

How Mexican Wrestling Works

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Look into the eyes of masked luchador Solar.
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Introduction to How Mexican Wrestling Works

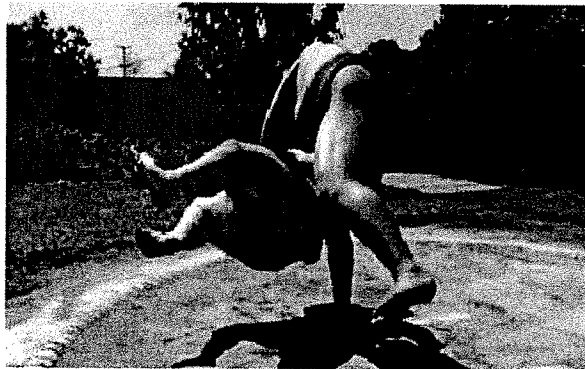
If you've ever seen their colorful masks and spectacular acrobatic wrestling style, you know that Mexican wrestlers add a spectacular twist to American pro wrestling. You might not know that *lucha libre* (the Mexican term for their form of wrestling) has a strong tradition going back decades, that popular Mexican wrestlers become film and TV stars, and that the *lucha libre* tradition is actually tied to significant social and political issues.

Mexican wrestling is similar in many ways to the form of wrestling that inspired it -- American professional wrestling. Both forms are full of colorful characters and outlandish story lines, and the rules in both types are very flexible and loosely enforced. In fact, *lucha libre* translates to "free fighting." As with American wrestling, people often say that Mexican wrestling is "fake." In some respects, this is true. The winners of most matches are predetermined, in order to move along planned, soap opera style plotlines. The wrestlers are usually acting out parts -- they don't really hate one another. On the other hand, if you've ever seen Rey Mysterio Jr. perform a *Huracán rana*, you know that there is nothing fake about the athleticism and training required to pull off the most impressive *lucha libre* moves.

The most obvious thing that sets *lucha libre* apart is that almost every major Mexican wrestling star wears a mask and doesn't use his real name (and yes, female wrestlers do exist, but for the sake of pronoun sanity, we'll focus on the men). The true identity of the wrestler is kept secret. In fact, it's an incredible dishonor for a Mexican wrestler to have his mask removed, or to be seen without his

mask. In rare special matches, the loser will be unmasked, a momentous event for the fans.

In this article, we'll climb into the ring and explore the world of *lucha libre*, from its rules and stars to the cultural influences that underlie its spectacle.



Launch Video



These colorful masks are typical of *lucha libre*.
Daniel Berehulak/Getty Images News/Getty Images

Some *luchadores* (the term for Mexican wrestlers) take their *lucha libre* identity outside the ring, keeping the mask on when out in public. Some families pass their ring identities on to successive generations, with a son taking over the same name and mask as his father.

Lucha libre wrestling is characterized by many aerial moves, acrobatic maneuvers and intricate combinations, one following after the other in rapid-fire succession. *Luchadores* are generally smaller, faster and more agile than their American counterparts.

Popular *luchadores* are always heroes admired by the fans. They may represent Aztec warriors, Christian saints or comic book superheroes, but they always fight for the common man -- workers, farmers and the poor. They are known as *técnicos*. The villains of Mexican wrestling, called *rudos*, represent very real problems faced by Mexicans -- corrupt politicians, crooked police officers and drug dealers. Americans make for popular villains as well. Wrestlers playing the part of an American villain will take on a racist and classicist attitude to inflame the crowd [source: Bondurant].

Lucha libre style wrestling isn't confined to Mexico. In addition to the crossover Mexican stars who have made a name for themselves (and their country) in American pro wrestling, Japanese professional wrestling has been heavily influenced by *lucha libre*. Masked stars like Último Dragon

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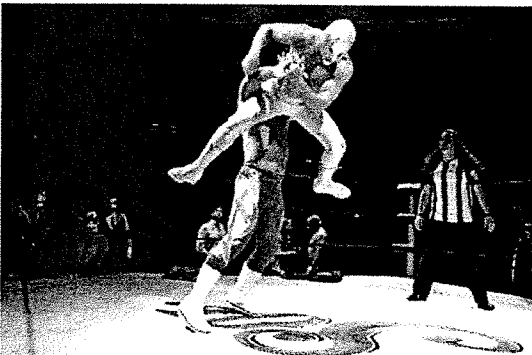
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Tsuki, a lucha libre "mini," performs alongside a burlesque dancer at a Lucha VaVOOM show at the Mayan Theatre in Los Angeles. Matthew Simmons/WireImage/Getty Images

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El Hijo del Santo (the Son of the Saint) outmaneuvers his opponent. Daniel Berehulak/Getty Images News/Getty Images

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and Tiger Mask took the Mexican mask tradition to a new level, creating elaborate superhero characters with carefully crafted masks that often include fins, horns, ridges and other adornments.

Who were the first luchadores? Find out on the next page as we trace the course of lucha libre's history.

Lucha Libre Yesterday and Today

Lucha libre dates back to the 1930s, when Don Salvador Lutteroth Gonzalez, sometimes called the Father of Lucha Libre, started the first Mexican wrestling league, **Empresa Mexicana de Lucha Libre (EMLL)**. He had been inspired by wrestling matches he saw in Texas, and he initially brought in many wrestlers from the United States. As the league's popularity grew, more Mexican wrestlers joined the league, often splitting their time between Mexico and Spain. The Spanish Civil War shut down most Spanish leagues, so most lucha libre wrestlers ended up in Mexico [source: Bondurant].

Today, the EMLL continues to thrive as **Consejo Mundial de Lucha Libre (CMLL)**, which translates to "worldwide wrestling council." Rival league **Asistencia Asesoría y Administración (AAA)** and a number of smaller, independent ones, such as **International Wrestling Revolution Group (IWRG)**, compete in the space as well. The two big leagues own several arenas designed specifically for wrestling and have forged agreements with the major American wrestling promotions, allowing Mexican wrestlers to gain important exposure in front of a new audience and giving the American leagues increased interest in lucha libre hotbeds like Los Angeles.

Lucha VaVOOM, a variation on lucha libre, has enjoyed great popularity in the United States in recent years. The Lucha VaVOOM events have been billed as "Sexo y Violencia," (sex and violence), since the night's festivities include not only lucha libre matches, but also burlesque stripteases and comedy routines.

Next, we'll look at the rules and moves used in lucha libre and learn about famous luchadores.

Lucha Libre Competition

Mexican wrestling championships are divided into well-defined weight classes. Each league can create their own weight classes, but common classes include lightweight, heavyweight, welterweight and light-heavyweight.

The rules are very similar to American pro wrestling. In single matches, there are four basic ways to win: pinning the opponent to the mat for a count of three, knocking him out of the ring for a count of 20, making him submit (which he signals by either waving his hands or telling the referee -- luchadores don't "tap out" like American pro wrestlers) or by disqualification. Performing an illegal move and removing an opponent's mask are just two ways to get disqualified. There's also an "excessive violence" (or *exceso de rudezas*) rule, in which the referee can stop the fight and award the win to a luchadore if he's clearly giving his opponent a beating.

But singles matches aren't nearly as popular as tag team matches. In the **three on three tag team match** -- also called *trios matches* or *Relevos Australianos* (Australian tag matches) -- each team appoints a captain. To win, two out of the three luchadores must be pinned, or the other team must score a pin-fall against the captain. This is the main type of lucha libre match, and there are usually **two referees** (often one *tecnico* and one *rudo*) to call the action. There are also four on four *atomicos matches* and five on five matches (like the WWF "Survivor Series"). In the latter, the goal is to pin the team captain.

In **two on two tag team matches**, or *parejas*, both team members must be eliminated to win. Actual "tags" aren't necessary in any of the tag team matches; when a luchadore falls outside of the ring, his partner can immediately enter the ring. Because of this, lucha libre tag team matches often go much faster than American pro wrestling ones.

Most lucha libre wrestling moves are similar to American wrestling moves, though they have different names. In fact, a number of acrobatic moves that are common in American wrestling today were actually developed by Mexican wrestlers. Here are some of the major moves:

- **Rana** -- a pin position in which one wrestler holds the opponent's shoulders down with his legs and hooks the opponent's legs with his arms. The famous *Huracan rana* is a way to get into the rana pin by starting with a flying headscissor, created by Huracan Ramirez.
- **Plancha** -- a move in which one wrestler is flat on his back and the opponent dives onto him from above with his full body.
- **Tornillo** - a *plancha* in which the diving wrestler twists in the air
- **Tope** - any move involving a head-butt
- **Centón** - a *plancha* in which the diving wrestler lands on his back

There are certainly many more moves used in lucha libre, as well as variations and combinations of other moves. Wrestlers often give these moves their own creative names, just as in American wrestling. The "piledriver" is illegal in lucha libre and results in instant disqualification. Luchadores still use it to advance the storyline, and often leave on a stretcher to show how dangerous they are.

Ready to meet the masked stars of Mexican wrestling? On the next page, we'll get to know lucha libre's past and present icons.

LUCHA LIBRE IN THE MEDIA

The characters of lucha libre have always had as strong a presence in the media as in the ring. El Santo starred in more than 50 films, not to mention comic books and TV shows. Other luchadores had film careers of their own. One character, **SuperBarrio**, exists only outside the ring, showing up to support labor unions, community groups and anti-crime initiatives. Lucha libre has seeped into popular culture in other ways, too.

The children's cartoon "Mucha Lucha" takes place in a town where everyone is a luchadore, complete with masks and outlandish wrestling moves. Homestar Runner Internet cartoon character **Strong Bad**, based on a wrestler in an old Nintendo video game. The shirtless Strong Bad wears a luchadore's mask and acts slightly villainous, speaking with a faint Mexican accent. "Nacho Libre" is a 2006 movie starring Jack Black, written by "Napoleon Dynamite" creator Jared Hess. In the film, Black plays a cook at a Mexican orphanage who takes up the identity of a luchadore to help provide for the orphans.



El Hijo del Santo (the son of the Saint) continues the legacy of his father, El Santo, a common practice among lucha libre families. Daniel Berehulak/Getty Images News/Getty Images

Lucha Libre Stars

The most legendary star of lucha libre is undoubtedly **El Santo**. His full name was Santo, el Enmascarado de Plata (The Saint of the Silver Mask), and his real name was Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta. El Santo began wrestling under various names in the 1930s, then created the Santo identity in the 1940s. His legendary status began in the '50s, mainly by way of a comic book featuring the character. El Santo would go on to star in dozens of cheap, quickly produced films, including titles like "Santo vs. the Vampire Women." El Santo was never unmasked -- he was buried still wearing the mask after his death in 1984. Only one known photograph of Santo without the mask is known to exist, and it is not publicly available.

The **Blue Demon** was a contemporary of El Santo. They were opponents in the ring, but appeared together in several movies. The Blue Demon starred in more than 20 of his own films.

Mil Máscaras, whose name translates as "Man of a Thousand Masks," was the first Mexican wrestler to have a major impact on American wrestling, appearing in many WWF (now WWE) events. He also wrestled in Japan and starred in several movies.

Rey Mysterio is perhaps the most popular luchadore who has made the jump into American wrestling leagues. Inspired by his great uncle, Rey Misterio Sr., Mysterio's style typifies lucha libre. From his early days in the Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) group to high-profile work in WWE, Mysterio has become known for his colorful masks and astonishing aerial maneuvers.

Eddie Guerrero was an immensely popular star in the WWE, despite the fact that he was a rudo, or heel, for most of his career. Guerrero was part of an extended wrestling family with a lineage tracing back to his father, one of the original luchadores, along with three wrestling brothers, an uncle, a nephew and a cousin. His death in 2005 of a heart condition possibly aggravated by prior steroid use was highly controversial.

Mistico debuted in CMLL in 2006 with a suitably "mystic" mask, complete with crucifixes. The high-flying tecnico became a top draw for the promotion before joining the United States' WWE in 2011 as Sin Cara, which translates to "without a face." His name and mask were altered due to CMLL's ownership of the character.

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