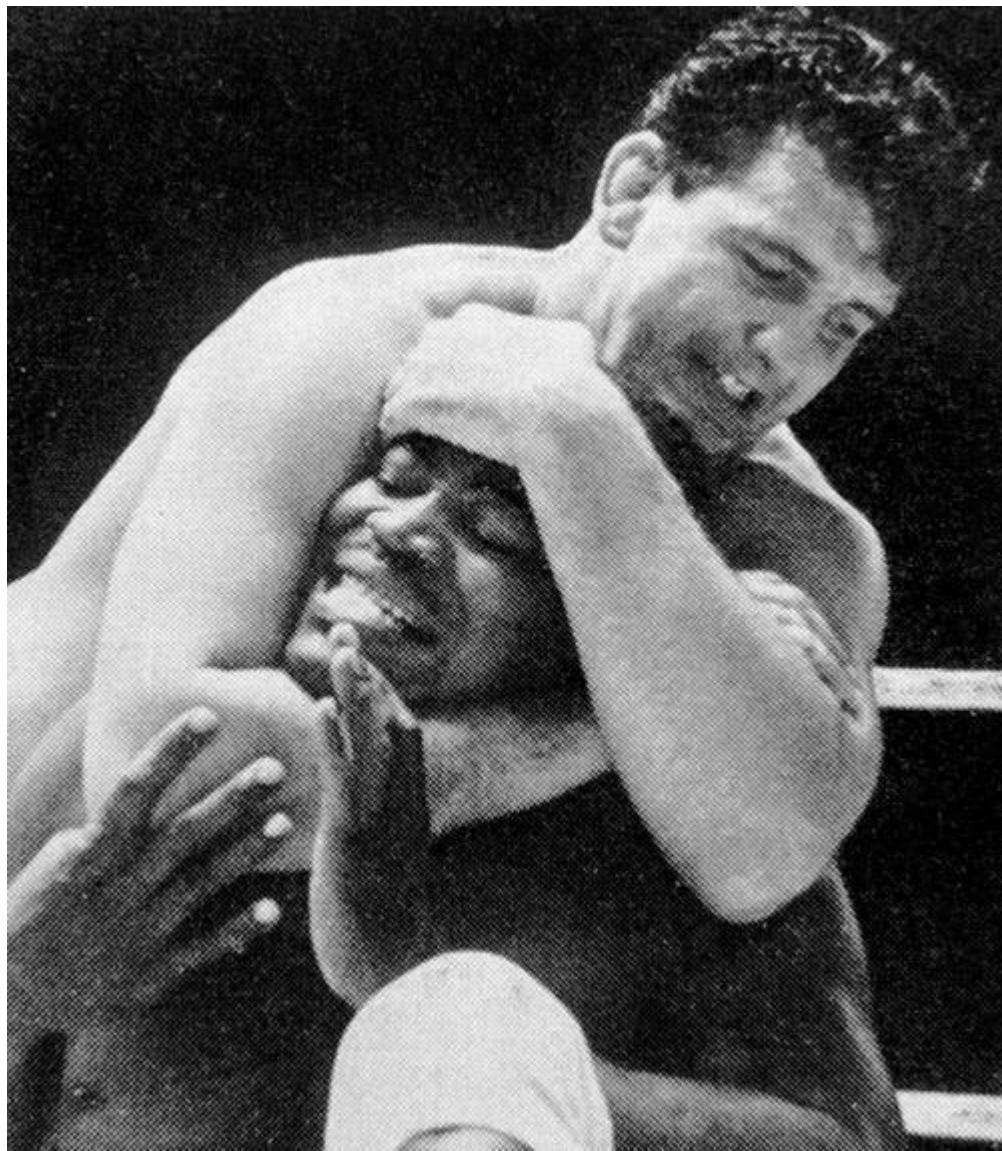


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Barring Strangles: The Evolution of Catch-As-Catch-Can Wrestling

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 from the industrial revolution in the northern [Anglo-Celtic Isles](#) and practiced there by predominantly Irish blue collar workers. The style was popular among the gentry in the Lancashire region of England betting upon wrestling outcomes as they did with the outcomes of dog and cock fights. 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-can. The cultural evolution and growth of [economic regulations](#) during the Twentieth Century mirrored the expansion of rules governing catch wrestling. The sport transitioned from the more laissez faire Golden Age to the modern, heavily-regulated [freestyle](#) and [folkstyle](#) derivatives. My aim is to explore the 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 sides in the mines. Eventually some of these laborers were able to sustain themselves and their families solely upon the money earned from "professional" wrestlers were born. The game of catch followed the immigrants that came to the United States during this period. 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 wars.

In the beginning, during the aforementioned side-bet period, the rules of catch wrestling matches (length of time, weight classes, wrestlers and their financial backers. The [bilateral](#) nature of such agreed upon matches resulted in an incredibly diverse set of rules. As the sport grew, third parties became more and more involved and promoters began to impose their own rules, not the individual wrestlers and the promoters. This shift in power dynamics meant that 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 the promoters took over, so too did they take control. (i.e., “pay the Piper”) the power and control shifted to these promoters. Fortunately even with this shift, there were still rule variants among these promotions. Perhaps the most common denominator among these varying rules sets was the ability for a competitor to win via pin or concession hold (*even this [pinning common denominator has variants](#), such as the two-point pin and three-point pin or changes 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 the latter eventually evolving into [pure entertainment](#) with no traditionally understood sporting competition involved (*the ill-fated hybrid sport somewhere in-between with [At Show](#) wrestlers wrestling all-comers and “plants” alike.*) Unfortunately, due to their proliferation and lack of understanding by those that haven’t actually wrestled (or attended matches of a close family member), amateur wrestling are seldom understood by those that haven’t actually wrestled (or attended matches of a close family member). In addition, none less than [Wade Schalles](#) has implored the contemporary wrestling leadership to help simplify the modern sport, “[o]ur strategies infinitely complex if we expect to entertain spectators” in his massive critique of contemporary wrestling “[How Wrestling Got It Wrong](#)”

Wade approached me a year ago to get involved with catch wrestling because of the freedom for participants and simplicity for spectators. I responded by writing him 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 tournament. He responded with a letter that became the bedrock of our modestly successful [King of Catch Wrestling](#) tournaments.

Scientific Wrestling Rules For Your Review Karl

Karl: this is a set of rules I am trying to create for a new league. Can you please make notes about what you think of each of these rules and please feel comfortable with adding new rules or suggestions!

RULES

-Submission or pin (3 count) ~~wins it.~~

-All matches are best 2 of 3 falls in a win (2 points), lose (0 point), or draw (1 points) format.

-All matches occur in a ring or a mat. Any body part on the ropes or out of bounds breaks the action. If break occurred while both players are standing, then they resume in a standing position in the center of the ring. If players go out of bounds while on the ground, they start in the center of the ring with the player that was on top when the break occurred on the top in the par terre position. Pro-rules simple

(No Amateur styl) Forget it.

-No striking, biting, eye gouging, hair pulling or other foul play.

(Slamming, chokes, and strangles allowed) Only Sleeper

MINIMUM

-12 minute time limits ~~fall~~ OR MORE

-Divisions include Heavyweight (201 lbs and above), Light Heavy (200 lbs to 181, Middle (180 to 161 lbs), Light (160 to 141 lbs), and Fly (140 lbs and below). Any competitor from a lighter class can move up divisions (but not the other way) Just Weight Up + Down OK

HEAVYWEIGHT Over 200 - LIGHT HEAVY 180

MIDDLEWEIGHT 160

LIGHTWEIGHT 140

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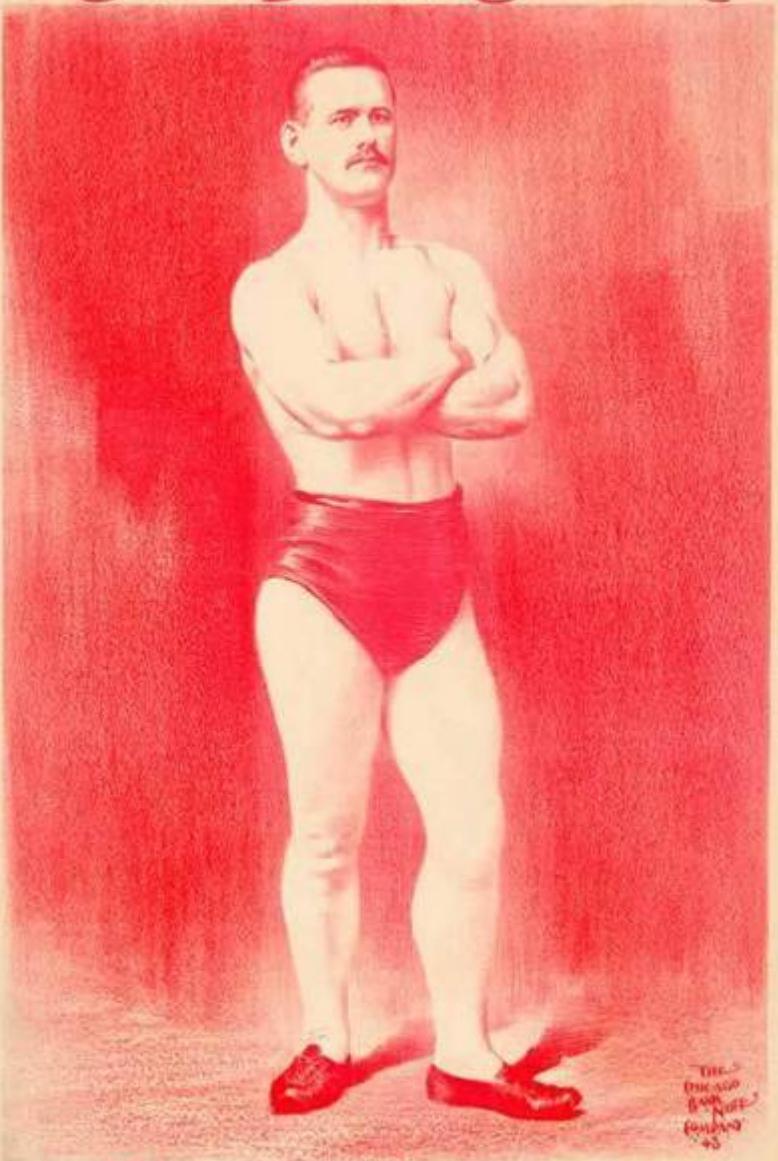
I don't think it is too controversial to suggest that Karl was perhaps the most influential catch wrestling proponent during the late 20th century by my trusted friend, coach and mentor Billy Robinson). Karl, after excelling in amateur wrestling competition, learned the craft of catch wrestling (which he famously dubbed "The Snake Pit) and then honed and improved his skills further in the United States with American catch wrestlers 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 \(see photo above\)](#) 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 popularity of Mixed Martial Arts (which allows a broad array of choking techniques) it seemed prudent to allow chokes even more liberally than just the [sleeper choke](#). Coach [Billy Robinson](#) supported the inclusion of all chokes into the competition and then proceeded to teach many of us choke variations. In fact, historically many catch-as-catch-can matches, especially during the later periods, barred strangles. Here is a newspaper blurb from 1923:

No form of strangling is permitted, unless especially agreed to by the principals. Before each match the announcement is 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, this first "Strangler" (not to be confused with Ed "Strangler" Lewis, who came later) embodied the free spirit that directly gave rise during its first Golden Era (the Farmer Burns, Tom Jenkins, Frank Gotch, George Hackenschmidt era). Evan Lewis was the first As-Catch-Can Champion (some but not all recognized him as world champion as well).

"PARSON" DAVIES CHAMPION SPECIALTY COMPANY.



EVAN LEWIS

CHAMPION CATCH AS CATCH CAN WRESTLER OF THE WORLD
"THE STRANGLER"

My inclusion of chokes in the [King of Catch Wrestling](#) open tournaments was a strategic one since the Evan Lewis tradition of st

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, 'no bones about his method,'" said Ring magazine in 1930, "which was to get an arm about the throat of an opponent and '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 Chicagoans considered the crudest forms of sport permitted in any civilized community. The breaking of a leg, the crushing in of the ribs, the slow breaking of a bone in the socket is permissible and constitutional ... " Ironically, boxing was illegal in most of the country then because it was considered a "sport of the underworld."

"Evan Lewis didn't invent the strangle hold, and nothing in the rules prevented others from using it on him. Henry Shellenberger had used it on Lewis in their July 25, 1887 match in Madison. Unfortunately for him, Lewis woke up 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 influence set by Evan Lewis. Take a look at some of the early newspaper reports of competitive catch wrestling matches, they sound like today's grappling events:

"Lewis flopped over from his back, and, after a brief struggle, succeeded in getting his right forearm across the throat of Clegg, who was being legally choked, frantically and hopelessly waived his hands in the air, thus signifying that yielded the bout to his adversary." Chicago Tribune, Dec 22, 1885

CHICAGO, Feb. 7. — Joe Acton, the champion catch-as-catch-can wrestler of America, defeated Evan Lewis, of Madison, 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 of men were present to witness the affair a hippodrome, but also declared it probably the best exhibition of skillful wrestling ever seen in Chicago. Only once did Lewis use a "strangle" hold, and then Acton broke it immediately. The men wrestled under special rules, which provided that two shoulders must 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. At the conclusion of the match both men posted \$100 to wrestle again according to regulation rules. - The New York Times – Feb 8, 1885

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 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 caused many to doubt the honesty of last night's match and remain away from the Armory. It appears that an effort was made 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 leave before the match was made.

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

At the call of time the men closed immediately, Acton grabbing Lewis around the neck. In a few seconds Lewis was forced to the floor with Acton having a back body-hold. They struggled for a few moments without result. Then Acton started Lewis for the count of ten minutes, and Lewis was forced to the floor again with Acton on top of him. The latter slipped out from under him like an eel and recovered his back body-hold. Then he got Lewis two points, and Lewis wriggled himself free, planting himself by a bridge, which Acton tried to break. In a scuffle Lewis was forced half-way through the ropes. Lewis wriggled out and got on top of 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 bridge was service. Lewis escaped again. Acton, always on top, got hugged and jolted him until his bridge gave way, and, in ten minutes, Lewis 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 lead, and they went into a deal of twisting and wriggling, some very clever work on both sides, and Lewis tried a hip-lock once more, raised Acton in his back. Time, 3 minutes and 4 seconds.

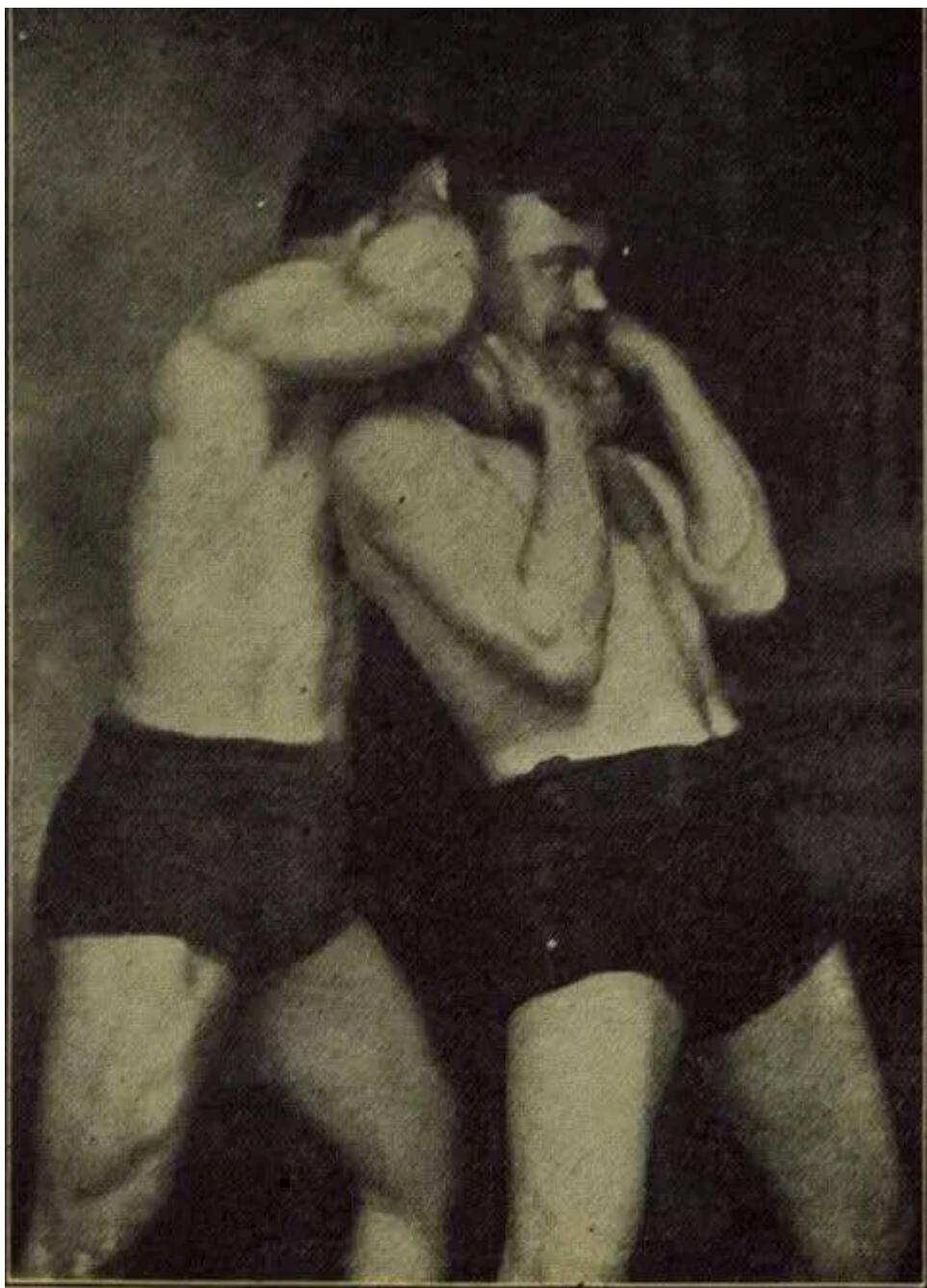
The third bout was comparatively tame. They closed quickly and, after a little maneuvering, went to the floor with Acton uppermost, Lewis getting another hip-lock on Acton and again planting him on his back. Time, 5 minutes, 40 seconds.

The fourth bout settled the contest. Almost at the outset Lewis got a strangle hold, by which he held Acton for about a minute, and Acton got on top of Lewis, and tipped him over his head. Lewis spun around on the top of his cranium and extricated himself. By the end of 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 to get a strangle hold. Lewis got it, and Acton was floored, winning the match. Time, 6 minutes and 33 seconds. In this bout Lewis showed more skill than Acton, and was 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 considerable 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 was the American Heavyweight Champion [Tom Jenkins](#).



No. 17—Jenkins Applying a Strangle Hold.

"A Wrestling match of international importance will take place Tuesday night in Madison Square garden, New York, in which the greatest catch-as-catch-can mat artist of America, will meet the champion of England and Ireland, Joe Carroll. The contest will be a strangle hold. 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 against Naraulah, the "Terrible Turk." Only pin falls are said to count in this contest, though it is said that Carroll is a wonder champion of England during coronation week when he defeated Tom Cannon, Carkeek and the other big mat artists on the circuit."

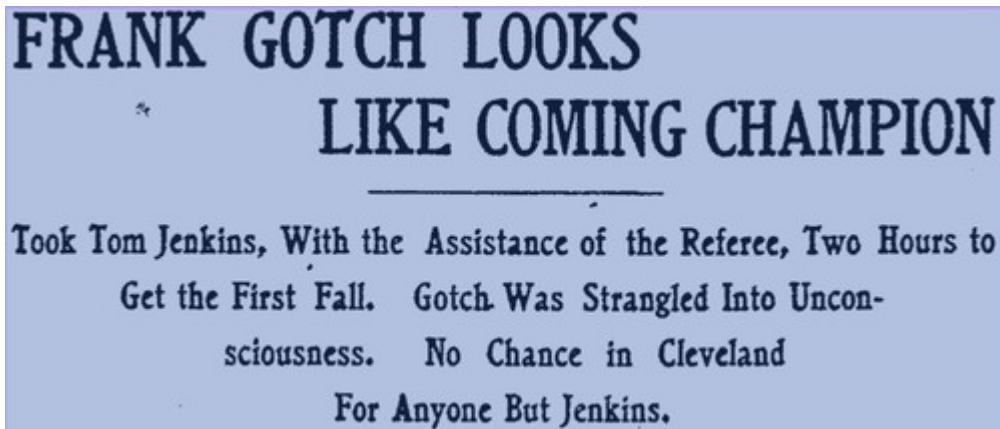
I think that Jenkins will defeat Carroll. Jenkins is America's greatest catch-as-catch-can wrestler, and I don't believe England has America's best man at the game." - *Bridgeport Herald* – November 9, 1902

At the height of popularity of catch-as-catch-can, Jenkins was actively participating in high profile matches where strangles were used to win. In one such match, Jenkins was strangling Carroll for a fall. Interestingly enough, the article seems to imply that the strangle was commonly barred only when the

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, defeated Dan McLeod, gaining two falls out of three. Contrary to expectations, McLeod, who was in excellent form, secured a half Nelson. For several years past this hold has been barred in public exhibitions of wrestling in this city but these two matches were 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.



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

SAYS STRANGLE HOLD Should be Barred



Tom Jenkins

By TOM JENKINS.

American wrestler, now instructor at West Point.

The styles in catch-as-catch-can wrestling methods as practiced in England and America differ in this respect, that in America only the strangle hold is barred. The strangle hold is a hold to punish a man and that is not what is wanted in wrestling.

If a wrestler cannot win without causing excessive pain and bodily harm to his rival, then it could not be called wrestling. A referee should have it with-

In his power to compel a competitor to release a lock which could not lead to a fall and which was merely put on to punish an opponent.

The effect of a strangle hold is that in time it puts a man into an unconscious state. I know of no other hold that cannot be got clear of. The hammerlock is used to upset an opponent and not to inflict injury.

In my opinion the full Nelson should be barred, also the lacing of fingers. In this country they do not bar the double Nelson, but they should do so.

Another thing is the securing of holds while off the mat. When wrestling with a much heavier continental opponent I invariably found that I was being continually forced off the mat, which is one of the tricks of foreign wrestlers to gain a better hold. It is the practice of the foreign wrestlers to thus hold their opponents and then, when the strength is exhausted, to turn them over. The Jap has gone to London with his native style, but one would not call that wrestling. It is purely a rough and tumble show.

It is fascinating to see Jenkin's attitude evolve from choking Gotch for a win toward advocating the removal of the more dangerous 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 England. By the 1800s, folkstyle had evolved into a popular sport practiced at local athletic clubs, along with boxing and gymnastics. Many schools picked 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). Since then folkstyle wrestling teams have been established at thousands of universities, high schools, and even at elementary schools. 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 the evolution of competitive wrestling now they are still being used, especially at the higher levels of competition. A perfect example of this is the evolution of their modified headlock. Here is [Olympian Dave Schultz using a modified choke](#) commonly known as the "Schultz Headlock" during competition. This maneuver has found application in Mixed Martial Arts too, here is wrestler [Matt Hughes talking about using the Schultz Headlock](#) at UFC 117. The spirit of Evan Lewis lives on in both wrestling and MMA. It seems there is cause to be optimistic that the evolution of the sport will continue, as it has for the last century and a half, perhaps precisely because it is difficult to pin down.

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

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