

Redneck in spandex plays patriot games

United States

Nico Hines Washington

Never in the field of sporting entertainment can so many people have queued up to be mocked and racially abused.

A predominantly Hispanic crowd fills arenas all over the US to hear a man in red spandex shorts attack them for cheating their way into the country and stealing American jobs.

R. J. Brewer, the most unlikely sporting villain in the United States, is an all-American ultra-conservative patriot. As soon as his boot touches the canvas, thousands of Hispanic families are up on their feet hurling abuse at one of the champions of Lucha Libre, a wrestling phenomenon introduced from Mexico four years ago.

Brewer is one of the few white wrestlers in the sport where he competes against opponents with exotic masks, Latin American costumes and names such as Azteco and Tigresa Caliente.

Before the bouts, he antagonises opponents with anti-immigration rhetoric. He demands that the border be closed and immigration halted while pledging to drive foreign competitors out of wrestling.

"I tell the crowd that when the night's over I'm gonna come out there and ID every one of them to make sure they're legal to be here," he told *The Times*. "That really gets them fired up."

With the American economy in the

doldrums and unemployment high, hostility towards immigrants has risen.

Some politicians, including Jan Brewer the Arizona Governor, have responded by drafting harsh new anti-immigration laws, while Lucha Libre officials mischievously hint that R.J. Brewer is her son. "I don't know if the Governor knows, or if she'd like it or find it insulting," the wrestler said. *The Times* inquired, but there was no response from her office in Phoenix.

"There are often signs about me and my mom, you know, my character's mom. There was one in Spanish that said that 'I'm the son of a bitch'," he said. "I've had stuff thrown at me. They really get into it."

Brewer, who often arrives ringside with a police escort, is no longer allowed to take part in autograph sessions because his security cannot be guaranteed. His real identity is John Stagikas, a veteran wrestler who also goes by the nom de guerre Hurricane John Walters.

The multimillion-dollar business was introduced to America by Steve Ship, who came across the popular free-style wrestling format while he was travelling in Mexico.

More than a century after the Statue of Liberty welcomed the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free," America's largest minority group has been rewarded with a pantomime villain to call their own.



R. J. Brewer: 'I tell the crowd I'm gonna ID them. That gets them really fired up'

Polls reveal Newt's bubble could burst

Alexandra Frean Sioux City, Iowa

Newt Gingrich came under fire in the race for the Republican presidential nomination in the last debate before the Iowa caucus as a poll shows him slipping behind his rival, Mitt Romney.

While it is too early to conclude that Mr Gingrich's bubble has burst, he clearly cannot take for granted victory in Iowa, which kicks off the selection process with its caucus on January 3.

After three weeks of polls showing Mr Gingrich in the lead in Iowa, a new Rasmussen Reports poll shows him dropping 12 points from a high of 32 per cent in mid-November, to 20 per cent now — one point behind Mr Romney, the former Massachusetts governor.

Another survey from Public Policy Polling, showed him declining from 27 to 22 per cent, but still ahead.

He has also come under criticism in the past week from right-wing commentators, who warned that if he wins the Republican nomination the Democrats will make sure that the presidential election will be about him and his "baggage" rather than Mr Obama's record in office.

The Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann attacked Mr Gingrich in a televised debate in Sioux City. She criticised him for taking \$1.6 million (£1 million) to advise the mortgage giant Freddie Mac, which was at the heart of the 2008 financial meltdown.

"I didn't have a chance to buy you anything,' she said, then held both closed hands toward him. Uncurled her fingers. In each cupped palm a brown egg. He took them. They were cold. He thought it a tender, wonderful thing to do. She had given him something, the eggs, after all, only a symbol, but they had come from her hands as a gift. To him. It didn't matter that he'd bought them himself at the supermarket the day before. He imagined she understood him, that she had to love him to know that it was the outstretched hands, the giving, that mattered."

Annie Proulx

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