

Homegrown Khali sells in enterprising Punjab

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The 7 feet 3 inches tall man from a Himachal Pradesh village who joined Punjab Police and went on to the US to become a World Wide Entertainment (WWE) star wrestler came visiting India last week - his fame already part of the enterprising Punjabi business sense.

While he called on President Pratibha Patil, addressed journalists in Delhi and was splashed across newspapers, T-shirts and other clothing accessories of the WWE champ - with his bare-chested enormous build prominently displayed with his name - were being snapped up all over Punjab.

'Much of the stock is coming from Ludhiana. Some garment manufacturers in that industrial city timed the arrival of the merchandise with his arrival in India. Since he is all over the media, including TV shows and newspapers, the clothing in his name is selling fast,' said Rakesh Kumar, a street vendor selling Khali-inspired T-shirts in Mohali town on the outskirts of the state capital Chandigarh.

The T-shirts are priced between Rs.75 and Rs.250 at roadside stalls.

Khali may be charging TV news channels, Bollywood filmmakers and others to make the most of his one-month India trip. But he is getting no royalty on the clothing and accessories selling with his photo and name.

The first time that clothes and accessories in Khali's name appeared in Punjab, especially in Jalandhar city where he lived and worked in Punjab Police as an assistant sub-inspector, was in February-March this year when he was to feature in the 'iron ring of death' fight in a WWE event in the US. Though he lost in the event, his popularity soared in India.

With even President Patil describing the 190 kg champ as 'pride of the nation', Khali has no dearth of fans, including top celebrities, lining up to meet him.

His profile on the WWE website says: 'This enormous monster has walked the jungles of India unafraid of pythons and wrestled white Bengal tigers.'

Actually, he worked as a roadside labourer and security guard in home state Himachal Pradesh before being picked up for a police job in 1993.

Wrestlers and fitness freaks in Jalandhar, where Rana once trained before he became The Great Khali' (a name taken from Hindu goddess of destruction Kali whose follower he is), say they would not mind sporting his T-shirt if he visited any of the gyms.

'I he happens to come to the gym, I will go wearing his T-shirt,' said body-builder Jaspal Singh.

Local wrestlers in Jalandhar say Khali has been encouraging whenever he has met them, and is an

inspirational figure.

Khali's arrival is also being eagerly awaited by Punjab Police officers. Interestingly, he has been featuring in WWE fights in the US while being on extended 'medical leave' from his Jalandhar office.

His employer had 'dismissed' him from service two years ago only to correct its move later and is waiting to receive him and even promote the man who is being sought by hundreds of fans since his arrival in the country.

- *Jaideep Sarin*