

‘Both Sides of the Tweed’: Relations, tensions and identity of Scottish Backhold and Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling

TREVOR HILL

Abstract

Little academic attention has been given to two closely-related styles of traditional wrestling in Great Britain: Scottish Backhold (‘Backhold’) and Cumberland & Westmorland (‘C/W’) Wrestling. Both sports are represented by the Scottish Wrestling Bond and the Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Association, and while each organisation maintains its own traditions and practices, they are able to participate in each other’s competitions as well as in international tournaments. Many areas of mutual satisfaction and respect exist between the two organizations and especially amongst the wrestlers themselves. There have, however, been areas of tension between the two groups. This article will explore several such issues that arose between 1998 and 2002, including regulations concerning dress, number of falls to a bout, and alleged non-recognition of certain techniques. We shall then discuss developments in Scottish Backhold between 2014 and 2019; and lastly, we shall examine the recent rise in female participation in what has historically been a male-dominated sport. This analysis raises questions of tradition, as well as potential breaks from tradition, in the development of both types of traditional wrestling. It also attempts to partially redress the lack of academic scrutiny, particularly with regard to Scottish Backhold.

Wrestling is an ancient sport worldwide, and has a long history in the British Isles, with wrestlers depicted on [carved crosses in Ireland](#) as well as on carved stones in Scotland dating from the sixth and seventh centuries.¹ Medieval wooden [church carvings](#) found throughout England depict forms of ‘jacket’ and ‘belt’ wrestling, in which competitors wear special jackets and/or belts which may be grasped during a bout.² Literary references are plentiful: in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, the Miller is described as a wrestler, as is Orlando in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*.³ In the nineteenth century, Thomas Hardy included a wrestling scene in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and R. D. Blackmore’s 1869 novel *Lorna Doone* portrayed an important character, John Ridd, as a wrestler. In Scottish literature, Sir Walter Scott’s protagonist in *The Lady of the Lake* (1810) defeats several ‘manly wrestlers’;⁴ and two novellas in James Hogg’s *Winter Evening Tales* (1820) depict wrestling scenes.⁵

Some older forms of wrestling in Britain and Ireland have died out, arguably with the advent of ‘modern’ styles such as Olympic Freestyle, Greco-Roman and Judo. In addition, the performance-

¹ Mike Tripp, *Cornish Wrestling: A History* (St Agnes: Federation of Old Cornwall Societies, 2023), 23–31; William Baxter, ‘New Vigour in our Oldest Sport’, *RLHF Journal* 8 (1997) <https://rlhf.info/wp-content/uploads/8.2-Wrestling-Baxter.pdf>. Also, search ‘wrestling’ at <http://www.irishmegaliths.org.uk/crosses2.htm>.

² Roger Robson, *Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling: A Documented History* (Cumbria: Bookcase, 1999), 9–10; for illustrations, see <https://www.traditionalsports.org/traditional-sports/europe/catch-hold-england.html>.

³ Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, ll. 547–550; William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act I, scene 2.

⁴ Canto V, stanza 23.

⁵ James Hogg, *Winter Evening Tales*, ed. Iain Duncan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2004), ‘The Bridal of Polmood’, 259–357, and ‘The Love Adventures of Mr George Cochrane’, 166–228.

based ‘All-In Wrestling’, based on a ‘catch-as-catch-can’ style and a forerunner to modern Professional Wrestling (WWE), emphasises ‘worked’ (i.e. fixed) matches. Mike Tripp writes how increased match-fixing was a significant factor in the decline of Cornish wrestling, whilst Robert Snape links the rise of All-In Wrestling and match-fixing to a decline in traditional styles nationally.⁶ Such problems led in 1906 to the establishment of The Association Governing Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling.

Despite these challenges, there are still pockets of the country where traditional forms are regularly practiced, most notably the ‘jacket’ style in Cornwall – its sister style in Devonshire died out in the early twentieth century – and the ‘backhold’ styles in northern England and Scotland. The northern English style is commonly referred to as ‘Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling’ (occasionally just ‘Cumberland’), despite the fact that it is also practiced in neighbouring Northumberland and Lancashire. In Scotland, the traditional form is today known as (Scottish) Backhold Wrestling.⁷ The sports are governed by the [Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Association](#) (hereafter CWWA) and the [Scottish Wrestling Bond](#) (SWB).⁸ An international circuit has been established under the banner of the International Federation of Celtic Wrestling (IFCW), founded in 1985, which organises international competitions in the ‘backhold’ and ‘gouren’ (Breton) styles, and supports [local traditions](#) elsewhere in Europe.⁹

Both Scottish Backhold wrestling (hereafter ‘Backhold’) and Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling (C/W) are predominantly practised on grass at events such as Highland gatherings or country shows.¹⁰ Both differ from the more widely known ‘Olympic’ styles of Greco-Roman and Freestyle in that a wrestler maintains a fixed hold, hands clasped behind the opponent’s back, while attempting to throw or trip the other competitor; the bout ends when a wrestler touches the ground with any part of the body other than the feet. Technically, the Backhold and C/W styles are almost identical, the main differences being in regulations and attire. Competitors from both sides of the border regularly participate in each others’ events as well as in international tournaments and, historically, Scotland versus Cumbria tournaments. Prizes for tournaments include money, belts and cups (some of them very old) and occasionally, in Scotland, quaichs (drinking cups).

There have been, however, some points of disagreement between supporters of the two styles. These came to the fore at the end of the last century in a discussion between William Baxter, then president of the Scottish Wrestling Bond (SWB), and Roger Robson, a senior figure in the Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Association (CWWA). A former C/W wrestling champion, newspaper columnist, and two-term president of CWWA, Robson self-published a monthly newsletter, *Inside Hype*, which focused on the C/W wrestling scene.¹¹ In the September/October 1999

⁶ Mike Tripp, ‘Match-Fixing in Cornish Wrestling during the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 35/2–3: Special Issue: Match-Fixing and Sport: Historical Perspectives (2017): 157–172; Robert Snape, ‘All-in Wrestling in Inter-War Britain: Science and Spectacle in Mass Observation’s “Worktown”’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 30/12 (2013): 1418–1435.

⁷ Robson, *Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling*, 1999, and William Baxter, “Wrestling (The Ancient Modern Sport),” In *Eclipse et Renaissance des Jeux Populaires*, edited Jean-Jacques Barreau, Guy Jaouen, 64–88, FALSAB, 1998, 72–73.

⁸ Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Association, <https://www.cwwa.org.uk/>. Scottish Wrestling Bond, <http://www.wrestle.co.uk/swcp1.htm>. The latter site has not been updated in some years, but contains useful historical information and illustrations.

⁹ *Gouren* (‘wrestling’ in Breton) is a style of jacket wrestling, similar to Cornish wrestling. Useful descriptions of other European wrestling styles can be found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folk_wrestling.

¹⁰ The capitalised form ‘Backhold’ is used here to refer to the Scottish tradition; the uncapitalised spelling refers to the technical style of wrestling.

¹¹ Roger Lytollis, ‘Cumberland wrestling legend Roger Robson grapples with retirement’, *News and Star with the Cumberland News*, 27 May 2019. *Inside Hype* was published between 1993 and 2001.

issue, Baxter contributed an article entitled ‘Refereeosis’ that extolled the progressiveness of Scottish Backhold and the superiority of its training, and criticized what he saw as problematic attitudes (for Scottish wrestlers) on the part of some C/W officials.¹² Among the items of contention were rules concerning the wearing of the kilt, the number of falls in a bout, and referees’ alleged attitudes to unfamiliar techniques. Eight months later, Robson responded in an article of his own, ‘Answering Back to Willie’.¹³ The differences expressed in these two articles, and the developments that emerged from them, will be a major focus of our discussion here.

Background and methodology

This article will examine the relationship between Scottish Backhold Wrestling and Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling in the period 1998–2002, when the writer was competing as a wrestler whilst undertaking informal fieldwork as a casual researcher. Discussion of subsequent developments in Scotland is based on conversations and communications with wrestlers in the period 2012–2020, including answers to a prepared questionnaire circulated amongst members of a particular wrestling club. Because of the lack of sociological and anthropological research and literature on this topic, much of the discussion is based on interviews with wrestlers and questionnaires developed by the author, as well as on sports histories and articles in popular publications. Because the research period spans some twenty years but was not continuous over that period, some personal background may be called for.

I first became interested in Backhold wrestling in 1998 whilst undertaking postgraduate studies at the University of Edinburgh and preparing research on Balkan oiled wrestling.¹⁴ I trained in Backhold and competed at events in Scotland and northern England, representing Scotland in a special indoor event titled ‘North vs South vs Scotland’ which involved teams from two regions of northern England and one from Scotland.¹⁵ I also attended a major international event as a spectator. Although none of this was formal research, I made some field-notes and conducted some informal interviews and conversations on these occasions.

In 2002 I moved to Poland and, apart from some sporadic communication with some of the wrestlers, engaged in no significant research until around 2014. At that time, having noted that little or no academic attention had been paid to this topic in the previous twenty years, I began to look again at the earlier notes and consider committing to further enquiry. In this situation, it proved useful to try to trace developments between the period when I myself was active in the sport (1998–2002), and the modern face of Scottish Backhold. The retrospective approach does have its drawbacks, in that some questions raised by reviewing the earlier period are seemingly addressed by informants or information from the later period. While I acknowledge that this may be a flaw in my own work, it may also highlight areas for further enquiry and provide a foothold for other researchers approaching the subject.

In an era of mass-marketing and globalisation, expressions of cultural identity become particularly interesting. Some of my curiosity about Scottish Backhold and Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling stemmed from my earlier work on Balkan wrestling, which examined cultural expression and tradition in the context of that sport. In addition, it seemed worthwhile to explore how things might have changed and advanced in both sports over the two periods of my involvement with them. Because the two styles have shared so much common history and practice, the disagreements over matters of attire and other shared problems seemed a good starting point.

¹² William Baxter, ‘Refereeosis’, *Inside Hype* 40 (Sept/Oct 1999), 5–7.

¹³ Roger Robson, ‘Answering Back to Willie’, *Inside Hype* 43 (June 2000), 7.

¹⁴ Trevor Hill, ‘Wrestling with Identities? Masculinity, Physical Performance and Cultural Expression in Pehlivan Wrestling in Macedonia’, *The International Journal of Albanian Studies* 2/1 (Spring 1998): 106–126.

¹⁵ These events, which were discontinued around 2000, alternated between venues in Scotland and England and were an example of arranged cross-border contests.

Because I no longer live in the UK, the second stage of my research has relied more on internet-based resources and communication (social media and email) and written materials including back issues of the now-defunct *Inside Hype*. One club trainer agreed to circulate a questionnaire among his members to try to gauge a wider selection of views about the sport from current participants concerning aspects of training, competition and Scottish identity; ten replies were received, a response rate of seventeen percent.

The Literature

While scholars elsewhere have begun to examine traditional wrestling styles,¹⁶ academic research of a sociological/anthropological nature concerning C/W and Scottish Backhold is not plentiful. Indeed, there are few detailed works on wrestling in Scotland, especially Backhold, at all. The more informative texts are by writers such as William Baxter, who has examined Scottish Backhold as a historical and modern sport and outlined some of the early history of the SWB.¹⁷ Webster and Dinnie's biography of the nineteenth-century Scottish athlete Donald Dinnie is also useful in illustrating some historical aspects of the sport both domestically and internationally.¹⁸

As regards Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling, several works from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries deal with the development of the sport in the English Lake District. Gilpin and Robinson's *Wrestlers and Wrestling* (1892) presents a collection of short texts about different wrestling styles from around the world along with a collection of biographies of several nineteenth-century C/W champions.¹⁹ One of these, the wrestler William Litt (1785–1847), himself published *Wrestliana* (1823), generally held to be the first history of wrestling in England.²⁰ An interesting sequel to Litt's account is a biography of William by his descendant, English novelist Toby Litt. As well as providing interesting historical data, the book follows Toby's research path, including his own attempts at C/W Wrestling. Toby Litt's work provides not only an interesting picture of an outsider coming to the sport for the first time, but also a description of a Scottish/Icelandic bout in Cumbria.²¹

A vital tool for researching Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling in the more recent past has been *Inside Hype*, the newsletter edited and published until 2001 by the late Roger Robson. In addition, Robson's frequent contributions to local newspapers contained his views on aspects of the sport, such as the debate over traditional attire, as we shall discuss below. His history of Cumbrian wrestling, a small but highly informative work aimed at both the general reader and the researcher/historian, includes information about the early relationship with the Scottish Wrestling Bond.²²

¹⁶ See, for example, Joseph S. Alter, *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

¹⁷ William Baxter, 'Wrestling (The Ancient Modern Sport)', in *Les Jeux Populaires – Éclipse et Renaissance: Des traditions aux régions de l'Europe de demain*, ed. Jean-Jacques Barreau and Guy Jaouen (FALSAB, 1998), 64–88.

¹⁸ David Webster and Gordon Dinnie, *Donald Dinnie: The first sporting superstar* (Aberdeen: Ardo Publishing Co., 1999).

¹⁹ Sidney Gilpin and Jacob Robinson, *Wrestling and Wrestlers: Biographical Sketches of Celebrated Athletes of the Northern Ring; to Which is Added Notes on Bull and Badger Baiting* (HardPress Publishing, 2016).

²⁰ William Litt, *Wrestliana: or an historical account of ancient and modern wrestling* (London: Forgotten Books Ltd, 2018).

²¹ Toby Litt, *Wrestliana* (Galley Beggar Press, 2018), 118.

²² Robson, *Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling*.

‘BOTH SIDES OF THE TWEED’

The most useful recent academic works dealing with Cumberland and Westmoreland Wrestling are those of Mike Huggins, who explores the links between sport and identity, particularly that of Cumbrian local identity. A 2001 article explores how the identity of C/W was regularly reinvented as Romanticism and the subsequent rise in nineteenth-century tourism in the Lake District created interest in local traditions and practices which eventually became examples of cultural markers.²³ In a subsequent work, Huggins examines Lakeland Sports (fell running, hound racing and C/W wrestling), providing useful insights into how cultural (and possibly political) identity is expressed through sporting practice, something which shall be touched upon in the following discussion.²⁴ Other recent texts referring to C/W, such as the *World Sports Encyclopedia*, are generally descriptive rather than analytical and, as such, are of limited use to a researcher.²⁵

Regarding other British styles, Mike Tripp’s 2023 book *Cornish Wrestling: A History*, based on his 2009 PhD, is a highly detailed history of the sport, covering aspects such as emigration and the practice of the style in the Cornish diaspora as well as the decline in traditional wrestling in Britain.²⁶ It provides an insightful account of the complex social and cultural factors affecting small, regional sports and their associated traditions. It is hoped that similar research may yet focus on the subject of Scottish Backhold and Cumbrian/Westmorland Wrestling.

Traditional Wrestling in Britain: The Backhold Style

In backhold wrestling, two competitors take hold of each other, each with the left arm over the opponent’s right and hands gripped behind the opponent’s back between the shoulders (*Fig. 1*).²⁷ The grip is formed by hooking the fingers of each hand inside the other; fingers are not interlocked, as this can be dangerous. In Scottish Backhold, if two wrestlers fail to take a correct hold, a third wrestler may be called to bend over between them, allowing the competitors to form a bridge over the third one to take an even hold (*Fig. 2*).



Fig. 1 Taking hold.



Fig. 2 A third wrestler is used to ensure an equal hold.

²³ Mike Huggins, ‘The Regular Re-Invention of Sporting Tradition and Identity: Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling c.1800–2000’, *The Sports Historian* 21/1 (May 2001), 35–55.

²⁴ Mike Huggins, ‘Sport helps make us what we are: the shaping of regional and local sporting identities in Cumbria c.1800–1960’, *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* XI (2011), 81–96.

²⁵ Wojciech Lipoński, *World Sports Encyclopedia* (Poznań: Oficyna Wydawnicza Atena, 2003), 150–151.

²⁶ Mike Tripp, *Cornish Wrestling: A History* (St Agnes: Federation of Old Cornwall Societies, 2023).

²⁷ Photos in figures 1–4 were taken by the author between 1999 and 2002. The referee in Figs. 2 and 4 is William Baxter.

Once the correct hold is established, the third wrestler leaves and the call to wrestle is given. When the bout begins, the wrestlers attempt to trip or throw their opponent whilst maintaining the correct hold. The first wrestler to either break their hold or touch the floor or ground with anything other than



Fig. 3 Breaking hold.

their feet (a fall) loses the bout (Fig. 3). If both wrestlers touch the ground simultaneously, the fall – called a ‘dog fall’ – is void, and the wrestlers have to restart. The basic backhold techniques are nearly identical either side of the border, although Baxter claimed that some Cumbrian referees might disallow certain moves (the *salto* and *souplesse*) adopted from Greco-Roman wrestling. Consequently, Scottish wrestlers tended to avoid using those techniques in England for fear of having the fall called against them.²⁸

The main differences between Scottish Backhold and C/W styles involve rules and regulations. In Scottish competition, for example, whoever scores the

best of five falls is declared the winner of that match, whereas Cumberland matches are decided on the best of three or even a single fall, as Baxter lamented in *Inside Hype*.²⁹ Another major difference is that CWWA rules allow adult females to compete in single-sex bouts only, whereas Backhold allows mixed matches.³⁰ Indeed, it is not unusual to see a female wrestler taking prizes, including cash, cups, and medals – or even a quaich.

Despite being found in Northumberland and elsewhere, this style of wrestling has become strongly associated with the Lake District of northwest England, arguably because of the rise in tourism to the region in the nineteenth century, and the fact that the first known history of English wrestling was written by a Cumbrian wrestler. William Litt’s *Wrestliana* (1823) included a broad history of wrestling, a more specific account of the Cumberland and Westmorland style, and some suggestions for modernizing the rules. In addition, Litt amusingly reviewed how wrestling was portrayed in the classics, including works by Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare and, interestingly, Hogg, whose 1820 novella ‘The Bridal of Polmood’ he particularly approved of. While Hogg does not specify the style of wrestling, his story contains a wrestling scene where ‘Carmichael was extremely hard to please of his hold and caused his antagonist [Polmood] to lose his grip three or four times and change his position.’ Polmood later ‘...forced in Carmichael’s back with such a squeeze that the by-standers affirmed they heard his ribs crash; whipped him lightly up in his arms and threw him upon the ground with great violence’.³¹ Litt’s interest in this scene, in which Hogg describes the competitors’ dispute regarding the hold, and the squeezing of Carmichael’s ribs by Polmood, suggest that Hogg is describing a match in the Backhold style.³² Litt was not the only nineteenth-century author interested

²⁸ Baxter, ‘Refereecosis’, 7

²⁹ Baxter, ‘Refereecosis’, 6.

³⁰ CWAA rules do, however, permit mixed matches for children.

³¹ Hogg, ‘The Bridal of Polmood’, 270; William Litt, *Wrestliana*, 16.

³² It is intriguing to speculate about a possible acquaintance between James Hogg and William Litt. Toby Litt, (*Wrestliana*, 146–153) suggests that his ancestor and William Wordsworth had met, and that both knew John Wilson (a.k.a. Christopher North, 1785–1854), a Scottish author and critic who also organised sporting events. Hogg is known to have accompanied Wordsworth and Wilson to the Lake District in 1814 (Richard Jackson, ‘James Hogg and the Unfathomable Hell’, *Romanticism on the Net* 28 (November 2002)). My attempts to ascertain what impact, if any, this excursion had on Hogg’s interest in wrestling have as yet been unsuccessful.

in the style: Charles Dickens later wrote about it for his magazine *Household Words* in an 1858 article called ‘Feats at the Ferry’, in which he describes a bout at the Ferry Ring, Windermere.³³

Backhold wrestling remained popular into the twentieth century in other parts of England, including London and Merseyside. It featured in some of the early regional Olympic Games, including the so-called Morpeth Olympics in Northumberland.³⁴ However, throughout the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries the popularity of backhold wrestling in England declined, and it is now almost entirely restricted to its home region and Northumbria. The Association Governing Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling, the forerunner of the CWWA, was established in 1906.

Backhold in Scotland

The history of Backhold in Scotland is more difficult to ascertain. Gilpin and Robinson suggest that, after borderland sports declined following the Reformation, the Cumberland style entered Scotland in the 1820s with a revival of traditional sporting events; both Walter Scott and James Hogg are supposed to have taken part in these.³⁵ If, however, as Robson suggests, Hogg’s writings feature Backhold, then it presumably existed prior to that period, although Gilpin and Robinson do not entertain the notion of a shared cross-border style existing beforehand.³⁶ Whether or not Gilpin and Robinson’s theory is correct, the similarity in style has allowed cross-border competitions to continue to this day, with a number of wrestlers, both English and Scottish, travelling to fixtures either side of the border, although the number of Scots travelling south has been, and still is, higher than those going north.

Exactly when the name ‘Backhold’ was first used in Scotland is unclear. The style seems to have been internationally known until fairly recently as ‘the Cumberland style’, even in Scotland. One Northumbrian wrestler told me in 2020:

It has always been Cumberland and Westmorland style wrestling. When my grandparents wrestled in Scotland eons ago it was Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling at Braemar and all other games. In my day it was Highland wrestling, and within 10 years Scotland have been calling it Backhold.

However, renowned Scottish wrestler and athlete Donald Dinnie (1837–1916) noted that his first wrestling match for a cash prize, at a Highland Games circa 1852, was ‘in the back-hold style’, although Dinnie himself occasionally competed in ‘Cumberland’ matches in the USA and Australia.³⁷

While Scotland once boasted a number of different styles, Backhold is today the most widely practiced of the traditional styles.³⁸ ‘Widely-practiced’, however, is perhaps a misleading term as hardcore competitors probably only number around a couple of hundred. During my initial research, competitors at events I witnessed rarely numbered more than fifty, including children. While wrestlers

³³ Robson, *Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling*, 33–39.

³⁴ Jörg Krieger, ‘Cotswold, Much Wenlock, Morpeth – ‘Olympic Games’ before Pierre de Coubertin, in *Olympia. Deutschland – Großbritannien*, ed. Stephan Wassong, Jurgen Buschmann and Karl Lennartz (Carl-und-Liselott-Diem-Archiv, 2012), 23–37.

³⁵ Gilpin and Robinson, *Wrestling and Wrestlers*, 37.

³⁶ Robson, *Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling*, 21.

³⁷ Webster and Dinnie, *Donald Dinnie*, 13. Dinnie was skilled in several styles, including the ‘Scotch’ or ‘Scottish’ style, a style that involved ground wrestling (Webster and Dinnie, *Donald Dinnie*, 61). The now defunct style, developed by Dinnie in 1870s, would start in a backhold position and continue on the ground (Baxter, *Wrestling*, 85).

³⁸ Baxter, ‘Wrestling’, 75–6. Baxter cites five styles, the other four in addition to Backhold being Catch-as-Catch-Can (similar to Olympic Freestyle wrestling); Loose Hold (a standing style with no fixed hold); Carachd Bharraidh (a form of freestyle from the Isle of Barra); and Carachd Uibhist (a Hebridean backhold style allowing hip throws but no trips).

I have spoken to say that there has been some increase in participation in recent years, participant numbers still appear to be fairly low in comparison to other traditional sports.

The majority of Backhold events take place under the mantle of the Scottish Wrestling Bond (SWB), founded in 1992 by William Baxter, himself a former Catch-as-Catch-Can/Freestyle competitor and Olympic coach, who felt that the sport was not receiving enough support from the Scottish Amateur Wrestling Association (SAWA). He explained his thinking in a 2002 interview:³⁹

They were trying to discourage people from practising Backhold. It was very short sighted, as they felt we should emphasize the Olympic style of wrestling. We felt the indigenous style was at least as important as the Olympic style.

The importance of the indigenous style did not, however, guarantee government support. Baxter was not impressed when SAWA received Sports Council funding to hire a Russian coach and international wrestlers whilst SWB received no financial backing. Robson's complaint that the Cumbrian association experienced a similar lack of recognition demonstrated that despite their differences, traditional sports often face common administrative challenges.⁴⁰

From the outset, SWB realised it had to expand if it was to survive. Links were made with Highland games organisations and other bodies for traditional sports, and SWB wrestlers continued to compete in English competitions as well as within the International Federation of Celtic Wrestling. Baxter had already established ties with CWWA as early as 1986 when, as part of the SAWA, he addressed a meeting of the Cumbrian association about cooperation. Some members of the board were wary, feeling that a closer link might compromise local traditions, and some CWWA committee members resigned;⁴¹ but the SWB was nevertheless able to continue competing each side of the border. This was particularly important for SWB as a fledgling organisation with few domestic competitions,⁴² as it allowed Scottish Backhold competitors to take advantage of the CWWA's larger pool of more experienced wrestlers and the much larger calendar of events. Scottish wrestlers subsequently had a lot of success in both English and international competitions, and in 1999–2000 they held five of the eleven C/W titles.

Clubs and Training, 1998–2002

When I first contacted SWB in Glasgow in 1998, there were seven or eight clubs in the city, as well as small groups training elsewhere in the country. In Dundee, Michael Philips trained a group of around thirty boys in the sport, transporting them to tournaments in a bus and occasionally turning the weekend into a camping trip. The Glasgow clubs, by Baxter's own admission, were not necessarily run to a high standard. They were predominantly attended by teenagers and children, a fact that made it difficult for a novice adult like me to train regularly with a suitable partner.⁴³

While the youngsters would be shown a technique and then paired up to practice, the absence of a suitable partner for a man of my size (1.85 cm, 90 kg) meant that I was shown how to practice the technique on my own with an 'empty' hold, usually completing the move with a body roll. For example, a 'front trip' required a wrestler to push their hands forward as they stepped in, pushing the opponent backwards and then pulling the hands backwards into the small of the opponent's back. The attacker then puts weight and motion onto the upper body to force the opponent to arch their back and fall backwards. To practice this move 'empty', the wrestler pulls the hands into their own stomach, moves their head downward, and goes into a forward roll – the head position being very important in creating the required body twist. Baxter, who invented this training technique, laughed

³⁹ Trevor Hill, 'An Interview with William Baxter', *Martial Arts Illustrated* 15/1 (June 2002): 46.

⁴⁰ Roger Lytollis, 'Cumberland wrestling legend Roger Robson grapples with retirement', *News and Star with the Cumberland News*, 27 May 2019.

⁴¹ Robson, *Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling*, 81.

⁴² Several Highland games organisers, working with SAWA, sponsored Freestyle wrestling competitions.

⁴³ Hill, 'Interview with William Baxter', 46.

at my first attempts: ‘If this was Japan, they’d call it “kata”!’ The technique was, however, quite effective in my case. In competition, I might half complete a technique (such as apply the correct leg positions) but not complete the throw; but when I remembered to adjust my head position, my body would go into the correct pose, and the throw seemed to follow through on its own.

Baxter maintained that Scottish wrestlers were successful, despite their small number, due to being ‘fitter and stronger than the English because of our more intense training’.⁴⁴ Robson, however, argued that Scottish wrestlers got more experience because they were also practicing other disciplines:⁴⁵

[T]he main differences I have noticed is that they have served long apprenticeships to hone their skills, they wrestle more frequently than ever and they think of themselves as specialist Backhold wrestlers rather than as free-style wrestlers or Judo-players who sometimes wrestle in the Cumberland style.

Whichever of them was correct, it cannot be disputed that the small number of regular adult attendees were – and still are – boosted by members of local Judo clubs who adapted their techniques to Backhold.

Robson indirectly raised an interesting point by comparing the training regime of Scottish Backhold wrestler Robert Clark, believed by many to regularly ‘pump iron’, with that of Tom Harrington MBE, a C/W wrestling legend who was noted for *not* doing so. What Robson failed to mention was that many Cumbrian wrestlers worked on farms and presumably regularly had to lift heavy objects like sacks of feed and possibly animals – daily training that a Glasgow-dwelling wrestler might be hard-pressed to replicate. A study of Breton *gouren* wrestling makes a similar observation about that sport which, despite its background among rural labourers, is today probably practised more by middle class urbanites.⁴⁶ Such differences would make an interesting subject for future research.

More recently, younger wrestlers, some of whom were minors during my time in the sport, have started their own Backhold clubs and adopted a more systematic and professional approach to training. This change has, in some instances, also brought about a different attitude towards teaching novices. In the past, it had been remarked that some champions were guarded about passing on techniques that might put them at risk of being beaten, and that the persistent dominance of some champions discouraged newcomers.⁴⁷ If the sport was to be promoted, such attitudes needed to change – and they may have begun to do so. One of the questionnaire responders, a former judoka, wrote in 2013 of a more open attitude to sharing:

One of my most memorable experiences was going to my first tournament and just seeing how it was different from a Judo tournament. After fighting one boy (who annihilated me), he then came over and showed me what it was I was doing wrong and how to correct it, not something you’d see in Judo.⁴⁸

While over the last fifteen years the increased consistency in training seems to have attracted newcomers of a more mature age, especially from other disciplines – one 2014 recruit who joined the Hamilton club was a judoka in her 50s – many younger athletes have been attracted to the burgeoning

⁴⁴ Baxter, ‘Refereecosis’, 9.

⁴⁵ Robson, ‘Answering back to Willie’, 13.

⁴⁶ Dario Nardini and Aurélie Épron, ‘Being Breton through wrestling: Traditional gouren as a distinctive Breton activity’, *Ethnography* 22/3 (2021): 12.

⁴⁷ My own experience as a beginner bore out these observations. During a training session I recall one wrestler, a champion Judo player and instructor, who continually felled me with an advanced technique, despite knowing that I had less than a year’s experience of the sport. By contrast, other established wrestlers, including some champions, took time to show me their techniques and let me practice them, allowing themselves to be thrown.

⁴⁸ Questionnaire respondent, 15 November 2013.

sport of Mixed Martial Arts. One coach estimated the membership of SWB at around 100–120 just before the pandemic. It remains to be seen how numbers will change in the future.

Competition and Highland Games

Just as the Cumberland-Westmorland competitions take place at country fairs and agricultural shows, so the major venue for Backhold wrestling in Scotland is Highland games. Kilted wrestlers may be found amidst scores of marching pipe bands, traditional dancers, caber-tossers and other activities. For many wrestlers, a major feature of Highland games is the presence of bagpipes. While these do not accompany the wrestling in the way zurnas do in Balkan oiled wrestling,⁴⁹ they are constantly in the background as the pipe bands compete with each other. Wrestlers have often said that the sound ‘pumped them up’ and ‘got them in a martial mood’. The combination of distinctly Scottish events seems to create a special atmosphere and a feeling of being ‘within’ a culture, especially if – as at the Ceres Highland Games in Cupar, Fife – the events themselves have some historical connection.⁵⁰ Perhaps because there were fewer obvious ‘cultural’ symbols (such as pipes or dancers), I experienced less of this feeling at northern English events. A Cumbrian/Northumbrian wrestler might disagree.

For Scottish wrestlers, competing in the north of England might involve a long drive; the same was true for English wrestlers travelling to compete in Highland games and indoor competitions north of the border. To facilitate the participation of Glasgow wrestlers, many of them juniors, William Baxter borrowed a minibus; wrestlers with cars made their own way. Baxter observed that distances could be problematic: for Michael Phillips and his young Dundee-based wrestlers, the round trip could be as much as 400 miles (644km). Travelling to England for a competition, especially one where match outcomes were judged on single falls, might not appeal to Scottish wrestlers.⁵¹

Since I first became involved with the sport, the number of Scottish wrestlers visiting English events has fallen, possibly because both Baxter and Phillips eventually ceased to arrange transport. But as Heather Neilson of the Scottish Wrestling Bond recently explained, another contributing factor was possibly that ‘the English season continues into September when the Scottish season ends in August. So successful wrestlers have often picked up injuries or would like to take a break...which often leads to them also not attending English events’. Finally, she noted that with Scotland now supporting more domestic competitions (including over ten at Highland games), wrestlers feel less need to head south. While some still do, she says that ‘it’s more of a personal endeavour rather than someone running a bus’.⁵²

Wrestling and National Identity

Jeremy MacClancy and others have pointed out how sport can function as a tool of cultural and national expression, not least because certain forms of competition enable members of smaller groups or nations to excel against those from bigger nations.⁵³ Combat sports are no exception. In his book examining wrestling culture in north India, Joseph Alter relates how the renowned Indian wrestler Ghulam Mohammad Baksh Butt, known as ‘The Great Gama’, toured the world (including colonial Britain) in the early twentieth century, defeating all comers and proving the superiority of Indian wrestlers.⁵⁴

In some cases, the regional aspect of a sport may also highlight the uniqueness of a regional or ethnic culture. Alter also explores the complex relationship between Muslim and Hindu identity, and

⁴⁹ Hill, ‘Wrestling with Identities’, 114.

⁵⁰ The Ceres Highland Games, the oldest free games in Scotland, were established by Robert the Bruce following the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 (<http://www.ceresgames.co.uk/>).

⁵¹ Baxter, ‘Refereeosis’, 6.

⁵² Heather Neilson, Facebook Messenger to author, 19 June 2024.

⁵³ Jeremy MacClancy, ed., *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity* (Hendon, VA: Berg Publishers, 1996), 1–20.

⁵⁴ Alter, ‘The Wrestler’s Body’, 64–5.

how wrestling supports expressions of Indian and Pakistani nationalism.⁵⁵ Similarly, both oiled wrestling in North Macedonia and *gouren* in Brittany are strongly aligned with specific cultures.⁵⁶ In *Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports*, a 2014 book edited by Raúl Sánchez García and Dale C. Spencer, twelve essays explore this subject in the context of different combat sports.⁵⁷

Nardini and Épron’s research on Breton *gouren* wrestling demonstrates how some aspects regarded as unique to a sport go beyond the fine points of technique to questions of cultural identity. Both a sport and a Breton tradition, *gouren* is regarded as an expression of ‘being’ Breton, and wrestlers’ pride in their sport thus expresses their regional identity.⁵⁸ Several of the authors’ points provide a useful lens for examining C/W wrestling and Scottish Backhold. Like *gouren*, a style adopted by many British wrestlers at IFCW events, both C/W and Backhold wrestlers see their sport as marginalised in competition with more powerful national cultures and more widely-practiced international styles.

In the face of such power differentials, both C/W and Scottish Backhold wrestling have staked out the uniqueness of their traditions by means of various cultural and identity markers. In international competition, for example, flags are always heavily symbolic. Scottish Backhold wrestlers parade as a national team under the Saltire, expressing pride in what they see as their sport’s national identity. For C/W wrestlers, the situation is more nuanced. At the 1999 IFCW tournament, the C/W team wrestled under the Cross of St George, but declared the team as ‘Cumbria’ (despite the presence of some Northumbrian wrestlers).⁵⁹ This was said to be a practice remaining from when Cornish wrestlers, who wrestle in a jacket style, participated in IFCW. Roger Robson maintained that the label ‘Cumbria’ was meant to differentiate the style of wrestling rather than a sense of regional rivalry; now that Cornwall’s connection with the IFCW has lapsed, the C/W team call themselves ‘England’ in international meetings.⁶⁰

While Cumbria is not itself a ‘nation’ in the sense that Scotland is, Mike Huggins’ research has shown how C/W wrestling and other Lakeland sports have functioned as identity markers for Cumbrians.⁶¹ Cumbrian wrestlers often cite the fact that William Litt’s *Wrestliana* was the first history of wrestling in England. They note C/W’s participation in the nineteenth-century National Olympics, and they are proud of its antique trophies, which are still in use. They boast of C/W’s historic connection with Grasmere Sports, arguably the most important event in the C/W calendar, reflective of the rural agricultural tradition of the region, and one in which wrestling has featured since the event was first held in 1850.⁶² Perhaps more important, many C/W wrestlers can trace a family lineage connected to the sport, something fewer of the Scottish wrestlers seem able to claim. For such reasons, a C/W wrestler may be seen as both an embodiment of the sport and an exemplar of Cumbrian culture and identity.

⁵⁵ Alter, ‘The Wrestler’s Body’, 225–227.

⁵⁶ Hill, ‘Wrestling with Identities’, 107–112; Nardini and Épron, ‘Being Breton’, 4–6.

⁵⁷ Sánchez García, Raúl and Dale C. Spencer, eds, *Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports* (New York: Anthem Press, 2014).

⁵⁸ Nardini and Épron, ‘Being Breton’, 5.

⁵⁹ When I asked a handful of Northumbrians about having to wrestle as ‘Cumbrians’ in the years 1998–2002, the answer was usually a raised eyebrow and a wry smile but little elaboration.

⁶⁰ Roger Robson, CWWA report for 1 February 2018 (<https://www.cwwa.org.uk/archive/2/2018-reports.pdf/>). Mike Tripp reports that Cornwall’s involvement with IFCW was in the mid-1980s, and while some wrestlers took part in international events, no Cornish association was a member; see, ‘Cornish Wrestling’, 140–141.

⁶¹ Mike Huggins, ‘Sport helps make us what we are’, 81–96.

⁶² Arguably the most important event in the C/W calendar, wrestling has been a fixture since the event began in 1850.

The history of Scottish Backhold may be less well documented, but its long association with events which are deliberately expressive of a Scottish (Highland/rural) culture carries considerable symbolic weight. Sharing a context that involves displays of Scottish dancing, pipe bands, Scottish music and various heavy sports, Scottish Backhold is seen as a part of this culture, and its kilt-wearing practitioners as visually performing the culture. While the wearing of the kilt in competition is likely a fairly recent innovation, it has become emblematic of the sport's Scottish identity, and many Scottish Backhold wrestlers who participated in my research valued their sport as an expression of that identity.⁶³ Although more than half of questionnaire respondents had experience of other styles, especially Judo, all reported that the 'Scottishness' of Backhold was important to them. The feelings of one wrestler were echoed by others:⁶⁴

It allows you to feel proud of your heritage, the idea that wrestling has been around for centuries and was used on battlefields, as well as this, the historical sites of the Highland Games lets you appreciate it.

Even non-Scots valued cultural symbolism of the sport. A Bulgarian member of one club commented, 'I am not a Scottish but yes, thanks to Backhold Wrestling I feel more Scottish than ever. Love it!'.⁶⁵ My own experience, as someone raised in England in an English/Scottish family, has been similar, as I felt an enhanced sense of Scotland as part of my own identity when I participated in the sport.

The historic rivalry between Scotland and England has undoubtedly encouraged wrestlers on both sides of the border to perform their best, especially in cross-border competitions. Champion Backhold wrestler Robert Clark told me about the time he once wrestled the local lord at Redesdale in Northumberland: 'His ancestor claimed to have hanged more Scots than anyone else... I took great pleasure in beating him!'⁶⁶ In his article for *Inside Hype*, William Baxter invoked the Border Reivers' centuries-long tradition of cross-border cattle-raiding to reinforce his boast about the superiority of Scottish training methods: 'Your men are no bigger than ours, the Border Reivers saw to that centuries ago.'⁶⁷

While several authors have noted elements of anti-Englishness in some areas of Scottish sport, this was not something that I encountered among wrestlers during either my research or my active participation in Backhold.⁶⁸ Whilst many wrestlers were in favour of Scottish independence, I never heard any Scottish wrestler do more than complain about sporting politics, or express exasperation at Cumbrian refereeing. As an Englishman, my presence might stimulate a bit of banter – such as when I was once advised to use my English accent to my advantage by greeting a Cumbrian wrestler on the

⁶³ While wrestling is undoubtedly an ancient sport in Scotland, the wearing of the kilt and other forms of tartan clothing was banned (apart from military wear) in Highland areas between 1746 and 1782. Lowland and Borders areas historically had never worn such clothing. The adoption of kilts by Scottish Backhold wrestlers is likely to have come about during the revival of Highland dress during the nineteenth century, when tartan first became symbolic of 'Scottishness' during the Romantic movement; see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_kilt. Webster and Dinnie note that 'there was a lengthy period in late Victorian and Edwardian times when kilts were optional' for competitors in heavy events at Highland games; but Scottish strongman and wrestler Donald Dinnie wore a kilt in at least one wrestling bout late in his career; see Webster and Dinnie, *Donald Dinnie*, 93 and 111.

⁶⁴ Questionnaire respondent, 7 June 2014.

⁶⁵ Questionnaire respondent, 7 July 2014.

⁶⁶ Personal Communication, August 15, 1998.

⁶⁷ Baxter, 'Refereeosis', 7. I asked Baxter if he was suggesting that the Scottish raiders had fathered children south of the border. He chuckled, saying 'You're the only one who seems to have got that.'

⁶⁸ Grant Jarvie and Irene A. Reid, 'Scottish Sport, Nationalist Politics and Culture', *Culture, Sport and Society* 2/2 (1999), 22–43; Stuart Whigham, "'Anyone but England'?: Exploring anti-English sentiment as part of Scottish national identity in sport', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 49/2 (April 2012), 152–174.

mat: ‘Seeing your kilt and hearing your English accent will confuse him long enough for you to get the fall!’

In contrast, William Baxter’s article mentioned occasions where he heard anti-Scottish sentiments expressed in Cumbria, although these appear to have been rare.⁶⁹ Many C/W events were only too pleased to have Scottish wrestlers attend, as they boosted the number of competitors. At one village fête in Northumbria, the local people were grateful for our attendance, because otherwise there would not have been much wrestling. It also helped that the winning Scots afterwards bought all the prize vegetables from the village show with their prize-money.

One source of tension which was apparent throughout my research had to do with the system of selecting wrestlers for bouts. SWB uses a pool system that allows wrestlers to compete against several opponents in their pool, with the two top wrestlers going through to the next round. The Cumbrian system, on the other hand, only allows one winner to progress, so that wrestlers who lose a single match are out of the competition. As noted earlier, Scottish wrestlers often felt that travelling long distances for one bout was not worth the trouble. Some also suspected that English events deliberately matched Scottish wrestlers against each other in the early rounds so as to reduce the number of Scottish competitors going through to the later rounds.

Scottish wrestlers maintained high regard for their counterparts (Bretons, Sardinians, Icelanders and others) in international competitions, in which many Scots excelled. International competitions were recognized as friendly and well organised, but because they often had much larger pools of wrestlers than Scotland and Cumbria, success in these tournaments was considered something special. Rival wrestlers respected one another as wrestlers, and I recall no instances of wrestlers being abused for their nationality.

Dress and its problems

We have already mentioned the differences between Scottish Backhold and C/W wrestling as regards competition attire. Whereas the style of dress can be functionally important in other forms of wrestling – in Cornish Wrestling and *gouren*, for example, items of clothing are fundamental to the wrestling technique itself – this is not the case in C/W and Backhold, where the clothing serves only as a visual marker of the relevant regional traditions and cultures.

As noted, many Scottish wrestlers compete in kilts. While these are not compulsory, most wrestlers have felt that the kilt was an important part of the tradition. One problem, however, has been that kilts are generally expensive, and few wrestlers would wish to risk damaging or staining a new one in competition. For that reason many wrestlers, particularly younger ones, sought out second-hand or army surplus kilts, the latter being heavier and tougher.⁷⁰ Despite the popular notion that a ‘true Scotsman’ wears nothing under the kilt, few wrestlers would go that far.⁷¹ Sporting bodies insist on

⁶⁹ Baxter, ‘Refereeosis’, 7.

⁷⁰ For details about the modern kilt, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kilt#Measurements>.

⁷¹ Matthew Smith, ‘[What does a Scotsman wear under his kilt?](https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/10/09/what-does-scotsman-wear-under-his-kilt)’, 9 October 2016. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/10/09/what-does-scotsman-wear-under-his-kilt>.

the wearing of underwear, and as one wrestler commented when questioned by a European TV interviewer, ‘You don’t want to find yourself upside down and everything hanging out!’⁷²

The kilt does, however, sometimes pose problems for Cumbrian match officials. Most commonly, a Cumbrian referee might judge a fall incorrectly when the bottom of the kilt touches the ground before either wrestler, causing Scottish referees to observe that the official was ‘watching the kilt, not the man!’ (Fig. 4). A second complaint is



Fig. 4 The low edge of the kilt.

that the metal buckles on the side of the kilt might snag an opponent’s clothes or even cause injury. To this, the Scots argue that the thick leather belt worn with the kilt covers the buckles and protects the wrestlers. A third problem with the kilt is its weight, given that participants in Cumbrian bouts are expected to weigh-in wearing the attire in which they will wrestle. Because the kilt can weigh several pounds, Scottish wrestlers usually weigh-in without it; but doing so may contravene C/W rules, as Baxter himself admitted.⁷³ Finally, some have felt that the added weight of the kilt disadvantages the wearer’s opponent. A leading Cumbrian wrestler suggested that Scots should wear something similar to the Cumbrian attire, with perhaps a strip of tartan on the trunks of their leggings. There were wry smiles in reply!



Fig. 5 Turned out for inspection, Grasmere Sports, 2022. (Photo: CWWA Facebook post)

The Cumbrian attire, introduced in the nineteenth century to make the sport appear more respectable, comprises a pair of leggings or tights (usually long-johns), a singlet, socks, and a pair of trunks or shorts, often finely embroidered. Before many tournaments there is often a competition for the best-dressed wrestler (Fig. 5).⁷⁴ But

because, as in Scottish competitions, there is a tradition that a wrestler may emerge from the crowd of onlookers, rules about traditional attire tend to be strictly enforced only at certain championships. Despite its historic adherence to standards of dress, several members of the CWWA suggested in 2005 that the tradition be relaxed to encourage more young people to get involved, to avoid their

⁷² Personal communication, June 2002.

⁷³ Baxter, ‘Refereeosis’, 5. He also claimed that some venues had banned the kilt, allegedly at sponsors’ request.

⁷⁴ The trunks in particular have been known to inspire ‘Superman’ references from journalists.

having to wear the ‘old-fashioned’ attire; predictably, this suggestion met with disapproval from traditionalists⁷⁵. Whilst many young wrestlers still wear the traditional attire with enthusiasm, it was agreed that tracksuit bottoms or shorts might eventually suffice.⁷⁶ According to the 2018 constitution, traditional attire has now become compulsory only for senior championships (male and female), and junior wrestlers are not required to wear it at all.⁷⁷ It will be interesting to see whether relaxing the rules around dress will have had any effect on recruitment of new wrestlers in the future.



Fig. 6 Connie Hodgson, first Ladies All-Weights World Champion, Ambleside, 2016. (Photo: CWWA, by permission)

Female Wrestlers

Tradition is important to those who practice heritage sports like those we have been examining here, and potential threats to traditional practices are taken seriously, as we noted in the resistance of some CWWA committee members to cooperation with SWB. With the increasing pace of social change in recent years, traditional sports have often found themselves challenged to adapt (or not). Wrestling is no different.

One of the most significant challenges has been the idea of female participation. Nardini and Épron note how the traditionally male sport of *gouren* in Brittany has dealt with the increasing involvement of women, both as wrestlers and as administrators.⁷⁸ Similarly, in the past twenty years both C/W and Scottish Backhold have seen more women and girls competing, particularly since the Covid lockdown period (2020–2021). This rise may be part of an increased interest in women’s wrestling since the inclusion of female Freestyle in the 2004 Olympics, as well as a wider expansion of female combat sports worldwide.⁷⁹

In response, both CWWA and SWB have introduced weight categories and championship competitions specifically for women (Fig. 6). Nowadays, women compete far more regularly, as Linda

Scott, Vice-President of CWWA, explained:

Even though the number of girls wrestling in the academies throughout the winter were slowly increasing before the millennium, there were only certain events which held classes for females. Concerns were voiced by female wrestlers, the CWWA Governing Board listened, and year by year more events began adding classes for females. Looking back at the Grasmere entries book, classes for females were not introduced until 2003.⁸⁰

Family heritage remains important, too: the vice-president of CWWA and the treasurer of SWB, both women, told me that many new participants, particularly younger girls, are often daughters of wrestlers (Fig. 7).

⁷⁵ Renwick, Jamie, (2005), “‘Embarrassed’ wrestlers drop embroidered pants to save sport from dying”, *The Independent*, 13 April 2005. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/embarrassed-wrestlers-drop-embroidered-pants-to-save-sport-from-dying-486252.html>

⁷⁶ Roger Robson, ‘Wanting the Gear to Make Them Look Cool Kids’, Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Association, 8 April 2005. <http://www.cumberland-westmorland-wrestling-association.com/2005-Articles/NEWS-11-April-8th-2005.html>.

⁷⁷ Thanks to Linda Scott of CWWA for sharing these regulations.

⁷⁸ Nardini and Épron, ‘Being Breton’, 8–12.

⁷⁹ Marc Levy, ‘Girls are falling in love with wrestling, the nation’s fastest-growing high school sport’, *AP News*, last modified 12 March 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/wrestling-girls-high-school-c1e18531cf36831e158282ea08ca9775>

⁸⁰ Linda Scott, Facebook Messenger, 19 June 2024.

TREVOR HILL

Just as they were for the male wrestlers, however, the CWWA's regulations have sometimes been a source of frustration for Scottish women hoping to compete south of the border. While CWWA allows mixed-sex matches between children under twelve, adult matches are single-sex only. Therefore, any Scottish female hoping to participate in a Cumbrian event might think twice, as she would be unsure of having any opportunity to wrestle. Heather Neilson, SWB treasurer and competing wrestler, explained:

When I bring up this topic to other wrestlers, the common response I receive is sometimes it is not worth the journey down to England to compete if you only get about one or two wrestles. You could take the three- to four- hour trip for a wrestle that lasts thirty seconds! Wasn't often worth it when we had great wrestling here in Scotland that was on your doorstep.⁸¹

As Neilson's comment indicates, part of the reason fewer wrestlers of both genders are willing to travel to compete in England is that there are more opportunities for participation in Scotland – around ten events per season – including an increasing number for women. Although SWB had previously allowed both female-only and mixed-sex matches, there were



Fig. 8 Gary Neilson; Katie Horne, 10st 7lbs Scottish Champion; William Baxter, Ceres Highland Games, 2019. (Photo: Richard Findlay, Fofofling Scotland, by permission)

no

exclusively

female categories until both SWB and CWWA began to introduce them in the early-to-mid 1990s. Championship tournaments followed, with the CWWA's Ladies World Championship at the prestigious Grasmere Sports in 2016, and the first Scottish Championship held at Ceres Highland Games in 2006 (*Fig. 8*).

The visibility of women's Backhold wrestling was further heightened when the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) commissioned a new play, *Thrown*, about a group of novice female wrestlers, the character of the coach being based on Heather Neilson herself. The show premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival and toured Scotland. The idea for the production stemmed from

a conversation between Neilson, a professional camera operator, and a choreographer at the NTS:

I was chatting to a choreographer about wrestling and a couple of weeks later we met up as she was interested to know more. She enjoyed the fact I was a minority within a minority sport and how females fit within the wrestling dynamic! I then heard in January 2023 that she had her play commissioned and she brought me on board to make sure all the wrestling techniques... were correct!

She explained that playwright Nat McCleary was interested in using wrestling as a tool to explore a number of issues, not just sport:



Fig. 7 Roger Robson with his granddaughter Gemma, winner of Ladies Open, Grasmere Sports, 2019.

(Photo: CWWA, by permission)

⁸¹ Heather Neilson, Facebook Messenger, 19 June 2024.

‘BOTH SIDES OF THE TWEED’

Basically she was inspired about my situation as a female wrestler but not of the WWE fame. Excellent promo for the sport and I have seen the show a few times and it’s incredible. Covers a lot of issues and topics for women and Scottish identity also!⁸²

While some reviews criticised the script, the subject matter was received with great enthusiasm.⁸³ Because the play was performed by such a prestigious company, the production would appear to be – as Neilson says – ‘Excellent promo for the sport’.

Conclusion

This article has sought to examine the sport of Scottish Backhold wrestling, and to trace its relationship with Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling over the past quarter century. While many different traditional wrestling styles exist, the similarity between these two backhold styles strongly suggests a shared heritage in the borderlands between Scotland and England, and the two groups’ long history of competing in each other’s events would seem to acknowledge that common background. Recent developments over the research period have, however, raised areas of tension between them regarding practical matters – rules and regulations, organisation of tournaments, length of season, matters of dress, refereeing, and the participation of women – as well as questions of national and regional identity.

Since I began my fieldwork, Scottish Backhold has seen increased participation, and – assuming ongoing council funding for Highland games – a growing roster of tournaments (currently ten) throughout Scotland. CWWA stages over fifty events, from village fêtes to large agricultural shows, over a longer season. Scottish Backhold has gained greater sophistication in forging business relationships and winning sponsorships, and has begun to see the emergence of generational lineages as older wrestlers introduce their children to the sport – something that has long been the case with several well-known Cumbrian ‘dynasties’. Heather Neilson believes both organisations have profited from each other’s example:

I think the relationship between England and Scotland subconsciously helps each organization to level up and progress. Certainly within the concept of female competitions. We often look over the border and see what they’ve achieved and look at our own personal situation and see how we can match it and make it better.⁸⁴

Even so, the long tradition of cross-border competition has undoubtedly declined as the increased number of events in Scotland, and the improving quality of Scottish wrestling, mean that Scottish competitors no longer need to travel to C/W tournaments to test themselves. While a small number of Scots do make the journey, the days of busloads of young wrestlers travelling across the border from Glasgow and Dundee are long gone. It remains to be seen if the rise of female competition in Cumbria might stimulate renewed cross-border rivalry.

In a period increasingly characterised by identity politics, it will also be interesting to see whether matters relating to national and regional identity will strengthen the healthy rivalry between these two backhold traditions, or exacerbate the differences between them. Just as the Scottish Independence referendum reinforced the Scottish identity of many citizens north of the border, has the ‘Scottishness’ of Scottish Backhold swelled the ranks of new practitioners? Do wrestlers from outside Scotland – like the Bulgarian questionnaire respondent mentioned earlier – experience a sense of Scottish identity through participation in the sport? How have developments in Scottish Backhold affected wrestling practices amongst Scottish diasporas? In Cumbria, given that the Cumbrian team wrestle

⁸² Heather Neilson, Facebook Messenger, 8 July 2023.

⁸³ Mark Harding, [review of ‘Thrown’, *Broadway Baby*, 6 August 2023](#); Roy Docherty, ‘[Thrown Theatre Review: Wrestling and Identity Piece](#)’, *The List*, 17 August 2023; David Jays, ‘[Thrown review – backhold wrestling tale tackles Scottish identity](#).’ *The Guardian*, Tuesday, 8 August 2023.

⁸⁴ Heather Neilson, Facebook Messenger 8 July 2024.

as ‘England’ in international competitions, do non-Cumbrian exponents of C/W wrestling feel greater affinity to Cumbria or to England? Wrestlers’ views and feelings about these matters deserve further scrutiny.

Although the issues aired by William Baxter and Roger Robson in the pages of *Inside Hype* revolved around administrative matters, the two men enjoyed a cordial relationship. Baxter acknowledged that Scottish Backhold owed a great deal to its English counterpart, and invited noted C/W wrestlers, including Robson, to lead workshops and seminars in Scotland. He also praised the organisation of major events like the Grasmere Sports and the 1999 ICWF championships. In response, Roger Robson extolled the skills of Scottish Wrestlers like Robert McNamara and Robert Clark. Leading figures in the CWWA praised the work of Baxter and of Michael Philips in promoting wrestling, especially their work with disadvantaged urban youth. Most important, wrestlers in both organisations genuinely respected one another and enjoyed competing in each other’s tournaments.

While social pressures, emerging cultural issues and questions of regional and national identity may have an impact on these two wrestling traditions in coming years, we may hope that the intense but respectful rivalry which has so far characterised the relationship between Scottish Backhold and Cumberland and Westmorland wrestling will continue to generate fierce competition, as well as warm friendships, on both sides of the Tweed.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

This essay is dedicated to the memory of my coach and friend William Baxter (1935–2023) and to Roger Robson (1942–2021), competitor, journalist, and longtime member of the CWWA governing board, both of whom generously shared valuable advice and insights during my research; also to the memory of Mike Tripp (d. 2024), who helpfully commented on a draft of this article. Finally, it is also offered to the memory of Robert ‘Big Rab’ MacNamara (d. 2019), multiple C/W wrestling world champion and Scottish Backhold champion.

My warmest thanks to Linda Scott, Vice-president of CWWA, who patiently answered my queries and supplied me with scans of *Inside Hype*, and to her colleagues at CWWA; to Robert Clark, Frazer Hirsch, Heather Neilson, and Michael Phillips; and finally, to all those wrestlers who inspired or contributed to my interest in this topic. The title, ‘Both Sides of the Tweed’ is quoted from a song by the Scottish folksinger Dick Gaughan.

References

- Alter, Joseph S. *The Wrestler’s Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Baxter, William. ‘Refereeosis’. *Inside Hype* 40 (Sept/Oct 1999): 5–7.
- Baxter, William. ‘Wrestling (The Ancient Modern Sport)’, in *Les Jeux Populaires – Éclipse et Renaissance: Des traditions aux régions de l’Europe de demain*. Edited by Jean-Jacques Barreau and Guy Jaouen, 64–88. FALSAB, 1998.
- Baxter, William. ‘New Vigour in our Oldest Sport’. *RLHF Journal* 8 (1997). <https://rlhf.info/wp-content/uploads/8.2-Wrestling-Baxter.pdf>
- Docherty, Rory. ‘Thrown Theatre Review: Wrestling and Identity Piece’. *The List*, posted 17 August 2023. <https://list.co.uk/news/43844/thrown-theatre-review-wrestling-and-identity-piece>.
- Gilpin, Sidney, and Jacob Robinson. *Wrestling and Wrestlers: Biographical Sketches of Celebrated Athletes of the Northern Ring; to Which is Added Notes on Bull and Badger Baiting*. HardPress Publishing, 2016.

‘BOTH SIDES OF THE TWEED’

- Harding, Mark. Review of ‘Thrown’. *Broadway Baby*, 6 August 2023. https://broadwaybaby.com/shows/thrown/796758?fbclid=IwY2xjawDzgFdleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHX5u77w1eTsnkMmgS-szjm7FdX4wFDP07_iXnPL5KEJItD-Ib6OOGgWKw_aem_ytQ_l9uKBZYyE5Pu1FAutA
- Hill, Trevor. ‘An Interview with William Baxter’. *Martial Arts Illustrated* 15/1 (June 2002): 43–47.
- Hill, Trevor. ‘Wrestling with Identities? Masculinity, Physical Performance and Cultural Expression in Pehlivan Wrestling in Macedonia’. *The International Journal of Albanian Studies* 2/1 (Spring 1998): 106–126.
- Hogg, James. ‘Love Adventures of Mr George Cochrane’, in *Winter Evening Tales*. Edited by Iain Duncan, 166–228. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- Hogg, James. ‘The Bridal of Polmood’, in *Winter Evening Tales*. Edited by Ian Duncan, 259–357. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2004.
- Huggins, Mike. ‘Sport helps make us what we are: the shaping of regional and local sporting identities in Cumbria c.1800–1960’. *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* XI (2011): 81–96.
- Huggins, Mike. ‘The Regular Re-Invention of Sporting Tradition and Identity: Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling C.1800–2000’. *The Sports Historian* 21/1 (May 2001): 35–55.
- IAWF/FILA (1962). *The History of the International Amateur Wrestling Federation (1912–1962)*. Paris: IAWF/FILA, 1962.
- Jackson, Richard D. ‘James Hogg and the Unfathomable Hell’. *Romanticism on the Net* 28, (November 2002). <https://doi.org/10.7202/007206ar>
- Jarvie, Grant, and Irene A. Reid. ‘Scottish Sport, Nationalist Politics and Culture’. *Culture, Sport and Society* 2/2 (1999): 22–43.
- Jays, David, “Thrown review – backhold wrestling tale tackles Scottish identity,” *The Guardian*, Tuesday, August 8, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/aug/08/thrown-review-traverse-theatre-edinburgh-festival-fringe?fbclid=IwY2xjawDzg0lleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHXBQ0U-5XXXIAXbWN9w2KEkonyPD8TTqg8mhkJtWDpMW-IJXPRcwO3zVeg_aem_cXR5aF6uCD6BCUJVb2nYrA
- Krieger, Jörg. ‘Cotswold, Much Wenlock, Morpeth – “Olympic Games” before Pierre de Coubertin’, in *Olympia – Deutschland – Großbritannien: Beiträge zu den Olympischen Spielen 2012 in London*. Edited by Karl Lennartz, Stephan Wassong and Jurgen Buschmann, 23–37. Köln: Carl-und-Liselott-Diem-Archiv, 2012.
- Lambrou, Andrea. “‘EK has lost a legend’: Heartbroken family pay tribute to champion wrestler Robert McNamara’. *Daily Record*, 24 September 2019, <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/ek-lost-legend-heartbroken-family-20167119>
- Levy, Marc. ‘Girls are falling in love with wrestling, the nation’s fastest-growing high school sport’. *AP News*, last updated 12 March 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/wrestling-girls-high-school-c1e18531cf36831e158282ea08ca9775>
- Lipoński, Wojciech. *World Sports Encyclopedia*. Poznan: Oficyna Wydawnicza Atena, 2003.
- Litt, Toby. *Wrestliana*. Norwich: Galley Beggar Press, 2018.

- Litt, William. *Wrestliana: or an historical account of ancient and modern wrestling*. London: Forgotten Books Ltd, 2018.
- Lytollis, Roger. ‘Cumberland wrestling legend Roger Robson grapples with retirement’. *News and Star with The Cumberland News*, 27 May 2019, <https://www.newsandstar.co.uk/news/17662648.cumberland-wrestling-legend-roger-robson-grapples-retirement/>
- MacClancy, Jeremy, ed. *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity*. Hendon, VA: Berg Publishers, 1996.
- Nardini, Dario, and Aurélie Épron. ‘Being Breton through wrestling: Traditional *gouren* as a distinctive Breton activity’. *Ethnography* 22/3 (2021): 372–395. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146613812111035478>
- Renwick, Jamie. ‘“Embarrassed” wrestlers drop embroidered pants to save sport from dying’. *The Independent*, 13 April 2005, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/embarrassed-wrestlers-drop-embroidered-pants-to-save-sport-from-dying-486252.html>
- Robson, Roger. *Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling: A Documented History*. Cumbria: Bookcase, 1999.
- Robson, Roger. ‘Answering Back to Willie’. *Inside Hype* 43 (June 2000): 7.
- [Robson, Roger.] ‘Wanting the Gear to Make Them Look Cool Kids’. Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Association, 8 April 2005, <https://www.cwwa.org.uk/archive/15/2005-reports.pdf/>
- Sánchez García, Raul and Dale C. Spencer, eds. *Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports*. New York: Anthem Press, 2014.
- Smith, Matthew. ‘What does a Scotsman wear under his kilt?’, 9 October 2016. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/10/09/what-does-scotsman-wear-under-his-kilt>
- Snape, Robert. ‘All-in Wrestling in Inter-War Britain: Science and Spectacle in Mass Observation’s “Worktown”’. *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 30/12 (2013), 1418–1435. DOI: [10.1080/09523367.2013.804812](https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2013.804812)
- Tripp, Mike. *Cornish Wrestling: A History*. St Agnes: Federation of Old Cornwall Societies, 2023.
- Tripp, Mike. ‘Match-Fixing in Cornish Wrestling during the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries’. *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 35, no. 2–3: Special Issue: Match-Fixing and Sport: Historical Perspectives (2017): 157–172.
- Tripp, Mike. *Persistence of Difference: A History of Cornish Wrestling*, Vol. 1. PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2010. https://www.traditionalsports.org/images/sports/europe/cornish_wrestling/A_HISTORY_OF_CORNISH.pdf.
- Webster, David, and Gordon Dinnie. *Donald Dinnie: The first sporting superstar*. Aberdeen: Ardo Publishing Co., 1999.
- Whigham, Stuart. ‘“Anyone but England”? Exploring anti-English sentiment as part of Scottish national identity in sport.’ *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 49/2 (April 2012):152–174. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1012690212454359>.