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 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 as catch can 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

Before 1820s.

The earliest known reference to a wrestling match in Ashton-under-Lyne probably dates back to Elizabethan times. It comes from local folklore in the form of a comical legend, collected by *Samuel Hill* (1864–1909), entitled *A Bear Story*. The tale recounts a wrestling match between a local man, described as *“an expert wrestler”*, and a bear named Bruin. Explaining his defeat, the wrestler reportedly remarked: *“I could have downed him if he had not had his topcoat on!”* (*Bygone Ashton-under-Lyne*, 1999, Page 78).

Prior to the invention of catch as catch can wrestling by local publicans in Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire, there were only two professional combative sports in South

Lancashire: *up-and-down fighting* and *puncing*! Both sports were also organised by beer-sellers.

Lancashire's *up-and-down fighting*, unlike a typical English prize fight, allowed attacks on an opponent even when he was down. Although it was referred to as fighting, it was, in fact, more of a no-holds-barred wrestling match, as wrestling skill was the decisive factor in this sport. Matches continued until one of the two competitors was either unable to continue or gave up. Kicking an opponent, even when he was helplessly lying on the ground, was permitted, as was strangling him. In addition, these matches featured all kinds of brutalities, including gouging, biting, and tearing at an opponent's nose, ears and mouth. *Samuel Bamford* (1788–1872), a native of Middleton and a famous writer, provides the most detailed account of these fights in Volume 2 (1893) of his book *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, which he wrote between 1840 and 1844. The most feared up-and-down fighters of Lancashire hailed from Oldham and Bolton areas!

Lancashire's *puncing matches* were a local variation of the traditional English upright form of *wrestling at arm's length* (aka a *square hold* or *hold by the arms*), in which tugging and kicking an opponent's shins with metal-clad *Lancashire clogs*, designed to inflict maximum damage, were the main requirements. Matches were conducted in rounds (falls on the ground) and were decided either when one of the competitors refused to continue and accepted defeat, or by the number of rounds won if both competitors were unable or unwilling to continue. *Harold Dearden* (1882–1962), a native of Bolton, provides a first-hand account of these contests in Chapter 36 of his book *The Wind of Circumstance* (1938). The best puncers of Lancashire were Rochdalians!

These two medieval-style sports were considered unacceptable in the modern age and were ultimately banned in the early 1820s. They were soon replaced by a newly born sport for all men: *Lancashire catch-as-catch-can wrestling*, in which *fair back falls* were the objective!

Thus, by introducing a relatively civilised new form of wrestling in South Lancashire, local publicans managed to save their *prize-fighting business*!

The 1820s.

Catch wrestling emerged as a professional wrestling sport and form of entertainment in the town of Ashton-under-Lyne in Lancashire. Its original format was described as *"the best of three throws (back falls), each man to catch hold of his adversary and throw him as he could."*

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. All first-

generation professional wrestlers were former up-and-down fighters and puncers. The earliest notable catch wrestlers known to have emerged from Ashton-under-Lyne during this period were Samuel Ashton (born 1798/1800) and John Cock (born 1800/1801), alongside the notorious Boltonian, Robert Bootal.

The 1830s-50s.

"There were also wrestling matches, and Dockham (NOTE: Adam Ridings of Bury, Lancs) and many other powerful men took part in them. The object of the wrestler was to place his antagonist on his back, and in this style of contest no throw was counted unless both shoulders of the fallen man fairly touched the ground. Any kind of rough usage was permissible. The wrestlers were of sturdy build, below rather than above the middle height, with powerful limbs, massive neck, and bullet-headed." Rochdale and the Vale of Whitworth. (1897). By Wm Robertson.

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. Wrestling matches at *Belle Vue Zoological Gardens* in Manchester were held as early as the 1840s.

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 Sugden ('Pain') and Seth Holden (or Holding), both of Bolton; James Matley of Ashton-under-Lyne; Adam Ridings ('Dockum') of Bury; James Buckley and Henry Ashton, both of Middleton; 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.

The Early Rules of Catch Wrestling.

"The conditions are to wrestle on a green sward according to the Lancashire fashion, that is catch as catch can; the first two fair back falls out of three; soleing (i.e. throttling) and all other unmanly practices to be barred; the competitors to wear drawers and pumps; and though spikes are allowed in the latter for not slipping they were not to exceed a quarter of an inch in length and not to be willfully used on the person's body; and no grease of any kind, resin or other ingredient to be applied to the person on any part of their body by either party."

The SNIPE INN RULES, 1856.

“The men should wrestle the best of three back falls Lancashire fashion, that is catch as catch can. In all matches the wrestlers compete in stockings or barefooted. They are allowed to catch hold of any portion of the body, with one single exception, but they must not scratch, throttle, pull each other's ears or commit any unfair act. Neither are they allowed to be rubbed with grease, resin or any pernicious drug. The competitors are allowed one second each, who must not be changed during the match; neither second allowed to touch his man or his opponent's man while wrestling. If the wrestlers get entangled with the boundary of the ring, they draw off, and renew, the contest with the same old as when they drew off. Should any match not be concluded on the day appointed both men must meet, weigh, and commence wrestling at the same time and place day by day (Sunday excepted) until finished, the decision of the referee in any match to be final, and the stakes to be given up accordingly. If the referee be not chosen in the articles, and the wrestlers or backers cannot agree to appoint one in fifteen minutes from the time of entering the ring, the manager of his deputy shall appoint one. The men are allowed ten minutes between each fall. If a wrestler gain a fall and neglect or refuse to continue the contest, his opponent shall claim the stakes, or in the event of a wrestler gaining a throw he can claim the stakes in the absence of any arrangement to continue the match. Any dispute arising not provided for in the articles shall be settled by the referee, whose decision shall be final.”

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT.

The 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 his generation, alongside others such as John Meadowcroft, Henry Counsel and David Bentley all of Bury, and William Schora, Thomas Haigh, Joe Acton (I), Frank Robinson, John Massey, Joseph Newton (‘Teapot’), and Edwin Bibby, all from the Ashton-under-Lyne area.

In 1870, French champion wrestlers toured England and also performed at Pomona Palace in Manchester, where David Bentley defeated Dubois Jr., the French lightweight champion, in a match contested under French rules, for a £50 prize and a silver cup worth £25, emblematic of the International Championship.

The 1870s-1900s.

“In Lancashire, where the Lancashire or catch-as-catch-can game, as it is called, originated, all falls count when the shoulders touch the mat together. It makes no difference whether you throw a fellow over your head and let go of him, or whether you press him down with a

hammerlock or roll him: it is a fall every time the shoulders strike together." (Jim Parr of Wigan, Lancs).

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, John Butterworth ('Dockum') and Abraham Travis ('Ab-o-Wags') all three from Oldham, alongside the undefeated heavyweight champion William Snape ('Dipper') of Bolton.

The greatest wrestlers from Ashton-under-Lyne, following Edwin Bibby's departure for America, were the brothers Joe and Dick Massey. They were the first Lancashire professional wrestlers to make their way to London. In 1888, they gave catch wrestling exhibitions at the Peckham Theatre of Varieties and the Sebright Music Hall. The true pioneers of the Music Hall era of catch wrestling in the capital of Empire!

Wigan was also a major hub for talent during this era, producing standout competitors such as John Tonge ('Eckersley'), Joe Acton (II), William Moullineux ('Sellars'), Miles Sweeney, James Faulkner, Isaac Smith, William Winstanley ('Soap'), Tom Connor, Charles Green, Tom Jones ('Burgy 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 pound-for-pound 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 of Burnley, Lancs 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.

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.

The biggest catch wrestling tournament open to local men 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 (‘Burgy Ben’), who claimed the title and silver belt.

In 1908, at London’s Hengler’s Circus, Wm. Bankier (‘Apollo’) held what was described as the first and largest open-to-the-world catch wrestling tournament in history. As expected, the lighter weight divisions were dominated by Lancashire men. The featherweight class (the nine-stone championship), their favourite division, was decided between the aforementioned Wm. Collins, who emerged as the winner, and Harry Mort. The lightweight tournament was won by T. Rose!

In the same year, Manchester’s Palace Theatre hosted what was described as the largest international wrestling tournament in the history of South Lancashire, organised by Wm. Bankier. The heavyweight honours were shared by the Scottish wrestler Jim

Esson and the Irish athlete Pat Connolly, while the middleweight competition was won by the American wrestler Sam Anderson, who was awarded a silver belt.

In the early 1910s, one of the most prestigious South Lancashire titles in catch wrestling was revived in Ashton-under-Lyne: the Snipe Inn Grounds 9st Challenge Cup, also known as the Andrew Cup (1910s). It was established during the Easter Tourney of 1912 and won by Harry Mort. Other famous champions included James Winstanley and Jack Brown.

In 1914, a separate competition, the “Andrew Cup for Amateurs,” was also established at the Snipe Inn. Its official 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.