

GUEST: ED FRANCIS

LSS 617 (LENGTH: 26:16)

FIRST AIR DATE: 4/9/13

I can say to the Hawaiian people that if it wasn't for them and all the fans, I wouldn't have had that, a life like I've had.

From a kid living on the mean streets of Chicago to a entertainment sports legend in Hawaii, meet wrestling icon, Gentleman Ed Francis, next on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. In this episode of Long Story Short, we'll talk with legendary wrestler and wrestling promoter, Ed Francis. We catch up with him at age eighty-six. He was a household name in the Hawaii of the 1960s and 70s, during the run of the wildly popular 50th State Big Time Wrestling. Long before his involvement with wrestling, however, Edmund Charles Francis, Jr. began life in the tough city streets of Chicago, in the midst of the Great Depression.**

I've read what you ate, the sandwiches you ate during the depression. What were they?

Oh, yeah. Well, they called it charity then. We used to go with my mother, and we'd stand in line at about four o'clock in the morning, and they give you some cheese and dried beans, and a big can of lard, and all that kinda stuff. And that's what you took home to eat. And I used to make ... and they gave her flour, so my mother used to make bread. And then I would put lard on a piece of bread with some ketchup and salt and pepper, and I'd put it in the oven, and let it warm up a little bit, and that's what I'd eat.

Oh ...

[CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE]

But it tasted good. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] How did your parents handle that depression?

Well, finally, when it hit real hard and then my father lost the business. He didn't work for six years. He couldn't get a job anyplace. And my mother worked several different jobs, but she worked for the Vassar underwear company I

remember she got a dollar a day there. And then, she got a job working at an ice cream parlor that was right down the street from us. The guy's name was Pete Palastini [PHONETIC]. He had this ice cream parlor, and he hired my mother. So, she worked a few little jobs like that, and that's how we survived.

How many children?

Just my brother and I.

So four people living on a --

Yeah.

-- reduced income.

Yeah.

I know for a while, you moved to public housing. Were you in rough neighborhoods?

That was quite a ways after that, when I was around twelve or thirteen years old, we moved to public housing. But before that, I had all kinds of things that I did, a little shoeshine thing, and I would go in all the bars.

How old were you?

I was about, I guess, nine or ten years old.

Uh-huh.

And I'd go in the bar, and I knew nobody's gonna want me to shine shoes. But they had a free lunch counter there. So I'd come in with the thing on my shoulder, and I'd go over and make a sandwich. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE]

They had good food in those bars. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE]

And the bartenders never kicked me out or anything. That's after, of course, prohibition was ... Roosevelt ... I forget when they repealed the law.

After Ed Francis' family lost the business, life was bleak in the Depression -- ravaged, rat -- infested Chicago of the 1930s and 40s. But a casual visit by young Ed to a gym near his home would plant the seeds for a better life, with pay.

When did the wrestling bug hit?

Well, the wrestling bug hit me when I was about twelve years old. That was when I was already in the Julia Lathrop Homes, where we moved.

The public housing?

Yeah. And I went to this park called Hamlin Park. And it was like a circus when you walked in there, because there were wrestlers and weightlifters, and hand balancers, and they had a high bar with a guy swinging on that. And, boy, I looked around there and I said, Man, what's going on here? So I tried to get in with the guys.

What kind of personality did you have? Were you a showman?

Well, I had it underneath, a showman, but I was really shy, to begin with. But there was a wrestling coach there named Lou Talaber, and he took me under his wing, and he started teaching me amateur wrestling. And then, they had a big weightlifting platform there. The German American Weightlifting Club were lifting there. So, they eventually got around to showing me how to do the different lifts. And they showed me how to do a lift called the one-armed bent press. And that's where you rock your weight to your shoulder, and you bend down between your legs and push it up. And I finally got to be able to do my body weight with one arm.

Wow.

So, they were paid to go around to different taverns and perform weightlifting, and they'd take me along. So I'd do the one-armed bent press and all the Germans were drinking beer, and clapping their hands.

And did the weightlifting keep you out of trouble?

Probably did. Yeah.

'Cause I'm sure there was trouble to be found in the area.

Yeah. Well, I was coming home from school, and I was in high school, and there was a car parked near the Julia Lathrop Homes. And as I was walking by, this guy stepped out of the car and he said, Hey, I want to speak to you. And he showed his badge, and he was a police detective. He said we're gonna sit in the car. I said, Well, I wonder what the heck I did. I thought they were gonna arrest me for something. So, I got into the car, and they start showing me pictures of criminals in there. And they said, This guy was wanted for murder, this guy raped, this guy, and they went on and on. He said, We want you to help us. I said, Well, how can I do that? He said, Well, you meet us here tonight at 8:00 p.m., and, we'll tell you then. But don't tell anybody else where you're going.

Young Ed Francis met the two lawmen, who then drove him to a place nicknamed Little Sicily in Chicago. The men told him to go into a nearby bar, purchase whiskey, and return to their car. Then, the officers took Francis back into the bar and confronted the bar owner for selling to a minor. Ed Francis left the bar, as instructed by the officers, and headed for a rendezvous point where they would pick him up. Just as the teenager thought the ordeal was over, the night took a scary turn.

So, I finally got over to the Bowman Dairy Company, and I'm standing there waiting and waiting. And all of a sudden, a big Lincoln pulls up, Lincoln automobile, and out jump two guys. One of them was in a uniform, soldier's uniform. And they grabbed me and put me in the car, and took me back to the bar. And they took me in the back room, and they told me what these cops did, that they were trying to get this guy to pay money.

That was a shakedown.

Shakedown. And so, he said, If we ever get these guys, we're gonna kill 'em, these two detectives, they told me. So the phone rang in a phone booth. He said, Hey, this is for you, bartender said. So I went in there, and it was the detective on there. He said, Listen to me. He said, Watch for a good spot, and then he said, run right out the door. And he said, And turn right and run down, and we'll pick you up, so you can get out of there. So, I went back and told the guys it was the detectives, and told them what happened. And that's when he said, Oh, don't worry about those guys. He said, But don't ever do this again, don't ever come back in this neighborhood again. And he gave me money, and we went to the streetcar so I could get on the streetcar to go home.

Oh, they escorted you to the streetcar?

Yeah, they did, the soldier did. And he said, You can look in the paper tomorrow. He said, These two guys are gonna be dead.

Wow; and you were fifteen years old.

[CHUCKLE]

At what point did you set off on a wrestling career?

Well, I found a fellow named Carl Pergelo [PHONETIC], and he was an old-time wrestler, and he had a wrestling gymnasium. And I used to go there all the time, and then he would put on shows at like the Shriner's Clubs and all that. They'd just put mats out, and I'd go there and wrestle somebody who would just wrestle an amateur. And then, he started teaching me some professional wrestling. But then, the war came along. And my brother, who's three years older than me, he joined the Navy, and my cousin who was about my brother's age, he joined the Navy. And I wanted to go. So, I couldn't; my parents wouldn't sign the papers for me to go. So, I found a way to get around that.

Ed Francis served in the Coast Guard during World War II. By January of 1945, Ed was discharged, and spent some time as a sketch model at the Art Institute in Chicago. Soon after, he felt a calling to a profession he'd been introduced to as a teenager.

And then, I started wrestling for Pergelo again, and then there was a fellow named Ray Fabiani. Ray Fabiani was a concert violinist with the Philadelphia Philharmonic Orchestra, and also, he went to Chicago. And he loved wrestling, and he got hooked with a promoter in Chicago, and he saw me at Carl Pergelo's gym and he signed me up as one of his wrestlers. So, he decked me out and got my hair bleached, and decked me out with a cape with sequins on it and all that stuff.

At that point, did you acquire your moniker, Gentleman Ed Francis?

No; that didn't come up 'til Al Ventres. So, my career went on from there.

You wrestled all over the place?

Oh, yeah.

Were you usually the good guy, or not?

Sometimes one way, and sometimes another way, depending on what the promoter wanted me as.

So, what are you like as a bad guy?

Well, I did a pretty good job, I guess, because I had plenty of riots.

[CHUCKLE] Is that right? People got so angry at you --

Oh, yeah.

-- they stormed the ring?

Oh, yeah.

By the early 1960s, Ed Francis was making frequent stops in Hawaii, wrestling for promoter Al Karasick. During a conversation with Karasick, Francis saw a golden opportunity he knew he couldn't pass up.

Well, when I was wrestling for Al Karasick and he told me that he was thinking of selling out his business, I thought that would be a good opportunity where I had my kids, and be a good opportunity to get off the road. Because it was killing me and killing them not having their father home, all the time. So, I asked him how much he wanted for the promotion, to have the rights for the promotion. And he said he would agree to ten thousand dollars. So, a friend of mine, a promoter in Oregon, Don Owen, who liked me a lot, Don gave me the ten thousand. I paid Al, brought everybody over.

How old were you at the time?

I was in my thirties, I guess.

And doing business; how was that for you?

Tough. Because now, I was an outsider coming in. Now, I'm sitting in Al Karasick's office. And in order to get to Al's office, I had to pass Ralph Yempuku's desk.

Who was a promoter extraordinaire, and a fixture.

I told him I was trying to get television. He said, If you get television, why would people come to the matches if they're going to watch 'em on TV? I said, Well, it doesn't work that way, Ralph. I said, There's a certain way you have to build things up, and not show them the main events or whatever, and then they'll come to the matches. He said, Nah, it'll never work. He said, Never work. So they all expected me to fail after a few months.

But you'd seen it work differently on the mainland.

Oh, yes; uh-huh. Yeah. So, when it came around to television, I went to all the stations and they were all saying, Oh, we don't want any of that phony wrestling on TV in Hawaii, and all that stuff. And finally, I think it was at KHVH when Kaiser owned that station, Denny Kawakami was the program director there. And I finally talked him into give thirteen weeks. He said, We'll give you a shot at this, he says. 'Cause I went back to him about ten times. [CHUCKLE]

And you wanted a live show from the studio at KHVH?

Yeah.

TV and radio.

Yeah, and then I had to figure out who I was gonna have do the announcing. Couple of guys told me about Lord Blears. And so, I contacted him, and he'd been wrestling for Al Karasick for years. So, he loved Hawaii because he was a surfer, all his kids loved the beach, so he jumped at the chance and came over.

So he agreed to be your narrator, your on-air guy.

Yeah; and he had a lot of contacts through wrestlers too. Different wrestlers that I didn't know out of the Los Angeles area and all that. So, the two of us put together like that, we got a lot of wrestlers to come over. Because they'd say, What do you want? Oh, how much can I make? He said, Well, you want to come to Hawaii, it's just like a vacation, stay here for a few months, or whatever. [CHUCKLE] And you get your airfare back and forth, and we'll give you a hundred and fifty dollars a week.

You had some wild characters. Did you create those characters, or did they come to you fully blown up and crazy?

Sometimes, we had to create them. Like the Missing Link, we named him the Missing Link. But he brought the shrunken head on, and he'd talk about that. So, he wasn't a great performer in the ring, but he was a great performer on television. So that sold it, you know.

May I mention some names to you? Could you maybe give me some thoughts about each of these wrestlers that you worked with?

Yeah, sure.

Handsome Johnny Barend.

Great guy, but crazy. He really was a little crazy. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE]

He was always a great drawing card. But I never knew what he was gonna do on the television show. So, he and Phil Arnone were conjuring all this stuff up. So, when I come out to interview him, now he's sitting there and he's gonna wrestle Billy White Wolf, and he's sitting there with a teepee. He's sitting in front of a teepee with a feather in his head. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE]

Smoking a cigar. [CHUCKLE]

Another name; Ripper Collins. People loved to hate Ripper Collins with his deliberate mangling of the Hawaiian language, saying Moo-ey, and Mo-wee, and Kamimami instead of Kamehameha.

Yeah. Ripper was ... the ultimate *Haole*. [CHUCKLE] And then when he started talking about Georgia and mint juleps and all that stuff [CHUCKLE], get everybody mad at him.

And he was doing it with great deliberation and forethought.

Yeah. [CHUCKLE]

What was he like off ring and off stage?

He was a good guy.

Wasn't like that at all?

Mm-mm.

But he really knew how to just rile people up. People who aren't wrestling fans would know Tosh Togo, who became Odd Job on the James Bond movie, Gold Finger. What was your relationship like with him? I think you did some shaping of him in his career.

Yeah. Well, a promoter came over, and Tosh had been wrestling for me for a while. A promoter came over from England, and he came to my house when I lived on Mokapu Boulevard. And he said that the movie producers over in England wanted a Oriental guy with a good body. I said, Well, I think I got the right guy for you.

His name is Harold Sakata.

Harold Sakata; yeah. And he won a silver medal in the Olympics too, Harold did, for weightlifting. And so, he had a fantastic body. And so, they arranged for him to go back and forth, and finally, they were gonna bring him over to England to test out for the part. And I knew what the storyline was gonna be. I said, Tosh, we gotta go down to a costume shop and get a derby. And you wear the derby, and you put some bricks -- 'cause he could break bricks with his hand. Put some bricks in this briefcase and handcuff the briefcase to you.

That was your idea?

Yeah.

That's fabulous.

And when he got off the plane -- 'cause they said they were gonna have news people there and everything. He got off the plane -- I didn't see it, but I was told that he got off and he took the handcuffs off and opened it up, put the bricks down and had this one brick across that, and he broke it. Got the part.

A legend was born.

Yeah.

Among others in the ring for wrestling promoter Ed Francis were two of his sons, Bill and Russ, who went on to pro football. Moody and disgruntled fans came with the territory at 50th State Big Time Wrestling matches. Ed Francis recalls that an incident at the Civic Auditorium in 1961 got the fans so riled up, it turned into a life-threatening riot.

Tell me about the riot. It was Curtis Iaukea, a Hawaiian, versus Neff Maiava, Samoan.

Yeah.

And there was race that played a role in the riot; right?

Yeah; oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, I forget how Curtis beat Neff. but I think I wasn't even standing outside. I was outside the locker room, and I heard this riot coming off, people screaming, and I came out. And Curtis was coming back from the ring, and a couple of cops were escorting him to get back in the locker room. And Neff was laying in the ring.

Now, did he do something? He was a heel, a bad guy.

Yeah.

Did he do something bad to Neff?

Yeah, I don't remember what it was. But then, the people went completely wild. And there was a sergeant there, Sergeant Capellas who also worked for me on the wrestling match. And they picked up some chairs, and the chairs in the Civic at that time, they were like four chairs that were together. So they picked it up, and they had Capellas and I against the ring. And he's hitting them, and I'm hitting them. [CHUCKLE] And they're going down so we could get out of there ourselves. And somebody called the Metro Squad, and there was Larry Mehau. I think he was lieutenant then, or sergeant, and he was handling the Metro Squad at that time. And they came down with police dogs and everything, and man, there was real turmoil there.

And those were the bruisers; they were big guys.

Yeah. And then, somebody grabbed the guy's gun out of his holster, and Luigi knocked it out of the guy's hand, and grabbed the gun and ran in the locker room with it. Then the riot was over, gave it back to the police officer. So there could have been a lot worse things happen.

Now, if that happened today, wrestling would have been banned from the auditorium.

Yeah.

But what happened instead? Life went on?

This is funny. I went to the police station the next day. They wanted to know what's going on and how this riot began, and all that, I guess. So, I'm coming up the steps, and out of the police station is ... about four Samoan guys. One's got a bandage on his head, and one got a arm in a sling. And they said, Eh, Mr. Francis. [CHUCKLE] What's going on next week at the Civic?

[CHUCKLE] It was acceptable damage? Was that the idea?

Guess so.

The days of wrestling have changed so much. You closed out your business in the late 70s, and I think it was probably in the 80s, that's when wrestling went national and it ceased to be a local phenomenon as it had been in the past. It's all national, and I can't imagine the security that must be present with the WWF matches, which are just spectaculars of television and pyrotechnics.

Yeah. Well, yeah, it's put everybody out of business, really. But he was a great promoter, the guy, and he's doing a fantastic job.

Did you fight that trend, or did you see it coming and say ...

Yeah, I saw it coming.

And you decided, I'm not gonna hang in when there's not gonna be a good return?

Yeah. 'Cause you have to have a lot of money to do it.

That must have been really hard, because you weren't ready to retire, and you were seeing the end of a business, and there's nothing like it to go to.

Yeah. Went back to the ranch. [CHUCKLE]

Which you knew how to ranch.

Yeah.

And you already owned a ranch.

Yeah. Old cowboy. [CHUCKLE]

So, how old are you now?

Eighty-six.

How does it feel?

Horrible. [CHUCKLE]

Why do you say that?

Well, you always have flashbacks of when you were young. I still have dreams about going to a wrestling match, and driving two hundred miles, and arriving there, and getting out of my car, and realize I didn't bring my tights and my shoes along with me. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE]

I have dreams like that all the time. [CHUCKLE] So now, what am I gonna do, I can't perform. And I'm worried about what the promoter is gonna say, he's gonna be mad and I'm in the main event. So, I guess that wrestling stuff stays with you over the years.

Wrestling promoter Ed Francis has stayed with us over the years through the many memories of die-hard fans. I spoke with him on a Hawaii visit he made in December of 2012, and people still recognized him on the street, calling out, Eh, Mista Francis! His amazing life is chronicled in the book, Gentleman Ed Francis Presents 50th State Big Time Wrestling, which was released shortly after our conversation. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

[CHUCKLE] Well, I used to test the waters all the time. Before a big match was coming off, I got disappointed quite a few times. I'd go to Ala Moana Center, go through all the stores and everything, and there were several times not one person said a word to me. And sweat would break out.

[CHUCKLE]

My god, no house tonight. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE]

But I always did have a pretty good house. But I thought that was kind of a gauge, and I'd say, Well, if nobody talks to me, then nobody is talking about wrestling on TV.