

CHOTT (CENTER) THROWS DOWN!



## Out at a Bout

# Smackdown!

Comedian Bill Chott referees a new high-energy, wrestling-themed comedy game at The Stable.

BY MARGARET BAUER

**I**t's 9:30 p.m. on a Wednesday in early June, and a thunderstorm is raging. By no stretch of the imagination is this prime bar time. Yet when we step inside The Stable on Cherokee Street for the Comedy Stage Match, nearly every table in the brewpub is full.

Just before 10 p.m., comedian Bill Chott appears, wearing shades and a twill fedora. He strolls out to take the mic amid a chorus

of boos from the audience. "Eh, shaddup," he snarls, waving them off. "I'm from the World Federation of Competitive Comedy!" he barks in his famed announcer voice. Post-introduction, keyboardist Darrell Barber plays an organ cue, and Chott ducks backstage, returning in a black-and-white striped referee's jersey and thick black glasses. He asks those assembled to rise for the singing of the national anthem, and the audience heartily obliges.

Earlier, we asked him to give us a preview of the evening's tenor. Would the wrestling theme, billed as "*Whose Line Is It Anyway?* meets *Wrestling at the Chase*," mean any danger of, say, flying people or chairs? Chott refused to promise we *wouldn't* be in danger ("Anything could happen," he said), but assured us the theme referred more to the "competitive nature of the improv that we're doing. So they're trash-talking like pro wrestlers, but about musical improv games, or things like that."

The midweek show harkens back to the friendlier, sillier days of wrestling. The ground rules are simple: "Nothing above our heads, and nothing below the belt," Chott told us. ("And nothing too...colleegy," he adds later.) Participants' manner of dress runs the gamut from black T-shirts and tights (with a white feather boa and kneepads) to red-and-white striped superhero hose. The setup is decidedly lo-fi: Between rounds, Chott dings the bell (the bottom of a stainless-steel mixer) with a utensil, as the four teams of two—the West County Winos, Soulard Slingers, Meramec Dropouts, and Dogtown Dubliners—switch places for the next game.

This new show features only students from The Improv Trick, Chott's nearby studio. "We're interested in taking this sort of show out to churches and corporations and things like that, and I can't just have any improviser up there, because a lot of local improvisers haven't been professionally trained," he says. "They learn that they can get quick laughs doing dirty jokes. I kind of like to instill in my students that you don't have to work blue; you get 10 times the big laughs when you're avoiding it."

The strategy works. At the beginning of one Royal Rumble "storytelling" round, Chott asks the audience for a title. "Free Ballin'!" someone shouts. "Free...Ballin'," repeats Chott. "I can only assume you mean the day when McDonald's lets everyone into the ball pit for free." The crowd cracks up, and the improvisers go ahead with the game.

One hour and a half-dozen comedy games later, the performers take their bows, to raucous applause. The second Comedy Stage Match of the season has proved a success.

*Catch the Comedy Stage Match every Wednesday at 10 p.m. through the end of the month at The Stable, 1821 Cherokee. Suggested donation \$10, with proceeds benefiting local improv students. To learn more, call The Improv Trick at 314-922-1998 or go to [theimprovertrick.com](http://theimprovertrick.com).*