



## Fanpower

Without the fans there would be no stars, no wrestling, there would be no Heritage.

# James Morton



After the war when I was growing up in Morecambe every Monday I used to walk down the promenade to the Winter Gardens where they put up the red and blue posters for Thursday's wrestling. My favourite was when Jack Pye The Uncrowned King of the Mat, the Doncaster Panther was topping the bill against I presumed a number of villains such as Charlie Green, Chief Thunderbird, Giant Anaconda, Abdul the Turk, Bearded Ken Davies – in those days anyone with a beard was automatically suspect. Very occasionally the bill was the Pye Family v The Rest of the World. I was never allowed to go by my Aunt Ada until one day Mr Walker the local newsagent promised to take me. I counted up the length and number of rounds and told her I would be back by

midnight. This brought a flurry of disapproval but Mr Walker reassured her. 'It never finishes beyond nine fifteen I'll have the little lad home by half past'. And permission was given but only on condition I sat at ringside. I think she paid Mr Walker's ticket that night. Jack Pye was to fight the Welsh champion Sandy Orford. I was in a fever of excitement all week. At last I was going to see my hero.

Sure enough there we were just next to the timekeeper who announced he'd broken his glasses but had taken his wife's even though it was her whist night, 'I weren't going to miss Jack Pye' he said. I think Bert Royal opened the bill against Tony Vallon and I'm sure Harry Fields defeated Gypsy Guy La Roche in the second — Ray Plunkett would know. Then came the interval and Mr Walker offered to take me for a cup of tea. I declined. We

might not get back in time I was not going to miss a second of Jack Pye. Next week's bill was read out. Can it have been Assirati and Rex Gable? Then the main event was announced and in came Sandy Orford. No Jack Pye. Where was he? Could he have been injured at this last minute? The crowd booed. A second was sent to the dressing room. Jack did not appear. The crowd yelled. The suddenly this man with long black hair, black cloak and tights swaggered into the ring, took out a mirror and combed his hair.

The fight took the pattern of what I learned was many of Jack's later fights. He attacked Orford when his back was turned and before the first bell. When it sounded he dropped on one knee; he tied Orford in the ropes, blew his nose on his fingers and then wiped them on Orford's trunks. Orford tied his hair in the ropes and the referee threatened to cut it. Warning followed warning. Orford gained a quick pin fall. The lady sitting next to me who looked very like my aunt hit Pye with her handbag. The crowd was in an uproar. He then tied Orford and the referee in the ropes and bounced back and forth. Disqualification was both inevitable and swift. He was out of the ring in a trice and back to his dressing room. The bout can't have lasted ten minutes. I think Jack Fallon was in the closing bout and dead on 9. 15 came the winning fall and we were in Mr Walker's elderly car, off down the promenade home.

I never saw Jack again except once on television when he wrestled clean and defeated Eric Liederman. But that night at the Winter Gardens was the night nearly sixty years ago I effectively discovered there was no Father Christmas.

## French Memories



When I lived in Paris in the early 1970s there were I believe three regular major promotions. The first was at the Elysée-Montmartre near the Moulin Rouge, the second at the Cirque d' Hiver near the Filles du Calvaire Metro and the third, I am told was the Salle Wagram up near the Arc de Triomphe. In fact I never heard of any wrestling at the Salle and I never saw any posters. On the other hand the café in my street put up a flyer in the window every Monday for the Cirque and, since I had a friend who looked after the Cirque's animals who had not gone on tour and who helped up the ring on a Friday tickets were easy to come by.

My recollection is that the Elysée and the Cirque's wrestlers came from two different stables. The Elysée which functioned on a Sunday and I think on a Thursday had Jean Ferre 'Le Justicier du Ring', Andre Bollet and Luc Straub along with Monsieur Montreal and the midgets. The Elysee had L'Homme Masqué, Robert Durantou, Jon Guil Don, Rasputin, Der Henker. I don't recall ever seeing an Englishman

when I was there. And above all Rene Ben Chemoul and his nephew Walter Bordes who often tagged together.

Wrestling has always been tribal. After the war there were often Black v White bills. In the East End of London there were regular bills featuring The Bengal Tigers against the likes of Don Steadman. In Northern France in the 1970s there were still whole cards of evil Germans led by a a pickle-haubered De Uhlan against the heroic Pierre LeBon and his mates. And in Paris at the time the Algerians represented by Chemoul and Bordes were matched with villainous French teams such as The Golden Falcons.

The main bout was always last on the card and when they appeared it was always Bordes and Chemoul who gave the down trodden Algerian population something to crow about. There was a chant, 'Re-ne-ben-Chem-oul' accompanied by stamping which rocked the old building as apparently down and out and with Bordes being beaten up outside the ring he would slowly climb to his feet, onto the ropes and launch himself in one last leap to save his nephew. No matter this was repeated at least once a month we all went home happy.

Then there was Der Henker, the German Hangman against L'Homme Masqué but that as they say is another story.

## Masked Men



I have always thought that one of the prettiest buildings in Paris is the grey and white circular Cirque d'Hiver (once Cirque Napoléon) in the Marais not far from Republique. [The Elysée Monmartre was another]. It was at the Cirque that Jules Léotard invented the art of the Flying Trapeze in 1859. He also gave his name to the wrestling costume. It was there in the late 1950s that in scenes of hysteria and disbelief the great L'Ange Blanc was defeated by L'Homme Masqué, a man enormously popular, that is enormously hated, in the French rings. I never saw either Léotard or that match but I did see L'Homme against Der Henker [The Hangman] in what was billed as their first meeting sometime around 1972.

I've no idea who Der Henker was. Nor for that matter L'Homme –even if he was still the same one who defeated L'Ange. [In fact the original was Gil Volney]. In those days there was wrestling on the television on most Saturday nights and Der Henker was a regular, beating

his opponent in short order but not before the commentator had had time to drool over his physique and how he was 'bien musclé'. So there was great excitement in our corner café when the poster went up in the window of the match 'inedit.' – never before. And, best of all, Loser to be unmasked.

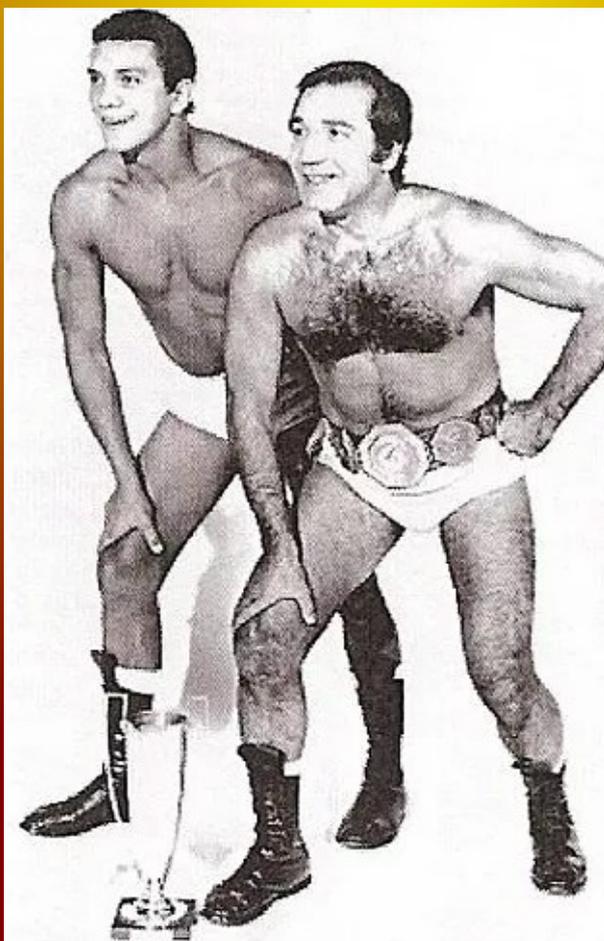
I can't remember now who else was on the bill and I believe contrary to the usual order the match was before the interval. Der Henker in red, L'Homme in black. One fall, one submission, an hour time limit.

It may well have been their first meeting because they didn't work well together. L'Homme was carrying poundage and there was little excitement until after what seemed less than ten minutes he gained the winning fall.

Now this was what we had come to see. But, of course, we didn't. Amid protestations by the Hangman, L'homme pulled off his mask, and turned his back on his opponent triumphantly waving the German's mask.

'Behind you', we shouted in best pantomime tradition because the cowardly German had a second mask underneath and, before we could warn L' Homme in time, he was out of the ring and back to the dressing room from which, despite all our stomping and jeering he was never going to reappear. A rematch was naturally announced but I did not go. The permutations for endless rematches —double disqualification, failure to appear, serious injury and so on — were far too many to get any more of what were my hard earned francs. Better spend them on a guaranteed riot of bad behaviour such as Bobby Duranton and his valet Firmin.

## One of the Nights Rene Ben Chemoul Died



The last time I went to the wrestling in France — I'm not sure it wasn't the last time I ever went — was when I was in Boulogne and there was a bill with two tag matches. I forget the names of the first which was a Match a Quatre Feminin France c. Angleterre. But the second was Rene Ben Chemoul and Walter Bordes against The Golden Falcons. It was the night Chemoul died in the ring.

When I arrived at the stadium up at the back of Boulogne to get tickets the French girls were there working out. Both were extremely agile and attractive. I know one had very bad scarring on her right thigh almost as if she had been burned. The other team were English. One looked like my seriously overweight and indeed unpleasant Aunt Annie and the other like Joyce Grenfell but I cannot believe it was either of them. It was not difficult to work out who would be the villains. My recollection is that Joyce Grenfell did most of the work while Annie sulked outside the ropes. However, she was clearly bilingual. We were in the front row and could clearly hear her say — when she actually condescended to take part and was giving one of the French

girls a good kicking — 'Raus Raus, stehe, stehe.' It is unnecessary to say who won.

And topping the bill as the last match usually did in France were Chemoul and Bordes. As the French girls had been, both were both flyers at a time when flying was not really seen in British rings. And flew they did, dazzling the Falcons until as was inevitable they flew

too high and Rene Ben Chemoul crashed to the ground at one side of the ring and was killed instantly.

Now the French referees were tougher in spirit than English ones and despite the fact we all pointed out there was clearly a dead man in the ring the referee ignored our yells and Bordes continued to fight on until he was thrown out on the other side. Both Falcons were on him in a moment. An elderly man tried to defend him waving a white stick which one of the Falcons took from him and broke over his knee. Chairs were picked up, gendarmes ran to intervene and to try to stop Bordes following his uncle to the cemetery.

And then suddenly, like Lazarus, Chemoul began to twitch and then to move. He wasn't dead after all. The audience was by now in hysteria urging him on. Could he get up — let alone save his nephew? And slowly to our cheers he pulled himself up, staggered across the ring, climbed the top rope and jumped on the melee. Yet again disbelief was suspended and good had triumphed over evil.

The bill for the next week included the heavyweight championship of French but it was not the top. That was a Match Feminin Seins Nus —Topless. As they used to say in the News of the World, 'I made my excuses' and never went again.