

Out of Darkness

The Story of Catch

Ruslan Pashayev

Part 13 Pioneers of the West

Amongst them were Edwin Bibby of Ashton, Joseph Acton, James Faulkner, Tom Connor (all three from Wigan) and of course Tom Cannon of Tyldesley. James Faulkner actually was champion wrestler, first holder of the Champion Challenge Cup of Oldham Borough Grounds, at 6 score 6 pounds (again 9 stone championship), 1879.

Joe Acton (Wigan)

Joe Acton was a very popular Lancashire wrestler in the 1870's who even claimed the heavyweight championship of England (both in England, and in America), but his weight didn't exceed 10 stones. His claims were subject of humor in Lancashire since "Bolton Giant" a 20 stones wrestler, Snape, champion wrestler at both London Catch-Hold and Lancashire Catch-as-catch-can was still alive. Acton never accepted Snape's challenge which was "open to the world", it was quite surprising how anyone could claim Heavyweight Championship without defeating an actual champion.

Joe Acton (Hurst)

Among other Lancashire wrestlers who made it to America and were holders of the Copenhagen Grounds Champion Belt in the past were Joe Acton of Hurst (near Ashton). He died in a mining accident,(and should not be confused with the later one from Wigan). Another was Frank Robinson, who died from blood poisoning. Both wrestled in America and had some success but again during 1870's Lancashire wrestlers community was "closed", and mostly restricted to former residents (miners) of Lancashire.

Edwin Bibby

Edwin Bibby in his early years in fact was Champion 9 stone Wrestler of England, holder of the Gold Cup of Lancashire. Edwin Bibby (an 11 stones veteran in the 1880s) was in fact the pioneer of them all. Everything he did in America was quite successful and yes he regularly took part in "challenge matches", where he was advertised as "Champion of England." Besides wrestling at catch-as-catch-can he also successfully wrestled at French style, as well as joining the entertainment company Barnum's Circus. For his great skill and accomplishments his employers planned to decorate him with the "champion belt".

Tom Connor

Tom Connor (10 stones 7 pounds), just like Acton, also claimed "heavyweight championship" (sometimes "middleweight") and based his claims on his victory over Ike Smith who in turn based his "claims" on his defeat of Acton.

John Cross and Ralph Wolfenden

John Cross of Ashton one of the best Lancashire wrestlers came to States and on September 11th, 1871 wrestled another expert from County Palatinat Ralph Wolfenden of Oldham, their match at Union Park, Allegheny Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was billed as for 1,000 USD and the "American Championship at Lancashire Catch-as-catch-can". Wolfenden got first fall, time was 1hr45min, friends of Cross protested the fall, according to their claims "Wolfenden's seconds threw sand in Cross' eyes right before the fall was given". Their protests were declined and the time was called. Cross refused to continue match. Referee Wm Winterbottom awarded match to Wolfenden.

Harry Howard

A wrestler from Glen Cove, NY who was originally from Bury, Lancashire, Harry Howard (b. 1850), 5 feet 6 inches, 10 stones. He successfully participated in the athletic tournament, "shows" in 1874 at Barnum's Hippodrome, New York City (later that area it was the location of the most famous sports arena in the world - Madison Square Garden), and won silver and gold medals at Lancashire wrestling, catch-as-catch-can, defeating the star of New York Caledonian Club Andrew Rennie in the finals. That was a definitely a good start.

Teddy Lowe

One of the best Lancashire catch wrestlers of all times "Teddy" Lowe, being inspired by Jem Mace, made it to America. It was in 1873 and he spent six years in the States without much success. Yes, of course his primary occupation was that of a miner (he worked in a coal mine near Washington, Pennsylvania), but he did wrestle occasionally (at Pittsburgh on August 11th 1873 he wrestled Irishman Mike Tierney, a desperate match which ended up in a 1 hour 25 minutes draw). But for the most part he was still another Lancashire collier who never achieved the same status in America as he had in his native Lancashire. Lowe remains the only man in history who held both Copenhagen Grounds Belt and Gold Cup at the same time, and when he came to America he genuinely called himself – Champion Wrestler of England, which was factually true. Many wrestlers after him would come and many would call themselves "champions" but not so many of them were of the championship class, and definitely none of them had the same glory as Lowe did.

William Schora

In his later years the great William Schora moved to States but he had retired long ago and in America was mostly busy with coaching young wrestlers.

Jack Turner and Joe Tinker

On January 18th 1869 there was a Lancashire catch "Championship of New Jersey", match between Jack Turner and Joe Tinker for 250USD a-side.

Lancashire Catch Promoters

In the early 1880's in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania the community of Lancashire "wrestling miners" was quite large and they were part of the local "English Sports" entertainment (promotion), under the patronage of Mr. Clark owner of the Olympic Club Theatre (Olympic Garden). Catch-as-catch-can championship – Champion Challenge Cup (also known as John H. Clark's Cup, a very handsome silver affair was an essential part of it. Some of the cup holders were famous Lancashire men: Richard Massey of Dukinfield (1882), who won Manchester Sweepstakes 1884, Edward O'Brien of Oldham (1882), Owen McCarthy also

of Oldham (1884), who claimed the lightweight catch championship of US following his victory over veteran Ashtonian Frank Robinson in 1880.

The promotion had some local stars, among them champion wrestler and cup holder William Coupe (we are assuming him being American since he is mentioned as a great side-hold wrestler, one of the two most popular American wrestling styles along with collar and elbow.

When in America Lancashire wrestlers joined the business which was operated pretty much the only way they knew of, the one of the Golden Era 1860's – Challenge Trophies. It's hard to tell whether that promotion was successful or not, but yet it had some really great names among their champions, and lasted few years. Also having the 9 stones 4 pounds weight class championship was right choice, since it was the most “competitive” division among natives of Lancashire.

Sometimes champions wouldn't want to defend their title (Owen McCarthy in 1882), because too many obligations to regularly defend affected their independence. No one wanted to be “employees” of the owners of the “promotion”. Wrestlers were learning to represent themselves without having support from “employers”.

Another local “Lancashire wrestling promotion” of Philadelphia was known as Echo Park Lightweight Championship, also won by McCarthy in September 1883. He defeated Harry Howard in the semi-final and Coupe in the final and was awarded gold medal and 75USD cash.

American fans truly enjoyed watching Lancashire catch matches, those matches in fact were more exciting shows than any other wrestling performances. The lack of local American catch wrestlers amongst the participants of the shows meant support wasn't as great as other styles of wrestling. Matches were mostly restricted to Lancashire men only, which hindered popularization of the sport.

America needed a star of American birth. They needed a “Muldoon of Catch” to make it popular in States. We have to remember when Muldoon got his official Graeco-Roman Police Gazette title and Gold Medal he defeated Bibby, which shows that Edwin fully integrated himself in American Wrestling. Lancashire men needed to bring “new American names” into Catch and only that would guarantee the final success. Soon two men, Evan Lewis and Jack Carkeek, (both former amateur Cornish catch wrestlers) who adopted Lancashire catch became superstars, and Lancashire stars like Acton “jobbed” to them. That was the start of a new Era. During that new Era being an American Wrestler became fashionable. Tom Cannon of Tyldsley, Lancashire, preferred to call himself Cannon of Cincinnati, Ohio, American champion wrestler.

By 1890 catch champions were actually Americans – Jack Carkeek and Evan Lewis who “defeated” their “English opponents”. In both cases English pioneers Joe Acton and Tom Connor did a great jobs to make that happen. Carkeek and Lewis would remain the best American catch wrestlers for a long time, and both of course claimed the “undisputed” championship of USA (or even the world) until that position was “taken away” from them by Martin Farmer Burns.

Another North American star of that epoch was Dan McLeod who won his first major professional catch title in 1893 at the International San Francisco Tournament, “defeating” famous Englishman Joe Acton in the grand final. All those events were very important in

popularization of catch and creating the environment for it to blossom in States. English catch wrestlers jobbed to young American stars to build up their “credibility.” It was the birth of Catch pro-wrestling in America when Lewis won the mixed wrestling match against the Graeco-Roman champion Roeberin 1892. In the early 1890's catch wasn't the only pro-wrestling style, it worked alongside Graeco-Roman wrestling whilst old “folk” styles were about to become extinct.

In the 1890's American wrestling stars Tom Cannon and the “Terrible Greek” Antonio Pierri toured England and that helped with popularization of the American “music halls” kind of pro-wrestling (mixed styles) in the music halls of the United Kingdom. The first thing Pierri did when he arrived to England was to get the Cumberland super-star George Steadman involved, and they had great match in Manchester with Pierri becoming a “Manchester Hero.” He was presented with a beautiful champion belt emblematic of the Graeco-Roman championship of the world. Pierri and Cannon would wrestle for that belt and title at stake quite regularly at every major town in Great Britain.

Among other “visitors” was Jack Carkeek, who was proclaimed in England as the “King of Wrestlers”, he was involved in matches with local mat stars, which gained him popularity among local fans That's why in 1899 Tom Cannon established the World Championship Wrestling promotion he chose Carkeek as their first champion. In 1897 the semi-retired Evan Lewis “The Strangler” came to England and had matches with local Lancashire “champions” om “Bulldog” Clayton and Joe Carroll. He won both matches and maybe there was a plan for him to stay longer stay in England. But that's how pro-wrestling operated, “new person” (usually foreigner) comes “wins over local” stars, then loses to “someone” local (usually new name) and then they play that the same scenario back and forth in every town. It's the Golden Rule of Pro-wrestling, more characters bring more money.

Placing the British 19th Century Pioneers into the context of 19th Century American Wrestling

Of course Pro-wrestling existed in America before the “arrival” of Catch. In the 1600's and 1700's American (or Colonial) Pro-wrestling wasn't that much different from the contemporary English one. Wrestling matches were usually held on May Day, Easter, Whit Monday, Shrove Tuesday, Wakes, and other folk festivals, even Sunday markets, practices which were brought to America by English Pioneers among other their customs. During that era, local wrestling just like in England was represented by two styles – arm's length (collar holds) and closed struggle (above and under holds, side holds), but there also was authentic “Indian Hug” style (Native American Back Hold).

Among the English pioneer wrestlers of that era one became very famous James Draper Jr (1654-1698) of West Roxbury, MA, of famous pioneers Draper Family (they came from Halifax, West Riding of Yorkshire). He was the eldest son of James Draper Sr The Puritan (1618-1694) and Miriam Draper (Stansfield). James Jr was King Philip War (1675/6) veteran. He also was well known for his great wrestling skills and reportedly was champion of Roxbury, MA. He badly injured his leg in one of the wrestling matches which put end to his pro-wrestling career.

Wrestling of that era existed in the form of traditional English rural/rustic games among other feats of strength. In different parts of US different styles prevailed. The Eastern men

(Yankees) preferred Square Hold (which is Collar and Elbow), those from the Middle States - Side Hold, and the Southern and Western men used Breeches Hold and old Indian Hug. Pro-wrestling of the early 1800's was mostly simple "challenge matches" (sometimes advertised in local papers as for some sort of "championship") for the wager between two "worthy opponents" and all it needed was agreement between three parties, two men and the organizer of the event, usually a venue owner.

It wasn't until 1840's when the situation started changing drastically with the arrival of "French Entertainers" to America, they brought something new which could be classified as the "vaudeville, carnival wrestling", which they called French or "Grecian" (after the name of old antique wrestling) and it was pretty much catch-as-catch-can of any part of the body above the waist, fair back falls constituted the victory. The main difference between this "new style" and the old traditional "country folk wrestling" or "challenge matches" was that this new wrestling was designed to be exhibited on the big stage, it was great entertainment. In England first exhibitions of "Grecian" wrestling go back to 1817, and there it was considered as nothing but "disgusting" (more likely because men according to the "ancient Grecian tradition" were half-naked). Among the pioneers were Elslerr Borthers (Gustave and Louis), Professors of Gymnastics, extraordinary artists, and their "Grand Gymnastic Exhibitions" of 1844, also Mr. Charles, the "King of Wrestlers" of "Messrs Charles and Carriere Associated" and their wrestlers, in 1846 they already had "international wrestling tournaments". In one of the matches Mons. Charles was "surprisingly" defeated by Mr. Henry James, "one of our hardy miners". This fact tells us that "miners and pro-wrestling" always had strong connections even in the 1840's.

All that was in the very true sense of it typical Pro-wrestling (after the French fashion), troupes of travelling performers (strongmen) would "wrestle" (and accept "challenges" of locals "for the round sum of One Hundred Dollars") here and there at the stages in local amusement parks, theatres, town halls, music halls, saloons etc. Wrestling contests became essential part of entertainment program, it was in fact "Circus Wrestling". Such "shows" were very common and popular in America during 40's and 50's and by the 1860's Pro-wrestling was already part of local mass culture. "Grecian" wrestling of course soon was substituted with more "historical" styles of Collar and Elbow, Side Hold and Cornish catch-as-catch-can in jackets.

In the 1860's the major wrestling star, of course "Champion of United States", was Uzile Pricket of New Jersey (b. 1840), he wrestled at any style. In 1866 he wrestled and won the match with John Mitchell of England (or according some other sources of Ireland), catch-as-catch-can above the waist, in shirts, 2 of 3 fair back falls. Pricket, who was "undefeated in 33 matches" in 1866 unexpectedly lost to some unknown wrestler from Tennessee, Simon Thompson. Interesting detail of that match was that both men were "stripped to the waist". There were rumors that Pricket "sold the match". Another similar scenario occurred in 1868 when Pricket again quite unexpectedly lost to Ohioan Tim Waller. After that loss Pricket was shot to death. Many fans lost their money on that game so they blamed Pricket for that, who prior to that loss was considered "undefeated." They were sure it wasn't a genuine sport, nothing but a sham play, which led to the murder of the champion wrestler.

In the 1870's Collar and Elbow was dominant, by that time this style already had all the features of pro-wrestling that we all know and love. That decade produced great number of the first class performers among them "champion wrestler of US" Colonel James Hiram McLaughlin of Detroit, Michigan, Homer Lane of New York, and Great Vermonters John McMahan, James Owens, Henry Dufur and William Flagg. All those wrestlers were were

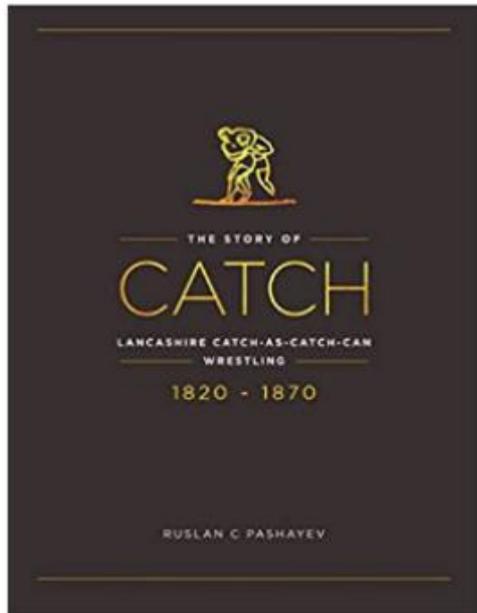
well known showmen, and had status of “Heroes”, local celebrities, quite often they appeared on the pages of local papers, back then there already were “news wars” between top notch men, interviews of the champions where they argued, disputed “who's the best of them all”.

It's interesting how back then one wrestler would call himself a “real sportsman, true athlete” and call all his opponents a “bunch of carnival clowns”. In the 1870's was the second “wave of French immigration” and America got few more talents among them Theo Bauer, Andre Christol the most popular Graeco-Roman wrestlers of that era. Bauer also will be remembered as the first pro-wrestler who had his own portfolio, a magnificent photo album of him exhibiting wrestling poses, produced by Sarony Photo Company. Bauer also was the first man in American wrestling history who was presented with the beautiful gold and silver world champion belt by admirers of his talent, which later will become local tradition, fans will decorate their favorites with belts. Champions of that era Belle Epoque of American Wrestling were “stars” and their images were on sale in the shape of pretty cabinet cards, some companies had exclusive rights on those sales. All that tells us that by 1880's there was a Big Time Pro-wrestling happening in United States. In the 80's the greatest American pro-wrestler of XIX century William Muldoon was at his prime. And he was recognized by the leading sporting authority in the country National Police Gazette of New York world champion at Graeco-Roman wrestling.

Graeco-Roman wrestling didn't replace local styles, neither it had such a goal, it added new colors to American Pro-wrestling making it more International, it gradually integrated in it, and brought into existence great new characters, produced the greatest talent of American Wrestling Ring in the person of Muldoon, and because of all that it never was considered foreign. Also mixed styles matches and tournaments became very popular during that decade, all wrestling styles peacefully co-existed on American soil. During the 80's National Police Gazette regularly had mixed wrestling championships. Wrestlers like Australian, Professor William Miller and Canadian Scotsman Duncan C. Ross claimed to be “champions of all athletic games” including wrestling, of course they wrestled at all possible styles. Professional athletics were huge sector in the world of entertainment. Barnum Circus always had wrestling matches in their programmes.

McLaughlin based his champion's claims on his 1870 victory in the first “Championship Tournament” in American History, it was a Detroit based competition where the winners of three different styles (Collar and Elbow, Side Hold and Back Hold) were called Champions of America. Tournament was organized by local “wrestling association”, they were thinking to have annual championships after the English manner (like they had in London for Cumberland and Cornish/Devon styles). But it never happened, as soon as McLaughlin got his title he basically “left promotion” and started “his own independent journey”, calling himself Champion and defending “his title” in the challenge matches. In 1872 McLaughlin through local press issues challenge to champion wrestlers of England namely Wright and Jameson (both men represented Northern Back Hold Ring), conditions were quite simple they had to accept his challenge within one year and if they won't McLaughlin will claim World Wrestling Championship. Of course no one ever answered any of his challenges so after the year of patiently waiting he added extra plate to his 1870 champion's belt which was inscribed “World Champion”. It was obvious that those matches never were going to happen, McLaughlin had no clue about contemporary English wrestling, Collar and Elbow of United States had no analogues in United Kingdom and Jameson and Wright would never wrestle any other style but their own Cumberland Back Hold. Most of English top pro-wrestlers (at any style) of that era wouldn't exceed 14st, in compare to them Colonel was kind of big (he was 6ft2in and his weight was 250lb). In 1875 McLaughlin will repeat

his “trick” by challenging Lancashire Giant “Richard” Snape, and even claim that he went to England to wrestle him. In fact Snape already lost interest to pro-wrestling and retired by that time and his actual name wasn't “Richard”, he was William, which shows that all those “attempts” to arrange the Intercontinental matches were nothing but a joke, sort of typical “pro-wrestling” behavior, known as ballyhoo.



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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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ruslan_pashayev@yandex.ru

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