

## Top 10 Heel Turns in WWE this Century: Where does John Cena's rank?



March 1<sup>st</sup> 2025 will go down as one of the most important dates in WWE history after fans witnessed the shocking moment of John Cena betraying Cody Rhodes and aligning himself with The Final Boss The Rock at WWE's Elimination Chamber event in Toronto Canada.

For the first time in over 20 years the 16 time World Champion will be performing as a heel as he embarks on his quest to be the first ever 17 time World Champion in professional wrestling.

Despite being so fresh, the heel turn is already considered one of the biggest moments in WWE history. But where does it rank amongst other heel turns in the company this century.

The heel turn has been an iconic staple of professional wrestling and when it is executed well it can produce a magical moment that can emotionally impact both the fans in attendance and those watching at home.

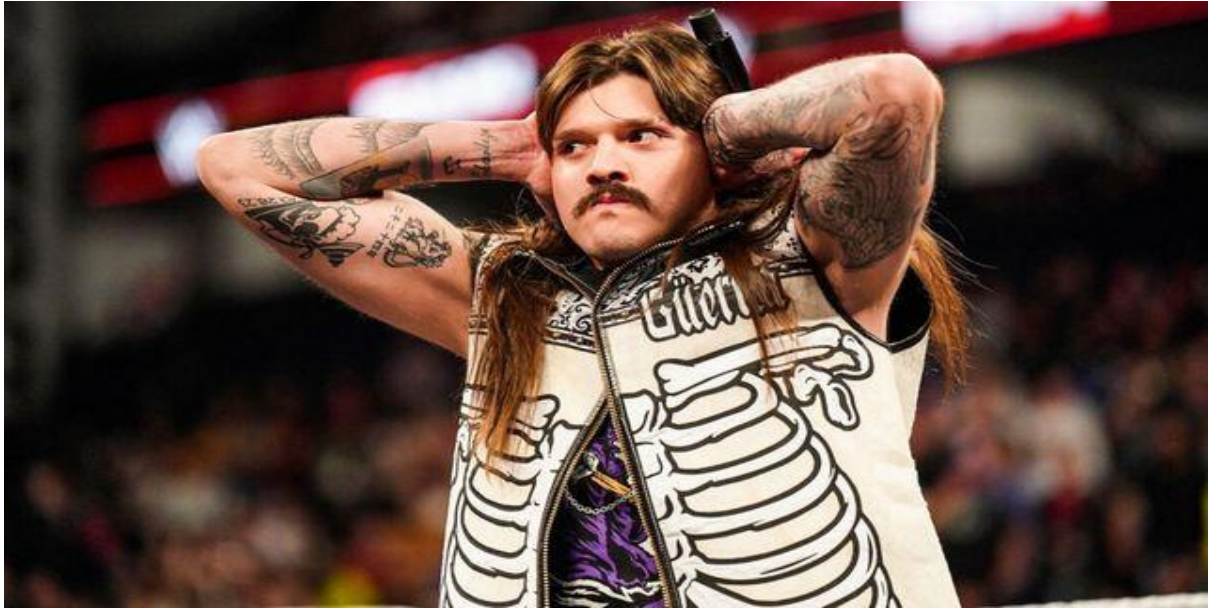
A heel turn can also be great because of future implications and how it can benefit not only the superstar who joined the dark side, but other wrestlers that are involved, either through alliances or rivalries.

Out of respect for many iconic heel turns this list is solely going to focus on the WWE. This immediately rules out Hogan's iconic reveal as the third man of the New World Order back in 1996, which many fans believe is the greatest betrayal in wrestling history.

This list is only going to focus on heel turns that have taken place this century as a means to limit the options to choose from, as well as also highlighting the many great recent turns that have taken place that fans may have forgotten.

Apologies to Bret Hart for his epic double turn against Stone Cold Steve Austin at Wrestlemania 13, Shawn Michaels for his betrayal of his Rockers teammate Marty Jannetty and apologies to Macho Man Randy Savage for getting jealous of Hulk Hogan interacting with Miss Elizabeth. All three of those moments would make a Top 10 All Time List.

## 10 – Dirty Dom is born – 2022



Before kicking Edge in the balls at the Clash at the Castle event in Cardiff, Dominik Mysterio was very much an afterthought. His father Rey Mysterio was assisting Edge in his attempt to take down the Judgement Day whilst he was Rhea Ripley's whipping boy on Raw leading up to their tag team match.

Even though he was a former Smackdown Tag Team Champion with his father, Dom was relatively boring as a babyface. Being stuck with his allegedly "deadbeat dad" didn't allow for him to express his personality and the fans didn't really have sympathy for a man who was constantly getting beaten up by a woman, no matter how strong Mami is.

One kick to Adam Copeland's nether regions and a clothesline to his dad set the ball rolling for one of the best character evolutions in WWE history. A short stint in county jail and the growth of a cartoonish moustache has allowed Dirty Dom to be a key player for the Judgement Day and a staple on Raw for over two years.

His negative crowd reactions have been nuclear and he remains the only heel in history to become an ultra-heel after he left Rhea Ripley for Liv Morgan at SummerSlam 2024.

Dominik is still young at only 27 years old and while a face turn is probable at some point there is no denying that he is a natural born heel. In that respect he is the literal antithesis of his father.

## 9 - Tomasso Ciampa did it himself – 2016



Tomasso Ciampa and Johnny Gargano are wrestling soulmates, whether that be as a tag team or as rivals. The pair are forever linked with each other in a similar fashion to Kevin Owens and Sami Zayn.

#DIY were formed in 2015 to compete in the inaugural Dusty Rhodes Tag Team Classic tournament but went on to have a successful stint in Triple H's black and gold brand by becoming NXT Tag Team Champions at the tail end of 2016.

This successful stint came to an abrupt ending when Tomasso Ciampa shockingly turned on his teammate Johnny Gargano in 2017 after failing to regain the NXT Tag Team Titles at NXT Takeover Chicago.

The nature of the heel turn surprised many fans at the time because it seemed as if #DIY were going to be called up to the main roster due to the way the fans in the All State Arena applauded the duo as well as the fact that the copyright graphic appeared signalling the end of the show.

Ciampa's vicious attack instead birthed the greatest rivalry in NXT history and in the process elevated both Ciampa and Gargano as capable singles stars as both would win the NXT Championship following the turn.



## 8 – A New Bayley – 2019



Bayley's heel turn was legendary primarily due to the huge transformation of her character. For six years Bayley was a fun loving, positive, hugger loving wrestler who was high fiving inflatable tube men before she cheerfully walked down the ramp.

A new haircut, new ring gear, new theme song and a new mean attitude was debuted in October 2019 and since then the California native has not looked back.

A yearlong Smackdown Women's Championship reign as well as an alliance turned rivalry with friend Sasha Banks was one of the few bright spots of WWE during its floundering pandemic era of television. The rivalry itself was named Rivalry of 2020 by Pro Wrestling Illustrated.

Bayley's heel turn was not just a success for herself but also for others. After spending a year away recovering from an ACL injury Bayley returned in 2022 and introduced her new faction Damage CTRL which also comprised of NXT stars Iyo Sky and Dakota Kai.

Sky has since gone on to be a key player in the women's main event scene since her main roster debut and her eventual rivalry with mentor Bayley played a huge part in that.

## 7 – Batista rips Rey's head off – 2009



Dave Batista was one of the biggest stars in wrestling during the mid to late 2000's and his initial face turn in 2005 catapulted The Animal into the main event scene where he would win multiple World Heavyweight Championships.

Whilst Batista's heel turn did not come as a surprise, it was short lived as he left the company seven months later, which is one of the main reasons why this turn does not rank higher.

Batista brutally attacked his friend and former tag team partner Rey Mysterio after he prevented him from winning the World Heavyweight Championship in a fatal four way match at the Bragging Rights Pay-Per-View which also included CM Punk and the Undertaker.

He cut a post-match promo where he told Rey that he was going to "rip his head off" before clotheslining him and repeatedly screaming "you're supposed to be my friend".

The Animal transformed from a perseverant hero to a cowardly brute. He would berate his opponents and fans on the microphone and demanded a spotlight for his entrance. This new look Batista had the potential to be on par with his mentor Triple H who was a dastardly heel in the early to mid-2000s.

A headline match with John Cena at Wrestlemania 26 was followed by multiple losses to the leader of the Cenation which culminated in a wheelchair bound Batista whining and complaining and eventually quitting the company.

Dave's commitment to playing a villain right to the end is a testament to his work ethic and respect for the industry. Whilst the timing of the heel turn only allowed for half a year of this iteration of Batista, it still was one of the best turns this century.

## 6 – The run that defined Chris Jericho -2008



Chris Jericho is one of the greatest wrestlers of his generation and his ability to constantly reinvent his character is something that fans celebrate the 54 year old for. However it was his character change in 2008 which cemented him as one of the greats.

After the novelty of Jericho's return in late 2007 had worn off, a heel turn was much needed, especially since Y2J was easily a better heel than he was a babyface.

A few weeks after losing to Shawn Michaels at Judgement Day Jericho became irate with how the crowd loved Michaels and savagely attacked him during his Highlight Reel segment. Jericho rammed Michaels head through the "Jeri-Tron 6000" which intensified what ended up being the best rivalry that year.

Jericho started to wear suits when he talked and would use words such as parasites and hypocrites very frequently when describing fans. He abandoned his signature tights and started wearing trunks for the first time in his career. He also stopped selling merchandise.

Along with his new short hair cut he looked like a completely different man than the one who beat Stone Cold Steve Austin and The Rock on the same night to be crowned the first ever WWE Undisputed Champion.

Jericho's new attitude was very well received and by the end of 2008 he had won the World Heavyweight Championship twice and received a Slammy Award for Superstar of the Year.

A successful tag team run with the Big Show dubbed "Jeri-Show" ensued followed by another World Heavyweight Championship reign and a Wrestlemania 26 headlining match with Edge. This was arguably Jericho at his peak and he was positioned as the companies top heel before Randy Orton's prominence in 2009.



## 5 - Lita Screwed Matt (and Edge) - 2005



This was a heel turn that broke kayfabe but it does not change the fact that Lita was the most hated women in the company from mid-2005 up until her departure in 2006.

Long time boyfriend and beloved Team Xtreme member Matt Hardy had exposed that Amy Dumas had cheated with fellow wrestler Edge after being released from the company to the outrage of many fans online.

Lita's storyline marriage with Kane was abruptly ended when she aligned herself with Edge and would be his valet for the remainder of her tenure. She was also forced to work a real story between Edge and a returning Hardy as WWE wanted to capitalise on fan interest.

Whilst it may be uncomfortable and unbearable for Amy Dumas to have been judged because of a mistake made in her personal life, there was no denying that she had nuclear heat.

Lita was absolutely adored by fans and has been cited as an inspiration for many future wrestlers including the likes of AJ Lee, Bayley and Liv Morgan. Yet for those 18 months she was one of the most despicable heels the company has ever had.

Lita was berated by fans who would call her a "slut" or a "whore" but she played the part as Edge's lover very well as she accompanied the Rated-R Superstar whilst he was thrust in to the main event scene where he would have two separate runs as WWE Champion in 2006.

Unfortunately her live sex celebration with Edge on an episode of Raw is more remembered by fans than any of her title reigns but that is a testament to how much the fans hated her at the time.

Unfortunately for her she didn't get the send off befitting of a four time WWE Women's Champion when she initially retired at Survivor Series as she was seemingly embarrassed by Cryme Tyme who would sell her underwear to the Philadelphia crowd in what was referred to as a "Ho Sale".

Thankfully Dumas has received nothing but positive reactions since returning to the company and has been celebrated as a pioneer of the Women's division in the WWE.

#### 4 - Austin shakes McMahon's hand – 2001



A lot of fans attribute this moment as the end of the Attitude Era and whilst it technically was not the end, it definitely was the start of it.

Stone Cold Steve Austin was a man of the people and was the biggest star in what many consider the greatest era of professional wrestling. When he decided to join forces with his nemesis Vincent Kennedy McMahon in order to win the WWF Championship at Wrestlemania X-Seven, many fans were left bewildered.

The entire foundation of the Attitude Era was built on the rivalry between Austin and McMahon so when Austin used a McMahon endorsed chair to pummel The Rock it undermined the story that had been told for the past few years.

The heel turn ranks highly because Austin was the biggest star in the industry and the image of a crimson masked Austin shaking hands with McMahon is iconic. The fact that the turn took place in Austin's home state of Texas was another reason why it was a special moment.

However it is only ranked fourth because it was not long lasting and felt wasted.

It was evident when the Two Man Power Trip was formed shortly after Wrestlemania X-Seven that the plan was to eventually lead to an Austin vs Triple H match, however after the latter tore his quadricep in a tag team match on Raw against Chris Jericho and Chris Benoit, that plan was thrown to the wayside.

Instead Austin turned face, heel and then face once again by the time the Invasion storyline had concluded by Survivor Series at the end of 2001. Austin was used as a heel to give the Alliance some star power since many WCW stars had not joined the company at the time WCW was purchased.

In retrospect his heel turn was wasteful and that is a shame as it had the potential to be the greatest heel turn of all time.



### 3 - Seth Rollins Initiates Plan B -2014



The Shield was one of the greatest factions in WWE history, however like any great faction their eventual breakup was inevitable. Fans never wondered that The Shield would end but they rather questioned how.

The answer to their questions was finally answered when Seth Rollins produced the most iconic chair shot in WWE history when he smacked an unassuming Roman Reigns in the back. A beat down of Dean Ambrose followed and Rollins joined forces with The Authority.

The Hounds of Justice were beloved by fans since they debuted on the main roster at Survivor Series in 2012 and they would go on to terrorise the WWE roster for the next year and a half before the Architect stabbed his brothers in the back.

The heel turn was the rocket launcher for Rollins career as 4 weeks later he was Mr Money in the Bank and he later became the first ever wrestler to cash in his title shot at a Wrestlemania when he stole his former brethren Reigns crowning moment.

The heel turn also benefitted all three members of The Shield as it was the promotions excuse to promote Reigns to the position of top babyface in the company whilst it allowed Ambrose to embrace his lunatic persona in which he flourished.

The trio were destined for greatness and this was proven when they had all held the WWE Championship by mid-2016, even holding it on the same night at the Money in the Bank Pay-Per-View.

The chair shot is constantly called back to whenever Rollins and Reigns cross paths in storyline and was highlighted during the main event of Wrestlemania 40 when Reigns returned the favour by hitting Rollins with a steel chair in similar fashion.

Whilst it is very probable that the future visionary was going to be one of the most successful WWE Superstars of his generation his heel turn in 2014 remains one of the most memorable moments of his career and was the catalyst for Rollins impeccable run as a singles star.

## 2 - Roman Reigns becomes the Tribal Chief– 2020



Fans had been begging for a Roman Reigns heel turn years before the Big Dog had finally caved in and transformed himself into the Tribal Chief. Once he did fans were not disappointed as the Bloodline saga had been one of the most compelling stories told in a pro wrestling setting.

Reigns had developed a new menacing and confident attitude when he returned to WWE at SummerSlam in 2020 where he attacked both The Fiend Bray Wyatt and Braun Strowman. A week later he aligned with Paul Heyman and had won his second Universal Championship which he would end up holding for a monumental 1316 days.

For the first time ever, the face of the promotion was a heel and it would stay that way for the next four years until Cody Rhodes would dethrone him.

The heel run elevated a multitude of wrestlers and was the catalyst for WWE to become the hottest it has been since the Attitude Era. WWE have posted record financials in terms of merchandise, network deals and gate receipts and all of this has taken place during Reigns tenure as a heel.

The Island of Relevancy was more than a catchphrase as talents such as the Usos (Jey Uso especially), Solo Sikoa, Sami Zayn, Kevin Owens, Cody Rhodes, etc, have benefitted greatly from their respective alliances and/or rivalries with the Head of the Table.

The Bloodline saga has allowed for great character development for different wrestlers as there has been extra emphasis on story telling for promo segments and matches. Many moments throughout the saga have been described by fans as cinema.

Reigns' Wrestlemania 39 and 40 main events against Cody Rhodes had enabled The American Nightmare to take over as the top star in the company as Rhodes pinning the Tribal Chief in Philadelphia felt like a passing of the torch moment.

The heel turn may have lacked the shock factor of an Austin or Hogan turn due to the circumstances of the pandemic but it definitely had a bigger impact on the industry than those two heel turns did.

## 1 - John Cena breaks our hearts - 2025



This is number one. It was the biggest shock that WWE has produced maybe ever. At this point in time, during his farewell tour, nobody believed that John Cena would turn heel. Then he did.

This was something that fans had been clamouring for since Cena's first WWE Championship run in 2005 when it was clear that the company was building around him. It became even more prevalent when it was obvious that Cena would win his matches all the time.

Despite being a hero and a role model to kids around the globe, adult fans chanting "John Cena Sucks" would be a weekly occurrence when the trumpets blared for his entrance theme "The Time is Now".

That stopped a few years ago as fans grew to appreciate Cena's commitment to his character and believed that he would be the ultimate babyface until he finally laced up his sneakers.

Then he shockingly kicked Cody Rhodes in the balls and brutally beat him down with his fellow Hollywood companion The Rock and rap megastar Travis Scott.

The moment of Cena's facial expression changing had a cinematic feel to it and was filled with suspense and tension, something Hulk Hogan's heel turn in 1996 lacked. It was a once in a lifetime moment that was over 20 years in the making and it was executed perfectly.

It is obvious that the goal of this heel turn has two objectives. The first is to win the coveted 17<sup>th</sup> World Championship. Whether he wins it at Wrestlemania or he turns back to the good side in an effort to win it with honour, he has to win it because that is what the fans want to see.

The second objective is to cement Cody Rhodes as this generations face of the company. Whilst Roman Reigns may be a massive draw he is a part timer and has been for a few years. This is Cody's ship and he has been the captain since he returned at Wrestlemania 38.



By the end of the farewell tour Cena will most likely give Cody Rhodes the seal of approval similarly to how The Rock did to him over a decade ago.

Triple H's attention to detail for storylines since he has taken over should give fans encouragement that Cena's heel run will be done well enough to keep audiences captivated for the rest of the year.

Even still, despite not precisely knowing where this heel turn will go, the moment of Cena looking at the Rock with villainous intent will remain iconic for as long as professional wrestling exists. For that reason alone it is easily the best heel turn of the century.