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Sky's the limit for TNA's Daniels

BY MIKE MOONEYHAM (CONTACT)
 Sunday, May 24, 2009



It's been a long time coming for Christopher Daniels.

Sixteen years into the business, the Total Nonstop Action sensation is finally knocking on the door of real stardom.

That's not to say Daniels, 39, hasn't enjoyed his share of success in the trade. He's been recognized for years as one of the most talented competitors in the industry.

But being talented and actually drawing top main-event money can sometimes be two different things in the wrestling business.

Daniels' last "official" TNA match as Christopher Daniels was at a TV taping following a December 2007 pay-per-view.

For the past 16 months, he's appeared under a hood as Curry Man and most recently as Suicide, subbing in that role for the injured Frankie Kazarian.



TNA Photo
 Christopher Daniels is hitting his stride in TNA.

Curry Man was a gimmick Daniels popularized in Japan and one that he wished could have been better utilized this past year in TNA. The cartoon-like character, a mid-card comedy act, was nothing like his previous, darker "Fallen Angel" persona.

"I wished more had been done with it," he says. "I can't really argue about it at this point. I wish they had done different things. But what are you going to do?"

He had better luck working as Suicide, and the stint may have earned him a crack at the top of the card.

"Christopher Daniels," whose ring moniker has been shortened to merely "Daniels," returned without the mask in April and is now enjoying a bigger role with the company. He worked as a member of Team Jarrett (Jeff Jarrett, A.J. Styles and Samoa Joe)

against the Main Event Mafia (Kurt Angle, Kevin Nash, Scott Steiner and Booker T) at last month's Lockdown

pay-per-view, and also is working tonight's Sacrifice PPV against the original Suicide (Kazarian).

Daniels has been more than pleased with his seemingly sudden ascension and feels comfortable working with the TNA headliners.

"I feel real confident about what's happening with me right now," he says. "I feel like this is probably one of the better spots I've been in in terms of the guys I'm with. I've been looking forward to working with Kurt (Angle) and the main-event guys for some time now. I felt like when they first came in I could have contributed. But I'm getting that chance now, so I can't complain about that."

Mid-Atlantic roots

Daniels' pro wrestling roots are in the Mid-Atlantic area where he grew up watching the likes of Dusty Rhodes and The Four Horsemen. He moved to Fayetteville, N.C., when he was 3, and graduated from Fayetteville's Methodist College before moving with his wife a year later to Chicago where he began his mat career with Windy City Pro Wrestling during the early '90s.

The Mid-Atlantic area, he says, will always have a soft spot in his heart.

"Oh, man, I grew up watching him (Flair)," Daniels enthuses. "I got to see him wrestle Magnum T.A., Nikita (Koloff), Dusty Rhodes probably three or four times. My first

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recollection of watching wrestling was when John Studd was one of the Masked Superstars, and they were doing stuff with Blackjack Mulligan, and Paul Jones was their manager. I saw a lot of that back then. It was great."

It wasn't until a few years later, though, that Daniels actually became a student of the game.



TNA Photo
Christopher Daniels has Kurt Angle on the mat during TNA's Lockdown pay-per-view

"The mid-80s was when I actually first started paying attention to stuff like babyfaces and heels, and the storyline part of it. I had always watched, but never started really paying attention to it until I was old enough to understand the angles. The first Starrcade match I remember was the I Quit match with Magnum T.A. and Tully Blanchard. I go a ways back."

Daniels also has watched the wrestling business change over the years.

"It didn't have the scandal or carry the negative connotation that I think a lot of people associate with pro wrestling these days. To me being a pro wrestler was more of a question as to how I'm going to make a living doing it, but it was never a question of being ashamed to do it or telling my family I was going to be a wrestler."

Daniels chuckles when he ponders the misconceptions many people — and even some fans — have concerning the business.

"I think people think it's easy. A lot of them have their preconceived notions of what we do. They think it's a cakewalk. They assume we're just actors and they think we're falling on a trampoline, using blood capsules and just pretending to get hit by a chair. Just the obvious nonsense. It's still there. Even today I get people asking if it's real or fake, and how did I get that blood. I don't. It's real blood. What do you say to those people?"

Career detours

Daniels could have been a mainstream star years ago, but was sidetracked by a combination of bad timing and bad luck. Twice he received contracts with the now-defunct WCW only to have an unkind fate rear its ugly head.

"I was (first) hired by Kevin Sullivan. But right before I started was when they switched everything back over to Vince Russo and Eric Bischoff. The person who hired me and the person who knew all about me and the person who had written stuff for me was gone. My first week was the day they were in Denver and they were doing the big reset. It was supposed to be my first day with Kevin. Before that happened, though, he was let go."



TNA Photo
Christopher Daniels will appear on TNA's Sacrifice pay-per-view tonight.

Daniels, who had signed an abbreviated developmental deal with WWE in 1998, says he basically drifted from that point on.

"Vince didn't know me and Eric didn't know me, and they were trying to justify the guys at the Power Plant. I literally got lost in the shuffle. So I was there and traveled with them for a while. They had an idea for me and Vampiro that never panned out. They also had an idea for me and David Flair and Daffney that never got off the ground. By the time six months had rolled around and they hadn't done anything with me ... they're paying me money and my contract was somewhat sizable for someone who hadn't been on TV. I was making too much money, but they weren't putting me on television. What could I do?"

Daniels admits that at the time he didn't understand the difference between getting the job and keeping the job.

"I thought that once you had the job, it was yours. What happened was I never ever got a chance to earn

my job or at least earn the reason to keep my job. They never put me in the ring. I lost the job despite the fact that I showed up and did everything they asked me to do. It was frustrating. It would have been one thing had I gone out there and hurt somebody or did bad promos, but none of that happened. I didn't do anything because they didn't have anything for me to do."

A second stint with the company also was less than fortuitous. A match with fellow indy standout Michael Modest almost saw Daniel's career come to a halt when he landed on his head as a result of a botched Asai moonsault. Both were top-rate workers, however, and both were offered 90-day contracts.

Shortly thereafter the purchase of WCW by the World Wrestling Federation meant neither would wrestle another match in WCW.

ROH and TNA

Daniels was a human highlight reel who had always seemed to be within reach of that elusive spotlight in the wrestling business. He earned a good salary working in Japan where he had established a solid reputation, but it also kept him from committing full-time to any other promotion.

He first earned mainstream notoriety during his tenure in Ring of Honor where he was known as one of that company's "Founding Fathers." His matches with opponents such as Bryan Danielson, C.M. Punk, Samoa Joe and Low Ki garnered lofty praise throughout wrestling circles.

At the same time he was headlining for ROH, Daniels was working with the fledgling TNA. It eventually would mean the end of his full-time gig with Ring of Honor.

"That's why I ended up going with TNA when they pulled their guys," says Daniels, who signed a contract with TNA in 2004. "I could have easily gone with Ring of Honor, but at that time the contract that I had was for a certain amount of dates and guaranteed money. As much as I liked Ring of Honor, they weren't running as often as that. It would have been a much bigger loss for me had I gone with Ring of Honor."

TNA meant more mainstream exposure — and more pay.

"I hated the fact that I had to choose and we got put in that place. But we had to do what was best for us. I had to do what was best for me and what was best for my family."

Daniels laments that things were never quite the same after he parted ways with the company.

"The thing that really breaks my heart about it is even when I went back to Ring of Honor, I don't think they ever looked at me again the same way. My opinion was that whatever company I was working for at the time, I was always loyal to. I felt a strong loyalty to Ring of Honor, but when I came back, they just looked at me as a TNA guy. I think that affected the way I was booked and the way I was presented."



Leroy Burrell/The Post and Courier
Christopher Daniels lands a picture-perfect dropkick against Petey Williams

Much like he had dazzled ROH fans with his exceptional ring work, Daniels made a splash in TNA as its X-division champion.

A three-way X-division title match with Joe and Styles in 2005 was regarded as one of the top matches of the year.

"I'm real proud of the work I did in Ring of Honor, but I think my best matches came in TNA," says Daniels. "My stuff with A.J. and my stuff with Joe ... it's hard for me to say that I did anything better than those matches. That has probably been my high point."

Although the X-division arguably was the company's most unique asset, TNA's older talent usually were put in the main-events spots and were the focus of the televised product.

Daniels has come to realize that star power draws ratings.

"Once Spike TV became a priority ... they were looking for a certain rating. Sometimes it's hard to justify having guys that, even though talent-wise can fit the bill, you've got executives looking for ratings and wondering why it's not happening. It becomes a balancing act where you're trying to get guys with names and guys with talent."

"Sometimes you can second-guess decisions all you want, but sometimes you're really stuck," he adds. "I feel like they're trying to present where the show builds from the beginning to the end. That's the path that we've chosen. You have to support that and go with it as best you can. When we're given what we're given, we only can try to do the best we can do. We can't affect what's written. All we can do is once we step into the ring, make it worth not changing the channel for."

Time is now

Daniel feels like he has been given new life in TNA, and that now is the time he can move into a main-event spot.



TNA Photo
Christopher Daniels' favorite TNA moment was the three-

No longer one of the industry's top "independent" performers, Daniels finds himself in the enviable role as one of wrestling's top performers. Period.

There's a way to climb the ladder, and Daniels points to the fact that other former X-division standouts, most notably Styles and Joe, have moved up to main-event positions.

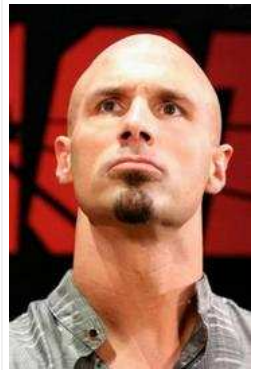
"Now is the opportunity for me to show that I belong in the ring with guys like Kurt and guys like Booker. I belong at the top of the card with the people like A.J. and Joe, who three or four years ago, we were in that group. Literally two years ago I was still doing stuff sort of third from the card. At Lockdown I was in the semi-main wrestling Kurt Angle. The position that I'm in now is as top of a spot as since I was X-division champion. My job now is to prove that no matter who I'm in the ring with, I deserve to be looked at in that light."

Fallen Angel

way match with Samoa Joe And A.J. Styles in 2005.

Daniels owns the rights to the ring name Christopher Daniels, but his real name is Daniel Christopher Covell.

"Christopher's actually my middle name. I think it's the Shawn Michaels (Michael Shawn Hickenbottom) version of finding your name."



Christopher Daniels grew up on Mid-Atlantic wrestling.

He also came up with the "Fallen Angel" character.

"It was actually like a two-part thing. I came up with the name way back like in '94. I had been looking for a name. I was just Christopher Daniels for a long time. I was going over names and had pitched that as a name of a tag team with my partner in Chicago. He didn't like that as a tag-team name, but I decided to keep it as my own."

Daniels continued to tweak the character.

"Maybe two or three years after that, I got the idea of wrestling with a priest's robe and having a religious overtone. I was sort of influenced by Goldust because I saw what he was doing with the whole idea of his ambiguous sexuality and how it influenced everybody across the board. I thought that if there was something that would affect people across the board, religion would be one of those things. I thought I could reach the masses. Over the course of my career, sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't."

There were periods of time, says Daniels, when it really seemed to be rolling. There also were periods when he felt he was allowed to test the boundaries.

"It's what you have to do with a gimmick like that. You see how far you can go without fear of falling off the ledge. Sometimes I thought I had that freedom, and sometimes I didn't. But I always understood the limits. It was the nature of the beast. Shock without offending."

Onward and upward

Daniels, now a 16-year veteran who has wrestled all over the world for a variety of promotions, feels he has finally hit his stride in TNA. What makes it even more gratifying is that it's a company he enjoys working for.



Christopher Daniels and Roddy Piper (right) were among the guests of Fox Searchlight at the premiere of "The Wrestler" earlier this year.

"I think TNA's growth has always been real slow and steady," he says. "We've never made momentous (leaps) ... cable access to Monday night. But I think every step we've taken has been a step forward rather than a huge step forward and then a stumble. We've been following a certain business plan, and it may not have always been clear to us what was happening, but in the end it's been positive for us and we've been making these strides from Wednesday pay-per-views to Fox Sports Net to Spike TV to prime-time Spike TV to prime-time two hours on Thursday night. And now the fact that we're doing a very strong house show schedule ... that's a huge deal for us."

Daniels says he feels confident that TNA president Dixie Carter has the company steered in the right direction.

"She's awesome. I've been very lucky that Dixie has not only been just a big supporter of me, but just the fact that she's put so much effort into the company. She's put her faith in the guys, in the wrestlers and creative, in Jeff Jarrett, the entire group. You can't ask for more support than that."

Daniels says he is also pleased with the direction of the TNA creative staff, and counts Vince Russo among his top supporters.

"Vince has always had a very high opinion of me. I think he's given me opportunities and has always been on my side. He's the guy I'm following in terms of just putting my trust in and writing the character and write what he wants me to do. I feel if I can just let that go and let him do his job, that he's going to help me get to a position where I can go out and do my job in the best light possible.

"The creative is going well. Jeff (Jarrett) is doing really well. The fact that we have guys like Mick Foley and Jim Cornette backstage doing things is a huge plus."

Daniels has experienced a number of detours and his share of pitfalls in the business. But, he says, they all helped shape his career.

"You can't help but talk about that stuff. It's funny. But had all those things not happened in those certain ways, I wouldn't be where I'm at today. Good or bad — that's my life. I'll laugh about it when I write the autobiography."

Reach Mike Mooneyham at (843) 937-5517 or mooneyham@postandcourier.com. For

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