

Legend Profile: Dory Funk, Sr.

Contributed by Tim Hicks
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Contrary to myth, Dory Funk Sr. was not born in Texas, though he spent the bulk of his life and career there, but in Hammond, Indiana. Aside from his grappling, he was a rancher and involved heavily with fellow wrestler Cal Faley at his Boys Ranch in Amarillo. Though an outstanding ring personality himself, he never held the world title as did his more famous sons, Dory Jr. and Terry. He died from a heart attack in the summer of 1973 and is buried at the Dreamland Cemetery in Umbarger, Texas.

Though known for his appearances in Texas, he was seen in many other states throughout his long wrestling career, including Arizona, New Mexico, California, Missouri, Florida, Oklahoma, Kansas and other locations. He made various trips into the Phoenix area over the years, though not on a regular basis and was a sure-thing as a fan favorite because of his brawling style. Good guys who had no reservations about fighting dirty when crossed were always well-received in Arizona. This man fit right in.

Dory Funk Sr was known as the Texas Death Match Champion, having won over 200 such marathon matches (Note, a Texas Death Match in most places today is simply a one fall, no-holds-barred encounter, but not so way back when. In his day Texas Death Matches went fall after fall, with a brief rest period between each. Some lasted over 1 1/2 hours, with up to 40 falls). When he did his promos from his Amarillo homebase, there was often a logo behind him billing him as the Texas Death Match Champion, with the aforementioned 200 plus statistic and an appropriate skull & crossbones, like something right out of an old Blackbeard movie.

Funk's final appearance in Arizona was one of his greatest matches, in early 1972. A marathon card at the Travel Lodge Theatre (Celebrity Theatre now) featured Kiko Torres versus Johnny Kostas, Belle Starr versus Tonah Tomah, Jerry Kozack versus Lou Thesz, Moose Morowski versus Ricky Romero, Cowboy Lang versus Willy Wilson and a main event Texas Death Match pitting Funk with longtime rival, Ciclon Negro. In many ways this was a routine bout for them, as they had met in Death Bouts before in Texas, as well as chain bouts, cage bouts and taped fist bouts. This encounter was a mere extension of their feud, hyped by television and a big advertising campaign.

The bout was a bloodbath though, lasting numerous falls, with both men covered in crimson. They punched, slammed, kicked, boxed, rammed each other into the ringpost and made a mess of the arena, which included a considerable dropoff when being thrown through the ropes as the ring was on an elevated stage designed for bands, in the center of the stadium.

Ciclon Negro did not become the first man to defeat Dory Funk Sr. in a Texas Death Match. In a scene right out of Rocky II, which would come many years later, the two men struggled to their feet to beat a final count out, with Funk remaining standing and his battered opponent falling flat at the last second. It was a classic finish to a classic brawl.

While his sons continued to come to Arizona from time to time for varied offices, then of course the WWF, this was Dory Sr.'s last appearance in Phoenix. He was still active at the time of his death, but had restricted his performances to closer within his homebase radius. he wa sinvolved in a feud with King Curtis at the time of his fatal heart attack, having concluded his series of matches with Ciclone Negro and moved onward.

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