

The 24 Measures of a Man & the antiquity of traditional Welsh wrestling

Unknown to many people including in its country of origin, Wales once had its own version of traditional wrestling, closely related to the Cornish & Breton sports in which a wrestling jacket was used to assist in holds and throws. According to the Welsh linguist & historian Darren Lewis it was known by several names;

'Ymavael', is a general, if slightly old-fashioned term used for wrestling, there are several words in Welsh, including 'codymu'. Believe it or not, most first language Welsh speakers now use a variation on the English word, i.e. - 'wrestlo' to denote the sport; formally, however, it is known as 'ymaflyd codwm' or 'ymaflyd cwymp', depending on whether the user hails from North or South Wales. The words 'ymafael' and 'ymaflyd' basically mean something like - 'to take hold of each other', and the words 'codwm' and 'cwymp' both mean fall, signifying downward movement. 'Codwm cefn' is a shorter version of 'ymaflyd codwm cefn', which translates as something like back-fall wrestling. As you'll appreciate, these terms describe the basic purpose of Celtic wrestling, that is - to take hold of your opponent and throw him down, or make him fall, especially onto his back in the 'British Celtic' tradition.

Another word “ymsang” could be added to this list, meaning a mutual struggle or wrestling contest. The sport still existed in Wales until the 1940s, although in a strongly modified form. John F. Gilbey traveled the world to explore *'The Secret Fighting Arts of the World'* and published his work in 1963. This is how he described the tradition of Welsh wrestling;

“In old Wales there was a favorite pastime called “purring.” Purring was a quaint form of playful mayhem in which two men wearing heavy shoes faced each other, both hands on the other’s shoulders. At the referee’s signal, they would begin kicking alternately using both feet on the opponent’s shins. And if you think this is outlandish, try pronouncing the name of this Welsh town: Brycheiniog.”

How Welsh wrestling came to receive the title from the noise a cat makes is an interesting study in philology. The old Brythonic word for wrestling was gwrynva, at least this was how the sport was called in Cornwall until replaced by the English derived wrasslin in the 19th century and the title of Breton wrestling, gouren, supports this. The Cymraeg word gwron meaning a hero or audacious warrior is also associated with this as is the word gwrthryn - to resist, which was another expression often used for wrestling, but a similar sounding word is grwnan meaning a low noise, groan or murmur otherwise called a purr and the English translation of this became a Welsh nickname for the sport. Think about it though and who wouldn't groan or purr after being kicked in the shins. There are historical accounts of this form of Welsh wrestling being played in the USA in late 19th century. This is from *"Duelling in America"* by Major Ben C. Truman, written in 1884, describing an event at Port Richmond Pennsylvania as reported by the New York Sunday Mercury Newspaper:

'At two o'clock the men appeared, wearing Lancashire shoes toed with copper, having submitted their feet for inspection to show that there were no protruding nails, and James gave the word to purr. Grabby advanced cautiously and appeared to forget about the shoulder straps until his second reminded him of it. He took hold with apparent unwillingness, and then began the most brutal and savage contest that two men could engage in. For fully five minutes they sparred with their feet in a manner that was simply wonderful. Blows were countered and returned with the same skill and rapidity as shown by men fighting with their fists. Not once in that time did either man more than touch his opponent's skin. Then McTevis, taking a firmer hold on his opponent's collar, lifted his left foot and, after keeping it poised for a moment, made a straight toe kick for his opponent's right knee. Grabby deftly avoided the blow by spraddling his legs far apart, and with almost inconceivable quickness brought his left foot around and caught McTevis on the outside of the right calf. The flesh was laid open almost to the bone, and the blood spurted out in streams. McTevis never uttered a word. At the same instant that his own leg was cut he gave Gabby what is known as the sole scrape. Beginning at the instep and ending just below the knee pan, Grabby's left shin was scraped almost clear of skin. Both men were evidently in pain, and angry. They kicked and countered a dozen times again without doing any damage. Then Grabby, by some mishap, lost his hold on his opponent's shoulder strap. In attempting to grasp it again he lifted his eyes for a moment, and before he could recover himself the calves of both of his legs were laid open by a double-foot kick. In return for this he succeeded in delivering a terrific kick on McTevis's knee, causing him to drop to the ground like a log, pulling the other kicker on top of him. The seconds rushed forward and separated the men and took them to their corners to bind up their wounds. The first go or round occupied sixteen minutes. When the call of purr came again the purrers hobbled to the centre and took another hold. They were, indeed, a pitiable looking affair. McTevis's legs, although bound up in plaster, were bleeding freely, and the exposed places looked like beefsteak. His opponent's shins had both been scraped clean of the flesh, and the blood was oozing out from between the strips of plaster. Without any preliminary sparring Grabby made a vicious straight kick at this opponent's lame knee, bringing him to grass again before he had time to think.'

Gilbey describes how he journeyed to South Wales in 1947 after reading this account to find an expert in purring called J.R. Williams, but unfortunately missed him as he had recently migrated to open a restaurant in Punta Arenas in Southern Chile. Two years later he tracked him down in South America to get lessons and Williams said the sport was very popular in Wales during his boyhood. Gilbey's emphasis was on the kicking aspects of purring but really this was just a method of taking an opponent's legs from under him, similar to the way the sport was conducted in the 'outplay' manner of Devonshire and the aim was the same as any style of wrestling, to bring a man to the ground. On this note the sport of 'shin kicking' which evolved from a combination Devon wrestling, Norfolk

wrestling (also known as hickling) and clog fighting done by Lancashire miners to settle disputes, is still the major event at the Cotswold Olympicks held in Gloucestershire since 1612. But what is the origin of this sport in Wales?

An article recorded in an 1834 edition of *'The Sporting Magazine'* otherwise known as the 'monthly transactions of the turf, the chase and every other diversion interesting to the man of pleasure, enterprise, spirit' (Volume 8 Series 2 published by M.A. Pittman Warwick Square) mentions the 24 sports & games of ancient Wales and added a proposal for their revival & extension. Interesting for this study is number 16 on this list, ymavael or wrestling which according to the article was at that time *"still practiced and held in estimation. The usual way adopted is that species of luctation prevalent in Cornwall. To prevent strength from wearing out less athletic ingenuity the contest was confined to three struggles and to give two falls was to secure victory"*.

These manly feats or heroic exploits were called gwrolgamp in Welsh but were also referred to as the four & twenty accomplishments or 'y pedair camp ar hugain' and were divided into;

6 feats of activity

1. Cryfider - Strength usually requiring the hurling of heavy stones
2. Rhedeg – Running as part of the races
3. Neidiaw- Jumping or leaping
4. Nofiaw - Swimming
5. Ymafael- Grappling or unarmed combat
6. Marchogaeth- Horsemanship

4 exercises of weapons

7. Saethu- Archery with Welsh longbows
8. Chwarae cleddau a bwccled- Playing with a sword and buckler shield
9. Chwarae cleddau deuddwrn- Playing with a two handed sword
10. Chwarae a ffon ddwybig- playing with a double pointed staff

3 rural hunting sports

11. Hely a milgi- Hunting with greyhounds
12. Hely pysg- Hunting fishes
13. Hely dderyn- Hunting with birds or falconry

7 domestic games

14. Barddoniaeth- Poetry
15. Canu- Singing
16. Darllain Cymraeg- Reading Welsh
17. Canu cywydd gan dant- Declaiming poetry with the harp
18. Canu cywydd pedair ag accenu- Singing an accented cywydd of four
19. Tynnu arfau- Drawing arms
20. Herodraeth- Heraldry

4 board games

21. Chwarae gwyddbwyll- Playing chess
22. Chwarae towlbwrdd- Playing throwboard
23. Chwarae ffritial- Playing fristial
24. Cyweiriad telyn- Tuning a harp

At least this was the list recorded by Iolo Morganwg, otherwise known as Edward Williams, in his discussion of the *Pedair Camp ar Hugain* in 1794. Mostly remembered in modern literature because of his forgeries and blatant tampering with history, Iolo was also a brilliant scholar who established the Gorsedd of the Bards of the Island of Britain (Gorsedd Beirdd Ynys Prydain) only two years before writing his article about the four & twenty. The Gorsedd continues to this day and is one of the most significant organisations for keeping Welsh culture alive but it is obvious that Iolo was wanting to reestablish physical activities as part of the Welsh Eisteddfod, which are not coincidentally held during the Autumn equinox, otherwise known as the Celtic month of Lughnasadh, August 1.

Iolo was using ancient sources to develop his list and in 1632 Dr John Davies Mallwd published his encyclopedic *'Dictionarium Duplex'* which recorded a list in the same order as that of Iolo's 24 measures. Obviously Mallwd was also basing his work on earlier records and in 1420 the poet from mountainous Snowdonia in North Wales, Rhys Goch Eryri, mentions a similar list of 'British Sports' in his poem *'Robert ap Meredydd'*. Of course Rhys Goch was again using earlier sources but in each age the customary list was slightly modified to represent the cultural mores of an earlier era, used to inspire the warrior mindset of the era in which they were written. In 1420 the list described the training regime for knights serving the Norman nobility that ruled Britain in the 12th century but Rhys Goch was also living in the era of Prince Owain Glyndwr and the decade of Welsh independence from Britain.

In 1325 an incredible work was done recording the Celtic mythology of Wales and scholars estimate it was a copy of an earlier work first written in the 11th century. The title of this work *'Mabinogian'* was given to it by Lady Charlotte Guest in 1849 who translated it into English but of the eleven tales recorded, they are divided into two sections, the original *'White Book of Rhydderch'* and the later addition from 1375, the *'Red Book of Hergest'*. Mabinogi means 'a tale from childhood' and referred to a mythical account of the conception, birth and early training of a great Celtic hero. The story of Pryderi is recorded in the first 'Four Branches' or portions of the Mabinogian and in it mentions that he was *'trained up, as befitting a king's son, in all the noble ways and accomplishments'*. No doubt this is in reference to the pedair camp ar hugain.

In 1139 another Welsh scholar (probably of Breton descent), Geoffrey of Monmouth, recorded a work that gives some of the earliest references for the life of King Arthur. The *'History of the Kings of Britain'* was said by Geoffrey to be based on an earlier work done in the British language. Geoffrey was a contemporary of Robert 1st Earl of Gloucester who led the Welsh uprising during the period known as 'the Anarchy', as later recorded by Rhys Goch and these events more than likely influenced his work but there is

also a strong hint of Celtic mythology contained in his history. The following is a translated extract from the "*Brut Tysilio*" said to have been written in Cymraeg by Saint Tysilio in the 7th century, which some speculate could be the source for Geoffrey's History. These events described the earliest part of British history when the Celtic people first landed on the island of Britain and encountered a race of giants.

"And so, as Bryttys was fighting upon a feast day in the place where he first came to land on this island, behold Gogmagog came with eleven giants and made a bloody slaughter upon the Bryttaniaid. And then many of them rallied and fought manfully with them and slew them all except Gogmagog, for Bryttys caused him to be kept alive because it would delight him to see Korineys fight him and they came together, stood face to face, and each one got a hold on the other with much tongue-lashing, until those that were nearby them were wearied by their breathing. And at once the giant hugged Korineys to him with all his might, until he broke three ribs, two on the left and one on the right. And then Korineys became so enraged and took his strength to him with all his might and lifted the giant to his shoulder and ran with him towards a sea crag and bearing him to its highest peak, threw him over the rocks into the sea, so that he went into a thousand pieces, and the waves were discoloured with his blood for a long time. And that place from that day to this is called 'Giants Leap'.

In recent discussions of this story some scholars have come to recognise the similarities between the name of the leader of the Bryttaniad, Bryttys and the name Brenos (or Brennus in Latin), another title for the god of light Lugh. Korineys is likewise associated with the Celtic thunder god Taranis and the Champion of Nuada, Ogma (also inventor of the ogham script), with Gogmagog. Comparisons can also be made with the Invasion Cycle, the earliest mythology of Ireland in which the Irish ancestor Partholan and his followers met a race of aggressive giants called the Femorians when they first arrived on the island. If these names are interchanged then it is obvious that the Brut Tysilio has retained an earlier Celtic fable. Naturally the land known now as Cornwall was given to Korineys and this is how the Cornovii tribe received their name as recorded by the Romans and why the sport of wrestling is so intrinsically associated with Cornish culture.

One thing is certain however and that is the multiple similarities between the lives of Pryderi and the great Irish hero Cu Chullain. These include the fact that they were both fathered by a Celtic god. Lugh the god of light and the sun but also of the underworld in Irish lore for Setanta, as Cu Chullain was known in boyhood and Pwyll Prince of Dyfed and Pen Annwyn or Head of Hades for Gwri of the Golden Hair, as Pryderi was called in his childhood. Raised by loving step fathers, both heroes were associated with beautiful baby colts which were given to them as presents at their birth and in both cases their mothers had to endure false accusations of slander. Both boys grew much faster than the other boys due to their deified lineage and they astounded those around them because of their martial abilities. During their lives they went on many adventures, endured incredible hardships and acted as models of the best behaviour for Celtic warriors, at the end of their lives both were killed by magical spears while in battle. It is highly likely that the myths of Pryderi and Cu Chullain are describing the same hero.

In the Ossianic Cycle set in the 3rd century, Finn mac Cumhal was originally the student of a druid named Finegas and when he licked his thumb after burning it while cooking the Salmon of Knowledge for his master, he gained great wisdom, inevitably becoming the leader of an order of warriors called the Fianna of Erin, devoted to the High Kings and the defense of the Emerald Isle from foreign invasion. These stories were recorded in the 11th century from an oral history that had been told for at least seven centuries prior.

Tests of the Fianna

In the time of Finn no one was ever permitted to be one of the Fianna of Erin unless he could pass through many severe tests of his worthiness. He must be versed in the Twelve Books of Poetry, and must himself be skilled to make verse in the rime and metre of the masters of Gaelic poesy. Then he was buried to his middle in earth, and must, with a shield and a hazel stick, there defend himself against nine warriors casting spears at him, and if he were wounded he was not accepted. Then his hair was woven into braids, and he was chased through the forest by the Fians. If he were overtaken, or if a braid on his hair were disturbed, or if a dry stick cracked under his foot, he was not accepted. He must be able to leap over a lath level with his brow, and to run at full speed under one level with his knee, and he must be able while running to draw out a thorn from his foot and never slacken speed. He must take no dowry with his wife.

Not only were Celtic warriors expected to know extraordinary physical and mental feats but they were expected to follow a code of chivalry throughout their lives as demonstrated in the following;

Maxims of the Fianna

Son of Luga, if armed service be thy design, in a great man's household be quiet, be surly in the narrow pass.

Without a fault of his beat not thy hound; until thou ascertain her guilt, bring not charge against thy wife.

In battle meddle not with a buffoon, for, O mac Luga, he is but a fool.

Censure not any if he be of grave repute; stand not up to take part in a brawl; have naught to do with a madman or wicked one.

Two thirds of thy gentleness be shown to women and those that creep on the floor (little children) and to poets, and be not violent to the common folk.

Utter not swaggering speech, nor say thou wilt not yield what is right; it is a shameful thing to speak too stiffly unless that it be feasible to carry out thy words.

So long as thou shalt live, thy lord forsake not; neither for gold nor for other reward in the world abandon one whom thou pledge to protect.

To a chief do not abuse his people, for that is no work for a man of gentle blood.

Be no tale-bearer, nor utterer of falsehoods; be not talkative nor rashly censorious. Stir not up strife against thee, however good a man be thou.

Be no frequenter of the drinking-house, nor given to carping at the old; meddle not with a man of mean estate.

Dispense thy meat freely; have no niggard for thy familiar.

Force not thyself upon a chief, nor give him cause to speak ill of thee.

Stick to thy gear; hold fast to thy arms till the stern fight with its weapon-glitter be ended.

Be more apt to give than to deny, and follow after gentleness, O son of Luga.

The earliest written survival of recorded Irish myth is a manuscript called the *Book of the Dun Cow*, containing parts of the Ulster Cycle and the Cu Chullain sagas. Written by a monk named Maelmuri who was later killed in a Viking raid at the Cathedral of Clonmacnois in 1106, the strange title derives from an earlier manuscript of the 7th century written on cowhide by St Ciaran that was used as a template for Maelmuri. In Scottish and Irish Gaelic, the warrior feats of the heroes were called chleas and included some impressive demonstrations of weapons control. One such was called ‘faobhar chleas’ or sword feat, which required a dazzling display of juggling skills with live weapons to intimidate an enemy before battle. The sword was a primary weapon of the Celtic warrior and a particular example has subsequently become the most famous sword in the world; the sword of Fergus was called Caladcholg which was latinised to Excalibur for the Arturian Cycle. Another chleas was ‘the leap over a poisoned stroke’ requiring the warrior jump over a venomous blade and this activity seems to have been retained in the Scottish ‘dirk dance’. The ‘wheel feat’ or roth chleas was created by Cu Chullain when he threw the axle and wheel of a chariot by swinging them around his body and this has survived in the form of the hammer throw. How many of these chleas there were is open to speculation but it wouldn’t surprise me if the number came to 24.

Another chleas that seems to have been retained is the feat of the pole throw, which is known as caber tossing today. The ‘salmon leap’ gave a warrior the knack to leap fortress walls like the Six Million Dollar Man and this has been retained in the high jump. Not all chleas were associated purely with physical capabilities and the sian churad or heroes chant was based on a war cry turned song, which gave the ability to immobilise enemies before battle. Other chleas also endowed the heroes with superhuman capacities. According to the 9th century *Yellow Book of Lecan*, Cu Chullain learnt the arts of war under the instruction of the warrior woman Skatha while living in the Land of Shadows. She taught him the Gae Bolga, known as either the feat of thunder or belly spear that kicked a force into an opponent, which filled every part of his body with painful barbs. This is the feat he used to defeat his own son Conla in combat later in the saga.

It should be noted that Cu Chullain was also considered a fine wrestler and he is said to have competed at the Aonach Tailtean or Fair of Tailtu, held in Teltown County Meath, where he invented the hammer throw. These 30 day long Athletic Games were instigated by the sun god Lugh at the beginning of August each year, just like the modern Welsh Eisteddfod, during the harvest festival in honour of his foster mother Tailtu, who died of exhaustion while clearing a massive field in the area. The Fair of Tailtu was also popular across all of Ireland because trial marriages lasting one year & one day could be arranged at the event, with a decision to either separate or formalise the marriage at the next annual gathering. They have been dated to 636BC and lasted until 1169 when ecclesiastical reforms during the Norman domination outlawed all pagan customs. The Lughnasadh Festivals were in reality a pan-European sporting carnival that lasted longer than the ancient Greek Olympiks & in addition to being harvest festivals were celebrations of the most popular deity in the Celtic pantheon; they are known as La Lunasa in modern Irish (*Gaeilge*), Lunastal in Scottish (*Gàidhlig*), Lunaistyn in Manx, Calan Awst in Welsh

(*Cymraeg*) & Lammas in Anglo Saxon; it survived into the Christian era as the Loaf Mass. The tradition of the Scottish Highland Games may have evolved directly in imitation of the Irish Lughnasadh.

Several references mention Cu Chullain using his wrestling prowess such as in his boyhood after a hurley match;

“Before they left Emuin, the king paid a visit to the playing field to bid the boys farewell; Setanta was single handedly playing the three times fifty boys and he was winning. When they tried to fill the goal with their balls, Setanta defended on his own and stopped every ball. Afterwards, in the wrestling, he threw them all to the ground, yet all the three times fifty of them could not pin him down.”

In the above reference we need to be careful not to interpret the concept of a pin by our understanding of the word. A pin in traditional wrestling is one of four points on the back, i.e. two shoulders and two hips. Merely touching the ground with two or more pins after being thrown brought an end to such a contest. After finishing these games Setanta traveled to again meet the king at the feast of the fortress of Cullan and after inadvertently killing this lord's guard dog, Setanta offered to protect him until a replacement could be found. From then on he was called Cu Chullain, the Hound of Cullan.

As already indicated Cu Chullain also did combat with his own son by Aifa, the warrior princess of the Land of Shadows. At the time of fighting, neither Cu Chullain nor Conla knew who the other was, in a retelling of the Persian myth of Rostam and Sohrab, but in addition to battling with various weapons both these supermen also faced each other in unarmed conflict.

“Enough trifling said Cu Chullain, and they crossed with each other, but the lad planted himself on a rock and stood so firm that Cu Chullain could not move him, and in the stubborn wrestling they had, the lad's feet sank deep into the stone and made footprints whence the ‘Strand of Footprints’ has its name.”

The way in which the sport of wrestling has imprinted itself in the landscape, as described above, is replicated across the Celtic world. The spot where Korineys threw Gogmagog as stated was called ‘Giants Leap’ and was also a well known tourist spot near Plymouth in Devon that had an associated geoglyph reproducing the scene; it was destroyed by a storm in the 1790s. Some burial mound hills in Cambridgeshire are said to be the last resting place of a giant that was thrown so forcibly on his back that the earth mounds then formed over his body and some of the fallen standing stones in Scotland are said to have been knocked over during great wrestling contests. At this stage there is no data to verify such a connection with wrestling in the landscape of Wales but this is also true in Brittany, where the sport of gouren (a close cousin of Welsh wrestling) is still so popularly supported.

So returning to the premise of this article, how old is Welsh wrestling? Who can say but all indication seem to show it is as old as Welsh culture itself. The Pryderi myth is missing significant parts of the narrative, which can of course be filled from the Cu Chullain storyline. Cu Chullain was a wrestler so it is natural to assume that Pryderi was too. Celtic warriors were trained in a series of feats and at some stage in the ancient past the number of these feats in Wales was set at four and twenty. Wrestling or ymavael was always an important part of this list of manly measures and the sport was closely connected with the other Celtic sporting traditions of Cornwall, Devon, Brittany, Ireland, Cumbria and Scotland. Welsh wrestlers often crossed Offa's Dyke to compete in other tournaments bringing new concepts back to the homeland to be incorporated into the sport. Possibly due to its evolution to a more brutal form of purring, by the 1950s, the sport had become extinct in its homeland. There has been some chatter to indicate the sports survival amongst the Patagonian Welsh of Chubut Province in Argentina but at this stage these stories haven't been confirmed. It is a shame though that there is no revival movement to restore life to this ancient custom. It is my hope however that this article inspires a Welshman to attempt this culturally important feat and who knows one day we might see a national championships in ymaflyd codwm cefn, as well as the other 23 achievements of manhood in a kind of double decathlon, at the Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Cymru.

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