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**WATSON'S  
THEATRICALS**

include playing  
a trombone  
named Francesca  
to trumpet his  
wrestling stage  
arrival.







# ON TOP OF THE HEAP

By Ron Wagner '93

AUSTIN WATSON '05 (AKA XAVIER  
WOODS) IS THE TOAST OF THE WWE



## THE NEW DAY

Watson (Woods) is the centerpiece of The New Day, a wrestling trio that includes Big E (left) and Kofi Kingston.



## WHEN IT COMES TO POP CULTURE, Austin Watson '05 may be one of Furman's most famous graduates. "But wait," you might be saying, "I've never even heard of Austin Watson."

If you're one of millions of pro wrestling fans, though, you've undoubtedly heard of Xavier Woods and his team, New Day, which at the moment are as big as big gets in the highest level of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), the most watched wrestling organization on earth.

Well, they're the same person, with or without the kaleidoscope singlet.

"He's always been theatrical. No matter what, he was in character," says Furman Psychology Professor

Onarae Rice. "So when I see him up there, that's not a stretch."

By up there, Rice means inside the ring at one of WWE's sold-out shows around the world, including periodically at Greenville's 15,000-seat Bon Secours Wellness Arena. Watson gives Rice tickets when he comes to town, and it's hard to say what impresses Rice's sons more—Xavier Woods in person, or their dad knowing Xavier Woods.

"I have young boys, and they look at him and they're like, 'You know him? You know Xavier Woods?'" Rice says.

"He's a big deal. He even has an action figure."

Frenzied crowds often chant "New Day rocks" during shows. *Rolling Stone* named New Day 2015's WWE Wrestlers of the Year, describing Woods, Big E, and Kofi Kingston as "a hat-trick of pro-wrestling awesomeness." On December 14, New Day became the longest-reigning tag-team champion in WWE history, capping a rise that began when they united on July 21, 2014.

The success is the result of tremendous popularity with fans, which stems from over-the-top silly antics and exceptional oratory skills. It's fair to say that Woods (Watson) leads the way.

His theatrics include playing a trombone named Francesca backstage to announce his presence to the arena and introducing Francesca II's Scottish cousin, Agnes, a set of bagpipes at a show in Scotland (the original Francesca was broken by Chris Jericho, forcing Woods to replace "her" with "her sister" Francesca II. When Francesca II was also broken by an opponent she was replaced by Francesca II: Turbo. You really need to watch WWE and play video games to



understand). The shtick is so popular that not only are there multiple videos on YouTube of Woods playing his trombone, there are videos showing how to make his WWE 2K17 video game character play the trombone.

“Once you’re in, it’s all based on your work ethic and your personality, because personality is 80 percent of the game,” Watson says. “If you can get people either to love you or hate you then you’re doing your job. Me, I am very outspoken and try to be quick-witted when possible.”

New Day credits “unicorn magic” and “the power of positivity” for its success, and considering the success Watson has achieved and the obstacles he overcame to get there, it’s tempting to say he used the same thing. The reality, however, is something far more impressive: determination.

“Everything that I’ve done in life has been to gain some sort of skill to help me become a pro wrestler,” Watson says.

**PRO WRESTLING IS FILLED WITH BEHEMOTHS** who were once professional athletes, bulging with muscles and exuding testosterone. Growing up, Watson was small, uncoordinated and, by his own admission, “a nerd.” Still, he knew that was his world.

“I was into wrestling and video games and Jackie Chan movies pretty much all my childhood,” Watson says.

“Wrestling was just awesome—the spectacle, the fireworks, the action, the larger-than-life characters . . . It’s something I’ve wanted since I was in elementary school, and I got made fun of my entire life for it.”

When Watson recounts the decisions that led to professional wrestling, it’s hard to imagine anyone in any profession being more singularly focused.

“In middle school, I didn’t play any sports. I wasn’t athletic at all,” says Watson, who hails from Atlanta. “So I thought, well, I should probably get in shape and get my mind right. So I started amateur wrestling and playing football because they had a great weight-training program. I started doing track and field because I wanted to learn how to run properly because I was just a mess all around.”

And those weren’t even the biggest problems.

“Senior year of high school, I had really bad stage fright,” he says. “So I joined the show choir, because I figured if you could sing and dance in front of people then you can do anything in front of people. I did that to push the stage fright out of my mind, which helped a lot.”



**AS A STUDENT, WATSON** enjoyed time cheering from the stands and in front of them as a cheerleader.

**“I’D DRIVE TO GEORGIA OR NORTH CAROLINA OR DOWN TO MYRTLE BEACH OR WHEREVER TO WRESTLE. AND I’D WRESTLE FRIDAY NIGHT, SATURDAY, AND THEN TWO TIMES ON SUNDAY, AND BE BACK IN CLASS AT 8 A.M. ON MONDAY.”**

Once he arrived at Furman, Watson challenged his comfort zone again by joining the cheerleading team. Why? To learn to do flips and other gymnastics that would be required in the ring. He also began traveling around the Greenville area to participate in amateur wrestling events on the weekends.

“I’d get done with class on Friday, and I’d borrow my friend’s car, at least until I got my own, and I’d drive to Georgia or North Carolina or down to Myrtle Beach or wherever to wrestle. And I’d wrestle Friday night, Saturday, and then two times on Sunday, and be back in class at 8 a.m. on Monday,” Watson says. “If you want something, you’ll figure out a way to make it work. So, yeah, I’d miss out on all the parties and stuff, but in the long run it didn’t have any bearing on me because I got what I came to get.”

That included a degree. Watson was intent on attending the University of Miami or UCLA, but unbeknownst to him his mother also sent an application to Furman after hearing about the university from friends at her hair salon. When he was accepted, she then persuaded him to visit, even though he’d never heard of the school. On campus, Watson immediately knew all he needed to know.

“I’ll never forget this. When we pulled in and we saw the huge fountain and all the trees, it immediately felt like home for



some reason,” he says. “It felt right, and that’s why I picked it.”

Watson made no secret of his ambitions, even organizing wrestling shows on campus. But more quietly he was devoting himself to his psychology major. A serious student, he was one of Rice’s first summer research assistants, and he points to a seminar class on autism taught by Erin Hahn that changed his life.

“Sometimes they would have parents come in and tell us stories about their kids, and it would be three hours of us sitting in class crying because it was so sad,” Watson says. “I love children. They’re awesome, and that was probably one of the turning points that told me I wanted to work with children with autism, because there’s so many things going on in the field that people don’t know about, and there’s not enough hands on deck to help.”

There were times when Watson needed help, too, and without Rice there to give it he’s not sure what would have happened. The two formed a bond so tight that Rice attended Watson’s wedding.

“Without him I honestly don’t think I would have graduated, because Furman is a very difficult school,” Watson says. “We’d talk in his office for hours some days. He’s a huge part of my college life and my actual life . . . Going to Furman helped shape who I am as an adult, because of the relationships I was able to make with my professors.”

Often, their conversations dealt with race and the expectations African-American students sometimes feel. “I made myself very available to him to talk to me in a way that would allow him to not be polished all the time,” Rice says. “You don’t want to necessarily feel like you’re representing all of the black culture, but at the same time you do have that pressure . . . I told him that it was very important you be culturally aware no matter what goes on because you’re going to have a platform where you could impact a lot of kids.”

Rice may not have thought Watson would have quite this much of a platform, but that only makes him more thrilled to see that his protégé has taken his words to heart. One of the most unique aspects of New Day is the fact all of the members are black, and they’ve built their identity on being “nerdy” to the point of parody. That’s no accident.

“We all have kind of the same background: young, African-Americans, nerdy, into our

own stuff,” Watson says. “We’ve tried to change the landscape of what it means to be a black nerd. I kind of want to show kids who are in the position I was, no, it’s fine: Be whatever you want and enjoy it.”

**AT BARELY 5-FOOT-10 AND ABOUT 200 POUNDS**, Watson is small compared to most WWE wrestlers. That began as a significant impediment to his career as he worked through wrestling’s minor leagues, but now it’s merely a testament to how good he is at entertaining. He signed with WWE in 2010 and was called up to the top level in 2013. The magnitude of what he’d accomplished hit him shortly thereafter during a match at the AT&T Stadium in Dallas.

“To wrestle in front of 101,000 people, and at the end of our match be in the ring with Mankind, Shawn Michaels, and Stone Cold Steve Austin and it not be weird . . . that was probably the pinnacle,” Watson says.

Wrestling’s cartoon violence isn’t real, but the physical toll is. Watson had his front teeth knocked out in a match, struggles with two bulging discs in his neck that will likely herniate, and has no posterior cruciate ligament in his left knee. Now in his 30s, the clock is ticking on his body. He’s wise enough to know it.

“What I do hurts every single time I do it,” he says. “There are a lot of guys that get addicted to the rush, because it is unreal when you come out and people are chanting your name and wearing your merchandise . . . It’s not something I will be trying to hold onto once my time has passed. I have lots of other things on the back burners for when this is finished because I understand this job will not last forever.”

Despite his time-consuming day job, Watson keeps busy pursuing other “nerdy” endeavors. He’s working on a Ph.D. in psychology, and a YouTube channel he hosts using his first wrestling moniker, Austin Creed, called UpUpDownDown, has 810,000 subscribers who go out of their way to watch him play video games. There may never have been a more validated nerd in history.

“I always believed in myself that I would be in this ring doing what I love to do, but I never imagined that people would be crying at the sight of (New Day),” he says. “It’s a very humbling feeling, and it isn’t something I thought would ever happen to me.” ●



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**HIGH-FLYING CELEBRITY**

Watson has his own action figure and a prolific fan base.