



# LONDON & MANCHESTER

## A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Two cities, two hundred miles apart, and two footprints on the historical map of wrestling in Britain. London, the capital city of the land, and Manchester the self proclaimed capital of the north, though the inhabitants of Liverpool, Leeds and Sheffield might well have something to say about that.



In the early 1960s television and cinema were making those outside of the industrial north begrudgingly aware that there was a culture and heritage other than their own. The grainy black and white screenings of the first Coronation Street (1960),

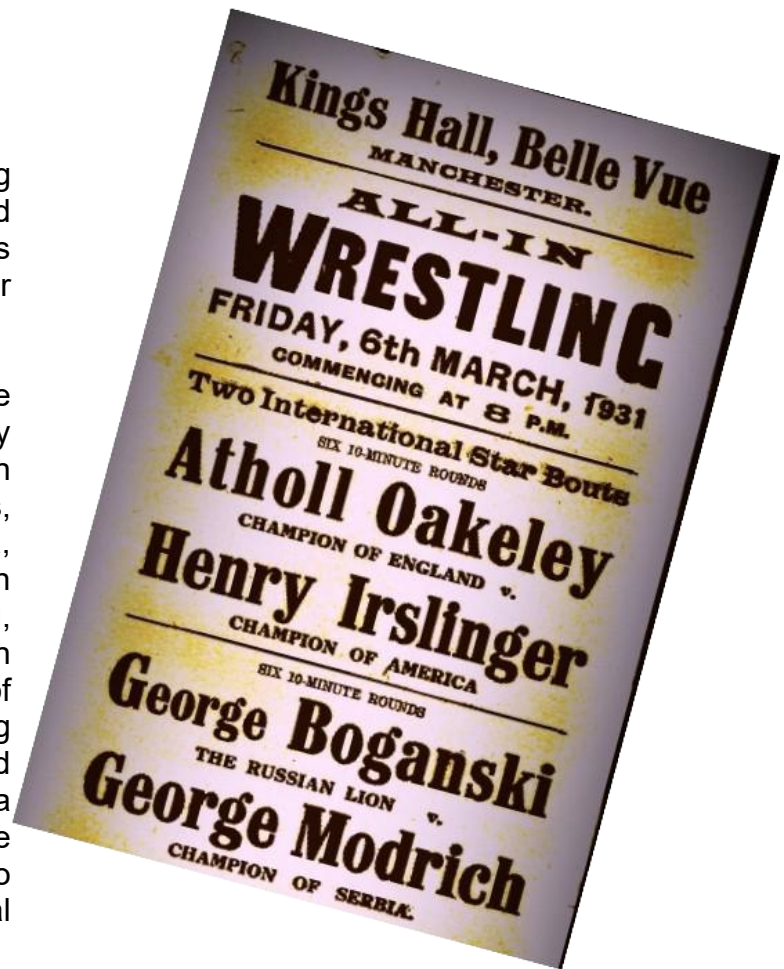
and films such as “A Taste of Honey” (1961), “A Kind of Loving” (1962), and “This Sporting Life” (1963), showed that there was life, of sorts, north of Watford. Britain was a divided land, and this division manifested itself in the realm of wrestling as it did elsewhere in people’s lives.



Dale Martin Promotions dominated the wrestling halls of London and the south, with the occasional peculiarity such as Norman Morrell’s Promotions at Lime Grove Baths, a throwback to an even earlier age. It was Lime Grove that was to epitomise the tensions amongst the northern and southern Joint Promotion members with the infamous Peter Preston conquest of Mick

McManus in baffling circumstances that would extend the deductive powers of Miss Marple until way beyond her bedtime.

Whilst the London fans had little choice but to queue up and pay their shillings to Dale Martin Promotions the Manchester fans, within a small geographical area, had the choice of Wryton Promotions, Morrell & Beresford, Billy Best, Relwyskow & Green and an assortment of independent promoters. Following Henri Irslinger, Kathleen Look and Jessie Rogers Belle Vue had a unique arrangement where the northern promoters took turns to present shows on a rotational basis.



This assortment of promoters at Belle Vue created a variety that was unheard of in the south, where imagination and creativity was restricted by the near monopoly of Dale Martin Promotions. At least that’s what the northerners thought. Whilst there may be an element of truth in the northerners’ bias it cannot

be denied that the professionalism and quality of Dale Martin Promotions was a standard to which the northern promoters aspired.

The variety for Manchester fans was enhanced by the proliferation of independent promoters. Fred Woolley, Danny Flynn, Jack Cassidy, Grant Foderingham, Jim Lewis, and Shaun O'Shea were amongst the many Manchester based independent promoters of the 1960s.

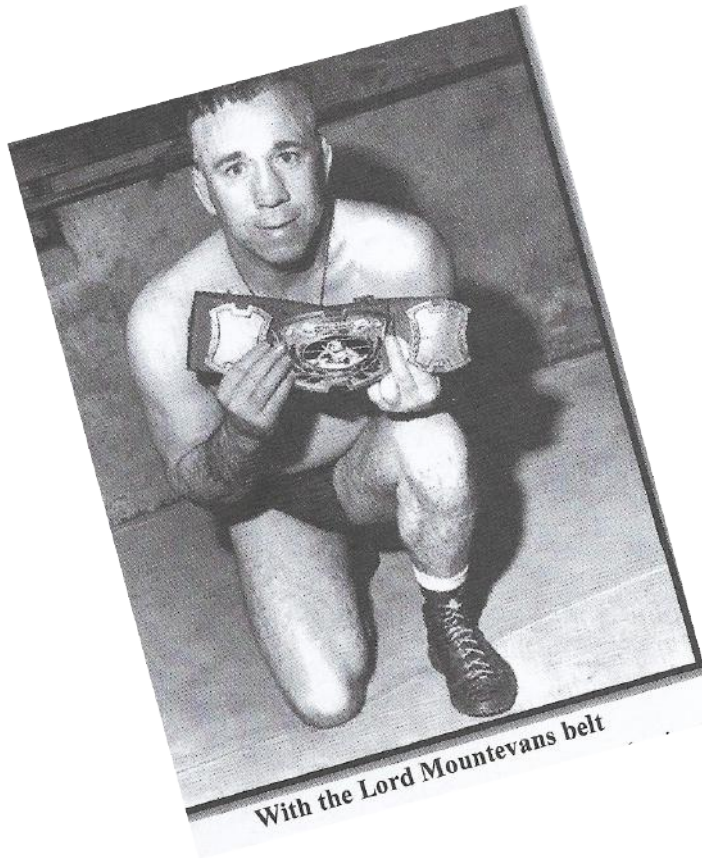


Apart from the Royal Albert Hall, which attracted visiting Continentals for the sole purpose of laying down their reputations for the sake of our domestic stars, the Manchester fan was more likely to watch overseas visitors than the London fan. For some reason the Northern promoters seemed able to dominate the booking lists of touring stars including, Ricky Starr, Jean Ferre, Red Ivan, L'Ange Blanc, and Jose Rodrigues Questa.

There were, of course, numerous similarities as many wrestlers worked nationally and the major promoters co-operated as part of the Joint Promotions organisation. This meant that Londoners and Mancunians were both assured of first-rate tournaments featuring experienced and skilful wrestlers in quality surroundings.

Delve beneath the high standard ring, professional presentation, and dinner jacketed Master of Ceremonies, figuratively speaking, and the differences begin to emerge.

The style of London and Manchester shows was likely to provide a stark contrast. Despite the Mancunian's view that Lancashire was the home of real wrestlers it was the southern shows that boasted a greater proportion of technical matches. Our London fan might well have watched shows with three technical matches on a four bout bill. Such match making would be unimaginable to the Manchester fan. Northern shows tended to be more aggressive affairs, where fans demanded a good helping of guts and glory in their evening's entertainment.



Wigan's Jack Dempsey, the embodiment of northern tenaciousness, spoke the unspeakable when he said,

*"The audiences in the south are better. They are much more appreciative of scientific wrestling, more sophisticated. In the north 'rough and tumble' wrestling is demanded by most audiences"* (*The Wrestler*, October 1963).

Such differences stemmed from the heritage of our sport. The northern tradition was of wrestlers from working class backgrounds, where Sunday afternoons were likely to be spent outdoors scrapping for a few shillings side stake, honing the skills that would provide their ticket out of

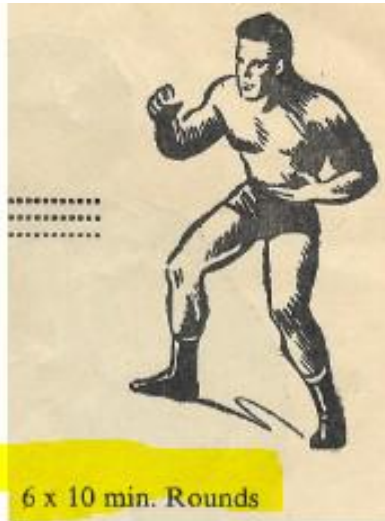
the pits, the factories and those dark, satanic mills. These surroundings gave the northern wrestlers, and their fans, a harder edge than could usually be found in the south.

The Mancunian fan was more likely to see blood than his (or her) London counterpart. Not a lot of it, mind you, but with shows in the north and midlands tending to be that much rougher than those in the south occasionally wrestlers would be cut. Wrestling

outside the ring was also a more common occurrence in Manchester than in London. Dale Martin Promotions took a dim view of such antics, but some of the Manchester promoters found it acceptable. Blood and outside of the ring activities were few and far between, but they did happen.



The London fan was likely to believe that he (or she) watched the most polished, professional shows in the country. The Manchester fans just believed they had the best wrestlers. Northern bills certainly appeared to have more big names, but this may have been a consequence of a more conservative approach to marketing by Dale Martin Promotions. Another possibility is that as Dale Martin promoted far more shows on any one evening than any other promoter they simply had to spread the talent around much more thinly.



One of the most noticeable differences experienced by our Manchester and London fans of the sixties was that of the length of rounds. Prior to the advent of television five and ten minute rounds were commonplace around the country. Television brought the requirement of ad breaks and so five minute rounds were adopted for televised shows. The shorter rounds were adopted universally throughout the north and midlands, though the boxing heritage of Billy Best and Liverpool Stadium gave Merseyside fans rounds of just three minutes. In the south Dale Martin clung steadfastly to the tradition of ten

minute rounds. Why this was so has been debated at length by wrestling fans, some suggesting that the less physical requirement of ten minute rounds enabled Dale Martin to pay their wrestlers less. Whatever the reasons many fans would have preferred five minute rounds.



There were other variations. Masked men were a familiar feature of wrestling bills in Manchester and throughout the north and midlands during the Muntevans period. Arthur Wright, founder of Wryton Promotions, gave



an unenthusiastic Geoffrey Condliffe a mask to wear in 1946. Thus came about the creation of one of the greatest masked men of all time,

Count Bartelli. Others followed in Bartelli's footsteps. The Ghoul, The Mask, The

Scorpion, The Katt, The Monster and a myriad of others. All frequently appeared in the north and midlands, but rarely ventured south. An exception was made in 1960 when Dale Martins booked the visiting American, Zebra Kid.

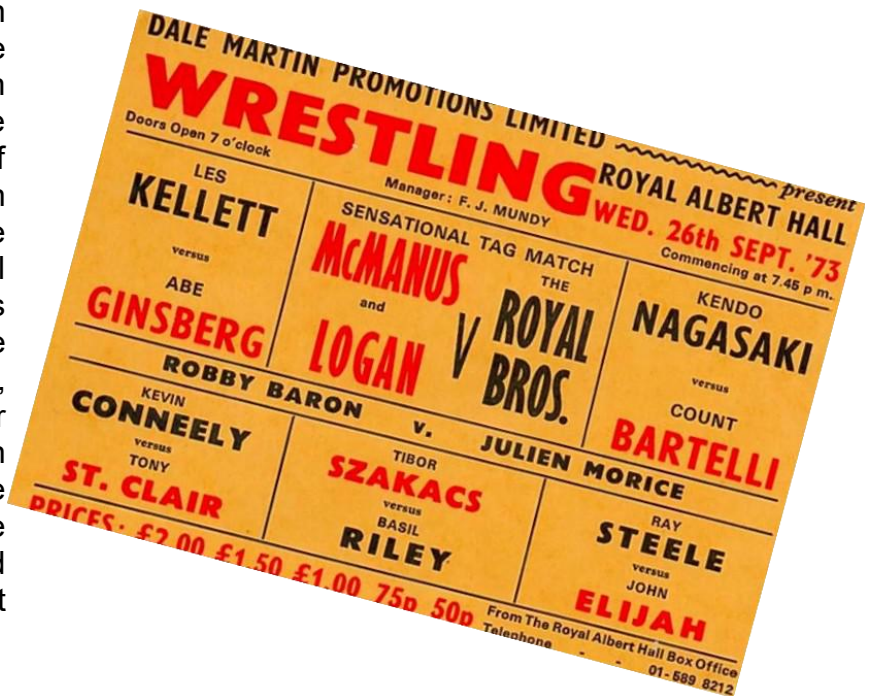


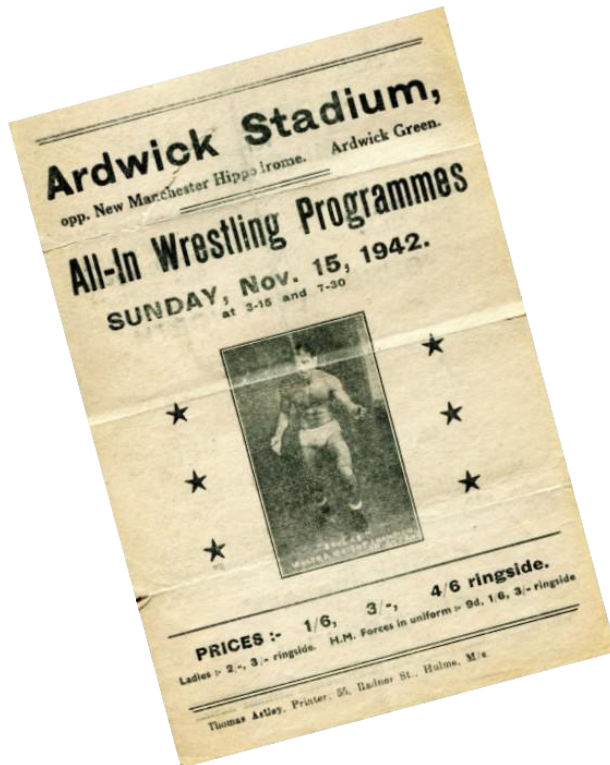
Even Kendo Nagasaki was for many years ignored by Dale Martin Promotions, and their spokesman told author David Marchbanks:

*"We don't need hooded terrors and Gorgeous Georges, we promote wrestling skill." (Wrestling by David Marchbanks, 1966, Corgi)*

The competition provided by Paul Lincoln Management in the early 1960s forced Dale Martin into confronting the issue of masked men. Still they resisted, presumably to protect the image of

wrestling they had carefully cultivated over the previous twenty years. Following the partnership of Dale Martin and Paul Lincoln and the appearance of Doctor Death on their bills little attempt was made to exploit the huge following of the masked man. We can speculate that the appearance of Doctor Death at the Royal Albert Hall was Dale Martin's payback to the man behind the mask, and their former rival, Paul Lincoln. The first regular masked man in Dale Martin rings was The Outlaw. Maybe the London promoters were reassured by the man behind the mask being trusty stalwart Gordon Nelson.





Without doubt the London fan did have the crème de la crème of wrestling venues, the Royal Albert Hall. A knock out loss was worth it for the opportunity of a tens second gaze at that ceiling. The hall had been the home of London wrestling since the days of Hackenschmidt in the early 1900s and in the early 1950s Dale Martin Promotions took over the reins. The venue itself, let alone the quality of the bills, stood head and shoulders above anywhere else in the country. Whilst the Mancunian could argue that Belle Vue bills were more vibrant and richer in talent than London counterparts such as the Fairfields Hall there was nowhere to match the Royal Albert Hall.

Belle Vue itself held a key place in the history of wrestling, being the venue of one of the first two all-in wrestling shows held in Britain. There were other major venues also. The Ardwick Stadium, only a short distance from Belle Vue, was known as the Blood Tub, and such was the popularity of wrestling in the city both venues could put on sell-out shows on the same evening. From the 1940s Ardwick Stadium shows tended to be overshadowed by Belle Vue, which attracted more of the big names. The Free Trades Hall and Houldworth Hall on Deansgate were also wrestling venues in the 1960s.

When it came to championship wrestling there was a huge imbalance between the North and the South. Manchester fans were far more likely to watch British champions in action than their London counterparts. Throughout the Mountevans era the British championship was dominated by northern wrestlers, with a few notable exceptions.



Maybe it was the sparsity of national championship activity that led to a collection of southern England regional champions. Even Mick McManus, the most successful wrestler of the Mountevans era, was deemed to require a southern area title for some mysterious reason. It certainly did nothing to add to his credibility and status. Regional title holders in the north were much thinner on the ground, and regional championship bouts practically non-existent.



Another difference? Sex. Promoters such as Chunky Hayes and Jim Lewis championed the cause of female wrestlers who could frequently be found in Manchester rings. In London it took the ruling of a judge to bring the ladies to a London public hall, and they remained a rarity.

Despite their differences there was one unifying feature of our Manchester and London fans. Each steadfastly believed that their wrestlers were the

best. Manchester bred professional wrestlers of the highest calibre, including Billy Robinson, Jim Hussey, Tommy Mann, Colin Joynson, the St Clair brothers, and Johnny Saint. Londoners had their own success stories, of course, and none more successful than the likes of Mick McManus, Jackie Pallo, Joe Cornelius, the Cortez brothers, Bert Assirati and Steve Logan.

Northerners knew that no one could match the tenacity and hardness of their wrestlers, whilst southerners knew that no one could match the skill and agility of their favourites. Decades later opinions are as divided as ever.

