



The Chronicle of Lancashire Wrestling. *(Starting 1828).*

"There were also wrestling matches, and Dockham (Adam Ridings) and many other powerful men took part in them. The object of the wrestler was to place his antagonist on his back, and in this style of contest no throw was counted unless both shoulders of the fallen man fairly touched the ground. Any kind of rough usage was permissible. The wrestlers were of sturdy build, below rather than above the middle height, with powerful limbs, massive neck, and bullet-headed."

(Rochdale and the Vale of Whitworth. By Wm Robertson).

There are no credible evidences or records of an organized prize-wrestling in South and East Lancashire before the year of 1828. I have a large collection of old broadsheets from South Lancashire in my possession which features all kinds of traditional English sports that were played during the local Wakes, Rushbearings, Fairs, and etc. festivals and there's not even a single mention of wrestling contest in them. Similar ads from the other so-called "wrestling regions" of England always mention the game of wrestling. This fact makes me think that in the eastern parts of Lancashire (historical Salford and Blackburn Hundreds of Lancashire) running open to all wrestling competitions or even a single combat challenge matches wasn't common. Instead, there is a rich and very old culture which surrounds the local variation of prize-fighting, aka the *Lancashire up and down fight*. Such fights were mentioned literally everywhere, any big sporting gathering had them.

- WHERE? - IN ASHTON-UNDER-LYNE!

The earliest recorded official pro-wrestling match in this area happened *in Ashton-under-Lyne, in October 1828*, and was a challenge match between the two "wrestling celebrities" from the South Lancashire mill-towns of Bolton and Bury. This sporting event was "among the amusements" played during the Ashton Wakes week.

- WHY? TO SAVE THE BUSINESS AND MAKE MONEY SAFELY!

The year 1828 was a very important year for English prize wrestling. On Easter holiday the gentry of the City of Leeds, in the neighboring with Lancs, the West Riding of Yorkshire, held an open to all wrestling championship tourney. It was a tourney in traditional English jacket-style of wrestling, in which only holds of the jackets being allowed, often this style was referred to as a "one hand to collar" wrestling. The rules stated: *"is to take hold of the other by the collar, after which they may shift their hold to any other part of the jacket they please"*.

Unfortunately the Cornish sportsmen ignored this tourney, I am surprised they decided not to participate in this big wrestling gathering but very likely they were against the *"each man to wear a fair shoe and padding, if he chooses"* thing. That condition was the main difference between Cornish and English jacket-wrestling styles. The Englishmen from various regions of the country did show up and participated. The competition was obviously dominated by the Devonian athletes, the best collar style wrestlers of England, and their hero A. Cann was an easy winner of the championship honors.



Notably, no local West Yorkshire wrestlers participated in that tourney, neither the wrestlers from neighboring South and East Lancs areas did. This fact tells us that a jacket-style wrestling was either not known to them or simply not practiced. One of the articles of the rules which governed the Leeds championship tourney stated – *no holds below the waist allowed*. My guess is that this paragraph was added to the rules because in West Yorks and South and East Lancs the wrestling holds below the waist were accepted as a fair wrestling technique. For the wrestlers from all other regions this was a no go, so there was no reasons to even mention it. So to say that addition to the rules was made specifically for the local men, to make sure that Yorks and Lancs wrestlers, if they decided to participate, will not turn normal English collar-wrestling into something else.

Even in the 1880s, when the jacket-style wrestling lost its popularity, during the heyday of the English Catch-hold wrestling, the holds below the waist were still considered an unfair action.

- CONCEPTUAL APPROACH. WHAT IS ENGLISH WRESTLING?

“CONCLUDING REMARKS. To be a good wrestler, quickness of eye, agility of movement, strength of arm and leg, and equability of temper are indispensable. A good even green turf is requisite for a very hard soil presents too much resistance to the foot, while a soft one causes the players to slip and stumble. The dress should be light and easy; a pair of woollen or linen trousers, confined at the waist by a belt, an elastic shirt, and thin shoes and stockings, being all that are necessary. Professional wrestlers, indeed, dispense with all but the trousers; but when you wrestle for mere amusement, your ordinary cricketing costume, minus the spiked shoes, will serve admirably. It is expressly forbidden by the etiquette of the sport for either player to seize his opponent by the throat or below the belt, to use the fist, or in any other way to take undue or unfair advantage.” (The Boys Own Book, A Complete Encyclopedia of Sports, by Wm Clarke 1885).

The ads of the *Leeds Easter Tourney*, as well as some details about the championship, like mentioning the participants and the matches’ results, appeared in Manchester press and that for sure grew interest of the local sports promoters, the publicans, to the game of wrestling which was neglected in South Lancashire areas for so long. A reason of this interest had also something to do with the strict prosecution of their favorite sport, the Lancashire up and down fighting, by the late 1820s it became illegal, and the organizers as well as the participants of those wild exhibitions were haunted by the local police. This business was unsafe. And yes of course the fighters themselves got maimed or permanently injured very often in this type of fighting. The publicans were about to lose a whole fighting industry, their main business, and many good “feyters” became soon “unemployed”.

This particular situation caused a certain interest, which made the sport-promoters of the South Lancashire to consider running Lancashire prize-wrestling matches, instead of the Lancashire fighting contests, something that was never done locally before. But their choice could not have been the sophisticated Cornish jacket-style, because its extensive wrestling vocabulary was unfamiliar in this region of England, and if introduced, it would have been perceived as nothing but an old brutal English tugging and clog-kicking game which was well known and widely practiced in Lancs, just like it was everywhere else in England. Yes, it was their local wrestling style too, “giving a Lanky” simply meant kicking a person to the ground. And the “bosses” obviously didn’t want that to happen. They wanted something else, a new legit official sport of their own, hence they called it “Lancashire”, the sport which according to their plan had to be



recognized and accepted by the contemporary English society. And of course the chosen sport should have been a safe sport, safe for everyone, for the players as well as for the business owners, which the first decades of catch proved it was, there were no recorded deaths in this style of prize-wrestling since its introduction.

The newborn game was designed to save the business and to become the safest way to make money, in compare to what the illegal up and down fighting was, to employ all the local gamesters, and quickly capitalize on it! The re-branding (wrestling instead of fighting) was an ultimate solution of local promoters! The *publicans of Ashton* were the *true fathers of Lancashire catch wrestling*, the originators of the game that was destined to change pro wrestling history once and forever.

- WHAT? – CATCH AS CATCH CAN!

The style of wrestling they (the bosses of the game) chose to become official Lancashire prize wrestling was a catch-hold of any part of the body above and under the waist line, a freestyle wrestling. The definition of fall, they used, or a fair back fall, was taken from the contemporary Cornish-Devon sources which were available through major English sporting publications, “*two shoulders should strike the ground together*”. But they ignored the other part of that rule which clearly states “*and before any other part of the body*, so to say the original reading of the rule suggests the Cornish-Devonian fair back fall to be directly onto shoulders. They, Lankies, instead, didn’t care much for that detail. Giving adversary a foil, first, and then not letting go the hold of him trying to turn him onto his back became a common scenario of most of early Lancs wrestling matches, and as a matter of fact this exhibition did look funny to most of the observants of this new kind of wrestling, especially when the attacker grabbing his opponent by the legs felled them onto their hands, or bellies, and then tries to overturn them by twisting their legs, and them walking on their hands or standing on their heads, whole thing did look somewhat comical, strange, foreign to a trained eye of a common English wrestling practitioner or to a fan who saw wrestling at the big Cornish-Devon or Cumberland wrestling gatherings.

Another important detail was that at that early stage of Lancs wrestling history there was no agreement to whether actual prolonged struggle on the ground, on “all fours” as they say should be allowed or not. Some said that wrestling contests *should not be conducted under the up and down system* which dominated local prize fighting for centuries. Those wanted it to be a fair or upright style for the most part. But as a matter of fact most of the pro wrestlers of that very first generation were employed from the former up and down fighters and they simply weren’t willing to learn to wrestle on their feet and basically dictated the fashions, what the new style of wrestling should be like. Those obviously chose familiar to them the up and down variation of catch as catch can wrestling. Bottom-line is that the wrestling vocabulary of the early Lancashire catch as catch can was based on the type of wrestling which was part of up and down fighting culture, so to say it was not a normal, generally accepted idea of what English wrestling is.

The adopted in Lancashire definition of fair back fall meant an instant touching or striking of two shoulders together, a touch-fall speaking the modern wrestling terminology, and that of course also included the so called rolling falls, when wrestler rolled from one shoulder to the other.



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Jim Parr of Wigan, Lancs a popular champion wrestler from the early 1900s thus explained the basics of catch wrestling: *"In Lancashire, where the Lancashire or catch-as-catch-can-game, as it is called, originated, all falls count when the shoulders touch the mat together. It makes no difference whether you throw a fellow over your head, and let go of him, or whether you press him down with a hammerlock, or roll him: It is a fall every time the shoulders strike together."*

Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle - Sunday, 09 July 1843; Page 2.

"RIDINGS AND CLOUGH.-A vast concourse of spectators assembled on the bowling-green of the Humphrey Chetham, near the Manchester Water Works, on Monday, to witness a trial of strength and skill in the Lancashire fashion, between Adam Ridings alias Dockem, of Bury, and George Clough, the Black Diamond, of Clifton, the best of three fair back falls for £10 a-side. About half-past three the magnets of the day came forth in wrestling trim, and two fine young men they appeared. Clough had the advantage in weight, but the odds ran as high as 2 to 1 against him.

They were not long in commencing operations, when Adam caught his man in his arms, and gave him one of the *cleverest cross buttocks ever seen*, which Jack M'Grath designated a catherine wheel; the round only lasted two minutes.

The next bout was undecided, although in the opinion of many it was a fair fall in favour of Adam, *as Clough was certainly on one shoulder when quitted, and turned over on the other instead of his breast.*

The third was an easy fall in favour of Clough, through Adam outstriding himself, 4 to 1 on Adam, who went in and completed his job in a masterly manner."

As a matter of fact Adam Ridings of Bury, Lancs aka "Dockum" won most of his matches on cross-buttock throws given from the standing position, he was locally known as a "cross-buttocker" and that his skill allowed him to successfully compete in the Cumberland Back-hold wrestling events as well.

Although the organized prize wrestling was not known locally, this fact does not speak for the game of wrestling being unknown to the native residents of that region prior the 1828 Ashton event. The pub-wrestle, the wrestling challenges in local pubs for a drink, or for a little wager with few pence, or a shilling aside being at stake, or a wrestle out of pure curiosity as to find out "who is a better man", or simply for fun, happened quite often. All these and similar events along with all the other facts related to the birth, evolution and the early history of Lancashire catch as catch can wrestling are well documented in my book *THE STORY OF CATCH (2019)*.

As it appears to me the game of wrestling was understood by the local people as a *skill of felling a person to the ground (in local dialect is was known as a thrut, wrestle for a thrut) without resorting to kicks, blows and etc unfair actions*. It seems like local wrestlers weren't familiar with the "noble art of tripping" which formed an essence of English jacket-style wrestling, they mostly wrestled with their hands, arms and widely utilized the physical strength of their bodies, instead of using their feet and legs for throwing their adversaries to the ground. Catching advantageous hold or struggling for such hold was the main focus of local gamesters. Taking holds of any part of the person's body was allowed (even below the waist), as well as very



likely was the instant felling opponent from his knees after either of the two or both were down on their knees (at that time though the actual struggle on the ground was not allowed), even though in the City of Manchester these were not considered a fair wrestling strategy.

Local wrestling practitioners only had 3 legit holds in their dictionary, *the variations of chancery hold, single leg, and double leg*. And it was from these holds that they would attempt to send their opponents onto their backs. Just like in other regions of England the fair-fall, or the fall was on one's back, a horizontal flat back fall, and any other kind of fall was seen as a foul-fall, or a foil. Lancashire wrestlers were very proficient in their traditional mode of wrestling. It is a known fact that the Manchester's Chetham School youngsters favorite pastime was that of wrestling. Despite all that there were no wrestling gatherings in Lancashire let's say similar to those which were held elsewhere in England, in such places as West Country, North Country or in Berkshire, counties of Norfolk and Lincolnshire.

Wrestling for a throw (or the "thrut") was original local Lancashire wrestling, but it wasn't the only wrestling game practiced locally. There also was another kind of wrestling in which both men could simply start contest on the ground, one being on his knees (advantage for his opponent) and the other trying to either keep him in this position for as long as possible, restraining his moves, or to try and turn him onto his back and then immobilize him, depending on what they actually agreed on.

Wrestling skills, or the skill of felling and dominating opponent, also played a very important role in the up and down Lancashire style of fighting, the only professional combative sport of Lancashire men. That sport as wasn't a fair upright fighting, the object of this kind of fighting was to take down, to throw your opponent on the ground first, and then deliver them all kinds of punishment, make them quit and say "I yield!", it was even allowed to kick a helpless person, who were previously thrown.

This short paragraph from the 19c press links together the two Lancashire sports, the newborn catch wrestling and the old up and down fighting. Interestingly, the author does mention the full-Nelson hold, a hold which likely was the most common "wrestling" finisher in the fights after the Lanky fashion.

"Among the other wrestling fashions which prevail in our own land, there is that of Lancashire, the most brutal and repulsive of them all. Under its rules almost unlimited action is permitted, and in days not far remote, when "purring" was a favorite sport, among the lower order - a "game," if such it can be called, played by two wearing metal-tipped clogs, with which they kick each other on the shins and legs until pain and exhaustion led one or other to give way-hardly any device was prohibited. Now it is forbidden to scratch, throttle, bite, or deliberately injure an adversary, and the "full-Nelson" is not practiced. This dreadful hold was obtained by thrusting both arms under the arm-pits of the opponent, bringing the hands round in a lock on the back of the neck, whereby such leverage could be exerted that the vertebra might be fractured or dislocated unless the man surrendered. But, in spite of its amendment, the Lancashire style is not pleasant to look upon, though it has thousands of followers, and many exponents who wrestle frequently for large stakes in the presence of excited crowds."

Frankly, the *full-Nelson* or a *Pillory Hold* as it was commonly known in England since probably early 18c, or even before that time, was not exclusive to Lancashire wrestling traditions, it was mentioned under this name in the famous *Yorkshires' Z. Wylde treatise* on manly arts of self-



defense. Another important detail is that it was not referred to as a legit hold in the game of wrestling, but rather as a way to overcome your adversary using wrestling skill and thus give them a lesson, punish their arrogance.

There has been a great deal of discussion of why nelson hold is being called the nelson. My explanation of that is actually pretty simple and sure is based on logic and common sense. Whether you call it a pillory, which was a medieval instrument of public punishment, or a nelson, what you mean is that the arms (or an arm in the case with half-nelson) of a person are locked in a specific way, and thus are disengaged, he simply cannot use them. Interesting coincident, but the famous admiral Lord Horatio Nelson lost his right arm in the battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife in 1797, so obviously after that happened he couldn't use it anymore, he didn't have an arm. So to say, it is very likely, and quite logical to guess that the idea of original "Nelson" was actually that of half-nelson (and not a full-nelson), which still is the most popular catch wrestling throwing and rolling technique, that is locking person's arm in that peculiar "pillory" way and thus disengaging it, causing a person problems with mobility or resistance, locking them, then giving pressure on the back of his neck usually combined with the crotch or leg/foot holds flipping or rolling him right onto his both shoulders.

And finally, the vast majority (if not all) of those Lancashire catch wrestling "matches of old" were the prize-wrestling events, which is another, a fancier word for pro wrestling exhibition. Taking that under consideration we should understand that this "game", the professional Lancashire Catch as catch can, never was about "who is the best wrestler of the two", but was a predetermined finish affair in which "wrestlers" (wrestling entertainers) who work like partners in ring (it does take two to tango) were both employees of an organizer of the event, and the ultimate goal of such enterprise was to make a good show that could attract large crowds and to get the maximum turnover off it (including the control and manipulation of the betting money of course because only a very limited group of people knew that it was not a genuine sport)...and then after that, repeat that the same show again, and again, and again to make even more money.

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