

## Barring Strangles: The Evolution of Catch-As-Catch-Can Wrestling

Jake Shannon - November 28, 2014

For those new to our sport, [catch-as-catch-can](#) is a tough sport with a rich and diverse history. Catch wrestling, as it is known for short, was born near the end of the industrial revolution in the northern [Anglo-Celtic Isles](#) and practiced there by predominately Irish blue collar workers. The style was likely first documented as a result of the gentry in the Lancashire region of England betting upon wrestling outcomes as they did with the outcomes of dog and cock fighting. Fast forward a century and a half and most of the wrestling that we are familiar with in the West today is derived, in some manner, from this seminal sport of catch-as-catch-can wrestling. In many ways, the cultural evolution and growth of [economic regulations](#) during the Twentieth Century mirrored the expansion of rules governing catch-as-catch-can matches as it transitioned from the more laissez faire Golden Age to the modern, heavily-regulated [freestyle](#) and [folkstyle](#) derivatives. My aim in this article is to explore the history and evolution of the growth of regulations in catch wrestling that seem to have really begun with the barring of the [stranglehold](#).

Originally, professional wrestling (i.e., [catch wrestling](#)) started when coal miners in the North of England began wrestling for side-bets after working an arduous day in the mines. Eventually some of these laborers were able to sustain themselves and their families solely upon the money earned from these after work wagers and the first "professional" wrestlers were born. The game of catch followed the immigrants that came to the United States during this period too. The sport born in the Anglo-Celtic Isles took root in the United States and flourished, eventually becoming one of, if not *the* most popular sport in American between the Civil War and World War I.

In the beginning, during the aforementioned side-bet period, the rules of catch wrestling matches (length of time, weight classes, etc.) were determined by the two wrestlers and their financial backers. The [bilateral](#) nature of such agreed upon matches resulted in an incredibly diverse set of rules. However as interest in the sport grew, third parties became more and more involved and promoters began to impose their own rules, not the individual wrestlers and their backers. During the side-bet period, the wrestlers clearly had more control and power over their sport. As the saying goes, "he who pays the Piper calls the tune" so as third parties began to control the money (i.e., "pay the Piper") the power and control shifted to these promoters. Fortunately even with this shift, there were still rule variants distributed across the assorted promotions. Perhaps the most common denominator among these varying rules sets was the ability for a competitor to win via pin, and to a lesser extent to win via a concession hold (*even this [pinning common denominator has variants](#), such as the two-point pin and three-point pin or changes in the referee count from a three count to a two or even a five count*).

Eventually as participation grew, catch-as-catch-can fractured into amateur and pro schisms, the former evolving into the [freestyle](#) and [folkstyle](#) we see today and the latter eventually evolving into [pure entertainment](#) with no traditionally understood sporting competition involved (*the ill-fated hybrid sport-entertainment of carnival wrestling was somewhere in-between with [At Show](#) wrestlers wrestling all-comers and "plants" alike*.) Unfortunately, due to their proliferation and complexity, the rules of modern amateur wrestling are seldom understood by those that haven't actually wrestled (or attended matches of a close family member that has participated in the sport). As an aside, none less than [Wade Schalles](#) has implored the contemporary wrestling leadership to help simplify the modern sport, "[o]ur rules must be simple to understand and our strategies infinitely complex if we expect to entertain spectators" in his massive critique of contemporary wrestling "[How Wrestling Wins](#)".

Wade approached me a year ago to get involved with catch wrestling because of the freedom for participants and simplicity for spectators. Much of my involvement started back in 2005 when I sent my friend (and another wrestling legend) [Karl Gotch](#) a letter for feedback on my idea for a catch wrestling rule set that would eventually become the bedrock of our modestly successful [King of Catch Wrestling](#) tournaments.

I don't think it is too controversial to suggest that [Karl was perhaps the most influential catch wrestling proponent during the late 20th Century](#) (followed closely in influence by my trusted friend, coach and mentor [Billy Robinson](#)). Karl, after excelling in amateur wrestling competition, learned the craft of catch-as-catch-can at Riley's Gym (which he famously dubbed "The Snake Pit) and then honed and improved his skills further in the United States with American catch wrestlers like as [Frank Wolfe](#) and [Benny](#)

[Sherman](#) (Karl was also an acquaintance of [Karl Pojello](#))

Karl Gotch suggested including only the [sleeper choke](#) into the rule set (see above) but given [the precedent \(see photo above\) of various strangles and gags being used to win the hugely popular matches of the Golden Age](#) and the fact that most of the resurgence in interest in catch wrestling is a direct result of the growth of the sport of Mixed Martial Arts (which allows a broad array of choking techniques) it seemed prudent allow chokes even more liberally than just the sleeper. My longtime friend and coach [Billy Robinson](#) supported the inclusion of all chokes into the competition and then proceeded to teach many of us choke variations. It is important to note that historically many catch-as-catch-can matches, especially during the later periods, barred strangles. Here is a newspaper blurb explaining:

No form of strangling is permitted, unless especially agreed to by the principals. Before each match the announcement is usually made "strangle hold barred." -*Minneapolis Tribune – February 20, 1910*

However, perhaps my biggest inspiration for my rule set came from America's first Heavyweight Catch-As-Catch-Can Champion, Evan "Strangler" Lewis. In my estimation, this first "Strangler" (not to be confused with Ed "Strangler" Lewis, who came later) embodied the free spirit that directly gave rise to the popularity of Catch Wrestling during its first Golden Era (the Farmer Burns, Tom Jenkins, Frank Gotch, George Hackenschmidt era). Evan Lewis was the first recognized American Heavyweight Catch-As-Catch-Can Champion (some but not all recognized him as world champion as well).

My inclusion of chokes in the [King of Catch Wrestling](#) open tournaments was a strategic one since the Evan Lewis tradition of strangling his opponents coincided with the largest explosion in the popularity of catch-as-catch-can wrestling that the world has ever seen.

"What stirred up friends and foes alike when Lewis wrestled was the trademark maneuver that gave Evan Lewis his nickname – "The Strangler." He "made no bones about his method," said Ring magazine in 1930, "which was to get an arm about the throat of an opponent and choke him until he whispered 'enough' or was unable to whisper anything."

It was for real and perfectly legal in wrestling then under the "catch-as-catch-can" and "no-holds-barred" style the Chicago Tribune called at that time "one of the cruelest forms of sport permitted in any civilized community. The breaking of a leg, the crushing in of the ribs, the slow torture of tearing a limb from its socket is permissible and constitutional ..." Ironically, boxing was illegal in most of the country then because it was considered too brutal."

"Evan Lewis didn't invent the strangle hold, and nothing in the rules prevented others from using it on him. Henry Shellenberger got his hands around Lewis' neck and choked him unconscious to win a fall in their July 25, 1887 match in Madison. Unfortunately for him, Lewis woke up in time to resume the match and then showed Shellenberger how it should be done." <http://onmilwaukee.com/sports/articles/evanlewis.html>

In my opinion, the massive modern growth of both [The Ultimate Fighting Championships](#) and even [Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu](#) attest to the popularity of the "strangling" precedent set by Evan Lewis. Take a look at some of the early newspaper reports of competitive catch wrestling matches, they sound like they might be describing modern MMA or grappling events:

"Lewis flopped over from his back, and, after a brief struggle, succeeded in getting his right forearm across the throat of Cannon, who, to save himself from being legally choked, frantically and hopelessly waived his hands in the air, thus signifying that yielded the bout to his adversary." - [Madison Wisconsin State Journal, Dec 22, 1885](#)

CHICAGO, Feb. 7. – Joe Acton, the champion catch-as-catch-can wrestler of America, defeated Evan Lewis, of Madison, Wis., to night, at Battery D Armory, in the presence of 4,000 spectators. The winner took 75 per cent of the gate receipts and the loser 25 per cent. A number in the audience pronounced the affair a hippodrome, but also declared it probably the best exhibition of skillful wrestling ever seen in Chicago. Only once during the match did Lewis secure a "strangle" hold, and then Acton broke it immediately. The men wrestled under special rules, which provided that two shoulders down should constitute a fall instead of two shoulders and a hip as is generally the case. The terms were the best three in five falls, and Lewis won only the second. At the conclusion of the match both men posted \$100 to wrestle again according to regulation rules. - *The New York Times – February 8, 1887*

**The Strangler Finally Gets The Better Of His Famous Adversary**

The catch-as-catch-can wrestling match between Joe Acton of Philadelphia and Evan Lewis of Madison, Wis., was decided at Battery D Armory last night. It was announced as for \$500 a side, best three in five falls, three points down to constitute a fall.

For years, Acton has been regarded as invincible and also an honest wrestler. Ugly rumors, however, were current yesterday afternoon, and these no doubt caused many to doubt the honesty of last night's match and remain away from the Armory. It appears that an effort was made to start betting on the contest yesterday afternoon at Dowling's, and the result was such a rush to get money on Lewis at any odds that the crowd began to shout "Rats" whenever an offer was made.

Nobody offered a dollar on Acton. Finally, one man offered \$100 to \$30 on Lewis, another "raised" him by offering \$180 to \$200 that he could call every fall. At this Dowling ordered the names off the blackboard, saying: "This match is already won; we don't want any betting here on a race of that kind."

At the call of time the men closed immediately, Acton grabbing Lewis around the neck. In a few seconds Lewis was forced to the carpet, but got up quickly, with Acton having a back body-hold. They struggled for a few moments without result. Then Acton started Lewis for the carpet. Lewis turned and landed on top of Acton. The latter slipped out from under him like an eel and recovered his back body-hold. Then he got Lewis two points down, the Strangler saving himself by a bridge, which Acton tried to break. In a scuffle Lewis was forced half-way through the ropes. Lewis wriggled out of the hold and back on the platform.

Instantly Acton was on top of him and in a running scramble sent him again to the edge of the platform, where a hold on the ropes and a bridge came into service. Lewis escaped again. Acton, always on top, got hugged and jolted him until his bridge gave way, and, in ten minutes and forty-two seconds, a fall was awarded to Acton, who was loudly cheered. During the intermission Mr. Rueschaw gave an exhibition of club swinging.

When the men came out for the second bout Acton appeared blown, while Lewis was perfectly fresh. Lewis assumed the aggressive. There was a great deal of twisting and wriggling, some very clever work on both sides, and Lewis tried a hip-lock once more, raised Acton into the air, and landed him flat on his back. Time, 3 minutes and 4 seconds.

The third bout was comparatively tame. They closed quickly and, after a little maneuvering, went to the floor with Acton uppermost. The bout terminated by Lewis getting another hip-lock on Acton and again planting him on his back. Time, 5 minutes, 40 seconds.

The fourth bout settled the contest. Almost at the outset Lewis got a strangle hold, by which he held Acton for about a minute. Acton then slipped out of it, got on top of Lewis, and tipped him over his head. Lewis spun around on the top of his cranium and extricated himself. By a movement that brought down the house Acton with a back body hold slipped down behind Lewis and pitched Lewis backward over him.

The "Strangler" nearly landed on his back but managed to turn to his side. After this they stood up and indulged in efforts at tripping until Lewis once more hip-locked Acton and floored him, winning the match. Time, 6 minutes and 33 seconds. In this bout Lewis showed more skill than he has heretofore been given credit for. The contest as a whole was an interesting and at times exciting exhibition, and the spectators were pretty well satisfied.

However, the transparent fact that Acton was in no condition for a hard struggle, coupled with the peculiar betting, caused a great deal of unfavorable comment. - *Chicago Tribune* - April 12, 1887

But Evan Lewis wasn't the only American champion that was game to wrestle "*no holds barred*". My personal favorite catch wrestler from the Golden Era is three time American Heavyweight Champion [Tom Jenkins](#).

"A Wrestling match of international importance will take place Tuesday night in Madison Square garden, New York, in which Tom Jenkins, the champion catch-as-catch-can mat artist of America, will meet the champion of England and Ireland, Joe Carroll. The contest will be to a finish and no hold is barred. Carroll is said to pride himself on his strangle hold and once he gets it on a man it is all over. Carroll's most notable performance was in staying three hours with Naraulah, the "Terrible Turk." Only pin falls are said to count in this contest, though it is said that Carroll is a wonder at flying falls. Carroll became the champion of England during coronation week when he defeated Tom

Cannon, Carkeek and the other big mat artists on the other side.

I think that Jenkins will defeat Carroll. Jenkins is America's greatest catch-as-catch-can wrestler, and I don't believe England has a wrestler who can defeat America's best man at the game." - *Bridgeport Herald* – November 9, 1902

At the height of popularity of catch-as-catch-can, Jenkins was actively participating in high profile matches where strangles were allowed. Here's a report of Dan McLeod strangling Jenkins for a fall. Interestingly enough, the article seems to imply that the strangle was commonly barred only when there were discrepancies in wrestling skill.

#### **Dan McLeod Thrown Twice in Match with No Holds Barred.**

In a catch-as-catch-can wrestling match which took place in Madison Square Garden last night, Tom Jenkins, world's champion at this style of wrestling, defeated Dan McLeod, gaining two falls out of three. Contrary to expectations, McLeod, who was in excellent form, secured the first fall with a strangle hold, half Nelson. For several years past this hold has been barred in public exhibitions of wrestling in this city but these two men were so evenly matched that it was considered unnecessary to bar the strangle hold. - *The New York Times* – December 23, 1903

Here is a [headline](#) showing how Jenkins subdued one of the highest profile catch wrestlers of all time, Frank Gotch, by strangling him into unconsciousness:

However, as the sport of catch wrestling grew in popularity, so the more brutal aspects of the sport began to be frowned upon. To accommodate the growth, participants began working to prohibit the more dangerous holds. As amateur catch-as-catch-can grew in popularity in the United States, many holds (including the strangle and full nelson) began to be marginalized (this was parallel to what was happening in Japan as [jiu-jitsu evolved into the sport of judo](#)).

It is fascinating to see Jenkin's attitude evolve from choking Gotch for a win toward advocating the removal of the more dangerous holds like the strangle and the full nelson. This evolution has been described in-depth elsewhere [here](#) and [here](#). Here is more:

“Early folkstyle rules were a combination of catch wrestling rules brought over by early American settlers and the freestyle rules of the time. By the late 1800s, folkstyle had evolved into a popular sport practiced at local athletic clubs, along with boxing and gymnastics. Many college wrestling teams sprung up at the beginning of the 20th century, and in 1928 the first NCAA national championship was won by Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State University). Since then folkstyle wrestling teams have been established at thousands of universities, high schools, and even at elementary schools.” <http://wrestling.isport.com/wrestling-guides/history-of-wrestling>

I will close with an interesting point made to me during a [conversation](#) with [Scientific Wrestling Head Coach Wade Schalles](#) about chokes; while they are against the rules of competitive wrestling now they are still being used, especially at the higher levels of competition. A perfect example of this is the famous wrestling Schultz brothers and their modified headlock. Here is [Olympian Dave Schultz using a modified choke](#) commonly known as the "[Schultz Headlock](#)" during high level international wrestling competition. This maneuver has found application in Mixed Martial Arts too, here is wrestler [Matt Hughes talking about using the Schultz Headlock to beat Ricardo Almeida](#) at UFC 117. The spirit of Evan Lewis lives on in both wrestling and MMA. It seems there is cause to optimistic that the evolution of catch-as-catch-can wrestling will continue, as it has for the last century and a half, perhaps precisely because is difficult to pin down.

**\*Special thanks to Dan Kanagie, Jimmy Wheeler, Nathan Hatton and Wade Schalles.**

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