Wrestlemania VII – Hulk Hogan vs. Sgt. Slaughter

Since 1985, the event known to fans of professional wrestling as Wrestlemania has become the Super Bowl of Vince McMahon’s billion dollar wrestling company World Wrestling Entertainment. The history of Wrestlemania, an annual event that is available to television viewers by way of pay-per-view, is defined mostly by memorable matches in which the company’s biggest prize, the WWE (Heavyweight) Championship belt, is awarded to the winner. The main event from Wrestlemania VII, held March 24, 1991 at the Los Angeles Sports Arena, was a match for the WWE Championship; that match featured the most popular protagonist of the time Hulk Hogan versus Sergeant Slaughter, who was the champion heading into the event.

Aside from being the storyline that promoted the event, as evidenced by the advertisements that featured the two superstars facing and staring each other in the face, what made the WWE Championship match from Wrestlemania VII significant was its ties to the events at that time. For that year’s Wrestlemania, the character of Sergeant Slaughter, who in his early years as a WWE wrestler was well known as being the embodiment of patriotism and a proud bearer of the U.S. flag despite his tough drill sergeant demeanor, was inspired by the outbreak of the Persian Gulf War. In a business where making an impact is important in order to achieve in-the-ring success and notoriety among the fans, Slaughter made his impact in a controversial way by becoming an Iraqi sympathizer. Part of Slaughter’s transformation involved carrying the flag of Iraq, wearing an Iraqi military uniform, praising then-Iraqi-dictator Saddam Hussein especially for Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, and being managed by General Adnan, who bore striking resemblance to Saddam Hussein.
The challenger, Hulk Hogan, had already won the WWE Championship twice before, and was considered a Superman-like hero amongst the fans. Hogan was inserted into Wrestlemania’s main event after winning a 30-man over-the-top-rope battle royal (that event is named the Royal Rumble, and is unofficially the beginning of the “Road to Wrestlemania”). But Hulk Hogan didn’t just want to win the championship; outraged over Slaughter’s anti-American attitude and comments, Hogan sought to defend the honor of the United States. Hogan has always been the embodiment of patriotism and the American spirit just like Slaughter was years before. In fact, Hogan’s theme song is Rick Derringer’s “Real American.” Lyrics such as, “I am a real American / fight for the rights of every man / … / fight for what’s right / fight for your life,” reinforce Hulk Hogan’s American hero character.

Like all of the WWE’s headline matches, the events that occur on the company’s cable television programs build up the hype leading up to the match. On old programs such as “Superstars” and “Wrestling Challenge,” programs that aired on weekends and featured pre-recorded matches with lesser-known scrimmage-like opponents, WWE reporter Mean Gene Okerlund conducted interviews with Sergeant Slaughter and General Adnan. In one interview in particular, with General Adnan holding a poster of Hulk Hogan that the champion eventually sets on fire, Slaughter claims, “What I see is an infidel, a foreigner who has invaded my turf. I also see a man who plays by the old rules. But we’re not playing by the old rules anymore; we’re playing by Sergeant Slaughter’s rules!” As a result, Slaughter did what Davin Allen Grindstaff and Kevin Michael DeLuca argue are the common persuasive means shared between war and terrorism: “The injuring of bodies and the use of those bodies to anchor ideological beliefs” (307). This is evident by Slaughter attacking his beaten opponents with the pole carrying the Iraqi flag, and asserting that they should be salute the Iraqi flag. In another instance, after beating down Hulk Hogan, Slaughter covered his Wrestlemania opponent with the Iraqi flag.
The wrestling match itself was intense. In the early stages, Hogan mostly dominates with traditional wrestling tactics such as a side-headlock and a shoulderblock. Usually, matches with the heavyweight championship at stake are intense to the extent that the action takes place outside the ring. Technically, when wrestlers go outside the ring, they have until a ten-second count to get back in the ring or risk losing the match; but in the WWE, “anything goes” is the norm outside the ring, as evidenced by Slaughter choking Hogan with nearby electric cords. Back inside the ring, Slaughter then goes on the attack. In the excerpt from the DVD I will share with the class, the match picks up with Slaughter jumping on Hogan’s already-damaged kidney. Hogan is then struck by a steel chair Slaughter uses; later, Slaughter punches open a wound – from the chair shot – on Hogan’s face. Hogan’s bloodied face can be considered a sign of the American hero who “becomes an agent of … ‘the national purpose,’ in which an ordinary man in extraordinary conditions is proved to be a hero by suffering and dying for his people” (Grindstaff et. al. 312). After breaking free of Slaughter’s then-trademark-move the “Camel Clutch,” Hulk Hogan regains energy to go on the offensive. A series of counter punches leads to Hogan kicking Slaughter in the face and later executing his trademark-finishing move the Big Leg Drop. Hogan pins Slaughter for the three count and is named the three-time WWE Champion.

This match defined the entire event with Hulk Hogan’s patriotism inspiring the “Super-Stars and Stripes” theme. After Wrestlemania, the Hulk Hogan vs. Sgt. Slaughter rivalry was the main event at live non-televised events across the country. The rivalry culminated at the 1991 Summerslam pay-per-view event with the “Match Made in Hell,” where Hulk Hogan teamed up with the Ultimate Warrior to challenge Sgt. Slaughter and his allies General Adnan and Colonel Mustafa. This rivalry also contributed to both superstars being elected into the WWE’s Hall of Fame.