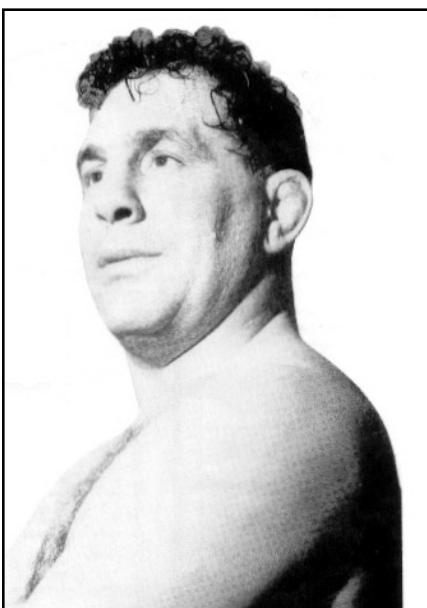


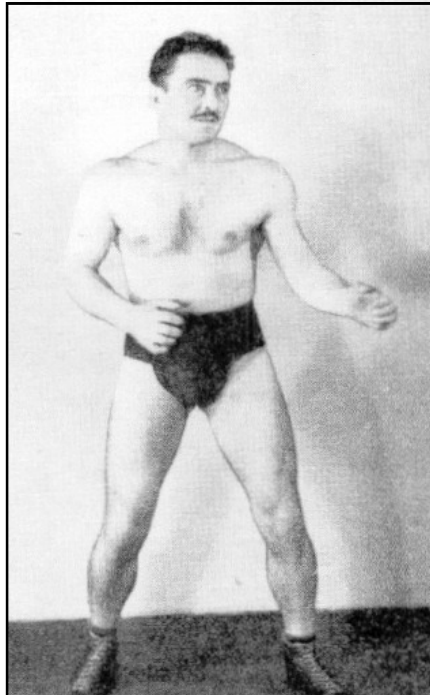
End of an Era

by Allan Best

Many years ago at a Junior International match in Wigan, I enjoyed a quiet drink with three venerable members of the wrestling fraternity. The one who insisted on paying: "Sure, 'tis not worth dirtying a glass for a single." was Mike Byrne, top Irish Heavyweight in the 1950's and the 1960's. Holding forth was leader of the pack, Ernie Riley, son of the immortal Billy and himself for many years the leading Light Heavyweight. Ernie was relating a tale of the great Bert Assarati who he accompanied on his tour of India in the mid 1950's. The two wrestlers were taking the air one evening



Ernie Riley

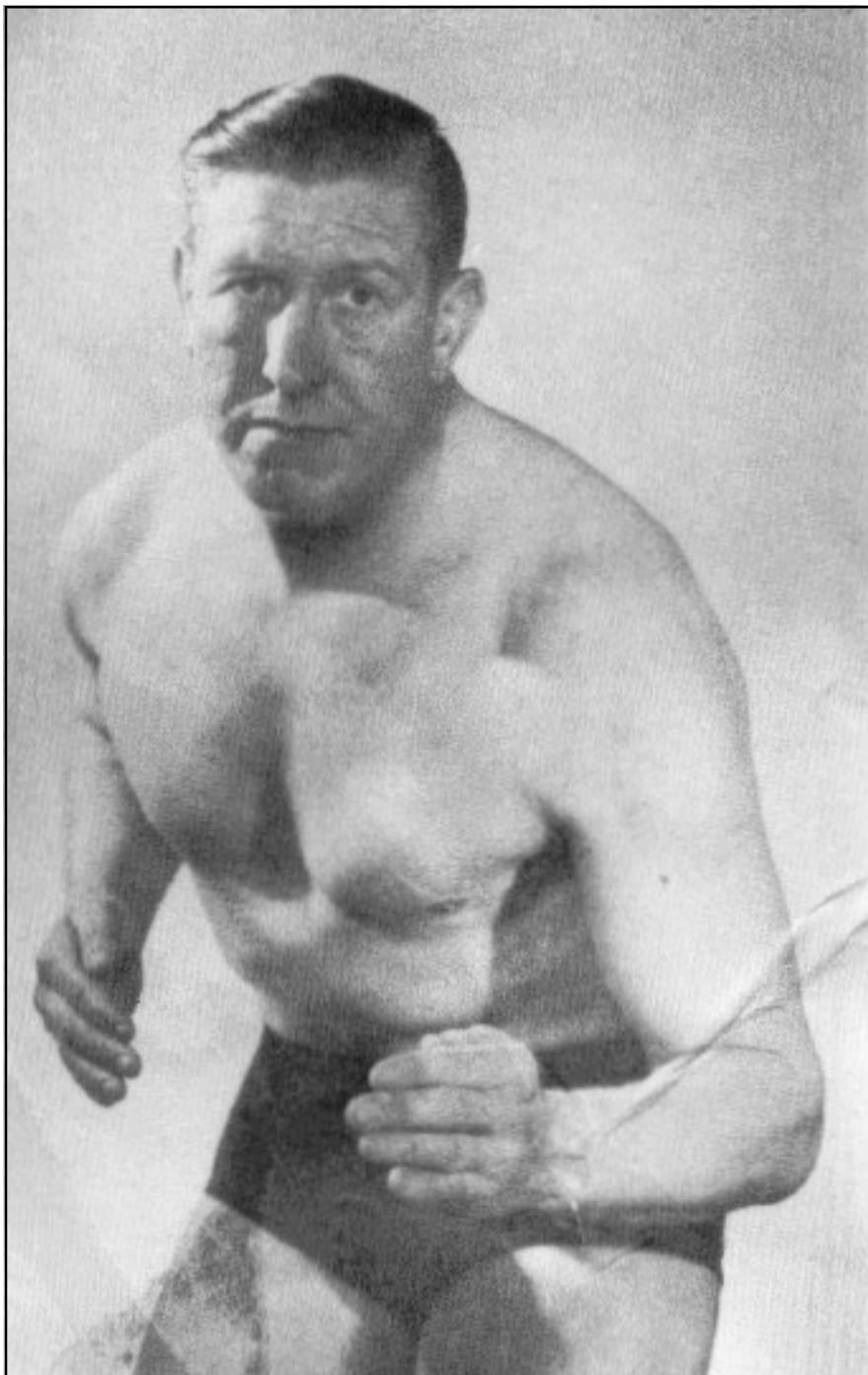


Mike Byrne

when they heard a cry for help. Bert, always happy in a crisis, was first away. He found an Indian gentleman being attacked by two obviously unsavoury characters. By the time Ernie arrived on the scene Bert had one thug under each arm and was quietly strangling them. "Stop" shouted Ernie "you'll kill them". The police arrived at this point whereupon Bert dropped the two onto the ground. Now for trouble, thought Ernie, but the police recognised the great man, asked for this autograph and made a great a fuss of him. The two villains simply lay where they had been dropped.

I hadn't seen the third member of our little group for many years before that day in Wigan. The tall, somewhat sparse, gentleman, much troubled by his wife, Edna's illness, joined in the stories in a self-effacing way, peering over the top of his half-moon glasses. The previous time I had seen Bob Robinson was in the ring at the Belle Vue, Manchester, in January 1967, defending his British Heavyweight Title against the young, strong, highly-skilled Billy Robinson, for Bob's ring name was Billy Joyce.

The Belle Vue Stadium was a dream of a place for wrestler and spectator alike. Steeply tiered seats with good views (even from the 'two bobs') and a first class ring sparkling under powerful overhead lighting. At the witching hour of seven o'clock, the strains of "Roll Out The Barrel" brought anticipation to a climax, not just for this particular evening but every Wednesday and Saturday, for at the Belle Vue, the bills were always something special. Even the most mundane *bottom of the bill*, seemed to find something special at this stadium. At the sound of the "Barrel" would appear Dick "the Dormouse" Rodgers, the referee, in immaculate whites, chewing whatever he



Billy Joyce

chewed. Tonight, though, a special referee for the event. No bottom of the bill these lads so Doug de Relwyskow, brother of the promoter, was on hand to see fair play. The King: Billy Joyce; the challenger: Billy Robinson, a young, strong wrestler with

enough of a flare for showbiz to set the crowd alight. Joyce, another product of Riley's no nonsense, real wrestling gym had the reputation of being dour, not disinclined to bend the rules, but beneath that facade was a real wrestler who could

have given the wrestlers of old a good chasing. Not for him the clowning and acrobatics. He was in the ring to wrestle and that's what he did. This attitude, of course, did nothing to endear him to an audience unaware of the quality of his wrestling which, as only just making heavyweight, he had to use at every turn.

With the entry of Robinson, pandemonium broke loose amongst the six thousand mat-fans. Here was their hero, a local lad, trained at Failsworth, on the rim of Manchester, to do battle with that mirthless 'foreigner' from Wigan. Billy Robinson had been a good amateur British Light-heavyweight Champion in 1957 and it showed. His general-ship of the mat set him apart from the run of the mill mat-men, as it later set him apart in the furious USA wrestling scene.

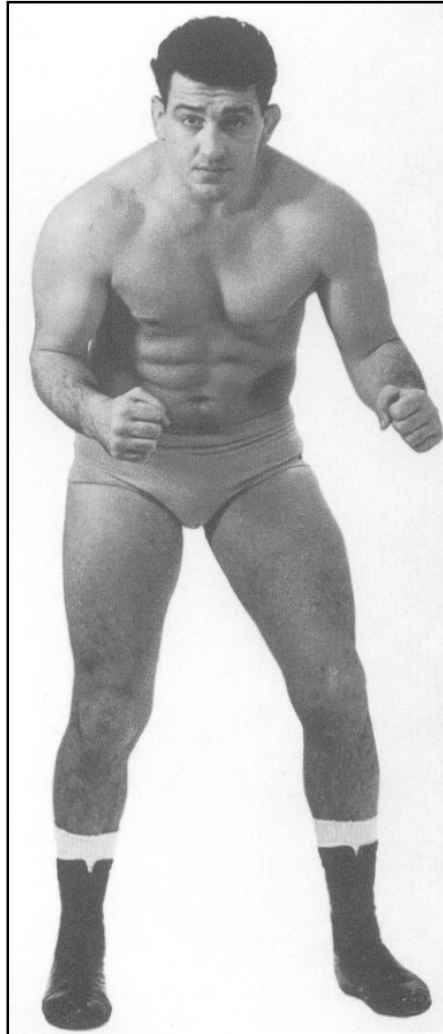
The two Robinsons had met many times; as you might expect, the older, wiser man coming out the victor, but tonight the crowd sensed the 25 year old Billy Robinson had served his apprenticeship, had caught up with the older man in the skills of the game and had youth on his side.

At the bell, Robinson, was straight in and used his speed and skill to try to upset Joyce, but the latter had been there before and parried every attack, slipping in a few hard elbow smashes between more legitimate holds. It was almost at the bell that Robinson took a re-

verse waist hold, upended his adversary and drove him, head first into the mat. Joyce held out, though obviously very dazed, until the bell. At the bell for the second round Joyce was on the attack. Hold after hold, chaining them, forcing Robinson to improvise escapes, making do, getting by somehow, to make that error that would give Joyce the fall. But the fall wouldn't come. Flashes of temper from both men gave some indication of the effort, the frustration. This frenzy continued for three rounds then, quite out of the blue and to unbelieving silence, Robinson took Joyce with a hook-in wrestler's bridge and the first fall from a body press.

The loss of that first fall electrified Joyce. He continued the attack started in round two. Joyce smothering Robinson in head and arm locks, throwing him at the ropes and grinding his back on the unforgiving hemp. A warning from Relwyskow persuaded Joyce to change to leg attacks and in round six he was rewarded by a clean single leg-hold ripe for conversion to a Boston Crab. Such chances are not to be missed by a graduate of the great Mr. Riley. A quick turn and an equalizer for the Champion.

Joyce's leg-twist had done its job. At the start of the seventh round there were doubts about Robinson's fitness to continue. Joyce was jubilant and before the bell had sounded he tore in to



Billy Robinson

grab Robinson's damaged leg. A difference of opinion with the referee as to Joyce's right to hold onto the leg led to a Public Warning. The fracas had given Robinson valuable minutes in which to recover. As Joyce came to him, he went behind, took the rear waist-hold and performing that most difficult of throws, the suplex, flipped Joyce to the canvas to body-press him for the winning fall. To the roars of the crowd their favourite was acclaimed the new British and Commonwealth Heavyweight

Champion.

As was his habit Robinson helped the defeated Joyce to his feet, embraced him, and on the address system declared Joyce the hardest opponent he had ever met. That winning move, the suplex, is possibly the throw that offers most danger to the performer, rather than the victim. To hurl oneself backwards, having no arms with which to break-fall and bearing a heavyweight wrestler, to, hopefully, land in a bridge and pitch your opponent onto his shoulders, requires consummate skill and a degree of bravery not found in all combatants. Robinson dared all to vanquish an equally brave man and earned his reward. And here was I, some thirty years on, listening to the stories from these, now aging, men. Men, the likes of which we may not see again. A man worrying about an ailing wife, a man who the kids in the street would not give a second look at, but a man who had fought with giants; Bob Robinson, aka Billy Joyce, once the British Heavyweight Champion wrestler.

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