

# Cornish Wrestling

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Cornwall is a happy hunting ground to the Antiquarian, and it seems quite natural that a pastime handed down from the days of antiquity should have been preserved there.

As to the origin of this ancient game we can merely indulge in flights of fancy. We might stretch the old legend and claim Corinaens as the first Cornish champion three thousand years ago, and we might stretch it a bit farther and claim that his bout with the giant Gog Magog on Plymouth Hoe, was the first of those inter-county (Devon and Cornwall) matches that retained their popularity even to the middle of the last century.

But to find authentic records we are obliged to leave the remote past, however wistful a look we throw in that direction, and to plunge into mediaeval times, when wrestling was a common sport throughout the length and breadth of Merrie England, special skill in the exercise being the hall-mark of Cornishmen. In "The White Company" Sir A Conan Doyle gives us a charming mediaeval scene at "The Pied Merlin" (a scene, by the way, that one would like to see on the stage), terminating in a wrestling match between Sankin Aylward and Hordle John. In view of the fact that the former threw his opponent by a variation of that quick "fore-heep," known as the "flying mare". I have never quite forgiven the author for not making Aylward a Cornishman. No man named Sankin Aylward ever stepped in Cornwall – out of a book.

It is well known that Cornishmen fought in the French wars of those days, and it is pretty well established that the Cornish contingent following King Henry V. to Agincourt, 1415, marched under a banner on which was depicted a pair of wrestlers in a "hitch".

"A silver tower Dorset's red banner bears.

The Cornishmen two wrestlers had for theirs."

(Drayton's Agincourt)

One feels that the banner floating proudly over the Cornish quarters was a direct yet friendly challenge to the rest of the British Army, and when the moment came for the archers to discard their bows and draw their swords with: "God for Harry, England and St George!" I have no doubt that our hardy ancestors were amongst the first in the charge that overthrew the enemy.

Less than a hundred years later, we find Henry VIII requesting Godolphin to supply a number of Cornish wrestlers "to compete in a great sporting carnival at Calais. (The Field of the Cloth of Gold, 1521) It is said that the Cornishmen justified their choice by winning.

The game "seems to have been generally similar to the Cornish game still in use. In the common game, the hold was taken by the collar and waistband, in the prize game the body was stripped to the waist, and each (wrestler) had a girdle something like a shawl, over one shoulder and under the other, for his opponent to take hold of".

Carew, writing in 1588, mentioned the girdle, " This (Cornish wrestling) hath also his laws, of taking hold only above girdle, wearing a girdle to take hold by".

After Tudor Times, wrestling, as a common pastime, died out, except in the North West, (Westmorland and Cumberland) and South West (Devon and Cornwall). In the North-west the shawl, or sash, or girdle has entirely disappeared, but the "sash" hold still survives, and, indeed is the one and only hold now permitted. That is to say each wrestler must take his hold by putting his arms over one and under the other shoulder of his opponent, locking his fingers at the back before the umpires (or as we should say "sticklers") give the word to go. There are recognised hitches or tricks such as "the outside hipe," "the inside hipe," "the back heel" and so on, "hipe" like the Cornish "heep" being a corruption of the word "hip". In the South-west the sash appears to have grown bigger and bigger until it became "the jacket". When Polkinghorne returned after his celebrated match with Cann in 1826, his Cornish admirers presented him with a "championship sash" which is now the property of the County Wrestling Association.

Two hundred years ago the jacket was almost tight fitting and small enough to be called a "vest". To-day it is big, loose, coarse and ugly. "Coat" is no name for it. We can scarcely call it an implement or an instrument, although it might easily prove an instrument of torture to a man of too delicate skin. The only name suitable to the stiff canvas abomination seems to be "jacket". In the Westmorland Cumberland game, the competitors appear in the ring as athletes should appear, clad to show the symmetry of their form. The body of a Greek god would be "uglified " by the jacket. It is only when that grotesque garment has been gathered," or better still when it is laid aside at the end of a bout that we realise the physical beauty of the wrestlers. Although Cornish wrestling, like "Punch," is not so good as it used to be, and we might use the witty rejoinder of a late editor of that national journal and say that it never was, nevertheless the palmy days of the game appear to belong to the periods of its unrecorded history. Carew tells us that "you shall hardly find an assembly of boys in Devon or Cornwall where the most untowardly amongst them will not as readily give you a muster of their exercise, as you are prone to require it".

This practice was common amongst our grandfathers in the game of "shuffle hats and wrestle," hats being tossed into a ring and paired to decide the order in which their owners should wrestle off and is yet struggling to survive in one or two remote districts. (Carew) intimates that the pastime had, even in his time, already declined in some degree from its former pre-eminence.

Fuller (1608-1661) says, "The Cornish are masters of the Art of Wrestling, so that if the Olympic games were now in fashion, they would come away with victory. Wrestling was not then a gentle exercise; perhaps it is scarcely a gentle exercise as we know it to-day. Gilbert's "History of Cornwall" speaks of former "desperate wrestling matches" and we learn from Shakespeare's "As You like it," how a champion might deal with his opponents.....". The eldest of the three wrestled with Charles, the Duke's wrestler; which Charles in a moment threw him, and broke three of his ribs, that there is little hope of life in him; so he served the second and the third". After which feat, we are pleased to note, the celebrated Charles was faced by the handsome, curly-headed young hero and naturally (and quite properly, too), was himself carried off on the ambulance.

A prototype of Charles, although we may trust he was not so brutal, was the Cornishman Lyttleton Weyworth who had the honour of wrestling before Charles II.

Skill in the pastime was not confined to any particular class. The "hero" quoted above was a young nobleman, John Goit, a champion during Elizabeth's reign, was a sea captain "upon often trial" and a friend of Carew. The Reverend Richard Stevens (born 1656) "who prized himself for skill in wrestling" was headmaster of the Truro Grammar School, and William Parson (born 1722), "several years champion of Cornwall," was the respectable parish clerk of Sithney.

It seems impossible to find descriptions of wrestling matches before the days of newspapers, but accounts of tournaments during the first half of the last century are fairly common.

A meeting at any of the larger centres, such as Truro, Falmouth, Redruth, etc., drew together thousands of spectators and usually lasted at least two days, sometimes three, the first day wholly occupied in wrestling off for "standers" or, as generally pronounced to-day, "standards," a standard being a player who reached the third round by vanquishing two opponents. The following day was devoted to wrestling for prizes. The practice of awarding cash is a comparatively recent innovation – say a hundred years old. Prizes consisted of gold-laced hats, silver-laced hats, silver goblets, gold and silver lined baskets, beaver hats, pairs of gloves, and even pairs of leather breeches. There are still to be seen silver goblets won by the great Parkyn of St Columb, but one concludes that the hats and breeches have long since become too worn and shabby for exhibition.

Parkyn held the ring for upwards of twenty-five years until he gave place to Polkinghorne (born at St Keverne 1788), who was successively landlord of the King's Arms and Red Lion Inns at St Columb. Polkinghorne sprang into fame by vanquishing the Devon Champions Flower and Jackson at the inter-county meeting of 1816, and was the greatest figure in Cornish Wrestling until 1826, when he met Abraham Cann in the historic match at Morice Town, Devonport. Many inaccuracies have crept into recent descriptions of these men and their match. Anyway it was a draw, and it appears to mark the close of a period abounding in talent, brawn and muscle on both sides of the Tamar, and also the magnitude of the stakes appears to have exercised a baneful influence on the pastime just as fabulous purses today exercise a baneful influence on the sport of boxing. From this date Cornish Wrestling began to languish, and later (after Gundry's day) fell into a serious decline. Ill-health compelled Cann to retire from the arena while Polkinghorne's fame and figure forced on him the role of stickler. It is interesting to recall that those desperate rivals put their heads together as sticklers twenty years afterwards, when Gundry won the Devon and Cornwall Championships at Camden Town, London, in 1846.

Without any doubt, Gundry, whose memory has not yet wholly vanished, takes rank amongst the very greatest exponents of the art. There is little to be said of the period from 1850 to 1900, although a few players of outstanding merit are still remembered (notably Treglown in the West, who followed hard on Gundry, twenty years later Philip Hancock of St Austell, who is yet living, hale and hearty, at Mullion, and about 1890 the brawny Pearce of Wendron, but inter-County matches died out, and the game had not only fallen into decline, it had fallen into disrepute.

The present revival, so well fostered and encouraged by the County Association, really dates from twenty years ago, when the Chapmans of St Wenn took the ring. Those brothers, each of them dead game to the last ounce, infused new life into the pastime, and, perhaps unconsciously, helped to prepare the ground for the new growth now springing up under the auspices of the Association.

The following describes a meeting that took place just before the Great War. Readers who followed the sport in those days will recognise some of the characters portrayed.

Blue sky overhead, green sward under foot, a light breeze from the sea, a ring 40 yards in diameter, rimmed with spectators ten deep, quick play of hand and foot, and the rigour of the game, the game that has been played in Cornwall from time immemorial!

The "wrestlers" shyly and awkwardly come up to the committee tent and give in their names. They are then matched according to their weight and record. They wrestle off in rounds on the knock-out system and, when the entries are many, two pairs often simultaneously take the arena. Each competitor must strip to the buff and don the regulation loose canvas "jacket". His other raiment consists only of tight-fitting drawers and (sometimes) stockings. He must not grip his opponent below the waist, but he rarely tries

for a body hold. He plays to get his favourite "hitch" on the jacket, and the hitch is often suggestive of "ju-jitsu".

When a man is thrown on his back so that at least three of the four points touch the ground at the same time (two shoulders and a pin, or two pins and a shoulder) his opponent has gained a "back " and becomes a "standard" (ie. he is standing) for the next round.

There is no struggle for mastery on the mat. He may play for the "cramp arm and heel" hitch, the "fore hip," the "under heave," the "back step" or any other, or he may give his man the "flying mare," but always three "sticklers" (umpires with sticks—old men wise in the craft aforetime) slowly revolve round each player to see that the wrestling is bona fide and the hitch a fair one. At each fall the sticklers solemnly put their heads together, a nod of profound gravity signifying a "back" and a shake of more profound gravity, "no back".

Exponents of the ancient sport assemble from all parts of the county to contend for money prizes varying from ten pounds (often with a cup or belt) to ten shillings.

The pair of youngsters with round faces, sturdy bodies and legs, and beautiful brown arms, are from the clay works where the most beautiful brown arms in Britain are to be found. They struggle together like young bulls, but neither will stand long when he meets a slippery light-weight from St Stephens or Nanpean (also in the clay district) in the second round.

The lanky lad wrestling in trousers is a farm hand from Tregadillet and he is matched against a dangerous-looking fisherman from Mevagissey. ("Mevagissey sibilantly swelling sounds like a roller hissing up the sand.") They will put up a great bout and whichever wins is pretty safe for a prize.

The game little fellow entered under a nom de guerre and matched against a travelling scissors-grinder is a yeoman farmer. Against every opponent he will wrestle fiercely, neither asking nor giving quarter, and at the end of the day he will drive off in his own car.

Getting slowly into the "jacket" is an oldish man long past his prime. He is foolish and unfortunate, foolish, because he thinks to reproduce the form of his youth and unfortunate because he is matched against an active and saucy boy. When at last he came down heavily on his stiff old back every bone in his body cracks.

There is the best light-weight, growing a little bald, always smiling pleasantly and handling his men gently and with the touch of an artist. His plan of campaign is to work his way into the last round and then give his back to the champion heavy-weight (against whom he would be hopelessly outmatched) thus qualifying for second prize.

The romantic figure of the champion with his pale and eager face, is as striking as a Greek statue. He scarcely looks a "heavy," but the rippling muscles of his back and chest tell of enormous strength. He will throw every man he meets this year, and next year, and, until the time comes when "youth will be served, my masters". There is many a trophy in his

mother's parlour which his skill and courage have gained for him in the mining camps of America and South Africa. Neither he nor his scarcely less famous brothers have ever been known to give their "backs" in the wrestling ring. He is sure of a place on the roll of fame in company with other great names.

Incidents are not wanting. An old man is tripped up by a promising youngster. Brute strength and weight are tossed heels over head by craft and cunning, The over-fat player worried by a sinewy stripling is, in the words of a spectator, "steaming like a crock". A novice of tender years, trying on the "jacket" for the first time— is gently laid to rest on mother earth by our friendly light-weight.

As a popular sport, wrestling is unique. We all know the clean game of cricket, with all its keenness, with its white-flannelled, sun-browned players, and well-dressed spectators, and we know football and the cigarette-smoking mob who invade the ground (mostly looking unable to afford the entrance price) often to jeer at the opposing team, and always to howl at the referee.

The wrestling crowd is very different. They are comfortable. They don't hurry to the ground. They take it easy and they smoke pipes. They are not excitable and they never howl at the sticklers. ("What, never? Well, hardly ever".) The most offensive remarks hurled at these impressive veterans rapt in the play, is when one of them, himself a "bony wrestler" in his day, but now running to weight and breadth of beam, allows his burly figure to block the view of half the field. Then we hear a chorus "Move round there, Sticklers!" And the wrestlers themselves, modest fellows some of them, chewing straws and sitting round in groups before they enter the ring, game to the last ounce, are the best tempered sportsmen in the world. You may see an experienced heavyweight lay a novice on his back with rough kindness, as you would chuck over a Newfoundland puppy and when the heavyweight's heels are knocked out, knocking him out of the prize list too, there is no malice in his grin as he shakes the hand of his vanquisher.

The second and later rounds sort out the prize winners and at the finish, shyly and awkwardly as at first, the wrestlers come forward for their money, and if you happen to meet one of them afterwards in the street or on the railway station, where he is not at all an imposing figure, you will be wise to remember the advice of Polonius and "beware of entrance to a quarrel". With a grip on the collar and cuff of your coat he can give you a turn which will land you, half a dozen yards away, on your head.