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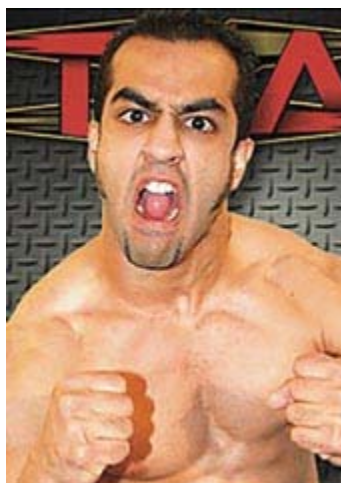
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Sunju spawns US wrestler double

TURNA RAY



Retesh Bhalla

Slip gold pants on his 5 ft 6 inch, 165-lb frame and throw him into a wrestling ring, and you have Sonjay Dutt — “The Original Playa from the Himalaya” — an American professional wrestler of Indian origin grown up on Bollywood flicks.

Retesh Bhalla's ring persona “Sonjay” is the result of childhood overexposure to films starring Sunjay Dutt (the original Bollywood “playa”) and hours of watching alpha-male wrestlers body-slammng each other in spandex tights.

The 22-year-old rising “good guy” on Total Nonstop Action Wrestling, a newly formed wrestling company in the US, doesn't wear tights. He dons flashy, gold pants straight out of a Bollywood dance number. “You have to have something extra in wrestling. Something that makes you stand out,” says Bhalla, who hardly looks the typical wrestling behemoth.

But a lot of charisma, those gold pants and high-flying acrobatic stunts such as the “Hindu press” — a finishing move where he does gravity-defying flips off the ropes on to his opponents — keep the crowds cheering “Sonjay”.

Born of Indian immigrants and raised in Virginia's suburbs just outside Washington DC, Bhalla said he draws on his Indian heritage because it sets him apart from other professional wrestlers.

While Sonjay is a nod to his Indian background, Bhalla is wary of reinforcing negative stereotypes about Indians. “The convenience store worker, the weird accents, the turban — I don't like to play to these negative stereotypes of Indians in the US.”

“I'm charismatic. I do a lot of stunts. The fans connect with the character I'm portraying, and me being Indian isn't the most prominent thing,” he said.



Still, it is hard to define a niche for ethnicity in an industry dominated by white, muscle-bound hulks. In 2002, Indian wrestler Gurjit Singh Hans — known in the wrestling world as Tiger Ali Singh — filed a \$ 7-million harassment lawsuit against the World Wrestling Entertainment. Hans alleged WWE workers stole his turban and stuffed it with cigarette butts and garbage.

According to Hans, the WWE demanded that he wear his turban and make speeches alluding to Indian people as taxi drivers and convenience store clerks as part of his gimmick. The WWE has denied mistreating Hans. The case is yet to be settled.



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