

Out of Darkness

The Story of Catch

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Part 2 Life Before Catch

There was wrestling before Catch.

But what was Lancashire wrestling like prior to the era when it became a professional sport in the 1840's?

Surprisingly, the term "Catch as Catch Can" wasn't used in Lancashire until 1833 though the term was in use in Nottingham, Devon and Cornwall a century earlier.

It is also known for sure that amateur or semi-professional wrestling was widely practiced amongst local Lancashire men prior to the 1830's even in the 1700's, during the rural, pre-industrial era. Bamford, author of "Life of Radical," refers to his father as a great up and down fighter as well as good wrestler. So back then there was differentiation between "wrestling" and "up and down fighting."

Since Civil War times (mid 1600's) on the territory of South Lancashire and bordering areas of Cheshire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire there was practiced an "Up and Down Fighting" (sometimes called Lancashire Fighting), a local version of All-in pugilism which was used to resolve disputes between residents (amateur, or semi-professional contests) of those areas as well as professional combative sport.

In England in the 1700's two styles dominated local wrestling: Arms Length where shin kicking was very important, and Closed Struggle (also called Tripping). In the latter the two wrestlers would grip of each other "above and under" and were said to be "playing with the hip" (Lancashire always was famous for its cross-buttock).

Similar styles were practiced elsewhere, Berkshire for example, where only two holds were allowed in wrestling contests: Collar and Elbow or Collar and Hip, first down to lose.

Among the most famous Lancashire wrestlers of the olden days was the Archbishop of Canterbury, Richard Bancroft (1544-1610), a native of Farnworth (near Bolton). He would often let his "theological" opponents try for a fall. Another famous wrestler of that era was Archbishop's good friend and "wrestling partner" from the days of youth, one of the translators of KJV Bible, Laurence Chadderton (1536-1640) of Lees, Oldham. Such an irony Boltonian and an Oldhamer, Lancashire Wrestlers.

In 1769 at Longfield, Bloomsbury in London a Mancunian, Milbourn, defeated Cheshire's Mitchell 6-4 falls with the great sum of 200 guineas at stake, again proving that back in the 1700's both counties shared the same wrestling style. A match in 1820 at Hackney Fields, London where a Lancashire man wrestled an Irishman to a draw shows that the two shared a wrestling style.

According to many historical documents (books, memoirs of individuals who lived in that era and newspapers) we can summarily state that there's no credible evidence that the Lancashire Catch-as-Catch-Can Wrestling style existed as a professional sport during the pre-industrial era, that is the mid to latter part of the eighteenth century. It wasn't reported as such by any major local newspaper.

During the early 1800's wrestling was the way of settling quarrels. It was a pretty simple "tripping" style of wrestling where men would get into close quarters and one man would "back heel" another and fall on top of him, which constituted victory.

We do know that the style of wrestling practiced in Lancashire was of an extremely violent nature. So much so that due to the high level of death-rate at Lancashire Fighting by 1825 it was officially banned by local authorities (Royal Order). The official contests were discontinued but illegal Lancashire fights or battles didn't cease to exist.

Robert Lord (1788-1852), the mill-owner from Farnworth, Bolton would walk down the streets of his home town in his singlet and challenge everyone to wrestle with him at the annual wakes. That's another important detail, the wrestler was wearing clothes – a singlet. In Lancashire Fighting (and later in Catch-as-catch-can) combatants were stripped to the waist (half-naked). Some said they took their clothes off because sooner or later both would end up being on the ground.

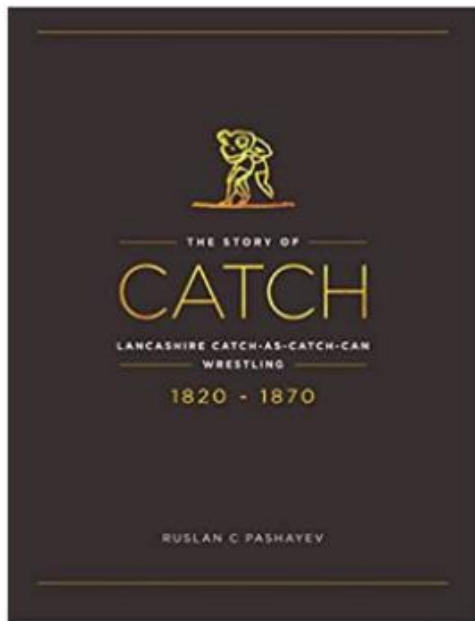
Professionalism occurred during industrialization when Lancashire wrestling became one of the most popular sports. A branch of the Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Society was established in 1844 at Bolton. The Back Hold style was promoted by Bolton Free Press editor Ballantyne and other members of local fancy.

Local journalists made it pretty clear that what they called Lancashire Catch-as-Catch-Can an approximation of the Lancashire Fighting that had been banned.

Publicans who controlled sports needed legalization of their sport which was still prohibited and considered barbarous and illegal. They "simplified" the rules of Lancashire Fighting and substituted "unable to continue" with 2 of 3 fair back falls, which was easy to do since Lancashire Fighting was more of a "ground fighting" rather than anything else.

Its very interesting but In 1855 at Bellevue a match between Peter Lord of Oldham and Greenhalgh of Pendleton was won by Lord 2-0, no falls. It was two "submissions." A strangle hold (a favourite hold of Oldhamers) which made Greenhalgh hold his hand up twice in succession. Of course most of the matches were regular back falls, but that incident shows that even in the 1850's the boundaries between two styles were quite vague.

And that was the birth of Catch. Basically Catch was the "wrestling portion" of Lancashire Fighting. We will explore the various styles of Lancashire wrestling in part 3.



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.

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Research mainly at British Newspaper Archive.

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