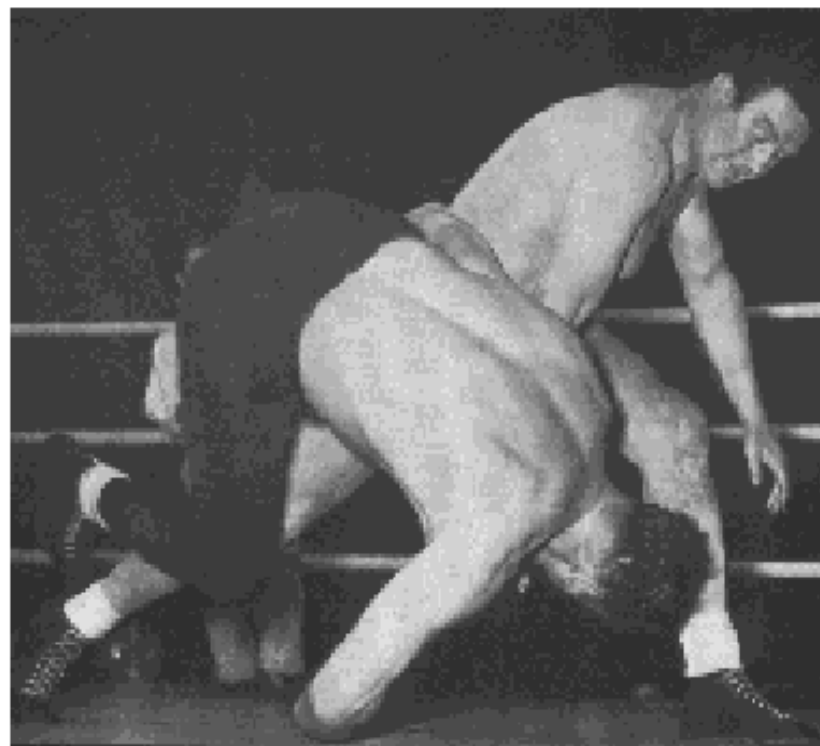


Blue Blood on the Mat

Sir Athol Oakley



Foreword by Geoff Thompson

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Mr Norman Morrell

The Author and Publishers are glad to make it clear that no reflection on Mr Norman Morrell was intended by the Author's suggestion, on page 137, that the 'Mountevans rules' were copies from the 'All-In' rules of 1930. The suggestion that the Mountevans rules, which it is now understood Mr Morrell prepared, were filched from the Author's 'All-In' rules of 1930 is entirely incorrect and steps are being taken to correct any future editions of the book. Further the 'tournament' which the Author attended, and criticised as an exhibition billed as a contest, mentioned on page 148, was held on the South Coast, and was not promoted by Mr Morrell; nor was there any intention to suggest that Mr Morrell has ever been involved in any such promotions.

To John Oakeley, and all other world champions, past and present, who, by their skill, courage and prowess, have set an example to people all over the world.

Foreword

A friend of mine, Marcus Trowler, a professional journalist and keen martial artist sent me an old copy of this wonderful book, ***Blue Blood on the Mat***, last Year and inscribed it with the words 'they don't make them like this any more '. To be honest it was six months before I actually sat down to read it, but when I did I loved every page, it's one of those rare books that you just don't want to put down and when you've reached the end you want more.

I really wanted to release this book in with my own books because I felt sure that the people who read my own book ***Watch My Back*** would appreciate a work of this calibre. I made enquiries with the publishers and, well, here it is.

I want to dedicate this re-release to all the great men of wrestling. Hopefully, by rereleasing this great book I can re-introduce these legendary athletes to an uninitiated public that, I'm sure, will fall in love with the characters just as much as I have. Maybe it will also stir up the interest once more in the sport and art of wrestling.

It also gave me the idea of re-releasing other books about great fighters of the past who, like Mr Oakeley, are now in Val halla-warrior heaven. This then is the first in the series **Geoff Thompson's fighting greats**, and it concentrates on lesser known fighting legends of the past, their lives, their loves, their victories and their defeats. I thought it appropriate to start with Mr Oakeley because of his outstanding achievements in wrestling and also because, in his book, he introduces some of the other legends who I think you might like to read about. They say that small libraries make great men (and women), I believe this to be true, what small libraries also do is offer the reader information, knowledge and inspiration. Inspiration is the fuel that gets you to every training session and helps you to excel, perhaps helping you to push a little further each session than the last, at the end of the day if you don't have the fuel it doesn't matter whether you have a Porsche or a Lada because neither of them will go very far. So reading is an excellent form of training fuel, so do as much as you can.

After I read this book I wanted to be a wrestler, the way that they trained, the way they fought even the way that they conducted their lives outside of the arena-these guys were fighting dinosaurs

and showed that, with dedication and commitment, one can achieve anything in life.

Mr Oakeley started out as a 5 stone, sickly teenager and worked him self up to a 15 stone world wrestling champion with an incredible 22" neck. He turned it around and proved that where there's a will there IS a way.

Sadly, very sadly, Mr Oakeley passed away in September 1994 at the grand old age of 85. After the 'flop' of his rival Wrestling organisation that he set up to try and combat the 'show' boys, he retired to live a quiet life in Buckinghamshire. His wife died several years before him. He has a son, John Oakeley, a yachtsman of some repute, believed to be living in Australia and a daughter that no one I spoke to knew very much about.

Mr Oakeley was so disgusted with the wrestling set up in the 50's and 60's, that he had nothing more to do with it. It is thought that he was probably one of the last Englishmen to try and wrestle or organise wrestling for REAL (that word keeps popping up in my books, doesn't it?).

The rest is better left to the words of Sir Athol Oakeley himself, I hope that, like I, you will enjoy and indeed learn from this book and that it will inspire you to do best what you best do. If you are into any form of martial training, add the art of wrestling to it-you'll be a lot better fighter and person for it.

I have left the book as it was originally written, by the expert hand of Mr Oakeley, what you read is what he thought and what he was.

Geoff Thompson. Coventry 1996

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Introduction

This story provides, I believe, an original example of domination of mind over matter. Together with the forces of hereditary ability, this enabled me, a person totally unfitted by nature to be a heavyweight fighter, to reach the top of the profession at that weight.

Provisionally born into a family renowned for many famous men and women, I probably inherited my desire to excel in athletics from my grandfather, Sir Charles Oakeley, who took a great interest in the Prize Ring, and was himself an amateur heavyweight prize fighter of some repute. Sir Charles had a passion for setting up athletic records and, when an undergraduate, once drove a 'four in hand' from Hyde Park Corner to Carfax in Oxford, with only one change of horses, in six and a quarter hours. In the days when badminton was all the rage he and his brother, without stopping and without dropping it, hit a shuttlecock seventeen thousand five hundred times over the net!

On my mother's side we have the mate to Morgan the pirate as an ancestor. A master sailor and a man of great size and strength, his hereditary influence has come out in my son John Oakeley, whose sailing championship victories are remarkable both in number and variety.

My father sent me to boarding school when I was six. At eight I went to Packwood Haugh, a school at that time famous for turning out many great athletes. The headmaster, a Balliol Scholar, was also Blues. Such a school naturally attracted the sons of many famous athletes.

Until I was eleven I had taken no interest whatever in any game. My only reputation was as an undersized fighter of some ferocity. I had recently read Lorna Doone, and the magnificent account of the fight between John Ridd and Carver Doone had a deep and lasting effect on me which I retain to this day. Possibly carried away by these heroes I dislocated the thumb of the late Lord Birdwood and was nearly expelled. This unfortunate episode pro tem. ended my fighting career. However, at about that time the example of a young South African cricket prodigy, J. D. Wyatt-Smith, fired me with enthusiasm for other sports: I never looked back.

From Packwood I went to Clifton. I weighed only four-stone seven at seventeen and the school doctor put his foot on the scales at

the 'medical' which I took in order to gain entry to Sandhurst. This low weight was due to the starvation we had to endure owing to the German blockade.

In my first month at the R.M.C. I put on two stone. Here I was taught to box by Jimmie Wilde. From Sandhurst I was gazetted into the Army and qualified as Physical Training Instructor. Georges Carpentier, George Hackenschmidt and Kohlmainen of Finland were my heroes. I won a number of championships in long-distance running, also competing in the 'Marathon' for which I trained under Ahlgren of Sweden, running twenty miles a day for six months and fifty miles on Wednesdays!

My interest in fighting was as sudden as it was dramatic. Walking in plain clothes down~ Westbourne Grove, London, one Sunday afternoon three men gave me a good beating up.

Mortified and furious I went the next morning to the Sandow Institute in St.James' Street. Eugen Sandow, himself world famous athlete of terrific strength interviewed me and when I left the Army it was under Sandow and Jim Pedley, his chief instructor, that I got my first training as a wrestler. My weight increased to twelve stone and I then began wrestling at the famous 'Ashdown Club' in Islington, so tough that it was said only three new members in each hundred ever kept their membership for more than a year.

In one open tournament I secured a headlock on Chartinet of Switzerland and he had a scissors on my ankle. Neither would give in or give way. He pulled my foot out of its socket and I rendered him unconscious for half an hour and we thought he was dead. I was adjudged the winner but spent the next two years on crutches and went back to five and a half stone.

It took four hours' exercise a day for another two years before I again reached twelve stone and recovered my strength. I also followed the body-building diet which Hackenschmidt had recommended in his book; this included drinking eleven pints of milk a day. I continued with this torture for a year and a half until George accidentally told me there had been a misprint in his book and it should have read five pints and not eleven!

I reduced my intake of milk and increased my training periods. Soon I was selected for the British International Amateur Wrestling team, later captained it and my career was well under way.

A.O.

1. The Mighty Men of History

Before the Prize Ring degenerated into effeminacy and bloodstained fists were wrapped in gloves, contests involving wrestling had been in existence for seven thousand years.

From the time of the Sumerians in 5000 BC the sport has been held in high esteem, both by the proletariat and royalty. Every nation in the world is known to have practised the art in one form or another.

Men wrestled long before they fought with fists. Wrestling is a sport of primordial instincts. It is also one of the most scientific of all games with its thousands of throws, counters, grips and locks, to learn all of which takes many years. Boxing has nowhere near the same number of moves.

From its earliest days, wrestling was always a major sport, even in the Middle Ages. It was a rule of prize fighting that a wrestling fall should end a round. From the Graeco-Roman era to the Lancashire Catch-as-Catch-Can period immediately preceding the Great War of 1914, wrestling flourished like no other sport.

From then, until Irslinger and I brought in the new style from America on the 15th December 1930, wrestling died in this country as well as in the United States. How this came about will be shown in later chapters.

For this is the inside story of 'All-In' wrestling. It is also the story of how it came about that I, a slightly built long-distance runner, public schoolboy, and former Army officer, first became interested in an art in which, later, I was to become the heavyweight champion of Europe and Great Britain.

You will learn the truth about this much discussed sport. How much of it is now competitive? Is it an acrobatic act under the guise of competition? Is it, like most other sports of the post-war era, just a spectacle to draw a gullible public! To be able to write authoritatively one has to be not only a champion but a life student of the subject.

The greatest of all the ancient fighters, Milo of Croton, lived in the Athenian Age. No book on wrestling would be complete without reference to this Colossus—possibly the strongest man of all time. Milo was never defeated. No modern gladiator would have lived

with him for a second. His physique was Herculean, his strength fabulous.

In his time, 511 BC, wrestling was always a fight to the death. There were no holds barred. Everything went. The winner was the man who sent his opponent into eternity.

It is said that Milo became strong through resistance exercises which developed every muscle in his body. This he achieved by lifting, not metal weights, but a calf every day until it grew into a bull. Whereas a metal weight is static, a live weight, especially an animal, struggles. This exercises the muscles of the sides and develops balance. Every movement of the animal has to be resisted whereas, with a bar or dumb-bell, the muscles are worked in a straight line without variation. John Ridd in Blackmore's *Lorna Doone* points this out after he has seen the legs of a man working a treadmill: insufficient variation is inclined to be antagonistic to supreme strength.

Milo is also said to have carried on his head a chariot with six men seated in it; to have hurled a rock of three hundredweight for twenty feet; to have slain an ox by punching it between its eyes, and to have strangled a bull. He pulled up trees by the roots and never lost a contest or fight.

Greek and Roman alike knew the value of wrestling. In their competitive games, as well as in their training for war, they developed a system of advanced physical training superior to the methods used today in Great Britain.

It will be appreciated that wrestling requires not only balance and skill but extreme strength. In by-gone days valour in battle was useless without strength and skill. Consequently every nation in the world encouraged wrestling. Even kings, who in those days led their armies, were proficient.

Milton, in *Of Education*, wrote: 'Children must be practised in all the locks and grips of wrestling wherein Englishmen are wont to excel, as need may often be in fight to hug, to grapple and to close. And this, perhaps, will be enough wherein to prove and heat their single strength.'

Pepys, in his diary, tells of a wrestling match in St. James's Park in the year 1667 before the King and his nobles. It was for a purse of a thousand pounds, and Pepys says: 'Many greater sums were betted.'

It is nothing new for a baronet or a knight to be a wrestler. Sir Thomas Parkyns, who lived in Nottingham in the seventeenth

century, was one. Educated at Westminster and Trinity College, Cambridge, he was an outstanding mathematician and a personal friend of Sir Isaac Newton, with whom he established an annual wrestling tournament at Bunny Park for a gold-laced hat valued at twenty-two shillings. He only engaged servants who could wrestle and who were willing to fight with him. Sir Thomas is said to have wrestled daily without a day's illness until his seventy-eighth year. 'when death gave him the back heel'. He is buried in Bunny Church where there is a figure of him in a wrestling pose. On the monuments inscribed:

'At length he falls, the long Contest is o'er
And time has thrown, whom none e'er threw before.
Yet boast not time thy Victory, for he
At last shall rise again and conquer thee.'

Perhaps the most famous description of a wrestling contest is the one in *Lorna Doone*, and it is based on fact. In Blackmore's story the death of the giant Carver Doone, the last of the band of robbers who lived on Exmoor during those times, is thus told by John Ridd.

I think he knew his time was come. I think he knew from my knitted muscles, and the firm arch of my breast, and the way in which I stood; but most of all from my stern blue eyes; that he had found his master. At any rate a paleness came, an ashy paleness on his cheeks, and the vast calves of his legs bowed in, as if he were out of training.

'Seeing this, villain as he was, I offered him the first chance. I stretched forth my left hand, as I do to a weaker antagonist, and I let him have the hug of me ... But in this I was too generous having forgotten my Pistol-Wound and the cracking of one of my short lower ribs. Carver Doone caught me round the waist, with such a grip as had never yet been laid upon me.

I heard my rib go, I grasped his arm and tore the muscle out of it (as the string comes out of an orange); then I took him by the throat, which is not allowed in wrestling; but he had snatched at mine; and now was no time of dalliance. In vain he tugged and strained, and writhed, dashed his bleeding fist into my face and flung himself on me with gnashing Jaws. Beneath the iron of my strength—for God that day was with me—I had him helpless in two minutes, and his blazing eyes lolled out.

‘ “I Will not harm thee any more,” I cried, so far as I could for panting, the work being furious: “Carver Doone thou art beaten; own it and thank God for it; and go thy way, and repent thyself.”

‘It was all too late. Even if he had yielded in his ravening frenzy, for his beard was frothy as a mad dog’s jowl; even if he would have owned that, for the first time in his life, he had found his master; it was all too late.

‘The black bog had him by the feet; the sucking of the ground drew on him, like the thirsty lips of death. In our fury we had heeded neither wet nor dry nor thought of earth beneath us. I myself could scarcely leap, with the last spring of o’er-laboured legs, from the engulfing grave of slime. He fell back, with his swarthy breast (from which my grip had rent all clothing), like a hammock of bogoak, standing out the quagmire; and then he tossed his arms to heaven, and they were black to the elbow, and the glare of his eyes was ghastly. I could only gaze and pant; for my strength was no more than an infant’s, from the fury and the horror. Scarcely could I turn away, while, joint by joint, he sank from sight.’

2. The Age of the Gorillas

The eighteenth century saw the advent of the prize ring. This flourished until the second quarter of the nineteenth century when it died, to quote Shaw, 'of its intolerable tediousness'. And tedious it undoubtedly was. Fights with bare fists went on round after round for hours. A wrestling fall ended a round. The harder a prize fighter threw his opponent, and the more times he flung him off his feet, the more exhausted became his adversary until, many rounds later, bleeding and unrecognisable, he eventually gave up. If the prize ring was killed by its boredom it lived by its ferocity.

As a means of self-defence pugilism has only since been bettered by 'La Savate' and 'Karate'. It is not generally realised that barefist fighting plus wrestling was an art which produced real champions. Men of husky physique, with strong legs and arms, barrel chests and great courage. Fists were pickled to strengthen the tissue. Men like Owen Swift, Tom Cribb, Jim Mace, Charlie Mitchell, Gentleman Jackson and others were heroes of their day. When Byron was rebuked for taking lessons from Jackson he replied that the pugilist's manners were infinitely superior to those of the Fellows of the college whom he met at High Table. The aristocracy, headed by the Prince Regent, supported the prize ring and wagered heavily on the results of matches. My grandfather, Sir Charles Oakeley, who himself stood six feet four, was not only an enthusiastic amateur and capable exponent of the noble art of prize fighting, but also attended all the big fights of his time.

Conan Doyle's Rodney Stane deals with the prize ring and has been widely read. But *Boxers and their Battler* by 'Thormanby', a book written long ago and passed down to me by my grandfather, gives this description which brings out the importance of wrestling in pugilism. He is referring to Owen Swift, lightweight champion of England, who, for skill, courage and ability in fighting at that weight, has probably never been equalled. Owen was champion in 1837, and had never been defeated at his weight. On the thirteenth of March, 1838, he was matched for a mill at Royston in Cambridge shire against the Brighton lightweight 'Brighton Bill', who, under his real name of William Phelps, had killed his opponent George Daniels.

'Swift was a far more formidable customer than he looked at first sight. Every muscle in his graceful symmetrical body was fully developed. He was all wire and whipcord, with well-knit shoulders, from which his blows came like stones from a catapult.'

(It should be remembered that the rules of the ring in 1838 allowed a man to be carried to the scratch by his seconds; only much later on was this altered to rule that each man must rise from the knee of his battleholder and walk to his own side of the scratch unaided while the seconds and bottle-holder remained at their corner.)

'First blood was booked to the Brightonian who landed a right hander on Swift's mouth. The blow was not severe, but Owen's lips were chapped and it only wanted a tap to draw the claret. In the fourth round, however, the Londoner had his revenge, for, as Bill rushed in, Owen met him with right and left on the nose and ripped the skin clean off that feature. As far as ringcraft was concerned, the Brightonian was a child compared with the wily Owen, who drew his man on, artfully and cunningly, till Bill fell into the trap laid for him and dashed in only to be sent back by a blow like the kick of a horse. In the fifth round Bill was caught in this way and got a terrific smack on the jaw which knocked him clean off his feet. So the fight went on for forty minutes and, though Phelps was badly punished about the face and bleeding freely, he was still as strong as a horse and game as a pheasant. After an hour and a quarter, Phelps had both eyes almost closed and every feature of his face knocked out of shape, blood and sweat coursing down his bruised cheeks, his face a purple hue suggestive of apoplexy. Not even when Phelps was absolutely helpless, his eyes closed, his arms hanging by his sides and only just able to stand, would his backers allow him to be taken away. After the eighty-fifth round Curtis threw in the sponge. Owen had just enough strength to shake hands with his beaten foe, who tried to rise, but fell back senseless into his second's arms.

As a result of this fight 'Brighton Bill' died without recovering consciousness. Owen Swift had already killed Anthony Noon in 1834 and been tried and convicted for manslaughter, getting six months. This time he went to Paris where he fought and beat Adams. Lord Henry Seymour found the money to back Adams; the Marquis of Waterford and Lord Curgenven for Swift. Warrants were issued against both contestants. Adams went back to England but Swift

dared not go back and was arrested by the French. Rather than be thrown into a French prison, Swift, after sentence, fled in disguise to England and was tried at Hertford Assizes on February 28th, 1839, and acquitted of the manslaughter of Phelps.

Owen never fought again. Thormanby writes: 'A prettier fighter was never seen in the ring during the hundred and fifty years of its history. Owen was remarkable for his marvellous quickness and precision in the use of the left, whilst he was so wonderfully active on his legs that, after delivering a blow, he was away out of danger before his adversary could touch him. At in-fighting he was equally good with both hands, the severity of his hitting was astounding and he was undoubtedly one of the best wrestlers seen in the prize ring. Add to this his admirable generalship, indomitable pluck and excellent temper, and you have the portrait of a consummate master of the art of fighting whose superior the world has never seen and perhaps will never see again.'

All through the ages, wrestling has always been the sport of Kings, and many ancient monarchs were able exponents of the art. Richard Coeur de Lion was one of the strongest men of ancient times. Henry the Eighth was an exceedingly good wrestler and competed against the King of France on the Field of the Cloth of Gold. Indian Maharajahs kept a whole stable of heavyweight wrestlers. These men have, for hundreds of years, worked many hours a day, strengthening their grips by working their hands in wet rice, then wet sand, and so on, as well as increasing their body strength, to a fantastic degree, by advanced resistance and concentration under hypnosis. They married the daughters of wrestlers and no white man, nor Japanese, has been able to defeat their champions, the product of two thousand years of inter-breeding designed to produce the super-athlete.

Stanislaus Zbyszko, when world's heavyweight champion in the Graeco-Roman and American Catch-as-Catch-Can styles, went to India for a match with the most formidable of all Indian champions, Gama. Zbyszko told me he was paid all expenses to India and back to America. The Maharajah of Patiala received him as his guest at his palace. He trained for two months, and entered the ring at twenty-three stone. For a height of five feet five inches such a weight made Zbyszko look like an egg. One could understand why no white man ever pinned his shoulders to the mat in fact, at Lane's Club years later, when Zbyszko was long past his prime, Bob Gregory,

myself and four other champions all tried at once to pin him. As fast as we got one shoulder down he rolled over on his face. He was in fact oval! You could not tell whether he was standing up or sitting down. His neck was two feet four around, his thighs three feet, his biceps two feet. This was the man whom Gama beat in ninety seconds. That is the calibre of the Indian wrestler. Had he won, Zbyszko would have gone home with a hundred thousand pounds. As it was he had to be content with the loser's share often thousand only.

Wrestling has always been a popular sport in Britain, long before anyone thought of soccer or cricket. It reached its peak in the early part of the twentieth century. Two people were responsible for this. George Hackenschmidt of Esthonia and C. B. Cochran of London. The former, known as the 'Russian Lion', was a magnificent figure of a man. He stood five feet nine and a half inches. His chest measured fifty-two inches and he was as active as a tiger. Cochran, the master showman, was quick to realise the potentialities of this wonderful athlete, who had been trained as a weightlifter and who had graduated into what is known as 'Graeco-Roman' wrestling, winning tournament after tournament all over Europe. 'Graeco-Roman', for the uninitiated, is that style where only holds above the waist are allowed.

Hackenschmidt's patron, Count Ribeaupierre, had advised him to agree to the Belgian newspaper proprietor, Herr Delmer, becoming his manager and, soon afterwards, Hackenschmidt arrived in London. He was then the heavyweight champion of the world in the Graeco-Roman style. He had won the title at the Casino in Paris where Cochran had first seen but not yet met him. A heavyweight named Carkeek was appearing at the Alhambra but refused to take on the Russian until after he thought he had left the country. He then issued a general challenge. But the words were hardly out of his mouth when Hackenschmidt, accompanied by Vansittart, the strong Man of England, leapt onto the stage in full wrestling costume from the stage box. When Carkeek flatly refused to take him on there was instant and prolonged uproar. The police were called in to 'quell the disturbance and interference with the act', and Hackenschmidt was ordered to leave the stage and the theatre.

The press, however, had been quick to note what had happened and reported it the next day at some length. Cochran, who by then had been introduced to the champion, quickly took advantage of