

# Out of Darkness

## The Story of Catch

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### Part 1 In the Beginning

There has always been a great deal of discussion about the origins of the Lancashire Wrestling style (better known as Catch-as-Catch-Can) and we have to admit that for many decades very little was known on that subject.

Recently when a great portion of the digitized newspaper archives of the British Library, the British Newspaper Archives (BNA), were made available online, researchers from all over the world had a unique opportunity to study the history of Lancashire wrestling strictly based on the facts recorded in contemporary newspaper publications.

The conventional view of Lancashire Wrestling history was based on a verbal tradition which was never supported by factual material and which claimed that this specific style of wrestling had always existed, was practiced in Lancashire since the days of old and was culturally unique to those areas.

Intense research of BNA has enabled us to challenge this view. It is now evident that not only was the emergence of Lancashire wrestling a relatively recent phenomena the origins of the professional style were not in the Lancashire town of Wigan.

There was no mention of Lancashire professional wrestling contests in the local press before the 1820's, and besides that the local style of wrestling (which we understand was Catch-as-Catch-Can) was practiced in a small isolated area which is now part of Greater Manchester, (including bordering areas of Cheshire, Derbyshire, and Yorkshire), Blackburn and the area around. The Lancashire Catch-as-Catch-Can towns from the West to the East were namely Bolton, Bury, Rochdale, Middleton, Ashton, Oldham.

Notably outside this area of activity is the town of Wigan. The mining community that has given so much to professional wrestling and is traditionally considered by many to be the home of Catch was not the place of origin.

Most of the professional contests were held in the back yard of public houses. Local publicans were in charge of the organization of the sporting events and took control of stakes and betting.

## Lancashire wrestling home towns of wrestlers up to 1855



The earliest known mention of the official wrestling competition in those areas (East Lancashire) is dated 1809, at Ramsbottom. It was the King George III Golden Jubilee Celebration where the rustic sports of Leaping, Wrestling and etc. were held in front of the local Grand Lodge. The earliest known Lancashire Wrestling Challenge matches (professional sport competitions, contests) report in newspapers goes back to late 1820's.

At Ashton Wakes (Note 1) in 1828 a wrestling contest between John Rowland (Rowland) known as "Rowly" of New Bury, Bolton and Thomas Browne, also known as "Tongue" of Bury. The match was decided by 3 out of 5 fair back falls (Note 2). Rowly won the match 3-1 (1-0, 1-1, 2-1, 3-1). Rowly had advantage in weight and strength, and had the frame of Hercules. Publicans were organisers of sports at local folk festivals such as wakes or rushbearings (Note 3).

In 1833 we have another match of Rowly, referred to as "Lancashire Champion." This time he met Crompton at Sheffield, Yorkshire, conditions were 4 of 7 fair back falls, £40 at stake. The match resulted in a draw, 3-3. The seventh fall was disputed so the wrestlers decided to meet another day on the following conditions 3 of 5 fair back falls, plus additional £5 stakes. Crompton won the match 3-2 (0-1, 1-1, 1-2, 2-2, 3-2). During the match Rowly was injured when Crompton accidentally trod on his hand. Rowly issued challenge for re-match to come off in six weeks, with £100 at stake, but Crompton declined to meet Rowly.

Another match of note at Hyde Park, Sheffield, took place in 1834, Sanderson beat Burton (3-1), match was 3 of 5 fair back falls for stakes of £20

These matches weren't referred to as Catch-as-Catch-Can matches, they were simply called "wrestling matches", but we assume all those matches were Catch-as-Catch-Can affairs, simply because fair back falls constituted the victory, and these were one of the most important features of catch. In other English wrestling styles conditions varied depending on the territory.

The first mention of Catch-as-Catch-Can (official term was - "catch hold of your opponent and throw him as you can") regarding a Lancashire wrestling match dates back to 1833. Four gold sovereigns were at stake, when local Manchester sporting celebrity/pugilist/publican Johnny Cheetham met Emanuel Howard of Haslingden at Bolton, 2 of 3 back falls, Howard won the match 2-0 (the first round lasted 10 minutes).

The earliest “championship matches” according to newspaper archives were usually “West” meets “East” when the best Bolton wrestler would meet the Oldham champion. In 1836 such a match of “extraordinary interest in the sporting circles of Manchester, Oldham, Ashton and Bolton” took place at the Bowling Green of Humphrey Cheetham Arms. It was the “Horwich Youth” of Bolton, weight of 12 stones 10 pounds (178 pounds) and famous John Holt aka “Jack o’ James” of Oldham, weight of 11 stones (158 pounds) who wrestled for the championship. Conditions 2 of 3 fair back falls, £10 a-side Their match was the greatest wrestling attraction of the year. Youth was coached by “Mountain Stag” and Holt by “Nelson” (I wonder if the famous Nelson Hold was named after that man). During the match the Oldham champion tried to apply his favourite hold – the headlock. Betting played a significant part in that contest. The Boltonian, Horwich Youth, proved to be an easy winner (2-0, first fall 36 minutes, second fall a little over 15 minutes).

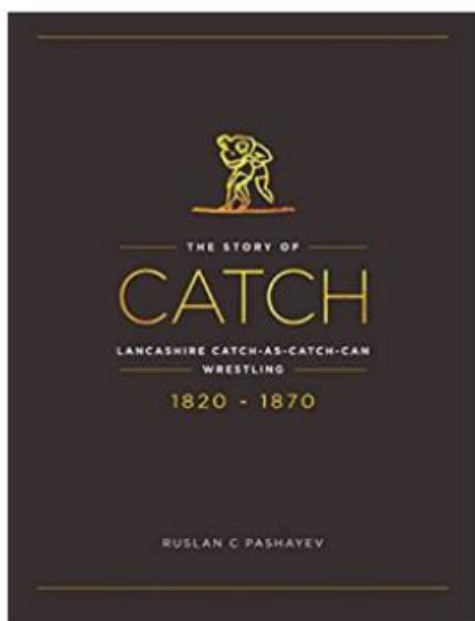
Another match worthy of attention was in 1837, at Craven Heifer of Brookhouse, Blackburn, for £2 a-side between local sports celebrity pedestrian (runner) Thomas Lang aka “Mountain Stag” and William Loud aka “Dolphin”, 2 of 3 fair back falls. Stag was the winner (2-0).

#### Notes

(1) Ashton under Lye, a town in south east Lancashire celebrated a Wakes Week, or holiday period that dated back to the 16th century. Originally a religious celebration the Wakes Week became a tradition in northern towns that enabled mills and factories to be closed for maintenance.

(2) Two shoulders pressed down constitute the fall.

(3) An English ecclesiastical festival in which rushes were collected and strewn on the floor of the Parish Church. The festival fell into decline during the 19th century.



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## **The Story of Catch: The Story of Lancashire Catch-as-catch-can Wrestling.**

**FIRST FIFTY YEARS 1820-1870. by Ruslan C Pashayev**

The Birth and Evolution of Catch-as-Catch-Can Pro-Wrestling in East Lancashire, England. "The Story of Catch" covers the most forgotten stages of Lancashire's Catch Wrestling history, including its origin, its fast growth and evolution during first fifty years of Catch, introduction of professionalism and its Golden Era, as well as introduction and popularization of it in the United States. This story has many heroes who affected Catch in its early stages and remained in history as true symbols of Lancashire Wrestling. But the whole story is dedicated to the memory of Adam Ridings of Bury, Lancs (1819-1894), who was also known under the nickname of “Dockum of Bury” a pioneer of Catch Wrestling, and the most prominent and popular wrestler of Lancashire in the 1840's-1850's. For anyone with a serious interest in history of professional wrestling "The Story of Catch" is a must.

Research mainly at [British Newspaper Archive](#).

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