

Out of Darkness

The Story of Catch

Ruslan Pashayev

Part 7: The Dawn of the Golden Era

In the 1840s and 1850s wrestling competitions there were no official titles, only regularly held tournaments or sweepstakes controlled by “sporting” publicans. Among the most prestigious regularly held sweepstakes in the 1850's were those of the Snipe Inn at Audenshaw, begun in 1856, and those organised from 1859 onward by the American champion-runner and publican George Seward, owner of the Hares and Hounds at Ridge Hill, near Stalybridge. Seward's gym at the Hare and Hounds was a stone building with a ring in the centre. It was roofed over, and lit at night, which guaranteed no postponement on account of darkness or bad weather conditions.

With fifteen tiers of seats it was designed to accommodate 2,000 fans. All those “American innovations” were unusual to that epoch, since traditionally Lancashire wrestling matches were held at the “green sward” and “postponement of the matches” wasn't an issue. Seward also introduced his own weight divisions in Lancashire wrestling (note 1):

- under 6 score (8 stones 8 pounds)
- 6 score 10 pounds (9 stones 4 pounds)
- 7 score (10 stones)
- 7 score 10 pounds. (10 stones 10 pounds)

Seward also organised wrestling tournaments at the annually held Stalybridge Wakes.

During the Golden Era this situation changed significantly with wrestling events becoming more widespread. The 1860's could be considered the Golden Era of Lancashire Wrestling because championship titles were established in almost every town of South Lancashire associated with catch-as-catch-can wrestling:

- Copenhagen Grounds of Newton Heath, Manchester (1861)
- Waterfall Gardens, Bolton (1861)
- Salford Borough Gardens, Salford (1861)
- Snipe Inn of Audenshaw, Ashton (1862)
- Wellington Gardens, Bury (1864)
- Higginshaw Grounds, Oldham (1865)
- Wigan Borough Grounds (1866)
- Royal Oak Park of Newton Heath, Manchester (1868) - - a unique all-weights championship

During that era real championship titles were established and these were represented by so-called Champion Challenge Trophies (mostly cups), and were run by proprietors of the sport venues in a way modern day pro-wrestling promoters run their entertaining business (shows).

Usually there was an initial, one-day elimination tournament (number of participants wouldn't exceed eight) which would launch the title. The winner thereof had to defend his title for a certain amount of time (usually one year) to make the championship trophy his own property. After that a new trophy would be introduced and another elimination tournament would determine the champion.

Champion wrestlers of that era were usually young (under 25 years old), colliers whose weight wouldn't exceed eleven stones. During that era amateur Lancashire catch-as-catch-can didn't exist and for a collier who was making about £1-2 becoming a professional wrestler may have been the only existing opportunity to achieve a somewhat better level of life. It was a choice that required the highest level of commitment though. Wrestlers didn't need to have any wrestling background, skill or experience, and there was only one requirement, and that was being faithful to the profession.

Wrestlers who belonged to the same promotion trained together regularly and thus perfected their showmanship abilities. They had a lot of obligations and had to follow strict rules set by their bosses (publicans and title owners). Champion Wrestlers, as well as main contenders for the titles, earned more than average colliers, but the organisers of those championships were the only people who were making real money, from gate receipts and control over stakes and betting. Wrestlers were nothing but just a "hired staff", some sort of personnel, and it was proprietor of the grounds who decided the championship title and controlled the title lineages.

For a promoter it was quite reasonable to have championships at "light" weight classes (7 ½ stones, 8 stones 3 pounds, 9 stones, 9 stones 4 pounds, 9 stones 12 pounds etc.), simply because it guaranteed the higher level of "competition." Most colliers were small men (about 5 feet 3 inches and under 9 stones), it was easier to find and establish new names of the "upcoming stars" - champions/challengers this way.

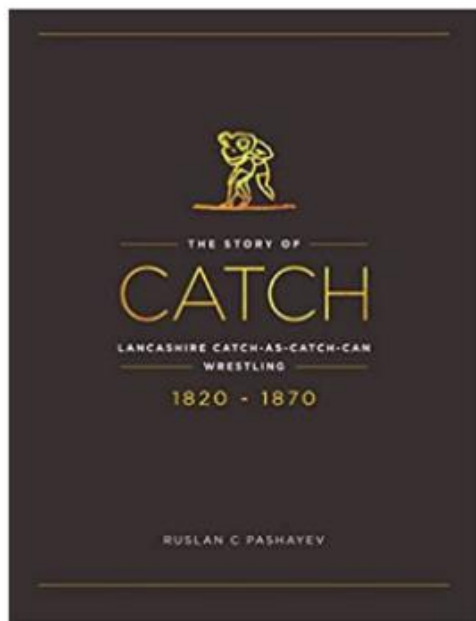
Champion Wrestlers were "local celebrities" but they owed their "popularity and success" to promoters. A good promoter could make a "champion" basically out of any wrestler whom he wanted to become a champion.

What made a wrestler a champion?

Faithfulness to the promoter an ability to always be the biggest draw, some kind of ability of being charming (some would call it being charismatic) despite the outcome of the match, victory draw, or loss. That was the only skill required.

Notes

(1) 19th century weights were often stated in scores. A score equalled 20 pounds, or 1 stone 6 pounds.



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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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