

Out of Darkness

The Story of Catch

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Part 6: Heavyweights of Lancashire

Salford Borough Gardens Cup was the third most prestigious trophy in Lancashire Wrestling History along with Copenhagen Grounds Championship Belt and the Snipe Inn Gold Challenge Cup. Both Snipe Inn and Copenhagen were 9 stones, or lightweight championships. It was the most “competitive” weight class in Lancashire at catch-as-catch-can since most of the wrestlers were about 5 feet 3 inches tall and weighed below 12 stones. But, of course, there were some “exceptions”. And some of those “exceptions” were the most outstanding champion wrestlers Lancashire ever had.

The main question was, and still, is whether “Heavyweight Championship of Lancashire” (the most mythical title) ever existed or not. This simple question has quite a complex answer, because the answer is Yes and No.

Let's start with the YES.

Original sweepstakes from the 1840's usually didn't have weight limits, so basically a man of any weight (open weight class sometimes is referred to as heavyweight) could compete at Nudger Sports (1843-45). The first time weight classes were introduced in Lancashire is the 1846 Bury Tournament, and they had only two weight classes, heavyweight and lightweight. Considering the fact that most wrestlers weighed less than 10 stones it would be reasonable to think that any wrestlers above 10 stones would have been considered as heavyweight back then. We have Adam Ridings the most gifted wrestler of the 40's and early 50's and his weight at his prime was only 11 stones. During that era he was considered heavyweight.

Rivalry between Ridings and James Buckley lasted for 2 years 1844-45, and both matches were won by Buckley, first the final of Nudger Sports and another one the controversial challenge match, in which Ridings claimed he was “robbed by the referee who acted in favour of Buckley”. Of course it's hard to tell what happened, but Buckley was a very famous up and down fighter, and of course less of a wrestler than Ridings, who was called by local newspapers the best wrestler many miles around Manchester. But again in those early years of catch when the boundaries between those two sports weren't clearly set we are assuming that Buckley “was allowed” to use his “up and down tactics” in the wrestling matches against Ridings which of course made Ridings unhappy. Adam called his pub “Lancashire Wrestler” and throughout his whole career made that pretty clear and firm statement - a wrestler (legal) not a fighter (illegal).

When the Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Association started running their Easter sweepstakes in Manchester (1830's) it was mostly Cumbrians who participated in it, Ridings was the first Lancashire wrestler of note who decided to participate, in 1844. He received special thanks and appreciation from the organisers. Later the special category "Back Hold by Lancashire Men" was created, where Ridings became a finalist in 1846 and finally champion, belt holder in 1847.

That Bury "Heavyweight" title of 1846 was won by a young man from Saddleworth (West Riding of Yorkshire) – George Swithenbank. (born 1825). He was tall and weighed more than other competitors, which logically made him an easy victor, and yes we see him easily defeating "old Riding's Nemesis" James Buckley in the grand final of the championship. Since that victory and for the next 11 years George was the "heaviest" wrestler of Lancashire of the championship class. Swithenbank was the first Lancashire wrestler who made it to the London Ring in 1849, which of course was the most prestigious wrestling championship in the country. Unlike Ridings he didn't wrestle at Back Hold. George competed at Cornish/Devon style, which also was "catch-as-catch-can", but no holds were allowed below the waist and wrestlers wore jackets to apply holds. In London newspapers Swithenbank was referred to as "Lancashire Champion". The annual Tournament was held at Brecknock, Camden Town. George found it easy for him to wrestle at that style (he won the first fall from Trimlett the Devon man in 23 minutes) but unfortunately got his shoulder injured and the rest of the match (46 minutes) completely lost ability to use his right hand. George lost and his next opponent (consolation round) was another Devonian, Hosgood, both wrestlers were injured and decided not to wrestle, and toss of the coin brought the victory (and £3) to Swithenbank.

Unfortunately there's not much known about George's further success in London Ring, but what's known is that local star Irish Champion at Cornish/Devon style Simon Finn challenged Lancashire Champion George Swithenbank for £25 a-side, which makes it clear Swithenbank gained some respect of the London Ring, and after that he challenges any man in the world at catch for the amount of £50-200.

The first exhibition of Lancashire Catch in London was in 1851 at White Hart, Earl's Court Kensington. The "wrestler and jumper" named Aldrim "Lancashire Jack" cleverly placed Cornish wrestler (and guardsman) Goodman twice on his back.

In the 1850's the "Heavyweight Division of Lancashire Catch" expanded and got a few new names among them: William Swann of Ashton, "Big" Daniel Heywood, Peter Lord and of course sporting celebrity Number 1, champion puglist of England, the "Staleybridge Infant" Samuel Hurst.

The first so-called "Heavyweight Championship of England at Lancashire Catch" was in 1856 when on August 11th William Swann (14 stones) wrestled Adam Ridings (12 stones 7 pounds) for £100 at Snipe Inn Grounds, Ashton in front of 5,000 (according to other sources 4,300) fans. Referee was George Swithenbank. Swann won match 2-0 (1-0, 1 hour 51 minutes; 2-0, 4 minutes) and then started styling himself a champion. Interesting detail, after the match Swann presented his "manly opponent" with subscription of £5. Why "so-called championship", because despite the "advertisement" in local press as the championship match, it was nothing more than a "challenge match" when "one man wrestled another" for "a lot of money".

Another most important “Heavyweight Championship” match of the 1850's happened on May 15th 1857 at Higginshaw, Oldham, when Swann (5 feet 8 inches 12 stones 10 pounds) met Swithenbank (5 feet 10 ½ inches 12 stones) for £100. Match lasted 2 days. On the first day Swithenbank got an easy fall in just 12 minutes. But then after 1 hour 20 minutes of struggle in the second round, a disputed fall took place, and crowds filled the ring (20 yards in diameter) and the “referee was knocked out” so he couldn't award victory to any of the two wrestlers, both parties claimed to win that fall. The referee made a decision to continue play on another day. Next day 2,000 spectators and many policemen witnessed Swann beating Swithenbank 2-0 (1-0, 1 hour 10 minutes; 2-0, 3 minutes).

After those two matches Swann couldn't find “worthy” opponent for himself for quite a while. Semi-retired, and barred from entering any catch-weight sweepstakes, since he would have become an obvious winner due to his size. Swann still claimed the “Heavyweight Title” but he didn't wrestle the biggest and heaviest Lancashire man of that epoch - Sam Hurst (6 feet 2 ½ inches during his pro-career his weight varied from 15 stones to 17 stones). In 1858 Hurst was matched with another “heavy man” Daniel Heywood (5 feet 8 inches, 12 stones). Copenhagen Grounds, Newton Heath, Manchester on October 4th the two wrestled for 1 hour 30 minutes without having a success of gaining a fall, then Hurst applied an “ears hold” and almost tore them away from Heywood. The referee tried to calm Hurst down, but not being successful at that left the ring. Match was postponed for another day. Next day both men were there but Heywood refused to wrestle, stakes were awarded to Hurst.

In May 1859 John Pollard American of Newfoundland issued a challenge to wrestle any man in the world at Lancashire style for 1,000 USD. William Swann accepted challenge and ready to meet him at Snipe Inn, Ashton for the amount of 1,000 or 2,000 USD.

In 1861 Swann (13 stones 4 pounds) made a short come-back out of retirement and wrestled Dan Heywood for £50 a-side. On September 14th both met at Copenhagen Grounds, and 2,000 fans saw victory of Swann 2-0 (1-0, 52 minutes; 2-0, 15 minutes). Swann issued challenges to the whole world at Lancashire catch for £100-500. If his challenge wasn't accepted within 3 weeks, then he would retire from pro-wrestling. His challenge was not accepted so he retired. In 1870 when the French National Pro-Wrestling Team was in England, during their stay in Manchester and Liverpool they saw Hurst and Swann do exhibitions at Lancashire catch. Swann obviously being a victor. Swann died in 1871, aged 42, he was landlord of Black Horse Inn (Failsworth), formerly of the Wheat Sheaf (Ashton).

On May 24th 1873 at the Royal Oak Park, Manchester Hurst wrestled and lost 2-0 (1-0, 6 minutes; 2-0, 8 minutes) to “Lancashire Giant” Snape of Horwich (or Lostock), who was 6 feet 1 inch tall and weighed 16 stones. Snape is usually referred to as being self-trained, but it looks like it was Edwin Bibby who taught him Catch. Snape himself was Back Hold wrestler of the championship class. For the rest of the century Snape would remain undisputed heavyweight champion of Lancashire. But he quit pro-wrestling by 1875, as it wasn't possible to find a worthy opponent for him due to his size.

That was the brief storyline of so-called “Lancashire Heavyweight Championship”.

Now let's be back to the initial question of whether the championship existed and continue with NO.

In 1861 the first official title at 10 stones 2 pounds weight limit was established at Mr. Attenbury's Salford Borough Gardens. That title would remain the "heaviest" among Lancashire Championships during the Golden Era of 1860's.

On October 26th 1861 at Salford Borough Gardens Joseph Newton, known as "Teapot" of Dukinfield (b. May 1st, 1840) wrestled John Cross of Ashton (b. October 6th, 1835) for £100 a-side for the Championship and the beautiful £50 worth 12 inches high solid silver Challenge Cup, manufactured for this occasion by the famous London firm – Messrs Harper of Goswell-road. Up to 8,000 spectators gathered that day at the Gardens to watch the play. Down one side of the ring there was erected commodious stand for 500 persons. Famous photographer Mr. Alcroft took photos of the champions before the start of the match. First fall was won by Newton in 51 minutes, the second fall he won in 53 minutes. During the first round the match was interrupted for 7 minutes due to panic which occurred because of the speculation that the "stand was going to fall", and the ring was broken by the crowd. The match was considered the best ever witnessed in the history of catch. After that match Newton was officially proclaimed Middleweight Champion Wrestler of England and had to defend his trophy for 18 consecutive months until it becomes his own property.

On July 19th 1862 at Stalybridge Recreation Grounds John Cross wrestled Newton again. Conditions of the match were £25 a-side and Cross catch-weight, Newton not to exceed 7 score .

Cross won that match quite easy 2-0 (1-0, 9 minutes; 2-0, 5 minutes). But the "title" wasn't at stake, so technically Newton is still champion at Salford Borough Gardens.

On June 14th 1862 Joseph Newton wrestled veteran heavyweight champion George Swithenbank for £25 a-side. Referee was William Swann. Newton won 2-0 in a very short time. It was time for old "Muck George" to retire. Great James Matley aka "Barrell" of Ashton pioneer from the early 1840's was still wrestling in 1861. Those two wrestlers of the 40's generation lasted longer than anyone else.

On September 13th 1862 at Copenhagen Grounds old rivals Newton and Cross met again. Conditions were £25 a-side, Cross catch-weight, Newton not to exceed 11 stones 7 pounds. Newton wins this time 2-0 (1-0, 1 hour 13 minutes; 2-0, 25 minutes). Another "challenge match", title wasn't at stake.

Looks like during 1862 it was hard to find worthy opponents for Newton so there was no title defenses that year.

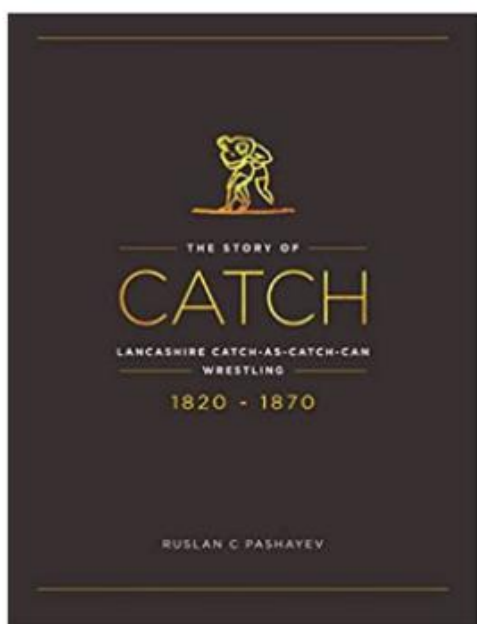
On November 29th 1862 John Howarth of Bury (formerly of Bacup) defeated Joseph Newton at Copenhagen Grounds, in a match that lasted less than half hour and "Bacup Lad" was victorious 2-0. Conditions of the match were Howarth not to exceed 6 score 18 pounds (note 1) and Newton 6 score 14 pounds. The match was for £100. That victory gave Howarth hope and soon he would challenge Newton for the Championship.

On March 10th 1863 Joseph Newton of Stalybridge defended his Challenge Cup at Salford Borough Gardens (attendance 900 persons) at 7 score 2 pounds, with £100 at stakes, against John Howarth of Bury, 2-1 (0-1, 16 minutes, 1-1, 7 minutes; 2-1, 25 minutes). It was the first official title defence since Newton had won the cup in October 1861. After that match the title was retired and "Teapot" became permanent possessor of the silver cup.

Even in the 1880's the heaviest weight class for Lancashire wrestling would be still under 11 stones.

In 1899 Joe Carroll of Hindley won the "Jolly Jumbo Belt" and Middleweight championship of England (under 12 stones) at Kensal-rise, London, which in fact was still the heaviest weight class in Lancashire wrestling.

On September 21st 1863 Newton of Dukinfield was supposed to have a match with veteran heavyweight "Big Dan" Heywood of Hollinwood, for £20 a-side, at Copenhagen Grounds. Only 100 persons were present at that match. There was a speculation that there was not betting on that match. So after 9 minutes of play the strong rain came down, wrestlers gave up, and match was over.



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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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