

# Out of Darkness

## The Story of Catch

Ruslan Pashayev

### Part 3 Lancashire Styles

#### Bunny Hall



#### Catch as Catch Can

The term Catch-as-Catch-Can existed long before Lancashire Catch wrestling came into existence. Nottinghamshire's Thomas Parkyns, known as the Wrestling Baronet of Bunny (Note 1), and the master of self defence Zachary Wylde of Yorkshire both refer to it in the early 1700's. Parkyns became famous all around the country as an author of

wrestling manuals "Inn Play or Cornish Hugg Wrestler" as well as a set of "General Rules of English Wrestling," published in 1727.

His wrestling was Loose Wrestling or Free Style, when an initial hold doesn't exist, neither does any applied hold need to be maintained during the match like, let's say, in Back Hold or Collar and Elbow and a wrestler was allowed to apply (catch) any hold of his opponent above the waist and throw him as he could. Parkyns also established the first annually held Professional Championship Wrestling Tournament at Bunny, Nottinghamshire, which existed for many years after his death. In his wrestling manuals Parkyns spoke of the popularity and advantage of Close Wrestle (Inn Play of Bedfordshire) in comparison to the Arm's Length Wrestle (Out Play of Norfolk).

The First time "Catch-as-catch-can Wrestling Style" (unrelated to Lancashire Catch-as-catch-can Wrestling) was introduced at the London Wrestling Ring was during the 1820's and it became very popular among local pugilists. Those matches were contested in a roped boxing ring, mostly by boxers who would challenge each other to wrestle.

Conditions were 2 of 3 fair back falls with holds at all parts of the body above the waist allowed. Of course that style had a strong influence of the Bunny Rules by Parkyns.

Also, Cornish/Devonshire wrestling (any hold of the jacket above the waist allowed) was quite often referred to as Catch-as-Catch-Can as well. One of their greatest champions Devonshire wrestler Abraham Cann once said – “I catch the way I can”.

Leg Holds and Ground Wrestling were brought to England by the famous Captain Clias of Switzerland, who created “his own system” of “freestyle wrestling” on the Continent in 1816. He introduced his wrestling style in to the British Army, around 1820, so originally it was “military wrestling”.

At first Clias' style of wrestling wasn't popular in England and considered “foreign and unmanly” (due to it's most important features leg holds and ground wrestling). It proved it's efficiency as the method of self defense and slowly but surely started becoming more and more popular among residents of London. It was the foundation of the style which became known as London Catch-as-catch-can. Later in the 1860's this version of Catch-as-catch-can became one of the major sports taught at the German Gymnastic Society of London the greatest Amateur wrestling school in Great Britain. They had their annual meetings, gatherings and championships for Amateurs.

Among their champions was famous Fred Gruhn who later became the main catch coach of George Hackenschmidt. Wrestling matches were 2 of 3 fair back falls, any hold at any part of the body, ground wrestling included. That wrestling tradition gave birth to English Freestyle Wrestling which later was adopted by National Sporting Club of London (1890's), National Amateur Wrestling Association of Great Britain (1904) and was finally exposed worldwide, being introduced at the London Olympics (1908).

There's no historical connection between this London based style of Catch-as-catch-can Wrestling and Lancashire Catch-as-catch-can Wrestling. The two Catch styles had different origins, evolved their own way and never merged. The most significant difference was that London based Catch-as-catch-can was an amateur sport from day one, whilst Lancashire Catch-as-catch-can was always Pro-Wrestling and had very long culturally unique evolution.

Even in the 1830's the term “Catch-as-Catch-Can” wasn't widely used in Lancashire. Different terminology was used to describe those competitions. Amongst them were “catch and lay hold,” “catch and throw,” and others but the one which attracted the greatest attention was without any doubt “Up and Down Wrestling.” This was first mentioned in 1840, in the challenge issued by one of the major Lancashire catch stars of the first half of nineteenth century James Matley of Knotts Lane, near Ashton-under-Lyne.. It is this very descriptive term helps to understand the true nature of that sport.

## **Up and Down Fighting (Lancashire Fighting)**

Up and Down Fighting had been prevalent in South Lancashire since the mid 1600s, a sort of All-In, sometimes called Lancashire Fighting.

Professional Up and Down Fighting (prize-ring) was governed by rules (“fair up and down fight with clogs on”) of the so-called, little known “Lougher Pugilistic Society” of Lancashire (circa 1835).



One of four sepia ink caricatures with inscriptions. Shows two men wrestling on the floor, inscribed; 'Bit him well old Lancashire/Beat and thump his ribs as if thou hadst got a kettle drum/keep him down old Derbyshire and shake his headpiece till he turns dizzy.'

Collection

It was an all-in or no holds barred mixed martial art, "rough and tumble" affair which included elements of

- boxing (punching, striking)
- kicking (purring also known as puncing, Lancashire fighters often were called puncers),
- wrestling (all possible holds including leg holds, ground wrestling, throttling and hanging, strangling, and the famous headlock or Lancashire Hug formed an essential

part of it),

- unmanly/illegal practices such as kicking an opponent when down, gouging, head-butting (tapping), biting, tearing ears and mouths.

The Wrestling part of it was also represented by the trick which was well known under the name of "Lancashire Throw" or Lancashire way (mode) of throwing/wrestling, when a wrestler or fighter ran into his opponent (purrs into/bollock) and having his head between his opponents legs grabs him by the thighs or knees and flips him backwards and thus takes him down.

Among the famous Lancashire pugilists of the early 1800's widely practicing that trick were Robert (Bob) Gregson (who claimed the All-England Championship in the early 1800's), Rimmer and the Manchester "super-star" Rough Robin. Those boxers "Lancashired" many of their opponents during their professional boxing contests.

In Lancashire Fighting fighters would usually exchange several blows then get close, grapple a little and both fall on the ground, where the fight would continue; and that's when one fighter would get on top of another in a dominant position. Heavy punching, purring or kicking, even strangling would take place. The contest would continue until one of the contestants gave up by rising his hand, unable to continue fighting anymore. Sometimes two combatants would fight and wrestle (and that's the official description of Lancashire Fighting in contemporary sources) until one was able to keep the other undermost for an agreed amount of time (usually five minutes).

The centres of Lancashire Fighting were Oldham, Bolton and Rochdale. There were rumors that it was Flemish weavers who brought that "foreign barbarity", or "abominable custom" to Lancashire in the 1500's, as they fled Protestant persecution in Continental Europe and relocated to South Lancashire where they helped to establish the textile industry that became symbolic of that region. There's a good chance that those rumours have some truth.

In his *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer calls Flemish knight Sir Topas “undefeated wrestler.” Germanic “Wrestling,” or better say “Grappling” (referred to in famous wrestling manuals by Fabian von Auerswald (1462 - after 1537) and Nicolaes Petter (1624 – 1672), which was practiced in Medieval Flanders was all-in, rough and tumble kind of combative sport. It allowed holds of any part of the body, including under the waist, and ground wrestling was an essential part of it. The painting by the Dutch Renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel “The Elder Children's Games” (1560) has representation of such “wrestling” among other games popular in Flanders during the Middle Ages, with two men grappling with each other on the ground. Another important detail, on the coat of arms of the town of Bolton, we still see the “Black Lion of Flanders” as one of the shield supporters by the banner which has an image of shuttle, representing the weaving industry.

Lancashire Fighting was popular sport entertainment at local weekly markets on Sundays (at Wrigley Head Green, Failsworth), Wakes (Rushbearings), Fairs (Turton Fair, Holcombe Fair, Ashton Fair) and other local folk festivals. The newspaper reports state that most of the professional contests were “fixed” matches. Lancashire Fighting was an illegal sport.



## Purring

Purring was a local version of Shin Kicking Stand-Up Fight (or simply clog fighting) which was a traditional English folk sport (some claim of Welsh origin) when two combatants tried to get each other down by exchanging kicks while still being in the closed position as breaking of the initial hold wasn't allowed. Fighters applied holds on each others arms, as in Lancashire, or in some cases at the jackets/or robes worn by combatants as in Gloucestershire, or even wearing shoulder-straps and

elbow-tugs to lay the holds at. In purring wrestling techniques were strictly prohibited.

It's also important to notice that Purring existed as a semi-professional sport parallel with Lancashire Fighting in the 19th century. It was still secretly practiced in South Lancashire in the early years of the twentieth century. Originally most of the best “purrers” were local miners. All of the Up and Down Lancashire fighters were also great “purrers,” and that's why sometimes “Up and Down Fighting” was confused with actual “Purring”.

Purring/Puncing was also practiced in Cheshire where it was known as hacking and West Riding of Yorkshire (pawsing). Purring, just like Lancashire Fighting, was an illegal sport.

Shortly after their sport was banned in the early 1820's most of the Lancashire Up and Down Fighters turned to Lancashire Catch-as-Catch-Can Professional Wrestlers. The 1844 Bolton newspapers made it really clear, calling Catch-as-Catch-Can Wrestling an “approximation of Lancashire Fighting”, basically saying that this professional sport was

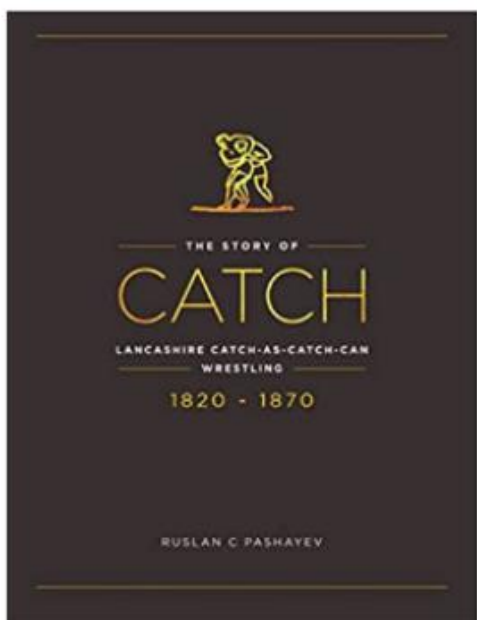
made up out of what was left from it's direct ancestor Lancashire Fighting, and all Lancashire Wrestlers were simply called "purrers."

Even the appearance of Lancashire Catch Wrestlers of the earliest era (1820-1850) strongly resembled Lancashire Fighters. Men were naked to their waists, wore breeches and spiked shoes (in case of fighters it was usually heavy wooden metal tipped shoes, famous Lancashire clogs). Adam Ridings (1820-1894) the greatest Lancashire wrestler of that era, would announce in his challenges that he was willing to wrestle anyone at 10 stones 10 pounds, Lancashire fashion, Catch-as-catch-can, 2of 3 fair back falls, in spiked pumps (light shoes). According to some reports the maximum allowed length of spikes was a quarter of an inch. The heaviest Lancashire wrestlers of that epoch wouldn't usually exceeded 11-12 stones (154lb-168lb). Nowadays we would consider them welterweights or middleweights. Most of the Lancashire catch wrestlers were colliers by trade.

Professional Lancashire Wrestling (Catch) of the first half of nineteenth century was an all-in, no holds barred affair just like its predecessor, Professional Lancashire Fighting, which had been declared illegal. It also contained such brutal practices as strangling, gouging and biting which were inherited from up and down fighting. There were no written rules of Lancashire catch in existence during that era so wrestlers had to negotiate conditions of the matches, quite often terms would state: fair wrestle, no unmanly practices such as hanging, throttling, hoofing, mouthing, putting in the damper allowed.

#### Notes

(1) Bunny is a village in Nottinghamshire. Thomas Parkyns (1663-1741) was the Second Baronet of Bunny. He had a passion for wrestling and organised wrestling matches on ground which was to become the gardens of the Rancliffe Arms.



**Buy From Amazon**

### **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 it's origin, it's fast growth and evolution during first fifty years of Catch, introduction of professionalism and it's 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](#).

Please comment in the [Talk Wrestling Forum](#)

All questions, comments and corrections are welcomed at

[ruslan-pashayev@yandex.ru](mailto:ruslan-pashayev@yandex.ru)

© Ruslan C Pashayev 2018