest* daughter supposedly came from the Tennessee Children's Home Society), June Allyson, Dick Powell, and the people I grew to love as my mother and father, Dick and Kay Fliehr.

My parents were both born in 1918, and had met at the University of Minnesota. My mother, Kathleen Virginia Kinsmiller, was from a town called Brainerd, Minnesota. She was a cultured woman who wrote articles for newspapers and magazines, and in 1968, she authored a book, *In Search of Audience*, about the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, a place where she introduced me to people like Jessica Tandy, Henry Fonda, and Elizabeth Taylor.

My father, Richard Reid Fliehr, was salutatorian of his high school class in Virginia, Minnesota. Like my

mother, he loved the theater, but he ended up taking pre-med courses, becoming a medic in the navy during World War II, and then a successful obstetrician and gynecologist.

I thought my dad was the most intelligent guy in the world. While working as an ob-gyn, he went back to school and got his master's and doctorate both in theater and English. He went on the road, performing in plays, and became president of the American Community Theater Association. Meanwhile, his practice -- Haugen, Fliehr and Meeker -- was one of the biggest in the Twin Cities. My dad probably delivered thousands of babies, among them wrestling promoter Gary Juster, former National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) Heavyweight Champion Gene Kiniski's kids (including his son Kelly, who wrestled in the World Wrestling Federation in the 1980s) and Superstar Billy Graham's daughter Capella.

Sadly, my parents weren't able to start a family of their own. In the mid-1940s, my mother gave birth to a daughter who died so quickly, I'm not sure if she had a name. Afterward, my mother couldn't become pregnant again, so in 1948 she began corresponding with the Tennessee Children's Home Society.

My father's salary was a bit of an issue. He was only making \$3,000 a year, but my mother explained that he was doing his residency in Detroit, and that any child they adopted would live a relatively privileged life, and most likely go to college.

On the form the agency sent them, my parents were questioned about their reasons for adopting. "Unable to have one of our own," my mother handwrote, "and our love of children."

"Will you treat the child as a member of your family?" they were asked. "Yes," my mother replied.

"If the child is returned," the questionnaire inquired, "will you pay the expense of bringing it back?" My parents agreed to the condition. But once they laid eyes on the Nature Boy, I wasn't going anywhere.

Depending upon which documents you read, my birth name was Fred Phillips, Fred Demaree, or Fred Stewart, and I was born in Memphis on February 25, 1949. My biological mother's name was Olive Phillips, Demaree, or Stewart. My biological father is listed as Luther Phillips.

Given all the deceit that went on between the Tennessee Children's Home Society and the authorities they paid off, I'll never really know the circumstances surrounding my birth, or what happened to me immediately afterward. The agency reported that, on March 12, 1949, "Olive Phillips and Luther Phillips did abandon and desert said child." A court later ruled that I was "an abandoned, dependent and neglected child," to be placed "under the guardianship of the Tennessee Children's Home Society," which now had the right to find me "a suitable home for adoption."

They didn't keep me around Memphis for long. On March 18, I was delivered to my adoptive parents at 6439 Devereaux in Detroit, just as the agency had dropped off other children at hotels like the Biltmore in Los Angeles -- an extra amenity, I guess, for preferred customers. My parents renamed me Richard Morgan Fliehr, and eventually took me home to Edina, Minnesota, just outside Minneapolis.

Believe it or not, I never bothered looking at my adoption papers until I started researching this book. The documents were sitting in a safe in my house, and I didn't even know my birth name. I was never curious. I'm still not. I'm an only child, and as far as I'm concerned, my parents have always been my mom and dad.

They never kept my adoption a secret from me; in fact, they described it as one of the happiest events of their lives. I'd have a birthday party and then, every March 18, my parents and I would go to an Italian restaurant (I always liked Italian food) by ourselves to celebrate my "anniversary."

In the summer, we'd take vacations that lasted three weeks and drive all ove...

Users Review

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