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HARD TIMES

Former wrestler Hardbody Harrison promised damaged women riches and stardom if they worked hard in the squared circle. All he asked in return was sex and prostitution

As his black 2002 GMC Denali SUV – the one with the “HARDBDY” vanity plate – was being searched, Hardbody Harrison decided to break the tension with a joke. “It isn’t illegal to possess any of that stuff,” he said to the police officers. He was referring to the open suitcase in the trunk, which contained a 12-inch double-sided dildo, a leather strap-on, a black and gold strap-on, two battery-operated dildos, ladies undergarments, lubricant, a bag of flavored condoms, four white letter envelopes with money, three spiral notebooks logging transactions, and a pair of fur-lined handcuffs. The burly 5-foot-9 man with the goatee and blond cornrows then delivered the punch line. “I can’t get in trouble for [that] unless my wife found out.”

Had there not been an unrelated disturbance earlier that evening at Citi Trends Fashion – basically a low-rent TJ Maxx – Hardbody’s pleasure chest might have remained unlocked. But on August 18, 2004, in Smyrna, Georgia’s Belmont Hills Shopping Center, his operation started unfolding. When police arrived on the scene, a woman ran out of Citi Trends toward them screaming that she was being held against her will. Jessica Hamrick, one of Hardbody’s “team leaders,” grabbed her wrist and pulled her away.

“When we walked in the store, [Hardbody] was paying for all their clothes,” says Lt. Keith Zganz, formerly of the Smyrna Police Department. “We knew something was up. This wasn’t big brother going out to buy clothes for little sister or anything. It appeared there was something not quite right about what was going on in there.”

The seven women accompanying Norris — dressed seductively, but with ranking military insignia pinned to their dresses — gave rehearsed identical statements. Later, however, their stories would change. “We separated him from the women so that we could get

honest testimony from them,” says Sergeant Robert Harvey. “You could tell these ladies were absolutely scared to death of him.”

Norris was arrested on three counts of false imprisonment, and throughout the detainment, he was defiant. He had \$800 in 10’s, 5’s and singles inside his pockets and fanny pack, and bragged that he would be out of jail in no time, which turned out to be true. He was freed on \$55,000 bond the next day. But following this ridiculous scene—a harem, a professional wrestler, and a pile of dildos—things went south for Hardbody. “I didn’t hear anything from the FBI until a couple of days later when they decided to go federal with it,” Sgt. Harvey says. “Then, they spun a story that was hard to believe. But it was all true.”

The scheme was diabolical. Hardbody approached women, most of them poor, often homeless and addicted to drugs. He’d then promise them fame and fortune in the world of professional wrestling. He would feed them, clothe them, house them, pay for their nails and makeup, even post their bond should it come to that, and, during the day, train them in the private gymnasium – a barn, really – built behind his Cartersville, Georgia home.

Nights were a different story. That’s when Norris and his dolled-up “soldiers” made the 45-minute drive southeast to Atlanta and hit what were called, “Mexican clubs.” At these skuzzy dives, the women danced with patrons for \$5 and did a whole lot more for up to \$200. Of course, Hardbody, or HB as he liked to be called, took a cut.

Day and night, their movements were limited, and “team leaders,” prostitutes who kept tabs on the new girls, always escorted them. Even the bathroom had a sign-in sheet. “It was like a movie,” said an observer of Norris’ federal trial.

Harrison Norris Jr. is a 42 year-old former platoon and motor sergeant in the United States Army. He enlisted after graduating from Catholic High School in Pensacola, Florida, saw action in Desert Shield and Desert Storm and received an honorable

discharge in 1995. At which point Hardbody, so named for his impressive physique, immediately tried out for the National Football League. He didn't make the cut, but found success as a Toughman competitor. He nicknamed his fists, "The Pork Chop" and "The Biscuit Cutter."

Norris also pursued professional wrestling with World Championship Wrestling, the Time Warner-owned promotion that eventually folded in March 2001. At some point, he accumulated what looked like an entourage—groupies, basically. "I told him, 'What are you doing? Pimping?'" says Jody Hamilton, owner of the now-defunct WCW Power Plant training facility. "He looked at me kind of funny and said, 'Oh, I would never do anything like that.'"

He passed the grueling tryout at the WCW Power Plant and was renowned for his almost superhuman cardiovascular capacity. He also became a mentor of sorts to younger wrestlers. "I owe that guy a lot," says C.W. Anderson. "He taught me about actual in-ring work, how to sell [getting hit] and how to get into better shape."

Still, it didn't lead to much exposure on the flagship program, *WCW Monday Nitro*. Loudmouthed and opinionated, Hardbody often clashed with his peers and superiors. "His mouth got him in trouble all the time," says Allen Funk, who wrestled as "Kwee Wee" in WCW in the late 1990s with Hardbody. "He was an awesome worker and always made [his opponent] look good, but he couldn't keep his mouth shut." His silly ring outfit (one-legged tights), early 90's look (a flat top fade with his name and a self-portrait shaved into the back) and inability to improvise in the ring, didn't help, and Hardbody Harrison never elevated above being a "jobber," the guy squashed by the superstars.

But his reputation backstage hinted at a more sinister side hustle – a domineering, compulsive agitator with a violent temper and warped sense of right and wrong. "This was a guy who was prone to committing professional suicide on a daily basis," says Lash LeRoux. In pro wrestling, there's a term called "heat," which is the ability to make

people hate you. “Hardbody was known for being a ‘heat seeker.’ Any situation you threw him in, he could find some way to turn it negative.” The most infamous of which happened in early 1998, when Jeh Jeh Pruitt, a young reporter for the Fox affiliate in Birmingham visited the Power Plant to tape a segment. During a sparring session, Hardbody clotheslined Pruitt in the face breaking his nose in two places. “The last thing I remember [Hardbody] saying, after I’ve turned over and there is blood all over the place is, ‘You’re getting blood all over the mat. Get up and go to the bathroom,’” says Pruitt, who says he now suffers from sleep apnea and had a second surgery on the nose in October 2007. “I don’t think he felt bad about it.”

Needless to say, Norris’ contract was not renewed. And in February 2000, he, along with two other wrestlers, sued WCW for racial discrimination. It was widely considered a reach since the company was in absolute disarray when the suit was filed. “There were tons of [wrestlers] who were used very poorly,” says Bryan Alvarez, editor of the wrestling website Figure Four Weekly. “I watched every single [WCW] show and would sit there and go, ‘Why aren’t they using this person better.’ Never thought that about Hardbody.” Eventually, almost a dozen wrestlers joined the case and WCW settled out of court. Norris reportedly received over a million dollars.

Hardbody had other gigs after WCW. He was the Kimbo Slice-like breakout star on the FX network’s *Toughman* program, and was even interviewed by *Sports Illustrated* for their November 26, 2001 issue. He also got his independent promotion, StarSouth Champion Wrestling Alliance, running, and trained wrestlers, most of who were female.

Michelle Achuff, a 6-foot tall 20-year-old with olive skin corresponding to her Sicilian descent, was walking to her job at a Waffle House when Hardbody Harrison pulled over in a navy Cadillac asking if she needed a ride. He told her about SCWA, and they met the next night at a boxing show to discuss working together. He later showed Achuff videos from WCW and told her that since she was already bigger and taller than Chyna, the

former WWE superstar, who in 2002 was considered the standard in the business, she could be a top female wrestler. It was a hell of a sales pitch, but there was a catch.

“He said, ‘If you want to come and train, you have to stay here and work for me as an escort to make money because you can’t have a real job,’” she says. “Being, young and stupid, I said, ‘O.K. No problem.’” Achuff then entered a cult-like atmosphere, in which Hardbody, “The General,” led these women by intimidation and mind control. Tactics included encouraging teamwork, setting goals—“Everyone felt great because we were losing weight, looking good and fitting into smaller clothes,” Achuff remembers—while also reminding them of their destitute past. (At Norris’ sentencing, U.S. District Judge Jack Camp told him, “Quite frankly, you seem to have a better understanding of psychology than most psychologists I’ve known.”)

“He had a God complex,” Achuff says, who had soon become one of Norris’ “team leaders.” “I came to love him. Other girls came to love him. A couple of them were off the street and grateful to him for taking them off drugs. Every time a new girl came in, he was like, ‘I’m going to make you love me.’ And he would, in his own way.”

Hardbody’s way was brutal. Women were initiated into the troop with forced orgies called “cut parties.” Hardbody took them seriously, often meticulously choreographing the action like a porn director, and turned vicious when someone refused orders—one woman was sexually assaulted with dildos after rebuffing Hardbody. They also performed manual labor on the property such as laying sod, hauling trees and having sex with Hardbody in his room, “The General’s Quarters.” He called that “HB Training.”

Wrestling training, however, ate up most of the day. The women jumped rope and did sit-ups, diamond push-ups, squats, mountain climbers and jumping jacks. They also learned basic wrestling moves such as back bumps, forward rolls and running the ropes, which with repetition became painful. “Some girls said they didn’t want to do it. Then Hardbody would say, ‘Get up there and do it.’ And they did it,” remembers Shannon

Dumas, a wrestler who helped train the women. “Hardbody would say ‘Jump’ and they would say, ‘How high?’”

During that time, Norris had no traceable income and claimed to be living off the settlement money. He didn’t file tax returns for 2002 and 2003. It was later revealed that SCWA was not registered with the state of Georgia and never turned a profit. Still, the independent wrestling organization put on events featuring a semi-respectable roster of former WWE and WCW stars. “He was a promoter and a good one,” says Frank Aldridge, owner of WWA4 Pro Wrestling School in Atlanta. “He was a very pushy guy...like a New York City stockbroker. You could lose your ass with them, but still, [he] had the balls to call you up and talk you into the next deal. He could talk you into stuff. He had an inner power and I think it frightened people, though it shouldn’t have.”

One show in Florida was particularly memorable. Upon arriving at the hotel, Hardbody announced that there were two rooms for the male wrestlers. Their wives and the female wrestlers would sleep in his king size bed. Some refused, others didn’t. “Some of the wives left their husbands for him,” says Debra Dumas, whose then fiancé, Shannon, appeared on the card.

“We were doing promotion at this bar in Florida, and this wrestler got a call from his wife,” Shannon Dumas remembers. “She told him that she was breaking up with him and working for Hardbody. What it meant was that she was being a prostitute.”

That woman eventually left Hardbody, while others pulled daring escapes. One woman ran into a friend’s car during a trip to Wal-Mart. And in the early morning hours of August 2, 2005, another woman cut through the window of Norris’ bathroom. Three weeks later, the FBI raided the house.

It didn’t take a federal investigation to start rumors about Hardbody Harrison. “While I was in WCW, all the talk going around was that he was involved with stuff like this,”

says C.W. Anderson. “We were told, ‘If you need anything, go to Hardbody.’” It was a flaunted lifestyle. He and his flock of women were spotted at a lawyer’s office, a Bartow County council meeting and at a funeral.

Norris was first arrested, for pimping, in Fulton County in 2001 so it wasn’t surprising that he continued recruiting women after the 2004 arrest in Smyrna. “He was so prideful and arrogant that it wouldn’t allow him to stop,” says Sgt. Harvey. “The Feds were watching him and it literally kept going on and on.” It was a shock, however, when Norris acted as his own attorney at his trial in November 2007. (Two people interviewed for this story cracked the same joke: “He had a fool for a client.”)

On Wednesday, November 14, Norris entered the courtroom accompanied by his standby council. With his straggly, bushy beard, Hardbody resembled Tom Hanks in *Castaway*. The outline of his huge triceps muscle was visible through his orange prison jumpsuit. There was a rolling clothing rack near the prosecution holding a black leather jacket, red negligees, red and black leather mini skirts, and a pair of thigh high black boots with 5-inch heels.

Watching Hardbody cross-examine his victims was disturbing, as he remained a heat seeker during the proceedings. “How many sexual encounters have you had?”

“None of your damn business,” snapped the woman with the neck tattoo.

The day ended with one of Hardbody’s witnesses, Robert Sean Terry, an SCWA wrestler known as Robbie Russo, on the witness stand. He was asked about the suitcase in the Denali. “No, I’ve never seen that in the wrestling ring,” he said, while holding up a still-packaged dildo.

On November 21, the day before Thanksgiving, Harrison Norris Jr. was convicted on 24 counts, including forced labor, sexual trafficking, peonage (essentially debt bondage), aggravated sexual assault, witness tampering and obstruction. His co-conspirators, Aimee

Allen, the highest-ranking team leader, and Cedric Jackson, a pimp nicknamed “Detroit,” pleaded out and received 34 months and 5 years, respectively. Norris was prosecuted under the Trafficking Victim’s Protection Act of 2000 and sentenced to life in prison.

Norris plans to appeal the case. Among his complaints are that he was not granted a speedy trial or supplied with the witnesses’ criminal history.

So far, life in prison seems to be taking its toll. “They deny me a lot of my rights,” Hardbody writes me in a letter. He tells of having gained 12 lbs. and keeping busy by pumping out 800 push-ups daily. He would not, however, consent to an interview. “It’s business,” he wrote in a follow-up letter. “Would you give up free information before you feed your family?” Hardbody claims that he has several serious offers from production and publishing companies to sell his story and that SCWA is negotiating with a local television network.

In the two letters, Norris exhibits either the mind of a shrewd self-promoting businessman or a desperate convict suffering from severe delusions of grandeur: He compares himself to Jesus and says that his story can “change history as we know it.”

On Highway 411, about two miles down the road from Hardbody Harrison’s Cartersville home where his wife lives with one of his three children, there’s a Huddle House, a 24-hour chain-style diner. It’s the type of place where a notice in the window reads, “Bring in your church bulletin and receive 10% of your meal.” “KKK” is scratched into the tiles above a urinal in the men’s room.

I meet Hardbody’s wife, Audrey, a pale middle-aged woman, in her driveway. We had chatted briefly at the trial and she seems like a quiet woman, exhausted from this ordeal. She had told authorities that she knew of Hardbody’s 2001 and 2004 arrests, saw no signs of abuse or prostitution, and was not aware if he had sex with the other women. Like her husband, Ms. Norris declined to be interviewed, citing the pending deals.

But she takes me back behind the home, to the barn where the girls trained. It's dusty and dark inside since the electricity has been turned off. The walls are covered with Hardbody's newspaper clippings and photos of the women wrestling. There's a lone jump rope on the floor, neglected exercise equipment everywhere and, of course, the wrestling ring in the center. An American flag is posted on the door. Next to it is a sign: "Caution: Beatings Occur Around the Clock."