



## Fanpower

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

# Dave Sutherland



Everyone knows where they were when they heard the news of JFK's assassination; so, more or less, begins the Frederick Forsyth classic "The Odessa File" and its true; ask anyone of that age and they will be sure to tell you exactly where they were. Personally I was getting dried in the changing rooms of Derby Street Baths in South Shields following a training session with the Volunteer Life Guards when the news was imparted but how many remember where they were the following day? I do, for on 23rd November 1963 I attended my first live experience of professional wrestling.

I considered myself fairly well versed in the wrestling game naturally from the regular Saturday afternoon television shows, from publications such as "Boxing and Wrestling", "Wrestling World" and, of course, "The Wrestler", avidly reading any wrestling poster in any location and listening enviously to my schoolmates who had attended any of the live sessions in the North East. Back in those days of lost innocence Newcastle was the big city and you didn't go there unaccompanied but once that I had secured a job there in the CWS Head Offices there was no choice and I transformed overnight from schoolboy to working man and Newcastle became the centre of my working and, very limited, social life.

We worked a five and a half day week back then so my workmate Jimmy Gemmill and I looked out for the nearest Saturday when we would both be working and Newcastle United would be playing at home to go straight out from work to take in the match and the

evening's wrestling. Fortunately for me my internal post route took me past The Essoldo outside of which a huge billboard advertising the next session of wrestling at St James Hall (part of the same group) was changed every Monday morning and on about my third trip the new poster was up and it declared that top of the bill was Gwyn Davies v Billy Howes; Brian Trevors was down to face Jim Rawlings while Donald Mitchell (I had to read that name a few times as I was more familiar with the more well known Dennis) was matched against Martin Borman but it was the main supporting bout which peaked my excitement where Bob Sweeney would be in combat with my all time favourite Francis Sullivan. That lunchtime Jim and I were off to book our ringside seats.

The shocked and sombre atmosphere of the day was enhanced by continual rain which made for a dreary Saturday morning delivering the post and it was a soggy afternoon enlivened by Newcastle gaining a credible 3 – 1 victory over Manchester City. A quick coffee in the city somewhere then back to Gallowgate and join the queue as we waited for the St James doors to open.

It was an excited atmosphere in the hall as at last the first two wrestlers appeared and Donald Mitchell (whose autograph I'd managed to get as he entered the hall) was making his debut there against Martin Borman who had been seen a couple of times previously but who was rapidly slipping down the billing. He looked a real villain but his actions were more crude than skilful as the crowd warmed to Mitchell and roared him on. I don't remember the score at the crucial moment that Borman quite needlessly brought his knee into Mitchell's groin but that brought a sudden end to the bout as the former was disqualified and Mitchell was helped from the ring to the dressing room, receiving appreciative handshakes etc from the crowd on the way back.

Then for me it was the big one; I had seen Bob Sweeney on television and I recognised him as a powerful and highly skilled wrestler while Sullivan was the king of the flying dropkick. However mainly due to Sweeney's tenacity the majority of the action took place on the mat with a series of holds and counter holds and Sweeney's continuance of trapping Sullivan in either a leg stretch or leg scissors. While Sullivan only managed about one drop kick throughout the entire bout he did keep us amused with a constant amount of chat either imploring Sweeney to submit, expressing exasperation at getting caught in one of the aforementioned holds or rebuking referee Mike Delaney who at the bell to end one of the rounds kept requesting both wrestlers to break the hold (which was a tangle of limbs) with "All right there's no need to shout!"

Sweeney went ahead with a fall in the third round with Sullivan, right, gaining the equalising fall in the last round; a contest full of skill, not a foul move to be seen and a match appreciated by the purists.

Gwyn Davies looked a big man on television but in the ring he was towering and Billy Howes, no slight figure himself, was conceding a fair amount of height and weight. Up to then I had only seen Howes as a blue eyed although I had heard that he could mix it when desired however tonight it was going to be another contest where skill rather than good guy, bad guy was going to be the watchword. It was a slow but enthralling contest which came to an abrupt end when Howes during a sustained period of attack attempted to leapfrog Davies, who was getting up to his full height, and suffered a painful end to what was declared "no contest".

The last bout was to feature to real journeymen of the wrestling scene (and I mean that as a compliment) as the young Jim Rawlings went against the veteran Brian Trevors who by

then was nearing the end of his active career. Trevors was keen to show off his stomach muscles as he bounced Rawlings head off his midriff a time or two but it was obvious that one of his knees was heavily strapped and once Jim got him in a single leg Boston submission was immediate. A limping Trevors came out for the next round but as soon as pressure was put on that leg again the bout was over and Rawlings had a 2-0 victory. So that was my first time at a live wrestling show and I couldn't wait until my next one. Getting on the train back to South Shields I noticed a familiar face and it was one of the schoolmates to which I referred to earlier; I hadn't seen Alan Patchett for a couple of years since he went off to the Grammar School and here he was a regular attendee at St James Hall.

Once again our paths were to cross; this time for a more sustained period which would see St James Hall as the springboard for a host of future activities.