

George Hackenschmidt vs. Frank Gotch

Media Representations and the World Wrestling Title of 1908

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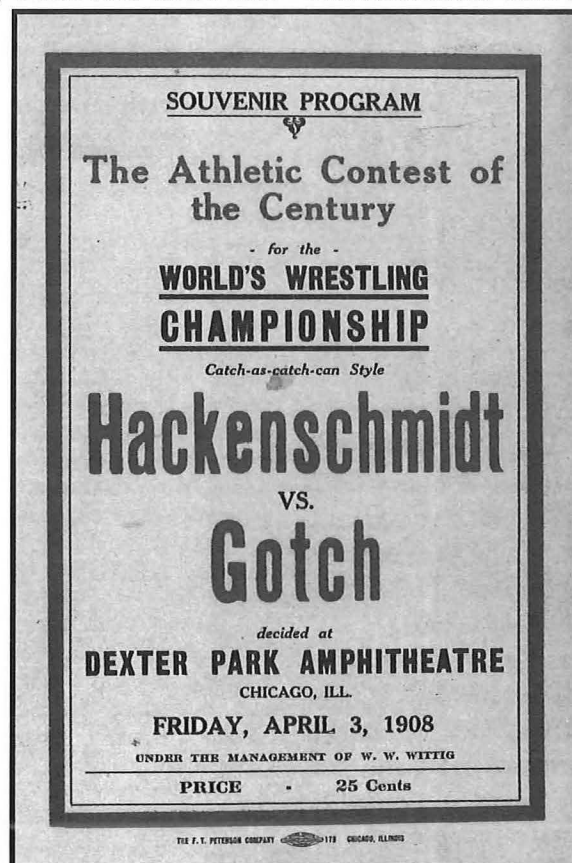
International wrestling star, George Hackenschmidt, widely known as “The Russian Lion,” met the American champion, Frank Gotch, at Chicago’s Dexter Park Amphitheater on April 3, 1908, in a wrestling title bout that was labeled “The Athletic Contest of the Century” on the cover of the match program.¹ After three preliminary bouts, the much anticipated World’s Heavyweight Wrestling Championships in the catch-as-catch-can style began at approximately 10:30 P.M. More than two hours later, reporters scrambled to file their stories in the early hours of the morning and share their ringside intelligence with an anxiously awaiting nation and world. The news they sent out from Chicago, however, was totally unexpected. The impossible had happened; the undefeated “Russian Lion” had been tried and found wanting. Gotch, the American, had won!

The journalist, like the historian, must make decisions about how he or she presents the facts. While modern journalists are taught to be objective and fair—to focus on the “Who, What, When, Where, Why and How” of the story—the reality is that most journalists (in 1908 as well as 2010) write from a particular set of socio-cultural biases. As Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson argue in *Reading the News*, reporting is actually “a double reality, both separate from the world it tells

stories about and a constituent of that world, an element of the story.” The reporter, they argue, “not only relates stories but makes them.”² Similarly, pop culture analyst Carlin Romano contends that journalism is not a “mirror placed before reality,” but a “coherent narrative of the world that serves a particular purpose.”³ Thinking about journalism in light of this definition makes it easier to understand how in the days following the historic Gotch-Hackenschmidt bout such different tales would be told

by various journalists even though all of them had watched the same sporting event. Like the characters in John Godfrey Saxe’s poem, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” almost all of the reporters who penned their reports from Chicago had a slightly different interpretation of what they experienced that evening.⁴ An investigation of these newspaper accounts reveals that while some aspects of their descriptions of the match are similar, many reporters took issue with Gotch’s tactics that evening and felt that he had not lived up to the cultural expectations of what it meant to be a man and a good sport in the early twentieth century.⁵ However, it must be said, others also felt that Hackenschmidt had not acted totally with honor.⁶

After more than one hundred years, some wrestling fans still consider the 1908 Hackenschmidt-Gotch match



The cover of the program for the 1908 Hackenschmidt vs. Gotch match contained in Hackenschmidt’s personal scrapbook is printed on light grey paper with red and black ink. It is 32 pages long.

to be one of the most significant ever. It was the match that catapulted Gotch from merely local hero status into an international super-star and in a way it was also a harbinger of professional wrestling's future. For, despite the fact that the match resulted in an undisputed world champion, the controversy over who did what remains the most important aspect of the match. In fact, much like the debate that rages in the modern era over whether we should regard as legitimate the records made in those sports where performance enhancing drug use is now ubiquitous, Gotch's name will always have an asterisk beside it on the list of title holders in the minds of many wrestling aficionados and scholars.

No such asterisk appears, however, on either the website www.frankgotch.com or in the 1990 biography *Frank Gotch: World's Greatest Wrestler*, both written by amateur historian Mike Chapman.⁸ Chapman paints an almost saintly picture of Gotch, claiming that he was rough but that he always wrestled within the rules and that he justly earned the title.⁹ Conversely, Chapman presents a negative image of Hackenschmidt, suggesting that the Russian wasn't on the same competitive level with Gotch because of his poor conditioning and ineffective match strategy.¹⁰ Writes Chapman, "Gotch had simply outsmarted Hack in the ring in 1908. Knowing how strong Hack was, Gotch devised a strategy to move him around the ring, head snap him, under hook him, and tire him out."¹¹ An examination of the various reports immediately surrounding the match, however, suggests that Gotch's victory cannot wholly be attributed to the fact that he was simply "smarter." There is, in fact, strong evidence to suggest that Gotch used dubious tac-



In the leadup to the big match, dozens of cartoons like this appeared in American newspapers reminding readers of the international stakes in the contest. The caption reads, "Frank Gotch, The Yankee, And George Hackenschmidt, The Russian, Battle For Wrestling Championship At Chicago On Friday." Cartoon by Cad Brand from the *Milwaukee Sentinel*.¹² And that the referee showed favoritism to the American contender.

As Hackenschmidt and Gotch counted down the days to their title match, newspapers throughout the United States and Europe covered every possible angle of the story. In 1908, Hackenschmidt was truly an international celebrity, perhaps the most famous athlete in all of sports at the time. As often happens in title fights, nationalistic rhetoric became part of the event's coverage. So, while Hackenschmidt was the reigning champion, he was also in the eyes of many newspaper readers in America a "foreigner," and so patriotic sentiment suggested that the Iowa farm-boy—Frank Gotch—should be supported by the Chicago fans.¹² A scrappy wrestler born to poor German immigrant farmers in the small community of Humbolt, Iowa, Gotch was relatively new to the international arena in 1908. The title defense had been awarded to Gotch because he had won the American title from Tom Jenkins in two controversial and vicious matches in 1905 and 1906. However, unlike

Hackenschmidt and most other wrestlers who then set off on international tours to challenge “any and all comers,” Gotch stayed in America after his victory over Jenkins, and only occasionally took on those few foreigners that ventured to America’s heartland.¹³

Prior to the Hackenschmidt match, most journalists gave Gotch little chance to win however much they hoped to the contrary. The grapplers’ records against common adversaries seemed to indicate an overwhelming victory for Hackenschmidt. Hack had easily beaten Tom Jenkins and Joe Rogers, while Gotch was known to have lost to these opponents and if he did win he had had to struggle mightily.¹⁴ New York journalist Horace Lerch wrote, “It has all along been conceded that Hackenschmidt as a strong man is superior to Gotch,” before continuing on to comment that all was not totally lost as Gotch’s quickness did offer him a “fine chance to win.”¹⁵ Ironically, many wrestling experts from that period and in subsequent years have argued that the main reason for Hackenschmidt’s dominance in the ring was his *power*—a combination of his lightning speed and his strength. (Remarkably, at the age of 75, Hackenschmidt was able to do a standing jump over a

stretched rope at a height of approximately 36 inches.) Other wrestling “experts” explained that Gotch’s favorite catch-as-catch-can style of wrestling gave him the greatest chance at winning.¹⁶

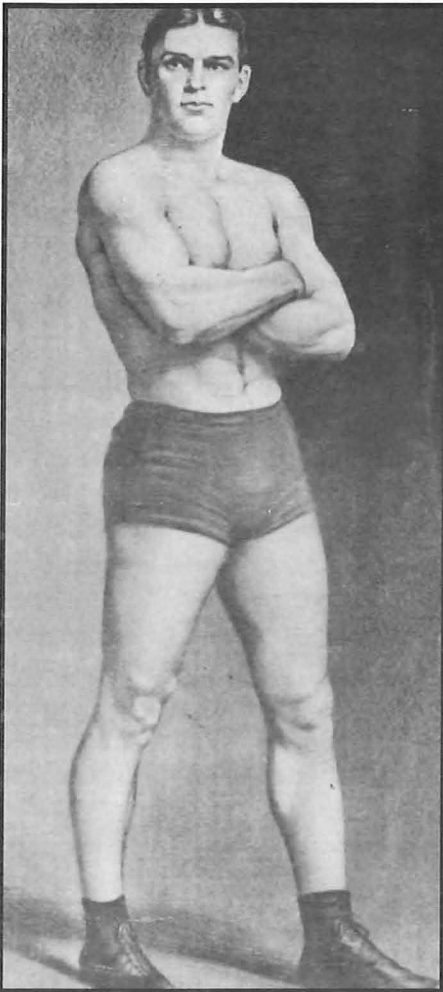
In any case, the entire sporting world knew that “The Russian Lion”—the reigning world champion—had been undefeated for at least the previous six years and had defended his title dozens of times. Hackenschmidt’s strength was legendary; he began his career in weightlifting, where he surpassed the mighty Sandow’s records, but then realized that he had greater earning potential as a professional wrestler.¹⁷ After he began his career—his first official match was in 1897 when he was only twenty—he had been virtually unbeatable.¹⁸ Unlike Gotch, however, Hackenschmidt travelled the world and had significant matches during the early years of his career in cities such as London, Paris, Vienna, St. Petersburg, Melbourne, and New York City. It was in Madison Square Gardens in New York, in fact, that in 1905 Hackenschmidt defeated the American champion, Tom Jenkins, for the second time and solidified his claim that he was the undisputed world champion.

As a wrestler, Hackenschmidt favored Greco-

Roman matches, a form of wrestling that features upper body holds where his great power gave him the advantage. However, while the Chicago match with Gotch was by no means his first catch-as-catch-can bout—it was certainly not his favorite style. The newspapers hyped Hackenschmidt, who was born in 1877 to middle class parents in Dorpat, Estonia, as the perfect man and often compared him to Eugen Sandow.¹⁹ He was, the papers claimed, physically magnificent, exceptionally strong, intelligent, and cultured.



This photograph from his personal scrapbook attests to Hackenschmidt’s celebrity status. It was taken in Blackpool, England in August of 1906 and shows the enormous billboard that advertised his week-long appearance at the Palace Theater. The Hackenschmidt Scrapbook has recently been fully digitized, allowing us to share some of its rare images in this article. As we’ve already done with the Attila scrapbook, we will soon put sections of the Hackenschmidt Scrapbook on our website: www.starkcenter.org for researchers to examine.



This illustration of Frank Gotch appeared in the official program for the 1908 contest. Gotch is listed as 5' 11.5" tall and weighing 210 pounds. He is described as the "Champion of America" and below his vital statistics is a very long list of various ring engagements and victories.

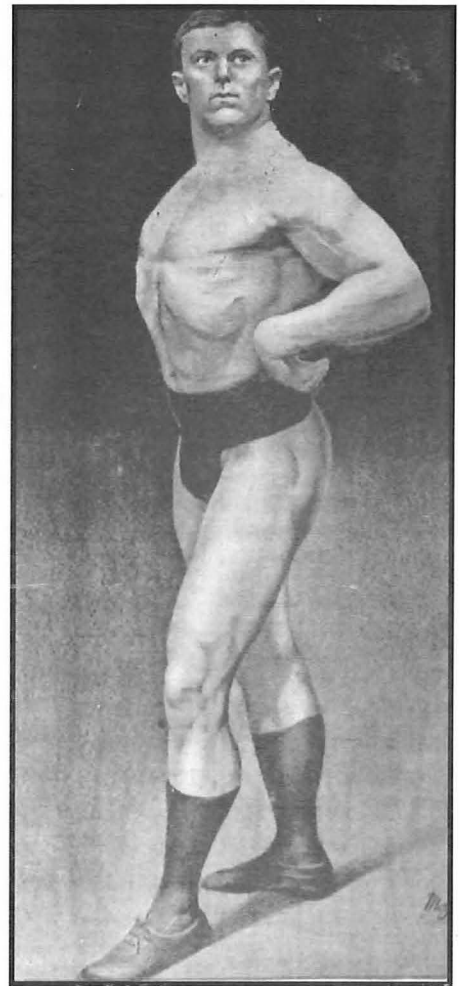
match opened, Hackenschmidt immediately went on the offensive and tried to lock his hands behind Gotch in a "bear-hug" grip. The bear-hug was one of Hack's favored methods of subduing an opponent as it allowed him to use his prodigious strength to hold the other man captive while he applied pressure to his opponent's chest, cutting off his wind. But on this fateful night, when Hackenschmidt tried to grab and pull Gotch in, the American slipped away. Hack lunged again, grabbed Gotch, but then felt him once again slip through his fingers. Surprised, Hack wrestled on, struggling to take any kind of effective hold against Gotch. However, as

Hackenschmidt was an exceptional man, fluent in at least five languages and comfortable in the presence of royalty and intellectuals as well as athletes. Honest as well as modest, he fit England's and Europe's idea of an ideal sportsman. Although he was not born an aristocrat, he embraced the manners and attitudes of the upper classes, including its strict moral code regarding ideas of sportsmanship.

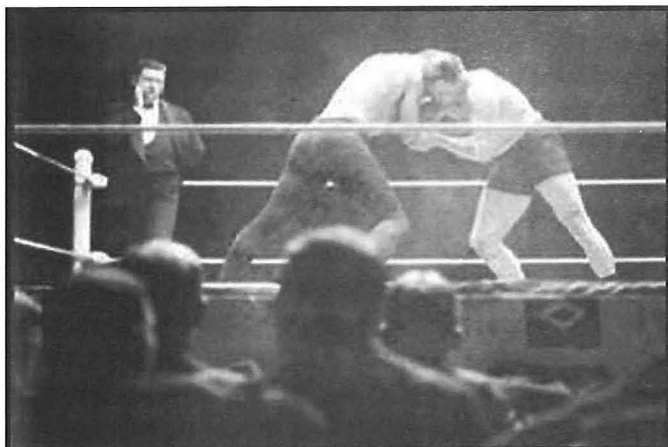
On the evening of the big match at Dexter Park, approximately 10,000 people purchased tickets to watch the champions battle.²⁰ As the

Gotch's body warmed from their exertions, Hackenschmidt began to understand why Gotch was so hard to capture; Gotch had rubbed oil into his skin. For the remainder of the match, although Hackenschmidt repeatedly tried to grab Gotch, he was unable to take a firm hold. Hackenschmidt suggested to Referee Edward Smith that both men be forced to go back to their locker rooms and take a shower to remove the oil.²¹ While this request seems absolutely reasonable on the face of what many in the audience could see, it was denied by the referee. It is

interesting that in the reports written after the match, many American reporters saw nothing wrong with Gotch's use of oil. John Butnam's article in the *Minneapolis Tribune*, for example, reported that the referee regarded Hack's complaints as "childish," and laid the blame for the match's conclusion at Hackenschmidt's door, arguing that he should have noticed the oil prior to the match starting.²² T.S. Andrews of *The Evening Wisconsin* took a similar view in an article published eight days after the match. Andrews claimed that the use of oil was "not a new trick" and that Gotch's coach, the famous wrestler Farmer Burns might have been behind



Hackenschmidt is listed as "Champion of the World" in the program, with a height of 5' 9.5" and weight of 215 pounds. Following a shorter but more impressive list of significant matches than Gotch's is a note that he had "defeated numerous other champions in all the countries of the world."



Because the fight was being filmed, an unusually large number of lights surrounded the ring making this action shot possible. Gotch is on the left, Hackenschmidt, in the trunks on the right. Smith, the referee, is dressed in the tuxedo.

the decision to use it. Andrews also claimed that he had had verification from someone in Gotch's camp that the American had used oil on his body. However, like Referee Smith, Andrews did not view Gotch's use of oil as an ethical problem. Andrews wrote that the match was "on the level," and defended his position by pointing out that Hackenschmidt had had the same opportunity to use oil that Gotch had had. He even went so far as to suggest that Hackenschmidt should have found better managers who would have helped him learn such tricks.²³

Hack's frustration was heightened by the fact that Gotch failed to engage him. Rather than staying within arms' reach, Gotch danced around the mat like a boxer trying not to be hit. Wrestling historian Mike Chapman claims that Gotch's tactics were not dissimilar to those of Muhammad Ali in Zaire in 1974 when he employed the "rope-a-dope" defense against George Foreman.²⁴ However, Chapman's analogy is not accurate. Ali did not stay away from Foreman in that famous fight; he did just the opposite. He lay back on the ropes and invited Foreman to give him everything he had. Ali took brutal punishment that night and only when Foreman had punched himself into a state of near exhaustion did Ali come off the ropes in the closing seconds of the eighth round and knock Foreman out.²⁵ Further—while Ali's tactics in Zaire were far from his usual "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" approach to fighting—no one has ever argued that what went on in the ring was not a clean fight; it was just unconventional.²⁶ In the Gotch-Hackenschmidt match, however, in those rare moments when the two men were in a clench, Gotch reportedly used a number of other unsportsmanlike tactics, includ-

ing repeatedly trying to use his thumbs to gouge Hackenschmidt's eyes. George Siler's account, from *The Chicago Tribune's* media seat, saw "the American's rough work, principally thumbing of the eyes" and heard the audience "hissing" at Gotch for his actions.²⁷ Horace Lerch, sporting writer of *The Buffalo Express*, wrote, "Gotch is rough. Squirming, twisting and slipping, the challenger for the title never lost an opportunity to work his fingers and thumbs somewhere in the vicinity of Hack's optics."²⁸ Hackenschmidt complained to Referee Smith about Gotch's tactics. According to Lerch's account, Smith ignored the complaint and simply "kept walking."²⁹ Weightlifting historian David P. Willoughby, writing sixty years after the match, argued that "Gotch had resorted to every unfair tactic he could think of—oiling his body, rubbing the oil into Hackenschmidt's eyes, butting, gouging, scratching and even punching the Russian in the nose."³⁰ Willoughby's source for this information, Ivan Linow, while undoubtedly biased in Hackenschmidt's favor, was nonetheless not just in the audience, but actually at ringside that evening. In the 1927 interview with Linow, who served as a training partner for Hackenschmidt before both the 1908 and 1911 bouts that Hackenschmidt had with Gotch, Linow emphatically stated that Gotch was oiled, and had been "bulling" Hackenschmidt by head-butting him, trying to gouge his eyes, and that the American used other normally illegal tactics.³¹ Despite the fact that even the audience was upset with Gotch's dishonest tactics and frequently "hissed" at him for fouling and cried "Cut it out!" at Gotch's brutality, Ed Smith, the referee, claimed in an article for the *New York Evening Journal* after the match that what he called the "Gotch transgressions" were not "worthy of more than a caution. I did not see that he did his broad opponent any hurt at all, and the 'bulling' was nothing more than is customary in any match seen in this country, especially where the affair is of any importance."³²

Smith's notion that sportsmanship and rule adherence was different in America is a critical point to consider. Rather than feeling outrage or revulsion at what was apparently open cheating on Gotch's part, Smith and many in the Fifth Estate excused it as merely another example of American ingenuity and can-do attitude. Hackenschmidt, however, product of a more ethical sporting culture that equated manliness with honor and integrity, was apparently not able to countenance such questionable tactics. Nor, however, could he quit the bout, for he had given his word to compete and he

knew that even though the Americans chose to follow a different set of rules than he'd agreed to, there was still an audience watching the match who deserved his best efforts. What's more, he also knew that had he retired in protest, he might not have been paid.

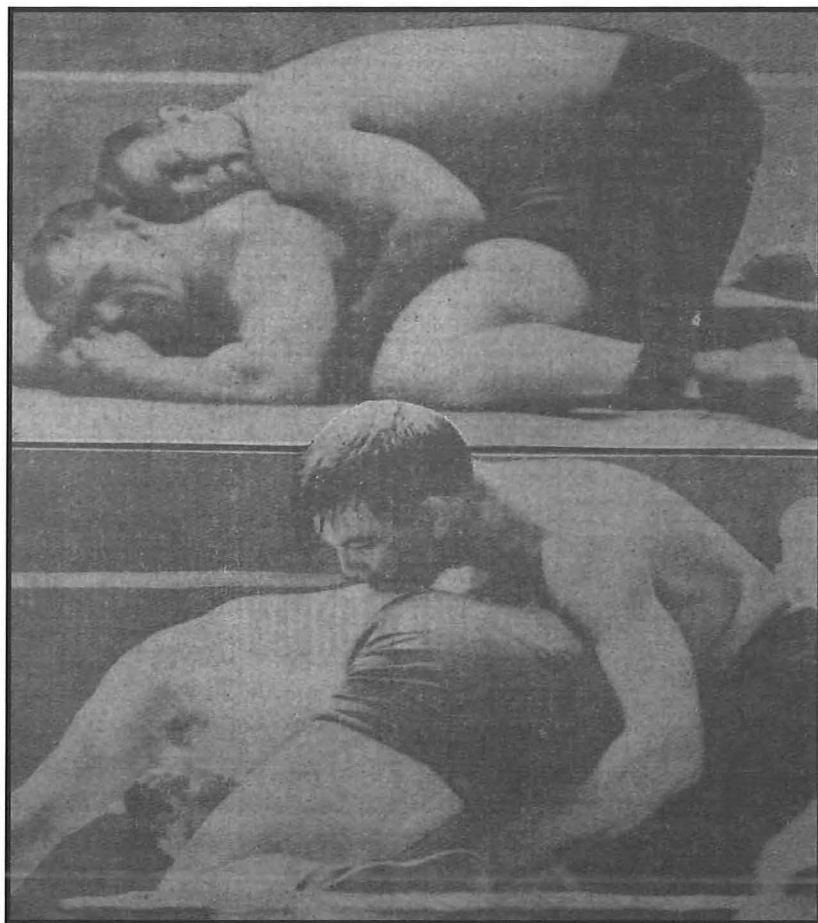
Catch-as-catch-can wrestling was widely practiced in late nineteenth century America and, as wrestlers could take holds below the belt as well as above, it differed from the Greco-Roman form of wrestling normally practiced by Hackenschmidt. By 1908 Greco-Roman wrestling was an official Olympic sport and so it not only had a formal set of rules to govern behavior during bouts, but it was also influenced by Olympic ideology and sports practices.³³ Catch-as-catch-can wrestling, on the other hand, still had no such structure; it thrived in America's rural areas and was ungoverned by any national agency. Catch-as-catch-can wrestlers tried to pull a man down on the mat and subdue him using intri-

cate holds and pressure points ("bone-bending" as historian, David Webster, calls it).³⁴ It was a much rougher and less refined method than Greco-Roman wrestling and it was favored by men who had learned their combat sports in rough and tumble America—men who weren't concerned with being regarded as "good sportsmen." Consequently, eye-gouging, head-butting, biting, and other nefarious tactics were commonly used in what were essentially "no holds barred" bouts.³⁵ Further, when carnivals and circuses began travelling the length and breadth of America in the second half of the nineteenth century they helped spread the sport as nearly every show had some wrestler or strongman attached to it who would take on all comers in matches that were, in many ways, very similar to our modern Mixed Martial Arts contests.³⁶ However, just as boxing had become civilized and gained in popularity by adopting the Marquis of Queensbury Rules, wrestling promoters at the

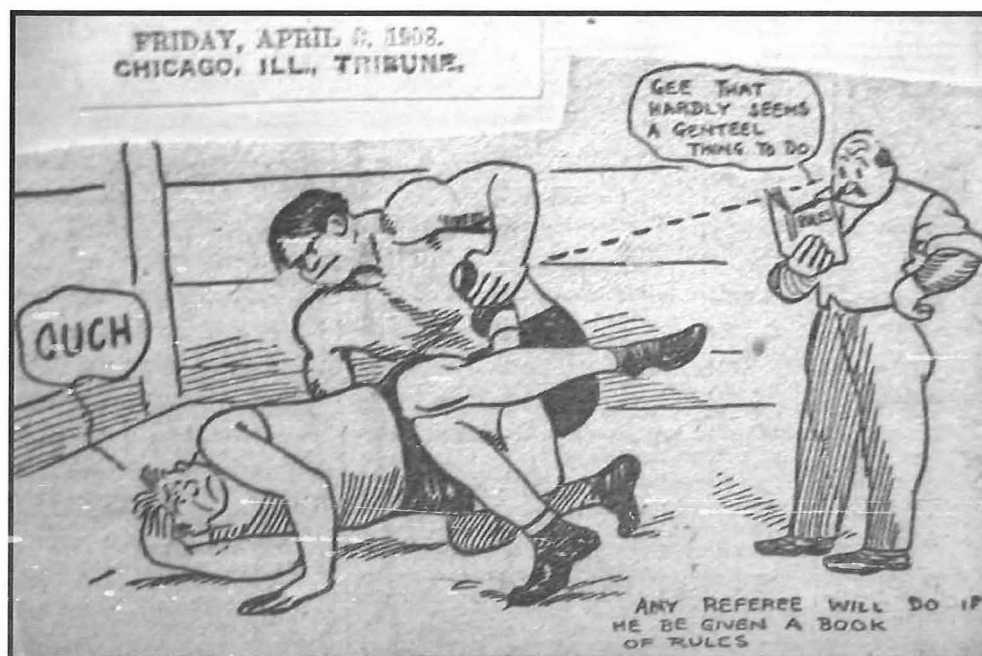
turn of the twentieth century also understood that when they set up a formal match—like the Gotch-Hackenschmidt bout—rules limiting these more barbaric tactics had to be in place if the general public was going to buy tickets. So, while it can be argued that many Americans may have found Gotch's head-butting and eye-gouging somewhat acceptable and even laudable, his actions were still clearly against both the letter and the spirit of the rules.³⁷

Historians Richard Holt and J.A. Mangan have suggested that sport heroes "reflect [their society's] values, aspirations and ambitions."³⁸ Historian Paul Gilchrist would have described both Gotch and Hackenschmidt as exemplifying "the purity of achievement in a distinctly cultural location" and being "a representative of what is publicly valued by [his] community."³⁹ In an era in which many Americans were worried by the influx of immigrants to their shores Hackenschmidt's heavy accent as well as his apparent wealth and aristocratic attitudes were less attractive to some Americans than the heroics of a Horatio Alger-like farm boy whose rise to the top in wrestling was symbolic of the struggles of America's lower classes.

In any case, throughout the match, under Smith's lenient eye Gotch continued



The Hackenschmidt vs. Gotch match was the lead sports story in nearly every major paper in America on the day after the bout. These photos were included in the April 4, 1908 report of the *Chicago Evening American* under a headline that read, "Gotch and Hack Struggling Fiercely on the Mat."



The *Chicago Tribune* used this cartoon to question the legitimacy of the refereeing in the match. As Gotch is getting ready to apply his famous “toe hold” the referee is musing, “Gee. That hardly seems like a genteel thing to do.” Below, the cartoonist has written, “Any referee will do if he be given a book of rules.” The typed notation in the upper left corner is part of the identification of the cartoon for Hackenschmidt’s personal scrapbook.

to tear at Hackenschmidt’s eyes, scratch at his head and ears, and even hit him directly in the face with his knuckles when the two men came close to each other. And for most of the match, Gotch stayed just enough out of Hackenschmidt’s reach so that the larger and more powerful man was unable to truly get a grip on his slippery opponent. Most newspaper accounts, including that of Referee Smith, agreed that Hackenschmidt had definitely been the aggressor and in command of the match until the closing minutes.⁴⁰

Finally, after more than an hour and a half had elapsed, during which Hackenschmidt constantly tried to get a good grip on an oiled opponent who danced away when possible and engaged in hitting, butting, and gouging when they closed, Hack suggested to the referee that the match be called a draw. Calling a match a draw was not unheard of. It was usually the result of a match in which neither wrestler seemed to be gaining an edge on his opponent, and it indicated an obvious stalemate. Since Hackenschmidt could not grip Gotch due to the oil and Gotch was unwilling to grapple, a draw would have seemed reasonable to the champion. However, nearly everyone else believed otherwise. As word spread through the crowd about what Hack had asked of the referee, the crowd began jeering and hooting at the Russian.

Gotch openly taunted him, while the referee denied Hackenschmidt’s request, stating, “I am here to stay all night if necessary.”⁴¹

In Mike Chapman’s self-described “fictionalized biography,” entitled *Gotch: An American Hero*, he claims that Gotch’s victory came from his superior cardiovascular conditioning.⁴² There is perhaps some truth to this as Hackenschmidt had not been involved in a match of such length for a number of years and he did not really interrupt his travel and exhibition schedule to any major degree to prepare for the fight. Newspaper interviews with Gotch prior to the match indicate that his plan was to wear down the foreigner since his

informants had told him that Hackenschmidt was not in the best of shape, but he also told reporters that he had plans afoot to upset the cool, calm, gentlemanly demeanor of Hackenschmidt.⁴³ And so throughout the match Gotch jeered at Hackenschmidt, taunting him and using language, Hackenschmidt claimed, that no gentleman would use in public. Ring-side attendants later reported they heard “a running fire of ridicule” that undoubtedly accounted for Hackenschmidt’s complaints to Smith concerning comments and words he would not want his mother and sister to hear.⁴⁴ However, again, Referee Smith found no reason to censure Gotch. Gotch was heard to retort, “You are in America now.”⁴⁵

As the match wore on, closing in on two hours without a break, Hackenschmidt finally began to tire as Gotch kept slipping away and the American was able to take the offensive at last. According to Smith, Gotch got Hackenschmidt down on the mat, and was working toward getting the champion into his favored submission move—the toe hold—when Hackenschmidt could see that he was close to being pinned and asked for a forfeit.⁴⁶ Perhaps Hackenschmidt wanted to salvage his reputation by being able to later claim that at least Gotch hadn’t pinned him, or perhaps he’d simply had enough of

the one-sided refereeing and of Gotch's willingness to flaunt all conventions of sportsmanship. In either case, just a few minutes past the two hour mark the match was finally over since Hack signaled to Smith that he quit and left the arena amid "catcalls and howls of derision."⁴⁷ Almost immediately American flags began flying in the arena and, while Hack walked backed to the locker room, many in the audience charged the ring—as Gotch's arm was raised by Smith—to celebrate what was viewed as a national victory.⁴⁸

As the newspaper reporters scurried into the night to write their stories and telegraph them to their hometown papers, amazingly different versions of the events began to emerge, some of which have already been described. Articles appeared praising Gotch's undefeatable defensive system of wrestling, explaining how skill surpassed strength, and arguing that Gotch was too quick for the foreigner. At the same time, Hackenschmidt was described as "having his feelings hurt," "having a tissue paper heart," having no courage, "showing the white feather," and "showing his canary streak."⁴⁹

Not surprisingly, the British press, who regarded Hackenschmidt as one of their own because he was then living in London, was consistently more skeptical of the events in Chicago and protested the treatment Hackenschmidt received while in America. One British paper opened its report with the lengthy headline: "Hackenschmidt Beaten: Loses Prize Fight to American Wrestler: Amazing Scenes: Struggle Like a Brutal Prize Fight."⁵⁰ A *Sportsman* writer asserted, "Hackenschmidt did not lose the championship, but simply withdrew from a most revolting and unsportsmanlike exhibition of butchery and not from a fair and square wrestling match. Hackenschmidt is thoroughly English in the sense that he is absolutely fair and square."⁵¹ While voicing his opinion of America's bulliness in worldly matters, and recognizing the "great gulf dividing the American notion of 'playing the game' from the notions of other less acute and more primitive peoples," another British reporter satirically wrote:

Does not Hackenschmidt know that to have your eyes gouged out and your ear bitten off and your body torn and scratched by the purposely long talons of an opponent opportunely greased as were the Spartans at Ther-

mopylæ is part of the game or sport of wrestling? Gotch is 'an ideal American.' He is 'a past master of all the little trickery that verges on the illegal and unfair.' So says the referee, and he ought to know. ...As for Hackenschmidt – what would you? ...These Slavs are but savages. They do not comprehend that all is fair in war, and that in America an American must win, come who may.⁵²

Besides these British criticisms, many American papers were also outraged at Gotch's tactics. William F. Kirk of *The New York Journal*, for example, "deplored that the 'Russian Lion' received a 'dirty' deal during his visit to this country."⁵³ A *New York Sun* reporter similarly wrote,

The easy-going referee did not seem to have made the least effort to prevent these foul tactics which were often repeated, even after spectators – by no means friendly towards the Russian – felt constrained to protest in a spirit of common justice. This is all extremely regrettable, and we must say that victory would have been more gratifying to our national vanity had the encounter been tolerably clean.⁵⁴

And, in another article, the reporter described Gotch's tactics as unsportsmanlike and despicable. "Verbally he taunted the Russian in a disgraceful manner and his every movement was unfair to the impartial spectator, but apparently everything in his favour went with the referee."⁵⁵ Still others described Hackenschmidt's countenance the next day "as if he had been in a prizefight instead of a wrestling match today. The left side of his head was badly swollen and his left eye was inflamed. His eyelids were swollen and lacerated."⁵⁶ Another description that circulated in the media concerning the treatment of Hackenschmidt by both Gotch and Referee Smith includes the following:

Gotch used foul tactics of a sort that would have fully justified the referee in disqualifying him. He jammed his thumbs into Hackenschmidt's eyes. On one occasion, when

Hackenschmidt had twisted the American's thumb, Gotch retaliated by smashing him time and again in the face with his fists until the blood spurted out and ran over the Russian's face and body in streams. Time and again he butted viciously.

It was evident that Gotch was determined to win at any cost, and the referee did not interfere.

The end of the contest was dramatic. Hackenschmidt, with his eyes fearfully lacerated, his nostrils torn, his lips and face battered almost beyond recognition, smeared from head to foot with his own blood that streamed from a score of wounds on his head and arms and body, went to the mat at last, with Gotch on top. He was half-blinded, dazed and weary. Immediately Gotch leaped upon him like a savage, driving his knees into Hackenschmidt's body and "roughing" in the style used when football in America was legalised(sic) manslaughter. The Russian suddenly quitted the struggle, and appealed to the referee, as he had a score of times before during the bout. The audience hissed and hooted.⁵⁷

Chapman claims the brawny Iowan was the "World's Greatest Wrestler." However, our analysis of the journalistic coverage surrounding the 1908 Gotch-Hackenschmidt wrestling match clearly demonstrates that Gotch was allowed to use and did use illegal and dishonorable tactics to achieve his victory. To employ a doping analogy again, it's like saying that confessed steroid user Mark McGwire was a better homerun hitter than Babe Ruth. Chapman bases part of his claim, of course, on the fact that when Hackenschmidt returned to America in 1911 for a rematch with Gotch in the then newly-finished Comiskey Park he was once more defeated by Gotch and then decided to permanently retire. As in the first bout, however, there were extenuating circumstances associated with this second loss to Gotch, including a major injury to the Russian's knee right before the bout.

As for which man really deserved the title of "World's Best Wrestler," no less an authority figure than wrestling promoter, Jack Curley, who managed both

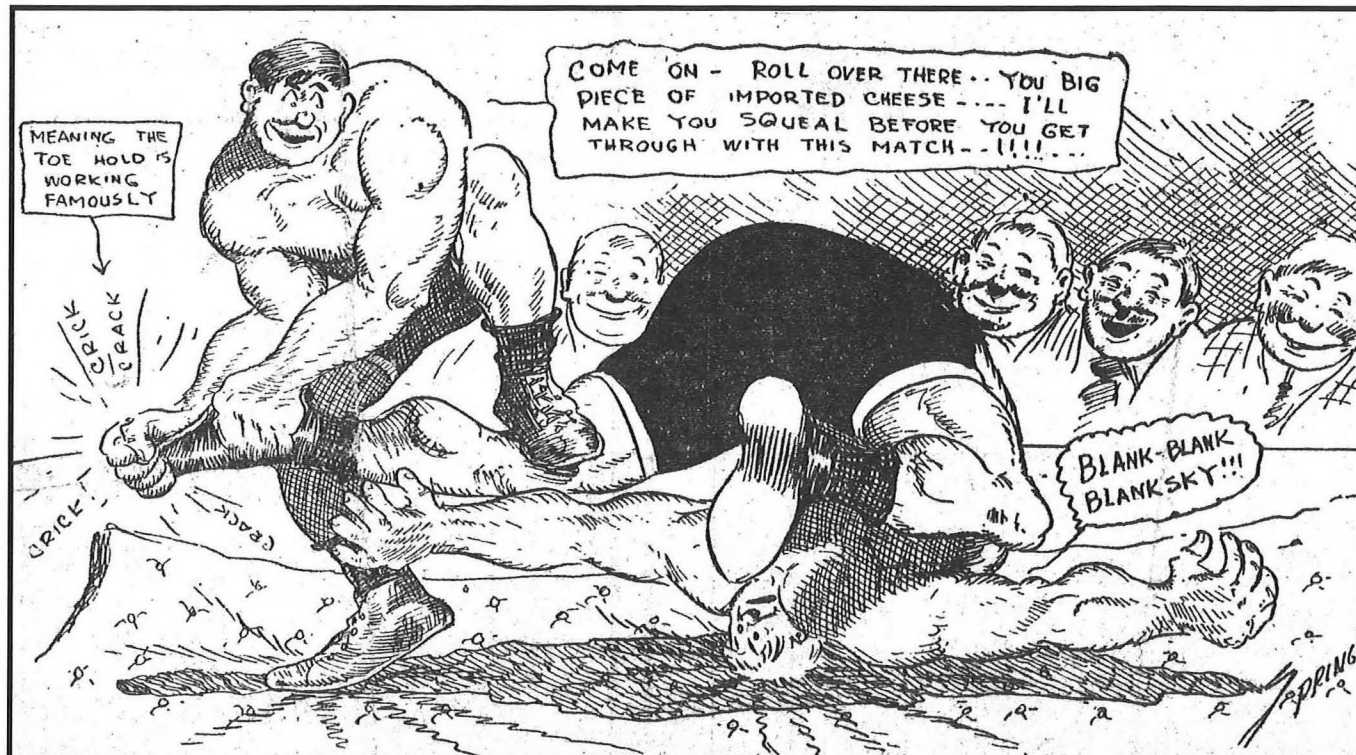
Gotch and Hackenschmidt at some point in their careers, wrote in 1934, "In my opinion the greatest of all great wrestlers is or was George Hackenschmidt, the Russian Lion. George possessed brain, strength, speed, knowledge of holds, leverage, courage, and if there is any word left out that goes to make a great wrestler I am willing to go on record to add that he had that too."⁵⁸

From the historian's vantage point, however, what is most significant and interesting about this match is that the controversy surrounding Gotch's victory still has "legs" more than one hundred years later and continues to be discussed on the internet and in nearly all works of wrestling history.⁵⁹ Like the Black Sox Scandal of 1919, the idea that a major sporting event was, in effect, rigged continues to tantalize us and those interested in the history of wrestling seem inevitably to champion one man over the other.⁶⁰ Unfortunately, the one primary source that could have shed considerable light on the bout is, apparently, lost to history. That source is a 15 minute synopsis of the legendary bout put on film by match promoter W.W. Wittig and released in April of 1908.⁶¹ Wittig had the entire match filmed but then only released fifteen minutes of film to the public. However, even that short version has apparently not survived.⁶²

As research into the journalistic coverage surrounding the championship match reveals, the nationalistic overtones of the bout suggest that the essentials of true sport—fair play, a level playing field, and impartial officiating—were so far removed from the squared circle in the Dexter Park Amphitheater in April of 1908 that it may not be an exaggeration to say the outcome of the bout was settled the minute Hackenschmidt signed his name on the contract. Although Hack failed to realize it at the time, he took a knife to a gunfight, and then they wouldn't let him use his knife.

It seems to be beyond argument that a genuinely confident Gotch, had he believed that he would be required to wrestle within the rules of the sport in such a widely watched title bout, would not have resorted to illegally oiling his body. Nor would he have hit his opponent with his closed fists, or head-butted him, or scratched him, or tried to gouge his eyes, especially since any of these rule violations, by themselves, should have caused his disqualification had they been repeated and intentional, as they apparently were.

A careful reading of the contemporary accounts of the match plus an understanding of the profound dif-



Before the match, the American papers were filled with speculation as to how effective Gotch's famous "toe hold" would be against the Russian Lion. Illustration from *The Post*, of Denver, Colorado, dated March 29, 1908.

ferences between a culture based on "Play up, play up, and play the game," and one based on a belief to which Oakland Raiders owner Al Davis gave voice years later when he famously said, "Just win, baby," provide an understanding of how such a controversy occurred. As was stated earlier, a comparison of the records of Gotch and Hackenschmidt against the same opponents suggests that Hack would have prevailed over Gotch fairly quickly and easily. In fact, it's probable—had referee Ed Smith disallowed only the body oil while allowing the gouging, hitting, and butting—that Hack would have still overwhelmed Gotch and pinned him because the American would have been too busy defending himself to use such tactics. Conversely, it's also possible—had Smith overlooked the oil but stopped any punching, gouging, and butting—that Hack, without being bothered by such tactics, would have been able to close with the slippery Gotch and finally secure a winning hold.

What apparently happened, however, is that Referee Smith, out of either rank favoritism, a preference for a no-holds-barred style of wrestling, or both, somehow communicated his intentions to Gotch either before the match or during its first few minutes. Gotch, thus freed from standard officiating, had his way in

what, for the Russian Lion, was wrestling's version of a perfect storm.

Notes:

The term "Scrapbook" refers to the personal scrapbook of George Hackenschmidt located at the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports at The University of Texas at Austin.

1. Scrapbook, program for Hackenschmidt vs. Gotch wrestling match, April 3, 1908.
2. Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson, *Reading the News: a Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 439-42.
3. Carlin Romano, "The Grisly Truth about Bare Facts," in Manoff and Schudson's *Reading the News*, 39-44, discusses the mistaken assumption that news written by journalists is a "mirror placed before reality," when it may actually be better thought of as a "coherent narrative of the world that serves a particular purpose."
4. John Godfrey Saxe's poem, "The Blind Men and the Elephant," at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant. In that poem the "six blind men of Hindustan" came upon an elephant and fall into an argument about what the elephant actually was because they each felt only one part of it and could not grasp the whole. They described it either a wall (side), a snake (trunk), a spear (tusk), a tree (leg), a fan (ear), or a rope (tail).
5. Scrapbook, "Hack Hands Gotch Title without Fall," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, April 4, 1908; W. Horace Lerch, "Gotch Makes Russian Quit," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 4, 1908; "Hackenschmidt Seeing Defeat, Quits; Gotch Is World's Wrestling 'Champ,'" *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 4, 1908; Horace Lerch, "To Wrestle for a Championship—Frank Gotch's chances against Russian Lion of a Very Fair sort—Not a Favorite, But...." *Buffalo (New York) Express*, March 30, 1908; Jeff Thompson, "Mat and Ring," *Minneapolis Tribune*, April

- 12, 1908.
6. "Champion Wrestler Quits, Exhausted," *New York Times*, April 4, 1908; "Hackenschmidt Seeing Defeat, Quits; Gotch Is World's Wrestling 'Champ,'" *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 4, 1908; Scrapbook, no title, *Evening Wisconsin*, April 11, 1908; "Hackenschmidt Quits Mat; Match to Gotch," *Lima (Ohio) Daily News*, April 4, 1908; "Pictures of Big Match Show Russian Got a Square Deal," *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 11, 1908; "Hackenschmidt Backing Up," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 17, 1908.
 7. "Why He Lost: Hackenschmidt No Longer Champion: Two Hour Fight: Fingers and Thumbs Near the Russian's Eyes," *Manchester Sunday Chronicle*, April 5, 1908; "Wrestling in America: Hackenschmidt Defeated," *Daily Telegraph*, April 5, 1908; "Hackenschmidt Beaten: Loses Prize Fight to American Wrestler: Amazing Scenes: Struggle Like a Brutal Prize Fight," *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, April 5, 1908.
 8. Mike Chapman, *Frank Gotch – World's Greatest Wrestler* (Buffalo: William S. Hein & Co., 1990). See also Mike Chapman, *Gotch: An American Hero* (Newton, Iowa: Culture House Books, 1999) and Mike Chapman – *Life and Legacy of Frank Gotch: King of the Catch-as-Catch-Can Wrestlers* (Buffalo: William S. Hein & Co., 2008). Chapman also maintains a website on Gotch at: <http://www.frankgotch.com>.
 9. See for example Chapman, *Frank Gotch*, Chapters 8 & 9, 91-115. See also, Chapman, *Life and Legacy*, 33-4 and 65-8, for Chapman's "Final Evaluation" of Gotch's career.
 10. For an example of Chapman's description of Hackenschmidt's readiness for the match see, Chapman, *Frank Gotch*, 60-1.
 11. <http://www.frankgotch.com/biography12.html>
 12. Arch Ward, *The Greatest Sport Stories from the Chicago Tribune*, (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1953), 87.
 13. A list of Gotch's matches leading up to his match with Hackenschmidt can be found on page 17 of the Hackenschmidt vs. Gotch program in the Hackenschmidt scrapbook.
 14. Charles Carnie, "Giants of the Mat Clash Tonight for the Championship," *The Inter Ocean* April 3, 1908; Sol Plex, "Gotch and Hackenschmidt Await Gong to Battle for World's Championship," *Chicago Examiner*, April 3, 1908; Ray Van Cleef, "Did Gotch 'Beat' Hackenschmidt?" *Strength & Health* (June 1942) 13, 36.
 15. Horace Lerch, "More on Championship Wrestling," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, March 9, 1908.
 16. "Dan McLeod in Town," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, February 23, 1908; "Hackenschmidt-Gotch, Carkeek Believes the Westerner has a Splendid Chance of Success," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, March 29, 1908.
 17. See "Sandow's Rival," *Taranaki (New Zealand) Herald*, June 9, 1902; Gord Venables, Siegmund Klein, and Milo Steinborn, "The Russian Lion," *Muscular Development* 3 (June 1968): 57; Jim Murray, "George Hackenschmidt: Iron Game Immortal," *Strength & Health* (February 1953); David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1970), 72-4.
 18. "George Hackenschmidt," *The Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame and Museum*, viewed at: <http://www.pwhf.org/halloffamers/bios/hackenschmidt.asp>. "Hackenschmidt turned professional in September 1896 at age twenty. Utilizing a classical Greco-Roman style of wrestling in the ring, Hackenschmidt was immediately a very tough competitor. He became the European Heavyweight Champion with a victory over Tom Cannon in September 1902 in Liverpool, England. With the title win, Hackenschmidt was given claim to being the World Heavyweight Champion. In May 1905, Hackenschmidt solidified this assertion by defeating American Heavyweight Champion Tom Jenkins in New York City to become the first undisputed World Heavyweight Champion."
 19. There is some confusion as to the year in which George Hackenschmidt was born. Hackenschmidt himself writes that he was "born on July 20, 1878 (Old Style), or August 2 according to English methods" in *The Way to Live*. In his unpublished autobiography, "The Russian Lion," Hackenschmidt states that his birthday is August 2, 1877. The Church of Latter-Day Saints Family-Search™ Internet Genealogy Service website has two listings: George Hackenschmidt - birthday August 2, 1878 and George Karl Julius Hackenschmidt – birthday July 20, 1877. A birthday poem celebrating his twenty-ninth birthday was written/published in *The Athlete*, August 1, 1906, giving credence to the 1877 birth year. The official program for the 1908 Hackenschmidt-Gotch wrestling match listed Hackenschmidt's birthday as July 20, 1877. For articles referring to Hackenschmidt's character and physical proportions as a perfect man, or at least believing him to be "out-Sandowing Sandow," see, Evelyn Campbell, "Muscle Without Brains—Nothing," *Chicago American*, April 3, 1905; "Trotting, Wrestling, Boxing," *Logansport (Indiana) Pharos*, June 22, 1904; "Hackenschmidt, Noted Strongman, in Chicago," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, April 2, 1905; "Hackenschmidt is a Great Athlete," *New York Times*, March 22, 1908.
 20. Even the number of people attending the match is uncertain. Some sources quote 8,000: Horace Lerch, "Gotch Makes Russian Quit," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 4, 1908; and "Champion Wrestler Quits, Exhausted," *New York Times*, April 4, 1908. Other sources quote 10,000: Special to the Post Dispatch, "Hack Hands Gotch Title without Fall," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, April 4, 1908; and A. D. Phillips, "From Milo to Londres - Chapter 8," *The Ring* 12, no. 5 (1933): 16. Another quotes "seats had been provided for 10,000 spectators, and in addition there was general admission room for 2,000 more," "Champion Wrestler Quits, Exhausted," and "Hack' Quits in Bout—Gotch the Winner," *New York Tribune*, April 4, 1908, and yet another quotes 15,000: "Gotch Declared Winner," *Chicago Examiner*, April 4, 1908.
 21. George Hackenschmidt, unpublished autobiography "The Russian Lion," 245, at The H.J. Lutchter Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports at The University of Texas at Austin. See also "Hack Hands Gotch Title Without Fall," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 4, 1908; and "Hack Wants No More of Gotch's Games," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 5, 1908, for mention of "massage treatment" and oil in pores.
 22. John R. Butman, "Referee Denies Charges of Russian," *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 9, 1908.
 23. Scrapbook, T.S. Andrews, no title, *The Evening Wisconsin*, April 11, 1908. See also "Hack Wants No More of Gotch's Games," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 5, 1908, for more info on use of oil in wrestling.
 24. www.frankgotch.com/biography12.html. "Truth is, Gotch 'rope-a-doped' Hackenschmidt in much the same fashion Muhammad Ali outsmarted George Foreman in Zaire in their classic fight in 1974. Like Hackenschmidt, Foreman was considered unbeatable and far too strong for Ali. So Ali made it a match of styles, forcing Foreman to fight his style. Foreman couldn't adjust and was knocked out. Gotch forced Hackenschmidt to wrestle his style, and Hackenschmidt couldn't adjust, either."
 25. From "The Rumble in the Jungle," viewed at: <http://www.baseball-statistics.com/Greats/Century/Games/Ali-Foreman.htm>. "Thirty seconds into the second round, Ali unleashed a daring and unheard-of 'rope-a-dope' strategy: for most of the next eight rounds, he let George Foreman try to kill him. Ali disdained his usual butterfly tactics, simply laying on the ropes instead and letting the unbeaten heavyweight champ flail away. He dodged, avoided or blocked most of the punches, and by the eighth round, the 25-year-old champion was running on empty. Ali took advantage to knock out his exhausted opponent with two seconds left in the round with a crisp left-right combination.
 26. Zang, David W., "The Greatest, Muhammad Ali's Confounding Character" in *Sport and the Color Line*, eds. Patrick B. Miller and David K. Wiggins (New York: Routledge, 2004), 296; and Frank Lotierzo, "Thirty Years Ago: Ali And Foreman Rumbled In The Jungle," found at <http://www.eastsideboxing.com/news.php?p=2100&more=1>.
 27. George Siler, "Gotch Defeats Hackenschmidt," *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 4, 1908.
 28. "Russian Lion Cries Enough," *Racine (WI) Daily Journal*, April 4, 1908.
 29. Horace Lerch, "Gotch, King of Them All," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 5, 1908.
 30. Willoughby, *The Super-Athletes*, 373.
 31. Ibid., 374. Willoughby also examined some newspaper accounts of the match although he does not identify them.
 32. Ed. W. Smith, "Hackenschmidt Gives up after Two Hours Fierce Grappling

with Gotch," *New York Evening Journal*, April 4, 1908.

33. "Wrestling at the Summer Olympics," viewed at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wrestling_at_the_Summer_Olympics.

34. Personal communication with David Webster, March 30, 2004.

35. Elliott Gorn, "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Back Country," *American Historical Review* 90 (February, 1985): 18-43; and Gorn, *The Manly Art – Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) for a description of masculinity in nineteenth century America.

36. Kelly Grigger, "Catch as Catch Can: Once a Carnival Attraction, Catch Wrestling Now Influences MMA," *FightMagazine.com*, pp. 94-100. At: <http://www.kellygrigger.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Catchwrestling.pdf>.

37. Ibid.

38. J.A. Mangan and Richard Holt, "Prologue: Heroes of a European Past," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 13, no. 1 (1996): 5.

39. Paul Gilchrist, "Local heroes and global stars," in *The Global Politics of Sport—The Role of Global Institutions in Sport*, ed. Lincoln Allison, (New York: Taylor & Francis Inc., 2005), 120.

40. Ed. W. Smith, "Hackenschmidt Gives up after Two Hours' Fierce Grappling with Gotch," *New York Evening Journal*, 4 April 1908.

41. Siler, "Gotch Defeats Hackenschmidt."

42. Mike Chapman, *Gotch - an American Hero*. This book, identified as an historical novel on its cover, is based on Gotch's life. It is liberally filled with examples of Gotch's training runs, see pages 3, 36, 69, 109, and 140-1 for example. Articles such as "Gotch and Hackenschmidt Discuss Their Match," *Health & Strength*, November 14, 1908, also mentions his endurance training regimen.

43. Horace Lerch, "After the Big Mat Struggle," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 6, 1908; Sol Plex, "Gotch and Hackenschmidt Await Gong to Battle for World's Championship," *Chicago Examiner*, April 3, 1908;

44. George Siler, "Wrestling: Gotch Defeats Hackenschmidt," in *The Greatest Sport Stories from the Chicago Tribune*, Arch Ward, ed. (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1953), 87-89; Scrapbook, "Hackenschmidt Surrenders Title After 2 Hours 1 Minute," unidentified newspaper, 4 April 1908.

45. "Russian Lion Cries Enough," *Racine (Wisconsin) Daily Journal*, April 4, 1908; "Hack Will Not Tarry Here," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 6, 1908.

46. Smith, "Hackenschmidt Gives up after Two Hours' Fierce Grappling with Gotch."

47. Ibid. Some newspapers reported that the match ended in two hours and one minute and others in two hours and three minutes.

48. "Hackenschmidt Seeing Defeat, Quits; Gotch Is World's Wrestling 'Champ,'" *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 4, 1908.

49. The phrase "his feelings hurt" appears in "Champion Wrestler Quits, Exhausted," *New York Times*, April 4, 1908; and in "Hackenschmidt Seeing Defeat, Quits; Gotch Is World's Wrestling 'Champ,'" *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 4, 1908. The "white feather" image appeared in Scrapbook, no title, *The Evening Wisconsin*, April 11, 1908; and in "Hackenschmidt Quits Mat; Match to Gotch," *Lima (Ohio) Daily News*, April 4, 1908; The "canary streak or yellowness" references were from: – "Aftermath Statements by Gotch and Hackenschmidt," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, April 5, 1908.

50. "Hackenschmidt Beaten: Loses Prize Fight to American Wrestler: Amazing Scenes: Struggle Like a Brutal Prize Fight," *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, April 5, 1908.

51. "To the Editor of The Sportsman," *The Sportsman*, April 14, 1908.

52. Scrapbook, no author, no title, *The Evening Standard and St. James's Gazette*, April 18, 1908.

53. Scrapbook, no author, no title, *New York Evening Journal*, April 5, 1908. This quote is attributed to *New York Evening Journal* reporter William F. Kirk in "Wrestling—'Gotch is a Brute,'" *The Sporting Life*, April 18, 1908.

54. "Brutal Wrestling – Gotch Denounced by the America Press," (London) *Morning Leader*, April 8, 1908.

55. Scrapbook, "World's Championship," unidentified clipping, n.d.

56. "Gotch, King of Them All," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 5, 1908.

57. "Wrestling in America," *Daily Telegraph*, April 5, 1908. This account and similar accounts show up in various English newspapers, such as "Hackenschmidt Beaten," *Lloyd's Weekly Newspapers*, April 5, 1908; "Wrestling – How Hackenschmidt Lost to Gotch," *Sporting Life*, April 6, 1908; "That Big Wrestle," *The Star*, April 6, 1908. Only a few American newspaper articles pertaining to the results of the fight are identified as such in Hackenschmidt's scrapbook with a similar if not the same passage, but *New York Sun*, *New York World*, and several Chicago newspaper reporters are cited in many articles.

58. Jack Curley, "Curley Picks Hack," *The Ring* 13, no. 2 (1934): 24. Curley also favors Hackenschmidt in his article, "Native Born Wrestlers Excel Foreigners," *The Ring* 9, no. 11 (December 1930): 30; and is quoted in A.D. Phillips, "From Milo to Londos, Chapter 13," *The Ring* 12, no. 10 (November 1933): 21; See also Ted Carroll, "Jack Curley, Greatest Promoter of 'Em All," *Ring Wrestling* (2) 5 (May 1968): 29.

59. There is a Yahoo chatroom called "FrankGotch vs GeorgeHackenschmidt," that's been active since 2005 at: <http://sports.groups.yahoo.com/group/FrankGotchVsGeorgeHackenschmidt/>; and the Lou Thesz forum at wrestlingclassics.com also contains threads of discussion concerning the match. There's also a video game on YouTube that lets you recreate the match at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7xZB43c8to>.

60. The best reference on the Black Sox scandal is: Eliot Asinof, *Eight Men Out: The Black Sox and the 1919 World Series* (New York Holt Paperbacks: 2000).

61. See: <http://www.silentera.com/PSFL/data/G/GotchHackenschmidtWres1908.html>. For an early discussion of the film see: "Pictures of Big Match Show Russian Got a Square Deal," *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 11, 1908. This article describes the film as showing "ten minutes of the first of the match...then the film skips the uninteresting parts and picks up where some real action occurs."

62. Ibid.



The cartoonist for the British newspaper *The Daily Dispatch* compared the match to a cat fight, titling this supposed painting "Scratch-As-Gotch-Can" An Impression By Geo. Hack." A label affixed to the "painting" also reads "Made In Chicago." It appeared on May 5, 1908.