

2. New Vigour in our Oldest Sport

Willie Baxter

At the 1988 Cowal gathering in Dunoon, Dougie Cambell from Dunfermline electrified the huge crowd with a spectacular 'hype' to win the Scottish 11st 7lbs wrestling championship. The loser, the champion of Brittany, was one of four Bretons who had travelled 800 miles to wrestle there, but nowadays, that is far from rare. Highland Games such as Balloch, Luss or Inveraray often attract wrestlers from Brittany, Iceland or England as well as the native Scots. Nor are the long journeys confined to foreign visitors. Willie Hollister used to compete regularly in the British 14st 7lbs championship at Shotts Highland Games; his journey from Eriskay involved two boats, a bus, two trains and a car. In 1994 two wrestlers competed at the North Uist Games on the Tuesday then travelled overnight to compete at Luss on the Wednesday.



Traditional wrestling still survives in Scotland and is, in fact, undergoing a modest revival in interest despite all the publicity given to foreign wrestling styles such as judo, sumo or aikido.

"Now clear the ring for hand to hand
The manly wrestlers take their stand."

(Canto 1 V, The Lady of the Lake.)

Increasingly young men and sometimes girls in Scotland and the Border Counties of England heed Sir Walter Scott, step into the ring and take hold to wrestle in the old traditional style.

Let me give you an example. In the very best traditions of English sportsmanship at the Alwinton Border Shepherd Games in October 1988, a long line of admirers lined up to shake Graeme English of East Kilbride by the hand. No football jobs here - these were the best wrestlers in the Border and Northern Counties of England and the Scotsman had just shaken the world of Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling to the core by winning, at his first attempt, its supreme prize, the "World" Heavyweight Championship. Fifty seven wrestlers had competed, including three Scots, and during the drive from Glasgow to Northumberland we had joked about making a border raid; all the more relevant because the venue was only three miles from Otterburn. A few rousing choruses of the old ballad during the journey proved to be a good omen and a large box had to be borrowed from our English hosts to carry three magnificent silver trophies, the spoils of victory, back to Scotland.

Alwinton Games was not the first time that the Scots wrestlers had made a cross border raid into England and carried off the supreme prize. In 1812 James Scott of Canonbie won the chief prize at Carlisle, at that period the premier wrestling ring in England. In the finals he defeated the famous William Richardson of Caldbeck in Cumberland who was nicknamed "Belted Will" as he had won 140 belts in the ring.

Just what is the history of this sport that so inspired men like Sir Walter Scott, James Hogg, Abraham Lincoln and the Earl of Lonsdale. Yes, the Earl of Lonsdale - it is a little known fact that the first Lonsdale Belt was awarded for wrestling. A belt is the traditional prize awarded to wrestling champions in the north of England and the custom has been adopted by other sports.

There is little need to refer back to the early religious imagery of Cuchuilan killing his son in a wrestling bout and its exact parallels in Asian culture such as the tale of Sohrab and Rustim. (To this day in India a champion in their traditional wrestling is called Rustim Hind.) There exist sufficient historical references to wrestling in the past in Scotland when it was the sport of the whole community, cottar and laird, clansman and chief.

Highland tradition tells us that during a visit by King Alexander 2nd to the English court for the christening of Edward 1st, the Scots King was irritated by the boasting of a Breton wrestler, the English King's favourite. At last patience exhausted he called out, "Is there none will rid me of this braggart?" The most feared highland warrior of his age, the Abbot of Applecross Foerchar O' Beolan Mac an-t Sagairt who was also Earl of Ross answered the challenge and in an act of "Notabile Vassilage" threw the Breton so heavily that he died. As you see, Scots wrestling Bretons is nothing new.

Savage combats between mediaeval knights for the honour of rival kings many would think bear little relationship to modern wrestling. Not so, there has always been a thin dividing line between the sport of wrestling and its martial application.

When the Norse invaders ravaged Europe in the 8th century and intermingled with the native Scots in the Western Isles and Galloway to form their hybrid Gallaghael culture they brought with them wrestling styles; all of them survive to this day - two in the British Isles.

Among the Norsemen Hryggspena or Backspanning the origin of Backhold and Lausatok or Loosehold were the most important styles. Lausatok or Loosehold through the old Loosehold style and the later Lancashire Catch-as-Catch-Can is the direct ancestor of modern Olympic Free Style Wrestling. Strangely enough Backhold wrestling with its emphasis on leg throws is probably the reason why Graceo Roman wrestling, the other Olympic Style which does not permit leg attacks, became so popular in Northern Europe at the end of the last century.

Occasionally wrestling was used by Icelandic settlers for trials by combat to settle land disputes. In these combats the wrestling was limited to a prescribed area and wrestlers tried to force their opponent over a specially sharpened stone to break his back.

Carachd Uibhist or Uist Wrestling is still practised in the Norse manner to this day and there is probably no difference between it and Hryggspena as practised by the Icelandic settlers. There is no great deal of skill required and the sport is really just a primitive test of strength.

Wrestling was practised by all social classes in Scotland as in Ancient Greece and in tracing the history of the sport we have the same problem as historians of the original Olympic Games, what were the rules? Due to the popularity and universality of the

sport no scribe thought to write down the rules and so until modern times we have no record of local variations. Despite this the idea of first down to lose seems to have been universal.

The earliest physical record of wrestling in Scotland dates from the 6th/7th century and consists of three carved stones, two Pictish and one from Dalriada. Each stone depicts a wrestling position instantly familiar to a modern wrestler. A stone from Tullibole in Clackmannan which is now in The National Museum of Scotland shows an incident in a bout where the attacker is using a throw known as the Inner Hook. There is no closed hold and the men appear to be engaged in Loosehold wrestling.

The other Pictish stone, the Prince's Stone which stands in the grounds of Glenferness House near Nairn though badly worn shows Backhold wrestling as does the beautiful stone on the island of Eilean Mhor off Knapdale.

Clan Chiefs and Lowland Barons encouraged their young men to wrestle as a means of hardening them to the rigours of warfare; the custom was not exclusive to Scotland and technical books were published in Rome in the 15th and 16th centuries. Perhaps the most famous book was published in Amsterdam in 1674. "Wurstiekunst" or Wrestling Science depicts two elegantly dressed gentlemen performing throws still in common use today. The popularity, even necessity, of learning to wrestle in Mediaeval times is not far to seek. During a battle the ability to throw an opponent cleanly to the ground was vital. Among the swinging swords and axes of a melee the ability to remain on your feet could ensure survival. Most Backhold wrestlers think that the custom of always wrestling right arm under derives from this - after all if an opponent has swung a sword at you and missed the most natural thing in the world to do is to trap his sword arm so that he can't repeat the manoeuvre.

After the decisive victory at Bannockburn a tournament was held by Bruce to celebrate his success and the English prisoners were invited to take part. In this first ever sporting international between the two nations the English won the jousting but the Scots yeomen won the wrestling.

Many years later King David was questioning the Countess of Errol about his exploits. Among his other skills she confirmed that he was a wonderful wrestler. Later in the conversation she was asked about Wallace and the King was discomfited when the aged Countess replied that he was a man without equal and could wrestle any two like Bruce.

Domhnail Gruamach, Chief of the Clan Donald and Lord of the Isles, the vast sea kingdom which included the Hebrides, the Western Highlands, the Isle of Man and much of Northern Ireland, established a gymnasium about 1400 on North Uist. To it were invited heroes and strong men from his own and allied clans. They were trained in wrestling and other "manly arts." It was probably the first gym in Scotland and was sited appropriately enough in Tigh Suntais in Parc a' Chlaimheamh or Park of the swords at Knockline.

Cameron tradition tells us that Allan son of Donald Dhu was having trouble with the MacLeans and needed help from Celestine of Lochalsh. The dispute was territorial but he could not approach Lochalsh directly as the aged chief had a young MacLean wife. He therefore asked Angus Og, Chief of Clan Donald to intercede. Angus Og and Allan had become firm friends and allies after Allan, a famous wrestler, had easily bested the MacDonald chief in a challenge match. Angus Og's diplomacy was successful and Allan was granted the territory he needed in 1472.

In 1574 when Fraser of Lovat was asked to hold Inverness for The Regent against

Huntly and the Gordons, "Lord Lovat went into Inverness with a guard of 200 pretty young men, all of his own training. My Lord Lovat hath now a very happy occasion to train his young kinsmen and clan with martiall disciplin, as well as to divert himself with recreations among them; for he caused the countrymen to come into Inverness per vices 50 or 60 at a time and were dayly exercised upon the levell of the castlehill or down in the links, by one Thomas Cerr, a townsman and my Lord's own domestic servant, an expert soldiour, bred abroad in the warrs of Flanders and France. So that not onely the young men of the name of Fraser got good occasion of education and disciplin by this means, but many mor of the adjacent clans out of emulation flockit in, the Monroes, the Rosses, MacKenzies, Macintoshes, Cerr keeping set dayes of exercise weekely and the whole muster, termed my Lord Lovat's train band. At intervals they used swimming, arching, football, throwing of the barr, fencing, dancing, wrestling and such manly sprightly exercises and recreations very fit for polishing and refining youth and to keep them from effiminacy, baseness, loitering and idleness which fosters vice and inclines men to evil."

In 1534 Lord William Howard came to Scotland as an envoy from Henry VIII to invest James Vth with the Order of the Garter. In his train he brought three score horsemen - "wailed (picked) gentlemen for all kind of pastime, at shooting, leaping, wrestling and casting of the stone." The Scots competed with them and almost invariably beat them which highly mortified the Queen Dowager of Scotland, King Henry's sister. She arranged an archery tournament, "contrair (against) the King her son and any half dozen Scotsmen, either Noblemen, gentlemen or yeomen. Ane hundred crowns was laid and one tun of wine was pandit (pledged) on every side." The Scots chose two noblemen, the Vicar of Dundee and three yeomen, one of whom was "Alexander Baillie who was ane piper." They shot "wondrous near, and won the wager from the Englishmen." Being Scots and true to form they used the two hundred crowns and two tuns of wine to hold a magnificent banquet for the King and his English guests.

James Melville the ecclesiastical diarist tells that at Montrose in the "happie and golden tyme of his boyhood," (about 1566) he and his schoolmates "were teached to handle the bow for archery, the club for golf, the batons for fencing, also to run, to swoom, to warsell, (wrestle) to preve pratticks, every one. haiffing his matche and andagonist bathe in our lessons and in our play."

During the same period Holinshead an English visitor to the Highlands wrote about his experiences, "Whensoever they had entered into league and amitie with their enemies, they would not live in such security that thereby they would suffer their bodies and forces to degenerate but they did keep themselves in their former activitie and nimbleness of lives, either with the continual huntinge (a game greatly esteemed among our ancestors) or with running from the hills into the valleys, or from the valleys into the hills, or with wrestling, whereby they were never idle."

During the Reformation wrestling in common with most sports in the lowlands suffered badly and there were prosecutions for practising the sport. William Litt writing in Maryport in Cumberland in 1822 said, "Before the Reformation, almost every town and village in Scotland had its great annual meeting for wrestling, pitching the barr etc., but that great event and the constant troubles it occasioned, nearly obliterated everything in the shape of amusement."

A decline in the social importance of wrestling took place when the aristocracy deserted their estates and followed the court to London. This decline was further hastened by advances in firearm design and manufacture. In the new era of mechanised warfare individual physical skills were no longer so important for survival.

Traditional wrestling, usually only seen by the general public at Highland gatherings or

Border games, is more than just an odd rustic survival. At the culmination of his Olympic career in 1972 Alexander Medved of the Soviet Union kissed the mat, a gesture familiar to millions of Asian wrestlers who invoke the help of Mother Earth each time they wrestle. When a young man or woman first steps onto a wrestling mat they continue a living tradition which stretches into the remote past. Modern Olympic competitions contain many superb wrestlers whose first bouts were in their own traditional style and who are aware of the history and traditions of their sport.

The International Federation of Celtic Wrestling which is held its 9th European Championships in April 1995 sees itself as a repository of a vital part of our common European cultural heritage whose diversity enriches us all. Traditional styles of wrestling are a means by which young people in an increasingly homogenised Europe can celebrate their unique cultural identities.

Wrestlers who compete in our unique Highland and Border gatherings are usually well aware of the history of their sport. They continue to train and compete much as their ancestors did a thousand or two years ago. In fact several years ago the good summer brought a novel problem; the lawns of the wrestling families in Milngavie were burned by the sunshine and ceaseless training, and "the Herald's" Dougie Gillon wrote of a call being passed around the village looking for suitable flat lawns so that the wrestlers could continue their training.

Perhaps the only real difference nowadays is that wrestlers compete in front of an audience conditioned by fake "pro wrestling" on T V. In the past it could have been before the expert eyes of the King or Chief who were also proud of their own wrestling skills.

A well known example is Rob Roy MacGregor, Captain of Clan Gregor. At trysts or cattle markets he would first sell his cattle then issue a wrestling challenge to all comers. He did this often in my own village of Milngavie after first settling his business over a drink. We still have an Open Milngavie week competition in his honour for The Rob Roy Trophy.

Traditional Backhold Wrestling is slowly creeping back from the brink of disaster where only a very few practised it and many more took part in foreign styles such as Judo. The sport should no longer be seen as a rural oddity but as a sophisticated sport in its own right with much to offer young and not so young people.

The survival of a native style in Scotland should be a source of pride. Among the attributes it has in common with all well organised sports it gives a sense of cultural identity to its participants. These values have been recognised and The European Institute of Corporal Anthropology has published a book on "Traditional Sports and Cultural Identity" with a chapter written by myself on the traditional wrestling styles of Europe.