

Out of Darkness

The Story of Catch

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Part 4 Professionalism and Rules



The professional Lancashire Catch that emerged in the 1840s was a violent sport. Strangling, Gouging and biting were inherited from up and down fighting.

Major competitions were held in the back yards of local public houses and were contested for money or a trophy (at The Old Cock Inn Sweepstakes it was a pig in 1844 and a silver watch in 1845).

The Old Cock Inn Tournament is the oldest known catch-as-catch-can wrestling sweepstake. As early as 1845 they tried to introduce simple rules to govern the contests, "No unmanly practices allowed". An 1848 report thus describes a match between two adepts of the catch-as-catch-can: "One grabbed another by both ears and gave him several falls from that hold, another kicked his opponents arms to make him release the ear grip, but soon retired from the match." The newspaper comments the sooner this sport was abandoned the better. The 1852 report on Bellevue wrestling speaks of Lancashire wrestling, one kicks and another then throws.

The Old Cock Inn was a local title but the first major Professional Lancashire Wrestling (Catch) Sweepstakes was held at "Baglslate Races" at Rochdale during 1843-44-45, the so-called "Nudger Sports" at Rochdale. Every major wrestler of South Lancashire participated in it. In 1846 at the famous Bury Tournament there were already two weight classes (heavies and lightweights).

It's barbaric nature led to the sport being discontinued in 1845, replaced by the Cumberland and Westmorland style, which was already as an established professional sport.



Cumberland style was proclaimed the “true noble way of wrestling” by Adam Ridings, also known as “Dockhum” of Bury, a finalist in Nudger Sports of 1844). Ridings was a prominent wrestler in the 1840's and early 1850's, competing in both Cumberland style and Lancashire Professional Wrestling (Catch) style.

The positions of Cumberland wrestling in Lancashire was strengthening year after year. When Lord Francis Egerton had his “games” at the Bridgewater Hotel grounds in June 1844, there was wrestling (for a pair of blankets) as well, but not the “barbarous Lancashire fashion” instead the “somewhat more civilized Cumberland style.”

The Cumberland Wrestling Society introduced a “special” category for “Cumberland Wrestling by Lancashire Men, residing 12 miles

around Manchester” with the champion belt as the trophy.

It's hard to say what exactly it was but the description of it provided by major local sporting newspapers shows that it was basically a local Lancashire version of Back Hold (they accepted the rules, but still did it their own way, “not the same style about the throws as a whole”). The title existed in 1846-47-48-49 until it was cancelled by the organizers, I am assuming because “wrestlers didn't want to follow the letter of the terms”. In fact Adam Ridings was ready to compete at any style.

In 1844 he tried to make arrangements for the match with the Cornish/Devon Champion Truscott. They were long and hard negotiations, since both wrestlers had a different understanding of what catch-as-catch-can was. Finally Ridings was ready to meet Truscott in Birmingham for signing articles. They agreed to wrestle him at Catch-as-catch-can, in jackets, Prize-ring Rules (above the waist), both men not to exceed 11 stones, 2 of 3 fair back falls, for £50 or £100 a-side, match to take place in Manchester or London. Unfortunately it's unknown whether the “historical match” ever happened or not, but that whole story tells us how desperate Adam Ridings was in his desire to establish himself as a recognized pro-wrestler of English Wrestling Ring, the first such representative of Lancashire.

George Swithenbank of Saddleworth, one of the best exponents of Lancashire Professional Wrestling (Catch), competed at Cornish/Devon style in London in 1849. In 1844 Adam Riding tried to arrange match with Truscott the Devon/Cornish champion wrestler. So we can see for a Lancashire wrestler to get some sort of recognition he had to wrestle the other styles which were already well known around the country.



The Midnight Struggle

"The Midnight Struggle" based on the "Manchester Man", an 1876 novel by Isabella Banks, shows the wrestling match between two men (early 1800's). The holds are Collar and Elbow and Collar and Waistband (Hip). Wrestling Style – Tripping (Back Heel).

It was a hard time for Lancashire Wrestling (Catch), a struggle to survive. As with any professional sport it needed a written set of rules which would regulate contests. It was time for great changes.

And they were successfully made in 1856 with the first written rules. Lancashire Catch-as-Catch-Can Wrestling rules were introduced by Nelson Warren proprietor of Snipe Inn, Audenshaw. These became known as the "Snipe Inn Rules."

Because of Ridings and Swithenbank efforts Lancashire wrestling became familiar to English wrestling fans and promoters. In 1851 the National Amicable Wrestling Society proposed a multi-style wrestling tournament to be held at Copenhagen House (Islington, London), consisting of various styles: Cornish/Devon, Cumberland/Westmorland, Lancashire and Irish.

The first exhibition of Lancashire Catch in London was given in 1851, White Hart, Earl's Court Kensington.

The "wrestler and jumper" named Aldrim "Lancashire Jack" cleverly placed the Cornish wrestler (and guardsman) Goodman twice on his back.

The rough and tumble Lancashire style should not be confused with the unrelated "Catch-as-Catch-Can Wrestling Style" which was introduced in the London Ring during the 1820's Pro Wrestling matches were contested in a roped ring, all matches were 2 of 3 fair back falls with holds at all parts of the body above the waist being allowed.

Leg holds and ground wrestling were introduced into the local London version of Catch by Captain Clias of Switzerland who created "his own system" of "freestyle wrestling" on the Continent. He introduced his wrestling style in British Army, around 1820. Later in the 1860's this version of Catch-as-Catch-Can became one of the major sports taught at the German Gymnastic Society (Amateurs) of London.

London Catch led to the birth of English Freestyle Wrestling which later was introduced at Olympics. 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 styles had different origins, evolved independently and never merged. The most significant difference was that London based Catch-as-Catch-Can was an amateur sport since the day one, since its very foundation when Lancashire Catch-as-Catch-Can was always Pro-Wrestling and had very long evolution.

Important sweepstakes (championships) of the earliest era of Catch-as-Catch-Can.

**Shrove Tuesday, February 20th, 1844 at Hyde Park Wrestling Ground
(Old Cock Inn, Mills Hill near Middleton).**

Style: Lancashire wrestling, Catch-as-Catch-Can

Trophy: The pig

First Round

Simon Smith beat Henry Ashton

"Barrell" beat Tom Mills

Final

"Barrell" beat Simon Smith

NOTE: "Barrell" - "the hero of hundred wrestlers" is James Matley of Knott Lanes near Ashton-under-Lyne.

April 21st, 1845 at Old Cock Inn, Mills Hill near Middleton

Style: Lancashire wrestling, Catch-as-Catch-Can

Trophy: silver watch, valued 30 shillings

NOTE: entries to be made on or before April 15th, 1845

Among wrestlers who already entered were James Buckley, Henry Ashton of Tonge, William Buckley, Peter Lord, Simon Smith.

First Round

Final

NOTE: Henry Ashton of Tonge won the prize. Attendance: hundreds of individuals from Oldham and other places.

Rochdale Annual Nudger Sports, report on December 6th, 1843

Lancashire Wrestling, Catch-as-Catch-Can, catch-weights

Attendance: 10,000

First Round

Cullen beat Hilton

Howarth beat Rhodes

Walton beat Sig

Whittaker beat Topper

Buckley beat Jo o'th' Hartley

Second Round

Cullen drew a blank ticket

Buckley beat Walton

Howarth beat Whittaker

Third Round

Cullen drew another blank

Buckley beat Howarth

Fourth and Last Round

Buckley of Oldham beat Cullen of Milnrow

Rochdale Annual Nudger Sports and Bagslate Races September 26th, 27th, 28th 1844

Lancashire Wrestling, Catch-as-Catch-Can, catch-weights

Prizes: 5 guineas (£5 5 shillings) to the winner, £1 (20 shillings) to the runner-up

No entrance money

First Round

John Hilton beat James Schofield

William Buckley beat Nelson Schofield

Adam Ridings beat John Hoyle

Simon Smith beat Venturesome

Robert Butterworth beat James Parker

Robert Whitehead beat James Shephard

Thomas Walton beat William

Henry Ashton beat James Cheetham

George Swithenbank beat Lockwood

James Buckley beat David Petty

Second Round

Thomas Walton beat Robert Butterworth

Simon Smith beat Robert Whitehead

James Buckley beat John Hilton

William Buckley beat Henry Ashton

Adam Ridings beat George Swithenbank

Third Round

James Buckley beat Simon Smith

Adam Ridings beat William Buckley

Thomas Walton drew a blank

Fourth Round

Adam Ridings beat Thomas Walton

James Buckley drew a blank

Fifth and Deciding Round

James Buckley of Tongue-lane near Middleton beat Adam Ridings of Bury

October 28th, 1846

Lancashire Wrestling (Catch-as-Catch-can) Championship, Littlewood Cross near Bury

Organizer: Adam Ridings of "Lancashire Wrestler" and J. Pearson of "Boar's Head"

Referee: Mr. Woolner, gentleman of Bury

Attendance: 3,000

All Weights Competition

Prizes: £3 to the winner, £1 to the runner-up

First Round

George Swithenbank of Saddleworth beat Simeon Smith of Middleton

James Buckley of Middleton beat James Quick (the Walmsley Flower)

James Entwistle of Walmsley beat J. Preston

John McGrath bye

Second Round

George Swithenbank beat John McGrath

James Buckley beat James Entwistle

Final

George Swithenbank beat James Buckley

Light Weight Competition

Prizes: £2 to the winner, £1 to the runner-up

First Round

Joseph Davenport of Bury beat E. Howarth of Rochdale
David Horrox of Bamford beat Richard Heys of Bamford
Samuel Brooks of Walmsley beat Henry Butterworth of Rochdale
Richard Nabb bye

Second Round

Richard Nabb beat Samuel Brooks
Joseph Davenport beat David Horrox

Final

Richard Nabb beat Joseph Davenport

Manchester Easter Wrestling - 1846

Easter Monday and Tuesday, April 13th and 14th, 1846.

Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling (Back Hold) By Lancashire Men residents of 12/14 miles around Manchester.

Venue: Mr. Plattford's White House Gardens, Stretford New-road, Hulme, Manchester

Prizes: total prize of £5, £1 10 shillings and handsome belt to the winner

Participants: Lancashire men residents within 12 miles of Manchester

Entries number: 24

Placements: 1st - Joseph Bolderson of Bolton £1 10 shillings ; 2nd - Adam Ridings of Bury 15 shillings ; John Guy Scott and Joseph Atkinson, 7 shillings 6 old pence each;
William Houghton, Thomas Peeling, William Lidle, Jhon Yeates, John Shaw, James Tring, David Horrick, Thomas Wilson, 5s each.

NOTE: wrestling was described as "clumsy tumbling which caused great mirth in the ring".

Manchester Easter Wrestling - 1847

Easter Monday and Tuesday, April 5th and 6th, 1847.

Venue: Mr. Plattford's White House Gardens, Stretford New-road, Hulme, Manchester

Style: Back Hold

Prizes: a prize and handsome belt to the winner

Participants: Lancashire men residents within 12 miles of Manchester

Entries number: 21

Fouth Round:

Adam Ridings beat Robert Buckley

John Parson a bye

Placements: 1st - Adam Ridings, aka "Dockum", publican in Bury, £1;

2nd - John Parson, 10 shillings ; 3rd - Robert Buckley, 5 shillings ; 4th - Isaac Newton, 5 shillings ; 5th - Robert Sander, 2 shillings and 6 old pence ; 6th - John Hay, 2 shillings and 6 old pence; 7th - Richard Sanden, 2 shillings and 6 old pence.

NOTE: Adam Ridings "buttocked most of his men". Wrestling was described as "hurly-burly, pully-hauley affairs".

Manchester Easter Wrestling – 1848

24 entries,

1 William Scott of Manchester, 7 shillings and 6 old pence

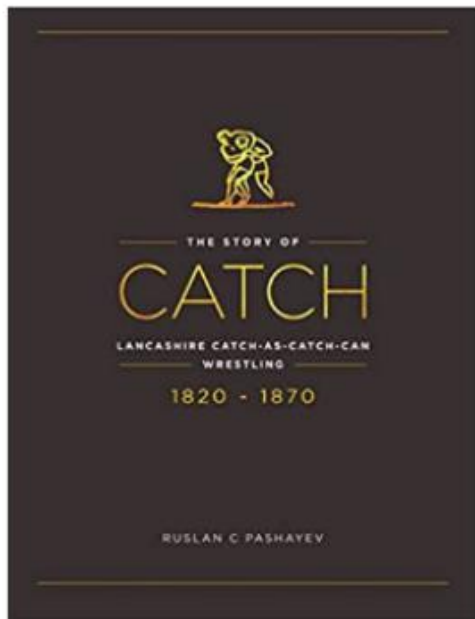
2 Wilfred Stalker, 5 shillings

3 Isaac Benson

Manchester Whit Monday Wrestling – 1849

1 Thomas Holland of Blackley (Manchester)

2 Whitehead (Barrell)



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.

Buy From Amazon

Research mainly at British Newspaper Archive.

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