

CATCH-AS-CATCH-CAN

(After the Lancashire fashion)

"The inhabitants of Ashton-under-Lyne have long been notorious for their admiration of, and the patronage they bestow upon the athletic sport of wrestling, and more important contests annually come off in that vicinity than in any other part of the county." (Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle, May 1, 1859, p. 7).

BASIC INFORMATION.

Catch-as-catch-can after the Lancashire fashion (hereafter referred to as catch wrestling) was a professional sport and form of entertainment in England. It appeared around 1825 and continued to develop and spread until it began to decline before World War I. It was a relatively unrestricted form of wrestling: wrestlers could use different holds and trips, and the match could continue both standing and on the ground. This set it apart from other English wrestling styles, where participants were restricted to grabbing the opponent's jacket or maintaining a back-hold, aiming to bring their opponent to the ground in a single movement from a standing position.

The winner in catch wrestling is the wrestler who scores a *fair back fall* against his opponent, i.e., forces his opponent to touch the ground with both shoulders at the same time, even for a brief instant, to the satisfaction of the judges. According to current international wrestling terminology, this is called a touch-fall.

There were three kinds of touch-falls that were accepted as fair back falls in catch wrestling: flying falls, in which the defensive wrestler was thrown from his feet with or without following him to the ground; rolling falls, in which the wrestler was rolled while on the ground; and pinning falls, which resulted from a slow forcing action and were also known as slow falls. The first two types were referred to as quick falls.

Since the 1890s, catch wrestling had become somewhat Americanized, and many international matches were decided according to the ruleset of the National Police Gazette (New York City), under which only pinning falls were allowed. In a pinning fall, both shoulders of the defensive wrestler were pinned to the ground and remained there for two seconds (count of three). Since 1900, all catch wrestling contests in North America were decided exclusively by pinning falls. In England, the Police Gazette Rules were never generally accepted.

The catch-wrestling match was usually decided by two out of three fair-back falls. Neither combatant was allowed to be rubbed with grease, drugs, or resin, and all foul acts were forbidden. Ten minutes had to elapse between each fair back fall. Originally, there were no time limits, and matches continued into the following day if the outcome was not decided on the day of the contest.

According to the traditional classification, catch wrestling had the following weight divisions: Flyweight – 8 st (112 lb); Bantamweight – 8 st 6 lb (118 lb); Featherweight – 9 st (126 lb); Lightweight (old rules) – 9 st 9 lb (135 lb); Lightweight – 10 st (140 lb);

Welterweight – 10 st 8 lb (148 lb); Light Middleweight – 11 st (154 lb); Middleweight – 11 st 6 lb (160 lb); and Heavyweight – 12 st (168 lb) and above.

PLACE OF ORIGIN.

Catch wrestling originated in Ashton-under-Lyne, a market town located in the Metropolitan Borough of Tameside, Greater Manchester, England. Historically, it was situated in South Lancashire's Salford Hundred.

MAIN TECHNIQUES.

The earliest known wrestling techniques in catch wrestling were basic standing throws, such as the headlock into cross-buttock, cradle-hold throw, double-leg throw, crotch-hold throw, and flying horse (wrist-and-leg) throw. The latter three were dangerous, over-the-head types of throws. Also very popular was the single-leg takedown followed by a turn onto the back using the so-called "leg snake lock" technique, with the offensive wrestler remaining in a standing position. The latter technique could be evaded by a famous catch wrestling escape known as the "Head Creel"—namely, walking on the hands first, then suddenly pivoting on the head.

In the 1860s, much of the ground-wrestling vocabulary was developed in catch wrestling. The essence of this was "getting behind" one's opponent. In other words, the fair-back throws from the feet were replaced by takedowns in which the defensive wrestler was brought down onto their knees or stomach, and this was followed by a prolonged struggle on the ground in an attempt to turn them over onto their back and score the fair-back fall. The most common technique for turning the opponent over was the application of Nelson holds combined with either wrist, foot, leg, or crotch holds.

PERIOD OF ORIGIN

1820s

Catch wrestling emerged as a professional wrestling sport and form of entertainment in the town of Ashton-under-Lyne in Lancashire. The earliest form of competition consisted of challenge matches, which were organized by local publicans and held during local folk and religious festivals, such as Ashton Wakes (Rushbearing), May Day, Easter, Whit Monday, and Shrove Tuesday. Matches were also held at weekly Sunday markets. Competitors wrestled for cash prizes or trophies, such as a silver watch or a trophy pig.

The earliest known challenge matches in the catch wrestling style were organized by Daniel Bardsley at the bowling green adjacent to his house, the Astley's Arms Inn, in Ashton-under-Lyne. The earliest professionals of the sport were recruited from among the colliers and textile workers of Ashton-under-Lyne and the neighboring South Lancashire mill towns of Oldham, Rochdale, Middleton, Bury, and Bolton. The earliest known notable catch wrestler from Ashton-under-Lyne during this period was Samuel Ashton.

1830s-50s

During this period, catch wrestling in South Lancashire became a well-established form of sports entertainment, driven by a robust circuit of professional wrestlers. The first known professional wrestler to hold the title of Lancashire wrestling champion was John Rowlance or Rowland ('Rowley') of Bolton.

The earliest annual catch wrestling tournaments in South Lancashire that were open to all local men were the Nudger Sports Wrestling Championship, held during the Rochdale Races on Bagslate Common since 1843, and the Old Cock Inn Wrestling Championship in Middleton, held since 1844.

Among the most famous wrestlers of that time were John Holt and William Buckley, both from Oldham; Johnny Cheetham, a famous Mancunian sports celebrity; James Matley of Ashton-under-Lyne; Adam Ridings ('Dockum') of Bury; George Swithenbank of Saddleworth, West Yorkshire; undefeated heavyweight champion William Swann of Ashton-under-Lyne; and England's heavyweight boxing champion, Sam Hurst of Stalybridge, who began his combative career as a professional wrestler.

In 1856, Nelson Warren, the proprietor of the Snipe Inn Grounds in Audenshaw (near Ashton-under-Lyne), unified and codified the rules of catch wrestling. This set of rules became the standard for all contests in South Lancashire and was known as the Snipe Inn Rules.

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT.

1860s

During this decade, major professional wrestling promotions and championship titles were established at sporting arenas in towns across South Lancashire. The primary titles included the Copenhagen Grounds Championship in Newton Heath (established in 1861), represented by a silver belt, as well as the championships of the Snipe Inn Grounds (established in 1862) and Higginshaw Grounds in Oldham (established in 1865), both represented by a gold cup. These titles represented catch wrestling's premier weight class: the 9-stone championship.

That era was known as the Golden Age of Catch, and it produced some of the most famous Lancashire wrestlers. These included Teddy Lowe of Whitworth, the best pound-for-pound catch wrestler of the nineteenth century, alongside others such as John Meadowcroft and David Bentley of Bury, and William Schora, Frank Robinson, John Massey, Joseph Newton ('Teapot'), and Edwin Bibby, all from the Ashton-under-Lyne area.

1870s-1900s.

In the 1870s, the old wrestling promotions lost their significance, and the region's best competitors operated as independent professional freelancers. During this time, a great number of professional wrestlers who emerged from Wigan established themselves as the strongest in South Lancashire. In the 1880s, catch wrestling was finally exported to

North America by the pioneer wrestlers from South Lancashire, namely, the aforementioned Edwin Bibby and Joe Acton of Wigan.

The most popular wrestlers of this period in South Lancashire were John Lees and John Butterworth ('Dockum') of Oldham, alongside the undefeated heavyweight champion William Snape ('Dipper') of Bolton. Wigan was also a major hub for talent during this era, producing standout competitors such as John Tonge ('Eckersley'), Joe Acton, William Moullineux ('Sellars'), Miles Sweeney, Abraham Travis ('Ab-o-Wags'), James Faulkner, Isaac Smith, William Winstanley ('Soap'), Tom Connor, Charles Green, Tom Jones ('Burgie Ben'), Joe Carroll, James Morris ('Stockley'), and the Lancastrian-American Jim Parr. Other dominant figures included Tom Clayton ('Bulldog') of Bolton; James Mellor and Jack Smith of Stalybridge; and Sam Moores of Salford, who is often considered the greatest catch wrestler of all time.

Among the prominent South Lancashire professional catch wrestlers of the British Wrestling Boom Era of the 1900s were Harry Mort of Oldham, Tom Rose of Bolton, Peter Bannon of Burnley, Jack Winrow of Heywood, Job Shambley of Westhoughton, and, from the Wigan area, Willie Collins, Bob Berry, Jack Carroll (the nephew of Joe Carroll), James Winstanley ('Cicely'), Jack Brown, William Charnock, and Jim Foster.

FIRST BRITISH TITLE.

In 1899, the first official British professional catch wrestling championship was decided in London, under the organization of W. T. Ecclestone, also known as 'Jolly Jumbo.' The 12-stone title, along with a magnificent gold-and-silver belt, was won by the aforementioned Joe Carroll.

FIRST INDEPENDENT PROMOTION.

The earliest privately owned professional wrestling championship entertainment company in England was established by the famous veteran wrestler Tom Cannon of Tyldesley, who organized World Catch Wrestling Championships in 1899 and 1902. These championships were won by the American Jack Carkeek and the aforementioned Wiganer Jim Parr, respectively.

THE WRESTLING BOOM IN LONDON.

The early 1900s saw a massive boom in catch wrestling in London, the capital of the British Empire. The city's music halls became a grand stage for major professional wrestling events, and the overall popularity of the sport skyrocketed as international professionals joined the British circuits.

The most prominent international professional catch wrestling tournament of that period was the "King's Coronation Tourney," organized by the National Sporting Club of London in Covent Garden in 1902 and won by the Swiss champion Armand Cherpillod.

In 1904, the National Sporting Club of London recognized the aforementioned Peter Bannon as the British professional catch wrestling champion, who, at that point, was regarded as the strongest catch wrestler in England in his weight class (under 12st).

In 1904, the National Amateur Wrestling Association of Great Britain was established in London. It used slightly modified rules of catch wrestling in its competitions. The best South Lancashire wrestlers did not participate in these events because, for the local men, wrestling was first and foremost a profession, and they would try to turn professional as early as they could.

The biggest catch wrestling tournament in South Lancashire, based on the number of entries, which exceeded 60, was the open-to-all 9-stone Championship of Britain, held in 1907. Sponsored by Chicago millionaire John Calvin Brown and held at the White City Stadium in Manchester, the tournament was won by the aforementioned Tom Jones ('Burgie Ben'), who claimed the title and silver belt.

From 1908 to 1910, the open-to-all World Catch Wrestling Championship—contested across three weight classes (lightweight, middleweight, and heavyweight divisions)—was held at the Alhambra Theatre in London.

THE WRESTLING BOOM IN LANCASHIRE.

In the 1900s, one of the oldest and most prestigious historical catch wrestling titles, the Oldham Borough Grounds 9st Championship Cup, was still around. The holder of that trophy was Wiganer Willie Collins, arguably the best pound-for-pound wrestler of his generation.

In the early 1910s, the most cherished South Lancashire title in catch wrestling was revived in Ashton-under-Lyne, namely the Snipe Inn Grounds 9st Challenge Cup, also known as the Andrew Cup (1910s). It was held by such famous champions as Harry Mort, James Winstanley, and Jack Brown. In 1914, the special "Andrew Cup for Amateurs" was also established at the Snipe Inn. The official name of the title was the "9st Northern Counties Amateur Catch-as-catch-can Championship."

The last professional heavyweight champion of Lancashire before the First World War was Jack Winrow, who was the best in his weight class (over 12 st).

DECLINE OF PRO WRESTLING.

After the end of World War I, professional catch wrestling in South Lancashire and the rest of Britain slowly died out. This decline occurred primarily because catch wrestling was internationally exposed right before the Great War as a predetermined spectacle—a staged show rather than a legitimate sporting competition. In its place, a new professional style called 'All-in Wrestling,' imported from America, successfully took over starting in 1929.

All-in wrestling was a hybrid of three distinct martial cultures: British catch wrestling, Continental Greco-Roman wrestling, and Japanese judo and jiu-jitsu. Consequently, contests were decided using rules from each discipline. Victories were achieved either by a fair back fall following British and European customs, by submission in the Japanese style, or by knockout, as in prize-fighting, although the knockout was caused by a legal wrestling move.

A slightly modified form of catch wrestling, under the same name, was featured at the Olympic Games from St. Louis in 1904 until the outbreak of the Second World War. The main difference was the introduction of time limits for bouts in all matches. The original Olympic catch wrestling rules were significantly changed over time, and the sport was eventually renamed freestyle wrestling.

CURRENT STATUS.

Defunct.

REFERENCES

The Story of Catch (2018), by Ruslan C Pashayev.

CHAMPION SILVER BELT OF LANCASHIRE.

Copenhagen Grounds (Newton Heath, Manchester).

The names of the champions in chronological order:

The Nine-Stone Wrestling Championship.

1861 John Meadowcroft of Radcliffe

1861 Thomas Haigh of Ashton-under-Lyne

1861 William Schora of Ashton-under-Lyne

1862 John Meadowcroft of Radcliffe

1862 Joe Acton of Hurst (Ashton-under-Lyne)

1862 John Meadowcroft of Radcliffe

Title retired by John Meadowcroft at this weight limit.

The 9-stone-4-pound Wrestling Championship

1864 Henry Counsel of Bury

1865 John Meadowcroft of Radcliffe

1865 Edward "Teddy" Lowe of Whitworth

Title retired by Edward "Teddy" Lowe at this weight limit.

The 9-stone-8-pound Wrestling Championship

1867 Frank Robinson of Ashton-under-Lyne

Title retired by Frank Robinson and Edward "Teddy" Lowe at this weight limit.

CHAMPION GOLD CUP OF LANCASHIRE.

The names of the champions in chronological order:

The 123lb Wrestling Championship at Snipe Inn Grounds (Audenshaw).

1862-1864 William Schora of Ashton-under-Lyne

The Nine-Stone Wrestling Championship at Higginshaw Grounds (Oldham).

1865-1866 Teddy Lowe of Whitworth

1867-1868 David Bentley of Starling

1868 John Massey of Ashton-under-Lyne

1869 David Bentley of Starling

1870 Edwin Bibby of Ashton-under-Lyne

1870 David Bentley of Starling

1871 Edwin Bibby of Ashton-under-Lyne

The 115lb Wrestling Championship at Higginshaw Grounds (Oldham).

1871-1873 John Lees of Glodwick

Note: The original Gold Cup of Lancashire, the Snipe Inn Trophy, was purchased by the owner of the Higginshaw Grounds and later used by him as the trophy for his wrestling promotion.

FRANK ROBINSON.

“During Ashton Wakes in August 1867, Robinson, the proud holder of the Champion Belt, put his beautiful trophy on view at his house, the Three Crowns Inn, Old Street, Ashton.”

“Some superstitious locals believed that there was a strange, dark, evil aura surrounding the belt and that it was cursed because many of the champions who had held it in the past did not end up doing well. The greatest of them all, Teddy Lowe,

became a vagrant and died on the street from exposure in 1887; the first champion of Lancashire, John Meadowcroft, died in an accident during a wrestling match in 1886, when his neck was broken; Joe Acton died in a mining accident in America in 1892; and Frank Robinson, who had also relocated overseas, died of blood poisoning in 1888, while his nine-year-old son Charles drowned in 1882.

Maybe that is why they decided not to award championship belts in Lancashire anymore, and it was not until forty years after the Copenhagen Grounds Belt championship was discontinued that another belt was awarded to a catch wrestler in Manchester. Ironically, that belt was also emblematic of the 9-stone Championship and was presented to Tom Jones, aka 'Burgie Ben' of Aspull, in 1907 for winning the biggest elimination tournament in Lancashire history."

"Frank Robinson. Another holder of the Copenhagen Grounds Champion Belt and one of the symbols of the Golden Era of Lancashire wrestling, Robinson also moved to America. During the early 1880s, Robinson achieved some success in America and claimed the lightweight championship in the Greco-Roman style, which was very popular in the States during the 1870s when he relocated there. Frank's son, James, was also a professional wrestler.

During the 1870s and early 1880s, the Lancashire wrestling community in America was relatively "closed" and mostly restricted to former residents (mainly miners) of South Lancashire."

JOHN MASSEY.

During that year (1868), Massey also had victories over both "immortals," Lowe and Robinson. John Massey died young in 1871 and would be remembered as one of the most gifted and greatest Lancashire wrestlers there ever was. He truly was the people's champion. His fame outlived him, and among the locals there was a popular ballad about him, "*A Song on Jack Massey of Dukinfield*," which told of his greatest victories.

JOSEPH ACTON.

"On October 11, 1862, there was an exhibition of the championship trophies belonging to local sporting celebrities at the City Grounds, Bradford (Manchester), where Joseph Acton and William Schora, holder of the Snipe Inn Gold Cup, exhibited their beautiful trophies."

Joe Acton (Hurst). Among the Lancashire wrestlers who made it to America and had previously held the Copenhagen Grounds Champion Belt was Joe Acton of Hurst (near Ashton-under-Lyne). He died in a mining accident and should not be confused with the later Joe Acton from Wigan.

REFERENCES

The Story of Catch (2018), by Ruslan C Pashayev.