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From sidebets to sideshow: The influence of gambling on the development of professional wrestling in America, 1870-1911

Lee Casebolt
University of Northern Iowa

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FROM SIDEBETS TO SIDESHOW: THE INFLUENCE OF GAMBLING ON THE
DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING IN AMERICA, 1870-1911

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Lee Casebolt
University of Northern Iowa

August 2013

ABSTRACT

While boxing and baseball have been common subjects of historical study, other sports of the nineteenth century have been comparatively neglected by historians. Professional wrestling, in particular, has received very little attention as a sport, as opposed to its twentieth century “sports entertainment” incarnation. What attention it has received has most commonly been through the lens of social history, focusing on wrestling as theater or its psychosexual overtones. Missing from its history is any consideration of the economic factors which influence the evolution of any professional endeavor.

This paper explores the relationship between a wrestler’s payment and performance. Specifically, it examines how the practice of side bets – wrestlers wagering their own money on the outcome of their matches – influenced a wrestler’s choice of opponents, styles, and rules. It will demonstrate how the side bet contributed to the rise of catch-as-catch-can as the dominant style from amongst a host of regional folk styles, as well as the increased brutality of wrestling as a whole. In addition, it will explore the role of side bets in maintaining legitimacy – or at least the appearance of legitimacy – and how the decline of the side bet and wrestlers’ concurrent loss of economic control over the sport led to the rise of promoters and the eventual predominance of the “worked” or fixed match in professional wrestling.

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Date Dr. Robert Martin, Chair, Thesis Committee

Date Dr. Brian Roberts, Thesis Committee Member

Date Dr. Konrad Sadkowski, Thesis Committee Member

Date Dr. Michael J. Licari, Dean, Graduate College

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is something between requirement and cliché to begin a history of professional wrestling by noting that wrestling is perhaps mankind's oldest and most widespread sport. It was practiced in the most ancient of times and, in one form or another, by almost every culture on Earth.

Depictions of its practice appear in holy books and on the walls of monuments worldwide.

With that requirement fulfilled and cliché indulged, and before discussing the scope and goals of this paper, it is unfortunately necessary to preemptively defend the study of its subject matter in the first place. Scott Beekman writes that “[o]nly the heartiest of academics embrace this maligned stepchild of sport and even then... invariably examine it like a science or sociology experiment. They pick wrestling apart and examine slivers of it to determine how pro wrestling related to blue-collar catharsis, masculinity, sexuality, and gender relations,” because only by cloaking their interest in these academically safe terms can a scholar justify their examination of such a base form of entertainment. This paper will wear no such cloak.¹

While class catharsis and gender relations are valuable lenses with which to examine professional wrestling, they are not the only lenses available or of value. Whatever else professional wrestling has been through the years – sport, art, con job, entertainment – it has always been a business, and it is as a business it will be examined here. Consider that professional catch-as-catch-can wrestling is the direct ancestor of American folkstyle wrestling, the style practiced by American scholastic wrestlers from the elementary school to university levels. It is likewise the father of international freestyle wrestling, the more popular of the two international

¹ Scott Beekman, *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America* (Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006), vii.

styles. Professional Greco-Roman wrestling also begat an Olympic counterpart. Professional wrestling, as it is understood and practiced today, is obviously descended from the earlier form.

In the United States alone, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) currently enjoys television contracts with the USA, SyFy, and ION networks. For September of 2010, which was considered a down year, WWE live events averaged an attendance of over 4,500 people and a gate of \$165,750. Its two flagship television programs, Raw and Smackdown, averaged ratings of 2.89 and 1.70, respectively. That month's pay-per-view event drew a live attendance of 12,500 and a live gate of \$782,205, with 160,000 pay-per-view buys and \$2.84 million in pay-per-view revenue.²

Gerald Morton and George O'Brien assert that "[t]here is a dictum that those who give birth to a sport and control its development determine what it is to become."³ While this may be true, said dictum is something of a tautology. To control the development of anything is, by definition, to determine what it will become. The real question is who possesses this control? In the realm of professional sport, that control is possessed by whomever controls the flow of money to the participants. In team sports, this has most commonly been team owners, though the degree of control has often waxed and waned depending upon the presence and power of player unions. In individual sports, which are typically not unionized, control has most commonly rested primarily with event promoters. In professional wrestling, for a few decades, the athletes managed to control the flow of money within their sport and, as a consequence, the development of that sport.

The struggle for dominance and expression of power and control within the economic realm of professional wrestling paralleled the similar struggle within the physical realm of the sport. Professional wrestling is an activity as much economic as physical. But in the scant historical

² Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, 3 January 2011: 27.

³ Gerald W. Morton and George M. O'Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1985), 29.

attention paid to the sport, there has been no analysis of the economic roots of professional wrestling or how those roots shaped its growth. As Stephen Hardy wrote

[I]t is important to remember that the social history of sport does not constitute the totality of sport history... [A] number of important topics demand attention from perspectives that are closer to business and economic history. These topics require a shift in attention from the significance of consumption to the structures of production, from the broad sweep of social forces to the minute elements of decision-making. In general, they focus on the ways in which entrepreneurs have developed a special, perhaps singular, industry that has produced a particular part of the past. They demand a closer look at why certain organizational forms have grown to dominate the production and distribution of games and sports to their consumers; how these organizations have merged into systems of interdependence, wherein some units clearly dominate others; and finally what rules, resources, and practices have constituted the structure or logic of the sport industry over time.⁴

Those economic roots are sunk in the soil of gambling. Like professional wrestling, sports betting – particularly sports betting by participants – is popularly regarded as at best crass and at worst profoundly dishonest, if not criminal. This attitude is hardly new; in 1884, Dr. Dudley A. Sargent, the Director of the Harvard University Gymnasium, claimed that “contestants are in the hands of trainers, who, in turn, are controlled by the gamblers. A contestant loses, to win from a pecuniary standpoint. Betting is ruinous to athletes.” But for decades, wrestlers wagered their own money on their performances. These side bets were a wrestler’s expression of confidence in his (invariably *his*; one looks in vain for a female professional wrestler in the 1800s) own abilities, and taken by the audience as a guarantor of honest effort. Perhaps, most importantly, the side bet was an expression and guarantor of a wrestler’s independence. Where a modern wrestler (and, to a lesser extent, boxer, kickboxer, or mixed martial artist) is reliant upon the graces of a promoter and booker or matchmaker to earn a living, the nineteenth century wrestler

⁴ Stephen Hardy, “Entrepreneurs, Organizations, and the Sport Marketplace: Subjects in Search of Historians,” *Journal of Sport History* 13, 1 (Spring 1986): 15.

was, or was at least perceived to be, self-reliant. He made his own matches, selected his own opponents, and often quite literally made his own rules.⁵

Gambling did more than establish a wrestler's independence. It shaped the way in which he wrestled, including the rules under which he competed and the tactics within those rules that he chose. This paper will examine the role of the side bet in wrestling's transition from folk sport to professional sport and then to what is today termed "sports entertainment". It will seek to establish that a) the connection between side bets and wrestling's path towards works (the modern term for matches with predetermined finishes) is at best tenuous, and that side bets may in fact have retarded rather than accelerated that movement; b) that the practice of side bets determined the styles of wrestling which would flourish in the American sporting realm; and c) that the practice of side bets influenced how wrestlers would view and treat each other within the rules established.

⁵ "Evils of Modern Athletics," *New York Times*, 16 December 1884: 2.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORIOGRAPHY

It has been said that professional wrestling does not have a history, it has a mythology. While not strictly true, it is easy to see how an observer might draw such a conclusion. For most of its existence, professional wrestling has been dominated by promoters and wrestlers with a vested interest and considerable practice in portraying past events in such a way as to generate revenue rather than to maintain an accurate record of events. In addition, academic interest in professional wrestling has generally been low, and that interest has focused more on the theatrical and psychosexual elements of the modern product than the historical roots of the sport. Danielle Soulliere's "Wrestling with Masculinity: Messages about Manhood in the WWE" is typical of this field of study; worthy enough in its own field, but not really relevant to a historical study of the type this paper seeks to present.

Despite the paucity of research into wrestling's history, one thing wrestling historians seem to be in agreement about is that gambling has played an essential role in the sport's development. Specifically, it is commonly credited (or blamed) for the transition from competitive sport to performance that wrestling underwent between 1870 and 1920. However, as this historiography will demonstrate, very little evidence is given to support that assertion. Furthermore, historians blindly following this accepted wisdom have failed to investigate any further effects of the relationship between gambling and wrestling.

Until very recently, Marcus Griffin's *Fall Guys* (1937) was the best book available on the history of professional wrestling in America. Unlike its contemporary, Nat Fleischer's execrable *From Milo to Londos*, Griffin's book explores the business of professional wrestling rather than parroting back the storylines ("kayfabe", in the wrestlers' parlance) offered by promoters. At the

heart of Griffin's narrative is a group known as the "Gold Dust Trio". The Trio consisted of Ed "Strangler" Lewis, Billy Sandow, and Joseph "Toots" Mondt. Lewis, a peerless wrestler, served as the group's central performer and champion in the ring. Sandow was the business mind and fit every negative stereotype of the wrestling promoter. Mondt was the wrestling mind. He was responsible for amalgamating the style of the group's promotion, drawing on bareknuckle boxing, Greco-Roman wrestling, and American football to supplement the traditional American catch-as-catch-can style. In addition, Mondt originated the variety of theatrical finishes that have come to characterize professional wrestling.

The Gold Dust Trio became a sort of wrestling trust. Wrestlers worked for Sandow and company, or did not work. In order to work, wrestlers had to follow the finishes laid out by Mondt – matches were won and lost in the manner ordered, rather than based on the abilities of the performers. Those who could not be convinced by economic means often faced more physical persuasion; Mondt was a wrestler nearly in the class of Lewis. Lewis himself often dealt with rogue wrestlers (Griffin referred to them as "trust busters") in the ring, either in an arranged contest or after a double cross. Eventually, the lion's share of wrestling in the Northeast was under the control of these three men.

When three men are united largely by the love of money, it is not difficult to predict that money will ultimately cause their falling out. So it was with the Gold Dust Trio. Accusations of "trust" were flung, accurately, by wrestlers who felt they had not gotten a fair deal from the Trio. Fighting those accusations cost money, both in legal fees and in lost revenue. Distrust sprang up between members as Mondt and Sandow disagreed over business matters and Lewis tired of the grind of being champion. Eventually, the trio's alliance fell apart.⁶

Though the Gold Dust Trio is Griffin's focus, he does not ignore the rest of the wrestling world. All of the major figures of the period – Joe Stecher, the Zbyszkos, Jim Londos, and others

⁶ Marcus Griffin, *Fall Guys* (Chicago: The Reilly & Lee Co., 1937), 87.

– come into play. Likewise, he addresses the promoters on the West Coast and in the Midwest. All aspects of the wrestling culture – the specialized language, the promotional gimmicks, the wrestlers’ feuds and practical jokes – eventually make it into *Fall Guys*.

For the historian interested in the interplay between gambling and the development of professional wrestling, one fact stands out – the Gold Dust Trio forbade their wrestlers from betting on matches. It is unfortunate that Griffin chose not to elaborate on the reasoning behind this decision. If Sandow’s reasoning was known to Griffin, he did not reveal it, nor did he offer any sort of speculation. One may infer from that fact, and Griffin confirmed elsewhere in the book,⁷ that the side bet system, wherein each wrestler put up his own money to form the victor’s purse, was still in use even after the “work”, or pre-arranged match, had become the predominant form of wrestling.

Unfortunately, while excellent for what it covers, *Fall Guys* deals primarily with the 1920s rather than the 1870-1920 period. As such, it has little to say about the effects gambling may have had on wrestling within that time, except as may be inferred by the reader in comparing wrestling in the 1920s to wrestling in earlier years.

It would be over twenty years following *Fall Guys* until another serious work on the history of professional wrestling would emerge. Charles Morrow Wilson’s *The Magnificent Scufflers* goes to the roots of American professional wrestling. Its eponymous scufflers were “collar and elbow” wrestlers from Vermont; Wilson’s book tells the tale of how those farmers-turned-wrestlers laid the groundwork for what would become a national sport.

The strength of Wilson’s book lies in its coverage of a topic otherwise ignored by historians. There is simply no other work in print which covers Vermont collar and elbow wrestling culture

⁷ Griffin, 71.

in anything like the depth that Morrow offers. Most importantly, Wilson explains the practice of the side bet – how it came to be and how it changed wrestling from a pastime to a profession.⁸

However, *The Magnificent Scufflers* suffers from a minimum of analysis. It tells the stories of wrestling's past, but those stories are neither placed in a greater context nor examined with a critical eye. Morrow discusses, for example, the transition from sport to show, but offers no explanation for why such a transition should have taken place. He likewise discusses the practice of wrestling styles other than collar and elbow and how collar and elbow influenced those styles. It is obvious from Morrow's writing that he considers collar and elbow the superior style aesthetically and technically, but he offers no analysis as to why it should have merged with, rather than supplanted, competing styles of wrestling.

At the time of its publication in 1985, Morton and O'Brien's *Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle* was the most complete book available on the history of professional wrestling in the United States. Like most wrestling histories, it touched on the sport's ancient roots in Greece and Egypt. Unusually, it also addressed medieval and early modern European wrestling before moving on to the more traditional topic of wrestling on the American frontier and then the television-dominated twentieth century product. The focus, however, was on the rise of professional wrestling in America in the nineteenth century. Influence came from a number of cultural sources, but the heart of the American style was collar and elbow, practiced first by Irish immigrants in Vermont and spread throughout the country by soldiers serving in the Civil War. Following the war, wrestlers would compete for small prizes and side bets, with their exploits being touted by a rising sports-press corps working for such publications as *Harper's Weekly* and *National Police Gazette*. The authors discuss how wrestling contests became long, drawn-out, defensive affairs which turned off paying crowds, and that the amateurs on one hand introduced

⁸ Charles Morrow Wilson, *The Magnificent Scufflers* (Brattleboro, VT: The Stephen Greene Press, 1959), 20.

scoring rules to promote more aggressive wrestling, while on the other hand the professionals came to use more and more choreographed matches.⁹

Unfortunately, this conclusion is in error. It is true that some wrestling contests were just as Morton and O'Brien characterized them, but a perusal of wrestling results from the period (such as the autobiographical portion of George Hackenschmidt's *The Way to Live*) indicate that shorter matches were the rule and multi-hour contests the exception, and that audience reaction was not always biased in favor of shorter matches. Long, boring contests as the death of competitive professional wrestling are a part of the sport's mythology, not its history.

Of greater concern, though, is the overall inattention paid to the transition of wrestling from legitimate sport ("Wrestling") to pure spectacle ("Rasslin"). It is noted in passing that wrestling had theatrical and gambling associations, but no argument is made for a compelling reason that the professionals should turn to choreographed matches while their amateur counterparts adjusted the rules of the game to better accommodate audiences. Given that the book is ostensibly about that very transition, it is a glaring oversight.

World championships, though, are very much a part of "Wrestling's Hold on the Western World Before the Great War." As author Matthew Lindaman explains, wrestling had become an international sport, and wrestlers pursued matches in every civilized nation of the world. Russian world title claimant George Hackenschmidt was so famous, for example, that prior to his match with Frank Gotch, the publicly asked question "Who are Gotch and Hack?" reputedly caused an overhearing waiter to drop his tray in shock at such ignorance of then-current affairs and his sympathetic supervisor to forgive the clumsiness.¹⁰

⁹ Gerald Morton and George O'Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin': Ancient Sport to American Spectacle* (Bowling Green OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1985), 21.

¹⁰ Matthew Lindaman. "Wrestling's Hold on the Western World Before the Great War," *The Historian* 62 (June 2000), 791.

But why, Lindaman's article asks, did wrestling have such a hold on the global public? One aspect was a change in the masculine aesthetic. As Lindaman notes, in the mid 1860s, a physically-fit man was expected to be of wiry build; the long-limbed Abraham Lincoln would be an archetypical example. By the 1890s, the peak of physical perfection was imagined to be the more heavily muscled frame of a Hackenschmidt or Eugene Sandow.

Successful wrestlers, however, come in many body types – the aforementioned Lincoln having been an adept wrestler himself – and so that alone could not account for the sport's popularity. Lindaman cites the combination of international tensions and changing technology as central to wrestling's rise. Nations viewed each other more competitively; it was the time of the Great Game, the Triple Alliance, and the Triple Entente. Which nation had the strongest man, as signified by the most successful wrestler, became almost as vital a question as which had the strongest navy or the most colonies. In addition, improved transportation and communication technology meant the world was smaller than it ever had been before. It was now feasible for wrestlers to make national or world tours and for their fans at home to follow their results.

Lindaman attempts to address the fade of wrestling and its descent into its current "sports entertainment" incarnation. In this his article falls short, primarily by attributing too much importance to the oft-repeated but poorly supported idea that wrestling's popularity was killed largely by lengthy, slow-paced, boring matches. Again, accounts from the period demonstrate that such contests were the exception, rather than the rule. Furthermore, other sports have had lackluster events – poorly played or mismatched championship games, unsatisfying first-round knockouts, and the like – without suffering such collapse. This aspect of Lindaman's thesis requires significant re-examination.

More significantly, Lindaman makes no mention of gambling in connection with wrestling of the period. Granted, by this period, the promoter-issued purse had supplanted the side bet as the primary means of wrestler pay, but gambling by both participants and spectators was an essential

element of wrestling's development. Drawing a conclusion about wrestling's public impact without addressing that element is a glaring oversight.

Histories of gambling, unfortunately, pay little attention to the association between gambling and wrestling. David Schwartz's *Roll the Bones* is typical; the word "wrestling" appears only once in the book, and coverage of nineteenth century sports gambling in general is limited to brief discussions of betting on pedestrianism, horse racing, and baseball. Lotteries, slot machines, and card and dice games of all stripes dominate Schwartz's research.

Gerda Reith's *The Age of Chance: Gambling in Western Culture* is similar; Reith addresses only the "Sport of Kings" – horse racing – and how it changed in the face of more scientific betting techniques and the spread of popular media. These changes made horse racing a more populist activity, enjoyed by all classes instead of being restricted to the wealthy. Wrestling, by comparison, has always been an activity enjoyed as much (if not more) by the poor as by the rich. Whatever influence gambling may have had over the development of wrestling, we may be sure it was not required to popularize the sport among the lower classes. That audience was already present.

Returning to the field of wrestling, Mike Huggins's *The Victorians and Sport* examines the growth of many professional sports in Victorian England, including football, horse racing, boxing, and wrestling. The British model of wrestling more closely resembled the European than the American. The tournament, featuring a field of wrestlers competing in an elimination format, was more common than the single-match arrangement which dominated American professional wrestling. As Huggins describes it, "[s]emi-professional Cumbrian [a British style of wrestling] wrestlers... walk[ed] miles to various wrestling competitions during the summer season, paying

their entrance fees and hoping to make a profit by getting past the first rounds against local men.”¹¹

In England, as in America, wagering on outcomes produced the opportunity and the motivation for fixed matches. In America, it was referred to as “hippodroming” or “working”; the British called it “barneying” and made attempts to ban the practice. Huggins notes that “[t]he 1859 Carlisle and Cumberland Wrestling Association rules stated that any wrestler ‘attempting sham wrestling, personation, buying or selling a fall, getting into any weight to which he is not entitled or otherwise misconducting himself or in any way attempting a barney... shall be at once expelled... and debarred from again contending in the Carlisle ring.’”¹² Sham wrestling, though, is a difficult thing for even an experienced observer to detect when practiced by skilled performers, and “losing a fall was unproblematic when friends could back the winner, and the winner might share the prize money.”¹³

Huggins’s book, though, is a general overview of sport in England. While the time period is similar, and he does address both wrestling and gambling, British wrestling differed from American wrestling in both style and organization. Both the national and wrestling cultures of the two nations were likewise dissimilar; British wrestling, for example, was never dominated by the traveling “at shows” which characterized American wrestling in the 1870s and ‘80s.

In 2006, *Fall Guys* was finally surpassed as a resource for the wrestling historian by Scott Beekman’s *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America*. Beekman divides American professional wrestling into distinct periods, beginning with the post-Civil War barnstormers, then what Beekman refers to as the “Catch-as-catch-can” (or simply “catch”) era, wherein the various traditional folk styles such as collar and elbow, Greco-Roman, and Lancashire wrestling were amalgamated into a broad-based, uniquely American style of

¹¹ Mike Huggins, *The Victorians and Sport* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2004), 128.

¹² Huggins, 72.

¹³ *Ibid.*

wrestling.¹⁴ After the catch era comes The Art of Deception; essentially the same material covered by *Fall Guys*. Beekman then discusses the advent of television, the territory system, and the evolution of wrestling into the form that we see today.

Ringside benefits from being a much more complete work than *Fall Guys*. It covers the entirety of American professional wrestling history, rather than a single era. Most significantly, the “Barnstormers” and “Catch Era” chapters address the period between 1870 and 1920. Beekman addresses the most common elements credited with expanding wrestling into a national sport – expanding transportation and communication systems, the growth of national media, and the rise of the “muscular Christianity” movement and associated interest in physical culture.

To Beekman’s credit, he debunks the popular notion that the presence of worked matches in this era was an indicator of an inevitable trend towards predominantly predetermined wrestling matches. “Hippodroming” was a popular practice in many sports at the time; the term itself is derived from horse racing, a sport every bit as corrupt as wrestling. Boxing, likewise, saw many fixed contests and remained an essentially honest sport. Sports fixing was (and is) used by gamblers to remove the element of risk and to increase profits from sports betting; fixed wrestling was no different from fixed boxing or horse racing in this regard. Beekman attributes the different course taken by wrestling compared to other sports to the influx of theater-minded promoters rather than the influence of gambling.¹⁵ Especially in the “catch era”, promotion was dominated by men from a carnival background who saw “paying customers as dupes to be swindled.”¹⁶ It was this mindset, rather than the presence of fixed contests or the influence of gambling, that Beekman claims separated wrestling from other sports of the time. In keeping

¹⁴ Scott Beekman, *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 36.

¹⁵ Beekman, 27.

¹⁶ Beekman, 40.

with this conclusion, Beekman pays scant attention to the role of gambling in wrestling's overall development.

Gambling and professional wrestling in America are inextricably linked; it was gambling that first put money (and hence professionalism) into the sport. Yet the nature of that link is more assumed than examined. Exactly what effects laying bets on the outcome of a match had on the wrestlers' performances and practices, the arrangement of matches, the public image of the sport, and the wrestlers' private images of themselves has not been researched in a rigorous way. If wrestling is to move past mythology and have a true history, the old assumptions must be questioned, researched, and examined much more thoroughly than they have been thus far.

CHAPTER 3

THE ROOTS OF PROFESSIONALISM IN AMERICAN WRESTLING

As with many aspects of nineteenth century American culture, American folk wrestling had primarily British roots. The styles were many and varied and generally named for the English counties in which they originated. Of these, the Lancashire style was the most prevalent. It was also known as “catch-as-catch-can” due to its loose rules. Unlike other systems that prescribed a particular opening position for the contest, in the Lancashire style a wrestler was free to catch his opponent any way he could. Lancashire placed few restrictions of any kind on the holds used by the participants. This would become the basis of American wrestling, both amateur and professional.

Lancashire was the most common, but other county styles had their devotees. In Devonshire, also called Devon and Cornwall, a “fair fall is reckoned as two shoulders and one hip, or two hips and one shoulder on the ground, squarely laid[.]”¹⁷ Devonshire also permitted the kicking of the opponent’s shins, referred to as “lashing”.¹⁸ Cumberland style wrestling obliged its practitioners to begin in what today’s wrestlers would call an over-under clinch, with each wrestler’s right arm under the left of his opponent and the hands clasped behind. Finally, side hold wrestling – rarely encountered on the professional circuit except as a part of a mixed-styles bout – compelled one wrestler to reach under his opponent’s right arm with his left and take hold of the mandatory harness, while the opponent’s left arm reached over to take a similar harness grip and the two

¹⁷“Wrestling Extraordinary,” *New York Times*, 8 August 1873: 8.

¹⁸ “The Graeco Roman Wrestlers,” *New York Times*, 30 December 1875: 2.

clasped free hands. Wrestlers would toss a coin to choose grips; the under grip was considered a significant advantage, much like the opening move in chess.¹⁹

For a brief period, “collar and elbow” wrestling was the dominant professional style in America. The Irish folk style was named for the grip which wrestlers were required to take prior to the beginning of the match. One hand grabbed the opponent’s collar, the other gripped the elbow of the opponent’s outstretched arm, which was likewise gripping the wrestler’s collar. This symmetrical opening stance permits a variety of trips and throws, and the “collar and elbow tie up” is commonly used even in wrestling styles in which it is not mandated. Jackets, usually canvas, were worn to facilitate these grips, and these grips would otherwise become uncertain in prolonged contests as the wrestlers began to sweat profusely. Collar and elbow was initially practiced amongst Irish-descended farmers in Vermont. It spread nationally during the Civil War, as Vermont soldiers taught or demonstrated the style to their peers.

The major exception to the rule of British-descended wrestling styles was Greco-Roman, a French folk style with classical pretensions. Like Lancashire, Greco-Roman was a “catch-as-catch-can” style in that it had no set opening position, and wrestlers were free to grab whatever hold they could. Unlike Lancashire, Greco-Roman forbids holds against or using the legs. This limitation is often credited (or blamed) for causing the style to favor larger, heavier wrestlers and resulting in matches that were extended, dull affairs consisting chiefly of wrestlers circling and pushing to little result. Greco-Roman was the dominant style of the European professional tournament circuit, but was always a secondary style in the United States and Britain.

With the popularity of modern professional wrestling in the American South, and the resemblance between the tropes of that televised masculine psycho-drama and many of the outward expressions of Southern honor codes, it is popularly assumed that professional wrestling

¹⁹ William Dick, *Dick’s Art of Wrestling* (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1887), 12; George Bothner, *Scientific Wrestling* (New York: Richard K. Fox Publishing, 1912), 26.

must have some roots in the South. The Southern frontier practice known as “rough and tumble” or “gouging,” in particular, is cited as a precursor to professional wrestling. Like today’s sports entertainer, the nineteenth century gouger would bite his opponent, pull his hair, and (of course) gouge his eyes in an attempt to gain victory, often to avenge an insult or settle a grudge.

Rough and tumble, though, was far from a system of wrestling. Culturally, rough and tumble was more a deliberate aping of the dueling methods of the aristocratic class than any sort of sport. The purpose of a rough and tumble contest was for a participant to defend his honor, just as his social betters did. That he used a handful of hair, a mouthful of nose, or a thumb to the eye rather than a sword or pistol changes the intent not a bit. A participant displayed courage by risking life and limb (and sensory organ) over a point of courtesy. A dueling participant who maintained composure in the face of danger thereby demonstrated his control over his own life. Winning or losing was, in the long view, largely immaterial. One could die or be maimed and, by virtue of having displayed courage by facing risk, win honor despite having “lost” the duel. Southern gentlemen, and those who wished to emulate them, were “always in control, never in a subservient position.”²⁰

A wrestling match was a different affair entirely. A wrestling contest, by definition, forced one participant into a subordinate position, either via true submission or in a symbolically submissive posture, having been thrown and/or pinned to the ground by his opponent. That would be an unacceptable result in any sort of public display for those obsessed with the notions of saving face and honor, which may account for the lack of any wrestlers of note of Southern origin.

Technically, rough and tumble was more brutal by far than any wrestling system— unlike today’s professional wrestler, a backwoods rough-and-tumbler’s bites and pulls and gouges were in earnest. While wrestling contests might see some use of such tactics, they were always illegal

²⁰ Kenneth Greenberg, *Honor & Slavery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) 93.

maneuvers, even if those regulations were honored in the breach and intended to distract or dismay an opponent preparatory to more traditional wrestling techniques. In rough and tumble, these were primary methods, not adjuncts. In *City Games – The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports*, Steven Riess wrote that “boxers fought under recognized rules, which forbade gouging and striking a downed opponent, and under the supervision of a referee and seconds” and that “boxing was relatively more civilized and more acceptable to comparatively sophisticated urban sensibilities. Boxing matches were far less likely to be impromptu, even when they were motivated by personal, ethnic, or political animosities.” Such a description is even more applicable to the differences between rough and tumble and wrestling.²¹

Its comparatively safe nature had long been a selling point of wrestling as a folk sport. As William Litt wrote in 1823 of the popular English wrestling of the time, “notwithstanding the Muchausen stories of its brutality and terrific consequences to those engaged, it is fifty to one against any accident of consequence occurring; and in fact this amusement will be found by all who are willing to receive proofs for prejudices, much less injurious, and more free from danger of bodily harm, than any other exercise whatever,” most notably boxing, football, and hunting. While Litt is not unbiased, having been himself a wrestler, he was hardly alone in his opinion. Wrestling is repeatedly praised for developing classically masculine virtues – strength, courage, etc. – with minimal risk of injury. As a consequence, English (and subsequently, American) villages and towns could host wrestling tournaments, semi-professional affairs offering prize belts or small cash awards, wherein competitors faced a succession of opponents. Win or lose, a wrestler could reliably expect to finish the day without serious injury and return to his normal

²¹ Steven A. Riess, *City Games – The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 19.

employment without the lengthy recuperation period which might be required of an unsuccessful pugilist.²²

Regardless of the style under which a match was contested, side bets were a popular practice. The addition of a wager added spice to the proceedings. A wrestler then risked more than just pride. By increasing his personal risk, he demonstrated a higher level of confidence in his own capabilities. Gambling on wrestling matches, by both participants and observers, closely resembled gambling on other contests in that as long as these contests remained strictly local the financial risk was minimized. The winnings stayed in the community, and what was lost in one contest might as easily be won in the next. It was only when the wrestler – like his card-playing, dice-throwing, or billiards-shooting contemporaries – left the confines of home to participate in the wider realm of a national or international market that true risk of loss and promise of gain began to take hold.²³

²² William Litt, *Wrestliana* (Whitehaven: M & W Alsop, 1823) , 35.

²³ Ann Fabian, *Card Sharps and Bucket Shops – Gambling in Nineteenth Century America* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 4.

CHAPTER 4

PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING IN NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICA

Probably a great number of men wrestled for wagers, but few of them could be considered “professional wrestlers” in much the same way that the vast majority of those who play a regular weekend poker game would not be considered professional cardsharps. Most were stay-at-home competitors who tried themselves against their neighbors. Their primary goal was entertainment or a bit of exercise, with a friendly wager to make a contest more interesting.

Improvements in communication – the spread of the telegraph, telephone, and national and international press – and transportation enabled nationwide and international competition. The proliferation of gambling permitted true professionalism. Men who would otherwise be mere cogs in the industrial machine – anonymous, poorly paid, and fungible – could act as individuals by taking up sports as a profession. It was true of boxing, where “the ring was a surrogate workplace. In an environment that rapidly eroded the skills of many laborers, prize fighters retained their autonomy and traditions, their sense of craftsmanship.”²⁴ It was true of billiards, which “provided talented and experienced participants with a source of self-expression and a means to earn money through gambling.”²⁵ It was likewise true of wrestling. By placing wagers on their matches, wrestlers were asserting their independence and expanding the scope of their sport, moving it from the realm of neighborhood tournaments and cultural festivals and into that of a profit-driven professional exhibition. They were participants in, rather than subjects of, the market.

²⁴ Elliott Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1986), 137.

²⁵ Riess, 17.

Wrestlers of the nineteenth century acted as their own promoters. They issued public challenges to either particular opponents or “all comers” and accepted the same. Said challenges were frequently issued through the newspapers, but, on some occasions, were made (and answered) face to face, often subsequent to a public match featuring either the challenger or the challenged party. While the bulk of a successful wrestler’s income was drawn from wagers won from other wrestlers, gate receipts and wagers with other parties could form a sizable supplement. Larger audiences obviously created both higher yields at the gate and greater opportunities for side bets. It was, therefore, in the interest of wrestlers (again, acting as their own promoters) to take steps to maximize the public interest in their contests and exhibitions.²⁶

By the early 1870s, professional wrestling was sufficiently well-established in the United States to have a recognized champion in Civil War veteran Major James H. McLaughlin. (McLaughlin is popularly referred to as “Colonel,” but the *New York Times* articles covering his matches list his rank as Major.) The *New York Times* had even begun to cover matches as sporting events, where the participants, rules, results, and stakes were presumed to be of interest to the reader. Whereas earlier reports addressed a tavern wrestling match in much the same way that a modern reporter might summarize a traffic accident – interesting only for the injuries and/or arrests it produced – now the names of top wrestlers such as McLaughlin and Homer Lane were presumed to be known to the paper’s audience.²⁷

The first match to be covered in any depth by the *Times* was a championship contest between John McMahon, also billed as the American champion, and Albert Ellis for the American title and \$500 a side. It serves as a perfect example of American professional wrestling in the late 1800s. Ellis was billed as the London middleweight champion and weighed just 137 pounds to McMahon’s 197. As a concession to that weight differential, McMahon agreed to wrestle

²⁶ “English Wrestling,” *New York Times* 5 January 1876: 1.

²⁷ “New Jersey,” *New York Times*, 28 July 1871: 8; “The Wrestling Tournament,” *New York Times*, 19 February 1872: 2.

exclusively in Ellis's preferred Cornwall and Devon style, as opposed to the more usual approach of alternating rule sets for a multiple-falls bout between exponents of different wrestling styles.

Modern wrestling contests, with rare exceptions, are single-fall affairs.²⁸ Wrestlers compete until a fall is obtained or the scheduled time limit reached. In early professional wrestling, this was not the case, and multiple-fall matches were a significant element in the rise of rationality in professional wrestling. Matches were typically best of three falls encounters. Like everything in wrestling, this was about control. First, it lowered the probability of a match being decided by a fluke fall. The reasoning here is simple, and similar to that employed by modern sports leagues with best-of playoff series, the better competitor (wrestler or team) will win the majority of contests, but not all contests. An inferior competitor will, statistically, win a non-zero number of encounters through surprise tactics, variations in physical or mental preparation for competition, errors in officiating, and other factors which are commonly filed under the heading of "luck". For example, if two wrestlers are disparate in ability such that one has an 80% chance of winning any particular fall and the other just a 20% chance, the lesser wrestler has a 20% chance of winning a single fall encounter. At two out of three falls, the lesser wrestler's chances drop to 10.4%, at three out of five to 5.8%, and at best of seven to a mere 3.3%. Obviously, the odds of a match between real wrestlers were never so cut and dried, but the essential principle is consistent – the more falls required to win a match, the more likely it was that the superior wrestler would win the contest. For men whose livelihoods depended upon the calculated comparison of their own physical skills to those of another, anything which minimized the role of random chance must have been welcome. The better wrestler was like the house in casino gambling – he did not have to win every hand (or every fall) to take in more money than he paid out.

²⁸ The finals of the U.S. Olympic trials, for example, are best of three falls, as are contests in the Korean *ssireum* style.

Secondly, the period between falls gave oddsmakers time to recalculate and gamblers (including, but certainly not limited to, the wrestlers themselves) time to place new wagers. A wrestler who had just won a fall, or who had put up a better struggle than expected in an unfamiliar style, might see his odds go up. A wrestler whose performance was weaker than expected might see his odds fall. For example, when J.H. McLaughlin faced Jacob Martin in a best of five falls match, collar and elbow rules, in March of 1876, the initial odds were 100 to 80 in favor of McLaughlin. After McLaughlin won the first two falls, having kept his opponent on the defensive throughout the encounter, his odds improved to 100 to 60.²⁹

As was the custom, each participant selected an umpire – a sort of personal advocate to observe the proceedings and protect the wrestler’s interests against the vagaries of referees’ rulings. Both men selected former opponents. For Ellis, exhibition partner John Browning filled the role; for McMahon, it was recent championship contender Homer Lane. In this match, there were questions about what constituted a “fall” or finish. The larger, more powerful McMahon repeatedly hurled his smaller opponent to the mat, but Ellis’s skill was such that he was able to take those falls on his side or hips. Under the agreed-upon rules, such a landing was not considered a “fall” in the sense of bringing an end to the contest. McMahon became so frustrated with either the referee’s ruling or his own inability to bring down Ellis in the approved manner that he threatened to abandon the contest. It was only an ultimatum from Harry Hill, stakeholder and owner of the venue, which would have given the match and accompanying stakes to Ellis that induced McMahon to return to the ring. Upon his return, McMahon and Ellis agreed to rule the contest a draw and continue wrestling at a future date.³⁰

That future date came two months later, and the second contest was very much like the first. McMahon again came in approximately sixty pounds the heavier man, and in light of this again

²⁹ “A Great Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 25 March 1876: 5.

³⁰ “Wrestling Extraordinary – John M’Mahon, the American Champion, Contends With Albert Ellis, Of London,” *New York Times*, 8 August 1873: 8.

agreed to wrestle exclusively in Ellis's preferred style. McMahon again threw Ellis repeatedly to the floor, and Ellis repeatedly twisted away from a bout-ending position. The bout featured a controversial fall call by referee Homer Lane, this time granting a fall to McMahon which Ellis and his second disputed and over which they threatened to abandon the contest. Ellis, like McMahon, ultimately returned to the ring. This contest, unlike the last, ended conclusively as McMahon used a hip throw to gain the deciding fall.³¹

That match demonstrates the value of the umpires employed by wrestlers as a means of legalistic self-defense, to observe their matches and argue their case in the face of an unfavorable referee's decision. Those umpires might, on behalf of their wrestler, threaten to forfeit or abandon a match. Should a wrestler's umpire fail to act to protest what was perceived as an unjust referee's decision, he might be replaced, even mid-match.

These umpires were necessary in part because of the great power that a referee held over the proceedings. The referee could decide that a match must be wrestled again if matters had not been decisively settled. In the absence of a formal agreed upon time limit, the referee had the power to determine that a match had gone on too long and call an end to the proceedings. The referee determined what constituted a foul and whether it merited costing the offending wrestler a fall. Beyond the result of the match itself, a referee also might have power over the disposition of funds, holding and dispersing the stakes associated with a match, and even, on occasion, assigning the division of gate money to be awarded to the competitors. For wrestlers interested in an honest contest, the value of a skilled referee and umpire was difficult to overstate.³²

James McLaughlin participated in one of the early "handicap" matches. Over the years, a variety of handicaps were evolved to stimulate interest in contests between wrestlers of disparate

³¹ "The Wrestling Championship," *New York Times*, 24 October 1873: 8.

³² "By Mail and Telegraph," *New York Times*, 6 August 1873: 1; "A Wrestling Match," *New York Times*, 12 December 1873: 2; "The Wrestling Championship," *New York Times*, 24 October 1873: 8; "A Great Wrestling Match," *New York Times*, 24 March 1876: 5.

talents. In the case of the March 28, 1872, match between James McLaughlin and Homer Lane, the wrestlers put up different stakes. Lane, the underdog, staked just \$1,000 to the Major's \$1,500. This is really just a variation on the odds given to a wrestler's financial backers and other bettors on a contest, be it wrestling or any other endeavor, but it does demonstrate the interplay between professional wrestling and gambling in the sport's infancy.³³ McLaughlin would literally defend his wrestling championship from coast to coast, facing Lane and Ellis in New York in 1872 and 1873, Michael Whelan (billed as the California champion, alternately referred to as "Whalen" and "McWhaley") in California in 1874, and Walter C. Benjamin in McLaughlin's home city of Detroit.³⁴

A trio of McLaughlin matches in 1876 against Jacob Martin illustrates related points about nineteenth century professional wrestling regarding common misperceptions about the length and legitimacy of wrestling matches and the opinions of wrestling audiences on both topics. The first two, in March and July respectively, were contests of epic length. The first featured a disputed fall claimed by McLaughlin but disallowed by the referee. When the bout was ruled a draw at 1:40 A.M., "[t]he men rushdd [sic] for the door money besides the stakes. The referee awarded McLaughlin two-thirds and Martin one-third." Whether McLaughlin's larger share was to salve disappointment over the disputed fall or some sort of championship advantage is unclear. In the second, the two men wrestled from 10:45 the evening of June 30 until 8:30 the following morning without result. "The referee endeavored to induce them to continue the match, but was unable to do so, and he then declared it a draw and all bets off."³⁵

A third contest was scheduled for October, with New York selected as a neutral site for the two Michigan natives. "Doubts were expressed as to the genuineness of the match, but that it was

³³ "New York and Suburban News," *New York Times*, 29 March 1872: 8.

³⁴ "Wrestling Match," *New York Times*, 15 February 1874: 5; "Wrestling Match in San Francisco," *New York Times*, 23 February 1874: 8; "English Wrestling," *New York Times*, 5 January 1876: 1.

³⁵ "A Great Wrestling Match," *New York Times*, 25 March 1876: 5; "Extraordinary Wrestling," *New York Times*, 1 July 1876: 1.

a bona fide affair is unquestionable, the stakes being \$500 a side and the championship.” The men were of roughly equal size, with McLaughlin noted as the aggressor. He won the first fall in nine minutes. The two took an eleven minute rest, and “quick work followed” culminating in Martin taking the second fall in fourteen minutes, twenty-two seconds. Following another rest period, McLaughlin returned to his aggressive approach, taking the deciding fall.³⁶

The legitimacy of contests would be a recurring theme throughout professional wrestling’s history. The question of whether a given meeting was a genuine competition or a sham of an exhibition was central to the audience’s appreciation of the sport. In large part, this can be laid at the feet of the gambling influence. If a contest was genuine, a bettor could weigh what he knew of the competitors – their size, condition, skills, and record – against his betting odds and lay his wagers accordingly. On the other hand, a worked match was no better a bet than a rigged card game. The wagering wrestling fan was thus compelled to include in his calculations not only the wrestling ability of the competitors, but also their reputation for legitimacy in contests. And one of the tools those gambling fans employed in those evaluations was, as the preceding article notes, the wager laid by the match participants.

Working (the modern term; contemporary sources refer to “hippodroming”, a term taken from horse racing for a faked or thrown contest) matches potentially damaged both sources of income. Audiences were quick to decry an unsatisfactory match as faked – particularly matches that went to a draw. Wrestlers invariably defended their own honor as competitors, while frequently accusing rivals of fakery. Reporters covering a match about which there was any question pronounced their own judgment upon the proceedings. To attract interest in a match, and more importantly to maintain their own reputations so as to be able to make future matches, it was imperative that a wrestler’s matches be legitimate, or, at the very least, maintain the appearance of legitimacy.

³⁶ “A Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 17 October 1876: 3.

Audience reactions to a match are often at odds with the conventional wisdom about early professional wrestling. It is commonly accepted that period audiences quickly grew tired of long, slow matches in the Greco-Roman style, hence the popularity of catch-as-catch-can and the eventual rise of the worked match. As Morton and O'Brien put it, "[f]air epic struggles, unfortunately, do not bring back paying customers."³⁷ Unfortunately for this line of thinking, Greco-Roman and catch-as-catch-can wrestling were largely contemporaries. Furthermore, reports of the time show that spectators, while certainly more excited by aggressive, fast-paced wrestling than a slower defensive contest, objected most strenuously to *inconclusive* wrestling. The winner of a contest of whatever pace and duration was invariably hailed, while a drawn contest was almost universally unsatisfactory, regardless of the caliber of the wrestling.

This state of affairs seems counter-intuitive if one views historical wrestling as merely an earlier, simpler version of today's professional wrestling, but makes perfect sense within its own context. Today's professional wrestling fan goes to see an exhibition of physical talent, charisma, and storytelling. The actual result of any given exhibition may be more or less satisfying to the fan, but the result is a secondary concern. The performance itself is of primary interest. Wrestling in the late 1800s, though, was a different sort of animal. While the wrestling action was certainly appreciated for its own sake, a plurality, even a majority, of the audience had a financial (as well as emotional) stake in the result of the match. The losers were disappointed, true, but the winners were elated. For good or ill, the interest of both parties was stimulated by the result. A drawn contest resulted in only disappointment, as all bettors could maintain that their man could have or should have won if only there was more time, the referee had made a different decision, or any number of other factors had played out differently.

It is important to keep in mind that when writers describe a match as being an X-hour long affair, that time is usually representative of the time from the beginning of the first fall to the end

³⁷ Morton and O'Brien, 26.

of the last fall wrestled, which is not necessarily the same as the amount of time actually spent wrestling. A three-fall encounter between McLaughlin and McMahon, wrestling for \$1,000 a side in the collar and elbow style, is described as being a two-and-one-half-hour bout. Yet the times for each fall are given in the same article – twenty-two minutes for the first fall, twenty-five for the second, and thirty for the third. Seventy-seven minutes were spent actually wrestling, then, rather than one hundred fifty.³⁸

McMahon and McLaughlin's thirty minutes between falls may have been unusual in duration, but it was customary to have breaks of ten minutes or longer between falls. These periods ostensibly gave the athletes a chance to rest between falls, much like a halftime break in a modern football game. Also, like that halftime break, it gave the audience members a chance to spend money on whatever food and drink may have been offered at the hosting establishment or to make or change wagers. For that matter, the wrestlers themselves might use the time to alter their own arrangements.

For example, in 1878, William Muldoon and William Miller, two top wrestlers of the period, were involved in a skirmish outside the ring. Muldoon cited Miller's penchant for dishonest wrestling as the root of their conflict. Miller, the head coach of the Police Athletic Club (of which Muldoon was the founder), had begun "to prostitute athletics to gambling[.]" According to Muldoon, all of Miller's professional matches were sham contests. Every one had had its finish pre-determined by the participants. Specifically, Muldoon accused Miller of colluding with the wrestler Thiebaud Bauer and site owner Patrick Gilmore in the following manner: a match was announced between Miller and Bauer for a stake and championship title, to be held at Gilmore's Garden, the venue later called Madison Square Garden. The stakes announced would entice audiences into believing an honest matchup would take place. In actuality, Miller and Gilmore would split all gate receipts between them, and Bauer was to be paid \$300 to concede two of

³⁸ "Chicago's Wrestler Victorious," *New York Times*, 24 November 1878: 2.

three falls to Miller. Furthermore, Muldoon alleged, Bauer twice held up the proceedings by refusing to concede a fall until he had been paid an extra \$100, and Miller, as it turned out, was quite unable to force the matter on his own grappling merits. Thus was William Miller obliged to pay \$500 for the privilege of throwing Bauer.³⁹

Muldoon's allegations might prompt one to ask how he knew of these dealings. He cited no source for his knowledge. While it is certainly possible that an expert could spot a fixed contest (and Muldoon was unquestionably expert in both legitimate and sham wrestling; Bauer would later accuse Muldoon of entering into a similar agreement with him, in reaction to which Muldoon withdrew from a scheduled title match between the two), the specificity of Muldoon's accusations speaks to either inside knowledge, if one is inclined to believe him, or pure invention, if one is not. Given that Muldoon himself was known to indulge in the hippodromed wrestling match when it suited him, either explanation is equally plausible in the absence of further information.⁴⁰

Ultimately, though, the specific truth of Muldoon's allegation is irrelevant. Whether William Miller's wrestling contests were legitimate affairs or frauds perpetrated upon the audiences is neither here nor there. Its general truth – that some wrestlers chose, for a variety of reasons, to engage in matches with predetermined outcomes – seems self-evident. Allegations of match-fixing date back to the Greek Olympics, and every professional sport has seen game fixing, point shaving, and similar infractions to a greater or lesser degree; for American professional wrestling to have been immune to the phenomenon is an absurd notion. What is most significant about Muldoon's accusation is that it explicitly reinforces the notion that, in the public mind at least, the wrestlers' stake money ensured an honest contest. It is an idea which will resurface again and again.

³⁹ "Policemen as Pugilists," *New York Times*, 23 March 1878: 8.

⁴⁰ "Officer Muldoon Indignant," *New York Times*, 24 October 1879: 2.

Exactly which match is at the center of that particular controversy is unclear, and it may be unrecorded. As most top wrestlers of the era did, Miller and Bauer met several times, usually to no conclusion, and the majority of those meetings are of no particular historical interest. But no contest for which records have been found match Muldoon's accusations. In 1875, for example, the two wrestled a best of five falls encounter. Each had obtained two falls, the fourth fall having lasted nearly an hour on its own. Rather than wrestle a fifth and deciding fall, the wrestlers and their associates agreed to call the match a draw. The reason given? A combined stake of \$80,000, or roughly \$1.5 million in 2008 dollars. Neither man was willing to risk his share of such a substantial sum. Ironically, in light of Muldoon's accusations, it is exactly this sort of inconclusive contest that most frequently drew the ire of fans, who often accused the participants of drawn contests of wrestling only for safe gate money, rather than risking true stakes.⁴¹

Two years later, Miller faced Bauer again for \$200 a side, with all gate receipts going to the winner. The bout was scheduled to end at 11:30 P.M. if a fall was had by that time or otherwise continue until a fall had been obtained by one participant or the other. Miller took the first fall at one hour, 13 minutes time. Bauer then evened the contest with a seven minute fall. The third fall was considered lackluster, and police intervened after midnight "on the ground that it was then Sunday morning." The referee announced a draw and that the wrestlers were to split the gate money. All bets were off. Again, this non-finish caused speculation of collusion by audience members, and the *New York Times* writer speculated that future bouts between these two wrestlers would not likely to be well-attended. A Frank Wilcox, whose connection to the proceedings is unclear, felt compelled to write to the *Times* to insist there was no collusion between wrestlers, that every effort had been made to ensure a match would continue until a satisfactory conclusion was had, and that both wrestlers wished to continue and were dissatisfied

⁴¹ "Modern Athletes – The Roman Wrestlers," *New York Times*, 19 September 1875: 5. Inflation calculation based on formula provided by Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank, <http://minneapolisfed.org/Research/data/us/calc/hist1800.cfm>, (accessed 9 November 2007).

with the result. The absence of any report of a subsequent match between the two suggests they were not so dissatisfied as to seek further competition.⁴²

Miller and Bauer both engaged in several matches with Andre Christol, a French wrestler of some note. An arranged match between Miller and Christol, “which [had] been pending for some time,” was delayed due to the obstinacy of Christol’s financial backers. The Frenchman’s sponsors, perhaps unfamiliar with American custom in these matters, refused for some time to place their share of the stake in the hands of the designated stakeholder. Fortunately for those wishing to see Miller and Christol meet, a party of Americans “known to Christol” made good the lack and the match could finally be made. Miller was praised for his patience in awaiting the final stake, rather than claiming his share as forfeit, as he was entitled to do. Sadly, the *Times* has no record of the match itself; it remains a mystery as to whether or not Miller’s patience was rewarded in the final contest. Just a month later, though, Christol is referred to as “champion,” which implies that, if the match was in fact carried off, he was the victor. Miller would later defeat Christol for the Greco-Roman “world championship” and a \$150 side bet in two straight falls.⁴³

Returning to the realm of collar and elbow wrestling, James Owens faced Charles Murphy in March of 1877 for \$500 and a championship belt, scheduled for the best of five falls. Owens claimed the title in collar and elbow wrestling based on a win over James McLaughlin in Boston, though McLaughlin and his supporters claimed the win was indecisive due to his injury. The belt in question was “furnished by a number of gentlemen of Vermont and [New York City]” and denoted the “Champion of the World” and was an early example of a title sponsored by an outside organization, rather than one arising from the efforts of the wrestlers themselves. Even

⁴² “Dividing the Profits,” *New York Times*, 1 July 1877: 7; “The Recent Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 3 July 1877: 5.

⁴³ “The Great Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 7 October 1875: 2; “An Athletic Tournament,” *New York Times*, 25 November 1875: 5; “Graeco-Roman Wrestling,” *New York Times*, 16 June 1877: 2.

this arrangement, though, left a great deal of power in the hands of the wrestlers, obliging the belt holder to “accept all challenges, with right to name time, place, and amount of stakes, within three month [*sic*] of challenge.” William Miller served as the referee. Owens was 28 years of age, 170 pounds, and noted as more muscular; Murphy, three years his junior and five pounds heavier, was less imposingly developed. Murphy took the first two falls with cross toe locks, the first in four and one-half minutes, the second in seventeen and one-half minutes. Owens used an “outside cross toe lock” to take the third fall in the fourth minute, which was disputed by Murphy’s seconds but stood. A combination of techniques and counters ending in an overhead throw gave Owens the fourth fall in short time, which was also disputed but maintained. Owens completed the comeback with a right inside grapevine lock for the fifth and deciding fall at seven minutes; Murphy’s umpire Mr. Pennell protested the stakes being given to Owens but to no avail. The technical detail included in the report of the match speaks to the popularity of wrestling among the sporting public. The typical reader of the time was expected to know the difference between an outside cross toe lock and an inside grapevine lock.⁴⁴

Henry Dufur, considered one of the finest collar and elbow wrestlers of the 1870s and 1880s, employed a variation of the handicap structure against both of the Burt brothers, three out of five falls under collar and elbow rules, for \$500 a side. While the article covering the match is minimalist in its description, one presumes that Dufur wrestled each brother in turn, probably in alternating falls, rather than simultaneously. Even for Dufur, accomplished as he was, to wrestle and throw two men at once would be a highly unlikely feat. Taking each in turn, though, would have been a relatively simple affair. Dufur did in fact throw each brother once before the pair quit, citing an injury suffered by one of the Burts in the first fall. This finish was less than

⁴⁴ “Collar and Elbow,” *New York Times*, 8 March 1877: 8.

satisfactory to the public, who decried the bout as one wrestled “for gate money only.” Again, the audience bias against inconclusive wrestling is evident.⁴⁵

Though drawn contests most frequently drew the audience’s ire and accusations of collusion, that reaction was not automatic or universal. If the wrestling was spirited and the wrestlers well-known, audiences might be well-pleased by the spectacle even in the absence of a decisive finish. James McLaughlin and John McMahon were two of the top collar and elbow wrestlers of the late nineteenth century and faced each other many times; theirs might be said to have been the definitive wrestling rivalry of the period. Each man won his share of falls and contests between them, so when their match of March 12, 1879, was ruled a draw, each man having gained a single fall and the theatre needed for another performance, the “audience felt perfectly satisfied that the contest had been square, and left without much fault-finding.”⁴⁶

For that matter, drawn contests were not the only matches to face accusations of dishonesty. A collar and elbow match between John McMahon, then recognized as the United States champion of that style, and his cousin, James Owens was arranged in the summer of 1879, with \$1,000 a side and McMahon’s title as stakes. “Both men wore rubber shoes, and they immediately began a system of kicking each other in the shins and thighs that bade fair to annihilate them both. The contest had hardly begun, when Owens objected to McMahon’s white jacket, saying it was too loose. The latter changed it for a gray coat, and the battle proceeded.” Owens took the first fall in twenty minutes time, and the writer noted that in best of three falls contests the winner of the first fall invariably loses the second. This observation does not entirely fit the facts; a significant number of matches were won in consecutive falls. In this case, however, the writer is correct, as McMahon took the second fall, and then the third. “McMahon won the match, and got the money. Perhaps. An old sporting man, who was in one of the

⁴⁵ “Wrestling That Pleased No One,” *New York Times*, 13 January 1879: 2.

⁴⁶ “Undecided Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 13 March 1879: 2.

proscenium boxes, said that it was a “skin” match; but as the reporter does not know the meaning of the term, this is merely mentioned incidentally.”⁴⁷

“Skin” may be filed alongside “hippodrome” and “work” as a descriptor of a match not entirely on the level. A match which features the level of violence described seems an odd choice for such a deception, but, true or false, the phrasing of the accusation indicates the role played by the side bet in ensuring fair competition. A man who risks his own money on a match is presumed to put forth full effort, if only to avoid coming out of a match poorer than he went in. It functions as a sort of insurance for the fan, who may watch (and wager on) the match, confident the contest is genuine. But it functions that way if and only if the wager is actually placed and paid.

Those matches, though, were exceptions to the general rule. In the majority of cases, at least in the eyes of fans and media, matches with decisive finishes were considered most likely fair. Matches ending in draws, due to time limits or other restrictions, were most frequently questioned.

The various sub-schools of wrestling – Greco-Roman, collar and elbow, catch-as-catch-can, and so on – generally remained separate in the 1870s, with the top exponents remaining within their preferred styles. However, there was some cross-pollination. When unable to contract for matches within their preferred rules, wrestlers could and did reach across the stylistic divide to find competitors. In these cases, it was quite common for some sort of compromise to be reached, accommodating the discomfort either would feel in taking part in a contest held solely under unfamiliar rules. For example, Greco-Roman expert William Miller and collar and elbow champion John McMahon engaged in a Greco-Roman-style match that specified “the use of the legs allowed.” This was a decidedly non-standard rule under the accepted Greco-Roman code,

⁴⁷ “A Wrestling Match Agreed Upon,” *New York Times*, 28 July 1879: 8; “Two Wrestlers At Work,” *New York Times*, 7 August 1879: 8.

but one which favored McMahon, who would have relied heavily on leg trips and similar techniques in his experience under collar and elbow rules. Similarly, some men agreed to wear a wrestling jacket while competing in a style, such as Greco-Roman or catch-as-catch-can, which traditionally did not make use of such attire.⁴⁸

Another approach to matching wrestlers of differing specialties was to take advantage of the multi-fall structure common to professional wrestling matches. It was common for falls to be divided between their respective areas of expertise, with deciding falls to be contested in a neutral style or determined at the option of one of the competitors. Which wrestler was entitled to make this vital decision could be decided randomly (e.g., by coin flip) or by merit, such as by the man to win the first fall, or to win a fall in the shortest period of time. Matches of more than three falls could, obviously, take place under a wide variety of rules. J. C. Daly and Duncan Ross, for example, engaged in a best-of-five-falls “championship” match which was comprised of five different styles – catch-as-catch-can in the first fall, Cumberland in the second, collar and elbow in the third, Scotch in the fourth, and finally Greco-Roman in the fifth. What region, weight, or style the victorious Duncan Ross then claimed dominion over is unclear, though many wrestlers (including Ross) laid claim to a “mixed-styles” championship at one time or another. Ross continued to engage in mixed-style bouts, including a match he won against Japanese wrestler Matsada Sorakichi which alternated catch-as-catch-can and *sumo* rules falls.⁴⁹

A mixed-styles approach to a multi-fall match would tax a wrestler mentally as well as physically, forcing him to adapt to a new and unfamiliar paradigm in a short period of time. A technique which gained or saved a fall under one set of rules might end a contest under another. Consider the case of Joe Acton, a top catch-as-catch-can wrestler who faced Sorakichi in a mixed

⁴⁸ “Victory For The Baltimore Wrestler,” *New York Times*, 4 April 1879: 5; “Greco-Roman Wrestling,” *New York Times*, 14 June 1879: 1.

⁴⁹ “The Ross-Daly Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 20 October 1879: 5; “A Fierce Wrestling-Match,” *New York Times*, 9 April 1884: 5.

rules bout. After handily winning a fall under his own rules, Acton was obliged to wrestle in the *sumo* style. Rushing his opponent, Acton overbalanced and reflexively placed one hand on the ground to catch himself. Under the rules to which he was accustomed, this was sound practice. Wrestling *sumo* style, it cost him the fall in an embarrassing five seconds.⁵⁰

Whether by use of alternating styles, the use of non-standard uniforms, or the modification of rules, these handicaps were designed to promote a certain sort of equality. It was not the simple equality of applying rules evenhandedly between participants, regardless of class or other categorical basis for discrimination. Instead, it was a more nuanced ideal which sought to equalize, as much as possible, the technical differences between competitors and, by extension, the gambling odds which applied to each man.

William Muldoon, the aforementioned accuser of Miller, came into his own as a competitor in the 1880s. He faced Thiebaud Bauer for a trophy valued at \$200 and the world championship of Greco-Roman wrestling. Enjoying a more than a twenty pound weight advantage, Muldoon took the first and third falls to win the title and the trophy.⁵¹

That match is notable for not including a side bet of any kind. In addition to his wrestling career, Muldoon served on the New York City police force. Police regulations forbade him from wrestling for stakes, as most competitors did. Instead, Muldoon would often wrestle for trophies or, as he did against Clarence Whistler in 1881, put up a trophy or championship medal against a money stake.⁵²

That match with Whistler brings up one of the longstanding myths of early professional wrestling – the prevalent marathon match, where competitors would wrestle for hours, often inconclusively. Muldoon and Whistler wrestled through the night and well into the morning. A short break was taken a little after 1 A.M. Over five hours into the contest, spectators grew

⁵⁰ “A Wrestling Contest,” *New York Times*, 17 June 1884: 1.

⁵¹ “Muldoon Defeats Bauer,” *New York Times*, 20 January 1880: 2.

⁵² “Muldoon and Whistler,” *New York Times*, 27 January 1881: 2.

restless and began to taunt the passive Muldoon, who had been in a defensive stance throughout the contest. The match was finally called to a halt at around 4 A.M., with the theater owner explaining he must close the house. Many audience members offered to pay a dollar each to pay for the gas to light the theater, and Whistler expressed his desire to finish the match, but the match was declared off.⁵³

That match was no fluke. The lengthy match was a signature of Muldoon. A match with William Miller for the Greco-Roman championship in 1880 lasted four hours and produced no fall to either competitor. The contest was so lackluster that spectators were referred to as “victims” in newspaper accounts. An 1883 title bout with Thiebaud Bauer took three hours, though in this case Muldoon was victorious. It is perhaps notable that in this latter case the bout included a \$1,000 side bet, which may have spurred Muldoon to greater effort that he might have otherwise displayed.⁵⁴

But Muldoon could wrestle at a quicker pace when pressed, or the mood took him. He had defeated Bauer in a match for \$500 a side, winning the first fall in seventeen minutes and the third in just four, earlier in 1883. Shortly after the bout, a telegram was received from Edwin Bibby, challenging the winner for \$500 a side. Muldoon accepted if Bibby would meet him in St. Louis or Cincinnati in 10 days.⁵⁵

Muldoon vs. Bibby was scheduled for a Sunday afternoon in St Louis, prompting opposition based on “the fact that a wrestling matinee will gather a crowd of the worst characters in the city,” a reference to the gambling sportsmen commonly drawn to wrestling contests. A newspaper writer predicted legal action and a general “crusade against all Sunday theatricals.”⁵⁶

⁵³ “Six Hours at Wrestling,” *New York Times*, 28 January 1881: 3.

⁵⁴ “Lachrymose Wrestling,” *New York Times*, 24 March 1880: 5; “Muldoon on the Pacific Coast,” *New York Times*, 31 December 1883: 4.

⁵⁵ “Muldoon Defeats Bauer,” *New York Times*, 28 January 1883: 2.

⁵⁶ “Opposed to Sunday Wrestling,” *New York Times*, 2 February 1883: 1.

Suit and crusade notwithstanding, Muldoon/Bibby was carried off on Sunday in February of 1883. The match was for \$500 a side, and Muldoon's "world championship". Muldoon won the only fall in two hours time and was declared the winner, "but the sporting fraternity looked upon it as a fraud, for Bibby stood not a ghost of a chance with Muldoon." Popular opinion was that Muldoon had carried his opponent well past the point where Bibby's own powers could take him. Whatever its sporting merits, the bout was financially successful; regular Sunday matches, including "a glove fight...as an extra attraction," were considered. While the crowd's behavior was considered disgraceful, the Olympic Theatre itself was considered a top-notch venue, equivalent to Madison Square Garden in New York City.⁵⁷

Muldoon then traveled to San Francisco, where he tried his hand at both wrestling and pedestrianism, another sport in which competitors often relied on side bets to generate income. In the process he lost \$1,500 and "joined a circus company in order to replenish his pocket-book." Clarence Whistler had enjoyed a similar fate, but found himself unable to join a circus due to a dislocated shoulder. Employment by a circus provided a significant advantage over traditional professional wrestling – guaranteed income. Muldoon might, potentially, have made more money wrestling for side bets, but at the time lacked the funds to stake himself. The circus gave lower reward, but at no risk. Muldoon could take the opportunity to rebuild his funds before taking on side bet challenges.⁵⁸

No financial risk, at any rate. A wrestler joining a circus faced a potential loss of prestige. By the mid 1880s, circus-promoted wrestling matches had "no longer any important place" since they "became so invariably 'crooked' that people ceased to patronize them." "Ceased" was undoubtedly an exaggeration; there is no reason for a circus to continue hiring wrestlers if no one attends the matches. But the implication that circus matches were rigged, while independent

⁵⁷ "A Sunday Wrestling-Match," *New York Times*, 5 February 1883: 1.

⁵⁸ "Notes of Sporting Matters," *New York Times*, 18 February 1884: 8.

matches were more likely to be honest contests, has some truth to it. Bauer and William Miller were considered “leaders in this movement, and it came to be a matter of publicity that their contests were decided before they set foot on the platform,” suggesting Muldoon’s earlier accusations may have had some truth to them. Again, the lack of financial risk put the legitimacy of the matches in question.⁵⁹

Less than a month later, Muldoon returned to challenge competition. He quickly defeated Bauer again, winning a \$500 side bet in a match that took a little over half an hour. That match was followed up with yet another marathon contest with Clarence Whistler. The bout began at 8:50 P.M. and, though regarded as “the most exciting contest ever witnessed” in San Francisco, produced no falls. Muldoon withdrew at 12:30 A.M., citing fatigue, and the match was considered a draw. It was soon rumored that the draw had been pre-arranged, though no evidence was produced to support this assertion. Muldoon was also reported to be planning his retirement following this match, “satisfied... that he had enough.”⁶⁰

This may have been a false report, a momentary whimsey, or an early example of the false retirement that would become a staple of professional wrestling. Or perhaps Muldoon simply needed the money wrestling generated - upon leaving San Francisco, Muldoon declared his matches on the West Coast generated \$40,000, of which he took \$25,000. (If both this figure and reports of his overall California losses are accurate, pedestrianism must have been an impressive money-loser for Muldoon.) In any case, he soon announced his intention to return to the city in two months time, mere weeks after allegedly retiring.⁶¹

June of 1884, though, found Muldoon active in Ohio, rather than California. In Cincinnati, he defeated Duncan Ross, the man who had claimed a “mixed styles championship”, for \$500 a

⁵⁹ “Forerunners of Spring,” *New York Times*, 28 February 1884: 3.

⁶⁰ “Muldoon Defeats Bauer,” *New York Times*, 5 March 1884: 2; “A Drawn Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 26 March 1884: 2; “Notes About Sporting Matters,” *New York Times*, 3 April 1884: 8.

⁶¹ “Profits of Wrestling,” *New York Times*, 20 April 1884: 6.

side and all receipts. Though Ross's title was not reported to be at stake, the match was a mixed styles affair and consisted of five falls. Muldoon took the first two falls, which were contested under his preferred Greco-Roman rules. The next two were "side hold in harness", a relatively obscure style similar to collar and elbow. As the name suggests, the two wrestlers were required to take a specified grip on a special harness each wore and wrestle from that position. As the more familiar, Ross took those two falls. The final fall was catch-as-catch-can, and won by Muldoon.⁶²

Muldoon spent the rest of the year in similar mixed styles bouts. He defeated Japanese *sumo* expert Sorakichi under a combined *sumo*/Greco-Roman/catch-as-catch-can match in Chicago that July. Muldoon ended his year in St. Louis, where he and James McLaughlin split a pair of mixed rules bouts. McLaughlin defeated Muldoon for a \$900 purse in November and Muldoon took the \$500 side bet in a December rematch.⁶³

Though times were not reported for either of the McLaughlin bouts, the matches with Ross and Sorakichi were notable for their brevity. The longest fall he wrestled with Ross lasted just thirty-five minutes, and his entire contest with Sorakichi just fifteen minutes. The latter can be partially attributed to the two falls held under *sumo* rules, under which any part of the body other than the feet contacting the ground constituted a fall, which lend themselves to brief contests. Even so, the matches stand in stark contrast to the stereotype of both professional wrestling of the period generally and Muldoon's career in particular. And, while it is true audiences could sometimes grow bored with longer contests, a shorter match was not always better received. Chicago wrestling fans, accustomed to a match serving as a full evening's entertainment, turned on Muldoon as severely for his brief dalliance with Sorakichi as they ever did for his longer contests.

⁶² "Muldoon Defeats Ross," *New York Times*, 21 June 1884: 2.

⁶³ "The Japanese Wrestler Defeated," *New York Times*, 27 July 1884: 2; "M'LAughlin Defeats Muldoon," *New York Times*, 10 November 1884: 1; "A Victory for Muldoon," *New York Times*, 15 December 1884: 1.

In what may have been the last match of his career – certainly the last for which records are readily available – Muldoon drew Carl Abs, a “German giant,” in a two-hour match where “[n]either man won a fall and neither was thrown from his feet during the entire time.” The finish, or rather the lack of same, was not well-received by an audience which had previously been quite enthusiastic, heretofore, “in a mood for cheering” having “gazed upon them with wonder and admiration” and “occasionally applauding when one shoved the other a foot or two to either side.” This was not a crowd which demanded a great deal of action. What they did demand, though, was a decisive conclusion or, failing that, the return of their entrance fee. They would get neither, “[a]s the ticket seller had had the presence of mind to retire with the gate receipts[.]”⁶⁴

While Muldoon was widely considered the premier wrestler of the 1880s, and certainly dominated both Greco-Roman and mixed styles competition, there were other notable wrestlers of the period. John McMahon and Henry Dufur were the top figures in collar and elbow wrestling. The two faced each other in 1880, to little result. The referee called a halt to their contest at 2:45 A.M. and, though both professed a desire to continue, they were obliged to depart the premises, their lease having expired.⁶⁵

McMahon would reign as collar and elbow champion until 1883, when he announced his intention to retire from competition. For his final match, he issued an open challenge to the six top wrestlers of the day – Henry Dufur for preference, or Clarence Whistler, William Muldoon, Joe Acton, Edwin Bibby, or Duncan Ross in his absence. To secure his challenge, he placed a \$100 deposit on his \$250-\$1,000 challenge with Richard K. Fox. Fox was the publisher of the *Police Gazette*, a popular men’s magazine, and a figure of singular prestige in the sporting world. Dufur would not reply, and Duncan Ross accepted McMahon’s challenge under mixed rules for

⁶⁴ “Wrestling to No Purpose,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1885: 5.

⁶⁵ “Good Profits in Wrestling,” *New York Times*, 18 March 1880: 5.

\$500 and likewise placed a \$100 deposit with Fox. William E. Harding was selected as referee, and the match was scheduled for Madison Square Garden on January 24, 1883.⁶⁶

Unfortunately, either the result of the match was unrecorded, or it never came about and no further information was forthcoming. In either case, McMahon apparently changed his mind about retiring or was willing to come out of retirement for one final contest with old rival Henry Dufur “for the heavy-weight championship of the world and \$250 a side.” The bout lasted two hours, and neither man was able to gain a fall. “McMahon then discovered he was 20 pounds overweight and withdrew from the match, forfeiting the stakes to Dufur.” All bets were declared off. The spectators were predictably dissatisfied, but again their ire seems directed much more at the bout’s lack of conclusion than any lack of action.⁶⁷

J.H. McLaughlin defeated Dufur in February of 1884 in what was regarded as a significant upset. Dufur had been the undisputed collar and elbow champion in the absence of McMahon, “regarded as almost invincible in the collar-and-elbow style” and “none of the aspirants for fame dared don the harness with him.” Meanwhile, McLaughlin had been retired from active competition and “getting on in years.” Consequently, McLaughlin’s challenge had initially been ignored until he “posted a forfeit and showed a desire to begin the work of arranging a match at once.” The loss, though, may have worked in Dufur’s favor. While a reputation for invincibility might please the ego, chasing off all of one’s challengers did little for a champion’s pocketbook. In fact, collar and elbow had, by 1884, begun to decline in popularity, while the more competitive Greco-Roman and catch-as-catch-can styles surged.⁶⁸

Dufur’s loss briefly rekindled interest in his specialty. He regained his title, defeating McLaughlin in straight falls for \$500 a side, then defended it against a wrestler identified only as

⁶⁶ “The Green Mountain Wrestler,” *New York Times*, 7 January 1883: 7; “The Green Mountain Wrestler,” *New York Times*, 16 January 1883: 3.

⁶⁷ “A Wrestling Fiasco In Boston,” *New York Times*, 14 December 1883: 3.

⁶⁸ “News in Sporting Circles,” *New York Times*, 4 February 1884: 8.

“Benjamin” for similar stakes. The resurgence was short-lived. Though collar and elbow matches would continue through the turn of the century, after the mid 1880s they would never again be considered major events.⁶⁹

That turn of events was unfortunate for Dufur. While he was an extraordinary collar and elbow wrestler, he never developed the knack for wrestling under other rules. His attempts to compete in other styles were generally disappointing. He faced Duncan Ross in 1880 for a prize belt, a \$400 side bet, a “special purse” of \$200, and world “mixed styles” championship. In the best of five falls contest, Dufur was able to win three – two under collar and elbow rules, and a third held under side hold in harness rules. Duncan, for his part, took two falls under catch-as-catch-can rules. Unfortunately for Henry Dufur, it was catch-as-catch-can, rather than collar and elbow or side hold, which would come to dominate wrestling.⁷⁰

Dufur did make history of a sort in catch-as-catch-can. The earliest record of a fall being won by submission in a major American professional wrestling match is from 1881. Dufur faced Clarence Whistler, a catch-as-catch-can expert, in a jacketed catch-as-catch-can match, best of five falls. In the fourth fall, leading two falls to one, Whistler locked Dufur’s arm behind his back. The hammerlock was (and is) a popular method for turning an opponent’s shoulders to the mat, but Whistler’s body and legs were tangled with those of Dufur in such a way as to prevent the latter from rolling to his shoulders to relieve the pressure of the hold, though he tried vainly to do so. Rather than suffer extensive damage to his shoulder, Dufur verbally conceded the fall and the match to Whistler.⁷¹

That such a result should come from Clarence Whistler is not surprising. Whistler developed a reputation for viciousness over the course of his career. Indeed, in his challenge of then-

⁶⁹ “Dufur Defeats M’LAughlin,” *New York Times*, 31 July 1884: 5; “Two Wrestling Matches,” *New York Times*, 6 September 1884: 1.

⁷⁰ “Wrestling For The Championship,” *New York Times*, 4 December 1880: 1.

⁷¹ “A Desperate Wrestling-Match at Turn Hall,” *New York Times*, 1 April 1881: 2.

champion Joe Acton, cruelty and an extra twenty pounds were counted as his sole advantages. Little good they did him; Whistler reportedly spent the better part of two hours in a defensive posture en route to a drawn contest which drew the typical response of such results.⁷²

But Whistler was hardly the only wrestler who took the opportunity to hurt his opponent when such a chance arose. The earliest accounts of Evan Lewis record his having defeated Tom Cannon and Matsada Sorakichi, both top wrestlers, in short order with choking or strangleholds. Sorakichi, having lost the third fall of a five fall contest to Evans via a choke hold, was so demoralized that he declined to wrestle the final falls, even after Evans agreed to bar the technique for the remainder of the contest. Lewis became so famous for this hold that he was popularly known as “The Strangler”.⁷³

While he was not the first wrestler to win via submission, Lewis may have been the first American wrestler to fully embrace the tactic. Aside from his eponymous stranglehold, he won an early match by dislocating the leg of the unfortunate Sorakichi and had another stopped by police due to excessive (though unspecified) brutality. Lewis may well have been responsible for the widespread barring of the stranglehold; certainly no explicit prohibition against it appears before he does, and after his initial success with the hold, notations that it had been barred became commonplace in records of catch-as-catch-can matches.⁷⁴

Such tactics were not always popular. In an 1886 match between Lewis and Edwin Bibby, Bibby was encouraged by the partisan crowd to “break his leg”. (Irony was apparently lost on the more vocal members of the audience.) When the more talented Lewis threw Bibby, the crowd’s “hissing was renewed”. For his part, Lewis had no regrets. “After the performance Lewis said to Charles E. Davis that time would change public opinion and that lovers of sport would at least

⁷² “The Garden in an Uproar,” *New York Times*, 19 December 1882: 5.

⁷³ “A Lively Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 23 December 1885: 2; “A Brutal Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 29 January 1886: 5.

⁷⁴ “Sorakichi’s Leg Broken,” *New York Times*, 16 February 1886: 5; “A Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 22 March 1888: 1.

give him credit for being honest in his matches and doing his utmost to win in accordance with the rules under which he was contesting.”⁷⁵

Even in the absence of debilitating or crippling holds, wrestling was becoming an increasingly rough business in the 1880s. Following a contest between them for a *Police Gazette* medal in which Duncan Ross, the “champion mixed wrestler of the world” defeated Thiebaud Bauer, the “champion Graeco-Roman wrestler of France” under Greco-Roman rules, “Bauer lost his temper” and challenged Ross for \$200 a side. Ross naturally accepted.⁷⁶

Papers between the two were actually signed for \$500 a side. Of the match itself it was reported “[t]here is no doubt of its genuineness ... There is some hostile feeling toward Ross on Bauer’s part because the former has been traveling over the country with a party who assumed Bauer’s name and brought him into disrepute.”⁷⁷

Bauer defeated his rival Ross, winning the first fall in forty-four minutes and the third in twenty six. Ross took a quick second fall in four minutes time. While strangleholds, hammerlocks, and similar dangerous techniques were not reportedly in evidence, “[b]oth men came out considerably battered, Bauer having two teeth knocked out and Ross getting a black eye.” “A good average Sunday night theatre crowd was present, including many ladies.”⁷⁸

Popular or not, and whether by cunning technique or raw force, the increased level of violence in professional wrestling came to define the sport in media. Preparatory to an 1882 match with Joe Acton, at the time a world title claimant, the aforementioned Bibby was described as “one of the most extraordinary wrestlers who ever attempted to break an adversary’s neck or back in Graeco-Roman or catch-as-catch-can wrestling.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ “The Strangler Throws Bibby,” *New York Times*, 24 February 1886: 3.

⁷⁶ “Bauer and Ross Wrestling,” *New York Times*, 27 February 1883: 2.

⁷⁷ “Ross and Bauer to Wrestle,” *New York Times*, 16 March 1883: 1.

⁷⁸ “Graeco-Roman Wrestling,” *New York Times*, 19 March 1883: 5.

⁷⁹ “A Big Wrestling-Match Arranged,” *New York Times*, 8 June 1882: 8.

In its own way, the multi-fall structure of professional wrestling encouraged wrestlers to be as forceful, even brutal, as possible. After 1880, at which point withdrawing from a bout due to injury frequently meant forfeiting a match rather than the declaration of a draw or no contest which had previously been customary, a wrestler who could injure his opponent early in the bout as a result of a hard fall, damaging hold, or rough tactics potentially saved himself a great deal of work. A man with a dislocated shoulder, sprained wrist, or other new-found infirmity was apt (like Sorakichi) to give up a contest before all scheduled falls had been wrestled. Even a man inclined to continue would find himself less effective than he had heretofore been.⁸⁰

This increase in violence is notable because it directly contradicts the spirit which had made wrestling a popular folk sport in the first place. In boxing, sustaining injury was a near inevitability. In rough and tumble, inflicting injury was the point of the exercise. Traditional folk wrestling, though, permitted family, friends, and neighbors to compete with each other in such a way that demonstrated physical prowess or dominance while minimizing the chance of injury. A man or boy (again, wrestling was a near-exclusively male activity) could engage in vigorous wrestling in the evening and reasonably expect to be able to work the next morning. In a community that depended upon mutual support and cooperation, it made no sense to deliberately injure a fellow competitor. Larger concerns were at stake.

Professional wrestlers, though, would come to regard each other less as fellows and more as competitors. Other wrestlers were necessary, of course – a man could hardly wrestle himself – but ultimately fungible. One wrestled in order to make money and made money by winning matches. Priorities had changed. Opponents were no longer friends and neighbors, but economic partners and rivals. As the cliché goes, it was just business. Breaking a man's leg to win a match, or strangling him into semi-consciousness, was not a personal assault in this context, but the cold-blooded result of a simple cost-benefit analysis.

⁸⁰ "Bibby Thrown By A Miner," *New York Times*, 2 February 1884: 2.

Part of that analysis lay in the certainty a dangerous hold implied. As has been amply demonstrated, wrestling matches were frequently marred by disputed falls. Whether a man's shoulders and/or hips made contact with the floor in the required combination and for the required time was a judgment call. The call was made by a referee surrounded by biased observers with different physical and financial perspectives on the issue. Those observers were, to put it mildly, prone to differ on such subjective matters. Even assuming an unbiased official – not always a safe assumption to make, as any sports fan knows – social pressure might sway a referee's decision. On the other hand, it is difficult to dispute the defeat of a man asking his opponent to refrain from breaking his bones. With substantial sums of money in the balance, this factor had considerable value.

Some made efforts to counteract this increase in violence. Whatever advantage a wrestler gained in hurting his opponent was offset by the additional risk he took of being hurt himself. A participant, therefore, had to weigh the relative benefits and costs. For this reason matches might be regulated more or less strictly, depending upon how much authority with which a referee was imbued. An 1882 rematch between Edwin Bibby and Joe Acton specified that “striking, kicking, gouging, butting, pulling hair, ‘full Nelson’, hanging, or doing anything to injure an opponent shall be considered foul; for each violation of this rule the offender shall be deemed to have lost a fall, and if in the judgment of the referee an assault is made with a malicious intent to injure an opponent he shall have the power to award the match to the injured person.” Reporters were assured at the outset that the match would be “square”. Whether due to the strict enforcement of the rules inhibiting Bibby's tactics or his own superior talent (Acton had won all five previous encounters between them), Acton was victorious in straight falls.⁸¹

The side bet as a standard for reimbursement most likely played a role in the primacy of the single-match format of American wrestling. In Europe, the tournament format prevailed –

⁸¹ “Wrestlers At Their Best,” *New York Times*, 8 August 1882: 2.

festivals lasted as long as a month and top competitors were paid purses or salaries to compete. America saw very few tournaments for professionals, except as a fad in the 1880s and again in the 1910s. This preference affected both the wrestling itself and the promotion of the event. From a business perspective, the tournament format radically changed the wrestlers' personal investment and expectations of return. In a proposed 1883 tournament, for example, a total of \$1,000 in cash prizes was offered, with \$500 going to the first prize winner, \$200 to the second-place winner, \$150 to the third, and \$50 to the fourth place finisher. Though this tournament, and its prestigious participants, was announced in advance, I have been unable to discover any report of its results. Most likely, as with many events that promise top competitors, it simply fell through. The announced competitors may have decided not to compete, or never agreed to compete in the first place – announcing a deal before it has been agreed to has a lengthy tradition in professional wrestling. Certainly, top professionals of the period could expect to earn more money wrestling traditional challenges (provided, of course, they won those challenges) than the announced purses of the proposed tournament offered.⁸²

The tournament, though, could be used as a promotional gimmick. Another tournament of 1883 (which, unlike its predecessor, was actually held) proposed to crown its victor the world champion of Greco-Roman wrestling. Including such prestigious wrestlers as Clarence Whistler, Edwin Bibby, and Andre Christol lent that proposal some manner of public credibility. Just as the creation of championships could lend additional weight to an already-credible wrestler, a tournament gave wrestlers the chance to combine whatever box office draw they might possess individually. It brought together not only elite wrestlers, but their followers and financial supporters. Lesser-known competitors might be brought in to fill out tournament brackets, giving up and coming wrestlers the chance to test themselves against competitors they might not otherwise have had the chance to face, and perhaps make a name for themselves with an unlikely

⁸² "International Wrestling," *New York Times*, 21 April 1883: 3.

victory. Everyone involved had the opportunity to make money on a scale that would not have been possible in single matches. Of course, they had an equal opportunity to lose money on a similar scale, which may partially account for the limited popularity of the tournament.⁸³

Another problem with the tournament format was that including more wrestlers in a single event led to a commensurate increase in the number of principals apt to complain if events did not proceed to their liking. Another 1883 tournament illustrates the difficulties. The event was certainly ambitious, perhaps overly so. Six wrestlers participated – Duncan Ross, Henry Dufur, George Flagg, Dennis Gallagher, Merwin Thompson, and Peter Kearns. Each man was to wrestle every other, round robin style, three times in three different styles over the course of three days. The man to win the most falls was to be declared the winner. Two matches, one between Dufur and Thompson and the other between Flagg and Gallagher, produced controversy. In the former, the referee declared Thompson to have pinned Dufur, while Dufur claimed his hips had not touched the floor. In protest (and having been mathematically eliminated from contention), Dufur withdrew. In the latter contest, the much larger Flagg trapped Gallagher in a dangerous neck hold and demanded his surrender. Gallagher's indistinct reply was interpreted as submission by the referee, and Flagg released his hold. Gallagher, once released, asserted that he had not surrendered. The referee demanded that the match be resumed. Flagg refused and was disqualified. The reaction of audiences was not recorded, but one cannot believe it was positive.⁸⁴

Tournaments aside, there were a few purse-paid wrestling matches held in the 1880s. The earliest recorded was a mixed styles bout between James McLaughlin and Duncan Ross in March of 1884. A purse of \$2,000 was offered to the winner, along with the door receipts. The match was held in Cleveland, Ohio's Euclid Avenue Opera House and reportedly drew "[a] large

⁸³ "Champion Wrestling Tournament," *New York Times*, 9 June 1883: 5.

⁸⁴ "Contest At Mixed Wrestling," *New York Times*, 11 October 1883: 1; "The Mixed Wrestling-Match," *New York Times*, 12 October 1883: 1.

number of people” from McLaughlin’s native Detroit, who wagered “[a]n immense sum of money” only to be “disappointed and depleted of the cash they fairly wagered.” While McLaughlin had an advantage over Ross in the bout’s second fall in his preferred collar and elbow style, he found himself at a loss absent the jacket worn in that style when he wrestled Ross under Greco-Roman or catch-as-catch-can rules and, hence, lost the first and third falls.⁸⁵

Four years later, Ernest Roeber wrestled Sebastian Miller for a \$300 purse “contributed by Harlem brewers who love wrestling.” While Roeber was the more skilled athlete and former amateur champion, he gave up twenty pounds of body weight and considerable power to his opponent. Miller took the contest, two falls to one, and with it the money.⁸⁶ Later that same year, the Olympic Club of San Francisco contributed a \$1,500 purse to supplement the \$1,000 side bet which financed a match between Joe Acton and a wrestler identified only as “Faulkner”. The Faulkner/Acton match was scheduled for July 31 in San Francisco, but no result from the bout was recorded.⁸⁷

These exceptions notwithstanding, the side bet was the dominant form of recompense for wrestlers through two decades of wrestling. By the 1890s, though, that was beginning to change. Matches sponsored by athletic clubs, rather than arranged by the wrestlers themselves, became more common. In 1892, the New Orleans Olympic Club offered a \$2,000 purse to the winner of a match between German strongman Carl Abs and Evan Lewis. A few months later, the same club put together a mixed styles bout between Lewis and Greco-Roman champion Ernest Roeber for the same price. Jesse Robinson defeated the colorfully named but overmatched Ed “Cyclone” Decker for purse of \$100 (sponsor unknown) and the collar and elbow wrestling championship of Western New York. Wrestlers – especially those new to America – continued to post challenges

⁸⁵ “Ross Defeats M’Laughlin,” *New York Times*, 25 March 1884: 2.

⁸⁶ “Won By Superior Strength,” *New York Times*, 31 January 1888: 2.

⁸⁷ “A Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 1 July 1888: 6.

and forfeits with *Police Gazette* editor Richard K. Fox, and the side bet remained a popular method of arranging matches, but neither practice was as universal as it had previously been.⁸⁸

Wrestling began to consolidate in the 1890s, with Greco-Roman and catch-as-catch-can emerging as the most popular styles amongst both wrestlers and audiences. The minor folk styles – Devonshire, Cornwall, side hold, and so on – essentially disappeared from the national scene. Even collar and elbow, once the most popular style in the country, was relegated to secondary status and appealed primarily to “old timers” by the mid 1890s. Meanwhile, catch-as-catch-can, in particular, was growing roots in athletic clubs, where it was considered the “latest fad”. Then-Governor of New York Theodore Roosevelt, a noted advocate of physical culture, took up wrestling in the catch-as-catch-can style. Lieutenant Governor Timothy Woodruff followed his example, and regular wrestling (and boxing) classes were established for the benefit of New York legislators in Albany.⁸⁹

The dominance of catch-as-catch-can wrestling ultimately lay not in its superior appeal to audiences, but in its superior appeal to wrestlers. By maintaining as broad and inclusive a rule set as possible, catch-as-catch-can included the widest possible pool of available talent. And that talent pool was wide indeed – catch-as-catch-can wrestling matches in America featured wrestlers hailing from Russia, Germany, England, France, Turkey, and even Japan. Essentially, all of what would have then been considered the civilized world could compete under catch-as-catch-can rules and could use the techniques of their native folk styles to do so. Virtually every style of wrestling in the world could add to the repertoire of the catch-as-catch-can wrestler. Except by mutual pre-match agreement, nothing in Turkish wrestling was barred from catch-as-catch-can,

⁸⁸ “Minor Sporting Matters,” *New York Times*, 29 November 1892: 3; “Lewis Is Now Champion,” *New York Times*, 3 March 1893: 3; “Minor Sporting Matters,” *New York Times*, 7 April 1893: 3; “Robinet Anxious To Wrestle,” *New York Times*, 10 March 1892: 3; “Minor Sporting Matters,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1892: 2.

⁸⁹ “Seaside Athletic Club’s Card,” *New York Times*, 15 August 1894: 6; “Wrestling Now Their Fad,” *New York Times*, 4 November 1893: 3; “Gov. Roosevelt A Wrestler,” *New York Times*, 1 December 1899: 1; “To Imitate the Governor,” *New York Times*, 3 December 1899: 2.

nor anything in European wrestling except the Devonshire kicks. From Japanese *jujitsu*, only the dangerous blows were banned, while the grappling techniques (save, by agreement, the strangles) were entirely permitted. The appeal of catch-as-catch-can to wrestling fans, as compared to that of other wrestling styles, was a secondary concern. Of primary importance was the fact that no other style was open to as many wrestlers.

Everything about catch-as-catch-can wrestling appears to have been set up to maximize the number of wrestlers who could compete. The range of permissible techniques was very broad, and both pinning and submission are in evidence as victory conditions. Broad weight classes were likewise present, maximizing the pool of opponents a wrestler was eligible to face. Numerous handicaps were available to balance out perceived discrepancies between wrestlers. Every standard objection to a match could be answered.

Virtually all rules were negotiable. All of these circumstances were in place in order give wrestlers as wide a field of opportunity as possible. More viable opponents meant more matches. More matches meant more wagers. More wagers, of course, meant more money. A minor match between two St. Louis athletic club wrestling coaches, Mike Mooney of the Business Men's Gymnasium and Max Luttbeg of the West End Pastime Athletic Club, illustrates the point. Mooney demanded a match under Greco-Roman rules, stranglehold barred, wagering \$200 to \$250 a piece. Luttbeg, a catch-as-catch-can specialist, refused to bar any holds if he was also wrestling in an unfamiliar style for a substantial sum of money. Since both men were interested in having a match, concessions were made on both sides. It was agreed that the stranglehold would be barred, in keeping with Mooney's wishes, but that the match would be conducted in Luttbeg's preferred catch-as-catch-can style.⁹⁰ In the end, regardless of the styles or sizes of the participants, a match could always be made if there was money in it. For roughly thirty years,

⁹⁰ "Prof. Mooney To Wrestle Luttbeg," *New York Times*, 18 March 1893: 6.

from 1870 to 1900, this meant that a wrestler with confidence and a bankroll could almost always find a match.

This state of affairs – the variability of rules, the rise of the more open style of catch-as-catch-can wrestling over more restrictive styles – stands in some contrast to the theory of modernization of sport advocated by sports historian Allen Guttman. Guttman suggests seven characteristics which define a modern sport in contrast to a premodern sport – secularism, equality, specialization, bureaucratization, rationalization, quantification, and obsession with records. While there was certainly movement towards many of these characteristics in early professional wrestling, the wrestler of the late 1800s could not afford to be a specialist, and the most popular form of wrestling was ultimately the least specialized. A wrestler who could and would compete with or without a jacket, with the stranglehold or attacks against the legs permitted or barred, or against opponents of widely disparate sizes could find more matches and make more money than one who, by talent or taste, competed only under more limited circumstances. Likewise, the wrestling style which accommodated the widest variety of talents was more apt to see use than one that more greatly restricted the actions and choices of the participants.⁹¹

In part due to the rise of catch-as-catch-can, which permitted a more aggressive approach to competition, as the dominant wrestling style, the sport maintained the more violent style and image it had developed in the 1880s. A Frenchman named Louis Uni, known professionally as Apollon, more accomplished as a strongman than wrestler, faced Ernest Roeber in New York City for the Greco-Roman World Championship and \$1,000 a side in 1892. Apollon's size – he outweighed Roeber by roughly 85 pounds – and power told in the first fall, which he won in under six minutes with a rare example of the oft-barred full Nelson. In the second, Roeber's skill was more in evidence, and he was victorious. In the third fall, Apollon complained that “the

⁹¹ Allen Guttman, *Sports: The First Five Millennia* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 4-6.

strain he had received in the second fall had been so aggravated in the third that he was unable to continue.” The match, championship, and wagers were awarded to Roeber.⁹²

Even amateur competition was more aggressive than had previously been the case. The 1893 New York City amateur championships were described in less than glowing terms. “The contestants satisfied everybody that they were bona fide amateurs. They did not know the first rudiments of boxing, and the wrestling was farcical. The entries were by long odds the poorest ever seen at a championship meeting.” A preliminary match in the 115 pound division, won in just seconds with a stranglehold, was singled out as “a most brutal piece of work.”⁹³

That consolidation comes in part due to a reported decline in the popularity of wrestling; it no longer supported so many contests as it had in prior decades. In addition, there were fewer of the mixed styles matches that had previously been common. With fewer bouts to be had overall, and minor styles suffering the greatest loss, practitioners of those methods became obliged to pursue either Greco-Roman or catch-as-catch-can wrestling if they wished to compete professionally.

Wrestling’s waning popularity was established both by the frequency with which such a complaint appears in reports and the dearth of reports available for it to appear in. A Greco-Roman match between champion Ernest Roeber and Yousouf , the first man to bear the moniker the “Terrible Turk”, “was claimed would restore wrestling to its former high favor with the sporting public[.]” It did no such thing. In fact, the bout “ended in a fizzle, and almost resorted in a riot.” In the course of their wrestling, Yousouf pushed Roeber from the elevated stage upon which they were competing, and Roeber was rendered unconscious, unable to continue. Roeber was awarded the match on a foul, and with it the \$500 and 50% of the gate money that had been

⁹² “Roeber is Champion,” *New York Times*, 26 July 1892: 3.

⁹³ “The Metropolitan Champions,” *New York Times*, 22 December 1893: 2.

wagered. Death threats were issued to the Turk from the crowd. For his part, Yousouf blamed Roeber for failing to engage.⁹⁴

A rematch was naturally arranged. As a part of the pre-match negotiations, Roeber's representatives demanded that the stage be enclosed in a set of ropes to prevent a recurrence of the incident which had ended their prior encounter. (Again, note how the circumstances under which a match is contested are under the direct control of the participants. The first bout with Roeber would linger as a part of Yousouf's reputation; Tom Jenkins would demand similar circumstances when next he and Yousouf were matched.) In twenty minutes time, the bout had devolved into a general brawl. Yousouf, frustrated by his inability to turn Roeber on the mat, resorted to slamming him bodily into the posts which supported the ropes Roeber had demanded. "The first time he tried it ... the German looked at him half doubtingly, with the idea that perhaps it was unintentional. But when he got Roeber into another corner and then hurled him with all his might against another post, the little man threw his knowledge of wrestling to the winds, and, urged on by the shouts of the incensed spectators, went at the Turk with bare knuckles." The affair became a general melee, as cornermen from both sides, including boxer Bob Fitzsimmons, became involved. "The result of the contest has probably put an end to the attempted revival of the sport of wrestling, for the spectators who turned out in such large numbers and paid generous prices for seats had in mind the fiasco in the bout at Madison Square Garden about a month ago, and after the referee's decision last night they began loudly to yell: 'Fake! Fake!' and then to sing the new negro song, 'Get Your Money's Worth.'" Police broke up the affair but made no arrests.⁹⁵

In the aftermath of the brawl, Roeber returned his championship belt to its sponsor, Richard K. Fox. Two new challengers for the title, a Greek named Heraklides and a Japanese wrestler

⁹⁴ "Yousouf Fouled Roeber," *New York Times*, 27 March 1898: 4.

⁹⁵ "Yousouf and Jenkins," *New York Times*, 14 April 1898: 7; "Wrestlers Have A Fight," *New York Times*, 1 May 1898: 4.

called Takezawa, faced off just months later. Despite the open weight nature of the contests and the influx of giants such as Apollon, Heraklides weighed just 169 pounds and, at that, outweighed Takezawa by twenty pounds. The finish of the bout was even more frightful than that of the Roeber/Yousouf contests. Heraklides “was made unconscious by the fearful pressure exerted by the Japanese wrestler... When the match was stopped, the Greek was black in the face and was in spasms. Tonight he lies in a precarious condition, and his death is expected.”⁹⁶

The reader will notice that wrestlers from Japan, Turkey, France, Greece, and Britain have been mentioned thus far, as well as American wrestlers of a variety of ethnic backgrounds. It would be fair at this point to ask where the African-American wrestlers are. The supremely unsatisfactory answer is there are none, or at least none whose exploits made the papers. While sports reports of the period frequently cover African-American boxers and baseball players, often in glowing terms, there is no mention of an African-American wrestler to be found. While wrestling lacked the explicit color line which separated black challengers from white boxing champions, it also lacked a Sam Langford-type figure who would have made drawing such a line necessary. What kept African-American athletes so completely out of the wrestling ring is not at all clear and deserves research quite beyond the scope of this paper.

The violence of wrestling led to some objections to its promotion. When the New Orleans Olympic Athletic Club, for example, sponsored a \$2,000 purse for the mixed rules (alternating Greco-Roman and catch-as-catch-can falls) match between Ernest Roeber and “The Strangler” Evan Lewis previously mentioned as part of a three-day athletic festival which also included a pair of prize fights, the festival itself drew opposition from the carnival societies which organized Mardi Gras. Their objection, though, was not to the fact of the bouts being held, but merely to the timing, which would have coincided with Mardi Gras week. Representatives of the carnival societies took the position that “[t]he prize fights which take place in this city are not attended by

⁹⁶ “Heraklides Nearly Killed,” *New York Times*, 26 August 1898: 1.

the class who come to our carnival, and if they are arranged to take place contemporaneously with the parades and balls here just before Lent they will have the certain effect of deterring many people from coming to New Orleans.”⁹⁷ (Note again the secularized nature of the sport; not only is it not integral to a religious/cultural festival, but is almost forcibly separated from same.)

The bout itself was gentler than it might have been. It was announced at the outset that the stranglehold would be barred for the contest, “at which Lewis smiles, while Roeber looked as if a great load had been lifted from his mind.” The five-fall match was described in thorough technical detail. The two men split the first four falls according to their respective specialties, with Lewis the superior catch-as-catch-can wrestler and Roeber the better Greco-Roman man. By dint of having won the quickest of the four falls, Lewis was allowed to select the rules under which the fifth fall would be contested. Naturally choosing his accustomed catch-as-catch-can, Lewis took the contest and the “championship of the world at mixed styles.”⁹⁸

As the New Orleans bout indicates, even those who objected to wrestling (or boxing) were aware of the money a major sporting event could bring in to an area. The Nevada State Legislature went into an extra session in the spring of 1897 to consider legislation which would “make Nevada a sporting paradise[,]” encompassing not only boxing, but wrestling, horse racing, and any other sport upon which sporting men placed wagers. Even those who had opposed permitting prizefighting (with which professional wrestling was often conflated in the press) were forced to admit that it had brought a great deal of money into the state. And though New York and other jurisdictions had banned boxing in the form of “prize-fighting or slugging contests,” Chicago mayor Carter Harrison chose to conflate wrestling with the approved-of “scientific sparring.”⁹⁹

⁹⁷ “The Olympic Club Contests,” *New York Times*, 7 December 1892: 6.

⁹⁸ “Lewis Is Now Champion,” *New York Times*, 3 March 1893: 3.

⁹⁹ “Gone Mad On Pugilism,” *New York Times*, 2 March 1897: 4; “Chicago To Have Boxing,” *New York Times*, 22 September 1897: 4.

Having grown accustomed to a certain level of aggression, however, audiences were not always receptive to the gentler sort of wrestling which had previously been popular. Reigning collar and elbow champion Joe Ryan faced Homer Lane in a best of three falls contest as part of the undercard for a boxing program in 1894. The match “was witnessed with impatience. It was too tame, and the spectators appeared relieved of a nuisance when Lane’s age told on him and he was for the second time thrown on his back by Ryan and declared vanquished.” Collar and elbow wrestling as an attraction was not long for the American sporting world. That did not mean that catch-as-catch-can bouts were necessarily more exciting.¹⁰⁰

In 1898, Hali Adali, billed as the “champion wrestler to the Sultan” was matched with Tom Jenkins, a top American, with the winner to earn a \$1,000 purse as well as 75% of the gate. The contest was to be held under catch-as-catch-can rules, and “[t]he conditions call for two falls out of three and that there shall be no draw.”¹⁰¹ The match was a draw. Jenkins was awarded the first fall on foul – Adali wiped his head with a towel in contravention of the agreed-upon rule that “neither contestant may be handled by any man, refresh himself in any way, or use a towel after a bout has commenced until there has been a fall.” Adali took the second fall “after chasing Jenkins around the Garden for three-quarters of an hour” before tossing his man to the ground.¹⁰²

Histories of wrestling gloss over the transition from side bets to promoter’s purses as a way of compensating athletes, but that transition is arguably the most significant change in the sport from 1890-1910. Morton and O’Brien say merely that “[p]romotion was in the hands of individuals interested primarily in profits who had learned their trade in the theater.”¹⁰³ But those theater promoters were late-comers to wrestling. Prior to their involvement, wrestlers had done their own promotion. Riess says boxing made a similar transition from side bet system to

¹⁰⁰ “Seaside Athletic Club’s Card,” *New York Times*, 15 August 1894: 6; “Brooklyn Prize Fighting,” *New York Times*, 28 August 1894: 2.

¹⁰¹ “Championship Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 9 October 1898: 4.

¹⁰² “Wrestling Match A Draw,” *New York Times*, 6 November 1898: 6.

¹⁰³ Morton and O’Brien, 37.

promoter purse system in response to laws regarding “prize fighting” which did not apply to bouts “sponsored by chartered athletic clubs.” Wrestling was generally not affected by laws governing prize fighting – often greatly to its benefit, as wrestling and boxing shared an audience, and boxing-starved fans in states that had barred or heavily restricted that sport frequently turned to both attention and wagers toward wrestling.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Riess, 173.

CHAPTER 5
WRESTLING AT THE DAWN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Ernest Roeber retained the world title in Greco-Roman wrestling into the first few years of the new century, but faced fewer and fewer challengers as that style's popularity declined in America, often to mixed results. He actually lost his first recorded match in 1901. Facing challenger Harvey Parker in a bout that lasted an hour with no fall earned by either party, Roeber retired for the evening. The champion declared "that his understanding was that an hour was the limit for a bout if no fall was obtained in shorter time." His, however, was the minority opinion, and Parker was awarded the bout on a referee's decision. Disposition of money terms and the effect on Roeber's title claim were not revealed, though Roeber was recognized as the champion in future reports.¹⁰⁵

Just a month later, Roeber was set to meet Turkish wrestler Nouroulah. The bout was a handicap match, with the Turk required to throw Roeber three times in an hour, on or off the provided wrestling pad, with no holds barred and only pin falls (where the opponent's shoulders are held to the mat, as compared to rolling or flying falls, wherein the shoulders make only brief contact with the mat in the course of a throw or roll across the mat) to count, Greco-Roman rules. Nouroulah had recently thrown three men twice each in thirty-two minutes. "[T]he promoters of the affair announce they have in addition arranged a number of high-class preliminary bouts to precede the main event."¹⁰⁶

Roeber took the match on a foul. Having failed to obtain a fall twenty six minutes into the contest, Nouroulah took a low hold. Greco-Roman rules forbade attacking the opponent's legs.

¹⁰⁵ "Champions For The Year," *New York Times*, 30 December 1900: 9; "Roeber Loses Wrestling Bout," *New York Times*, 30 April 1901: 7.

¹⁰⁶ "Nouroulah to Meet Roeber To-night," *New York Times*, 24 May 1901: 7.

Roeber's corner protested and the referee awarded the foul and the fall. Police action was required to "suppress the disorderly and dissatisfied element."¹⁰⁷

Later in 1901, Roeber would defeat Nechad, another Turk, in a standard match under Greco-Roman rules. Roeber took the only fall at one hour, twenty-one minutes. What is interesting about all three of Roeber's matches in this period is the lack of attention given to money affairs. Announcement of the relevant side bet or purse had been a standard, even essential, element of wrestling reporting for three decades at this point, yet no mention of remuneration for either Roeber or any of his opponents is mentioned. Likewise, there is little or no mention of wagers placed by audience members. The "disorderly and dissatisfied element" reported at the conclusion of the Roeber/Nouroulah bout may have been frustrated bettors, but again, wrestling audiences had a long-established antipathy towards inconclusive bouts, and while there was a declared winner in the bout, the method – a foul rather than a throw – was certainly less than decisive. These omissions, as well as the paucity of bouts for a recognized top star in the field, point to a general decline in Greco-Roman competition.¹⁰⁸

Joe Piening, colorfully dubbed "the Butcher Boy", was the next Greco-Roman title claimant. As a wrestler, he was noted more for his power than technique. He defeated yet another Turkish wrestler, Nachad, with "a quarter Nelson and hammer hold" in ten minutes, thirty-seven seconds to secure the title. Nachad was said to "yield" rather than be turned or pinned, suggesting a submission rather than pin fall. Nachad was reported to be so shaken by the experience of having his arm thus abused that he refused to return for subsequent falls, and the bout was awarded to Piening, as was the title. As with Roeber's bouts, money terms were not disclosed.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ "Roeber Won On A Foul," *New York Times*, 25 May 1901: 3.

¹⁰⁸ "Roeber Defeats Wrestling Turk," *New York Times*, 23 November 1901: 7.

¹⁰⁹ "Wrestling Bout Won By Piening," *New York Times*, 7 December 1901: 10; "Piening Won Wrestling Championship," *New York Times*, 3 January 1902: 8.

If Piening ever successfully defended his title, I have not been able to find a record of it. He was defeated by H. H. Egeberg, “announced as the Danish champion” for the Greco-Roman championship and a \$1,000 purse almost three years after he won the title, and the *Times* reported that “[t]he bout was the first of its character that has been had in New York in several years, and it drew a huge attendance, more because of the conviction among patrons of athletic sports that it would be a bona fide struggle than because of any thing known of the skill of the competitors.” This further reinforces the decline of Greco-Roman wrestling if no matches were to be had for the recognized champion of the discipline. Furthermore, it suggests that working matches had become more common, though there are no comments about worked Greco-Roman bouts to be found and the paper had never been shy about making such accusations in the past. It was reported that “[t]here was practically no betting on the result at the arena side[.]” Either the match appealed only as a novelty attraction or wrestling fans, having been burned by worked bouts in the past, were becoming reluctant to risk their money, especially on a purse bout which offered less financial incentive for the wrestlers to compete honestly.¹¹⁰

Piening took the rematch held a month later. Each man had taken one fall when Egeberg was forced to concede the match “due to a carbuncle on his left shoulder, which, though well bandaged, gave the wrestler great pain in both of the preceding bouts.” The crowd was initially hostile to the inconclusive finish, until Egeberg’s bandage was removed and the carbuncle was revealed. Given the frequency of similar infections among competitive wrestlers today, it is rather surprising that this is the first of its kind to interrupt a major American professional wrestling match. The match drew “a typically sporty crowd, but a wonderfully well-behaved one, and among the spectators were many men prominent in Wall Street and club circles, who were in evening attire.”¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ “Danish Wrestler Won Graeco-Roman Title,” *New York Times*, 3 December 1904: 10.

¹¹¹ “Wrestler, In Agony, Forfeits Big Match,” *New York Times*, 19 January 1905: 7.

As perhaps indicated by the most prominent title challengers – three Turks and a Dane – Greco-Roman was always more popular in Europe than it was in the United States. The sport there was organized under a regular tournament structure, similar to Japanese *sumo basho*, with select salaried competitors facing each other in a round robin manner. A major event might last a month, “giving a bout or two each night.” Due to the greater popularity of the style on the continent, the level of competition was somewhat higher. Of a major Austrian tournament, it was claimed “there were a dozen wrestlers in Vienna who can throw [American “world champion”] Roeber.”¹¹²

American promoters tried on occasion to mimic the European model. A Greco-Roman tournament was arranged for New York City for late 1900 or early 1901. The field was limited to 8 entrants, each charged a \$100 entrance fee. Those fees, combined with \$500 added “by the management,” composed a total purse of \$1,300. The sum would be split, \$1,000 to the champion and \$300 to the first runner-up. Like similar events in earlier years, however, the event never came to pass. It would be over a decade before another tournament would be organized, this time successfully. The Manhattan Opera House would host international tournaments for top Greco-Roman competitors in June and November of 1915; effectively, the last hurrah for professional Greco-Roman wrestling in the United States. The first culminated in a lengthy but inconclusive final bout between Alexander Aberg and Władek Zbyszko, the second lacked a recorded victor. In both cases, financial terms for the bouts were not disclosed, nor was there any mention of gambling by the audience. Greco-Roman competition had ceased to be a betting proposition.¹¹³

¹¹² “Athletic Sports Abroad,” *New York Times*, 27 July 1900: 5.

¹¹³ “Graeco-Roman Wrestlers’ Tourney,” *New York Times*, 18 November 1900: 23; “Bout With Aberg Exhausts Zbyszko,” *New York Times*, 27 June 1915: 19; “Linow Fails to Throw Bothner,” *New York Times*, 1 December 1915: 15.

Prominent wrestlers, though, were frequently versed in more than one style. No less an authority than world wrestling champion George Hackenschmidt advised catch-as-catch-can wrestlers that cross-training in Greco-Roman wrestling and/or *jujitsu* could only help their catch-as-catch-can skills. The former method was commonly viewed as inferior due to the limited scope of its techniques and greater reliance on pure physical strength. Hackenschmidt, himself initially a Greco-Roman wrestler before making the transition to catch-as-catch-can, suggested that these limitations could be turned into strengths. Limited as the Greco-Roman wrestler is to upper body techniques, he must of necessity become expert in those techniques. By temporarily immersing himself in the Greco-Roman method, a catch-as-catch-can wrestler might likewise improve his own expertise in an area commonly overlooked or under-utilized by his competitors in the catch-as-catch-can arena.¹¹⁴

At quite literally the other end of the spectrum of wrestling technique, Hackenschmidt asserted that the common catch-as-catch-can wrestler was woefully deficient in the art of tripping his opponents, and otherwise using the feet and legs for offensive wrestling purposes. To remedy this, he recommended a course of study in Japanese *jujitsu*, whose practitioners traditionally excel with those techniques. Such practice should also demonstrably improve the wrestler's overall balance, an attribute highly valued in all styles of wrestling. That Hackenschmidt does not mention collar and elbow wrestling in this context, whose practitioners had been renowned for their adept trips and foot sweeps, is telling with regard to the decline of that style.¹¹⁵

Multi-skilled as they often were, wrestlers continued to engage in mixed style bouts, though with less variety than had been common in the 1800s. Collar and elbow, side hold, Devonshire, and the like were things of the past. In their place, catch-as-catch-can alternated with either

¹¹⁴ George Hackenschmidt, *The Complete Science of Wrestling* (London: Health and Strength Ltd., 1909), 12.

¹¹⁵ Hackenschmidt, 14.

Greco-Roman or *ujitsu* (more properly judo; Jigoro Kano's offshoot had almost wholly supplanted earlier methods in Japan), the secondary styles of the time.

Even these bouts, though, were less common than they had been in earlier years. The idea of a "mixed styles" champion had fallen out of favor. Instead, the bouts tended to be either a way of matching top stars of differing disciplines, as in a pair of inconclusive matches between catch-as-catch-can champion Tom Jenkins and Greco-Roman champion John Piening, or of matching one top star against an opponent he would not otherwise face. A mixed styles bout, for example, was the first *Times* report to feature Iowa native Frank Gotch, who would go on to become the top star of the first decade of the 1900s. George Bothner, a lightweight champion who often had trouble getting contests in his own discipline and weight class, took mixed matches against *ujitsu* practitioners.¹¹⁶

Of the mixed styles bouts reported, none mention money terms. Specifically, there is no mention of a side bet associated with any of the contests. In concert with other typical warning signs – wrestlers winning too quickly in unaccustomed styles, bouts ended with unlikely holds, repeated draws between top stars – this points towards bouts with predetermined finishes.

While the mixed styles bout was on its last legs, the handicap match was alive and well in a number of permutations. Turkish wrestler Adali Halil took on six opponents in a 1901 handicap match, contracting to throw each in an hour or receive no payment for the bout. To further his disadvantage, his opponents were allowed the stranglehold, which was barred to Halil. He threw his first man in under three minutes, but the second and smallest opponent, George Baptiste,

¹¹⁶ "Wrestling Bout A Draw," *New York Times*, 1 February 1903: 9; "Broke Up Wrestling Match," *New York Times*, 12 March 1904: 7; "Wrestling Match Won by Ruhlin," *New York Times*, 5 May 1903: 5; "'Farmer' Burns Won Wrestling Bout," *New York Times*, 28 July 1902: 6; "Gotch Won Wrestling Match," *New York Times*, 26 November 1904: 5; "American Wrestler Beat Jiu-Jitsu," *New York Times*, 1 March 1905: 6; "McAdoo May See Wrestling Match," *New York Times*, 5 April 1905: 10; "Jiu Jitsu Beaten By Yankee Wrestler," *New York Times*, 7 April 1905: 2; "Jiu-Jitsu Defended," *New York Times*, 8 April 1905: 10; "New York Wrestler Defeated," *New York Times*, 28 May 1904: 5.

stayed with Halil to the time limit, “and but for the Turk’s great bulk would undoubtedly have thrown him.”¹¹⁷

The most popular variation of the handicap match, though, was for a (presumed) superior wrestler to undertake to throw his (singular) opponent multiple times within a set time limit. These bouts were generally set for one hour, and the handicapped wrestler was to throw his opponent three or more times within that span. The wrestler benefiting from this handicap could win the bout by either throwing his opponent or simply losing fewer falls than the agreed limit. This allowed decidedly inferior wrestlers significant leeway in how they wrestled a bout. As the lengthy bout times in early contests demonstrate, throwing a defensive wrestler can be a difficult task even for the skilled competitor. In wrestling, the most successful attacks are often counterattacks, where a wrestler takes advantage of his opponent’s aggression to create openings for his own offense. In the absence of those opportunities, creating offensive opportunities becomes dramatically more difficult. In this context, limited competitors like Jack Munroe, “the big miner pugilist,”¹¹⁸ or Gus Ruhlin, “the heavyweight pugilist,”¹¹⁹ could plausibly meet championship level wrestlers like Tom Jenkins or Ernest Roeber while leaving the outcome of the bout in some doubt.

Arguably the most successful proponent of the handicap match was the lightweight champion of America, George Bothner. Then, as now, the heavier weights tended to attract the most attention from the public and press, and Bothner frequently had difficulty finding competition within his weight class. To keep active, he took many handicap matches with heavier opponents, giving away as much as eighty pounds in some cases, and, in others, facing less massive but still larger and more skilled opponents like Piening and Jenkins. While a Munroe or Ruhlin would rely

¹¹⁷ “Turk Could Not Throw Baptiste,” *New York Times*, 17 February 1901: 17.

¹¹⁸ “Wrestlers to Meet To-night,” *New York Times*, 13 March 1903: 5.

¹¹⁹ “Ruhlin Won Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 22 May 1903: 7.

on superior strength to avoid falls from superior opponents, Bothner worked in the opposite direction, using his technical superiority to counteract greater mass.¹²⁰

Given that background, it is appropriate that Bothner's retirement match was a handicap bout against "a giant in size and weight" named August Faust. The bout drew "[u]nusual interest" due to Bothner's retirement announcement. To counterbalance Faust's size advantage, he had "contracted to throw Bothner four times in one hour."¹²¹

Bothner was successful; Faust failed to gain a single fall. Reports note the stranglehold was barred, "but Bothner wormed and wriggled out of bar and hammer locks as well as quarter, half, and three-quarter Nelsons so cleverly that some of the onlookers claimed that he could have broken a stranglehold." Bothner's fifteen-year career was at an end, "as he had given all the big men a chance in these handicaps, and there is no man in his own class with whom he can secure a match."¹²²

Bothner's retirement highlights a critical difference between a professional sport where remuneration is based on wagers versus one where purses or other regular payments are offered. If some level of reimbursement is guaranteed, underdog challengers have material incentive to take on dominant champions. They are certain to be paid at least a minimum fee and had the potential to radically improve their profile and future earnings if they manage a victory. With a wager or other winner-take-all system in place, the motivation to take these high-risk bouts is lessened – the challenger is very likely to risk health and well-being (and money!) for no gain, or even a loss. Favorable odds and handicaps can manage the risk to some degree, but as Bothner

¹²⁰ "Bothner and McCormick to Wrestle," *New York Times*, 13 October 1901: 11; "Wrestling Match Postponed," *New York Times*, 15 October 1901: 10; "Bothner Wins Wrestling Match," *New York Times*, 22 October 1901: 5; "Bothner to Wrestle Leonhardt," *New York Times*, 5 February 1902: 10; "Bothner's Wrestling Match," *New York Times*, 22 November 1902: 6; "Row At Wrestling Match," *New York Times*, 23 December 1902: 6.

¹²¹ "Bothner's Last Wrestling Match," *New York Times*, 28 January 1903: 10.

¹²² "Bothner Wins Again," *New York Times*, 30 January 1903: 10.

(and Henry Dufur before him) demonstrated, once a certain reputation for dominance was earned it was often detrimental to business.

Even the favorite might want a guarantee. Former middleweight champion Frank H. Lewis, having outgrown that weight class without being beaten for the title, took a number of handicap matches against true middleweights to mixed results. When, in 1905, he agreed to a rematch with W. W. Beal and contracted to throw him three times in an hour or be declared the loser, Lewis insisted on a split which promised \$500 to the winner of the contest and \$250 to the loser. He and Beal had wrestled under these conditions before under a winner-take-all agreement, and Lewis had come up short. The former champion wanted to be sure his efforts were rewarded in some way.¹²³

The violence level of American wrestling continued to increase in the early 1900s. This came in two flavors. The first was a shift towards more dangerous wrestling techniques – holds which not only placed the opponent in jeopardy of losing a fall, but of sustaining severe physical damage as well. There were three primary techniques in this category – the full Nelson, the stranglehold, and the toe hold.

The full Nelson was of limited practicality. Though painful and potentially dangerous – the hold puts stress directly on the spine – it is extremely difficult to apply to a powerful opponent and comparatively easy for such an opponent to resist its effects. At the same time, the body position of the two wrestlers is such that, even if the hold is applied, obtaining a pin fall is nearly impossible. Because of these impracticalities, use of a full Nelson may indicate either an extremely unusual wrestler or a worked match.

The stranglehold suffers from none of those limitations. It is no more difficult to apply to a powerful opponent than to a weaker one, and its effects are virtually impossible to resist with strength alone. While it suffers from a similar problem with regard to body position as the full

¹²³ “Lewis and Beal to Meet Again,” *Los Angeles Herald*, 8 September 1905: 4.

Nelson, the offensive wrestler can strangle an opponent into semi- or unconsciousness and obtain a fall afterwards.

Toe holds were a favorite of long-time champion Frank Gotch. Like the stranglehold, the toe hold is more of a family of techniques than a unique method. Gotch's mentor, the wrestler and coach from Cedar County, Iowa, Martin "Farmer" Burns, devoted a great deal of attention to the variations of the toe hold in his mail order course, *Lessons in Wrestling and Physical Culture*. What links all of those variations is the use of a grip around the toes of the opponent to twist the foot and put pressure on the ankle, forcing him to turn, submit, or suffer severe damage to the joint. Like the stranglehold, the toe hold is virtually impossible to resist by sheer strength, attacking as it does a relatively weak extremity with all the power of the aggressor. When George Hackenschmidt – a powerful and skilled wrestler, but one largely ignorant of the toe hold – met Gotch, he lobbied heavily to bar the technique.¹²⁴ Likewise was it said of another Gotch challenger, George Lurich, that he "said he wanted the toe hold barred if he met Gotch. Perhaps he was thinking of a winner-take-all match and wanted to be prepared to walk home."¹²⁵

Holds such as these were frequently barred for safety reasons – the strangle was potentially fatal, and both the toe hold and full Nelson could cripple an opponent. Just as commonly, though, the barring of one or more specific holds could act as a leveling handicap in a mismatched encounter. An opponent facing, say, Evan Lewis might well breathe a sigh of relief upon hearing that strangleholds had been barred from the contest. A challenger to Frank Gotch's title might feel similarly more secure in the absence of legal toe holds.

The popular assertion that these holds were developed by catch-as-catch-can wrestlers to more quickly end matches is, frankly, somewhat ridiculous. First of all, it is a tautology - all wrestling holds are, by definition, designed to more quickly end matches. A wrestler uses a back

¹²⁴ *New York Times*, 16 November 1910: 12.

¹²⁵ George S. Robbins, *Frank A. Gotch, World's Champion Wrestler: His Life, Mat Battles, and Instructions on How to Wrestle* (Chicago: Joseph B. Bowles, 1913), 15.

heel trip with the intent of swiftly ending his contest as surely as he does a toe hold. A hold that does not work towards the end of a match is of no particular use to anyone. Secondly, the holds were hardly a unique or original development of catch-as-catch-can practitioners. The strangle and the toe holds, for example, are recorded as being used in competition as far back as the ancient Greek Olympics. One of the more famous accounts of an Olympic *pankration* contest, in fact, includes reference to both of them:

Having already grabbed Arrichion around the waist, the opponent had in mind killing him and rammed an arm against his throat, cutting off his breath, while with his legs fastened around Arrichion's groin, he pressed his feet against the back of both his knees. He got ahead of Arrichion with this stranglehold since the sleep of death was from that point creeping over his senses, but in relaxing his grip, he did not get past Arrichion's stratagem. For Arrichion kicked away his heel, which put his opponent's right side into an unfavorable position, since now the knee was dangling. Then Arrichion held his opponent – who was not really an opponent any more – to his groin and leaning to his left he trapped the tip of his opponent's (right) foot in the bend of his (right) knee and pulled the ankle out of joint with the violence of his twist in the other direction.¹²⁶

Expectations played as large a role as technique in increasing the brutality of wrestling. One of the defining traits of professional wrestling, in contrast with the amateur game, was a greater tolerance for brutality on the part of the participants. A certain level of punishment for punishment's sake was expected by the wrestlers, referees, and onlookers. Wrestlers were exhorted to use every technique to its maximum capacity in order to incapacitate the opponent. In advising aspiring wrestlers on the use of various throws, for example, George Hackenschmidt wrote “[t]hese are only a few of the reasons why you should throw your man heavily, but the chief one is, of course, that by so doing you are able to so shake him as to render him momentarily, at all events, practically incapable of offering any serious resistance at pinning him down.”¹²⁷ While Hackenschmidt abhorred senseless brutality in the course of a wrestling match, he also recognized that foul or injurious tactics by the opponent must be countered using similar

¹²⁶ Michael Poliakoff, *Competition, Violence, and Culture: Combat Sports in the Ancient World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 62, 63.

¹²⁷ Hackenschmidt, 35.

methods in order to be successful; he recommended “good teeth” as the best defense against a particularly brutal hold across the face, for example. Excessively gentle wrestling was ineffective to the point of farce.¹²⁸

Nor was all brutality applied strictly within the bounds of legal wrestling technique. Reports of bouts from the early twentieth century are full of technically illegal tactics which were either tacitly approved or at least tolerated by officials – including hair pulling, gouging, biting, kicking, and punching. This last would draw some sanction – in 1901, a match was broken up by police as an illegal boxing contest and on more than one occasion referees awarded bouts on a foul following thrown punches. For the most part, though, rough tactics earned no more than ineffectual referee warnings and retaliation in kind from the opponent.¹²⁹

Again, wrestling had been transformed from a communal activity into an economic activity. At the professional level, it was no longer a method of celebration and relaxation, but of competition for resources. Regardless of the method used, whether the brutality could be cloaked in wrestling technique or was mere gouging and biting, wrestlers demonstrated little compunction about damaging each other in any way they could. The intrusion of economic ends into the sport had a dehumanizing effect on the participants. Opponents became obstacles to be removed in the most expeditious way.

It is telling that these sorts of tactics seemed most common in the most high-profile contests. Championship bouts between evenly matched competitors saw the most frequent use of the most dangerous tactics. Champion Tom Jenkins defended his title with the use of the full (or “double”) Nelson, and challenger Dan McLeod attempted to take it from him with a (legal) stranglehold.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 50, 110.

¹²⁹ “Police Invade A New Athletic Club in the Bronx,” *New York Times*, 6 March 1901: 6; “Parr’s Wrestling Bout on a Foul,” *New York Times*, 13 January 1903: 10; “American Wrestler Downed By Turk,” *New York Times*, 27 November 1908: 6; “Threw Wrestler Off Stage,” *New York Times*, 30 December 1908: 10; “Wrestling at Grand Central Palace,” *New York Times*, 22 November 1909: 7; “Irish Wrestlers Both Disqualified,” *New York Times*, 23 November 1909: 10; “Con O’Kelley Throws Turk,” *New York Times*, 22 April 1910: 10; “Americus Throws ‘Yankee’ Rogers,” *New York Times*, 23 April 1911: C6.

George Hackenschmidt dislocated a man's arm in London to win a title before coming to the United States; once there, he used the full Nelson as part of his arsenal in overcoming Jenkins.¹³⁰

Frank Gotch, aforementioned master of the toe hold, while by all accounts an excellent technical wrestler, was also known to use more prosaic methods to defeat an opponent. Tom Jenkins accused Gotch of biting him in a title match. Although Hackenschmidt was not concerned about Gotch's toe hold going into their climactic match in 1908, the bout was marred by reports of all sorts of nefarious activity – it was reported Gotch “roughed his man's features with his knuckles, butted him under the chin, and generally worsted Hackenschmidt until the foreigner was at a loss how to proceed.” While Hackenschmidt was initially gracious in defeat, he later claimed to be repeatedly fouled by his opponent, and that Gotch had greased himself to prevent Hackenschmidt from securing any offensive holds. The bout was dirty enough to provoke the *New York Times* to print a review of popular methods of cheating wrestling experts.¹³¹

The increase in both violence and rumors of faked matches eventually led to the involvement of the law. George Hackenschmidt, following his first tour of the United States in 1905, claimed, “[o]ne thing I could not understand about America was the faking methods of some of the wrestlers. Wherever I went to seek a match I was confronted by a lot of schemers, who made all sorts of unsportsmanlike propositions to me. When they saw that I was not a fakir they avoided

¹³⁰ “Sharkey Downed in Wrestling Match,” *New York Times*, 12 June 1901: 7; “Jenkins Won At Wrestling,” *New York Times*, 23 December 1903: 10; “World's Wrestling Contest,” *New York Times*, 31 January 1904: 13; “Hackenschmidt Is Wrestling Champion,” *New York Times*, 5 May 1905: 5.

¹³¹ “Jenkins Gets A Fall,” *New York Times*, 20 May 1905: 2; “Wrestlers Training For Match,” *New York Times*, 30 March 1908: 8; “Champion Wrestler Quits, Exhausted,” *New York Times*, 4 April 1908: 10; “Gotch Great Wrestler,” *New York Times*, 5 April 1908: S1; “Defeated By Fouls, Hackenschmidt Says,” *New York Times*, 6 April 1908: 8; “Clever Tricks Win Wrestling Matches,” *New York Times*, 12 April 1908: S4.

me and began to say unkind things about me. I guess I became unpopular with some of them, but I don't mind this as long as I have the better element on my side."¹³²

In 1909, wrestling promoter Jack Carroll, former manager of Frank Gotch, and his associates Bert Warner and Winn Sharris were arrested as members “of the Maybray gang of wrestling and foot-race swindlers” indicted at Omaha and Council Bluffs. John C. Mabray and thirteen associates, including Carroll, Warner, and Sharris, were convicted “of illegal use of the mails to promote fake sporting events,” including “[f]oot racing, wrestling, prizefighting, horse racing, and wire tapping”. The case was the first legal action reported against a person or group for fraudulent wrestling, despite decades of accusations.¹³³

The Mabray (AKA Maybray) case and accusations like those leveled by Hackenschmidt led to a Chicago ordinance that gave the mayor power to refuse or rescind wrestling permits. When a prestigious and potentially lucrative match between Frank Gotch and Stanislaus Zbyszko was planned for Chicago, Mayor Fred Busse refused the permit, saying “Decoration [Memorial] Day is sacred to the dead heroes of the war, and I will not permit professional sports of this type to desecrate it.”¹³⁴

The Superior Court of Cook County, Illinois, however, overrode the mayor and issued a writ of mandamus to compel the issuance of the required permit. Initial reports suggested the Mayor would let the matter drop, but two days later an appeal was filed. The Court was unable to hear that appeal until after May 30, and the writ of mandamus was to remain in effect until the resolution of the appeal.¹³⁵

¹³² “Flays Our Wrestlers. Hackenschmidt, ‘Russian Lion,’ Says Americans ‘Fake’ Matches,” *Bisbee Daily Review*, 20 August 1905: 8.

¹³³ “Wrestlers Held As Frauds,” *New York Times*, 9 October 1909: 6; “Convicted For Fake Sports,” *New York Times*, 21 March 1910: 3.

¹³⁴ “Chicago Plans to Restrict Wrestlers,” *New York Times*, 16 March 1910: 11; “Mayor Busse Checks Wrestlers,” *New York Times*, 14 May 1910: 11.

¹³⁵ “Chicago Cannot Stop Wrestling Bout,” *New York Times*, 20 May 1910: 10; “Busse Wins ‘Fall’ in Wrestling Case,” *New York Times*, 22 May 1910: S2.

The appeal was ultimately irrelevant. Gotch faced Zbyszko in Chicago (and not, as had been suggested, on an abandoned race track outside of town) and the preceding legal issues were the most difficult part of the bout. He defeated the Polish challenger in straight falls. The first was an improbably swift (and even more improbably accurately timed) 6.5 seconds, and Gotch was never regarded as being in danger.¹³⁶

Busse's successor, Carter Harrison Jr., reluctantly approved a 1912 Chicago match between wrestlers identified only as "Mahmout and Pedersen", citing a lack of legal grounds to refuse it. However, the Mayor complained that the promoting organization was the same group that had promoted the Gotch/Hackenschmidt championship match of the previous September. Of that bout, "[t]he Mayor said that... one of the men was in such physical condition that he was unable to offer genuine resistance much less take the initiative in a grueling match."¹³⁷

The match in question was the second between Gotch and Hackenschmidt. The first had been a long and grueling affair, with Gotch the ultimate victor. The second Hackenschmidt called "the cheapest world's championship ever won." Hackenschmidt, the former champion, entered the ring with a pre-existing knee injury. Such an injury would be a handicap in any high-level bout; against a man who specialized in punishing holds against the legs, as Gotch did, it essentially guaranteed defeat. Details of the injury itself are sketchy. According to Lou Thesz, Gotch's people paid one of Hackenschmidt's training partners to injure him deliberately. This claim is impossible to verify, and presents the obvious question of how Gotch's people could know Hackenschmidt would go through with the match following such an injury, but the mere fact it was made helps illustrate how widespread suspicions were regarding the contest.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ "Gotch Defeats Zbyszko," *New York Times*, 2 June 1910: 11.

¹³⁷ "Mayor Arraigns Wrestling," *New York Times*, 29 February 1912: 9.

¹³⁸ "Statements of Principals," *New York Times*, 5 September 1911: 11; Lou Thesz, *Hooker* (self-published, 1995), 61.

A year later, Harrison found enough legal ground to prevent a Zbyszko/Lurich match, because “[m]y information is that Lurich is or has been under the management of persons connected with the Labor Day swindle in 1911... Certainly no permit should ever be issued to any of the crowd which gulled the public in the Gotch-Hackenschmidt fiasco of 1911.” Frank Gotch supported Mayor Harrison’s intentions to keep wrestling clean, but objected to the characterization of his match. “So far as I was concerned, my match with Hackenschmidt was no fiasco, as the Mayor calls it.”¹³⁹

Gotch’s objections notwithstanding, more and more wrestling matches came to be popularly regarded as “fiascos”. “[B]urlesque,” “bluffing,” “joke,” “farce,” and “alleged bout” also saw common use in describing wrestling matches. While Gotch’s retirement in 1913 is commonly credited with signaling the beginning of the “worked era,” the increase in accusations of match fixing coincides most closely with the decrease in the use of side bets to pay wrestlers. On the one hand, guaranteed purse payments took a great deal of the financial risk out of wrestling for the athletes. A wrestler no longer need fear losing money on a bout, and even a losing wrestler might find himself taking home a respectable sum of money, provided, of course, he was paid as promised, because not all wrestlers were, or are. That risk was now assumed by the promoter, who took on the costs of providing a venue, advertising, paying the athletes and ancillary participants, and other costs associated with putting on a wrestling contest.¹⁴⁰

On the other hand, in giving up risk, the wrestlers gave up influence, as well. As the man (almost invariably a man even today, certainly so in the early 1900s) who decided who wrestled whom, and for how much money, the promoter wielded a great deal of power. A man who wrestled for a purse, rather than a wager, was at the mercy of those who provided the purses. The

¹³⁹ “Bars Wrestling Promoter,” *New York Times*, 7 February 1913: 12; “Gotch Explains ‘Fiasco’ Wrestling,” *New York Times*, 9 February 1913: S2.

¹⁴⁰ “Burlesque Bouts On Mat,” *New York Times*, 31 October 1911: 11; “Strike at Gamblers in West,” *New York Times*, 14 September 1911: 10; “Roller Fails To Appear,” *New York Times*, 28 November 1911: 14; Beekman, 50.

most successful wrestlers – the performers who draw the largest crowds and have the highest public profiles – have some negotiating power. The less recognizable, less popular performers have no leverage. Unlike competitive sports, wrestling “talent” in the form of being able to defeat an opponent is meaningless; the would-be star cannot simply outwrestle his more successful opponents to move up the ladder. He must instead out-politick them in the promoter’s office, or find some other way of demonstrating the potential to make their promoter more money than other performers do. The wrestler no longer supplies capital to the professional wrestling industry. Where once wrestlers had been independent entrepreneurs, they have become contracted employees.

This promotional model lends itself to monopoly. Just as the National League in baseball either crushed or absorbed competitors like the American Association and the Player’s League, wrestling promoters drove smaller competitors out of business. The Gold Dust Trio rose in the 1920s around Ed Lewis, Joseph “Toots” Mondt, and Billy Sandow. Though it fell apart, it was replaced in time with the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA), a conglomerate of promoters that dominated professional wrestling in the United States and, to a lesser extent, other parts of the world from the 1940s until the early 1980s. The NWA was eventually surpassed by the rise of the World Wrestling Federation (now World Wrestling Entertainment) in the 1980s, and that company currently dominates the professional wrestling business. Though the names, owners, and acronyms have changed over the years, the fundamental operating principle has not. The promoter still decides who wrestles whom, who defeats whom, who is recognized as a champion, and who is confined to the opening matches.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ See Tim Hornbaker’s *National Wrestling Alliance: The Untold Story of the Monopoly That Strangled Pro Wrestling* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2007) for a complete history of the organization.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

The use of the side bet as the primary method of paying wrestlers acted as an economic driver in unforeseen ways. Initially, it placed control of the sport's economic and technical dimensions in the hands of the competitors. A wrestler could make any bout he cared to, for whatever terms and under whatever rules, provided he could find an amenable opponent. He controlled profit, loss, and working conditions. No one set out to reduce the various folk styles to a pair of internationally recognized sets of rules. No one set out to transform what had been a safe way to test one's physical prowess against one's neighbors into a profession which risked life and limb.

But over time, the side bet changed wrestling in precisely those ways. Wrestling was transformed from a communal athletic celebration into a private economic exchange. The cornucopia of folk styles that was once scattered across America was gradually pared down to two sets of rules designed to accommodate the widest possible array of competitors. That paring down contributed to the homogenization of American sporting culture; local variation slowly but inexorably gave way to national, even international, standardization.

While not intentional, it is not coincidental that that single style allowed for a greater degree of violence in competition than its predecessors. Wrestlers (and audiences) were no longer members of a shared community, where mutual well-being was a central concern. Instead, they were economic actors, sometime partners and sometime competitors, with the profit motive the focus of the relationship. When profit was mated to the defeat of an opponent, and rules sufficiently broad, the priorities of competitors changed from mutual entertainment to personal gain.

At the same time, the side bet system protected the integrity of the sport. So long as bets were placed and honored, each competitor was motivated to give a sincere effort. The side bet created economic incentives in the style of both carrot and stick – the winning wrestler profited, while the loser not only failed to profit, but suffered an outright loss.

This created an opening for professional promoters. The guarantee of income relieved a wrestler's fear of coming out of a bout empty-handed. But in taking that guarantee, a wrestler forfeited control over their career. It was a case of the Golden Rule at work – “he who had the gold made the rules.” Once promoters controlled the wrestlers' pay, they controlled every aspect of the sport. Rules, scheduling, and ultimately wins and losses were no longer decided by the men in the ring, but by the men in the office who paid them.

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