

# Civil War Era Wrestling

By John Dewey

Wrestling (or scuffling) in America during the first half of the 19th century was a very popular pastime. No county fair would be complete without a wrestling competition. Every locality had its own champion. Every traveling carnival had its house grappler who would take on all comers. Abraham Lincoln himself had been a "scuffler" as a youth.

The style of wrestling practiced in this country during the time of the Civil War varied from place to place depending on the make-up of the local immigrant population and other influences. In Vermont, a style of wrestling, which originated in Ireland, predominated. This style was called "collar and elbow" wrestling.

Collar and elbow earned its name by the grappling hold the contestants were required to apply to each other. The wrestlers wore special sleeveless jackets with very stiff collars. Such a jacket resembled, almost exactly, the cap on an infantryman's overcoat. Each contestant gripped his opponent's collar with his right hand and his elbow with his left. This hold was not allowed to be broken by either man throughout the duration of the contest. The object of each combatant was to put his opponent on the ground (usually turf, as mats were uncommon in America at this time) by a hip throw or a leg sweep and pin his back, shoulder to hip, for a one count. Matches were usually conducted two out of three falls with no rounds and, often, no time limits. This type of wrestling required good upper body strength. Nimbleness of the feet was also a valuable asset.

The Vermont regiments introduced this style of wrestling to the other units in the Army of the Potomac and it caught on. Every regiment soon had its own champion and inter-unit matches were common occurrences in camp. In 1864 a member of the 2nd Vermont with the satisfyingly patriotic name of George William Flagg won something called the Gettysburg

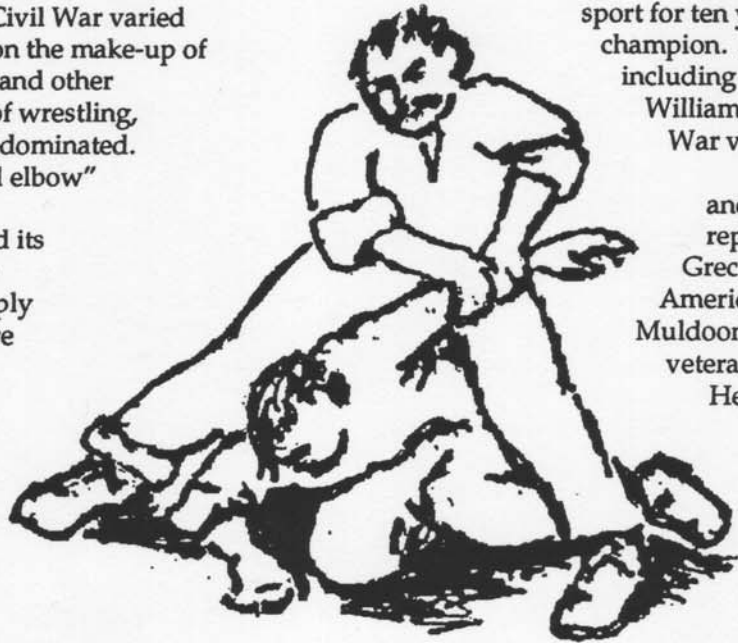
Tournament while still recuperating from a leg wound and was declared the Heavyweight Champion of the Army of the Potomac.

The popularity of Collar-and-Elbow wrestling did not wane with the ending of the Civil War. It soon became a national sport. The charismatic Col. James McLaughlin, late of the 26th New York Infantry and 24th United States Cavalry, dominated the sport for ten years as the American champion. Many of his challengers, including the renowned George William Flagg, were Union Civil War veterans.

By 1880, however, Collar-and-Elbow wrestling was replaced by European Style Greco-Roman wrestling. The American champion was William Muldoon, another Union Civil War veteran who had been a bugler.

He reigned for another ten years. When he retired,

Greco-Roman wrestling was, in turn, replaced by the Catch-as-Catch-Can wrestling of Frank Gotch and George Hackenschmidt. This last form of grappling



is the precursor of the Amateur Free Style and theatrical Professional Wrestling of today.

Main Source of Information: The Magnificent Scufflers by Charles Wilson (1959).