

# Cornish Wrestling

Peter Shelden Article for Federation of OCS

## The Sport

Cornish Wrestling, in common with other ancient celtic styles of wrestling such as Cumberland -and -Westmorland and Breton, is a stand-up style with no mauling or holding on the ground, the object being to throw your opponent on to his back from the standing position. This stand-up style places the emphasis on skill rather than superior weight or strength. The wrestlers wear a traditional jacket made of strong canvas material with short loose sleeves and tied across at the front by cords. This is strong enough to be pulled and twisted without tearing. The role of the jacket is of paramount importance as contestants are only permitted to grip on the jacket. You must not grip on your opponents flesh, though it is permitted to use the flat of the hand to manouvre and lift him. Use of hands is limited to above your opponents waist.

The jacket, when worn, will hang cape-like from the shoulders and it is usual to gather the slack to the front, twist the two sides together and tuck the surplus up under the left arm. This is to prevent your opponent making a quick grab and throw before the grips have been applied properly. There are a number of ways of taking up a grip and wrestlers will adopt a method to suit their own style and stature and change the grip as circumstances demand.

The aim of wrestling in the Cornish style is to either “back” your opponent or to effect a win over him on points.

A “back” is scored when a man has been thrown on his back so that at least three of his four “Pins” hit the ground simultaneously. “Pins” are defined as the shoulders and the hips. A “back” will win a contest for a contestant whenever it takes place and the bout is then over. If no “Back” is achieved during a contest the bout will be decided on points.

Points are scored when a shoulder or hip hits the ground - one point for one pin down and two points for two pins down. If no points are scored during a contest a point will be awarded to the wrestler showing most ‘play’, i.e. has made a genuine attempt to throw his opponent.

All throws must be made from the standing position and there must be no grappling on the ground whatsoever. When any part of the body - other than the feet - touches the ground the ‘hitch’ is broken and the wrestlers must shake hands and restart the contest.

The handshake is a formality which is traditional and must take place before a contest begins, before each hitch and after the bout is over.

In order to achieve a Back a number of throws can be used - the Fore Hip, the Fore Crook, the Back Crook, the Fore Heave, the Back Heave, the Under Heave, the Knock Back, the Flying Mare, the Heel, the Back Step ( or Back

Strap ) etc. In past times these wrestling skills would have been passed on from father to son or friend to friend. However in the 1970s Brian Kendall, himself an experienced wrestler, published his book *The Art of Cornish Wrestling* in which he describes in words and pictures all the classical throws, holds and counter moves. This book has become the standard teaching manual and copies have been sold to many parts of the world, mostly where Cornish descendents are settled such as Australia, the USA and South Africa.

An experienced wrestler will develop his own style of wrestling and will adapt and improvise the standard throws. Theoretically as long as a wrestler plays within the rules he can use any means possible in order to throw his opponent. Moves not permitted are:-

Holding an opponent below the waist.

Striking with the foot above an opponents knee.

The Cross Collar ( A choking action applied to the throat by crossing over the collars of the jacket and pulling tight ).

The pressure of thumbs or knuckles on the throat.

The Crowbar ( Where the arm is passed inside an opponents jacket and is used as a lever across the throat ).

Deliberately touching the ground with hand or knee to avoid being thrown.

Gripping your opponent on wrists or fingers.

Also, any play considered by the Sticklers to be unfair.

Foul or unfair moves will have marks charged against the transgressor and in extreme cases he will be disqualified.

Traditionally Cornish Wrestling is practiced outdoors and the ring formed in any grassy field, meadow or lawn which is reasonably level, free from bumps, pits and any objects which could injure a wrestler. These days the contestants are required to wrestle within a circle of 6 metres radius marked out on the ground with sand or saw dust. Outer rings of 8 and 9 metres radii delineate the area on which non- participants should not enter. Beyond the outer ring seating is provided for the spectators.

Before tournaments, the wrestlers line up and take the Wrestlers' Oath:

“ War ow enor ha war enor ow bro, my a de mewled hep tratury na garowder, hag avel ol ow lelder my a ystyn ow luf dhe'm contrary. Gans geryowow hendasow. Gwary whek yu gwary tek”.

Translated, “ On my honour and the honour of my country, I swear to wrestle without treachery or brutality and in token of my sincerity I offer my hand to my opponent. In the words of my forefathers, Good play is fair play.

Wrestling contests are controlled by three “Sticklers”, usually retired campaigners, who do indeed carry walking sticks. The job of the Sticklers is to see fair play between the two contestants, decide which throw merits points or is a fair “Back” or if a foul has been committed. Their decision is final and a two to one majority as to points or a “Back” is sufficient to carry the day. If a contest goes to a points decision each card is individually totalled and the winner needs the highest score on at least two cards.

In days gone by, wrestling took place in a relatively large area of unspecified size, bouts could be very prolonged as there were no timed

rounds and a win could only be achieved by a “back” or by ones opponent giving his back ( i.e. conceding the bout ). However, in the 1970s new rules were drawn up introducing the points system, the standardisation of the ring size and timed rounds. Senior events are usually set for two ten minute rounds and, unless the bout has been ended by a “Back”, at the end of which the winner is the contestant who has been awarded the most points over the two rounds.

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## Historical Notes

The first mention of wrestling in the British Isles is in the ancient Book of Leinster which refers to the sport being included in the Taitin Games in County Meath. This festival dates back to at least 1829 BC when, according to legends, it was founded by Nuguid of the Strong Arm. The Cornish style of wrestling is believed to date back over two thousand years, probably before the coming of the Romans.

From early times the men of Cornwall established a formidable reputation as wrestlers. At the Battle of Agincourt, in 1415, where the banners symbolised the different county contingents, the Cornish banner depicted two wrestlers in a “hitch”. The banner needed no words, the picture was enough to let anyone know that the men of Cornwall were behind it.

A banner based on that carried at Agincourt is still displayed at Cornish wrestling tournaments and other events. Also on the banner are the Cornish words “Gwary whek yu gwary tek”, the wrestlers motto.

At the meeting between King Henry VIII and Francis I of France at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in France a team of Cornish wrestlers faced the champions of France. Godolphin, the chief wrestler, had received the royal command direct to bring his men to uphold the “English” honour at Calais. This they did in grand style, humbling the French team and causing the king to gloat so much that he was challenged by Francis to a personal wrestling match. The two monarchs actually clashed for a few moments before being separated by their courtiers.

Cornish mens’ love of the sport and their prowess at it were proverbial for centuries. Richard Carew, in his Survey of Cornwall, printed in 1602, wrote of Cornish and Devonshire wrestling “Wrestling is as full of manliness, more delightful and less dangerous (than Hurling)..for you shall hardly find an assembly of boyes in Devon and Cornwall, where the most untowardly amongst them will not as readily give you a muster of this exercise as you are prone to require it”.

Interestingly, in his book, Carew does not mention the jacket but refers to a girdle that is used for grips. A girdle that perhaps gives rise to a connection between the Cornish style and another indigenous British style known as side-hold in which a harness was worn for grips.

Wrestling acquired a great patron in the 18th century in Sir Thomas Parkyns of Bunny Park near Nottingham. Wrestling was the great love of his life and every year he would hold matches on his estate for a prize of a gold-laced

hat. In 1713 he wrote the first book in the English language entirely devoted to wrestling, "The Inn-Play or Cornish-Hugg Wrestler". Parkyns description of the close-hugg style differs greatly from the modern sport of Cornish wrestling. It is much more combative in nature yet does contain many of the same throws. It deals not only with the sportive aspects of the style but also with self defence. Defences against lapel chokes and several other attacks are included as well as a section about which of the close-hugg moves to use while boxing. Parkyn also warns "Whoever would be a complete wrestler must avoid being overtaken in drink".

Little mention is made by Parkyn to the jacket, however by the 19th century the use of the jacket was standard. At this time there was great rivalry between the wrestlers of Cornwall and Devon. The style of wrestling of the two groups was basically the same but differed in certain aspects. The Cornish concentrated on the "in-play or close-hug", relying mostly on the upper body, while the Devonshire wrestlers concentrated on tripping and kicking, known as "out-play". Of course the Cornish and Devonshire styles each contained the elements of in-play and out-play but a preference for one or a prejudice against the other was held. The Devonshire style was thought of as brutal by the Cornish due to the fact that Devonshire matches often turned into punishing shin kicking contests. Often shoes were worn in the Devonshire style to add more damage to the kicking techniques while the Cornish wrestlers stayed barefooted or wore socks.

The last great intercounty match was in 1826 between the Cornish Champion, James Polkinghorn and the Devonshire Champion, Abraham Cann. Polkinghorn was 5ft 11inch and weighed 19stone 10lbs of great power and fame. Cann was 6ft 1inch and weighed 13stone 10lbs endowed with surprising strength of limb, especially in the legs. The match took place at Morris Town, Devonport in front of a crowd of seventeen thousand. The two had fought each other many times but the result of this match has always been disputed though the best authorities pronounce it to have been a draw, perhaps a fair enough way to end a prolonged series. Twenty years later, Polkinghorn and Cann were to be Sticklers at the Inter-county Championships, held in Camden Town, London, between another legendary Cornish wrestler, Thomas Gundry, and Chapple of Devon, which Gundry won.

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### The Modern Era

Until comparatively recently each town and village had its own rules. At a meeting in Bodmin in 1923 The Cornish Wrestling Association (C.W.A.) was set up, with its first President Captain T.E. Bisdee, to formulate rules that would be acceptable to all local committees. The basic aims of the association were, to promote and foster Cornish wrestling, co-ordinate fixtures, the registration of wrestlers and to promote and hold annual championships. Since its formation the association has had its ups and downs but it is still there with its current enthusiastic committee still

fostering those aims.

There have been many fine Cornish Wrestlers since the setting up of the C.W.A., probably the most notable of these being Francis Gregory. He was the youngest member of the squad that took part in a two week long exhibition to promote Cornish wrestling at The London Palladium in the 1920s. He represented Cornwall as heavyweight champion against Brittany at the first seven Cornu-Breton tournaments, winning on every occasion - including victories over the famous Breton champions Scordia and Cadic.

He later made his living as an "All-in" wrestler.

Competition had taken place between Cornish and Breton wrestlers over hundreds of years but in 1928 the first official Cornu-Breton

Championships took place in Quimperle before a crowd of 10,000 spectators. This followed a meeting between William Tregonning Hooper Snr. and Dr. C. Coteneq at the Celtic Consortium in Brittany in 1927. This led to a discussion comparing the styles of the two Countries and a decision that an Inter-Keltic tournament should take place. Tournaments continued regularly up to the Second World War and intermittently afterwards until 1985. Contact has always been maintained between the C.W.A. and the

Breton wrestling associations of "La Federation de Gouren" and "ARMEL", with exchange visits taking place on both sides of the Channel. With the decline of mining in Cornwall in the latter part of the 19th century,

Cornish miners emigrated in large numbers to help open up many of the world's major mining fields. It was said that - anywhere in the world where there was a hole in the ground, you would find Cornishmen at the bottom, working away with pick and shovel. These men took with them the tradition of Cornish wrestling and tournaments soon became a feature of life in the mining areas of the U.S.A., Australia and South Africa. Even today there is great interest in the sport amongst the descendants of these emigrants and reports are received of wrestling events in these areas.

In recent years Cornish wrestling has been in decline with just a small number of regular wrestlers. The sport has undoubtedly suffered from competition with better promoted games and from the more glamorous martial art forms and also from a lack of finance.

Faced with these problems, the CWA and their supporters have responded in a number of ways. In 2004 the CWA became affiliated to The British Wrestling Association ( BWA) in order to raise its profile and to benefit from the BWA's established strengths. Some members of the CWA have been trained as official Cornish wrestling coaches and their task is to establish training centres and attract and train the wrestlers of the future. Interest in Cornish wrestling has been spread beyond the boundaries of the county and exponents of other forms of wrestling have discovered what a good sport Cornish wrestling is. Some competitors are prepared to travel hundreds of miles to take part in our tournaments.

As well as running championship events throughout the summer, the CWA will arrange demonstrations at events such as the Royal Cornwall Show to raise public awareness of the sport.

The CWA was recently awarded a grant from Sport England and this has

been used to buy training mats, for indoor coaching, jackets and other equipment and to fund coaching in a number of Community Colleges. The determination is there and with hard work and good fortune the sport will regain its former popularity.