

'The Lion of the Punjab' – Gama in England, 1910

by Graham Noble

I.

Wrestling in India has a long tradition, but its early history is obscure, and probably lost. S. Muzumdar, in his classic *Strong Men over the Years* (Lucknow, 1942), wrote that "The great art of Indian wrestling has its legends but no history whatsoever," and so he chose to start his account of wrestling and wrestlers in 1892, when the English champion Tom Cannon visited India and was defeated by the 21-year-old Kareem Buksh. That, it seems, was the first international contact between the Indian and western schools of professional wrestling.

The first great Indian wrestler to appear in the West was the 5 foot 9, 280 pound Gulam, who wrestled in Paris in 1900 at the time of the Great Exposition. His manager put out an open challenge and a match was made with Cour-Derelli, regarded as one of the strongest of the Turkish wrestlers then in Europe.



Gulam,
Courtesy Michael Murphy

ca.

1900

Edmond Desbonnet's account of the bout was given in his 1910 book, *Les Rois de la Lutte*:

The encounter between Gulam and Cour-Derelli took place at the hippodrome in the Boulevard de Clichy, today the Bostock Hippodrome.

From the beginning of the bout Gulam demonstrated a crushing superiority over the Turk Cour-Derelli. As soon as the whistle signalled that the two contestants could come to grips, the Hindu, agile and swift, sprang on his adversary and threw him with a marvellous "flying mare (tour de bras)." Both of his shoulders touched the mat but, as this match brought into play big financial interests, after interminable discussions, the throw was not admitted and the bout recommenced.

Several times the Hindu used his terrible arm roll and each time Cour-Derelli rolled on his two shoulders, but got up at once. Finally, realising that his opponent was too strong, the Turk decided to crouch down on the mat, and not budge from that position for an hour and a half. He was content only to defend himself against the attacks of Gulam, who, tired of all this, invited him to get up, and to emphasize his contempt at the incorrect attitude of his opponent, he punctuated his invitation with several kicks to the kidneys. But Cour-Derelli, who probably found it fine where he was, did not wish to get back up when the judge signalled him; Cour-Derelli seemed rooted to the mat for the whole match. Finally, the only recourse was to the points system, and, to avoid harming those [financial] interests of which we spoke above, the bets were called off. It was declared that Cour-Derelli had not been thrown, Gulam was proclaimed the winner, but all bets were reimbursed.

Be that as it may, Gulam was manifestly superior to the Turk. Although he had to wrestle the length of the bout with a sprained left arm, he wrestled a hundred percent, throwing his opponent three times.

I witnessed this memorable match with the much missed Dr. Krajewski, of St. Petersburg, and Noel le Gaulois; we occupied a box at floor level and no detail of the bout escaped us. Dr. Krajewski was enthusiastic about Gulam, who he had examined several days before when he was photographed in the pose which we reproduce here. It was in the studio of the photographer Walery that we took Gulam's measurements.

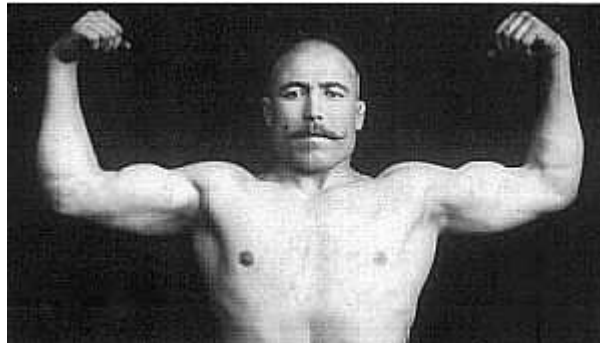
To our mind, no current wrestler could stand five minutes against Gulam in fair wrestling, that is to say, without grovelling on the mat, a system of defense which should be banned as anti-sporting.

There is another reference to this contest in Muzumdar's book:

In 1899, I believe, in the year in which a great exhibition was held in Paris, the late Pandit Motilal Nehru took Ghulam to try his luck in Europe. A match was soon fixed up for him with Ahmad Madrali, the well known Turk who was the champion of the world at that time. It is not clear what the result of the battle was, there are quite conflicting versions about it. But without the least doubt Ghulam was overwhelmed by the Turk in his first grips with him. He was said to have shouted out to Pandit Motilal, "*Panditji yeh mujhe mare daita hai* (he is killing me)." But Pandit Motilal who had an irascible temper had brought Ghulam back to his senses with a sharp rebuke. According

to some accounts Ghulam, who possessed phenomenal powers of recovery from very awkward situations, won; according to others the result was a draw, but Jawaharlalji, of whom I enquired about the real fact some years ago, was of opinion that Ghulam had lost to Madrali. The little information that could be had from English journals of the time made it amply clear that responsible critics regarded "Gallam", as they styled him, as one of the greatest wrestlers the world ever produced, whose only compeer was the great Turk, Yousuf Mahmout, who although a capable swimmer, was drowned off the Californian [*sic*] coast in a shipwreck carrying as he was on his person the enormous amount of money in gold he had earned in the States.

Muzumdar must be writing about the same contest, yet his account is curiously at odds with Desbonnet's. Moreover, he confuses Cour-Derelli with Ahmed Madrali, another Turk (actually Bulgarian) who only came to prominence five years later when he fought George Hackenschmidt. Muzumdar also mistakes Youssuf Mahmout for the much earlier [Youssuf Ishmaelo](#), the original of all the "Terrible Turks." Nonetheless, this is an intriguing account, probably containing some fragments of personal reminiscence. (Presumably Muzumdar did not have access to French sources at the time he was writing his book.) It's a surprising account, too, because Muzumdar was a real enthusiast of Indian wrestling who described Gulam as "the ideal of Indian manhood," yet here he suggests that Gulam may have had the worst of the match, and at one point was almost overpowered by the Turk. As is so often the case in professional wrestling history, it's impossible to reconcile the different accounts of a particular contest.



Ahmed Madrali

Gulam returned to India where, not long after (1900), he died of cholera. It was a century ago, and it's difficult to judge his real strength from that one bout with the Turk Cour-Derelli. Historians of Indian wrestling, however, often look back to him as the greatest of their champions, and those who saw him in Paris also seemed to regard him as something special. Desbonnet referred to Gulam as one of the two "super wrestlers" of the modern era (the other was Youssouf Ishmaelo) and Stanislaus Zbyszko told Robert W. Smith that, although he had never met Ghulam himself, "I got information off one wrestler who did train with Ghulam. He was the ruler of his day, of the mat, of human strength."

A few years after Gulam's death, a new prodigy came along. This was Gama (birth name, according to Robert W. Smith, Mian Ghulam Muhammad), who was born to a family of wrestlers in 1880 or so. I've never seen an exact birth date given for Gama, and calculations from references in books and magazines give variously 1878, 1880, or 1882. When he died in 1960 his age was given as 80, so the date of 1880 seems the most reasonable.



Gama, ca. 1916

His father was a top wrestler and Gama is said to have started training at age five. When Gama was eight, his father died, but training continued under the direction of his grandfather; then, when he died too, under his uncle Ida Palahwan, who vowed that Gama would become the champion his father had wanted him to be. According to Joseph Alter, "Intent on impressing upon him the desire to be a great wrestler, he constantly pointed out to the young boy that this is what his father wanted above all else." From being a child, wrestling seemed to be pretty much all that Gama knew. In time, as he reached maturity and eventually did become Champion of India, "The crown passed on to a person perhaps as great and worthy as Ghulam."

Gama first became known at the age of ten when he took part in a national physical exercise competition held by the Rajah of Jodhpur. This was not in a wrestling contest, but in an endurance competition of *bethaks* (free squats), the fundamental conditioning exercise of Indian wrestling. "Over four hundred wrestlers from around India had gathered in Jodhpur," wrote Joseph Alter, "and at the Rajah's signal the competition began. As wrestlers became tired they left the field until only one hundred or so remained. As more and more retired, all eyes turned on Gama, until, after a number of hours had passed, only fifteen wrestlers were left exercising. At this point Jaswant Singh [the Rajah] ended the contest saying that the ten year old boy was clearly the winner in such a field of stalwart national champions. Later, upon being asked how

many bethaks he had done, Gama replied that he could not remember, but probably several thousand. In any event he was bed-ridden for a week."

That victory didn't necessarily show any wrestling ability, but it did demonstrate unusual qualities of physical robustness, will power and competitiveness in the young Gama. At that time he was routinely doing five hundred bethaks and five hundred *dands* (stretching pushups) daily, and working on pit digging – turning over the earth of the wrestling area with a *pharsa* (hoe). He ate a special diet concentrating on milk, almonds, and fruit: he didn't begin eating meat until a few years later.

Gama would wrestle every day, of course, but he didn't compete until he was fifteen. "Very quickly, however, he proved to be virtually unbeatable, and formally became a wrestler to the court of Datiya soon thereafter." As he grew older his training routine was intensified and his diet upgraded to include meat, butter, clarified butter, and *yakhi*, which Alter describes as a "boiled down glutinous extract of bones, joints, and tendons, which is regarded by many Muslim wrestlers as being a source of great strength, and being particularly good for the development of knees, ankles, and other joints." The amounts eaten by the Indian champions were prodigious, and Barkat Ali gives, with what truth I don't know, the mature Gama's daily diet as six chickens or an extract of eleven pounds of mutton mixed with a quarter pound of clarified butter, ten litres of milk, half a litre of clarified butter, a pound and a half of crushed almond paste made into a tonic drink, along with fruit juice and other ingredients to promote good digestion. This expensive high fat, high energy, high everything diet helped to drive Gama's daily training, which in maturity consisted of grappling with forty of his fellow wrestlers in the court, five thousand bethaks, and three thousand dands.

The figures may be exaggerated, I don't know, but no one doubted Gama's dedication to his conditioning routine. The English writer on wrestling Percy Longhurst recalled seeing Gama training when he was in England:

I shall not readily forget the day when I went over to Gama's training quarters near Kingston to watch him at a spell of training.

The morning he spent in going through a few hundred repetitions of the 'dip'; this was followed by several bouts (no rests between) with his fellow Indians, Imam Bux and another. A two hours rest and a meal followed. The meal, by the way, was a quart of broth, concocted of a couple of fowls, with spices. The afternoon was given up to deep knee bending. Nude but for a loin cloth, out of doors in the warm September sunshine, Gama began his up-and-down motion. Methodically, rhythmically, his open hands on the top of a post standing about 4 foot out of the ground, Gama went on with his knee bending. There was nothing hurried about it; he started as though he meant keeping on forever; and after watching him for a long while, that, so I concluded, was his intention. I timed him by the watch for twenty minutes, and still he continued. The perspiration was streaming down him, but there was never a sign of wavering or slacking off. For how long he actually did continue I do not recall. I was deep in a chat with Mr.

Benjamin [Gama's manager in England], who told me that when Gama did finish he would undergo a vigorous all over rubbing with dry mustard.

To watch him doing the dipping exercise was a revelation. There was *power* put into every movement, up and down... It was easy to understand, watching the regular rise and fall of the smooth brown body, the bending and straightening of the rounded limbs, to what extent not only the arms and the shoulders, but the muscles of the chest, abdomen, back and loins participated in the vigorous execution.

One could understand how Gama had acquired the enormous bulk of solid flesh at the back of his upper arms; whence came the wonderful size of the muscles around the shoulders and the base of the neck. Smooth, solid muscle; muscle in bulk; yet again I must repeat that when Gama 'set', for example, his arm, his fist clenched, that acute outlining of the individual muscles on which the enthusiastic physical culturist is wont to pride himself, the 'steel bands' and 'hard knots' beloved of the lady fiction writer, were conspicuous by their absence. All one saw was a rounded swelling, a smooth prominence here and there.

But there was strength, an abundance of it, in those smooth and supple limbs. Anyone who saw Gama overcome Dr. B.F. Roller could be sure of that.

Longhurst went on to say, "The Indian system of training... has results beyond the development of great strength; it creates most remarkable powers of endurance while at the same time increasing agility. Gama, Imam Bux, Ahmed Bux – all when in action, impressed by the cat-like activity of their movements, the feline readiness with which their muscles responded to the demands of the moment, which is one of the attributes that make for the winning of falls."

Gama gained real recognition as a wrestler in 1904, apparently, when he had a series of impressive wins at a tournament organised by the Maharajah of Rewa. In 1906 he won a tournament organised by the Maharajah Pratap Singh of Orchaz and was given a position of wrestler at the Maharajah's court. Over the years he defeated the champions of other states and cities – Gwalior, Bhopal, Tikamargh, Datia, Indore, Baroda, Amritsar, Lahore – and around 1909 he gained recognition as Indian champion when he defeated his famous rival Gulam Mohiuddin. Gulam Mohiuddin was regarded by some as Gama's equal, but when they met he was defeated in only eight minutes.

Ten minutes, eight minutes, two minutes – when you read the accounts of Gama's Indian matches, such as they are, it seems that his opponents, some of them well-known champions, were simply brushed aside. But there was one exception, the famous Rahim Sultaniwala. He was older than Gama, a one-time student of the great Gulam, and he is described as standing six foot eleven and weighing 270 to 300 pounds – exaggerated figures, I would imagine, but still much bigger than Gama, who was around five foot seven and 200 pounds.

There are some discrepancies in the accounts, but it seems that Gama and Rahim Sultaniwala met two or three times before Gama's visit to England in 1910. According to one version of events, the two men first met at Junagarth in the state of Lahore when Gama was nineteen. Rahim took the offensive in that match and was somewhat taken back when his attacks failed to make much headway against his younger opponent. In the second half of the match the advantage probably lay with Gama, but the action was stopped after sixty minutes by the Nawab of Junagarth and a draw given. The second time the two men met was around 1909 when they wrestled to a two-hour draw.



Rama Murti, who trained Rahim Sultaniwala for his matches with Gama

S. Muzumdar gives a slightly different version of events, writing that the two men first wrestled a twenty-minute draw at Datia. (Joseph Alter dates this as late as 1907.) They met again at Indore in 1909, where the result was another draw "after a cunning fight which lasted for three hours"; and then a few months later they wrestled yet another draw at Lahore, this time in a contest of two hours ten minutes. "Gama was not to be mastered," wrote Muzumdar, "nor could he bring his great opponent under control."

Quite how Gama's visit to England came about is not too clear, but the driving force behind it was R.B. Benjamin, an English wrestling promoter. According to one report, it was after seeing Gama defeat the well-known Chandra Singh Mudaliwala that Benjamin decided to bring Gama over to England. On his part, presumably, it was a straight commercial venture, whereas for Gama it was a chance to test himself against Western champions and establish himself as the greatest wrestler in the world. For others, such as Sharat Kumar Mishra, the Bengali millionaire who sponsored the tour, it was a way of demonstrating the strength of Indian physical culture right in the heart of the British Empire. At any rate, in early 1910, Gama, along with fellow wrestlers Imam Bux (his brother), Ahmed Bux, and Gamu, set sail for London.

II.

They arrived in England in April. Some Indian writers have stated that Gama intended to take part in the John Bull wrestling tournament but was refused entry because of his relatively small size. In fact, there was no John Bull Tournament, and it's unlikely that Gama's size would have been any problem: the much lighter Esai Maeda (Yamato) competed successfully against heavyweights in the Alhambra Tournament, and Gama, at a little over 200 pounds, was not small by the standards of the day.

Anyway, by early May the Indians were settled in their training quarters, and *Health and Strength* announced "The Invasion of the Indian Wrestlers" in its May 14 issue. The members of the troupe were listed as Gama, Champion of India; Imam Bux, Champion of Lahore; Ahmed Bux, Champion of Amritsar; and Gamu, Champion of Jullundhur. Their weights ranged from about 198 to 206 pounds, and the article noted that none of the wrestlers trained with dumbbells or barbells.

They would rise at 5:30, wrestle for two hours, then drink a quart (two pints) of milk with Indian spices. Breakfast at around 11:00 would consist of eggs, dahl, and rice, prepared by their own cook, who had travelled from India with them. A rest followed and then at 3:30 there would be two hours of exercise. About 7 o'clock, the main meal of chicken or mutton would be eaten. Finally, before retiring for the night at 9:30, another quart of milk with spices: the wrestlers had brought twenty varieties of spice with them.

The magazine also carried a challenge:

The Sensation of the Wrestling World

Exclusive Engagement of India's Catch-as-catch-can Champions.

Genuine Challengers of the Universe.

All Comers. Any Nationality. No One Barred.

GAMA, Champion undefeated wrestler of India, winner of over 200 legitimate matches.

IMAM BUX, Champion of Lahore.

AHMUD BUKSH, Champion of Amritsar.

GAMU, Champion of Jullundhur.

(These wrestlers are all British subjects.)

£5 will be presented to any competitor, no matter what nationality, whom any member of the team fails to throw in five minutes. [EN2]

Gama, the Lion of the Punjaub, will attempt to throw any three men, without any restriction as to weight, in 30 minutes, any night during this engagement, and competitors are asked to present themselves, either publicly or through the management. The Indians, according to contract, are compelled to meet all champions on the above terms. Any man proving he has been refused the right to wrestle with the Indians will be presented with Five Sovereigns by the management from the Indians' salary. [EN3]

NO ONE BARRED!! ALL CHAMPIONS CORDIALLY INVITED!! THE BIGGER THE BETTER!!

I'm sure the Indians were eager to meet the top professionals of the time, but in issuing a genuine challenge they were, in a way, intruding into a rather cozy world of pro wrestling which operated largely as a music hall entertainment and was, as George Hackenschmidt himself explained, a "business." So if the Indians had expected to meet professionals willing to engage in genuine matches, then they were going to be disappointed, and for quite a while, no challengers came forward.

By July the lack of any response was becoming noticeable, so much so that *The Sporting Life* carried a short article entitled "Gama's Hopeless Quest [to find a genuine opponent]." Around the same time *Health and Strength* referred to the "apathy, cowardice, call it what you will" of the current crop of professional wrestlers. And interestingly, the article also mentioned that Gama had, in fact, had many offers of "lucrative employment" if only he would be willing to "go down" – that is, take part in arranged matches. But then, the article went on, "He simply doesn't understand what that means."

Gama's challenges were also printed in the magazine:

GAMA TO ZBYSCO

Gama is prepared to meet Zbysco in London and throw him three times in one hour for £100 or £200 a side.

GAMA TO GOTCH

Match £250 a side.

Match to take place in London.

GAMA TO THE WORLD

Gama will wrestle any man in the world from £100 to £500 a side.

Match to take place in England.

A SENSATIONAL CHALLENGE: INDIA V. JAPAN

Gama is prepared to throw every one of the thirty Japanese wrestlers now showing at the Exhibition in one hour – actual wrestling time.

Gama will guarantee to carry out the contract, the only stipulation being that the men stand five yards apart, and as soon as the signal is given to start they approach one another and begin wrestling. Ten minutes rest to be allowed after Gama throws the first fifteen. £100 a side.

Gama is also prepared to throw the champion of the Japanese ten times in thirty minutes for £100 a side.

Well, a little later Gama's challenge was taken up by the well-known American professional, [Benjamin "Doc" Roller](#). Ben Roller was a character in his own right: a real medical doctor, apparently, who had gained his degree at Pennsylvania; a natural athlete who had excelled at football and heavy field events before turning to professional wrestling in 1906 at the rather late age of thirty. It's difficult to say how skilled he really was, but Roller had worked with Frank Gotch and was a busy professional: he seemed a decent first test for Gama.

A correspondent for *The Sporting Life* wrote an interesting account of Gama in training for the Roller match, which is worth quoting:

To watch Gama at work is to realise that one is looking at a master of his craft. That is, provided one has not a prejudiced conception of what is his craft. He is there on the mat to get his man down on his shoulders, and it is obvious that the paramount thought in the Indian's mind is that the quicker his opponent is defeated the greater is the credit due to himself.

He is not wrestling with one eye on his adversary and one on the spectators. He is not speculating on the effect his wrestling may have on future engagements. At the moment there is only one thing to be done: to put his man down as soon as may be.

There is no wasting of time playing for head holds or holds of any other kind. He doesn't play for holds at all, he goes in and takes them, and should it happen that his opponent is clever enough to avoid the first attack he also has to be ready to meet the next, which comes upon him with lightning rapidity.

Quickness is perhaps the Indian champion's quality which most impresses the onlooker. The latter is apt to overlook the tremendous force which is concentrated in the Indian's rapid movements. Gotch is said to be quick, he has laughed at all the

European wrestlers he has met because of their elephantine slowness. The cinematograph pictures of his contests with Hackenschmidt and Zbysco proved that by comparison with them he is quick. He has declared, and he has realised, that quickness is strength; that quickness in a wrestling bout is of infinitely more importance than mere physical bulk and ponderously exerted strength, -- but if ever he met Gama it will be interesting to see how he compared in this respect with his challenger. He will be up against a man who has at least equally as great an appreciation of the value of quickness as himself and possibly greater executive power.

But the strength is in Gama also. One can see it in the fine proportions of his figure, the enormously deep chest, the strong loins, the huge thighs, and the powerful rounded arms... 'The strength of an ox and the quickness of a cat' were the words in which one spectator summed up Gama.

He is a worker and he sees to it that his opponent needs to be a worker too unless he is to go down on his shoulders within the first five seconds. There is no letting up, no breathing time, no holding off to gather wind and strength when Gama is wrestling. Move follows move with such tremendous rapidity that it is not entirely easy to distinguish the particular chip which brings about a fall. From grip to grip he changes with the quickness of lightning, arms and legs both at work, the one ready at an instant's notice to supplement the movement of the other.

Thus it is that one loses sight of the man's enormous strength.

But his opponent knows it's there. There is no violent striving for half-nelsons; there are no deliberate movements by which an opponent may be held so that a particular hold may be obtained. An uninitiated person might almost consider that he was witnessing merely a rough-and-tumble, get-hold-anywhere encounter, but it is not so. There is a purpose behind every movement. Both offensively and defensively he knows the value of leg work and in addition he knows a good deal about leg work which the smartest catch-as-catch-can wrestler in this country has never thought of.

And all the while his wrestling is clean. There is no violent exercise of his strength when having forced an adversary into a particular decision which suggests that if the victim does not move something will be broken. There are no strangles, no foot twists, no bridging or head spinning, the latter for the very simple reason that the Indian wrestler has no use at all for ground wrestling. His wrestling is done on his feet. If forced to the ground, or to ease himself he goes down, his object is not to sit there and seek defence, but to get up as quickly as he can and resume the struggle afoot, and the opponent who does try ground wrestling against Gama will very quickly find that he has made an unlucky choice. It is no part of his game to overturn a man who lies on the floor, but he can do it if necessity arise. There was a man in Scotland, and he was four stone [56 pounds] heavier than Gama, who found this out.

It is said that no opponent has ever got behind the Indian champion. One can believe it.

... One could learn something from a slight incident that occurred on the occasion when the writer saw Gama at work. A sturdy English wrestler was opposed by the least skillful of Gama's compatriots. Within six seconds of time being called the Englishman was on his back. His opponent, admittedly somewhat heavier than himself, simply walked into him and buttocked him.

The winner was thrown by Gama inside two minutes.

The contest between Gama and Doc Roller took place at the Alhambra Theatre on the afternoon of August 8, 1910. It had been organised by *John Bull*, the popular magazine which seemed to support Gama's cause throughout his time in England, thus giving rise to the idea, strongly held by Indian writers, that there was a John Bull wrestling tournament that Gama entered and won. The contest was for £200 a side, the best of three falls, with the stranglehold and full nelson barred.

The Alhambra was "packed to the point of suffocation," with hundreds turned away, and "the air was electric with excitement." When the men came together, it was clear that Roller was much taller than the "stocky native of the Punjab." The weights were announced as Roller 16 stone 10 pounds (234 pounds) and Gama 14 stone 4 pounds (200 pounds). When the emcee declared that "no money in the world would ever buy him [Gama] for a fixed match, there was a perfect hurricane of approving shouts."

As soon as the signal to start was given, Gama came out with his "curious kind of galloping action" and immediately dived for a leg hold that Roller only just managed to escape. The American tried to use his additional weight to stall but an outside click almost had him over again. Gama then brought Roller down beyond the edge of the mat. After the referee ordered the men back to the middle of the wrestling area, he attacked again, taking Roller's leg and then applying "a lovely back heel" which sent Doc down to the mat with a crash. Gama immediately put on a half nelson with body roll and turned Roller over for the first fall. It had taken just 1 minute 40 seconds.

As the second bout started Roller was, understandably, much more wary and a lot of time was spent sparring for a favourable position. Roller seemed unsettled by Gama's feinting, and then the Indian dived for the leg and Roller was down, with Gama onto him immediately. Now the rest of the bout was a struggle for the pin-fall: Roller always on the defensive and Gama always on top, often drawing favourable comment for his excellent leg work. Roller was in difficulties throughout (at one point he winced when Gama put on a powerful body hold) and although he broke free from holds several times, Gama was always quicker and would immediately apply another move. Eventually Roller, "trussed up on all sides," was turned over for the second fall after 9 minutes 10 seconds of wrestling.

Gama's victory was greeted with "considerable enthusiasm." It was also well received by the press and some commentators thought (rather naively) that it could lead to a

revival of real wrestling. Gama's "cat-like quickness" was noted, and the reporter for *Health and Strength* wrote that "I shall never forget the whirlwind swiftness of that first bout; the people gasped as they looked on, and they cried with one accord, 'There's no swank there!'" In the same magazine, "Half Nelson" commented, "Frankly, I was astonished at the Hindoo's performance... The moment the contest started it could be seen that Gama was full of confidence, and displaying prodigious strength, he had the mastery throughout. Not once in either fall did Roller venture upon the initiative; indeed, he had his work cut out all the time to keep his shoulders off the mat... One most important thing – he [Gama] wrestles on the 'dead level' all the time."

After the match it was reported that Doc Roller had suffered two fractured ribs. (*Health and Strength* said one broken rib on his right side.) The consensus was that the injury had occurred in the first bout when Roller had been brought down off the mat, and credit was given to him for wrestling on, showing little sign of the damage except maybe when he gasped as Gama put on a body hold. According to the reports Roller was taken to Charing Cross Hospital and attended to by Dr. Edward B. Calthrop, who diagnosed fractures of the seventh and eighth ribs on the left side. In the evening Roller was visited at his hotel by a *Sporting Life* reporter who found him with his body bandaged and "in excruciating pain." Roller was disappointed that the injury had handicapped him during the bout; he felt that he could have done better if he had been unhurt, but still considered Gama "a great wrestler."

At the end of the contest, while Gama was being cheered, the famous Polish wrestler Stanislaus Zbyszko came forward to shake the Indian's hand and congratulate him on his victory. An announcement was made that Zbyszko and Gama would meet in a month's time, September 10, at the Stadium (Shepherd's Bush). And on behalf of Gama a challenge was issued to the world, for £1,000 upwards. Frank Gotch was specifically named, and Gotch's agent, who happened to be present, said that Gotch would be happy to meet any wrestler who visited America.

But first there was another contest to be decided. On September 5, a Monday afternoon, Imam Bux was meeting the well-known Swiss professional wrestler John Lemm at the Alhambra Theatre. The match was for £100 a side and a share of gate receipts, catch-as-catch-can style, the best of three falls.



Imam Bux

Imam Bux was the second string of the five-man troupe, although some observers thought that he might actually be a better wrestler than Gama himself. John Lemm was a leading professional who had won the Alhambra and Hengler's tournaments and who for the past couple of years had been trying to get a match with Hackenschmidt or Gotch. In 1908, when the ill-fated Professional Wrestling Board of Control selected four men to wrestle for the Championship, John Lemm was one of the four (along with Gotch, Hackenschmidt, and Zbyszko). Lemm was short for a heavyweight, about five foot seven, but he weighed 200 pounds and was quick and strong, being known for a determined, rushing style. He was very powerfully built, particularly in the legs, and I think he may have claimed a world record performance in the squat at one time.

Once again the Alhambra was packed for the contest. As the two men stepped on the mat they presented a contrast in physique: Lemm short and heavily muscled, Imam Bux six foot tall, rather gangly and loose limbed. The weights were announced as Lemm 14 stone (196 pounds), Imam Bux 14 stone 8 pounds (204 pounds).

At the signal to start Lemm rushed out in his usual style and seized Imam Bux in a waist hold. After a brief struggle he used a back heel and Imam Bux went down flat on his back. Recovering immediately, he escaped any follow up, and from that point on, Lemm was never in it. Soon after, Imam Bux lifted Lemm up "easily" and threw him to the ground, following up immediately and putting on a half nelson and crotch hold. He turned Lemm over and despite his struggles, the Swiss was pinned in 3 minutes 1 second. "It was a masterly piece of work," said *The Sportsman*.



John Lemm

After a ten-minute rest, the second bout started and "Once more the Indian astonished his rival by his tremendous quickness." Imam Bux went for the legs and both men went down, interlocked. They struggled and there was an awkward moment for Imam as Lemm caught his leg, but he escaped and then Lemm was underneath – and again he was fixed in a half nelson, as Imam Bux applied his full weight. Lemm seemed to use every ounce of his strength in trying to resist, rocking from shoulder to shoulder to avoid the pin, but he was forced down and the referee awarded the fall in the very short time of 1 minute 8 seconds.

Imam Bux's victory over Lemm in a little over four minutes of wrestling was a sensation. Lemm himself was crestfallen, but shook Imam's hand and congratulated him. The press was full of praise for the Indian, saying that "with such pertinacity did Bux pursue his course that he made Lemm – the hero of so many protracted battles – look quite commonplace." Imam Bux was "really like a great cat, wonderfully nimble and lissom, able to turn and twist with lightning-like dexterity," and overall it was a "marvellous performance."

A fulsome summing up was given in *Health and Strength*, the writer stating that the match was "one mighty thrill from start to finish."

When I saw the Indian Imam Bux and John Lemm, the great Swiss wrestler, come to grips, I tell you right here I hardly knew whether I was standing on my head or my feet. That really was a wonderful combat – a combat in which both men wrestled like the masters of the art they were; they wrestled as though they had staked all upon the issue, and though it did not last long, it was great, positively great.

During that five minutes I saw more actual wrestling, more variety of holds and locks and throws, more dramatic, soul-stirring incidents than I have witnessed for many a year.

Let us have a few more big matches like unto that, and I tell you straight that the grappling game will soon become the greatest game of all.

In the audience, watching all this, was Stanislaus Zbyszko, who was due to meet Gama in five days time. He didn't say anything, but he must have been thinking. In the last few weeks he had seen Roller and Lemm, two well-known, solid professionals, blown away in a matter of minutes. As he wrote to Robert W. Smith almost fifty years later, "I knew I had work on my hands."

ENDNOTES

EN1. Publications by Professor Alter consulted included "Gama the Great: Indian Nationalism and the World Wrestling Championships of 1910 and 1928," *Yugantar Punjab*, Summer 2000, <http://www.yugantar.com/sum00/gama.html>; "Gama the World Champion: Wrestling and Physical Culture in Colonial India," *Iron Game History*, October 1995, http://www.aafla.com/search/search_frmst.htm, then use "Gama" as the keyword; and *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992); http://www-ucpress.berkeley.edu:3030/dynaweb/public/books/south_asia/alter.

EN2. Depending on exchange rates and how you calculate purchasing power, in 2002 it required about £58 to equal the purchasing power of a pre-WWI pound sterling. Thus £5 represented a significant amount of money for an English working man, and a fortune for an Indian labourer.

EN3. A sovereign was a gold coin valued at 20 shillings (e.g., £5). The modern numismatic value of a 1910 sovereign in very fine condition is on the order of £60.

III.

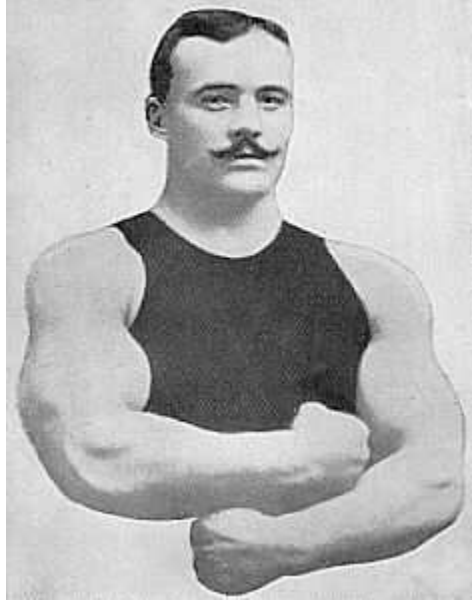
Nat Fleischer, the editor of *The Ring*, once rated Stanislaus Zbyszko as the third best professional wrestler of all time. That was a rather easy, glib judgment, and Fleischer was really known as a boxing journalist, but I suppose a case could be made for Zbyszko's placing based on a long professional career of over thirty years, his winning of the world championship twice (the second time at age 46), and his win-loss record in a pro wrestling world which was supposed to be genuine.

Certainly Zbyszko was one of the most interesting figures in twentieth century pro wrestling. He was active from the turn-of-the-century days of strongmen and Greco-Roman tournaments held throughout Europe to the new world of professional wrestling which came into being in America in the 1920s and 1930s. In his later years, from his home in Missouri, he looked with disdain on the modern style of wrestling, which he contrasted with the good old days when it was an honourable sport contested by athletes rather than showmen.

He was born Stanislaus Cyganiewicz, in Krakow, Poland, a city which was at the time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Social Security Death Index says that his date of birth was April 1, 1881. Zbyszko – the name he later took for his wrestling career – started training in his teens, and while attending college in Vienna, he joined the well known Vindobona Athletic Club. (Vindobona was the Imperial Roman name for Vienna.) There he trained with weights and made rapid gains: Zbyszko was one of those rare people who are genetically disposed to put on muscle rapidly with exercise.

Early photos of Zbyszko show an impressive development of the upper body. He was still relatively trim at this time, but he soon put on additional size as he established himself as one of the top Greco-Roman wrestlers on the Continent. The extra weight was useful for wrestling, and some of it may have been excess flesh by today's standards, but beneath that there was still massive muscular development.

Zbyszko was a genuine heavyweight, but he wasn't all that tall: as Leo Gaudreau noted, in a lineup, other heavyweights such as Jankowski and Dettinger seemed a full half head taller. His height is generally given as five foot ten, though Desbonnet measured him at a little less than five foot nine, and *Health and Strength* once had him as five foot seven and a half. I would think he was around five foot eight, but still a real heavyweight: Desbonnet weighed him at 240 pounds, with 20 inch neck, right biceps 20-1/2 inches, right forearm 15 inches, thighs 28-1/2 inches, and for a man of Zbyszko's height, that pointed to tremendous physical power.



Stanley Zybszko

Zybszko had trained with weights, but never really specialised in weightlifting, trying rather to develop "agility, speed, quick orientation, points necessary for wrestling." Yet, in front of Desbonnet he could still do a two arm press of 253 pounds, a clean and push press (feet together) of 264 pounds, and a performance of 275 pounds on a Regnier dynamometer. The dynamometer was a device used to measure grip strength, and Zybszko's 275 pounds was near the top of the range: it was, for example nine pounds better than Charles Batta had done, and Batta was a strongman famous for his grip strength.

Around 1900, as Zybszko recalled, "George Hackenschmidt made his sensational appearance, attaining spectacular victories over the great Turkish wrestlers Kara Ahmed and Halil Adali, two wrestlers who had been considered invincible." Zybszko was attracted by a career in professional wrestling, and he seems to have been introduced to the professional game by the well-known Polish wrestler Ladislaus Pytlasinsky, who at one time he considered his "mentor."

By 1903, *Health and Strength* listed Zybszko as one of the leading continental heavyweights. The records, such as they are, indicate that "St. Cyganiewicz" was second place winner in a Greco-Roman tournament in St. Petersburg as early as 1900, and Zybszko took third place in Paris in 1903. Zybszko himself thought that he established himself in the top flight in Petersburg in 1905, when he wrestled the famous Ivan Poddubny to a two-hour draw. In 1906 he won the big Greco-Roman world championship tournament held at the Casino de Paris. George Lurich took second place and Constant le Marin third.

Zybszko was then brought to England by Charles Cochrane. This was the same Charles Cochrane who had been Hackenschmidt's manager. He wasn't brought over to wrestle

competitively, but to work the theatres and music halls, and according to Cochrane, who described Zbyszko as "a good soul, of good family, well educated, cultured even" and "most straightforward in his dealings," he was a great success. "He was a great drawing card. They came hoping to see Zbyszko beaten. He was a splendid showman, and gave the public exactly what they wanted."

In his book *Secrets of a Showman* (1925), Cochrane described how it all worked:

After his London engagement Zbyszko did enormous business in the provinces. I supplied him with a number of aggressive contestants, who always appeared to have a good chance with him – and this made for big receipts. I had learned from experience with Hack that the music hall public required a *show*, and I had no compunction in giving them what they wanted – a *show*.

A member of the troupe, who was particularly successful in creating excitement, and making the receipts go up, was a raw-boned Scotsman. Zbyszko wrestled under Graeco-Roman rules, but the Scotsman always disregarded them, and notwithstanding the protest of the referees, in the different towns we visited, practised catch-as-catch-can holds. In one case, I remember, he threw the referee himself into the orchestra.

Zbyszko did wrestle some competitive matches against other professionals, but, for example... when Zbyszko was appearing at the London Pavilion, a Turkish wrestler, Kara Suliman, "The Champion of the Bosphorus," turned up with his manager and challenged him. Zbyszko did have an open challenge, but since Kara Suliman hadn't fulfilled certain conditions, he wouldn't wrestle that night. But a match was arranged for a few days later.

They met at the Pavilion on January 4, 1908, for £50 a side, Zbyszko undertaking to throw Kara Suliman in twenty minutes. In fact, Zbyszko had to act on the defensive for most of the time against the 6 foot, 265 pound Turk: Suliman generally had the advantage but couldn't get a fall, and "Zbyszko was apparently all at sea with the Turk's methods." After twenty minutes, time was up and the match was stopped, to cheers for Kara Suliman and boos for Zbyszko. Actually, "Pandemonium reigned for some time," and Charles Cochrane recalled some of the crowd pulling electric light fittings off the wall and throwing them on the stage. Things only calmed down when it was announced that a return match would take place.

The management of the Pavilion was so shocked by these scenes that they stopped any wrestling at the Theatre, and Zbyszko's appearances there were cancelled. However, it worked out fine because Cochrane signed a contract for Zbyszko to appear at the Gibbons music halls for eighteen weeks, and also had the use of the Holborn Empire for the Zbyszko-Suliman rematch. This was an eagerly awaited contest and Cochrane remembered that receipts were in the neighbourhood of £1,000.

He return was in the Greco-Roman style, for the best of three falls, and this time Zbyszko won easily. Although Suliman was able to turn Zbyszko over, and "time after

time brought him close to his shoulders, "he couldn't get the pinfall," and finally Zbyszko "gripped him in a vice, and with Herculean strength gradually forced Kara Suliman onto his shoulders with a reversed chest hold." The time was 30 minutes 40 seconds. After a rest the second fall was contested, and Kara Suliman was pinned in the disappointing time of 33 seconds. He seemed to have no fight left in him.

The papers thought that Kara Suliman's performance was poor, and that Zbyszko was not too good either: "The best that can be said of the match was, it was a sight of two burly men tossing each other about, sometimes very aimlessly, and in a style totally devoid of scientific principles."

And there it might have ended, just another Zbyszko victory, except that someone tipped off the papers, because *The Sporting Life* of February 22 revealed that Kara Suliman, Turkish "Champion of the Bosphorus," the son of a wealthy carpet dealer, etc., didn't exist. Rather, Zbyszko's opponent had really been Ivan Offtharoff, a Bulgarian, who had in effect been in Zbyszko's employ the whole time. Offtharoff had disappeared from his lodgings at 259 Kennington Road, which, strangely, had previously been Zbyszko's lodgings, and which even now housed Weber, a member of Zbyszko's wrestling troupe. It was established that Offtharoff's rent and food bills at Kennington Road had been paid by Zbyszko, and that now that he had left, his landlady had instructions to forward his mail to 46 Kennington Oval – which happened to be Zbyszko's current address. Furthermore, no one had ever seen "Mr. Constanin Papiani," Offtharoff/Suliman's backer, or could even establish that he existed. And there had been the hullabaloo over Suliman's "secret preparation," an oil that was absorbed into the skin before the match, but which came to the surface during wrestling and made Suliman impossible to hold. Cochrane had insisted that both men were fully washed before the contest, which they were, but in his memoirs he admitted that there never had been any secret preparation: it was all a publicity stunt that he had dreamed up.

The Sporting Life summed up the whole affair in its edition of February 24, 1908:

We cannot deny that there is a certain element of humour in the situation. Here are two foreign wrestlers hoaxing the British public as it has not been hoaxed for many a long day. There were challenges and counter challenges, affected quarrels, threatened breaking off of negotiations, meetings at the *Sportsman* office, the deposit of money on behalf of Mr. 'Constantin Papiani,' who does not exist, charges of skin-greasing, and to crown it all, hot water baths for the two friends who were soon to be in each other's deadly embrace. How these two fellows must have enjoyed their baths – with their tongues in their cheeks, while the deluded British public were rolling up in their thousands to pay for admission to see the wrestling. It is more like a bit from a comic opera than anything we have ever heard of in the world of sport. While we admit to the humour of the situation, we cannot shut our eyes to the seriousness of the matter, and we ask, How long is the generous-hearted supporter of wrestling to be imposed upon by these gentlemen from the continent? If a state of matters exist such as we have shown existed between Zbyszko and Suliman, what confidence can we have that when the men, after due palaver, do meet, we are to have real honest wrestling? Both at the

Pavilion and the Holborn Zybszko and Suliman gave good 'shows', but the story we have disclosed of Zbyszko paying for Suliman's board and lodging since he stayed in Kennington Road does not reassure us that the two men were really trying. Is this wrestling farce never to end?

It was for reasons such as this that many people were unhappy when the short-lived "Professional Wrestling Board of Control" chose Zbyszko as one of the four contestants in their abortive Championship elimination process, the others being Gotch, Hackenschmidt, and John Lemm. "We detest his fake proclivities," was one comment. Yet I don't think anyone ever doubted Zbyszko's physical power. The well-known professional strongman and trainer Monte Saldo recalled helping to train Zbyszko for his abortive match with Giovanni Raicevitch, the Italian heavyweight who had won the big Paris (Folies Bergeres) tournament in 1908: "The practical training for this intended match took place at my small gymnasium in Leicester Place, Leicester Square, London. The usual method of procedure was to line up six men, when Zbyszko would throw them in sequence again and again, until they all had enough."

Zbyszko's powers of physical strength and endurance were also illustrated by his London match with Ivan Poddubny, on December 12, 1907. Poddubny, who was often described as "The Cossack," was considered by many to be the strongest Greco-Roman style wrestler in the world. He had won many championship tournaments, including the big Paris events. Edmond Desbonnet measured Poddubny at 6 foot tall, weighing 246 pounds, and considered that, "currently, Padoubny is the athlete who gives the greatest impression of strength." Although Poddubny wasn't a weight-trained wrestler he possessed great natural power, and at the "Weightlifting Club of France," Desbonnet saw him raise a cast-iron bell of 468 livres. (A livre is French pound, and that lift was 505.6 English pounds, or 229.3 kilos.) When his match with Zbyszko took place at the London Pavilion, the theatre was "packed in every part," and such was the interest that large crowds had to be turned away.



Ivan Poddubny. Courtesy Michael Murphy.

These really were two of the most physically powerful men in the world, and the report in *The Sportsman* read:

When the two great protagonists of Greco-Roman wrestling appeared on the mat, a murmur of admiration came from the expectant house at the spectacle of two such magnificent specimens of humanity. Padoubny at once struck the eye as the harder and better trained man. He simply towered over the other but his greater length of limb gave him an advantage that was more apparent than real, and if anything Zybsco carried more advantages for Greco-Roman wrestling in the superior concentration of muscular power in his arms and shoulders. Balance is everything in this style of wrestling, and the Galician's abnormal development of chest gave him a perfect leverage in warding off the attacks of his opponent, for Padoubny had to bend down to get to grips and thus found his full power considerably lessened. Zbysco appeared to carry too much flesh, but it is an axiom with Continental wrestlers to get fit with as little loss of flesh as possible as they regard weight as one of their most telling assets. The Galician's build above the waist is simply superb and a strong, square head is moulded on a neck as firm as a block of marble and as thick round as the average man's thigh. He has enormous width of shoulders, and his biceps are the biggest possessed by any living wrestler. Padoubny took the stage weighing 19 st. 1 lb. [261 pounds], Zbysco, Mr. Cochrane's protégé, turning the scale at 18 st. 2 lb. [254 pounds]."

The referee was George Dunning and the timekeeper E.W. [Barton-Wright](#). It was announced that the match was for £200 a side, in the Greco-Roman style, one pin fall to decide the winner. The winner would receive all the gate money, less expenses. The loser would get nothing. The men would wrestle for fifteen minutes, then have two minutes rest before going on for up to three hours. For some reason "this last announcement provoked a ripple of laughter."

At the start of the contest they came to grips – and from then on neither would budge an inch. The match lasted 35 minutes and, up to the end, they were never once off their feet. Both strove to find a weakness, or to get an advantageous hold, but their strength was equally matched: "For thirty five minutes the men strove in vain to find a weak spot in his opponent's guard. Not once did either get an effective hold, and it looked as though the match would only be decided by the process of exhaustion."

Poddubny was the aggressor throughout, but he found Zbyszko's dour resistance hard to break down, and mostly it was a struggle for holds. At one point Zbyszko tried to push Poddubny down with a neck grip, but Ivan pulled out of the hold. A few minutes later Poddubny began uppercutting Zbyszko under the chin, giving him a cut lip that bled profusely. Then he began butting with his head, an action for which he was cautioned by the referee and booed by the crowd.

The break at fifteen minutes came round, and then after two minutes rest, the contest resumed. "Up to this point," said *The Sporting Life*, "not one single good point in wrestling was observable."

As the second round got under way, Poddubny was again the aggressor, with Zbyszko defending. Zbyszko's tactic was to wait, to let Poddubny do all the work until he began to tire himself out. As he wrote after the match: "I must defend and keep on defending until I wore him down. It is always my policy." And, despite all the rough handling, Zbyszko remained strong. "He appeared to carry such a powerful reserve of strength," read one report, "that he was able to push his opponent at will."



Laurent le Beaucairoyis (left) and Ivan Poddubny. Courtesy Michael Murphy.

Poddubny continued his rough tactics, including the use of the head. Zbyszko butted back once, in retaliation, and then a few minutes later, "Padoubny ran full tilt at Zbyszko with his head and gave the Galician a terrific blow. This incensed the crowd, and they called loudly for Padoubny's disqualification. He was cautioned."

After Poddubny was warned that he would be disqualified, he calmed down a little, although he attempted a prohibited stranglehold, which Zbyszko broke fairly easily. He managed to get on a partial arm lock, and then a head hold, but by now both men were covered in sweat, and Zbyszko again slipped free. The match had now become a grim struggle in which it seemed endurance would be the deciding factor.

Then, at 35 minutes into the match, Poddubny made "a wild dash" at Zbyszko and threw him over his outstretched leg so that both men went through the bottom ropes, Poddubny on top. They continued to struggle, and Poddubny had to be pulled off his man by the referee and seconds.

That throw was a foul under Greco-Roman rules and, "For a time there was such a pandemonium as is seldom witnessed in a place of entertainment in London. Padoubny had to be pulled away from his man, and it was amid much angry shouting that Mr.

Nixon [the emcee] announced that the referee had disqualified Padoubny for unfair play."

"Padoubny seemed to lose his head completely on being disqualified," said *The Sporting Life*. He hurled "defiant threats" and it looked as if he was going to attack Zbyszko until both men were restrained. He strode about the stage insisting it had been a fair throw and he shouldn't have been disqualified, but the crowd were unsympathetic, hostile even, and eventually he left the scene. Zbyszko took the side stake of £400 and his share of the gate receipts, after expenses. And he still felt able to call himself "Zybszko, Champion Wrestler of the World," at least in the Greco-Roman style.

Charles Cochrane recalled this match in his 1925 autobiography, *Secrets of a Showman*:

During Zbyszko's engagement at the London Pavilion, Sir Oswald (then Mr.) Stoll brought over the Russian, Padoubny. He was a veritable Hercules, and probably the strongest man in the world. He had considerable skill in the art of Graeco-Roman wrestling, but knew nothing of catch-as-catch-can.

Mr. Stoll issued a challenge to the world on Padoubny's behalf, and particularly mentioned Hackenschmidt and Zbyszko. A match with Zbyszko was arranged in the offices of *The Sportsman* for £200 a side. Mr. Stoll's contract with Padoubny stipulated that he or his manager – a very knowing fellow named Dumond who had organised the most successful championship tournaments in France – should back themselves with their own money. My contract with Zbyszko called for the Pole to put up his own side bet. Moreover, Mr. Stoll insisted that one of the conditions of the match should be 'winner take all'. Articles to this effect were signed, and an arrangement was come to for the match to take place at the London Pavilion. The Pavilion management found the house, the staff, did the advertising, and took one third of the receipts. The other two thirds were to go to the winning wrestler.

I have never known Piccadilly Circus more crowded than on the day of the match. Although we charged a guinea for the majority of the seats – a very big price in those days – thousands were unable to gain admittance. A more violent contest has never been seen in London. Both men were enormously strong. The day before the match I was walking with Zbyszko in Regents' Park, and I asked whether he felt sure of the result. He told me, I remember, that he was positive Padoubny could not get him off his feet; but at the same time, he was not at all sure he could move Padoubny.

And from the start it was obvious that Zbyszko had sized up the situation properly. Both men stood like rocks.

After a few minutes, Padoubny, finding himself unable to shift Zbyszko, began a series of foul tricks, all the time growling out barbaric Cossack terms of abuse. He would take a neck hold, and in breaking it would let the back of his hand fall heavily on Zbyszko's ear. Several times he tried to push Zbyszko's head back by putting the palm of his hand

savagely under his chin. Then he would bring his elbow viciously in contact with Zbyszko's chin. The audience repeatedly cried 'Foul!' 'Disqualify him!' and so on. Mr. G.T. Dunning of the *Sportsman* – one of the squarest men who ever lived – was the referee, and repeatedly he warned Padoubny to desist, but to no purpose. Mr. Dunning was most anxious not to end the match by a disqualification, as he knew what dissatisfaction it would give to the audience, even though they were clamouring for it.

However, after twenty five minutes of Padoubny's savagery, with Zbyszko bleeding from mouth and ears, and the audience in a state of frenzy, Mr. Dunning stopped the match and disqualified the Russian. Antonio Pierri, 'The Terrible Greek', Charlie Mitchell, and Apollo, were all in Padoubny's corner. Padoubny's party shouted execrations at Zbyszko and his camp. It looked as if there would be an ugly finish.

I got hold of Mr. Dunning, whose paper was holding the stakes, hurried him into a cab, and took him down to Fleet Street. Upon arrival at the *Sportsman* office, I found that the cheque had been drawn, but not signed, and that the name of the drawee was not filled in. We were told that Mr. Batty Smith, one of the proprietors of the *Sportsman*, was at the Victoria Club. Dunning and I went there with the cheque and got his signature. Then I returned to the London Pavilion, where the wrestlers and their followers were still arguing upon the stage. I asked Mr. Glenister to pay over immediately the wrestler's share of the gate. This he did. When I came out of Glenister's office I learned that Padoubny and his manager, with Pierri, Apollo, Mitchell, and others had gone to the *Sportsman* office, as I expected they might do. They had gone to protest against the paying over of the stake money. It was lucky I had forestalled them.

... Padoubny was engaged to appear that night at the Shepherd's Bush Empire. He was in his dressing-room ready to go on when he received a notification from the Stoll offices that, in accordance with a clause in his contract which gave Mr. Stoll the right to cancel it, in the event of his being beaten in any match, his engagement was then and there terminated. Dumond either had not understood the clause, or had forgotten its existence. What happened at the London Pavilion had cost him and Padoubny £200 in cash, and Padoubny had lost forty weeks engagement on the Stoll Tour at a very big salary. Zbyszko and I, on the other hand, had won Padoubny's £200, and about £700 as our share of the gate; also we had all the contracts we wanted from music hall engagements.

A section of the sporting press suggested that the Zbyszko-Padoubny match was a fake; but a more unjust accusation was never made. It was in every sense a needle match. Padoubny was probably the world's greatest Graeco-Roman wrestler, but he knew that it would take him hours to throw Zbyszko by legitimate means, even if he could throw him at all. His tactics were to frighten the Pole. Had the match been in the hands of a weak referee, he might probably have gained a decision through sheer brutality.

Dumond had the reputation of being a pretty tough fellow, and I must confess that it was with some trepidation that I accepted an invitation to meet him the next day at the

Café Monaco. But I found him resigned to the position of affairs, and most philosophical about his losses. He was anxious to have a return match in a place which would hold more money than the London Pavilion. We could have filled Olympia; but I could never get Zbyszko to agree to take the mat again with Padoubny.

As to the merits of the two men, opinion was divided. *The Sporting Life* thought that "on points Poddubny was all over the better man," as he was always acting on the offensive, while "never once did Zbyszko attack." *The Sportsman*, on the other hand, thought that Poddubny was slowing down and if anything, Zbyszko, with his "impregnable defense" was stronger towards the end.



Ivan Poddubny (left) and Laurent le Beaucairois. Courtesy Michael Murphy.

So the eagerly awaited match was a profound disappointment: "A Colossal Fiasco," as *The Sporting Life* headed its report. And yet, the descriptions of the action are intriguing. Maybe it really was something rare: a genuine contest between two top, very powerful, Greco-Roman champions. It's difficult to judge, and some of the action sounds reminiscent of the 1906 meeting between the two men in St. Petersburg, when neither could gain an advantage and the match ended in a draw after Poddubny attempted a throw and both landed on the judges' table. So an old routine may have been working itself out in the London match. The referee, though, George Dunning of *The Sportsman*, had a reputation for being straight, and he didn't seem to think that Poddubny was faking. "Padoubny," he wrote, "struck one as being a man of a temper that was at times almost beyond control." And if it was a work, it's not easy to see what anyone got out of it. Both Poddubny and Zbyszko were seasoned pros who were well able to give the audience a show, and yet in the London match there was little wrestling, just a grim struggle for holds. The reputation of both men suffered, and there was no big money rematch. The newspapers did report that Poddubny's contract with Moss Empires had been cancelled, and that actor Bransby Williams (known for

"dramatized Dickensian extracts of unforgettable awfulness") would take his place at the Shepherd's Bush Empire. I suppose the match might have been a work that turned real, but in that case the financial arrangements are difficult to understand. We'll never know, but if it was a genuine contest then, despite all the negative press comment, it could actually have been a fascinating thing to watch: a battle of will, endurance, and tactics between two of the strongest wrestlers in the world.

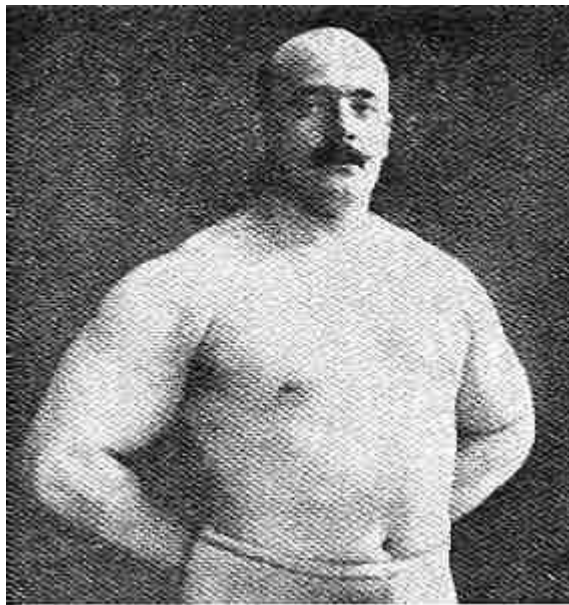
This contest was held under Greco-Roman rules; in fact, it was billed as for the world championship in that style. Both men had made their reputation in Greco-Roman, but as Zbyszko began to spend more time in England and America, he began to gradually switch over to catch-as-catch-can. In fact, for several years yet he wrestled in both styles as he moved between countries and continents. I'm not sure exactly when he began wrestling in catch-as-catch-can, but in November 1909 he wrestled a handicap match with Frank Gotch in Buffalo, New York, Gotch undertaking to throw him twice in an hour. He failed to do that, and some accounts say that Zbyszko held his own, and may even have been slightly the stronger at the end of the contest. That helped to establish Zbyszko in America, and when he beat Youssuf Mahmoud the following May by two falls (after 1 hour 4 minutes, and 45 minutes of wrestling respectively), the last obstacle was removed for a match with Gotch for (as *Health and Strength* called it) the "so-called World's championship."

The story of that match, held at the Chicago Coliseum on June 1, 1910, was that, as the men came out of their corners, Zbyszko extended his arm for a handshake, but Gotch ignored the gesture, took Zbyszko's legs, and threw him to the ground, following up with a pin in the world record time of "6-2/5 seconds," something which seemed suspicious then and still seems suspicious now. Zbyszko protested, "horrified at the disaster that had befallen him," but to no avail. He was still unsettled as the second bout began after a five-minute break. Some good wrestling followed, although Gotch was always on top, and he pinned Zbyszko for the second fall in 27 minutes 33 seconds, using an armbar and wristlock.

Some writers regarded this contest as the best performance of Gotch's career, although others wondered about the sportsmanship of "a fall secured by diving beneath an opponent's proffered handshake for a surprise attack." As for Zbyszko, he had failed in his attempt to win the World championship, but he had some excuse in the way Gotch had taken advantage for the first fall, and he was now established as one of the top men in the world in both Greco-Roman and catch-as-catch-can wrestling. Thus he would be a testing opponent for Gama, the Lion of the Punjab.

IV

To prepare for his match with Gama, Stanislaus Zbyszko went into training at Rottingdean, under the supervision of Bill Klein. He rose at six, worked out for an hour with his younger brother Ladislaus (Wladek, I presume), then went for a walk and a swim before breakfast at nine. After an hour's rest he took a long walk over the hills ("ten to fifteen miles") and the rest of his practice consisted of wrestling, skipping, boxing, and working out with the medicine ball. A thorough massage ended the day's training. Supper was at eight, and bed at nine.



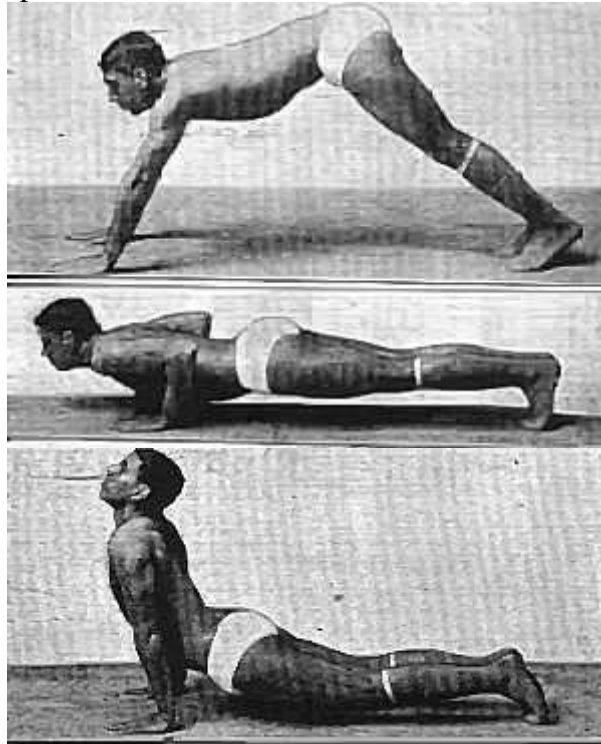
Stanislaus Zbyszko, ca. 1909

Zbyszko trained at Prinn's, the local Rottingdean blacksmith, who had a well-fitted out gymnasium, but a lot of his training was done in the open air, and since the weather was good, he had acquired a tan and looked fit and in good condition. Klein had watched his diet, so that Zbyszko's weight was reported as down to 17 stone (238 pounds), and he may even have gone down below that. In contrast to the match with Poddubny, where weight and strength would have been vital factors (and where Zbyszko pushed his weight over 250 pounds), in a match with Gama, quickness and conditioning would be more important, and so Zbyszko was working on reducing his weight. The weights for

the Gama-Zbyszko match were never announced, although it is generally stated that the Pole was up to 4 stone (56 pounds) heavier. I doubt that: the photos of the two men shaking hands for the match show little apparent difference in size, although clothing hides their true physical condition. Zbyszko's face does look lean, so he may well have been as low as 230 pounds, maybe a bit more. Gama's weight is usually given as 200 pounds, but if he was more than that, then the weight difference would fall well below the 50-pounds-plus usually quoted. Zbyszko told Robert W. Smith that the difference was only ten pounds. I would guess between 20 and 30.

Gama was training at Surbiton, going through his usual routine of thousands of dands and bethaks and wrestling with his compatriots. Around this time the Indians were showing at the Alhambra Theatre, doing some exhibition work, and on August 23, 1910, the report of their appearance read:

The exhibition work – Gama threw all his three fellow Indians twice in 15 minutes – showed the leader of the troupe as a fine exponent of the leg work of catch-as-catch-can wrestling, but one felt that neither he nor Imam Bux, who threw Peter Bannon later, was so competent on the ground as on his feet. It may be that Gama has not had a real chance of showing good mat work, for the fact that Dr. Roller's ribs were fractured in the first half minute of their bout at the Alhambra disarms criticism on that match. We have yet to see Gama finish his man in a thoroughly workmanlike manner. The 'turn' was an immensely popular one with the audience.



The dand. "For adopting position 1, keep both arms parallel to each other, as shown in Fig. 1. Push your body back as far as possible by pressing your palms on the ground, and raise your head as high as possible; don't look downwards, but straight up. After adopting this position push your body (Fig. 2) gently forward and bring your chest

between your hands as near to the ground as possible, keeping your legs quite straight. Never let your chest or knees touch the floor. After performing this operation again, push your body forward as far as possible... Now gradually rise higher and higher, so much so that you adopt [the position in Fig. 3], i.e., head quite up, chest coming out, arms quite straight, and a curve in the back. From this position you must quickly take yourself back to position 1, and repeat the operation again and again. Keep your mouth shut when performing the exercise, always breathing through your nose... The best method for a beginner is to start with five dunds the first day and go up to ten at the end of the first week... You will be quite surprised to hear that when last year I went to see Gama performing this exercise I began to count, and saw that he went on doing over 2,000 dunds within three hours time." From "What Makes the Oriental Strong? 'The Indian Dunds,'" by T.M. Alexander, Health & Strength, July 8, 1911.

That was an interesting point about Gama's ability on the ground, especially considering what was to follow, and a similar comment was made in *The Sporting Life's* preview of the upcoming bout with Zbyszko. "As Gama has not had to wrestle much on the ground, it may be that in ground wrestling he is not such an accomplished exponent as in an upright position." One point mentioned several times in the contemporary papers was that in India one shoulder down counted as a fall, so this variation in rules may have made a big difference to Gama when he came to wrestle in Western arenas.

Some of the initial enthusiasm for Gama's victory over Roller seemed to have worn off, particularly because it now seemed that he had had to work hard to pin a man who was suffering from two broken ribs. It has to be said, though, that apart from one instance when Roller winced from a Gama waisthold, "The Doc" showed little sign of his injury during the match. And I may be unfair and too cynical, but when you read the background of Benjamin Franklin Roller, you begin to question whether he actually had any ribs broken at all.



Benjamin F. Roller

Joseph Svinth sent me some research he had done on Doc Roller. Several clippings from that era refer to the Doc's unfortunate habit of being injured in wrestling bouts. In May 1910 his left shoulder was badly wrenched in losing to Zbyszko in Buffalo, and the *Seattle Times* commented that "Roller has not been making much of a showing in his matches of late. He usually gets hurt and loses, and he puts in the time between various hospitals nursing his hurts and fighting off attacks of blood poisoning." The same paper reported on November 16, 1912: "Dr. Roller has had his ribs broken again. Doc has had ribs broken in London, Seattle, Philadelphia, and several other seaports, both in football and in wrestling, and last night honored Ottawa, the capital of Ontario, by having his slats cracked there. He was wrestling a large, well-fed Belgian named Constant le Marin."

This was the same Doc Roller who was one of the busiest wrestlers in the game, and who told the *Seattle Times* in December 1910 that he was wrestling every night, and had had 21 matches in November. It's hard to reconcile that level of activity with someone who was regularly injured (broken ribs take at least 4-6 weeks to heal), and so it sounds like the saga of the broken ribs was a story line Roller regularly trotted out for dramatic effect and to emphasize his gameness.

In the Gama contest he may for once have actually suffered broken ribs, but there is an element of doubt, and that makes any judgment on Gama's performance problematical. On the whole, experts seemed to think that Gama would beat Zbyszko in their upcoming match, and some people may have been swayed by Gama's boastful promise to throw the Pole three times in an hour, but there was still quite a bit of uncertainty about the outcome.

V

The great wrestling match for £250 a side and the John Bull Belt started at four in the afternoon on September 10, 1910. The venue was the 68,000-seat stadium built for the 1908 Olympics at Shepherd's Bush. The crowd was estimated at 12,000, although they were lost in the huge stadium, most of which looked empty. The referee was the well-known Jack Smith.



Zbyszko, Jack Smith, and Gama, 1910

Within a minute of the match starting, Zbyszko was taken down, and took up a defensive position, where he remained for the rest of the match. Gama tried a half nelson, and then a wristlock, but Zbyszko seemed too strong, and after a quarter of an hour, the men had hardly moved from their initial positions. After half an hour, there was a brief struggle "like a rugby scrum," but nothing resulted and Zbyszko went back to his defensive position, with Gama trying unsuccessfully to turn him over. At intervals Gama would try a waist hold, a quarter nelson, a half nelson, but his efforts were futile and it seemed that, even in these early stages of the match, he had pretty much run out of ideas.

Almost all of the attacking work was done by Gama. He tried hard but he was ineffective against an opponent who wouldn't wrestle in open play. Zbyszko remained strong, however, and at one point "rearing up from the ground to his hands and knees

he momentarily precipitated Gama into the air." But then he again returned to his passive defence and the wrestling stopped once more. As the bout moved into its second hour the pattern remained the same: "At long intervals Zbyszko would wake up, there would be a stiff tussle for a few minutes after the manner of a rugby scrimmage, but the instant the Gallician detected the lightest sign of danger he would return to an entirely prone position." For long periods Zbyszko would simply remain stationary, Gama trying to turn him over, but without achieving any result.

On the two-hour mark, Zbyszko sprang to his feet and managed to get a reverse waist hold on Gama. He lifted him slightly and both went down together, but then Gama was back on top and the monotony continued. A little later the two men were on their feet for a few seconds as Zbyszko tried for a waist hold, but Gama was "strong and nimble" and evaded the attack. Gama attempted a crotch hold but Zbyszko was too heavy for him.



Indian wrestlers preparing for a throw.

A halt was called after 2 hours 35 minutes, with Zbyszko in that defensive position on all fours, and Gama on top trying to work some kind of a hold, the positions they had held for most of the bout. Since, under the terms of the match, there had to be a result, it was announced that the men would wrestle to a finish at the Stadium the next Saturday, September 17. *The Sporting Life* estimated that in the whole two-and-a-half hours, there had been maybe one and a half minutes of wrestling. It headlined its report, "Fiasco at the Stadium," and described the bout as "a miserable farce." It went on to say:

A more miserable, more disappointing match than this, the first professional out-of-door match of any consequence that has taken place in London of recent years, has fortunately seldom if ever taken place. It was disgraceful, a mockery of wrestling; and by it the game, which, it had been hoped, had received a healthy stimulus and recommendation to the public interest, has received one more bad shock. To expect that

the public will again waste their time and pay their money for the privilege of seeing a so-called champion wrestler lie flat on his chest, or be on his hands and knees for two and a half hours, and to make no attempt at genuine wrestling, is to insult their intelligence and overestimate their credulity.

Both *The Sporting Life* and *Health and Strength* called for a new rule to stop the passive methods used by Zbyszko. Both publications blamed Zbyszko for the way the match had turned out. Writing in *Health and Strength*, "Half Nelson" described him as "woefully lacking in enterprise," and thought "his caution exceeded all reasonable bounds." The editor of the magazine called Zbyszko "a figure of ponderous, gawky, clumsy cowardice."



Gama

But Gama did not escape criticism. Everyone recognised that, throughout the two and a half hours, he had tried honestly to overturn Zbyszko: it was just that his efforts had been ineffective ("wholly useless," as Percy Longhurst later recalled). "Gama was frankly disappointing," said *The Sporting Life*. "He evinced a woeful ignorance of the technicalities of ground wrestling. His attack was all of one kind, and continued in spite of its non-success." There was general agreement that, although Gama was quick, he lacked skill and variety in groundwork, and Zbyszko was just too strong for him. In a letter to *The Sporting Life*, Henry Werner wrote that "Gama's knowledge of the mat is not far above that of a novice and his holds were broken with the greatest ease. Imam Bux would be a far superior opponent to Zbyszko than Gama as a match would very quickly prove."

So the reaction to the match was almost wholly critical, and yet there was a handful of people who were able to look at it from a different perspective.

Moses Rigg, a wrestler himself presumably, wrote that he was sorry to have missed a genuine wrestling bout – he had been expecting an arranged match and had therefore

given it a miss. He thought that the abilities of each man had neutralised the other. He wrote, "I want to know from wrestlers – for no one else who has not gone through the mill can tell me – what could these heavyweight men do, in their fashion, that they did not do? ...As for Mr. Zbyszko, I believe he did all that such a fat man could do or be expected to do – ‘Make it a draw’."

Similar comments came from the magnificently named Baron Helmuth von Knobelsdorf-Brenkenhoff, who was fairly well known in wrestling circles of the time. "When I bought my ticket," he wrote, "I expected to see no ‘wrestling’ as I knew that it was a straight match. People who know only a little of wrestling know too well that they can never expect exciting bouts in straight heavyweight wrestling. Certainly in fake wrestling and exhibition bouts both competitors try to bring themselves into most impossible positions and come out of even more impossible ones, thanks to the previous ‘arrangement’. I do not want to mention names, but I have witnessed two well known champions wrestling for three-quarters of an hour and going six times over the footlights among the audience, taking the referee with them on one occasion. The audience took this game as most serious." The Baron said that both Gama and Zbyszko had "tried their best in their own way" and pointed out the irony that, although it was the sporting papers who had called so loudly for straight wrestling, now that such a contest had taken place, they called it "disgusting."



Indian wrestlers demonstrating leg throw from inside

Anyway, the two men still had to wrestle to a conclusion the following Saturday, September 17th. At the appointed time, Gama turned up with his entourage, but – no Zbyszko. His name was called several times, but he had already left the country, supposedly because his mother was seriously ill, although there was a rumour that he was wrestling in Vienna. Again he was vilified, and there were demands that he never be allowed to wrestle in England again. Anyway, Gama was declared the winner by default, and Horatio Bottomley, the owner of *John Bull* magazine, presented him with

the 100-guinea "John Bull" belt and the £250 stake. Bottomley praised Gama's sportsmanship and the beneficial influence of the Indians on British wrestling. He said that if Gama were to win two more championship matches the belt would become his personal property.

A little later *Health and Strength* carried the comments of the two wrestlers themselves. The editor went to see Gama at his training quarters at the Oak Hotel, Surbiton, and talked to him through an interpreter. Gama, he noted, had taken to wearing a bowler hat occasionally, "and very handsome and dignified he certainly looks." The Indian champion said he was sorry he had to win in such a way, but it was very difficult to deal with someone who just wouldn't wrestle – and here he compared Zbyszko very unfavourably with John Lemm – and he was sure that he would have beaten Zbyszko if the contest had been continued on the 17th. He felt that Zbyszko knew this, and that was why he had fled London.

"You have no idea," said Gama, "how handicapped I was in my match with Zbyszko by my ignorance of the English language."

The referee spoke to me several times. I only wish there had been somebody on hand to interpret what he said. I knew that certain holds were barred, but I had a very hazy idea as to what they were, and I fancied every time the referee spoke he was cautioning me. For instance, when I had hold of Zbyszko by the foot he said something to me, and, believing that I was doing what was not allowed, I relinquished my hold, and thereby lost a decided advantage. I have since learnt that he [the referee] merely meant to point out that I mustn't put on a toe-hold. His caution was really a friendly one, but, unfortunately for me, I misunderstood it. Then Zbyszko kept on talking all the time – I'm not making any excuses – I'm not even complaining – but simply telling you the actual facts of the case. I leave you to judge for yourself.

I will never, under any circumstances, wrestle Zbyszko for a money match again, but as I am anxious to prove my superiority to him, I'll tell you what I will do: I'll wrestle him in London any time that he likes, in the open, and on a green (not on a mat, like a bed that positively tempts a man to go to sleep on it). I'll wrestle him thus for no stake at all, and without a referee, the proceeds to go to charity.

Then, a couple months after the match, Zbyszko sent his version of events, which were published in the November 19 issue.

After three weeks training with Apollo, Lemm, and Klein, I started my match with Gama in the best of form. The quick victory of Gama over Dr. Roller, and of his brother over Lemm, showed me that I would have to wrestle very carefully, and, as I had expected, I found Gama to be a remarkably good wrestler. It has always been acknowledged on the Continent that I am a good wrestler when in an upstanding position, and that I have improved in this during the last few months as my victories over Dr. Roller, Antonitch, Steinbach, etc. will show, and I am willing to prove my capabilities at upstanding wrestling at any moment; in spite of this, however, I found that I could not stand on my feet for two minutes against Gama. In close body holds I

did not find him very strong, but as soon as there was any space between us he brought me to the mat with one of his swings which I really cannot yet understand. On the mat he could not put a single dangerous hold on me, and after one and a half hours I began to find it really boring. I obtained a foot-hold, stood up, and with a side body hold threw Gama to the mat so that both his shoulders were touching for a moment; the referee seemed to take no notice, however, and this angered me so that I decided to take no more risks and to allow Gama to do his worst. Well, I managed to upset many people by holding out so easily. Pierri wrote in *The Sportsman* the day before the match that I would be thrown twice in ten minutes. Gama had been promised a very lucrative engagement if he beat me in quicker time than Gotch did. He (Gama) had also offered to throw me three times in half an hour (he did this, I suppose, because he had been told that I knew nothing about catch-as-catch-can), but he was not even able to put a dangerous hold on me in two and a half hours, and although I was mostly on the defensive, the fact remains – and every witness must acknowledge it – that Gama was the man who had his shoulders on the mat, although the referee did not give me a fall. I am now under negotiations for a return match with Gama in the Punjaub. We will start wrestling at ten in the morning, and I am to receive my travelling expenses and 15,000 dollars, whether I win or lose. The money is to be deposited by the beginning of April, 1911, and the match will then take place at the end of the month.

During my appearance here (Galicia) my name was made so bad in the papers by jealous and lying enemies that I broke off my engagement, and I will probably never wrestle in my native country again.

For the record, the 1911 return match with Gama never took place. The two men did meet once more, but not for another seventeen years, when both were almost fifty years old. As for Zbyszko's claim of a fall over Gama in the 1910 contest – well, he was on the ground himself for two and a half hours; but there were a few, very infrequent, moments of scrambled action, and Zbyszko may have felt he had scored some kind of momentary "fall" then, but none of the reports made any reference to such an incident. However, I suppose Zbyszko's claim allowed him some justification for the defensive tactics which aroused so much scorn.

And then, almost before anyone realised, they had gone: packed their bags and returned to India. The reasons for the departure of Gama and the troupe were unclear, but it was said to be due to the problems in making matches and so on. Some reports implied that the Indians had been "driven home," although Herbert Turner was sceptical about that. He had heard that Benjamin, the group's manager, had accepted an offer of £1,000 for a series of engagements in India, and that he would also be making money from the Eastern rights to the film of the Gama-Zbyszko match. Turner added the information that the gate receipts for that match amounted to £749, that Zbyszko received nothing, and "Gama did not receive a seventh part of this amount."

There was another chapter still to be played out in this story of Indian wrestlers and wrestling. In April 1911 Benjamin brought over another group of wrestlers, including Ahmed Bux, who had been with the 1910 troupe, but who had never wrestled a competitive match on that visit. The usual challenges were thrown out, with Hackenschmidt and Gotch being specifically mentioned. They had no intention of responding, and according to some reports Hackenschmidt was retired anyway, but in May a challenger did come forward, an "unknown" who subsequently turned out to be Maurice Deriaz, one of three famous strongmen brothers.



"Ahmud Bux waiting for Armand Cherpillod," Health & Strength, July 8, 1911

The wrestling season was flat and it seemed that interest in wrestling was dying down, so this match was a welcome boost to the sport. It was, in fact, the first big competitive match since Gama vs. Zbyszko, and to stop any repetition of that "lamentable episode," it was decided that the referee would be given the power to disqualify a man "unduly lying on the mat and refusing to work." It was also decided that there would be no time limit to the match; it would be for the best of three pin-falls, catch-as-catch-can style, fifteen minutes rest between falls; for £50 a side and the best purse offered – 70% to the winner and 30% to the loser.

Maurice Deriaz was 25 years old and a real pocket Hercules: a heavyweight who stood only 5 foot 4-1/2 inches, a shorter version of Hackenschmidt in physique, and if anything even more densely muscled. Although probably better known in England as a weightlifter, he told Vivian Hollender (in 1911, when he arrived in England for the Ahmed Bux match), that he had been wrestling for eight years. Most of that was on the Continent in the Greco-Roman style, although recently he had been wrestling in America in the catch-as-catch-can style, and had beaten John Lemm, drawn with Zbyszko, and stood an hour with the bigger and heavier Hackenschmidt before going down to a fall. Deriaz was tough. He had a knife scar on his left side from a time he had wrestled in Madrid. As usual, he had issued his open challenge, and threw the first challenger in less than a minute, and then another, a 300-pounder. For some reason that caused a minor riot and Deriaz was knifed by one of the mob. The scar was still plainly visible when the doctor examined him for the Ahmed Bux contest.

Ahmed Bux was described as another great Indian champion, perhaps even cleverer than Imam Bux. He was 25 years old, 5 foot 8, and around 14 stone (196 pounds). Like Gama he was said to be very quick, clever, and a non-stop worker, "a man who never acts on the defensive... In practice he wrestles and exercises with his eight compatriots every day. They do not use dumbbells or clubs or apparatus of any description and they never vary their daily routine in the least."

The match took place on May 24 before a rather meagre crowd at the Crystal Palace, where "The Festival of Empire" was then being held. Deriaz looked rather tense, unsmiling, and determined, while Ahmed Bux was smiling easily. "The mighty arms and chest and limbs of Deriaz looked most impressive... Ahmed Bux looked for all he world like a bronze statue of exquisite workmanship... but his muscles pulsed with nervous energy."

As soon as the match started there was only one man in it as Bux's speed carried Deriaz off his feet: after some preliminary sparring the Indian went in to take the Swiss round the waist and put him on his back. Deriaz struggled, but the throw was so quick he had no time to bridge, and he was quickly pinned. Referee Vivian Hollender tapped Ahmed Bux on the shoulder to give the fall in the amazing time of 66 seconds.

There was a 15-minute rest during which Deriaz and his manager retired to the dressing room while Ahmed Bux remained in his corner, calmly waiting. When the second bout started a determined Deriaz went for the leg but Bux was too quick. Then the Indian caught Deriaz in a body hold and again threw him on the mat. Deriaz tried a crotch hold, Ahmed Bux countered and almost turned him but this time the Swiss was determined not to get caught and twisted onto his stomach. He tried to get onto his hands and knees and at one point got a hold on Bux, but then again he was turned over and was forced to bridge to prevent the fall. Gradually, though, his right shoulder was forced down – and then his left, giving Ahmed Bux the second fall and the match after another 3 minutes 19 seconds of wrestling.

Deriaz felt bad about the loss, but he took it well, telling *Health and Strength* that "I've been beaten by a better, quicker wrestler and a stronger man, and though disappointed at the result I am not ashamed of it. I thought I was stronger than he, but now I know that I am not. Those arm rolls of his were terrible and, try as I would, I could not resist them. He is the strongest wrestler I have been up against in all my life." The reporter for the magazine also observed that Deriaz had drawn with Zbyszko and stood up for an hour and a half against Hackenschmidt, and so, he concluded, it was a matter of "simple arithmetic" to conclude that Ahmed Bux would also beat Zbyszko and Hack.



Indian wrestlers demonstrating arm bar with wrist lock

The Bux-Deriaz contest was a slight disappointment, it seemed, because of its brevity, and it being "so terribly one sided, more one sided than anyone expected." Ahmed Bux took the victory in his stride, saying only that Deriaz was a very strong man, while Benjamin appealed to anyone who would listen that he now wanted a match with Hackenschmidt, although, as one reporter commented, "I am sure he would like to, but this is not easy."

It was a rerun of the Imam Bux – John Lemm contest, and it must have scared off most prospective challengers, but Deriaz's manager Ernest Delaloye soon came up with another opponent for Ahmed Bux, another Swiss as it happened, Armand Cherpillod. The contest was arranged for July 10 at the Oxford Music Hall.

Cherpillod was a well-respected technician, though some had doubts about his temperament. He had visited England as far back as 1902 when he had won a Coronation wrestling tournament (Greco-Roman style) at the National Sporting Club. It was rumoured, with what truth I have no idea, that in a private bout he had once thrown Hackenschmidt in three minutes. Cherpillod was respected as a catch-as-catch-can stylist, and he had also studied jujutsu, and had even written a book on it. He was supported by Peggy Bettinson, the manager of the National Sporting Club, who had been an admirer from that 1902 tournament. Cherpillod was 34 years old and weighed around 14 stone (196 pounds).



Armand Cherpillod

Unfortunately the match, when it took place, was another one of those fiascoes that seemed to plague professional wrestling around this time, and it was all over in four minutes. There was a curious preliminary to the actual wrestling when R.B. Benjamin, Ahmed Bux's manager raised a couple of objections: "This gentleman caused considerable delay by first objecting to the resin with which Cherpillod had rubbed his feet, and when that had been removed by finding fault with the Swiss' fingernails, which had to be cut and trimmed with a pair of Tom Pevier's scissors."

The match started well enough, if cautiously. Bux got a waisthold that Cherpillod broke, and then the Swiss tried for the legs and failed to secure a grip. Soon Bux got behind, and Cherpillod tried one of his "clever dodges," striking his leg out sideways to try and hook Ahmed Bux's foot and take him to the ground. But this time it didn't work as the Indian parried the move so cleverly that it was Cherpillod who was brought down. Twice he just managed to rise but Bux retained his hold and the men went down to the mat with the Indian on top.

Seizing Cherpillod by his two wrists [Ahmed Bux] pulled his hands in under him, and the Swiss was flat on his face, in which position he remained for several seconds; then suddenly screams of pain and a volley of Alpine abuse in which the word *cochon* (pig) was predominant, heralded the fact that Cherpillod was being hurt. He howled and bellowed and appealed to the referee, who was so nonplused that he didn't know what to do, and ordered the men to go on wrestling... Bux looked very surprised when Cherpillod started screaming, and let the Swiss up a bit to show the hold he had on... the men continued, with Bux smiling and Cherpillod screaming. Releasing this hold, the Indian clapped on a half-nelson and turned the Swiss quickly over, and, pressing him slowly down, received the referee's pat after four minutes actual wrestling. One shoulder was not actually touching the mat, but Cherpillod could not have escaped. The audience had quite enjoyed the spectacle of the screaming Swiss wrestler and were looking forward to the second bout, however, there was to be no second bout: Cherpillod was in his dressing room, refusing to come out, despite the entreaties of his manager and everyone else, and despite being certified fit by the doctor. The match was given to Ahmed Bux, who, to mollify the crowd a little, wrestled an exhibition with

Kala, another of the Indians. One wit in the audience shouted to Ahmed Bux, asking if he could make his opponent cry "Cochon!" again.



Kala (left) and Ahmed Bux. The photographer for Health and Strength had arranged with the wrestlers to take some photos after the match, "but Armand Cherpillod refused to face the camera then." (Health & Strength, July 15, 1911)

Cherpillod, apparently, claimed he had been fouled. Some observers, such as Cyril F. Upton, who reported the contest for *Health and Strength* thought that Ahmed Bux had used an illegal jujutsu hold, although he did not intentionally foul. Monte Saldo said it had been a jujutsu hold, "though not a well known one." Mr. Elliott, the referee, said that the hold had been perfectly fair, and he made that judgement with thirteen years of experience in jujutsu behind him. In any case, Cherpillod was branded a "quitter," even being criticised by a supporter like Peggy Bettinson. "He has no heart," said Bettinson. "I do not like to hear a man squeal as he did, and he might at least have had another try."

This second win of Ahmed Bux seemed to scare off any other challengers. "Wrestling seems in a very bad state," commented Vivian Hollender, "inasmuch as the quicker a man wins and the more business-like his methods the less chance he gets of future matches." So although Benjamin had plans for Ahmed Bux to wrestle Hackenschmidt and Gotch, Bux's career stalled, and those plans were never realised.

In mid-July, a new batch of Indians arrived in England, including the highly respected Gulam Mohiuddin. Although only around 13 stone (something over 180 pounds), he challenged all heavyweights. No matches occurred, but a couple of months later in France, in what was the last fling of Indian wrestling in Europe, Mohiuddin met Maurice Gambier, the French champion. This match, which took place in Bordeaux in a bullfight arena before a crowd of 5,000, was in the French Greco-Roman style, and yet Gambier was thrown twice in five minutes. Gulam Mohiuddin had only a few days to accustom himself to Greco-Roman wrestling, so – if this was a genuine match – his was a terrific performance, as good as any of the other Indians in their better known English victories.

As far as I know, that was the last significant competitive match fought by the Indians in their prewar incursion into British and European wrestling arenas. Others came later, but the days of legendary victories were gone and they made little real impact. That may have been due to a decline in the general standard of Indian wrestling, though a more important reason was that professional wrestling was now a totally worked environment. There simply was no place for professional wrestlers who wanted to engage in real matches, and as the performances of the Indians had shown all too well, genuine wrestling bouts were often too short (as with Imam Bux vs. Lemm, and Ahmed Bux vs. Deriaz), too long and boring (Gama vs. Zbyszko), or otherwise unsatisfactory (Ahmed Bux vs. Cherpillod). For the growth of professional wrestling in its modern form, the product had to be managed and outcomes controlled.

Back in the early 1900s, it seems, you could still have genuine contests, though they weren't all that frequent and the Indians did have difficulty in getting competitive matches. Gama, Imam Bux, and Ahmed Bux did make an impact, but it seems that they often had to work against the vested interests of pro wrestling: the promoters, managers, wrestlers, theatre owners, and to some extent the public themselves, all of whom wanted "a show." That's not to say that the Indians were on some kind of crusade – even Gama, in the later years of his career, showed little inclination to put up his own crown against new challengers – but they were dedicated wrestlers who trained hard, and they wanted to wrestle; and Gama definitely had aspirations to be recognised as the greatest wrestler in the world.

In that respect, the visits of 1910 and 1911 didn't fulfill their promise: the Indians made waves, but mostly they were unable to get the major matches they wanted, and their appearances had little long term effect on professional wrestling. They were certainly respected for their abilities, and were given full credit for their victories over Roller, Lemm, and Deriaz, and yet an authority like Count Vivian Hollender could still feel that they were not given the welcome they deserved:

Many people who swear by, and even applauded Hackenschmidt and other foreign wrestlers, will not even bestow a welcome to a British subject even if it is not a Britisher. I refer to the Indians. It is an extraordinary thing that an American negro, as a boxer [a reference to Jack Johnson, then world champion], should be more popular than an Indian, who is not only a British subject, but an entirely different class of man. Although there may have been indifference to the Indian wrestlers, there are few racist (in modern terms) comments about them in the reports of the time. Before Gama's match with Zbyszko the editor of *Health and Strength* did observe that "I actually received letters from readers in India pointing out that if they [the Indian wrestlers] kept on winning, their victories would give a dangerous filip to the seditions amongst our dusky subjects that menace the integrity of our Indian Empire. But that is another story, upon which I do not propose to enter."

A more common view, though, was that expressed in a letter to the magazine from a John Moore. In praising the Indians, he wrote, "They will meet all comers, not waiting

for a large sum of money; there is no hugging the mat, no resting, no fake. Let the best man win, whatever his colour or nationality!"

This was an age, of course, which thought in terms of race, and the question was always there. It often expressed itself as a concern that the Indians' crushing victories over Western opponents might indicate that these "dusky subjects of the British Empire" were actually representatives of a physically superior race. When the editor of *Health and Strength* concluded his report on the Ahmed Bux/Armand Cherpillod match, his last paragraph was a lament on the feebleness and lack of enterprise of British wrestlers:

It is certainly time some white man came forward to extend the Indians. Mr. Benjamin, after the match, advanced to the front and addressed the audience. 'Ahmed Bux,' said he, 'is a British subject, born under the British flag.'

'We acknowledge the fact, and yet we would like to see one of our own race beat him. Is there none to be found? Surely – surely there must be someone who could do it. In this great game of chess, will the dark pawns sweep the board all the time?'

'Maurice Deriaz was game, but not a wrestler; Armand Cherpillod was a wrestler, but not game. Where is the man who is both, and strong to boot?'

'Let him COME FORTH.'

'I do not grudge the Indians their victories; I only want to see our race victorious too.'

The Indian incursion was only short lived, and its details were soon forgotten, but to judge by the performances of Gama, Imam Bux, Ahmed Bux, and Gulam Mohiuddin, they were an exceptional group of wrestlers and a level above the professionals of the Western nations. A unique combination of circumstances – a group of talented and dedicated athletes, a culture which embraced wrestling, and a group of wrestling-mad maharajahs who financed the sport – produced a great era of Indian wrestling which can never be repeated.

VII

Soon after he returned from England Gama fought in a major tournament in Allahabad. (December 1910, though some say 1912.) Here he again met Rahim Sultaniwala, the opponent who had held him to a draw three times previously. Rahim, for some reason, had covered himself in red ochre. This description of the contest is from Muzumdar's *Strong Men over the Years*:

I was present to witness the fight that followed. From a corner of the great saucer-shaped arena descended Raheem smeared all over his body with a red powder.

Ramamurti followed him as Raheem was in his employ at the time. As he descended in measured bragging strides he gave mouth to his hefty battle cry – "Deen, Deen Elahi." Raheem looked positively like a red fury let loose from the underworld, and Gama stood regally patient in the arena now and then swinging his great arms to warm himself up.

Without being announced, without the usual preliminaries the two giants closed in right away. Raheem's red paint set off Gama's handsome fairness; in his scarlet trunk-slip Gama looked a veritable Apollo. The very first moment revealed how Raheem respected his opponent, he was on his defence and Gama was at once on the aggressive with his characteristic relentlessness. But times without number the older man escaped his rival's holds upon him. Apparently deadly holds were broken as soon as they were applied, they were fighting as if to demonstrate text book holds and counters. Raheem fled from the arena twice when Gama forced the pace upon him.

When after the second break-away Raheem returned Gama was determined to make an end of him. If the spectators held their breath in suspense and in unconscious rhyme with the breathless pace of the battle, Raheem did not. He was more and more on the defensive, but coolness and cunning did not leave him. I still remember vividly a particular juncture in this epic fight. Raheem had survived Gama's repeated onslaughts, but when the latter held him from behind by the trunk-slip the vast appreciating crowd around the arena stood up as one man to witness the grim tragedy of the end of a popular hero. Gama tugged ferociously to bear down his opponent but Raheem stood his ground. At last Gama lifted him bodily up and Raheem hung head downwards in a precarious position. For a moment it seemed that Gama was holding his gigantic rival at arm's length quite clear of the floor. But Raheem was not rendered helpless; suddenly his legs moved like scissors and with a powerful, incisive movement he struck against Gama's might arm. The next moment Raheem was standing before Gama in complete defiance. I have taken more time to describe the momentous event than it actually took to happen, for it happened in the twinkling of an eye. Perhaps Gama was exasperated, he rushed at Raheem and clinched, but the latter broke away and wriggled out of the ropes followed by Gama who was now mad with the thrill of the chase. Raheem did not return to complete the fight, he was hurt in the ribs and all the honour of the battle went to Gama, who finally proved the other man's master.

Towards the end of his life, when asked who had been his strongest opponent, Gama said Rahim Sultaniwala, followed by Zbyszko, Calipha Gulam Mohiuddin, and Hassan Bux Mulkani.

In 1916 Gama met Pandit Biddo, the top Hindu wrestler (Gama, remember, was Muslim), at Gujranwala. The 17 stone (238-pound) Biddo couldn't fend off Gama's constant attacks and was thrown in five minutes. With this victory, Gama reestablished his supremacy over Indian wrestlers, and pretty much seemed to run out of challengers to his crown. He was still a strong presence at wrestling tournaments, and in a major tournament at Kolhapur in 1918, he passed his title of Indian champion to Imam Bux, who had thrown Rahim Sultaniwala in 20 minutes. In 1922, during the Prince of Wales'

visit to India, the future Edward VII presented Gama with a silver mace. One onlooker thought, "seeing Gama with his mace it would appear that the epic hero Bhim had been reincarnated."



Gama with mace

"From 1916 to 1928," wrote S. Muzumdar, "Gama had no opponents." Then, in 1928, eighteen years after their first contest, came the rematch with Stanislaus Zbyszko.

There was a slightly curious history to this contest. Back in November 1910, Zbyszko said he would be wrestling Gama again in the Punjab the following April. However, 1911 came and went without any return match. After that Zbyszko was wrestling in Europe and North America, and then of course there was the First World War. After that, Zbyszko established himself as a topline in the States, and it may have only been after he lost the "World Championship" that a rematch with Gama became an attractive proposition.

The February 12, 1927 issue of *Health and Strength* carried an article, "Two Giants of the Mat." It stated, "One of the greatest events of 1927 in the world of sport" was due to take place soon: the great wrestling contest between Zbyszko and Gama. It said that Gama had arrived in Bombay on December 18, 1926, and had given two displays of wrestling at the Excelsior Theatre. For the match, the Maharajah of Patalia had offered to build "a huge pavilion accommodating about 80,000 persons."

Nothing happened in 1927, either, but in 1928, the Maharajah of Patalia organised a trade fair and, in conjunction with this event, the Gama-Zbyszko rematch finally took place in a specially built stadium accommodating 40,000 spectators. They wrestled on prepared earth, Indian style. Among the crowd were many VIPs, including the Nawab of Bhopal, the Maharaja of Kapurthala, the Maharana of Dolpur, Sir Leslie Scott (a noted maritime lawyer), and Sir Harcourt Butler (then chairman of the Indian States

Committee, and a former governor of Burma). The Maharajah of Patalia, who was sponsoring the match, was in effect Gama's employer: Gama had been recruited by the Maharajah as a court wrestler around 1910, the time of his last match with Rahim Sultaniwala.



Zybszko and Gama, 1928

Anyway, at 4:15 on the afternoon of January 29, 1928, Gama and Zybszko faced each other for their eagerly awaited rematch. They came to grips, and then after a few moments Gama released his hold on Zybszko's neck and quickly took his left ankle, pulling it forward and simultaneously sweeping away his right leg. Zybszko went down on his back. Gama followed him down, and after a brief struggle pinned him to the earth for the first and winning fall. The crowd erupted, shouting, "India has won! India has won!" The Nawab of Bhopal presented a silver mace to Gama while Zybszko retired from the arena "deeply dejected and declaring that Gama was a tiger and a sportsman."

The contemporary reports that I have seen give no time for the fall, although the *Tribune* stated that "hardly a minute had elapsed" before Gama took Zybszko down. S. Muzumdar, who was there, gave the time as 42 seconds. Other accounts say 49, 21, or even 10 seconds. And there has been a little uncertainty about the nature of the fall: that Zybszko may have been thrown "just off his feet," for example. However, the Indian accounts are fairly clear in saying that Zybszko was pinned, and in fact the 1928 reports from *The Tribune* (January 31, 1928) and *Vyayam* magazine, both state that Zybszko was "completely overpowered" on the ground.

"Completely overpowered" – I wonder. It's no surprise that Gama took Zybszko down quickly, since he demonstrated he was able to do that repeatedly in their first match, but to "overpower" him on the ground? How was the 48-year-old Gama of 1928 able to pin Zybszko in less than a minute when the Gama of 1910 was never able to get close to a pin in over two and a half hours of wrestling? No doubt Zybszko was unused to the conditions, and he later said that the fall was called too quickly. Perhaps in the eighteen years since the first contest Zybszko had got weaker and Gama had somehow grown stronger. However, I can't help having doubts about such a quick and easy win.

In some correspondence, wrestling enthusiast Ernest Sodergren wrote, "In the second match with Zbyszko, in India under Gama's conditions and style, there was a lot of suggestion that there were suspicious circumstances about the match. This was conveyed to me on a number of occasions by wrestlers coming home from India in the fifties but none of them were too happy to elaborate other than to say that rumour was rife over there about the outcome." Richard Haynes, in his wrestling record book, also wrote that the "Maharajah had come to Zbyszko to offer the Pole \$50,000 'to let Gama throw you.' The Maharajah had feared that if Zbyszko had won there would have been a riot and was afraid for his own safety as well as Zbyszko's. Zbyszko was rebuilding his own fortune lost in World War I, and gladly accepted the offer. It must be stated that Gama knew nothing of this. If he did, he most certainly would not have gone on with the match. So, before the largest crowd ever to see a wrestling match, Gama won in less than one minute."



Indian wrestlers demonstrating flying mare

Well, it's all rumour and hearsay, but there may be something in it. None of the reports, of course, mentioned any payoff by the Maharajah, but Zbyszko had all his expenses reimbursed and reportedly received \$8,000 win, lose, or draw, so really, there was no incentive for him to try too hard. Zbyszko was a veteran professional and it doesn't seem too farfetched to suggest that he would roll over for a good payday, especially as his competitive days were then drawing to an end. Certainly, it is strange that Zbyszko, who must have been one of the most difficult men in the world to pin, lost two of the quickest pin-falls on record: 6 seconds to Gotch and 42 seconds (or whatever) to Gama. True, Gama may not have known about any arrangement, but he was a very, very experienced wrestler and if Zbyszko had succumbed too easily, then surely Gama would have sensed it. While this quick win is now recognised as one of the highlights of Gama's career, S. Muzumdar, who was a real Gama fan, once mentioned that "at the time of this fight most Indian newspapers criticised it as a battle between two old, dilapidated, slow moving persons."

A year later, in February 1929, Gama wrestled Jesse Petersen, another name from the old days. Although not much remembered today, Petersen was one of the leading Greco-Roman wrestlers in Europe in the early 1900s. He was often among the top finishers in the major European tournaments and won the big world tournaments held in Paris in 1908 and 1910. Now it was two decades on, and as Petersen took off his dressing gown at 4 o'clock in the afternoon of February 24th, "acute judges could see that his muscles were not in first class condition and there were folds beneath his chin; and his arms and chest looked flabby, while his thighs and calves were too poor for a first class wrestler."

The following account is from *The Tribune* of Lahore:

At 4.10 the giants came to grips. It was noticed that Petersen wore wrestling boots, a thing which Zbyszko had not done. The afternoon sun shone full on the contestants and Petersen's body, particularly his legs, was glistening with heavy oiling. As he had been warned that Gama would go for his legs, this was a defensive precaution, but it struck the onlookers as overdone to be really sporting.

Gama at once went for his rival's legs but his hands slipped off them. The two stood crouching again, eyeing each other, but Petersen's glance was uneasy. He looked like a man expecting an attack from an unexpected quarter. Gama caught Petersen by the legs again and as he had sanded his hands this time the grip held. In a flash Petersen came down like a log on his right shoulder and part of his back. Gama was down on his rival pressing with his full weight and strength on Petersen's left shoulder.

I could not see it, though I was quite close; but I was told that Petersen's left leg got flexed, so that his left foot came under his right leg after the fall. This made it still more difficult for him to get up. Relentlessly Gama exerted himself and I could hear Petersen gasp with pain and exertion. Knowing that he might be thrown down on one shoulder, Petersen had specially trained to keep the other shoulder up. It was relying on this training that he had got a condition inserted in the terms of the match that both shoulders must touch the earth simultaneously. But all his special training, or his strength, availed him not. The pain and the weight of the other proved too much. Slowly, after a brave but unavailing struggle of some seconds, his other shoulder touched the earth and he raised his hand in token of defeat. Gama jumped off and the match for the world championship was over in a minute and a half.

The reaction of the crowd, however, was not good. The match was a disappointment; Petersen was a disappointment. "People had expected some skill in Petersen," the report went on:

but there was none. He looked during the preliminary gripping thoroughly bewildered, as if he did not know what was to be done... The public were fully justified in their complaint that they had been defrauded of their money. I do not think that if another match between an Indian and a European wrestler is arranged, there will be any spectators present. One is justified in asking the promoters of the match as to why they arranged this match. It was a sheer waste of money. If that is all the skill the European

wrestlers can show, no more matches should be arranged with them. The match of Gama-Zbyszko was a farce, and this was another. The reporter ended by saying that Gama "is over 50 and his wrestling days should be over"; moreover, he said, the Maharajah of Patalia should generously acknowledge Gama's services to Indian wrestling. In effect, he was saying that the Maharajah should pension Gama off.



Indian wrestlers demonstrating single leg throw

Gama didn't retire; he just stopped wrestling competitively. Yet he still considered himself world champion, and as late as 1937, Muzumdar could write, "without any shadow of doubt he is the greatest wrestler of the present time. He believes that he won the world title twenty seven years ago by defeating Stanislaus Zbyszko in London. He is advanced in age now, but if I am any judge of his physical condition I can candidly say that none of the young super-wrestlers of India would be able to extend Gama for ten minutes."

How strong a wrestler was Gama? Very strong, I would imagine, and very quick. However, in trying to answer this question you have to try to clear all the inaccurate information that has accumulated over the years. The legend of Gama seems to have a life all of its own. In an error-filled article of 1947 by Charles B. Roth (*Your Physique*, December 1947), the "sixty-nine year old" Gama was described as the toughest man in the world, and the "unofficial heavyweight wrestling champion of the world." Roth stated that in England, "at a private get together," Gama threw Doc Roller thirteen times in fifteen minutes. Another biographer, Ratan Patodi, wrote that, also in England, Gama threw thirty Japanese wrestlers in one hour. And on a recent website, it's asserted that before meeting Zbyszko, Gama defeated 200 wrestlers in the preliminary rounds of the John Bull Tournament.

Well, Doc Roller was thrown (pinned) twice in ten minutes of wrestling, and there is no mention of Gama throwing thirty Japanese, although he did make that challenge. There was no John Bull tournament, and the two hundred wins in the preliminary rounds are simply a fantasy. There may be some bizarre confusion here with newspaper reports stating that Gama was undefeated in two hundred contests in his native India.

Gama seems to have been recognised as a prodigy from an early age, and as victory followed victory over high profile opponents, he came to be recognised as a great wrestler, a modern day "incarnation of Bhim." In *Strong Men over the Years* (1942), Muzumdar wrote:

Excepting against Zbyszko and Raheem, Gama never allowed his fights to be drawn out; he won every fight inside ten minutes. It is all due to his terrible attack; those who have seen him fight will agree with me that from the first move his onslaught is terrific, and with his extreme aggressiveness he finishes his man as soon as he can. In India at least there has been no one to come up to him since 1916.

I believe that Gama and the wrestlers of his school are unbeatable because their methods have been different to older ones. All of them seem to be imbued with the idea that aggressiveness is the best defence so they start their fights in such a pace as to completely overwhelm their adversaries and force an issue as soon as possible. Just as boxing in England and elsewhere used to be long drawn out 'marathon' affairs a few decades ago, wrestling battles lasting for hours used to be almost a feature in India. 'Marathon' wrestling has now become an exception [rather] than the rule, but be it said that Indian wrestlers of all schools invariably train themselves to last out indefinitely if such demands upon their stamina rise. This sort of a power is now a personal asset of the wrestler; the needs of the day expect him to finish quickly or be finished so.

In 1916 Gama met Pandit Biddo, the greatest Hindu wrestler after Kikkar Singh. Biddo was a much older man and represented the older form of the grappling art I have just mentioned. This match took place in Gujranwala, Biddo's home town, and Gama forced the issue in eight minutes. Biddo did not get a single chance to strike out. With the defeat of Biddo Gama wiped out the last of his Indian opponents, and since then he has been regarded as the living ideal [rather] than a profane competitor by all the Indian wrestlers.

"Gama's methods are his own," reported *The Sporting Life* in September 10, 1910. "With panther-like speed he has tremendous strength, and if, as he often does, he takes his opponents off his guard, his adversary is on his back before he is aware that the bout has begun. Gama advances on his man with a sliding gait, slapping his wonderfully developed thighs the while, and feinting as if he were about to box. A dive for the legs, a waist hold, a back heel, and the bout is over."

But that report also mentioned that Gama did little training in groundwork, and others mentioned a possible weakness in this part of wrestling. Gama came to England the great Indian champion, and although the Indians quickly proved themselves terrific

straight wrestlers, the first Zbyszko match tarnished Gama's reputation. Eighteen years later he redeemed himself in the sensational Patalia rematch, which then became a central part of the Gama legend. Gama had to wipe out the memory of the first match, and achieved that in a manner better than anyone could have hoped. Nonetheless, the first, Shepherd's Bush Stadium, contest had highlighted chinks in Gama's wrestling ability.



Indian wrestlers demonstrating leg tear

In England, Gama would regularly work out with the other Indians in the troupe, and in training and exhibition bouts in the music halls, he was absolutely acknowledged as the strongest wrestler. Yet when it came to actual performances against western opponents, Gama's performances in England were somewhat eclipsed by the victories of Imam Bux and Ahmed Bux. After the Zbyszko match, Henry Werner had written that letter saying that Imam Bux would have been a better opponent for Zbyszko than Gama, and in fact that was not a rare viewpoint. The editor of *Health and Strength* wrote that, "in my opinion, he [Gama] is not quite so clever a wrestler as his brother, Imam Bux, who enjoys the advantage of a longer reach." Another expert (not named) considered that both Imam Bux and Ahmed Bux were superior ground wrestlers to Gama, though perhaps not as strong.

Doc Roller, apparently, told Joe Carroll Marsh, Frank Gotch's one-time manager, that Gotch was a superior wrestler to Gama, and Zbyszko, after the Shepherd's Bush Stadium match, told Tromp Van Diggellen that Gotch would beat Gama in ten minutes. Around the same time, however, Zbyszko told R.B. Benjamin that he would back Gama for £500 against anyone in the world in standing wrestling.

So it was in ground wrestling where Gama was judged wanting, at least in Western terms. That may have been due to the style, rules, and techniques of Indian wrestling, and it's interesting that Gama's problems with Zbyszko seem to have been almost a rerun of the great Gulam's match with Cour-Derelli ten years earlier, although Gulam never received the criticism that Gama did. Strangely, wrestling Western opponents on the ground didn't seem to bother Imam Bux or Ahmed Bux.

Imam Bux, though, was a younger brother, so he was always in Gama's shadow, and he was beaten by Gunga, the deaf-mute, while Gama was never thrown in his whole career. Gama was the king of Indian wrestling: his greatest victories were in the earth pits of India. [EN1] It must have been terrific to watch him in one of his famous quick wins, with his fast, fluid, continuously attacking style bringing him victory in a matter of minutes. He seemed perfectly fitted for his role of the dignified, modest, and straightforward Indian super-wrestler, the victor in hundreds of battles, conqueror of Western champions, and the embodiment of Indian masculine virtues.

S. Muzumdar, in his *Strong Men over the Years*, wrote that a "fighter like Gama is expected to be the hero of hundreds of battles, but curiously enough he had not had much fighting to do in his whole career." The British press in 1910 reported that Gama was undefeated in 200 bouts in India, that he had never been pinned, and no opponent had ever been able to get behind him. After he returned from England, Gama had a major win over Raheem Sultaniwala, and six years later he defeated Pandit Biddu, but after that, having established himself as the Champion, he seemed to rest on his laurels. In 1918 he passed the Championship of India over to Imam Bux, and then a decade later the victories over Zbyszko and Petersen closed off his competitive career.

He still seemed to keep up his disciplined regime of training, still doing his thousands of dunds and baitheks every day, and wrestling numerous opponents at his gym. Muzumdar recalled one occasion at Allahabad in 1934 when the 54-year-old Gama gave him a private exhibition of wrestling with his own men.

It suited his dignity to refuse entrance to anybody else beyond myself and three of my friends. The very next day while I was measuring him he refused to see three military officers who also came with a tailor's tape. Anyway, the exhibition began at five in the morning and I saw new men in action for the first time... The bouts lasted till eight o'clock and Gama fought all with the exception of Imam and Hamida with untiring zeal and energy. One can only believe by seeing how much fine and gigantically proportioned men like Bussah and Sahabuddin sprawled frequently on the ground at the movement of the aggressor's arms, or at a forcible placing of an enormous thigh. Once Sahabuddin caught Gama by the shoulders from the front, he merely threw his chest out and the heavier man that Sahabuddin is, was thrown quite a distance away.

Gama still regarded himself as World Champion. Occasionally he would throw out a vainglorious challenge, such as in Bombay in 1938 when he challenged twenty foreign wrestlers then in India, including Ed "Strangler" Lewis, King Kong, Edmond Kramer, Tony Lamaro, Mike Gill, Koroschenko, etc. In 1937 Ed Lewis tried to set up a match with Gama in India, but nothing came of it, and he returned to the USA, stating that Gama had stalled, asking for six months training time before any match could take place. This was disputed by Indian wrestling fans who said that before anyone could wrestle Gama for the championship, he first had to defeat Imam Bux and Hamida. If Gama did lay down those conditions, it seems somewhat arrogant and dismissive behaviour, as Ed Lewis had been a world champion in his own right, and besides being a capable wrestler himself, was one of the most famous names in the professional game in the 1920s and 1930s. Whether Lewis actually wanted a genuine contest is open to

question, and another version of events is that it was his own financial demands that were the problem.

In 1929 a Sydney group, Stadiums Ltd., tried bringing Gama to Australia, and in 1935 Jack Curley announced that he would be bringing Gama over for a tour of the United States, but nothing came of these efforts, and so Gama remained in India, teaching and training. He was sometimes urged to retire but refused, and so while his competitive career faded away, his continued presence (and reluctance to face new challengers) must have had a rather stultifying effect on the sport. Writing in 1941, Bill Hillgardner reported that, as "Gama is still considered champion of the largest camp, and no one can defeat him, the others can only compete unofficially, without any title at stake. This, of course, keeps the wrestling game at more or less of a standstill here in India, especially as concerns a new champion being crowned." Gama did eventually relinquish his title, date uncertain, but sometime in the early 1940s.

If Gama had considered an Australian tour in 1929 or American tour in 1935, it's hard to see how it would have worked, especially if he was expecting to wrestle real matches. Professional wrestling by this time was wholly worked, and Gama was such a proud man that it's difficult to imagine him agreeing to lose a match, or even a fall. Imam Bux, however, did wrestle in Canada during the mid-1930s, and others appeared in Western rings with mixed success. The sensational victories of the early 1900s no longer seemed possible. In a 1928 article on Indian wrestling, Robert L. Jones attempted to answer the question, "Just how good are these Indian wrestlers, and how much do they know of the art?" His response was: "I cannot answer that question, nor do I know anyone who can answer it at all fully." He did refer to Gama and Imam Bux's victories in London, but also mentioned Pandit Biddu's defeat by Zbyszko in America (1920s, I guess), and Gobar's losses to some "unknown" German and to Ed "Strangler" Lewis. He also pointed out that Indian amateur wrestlers had made little headway in the Olympics. Likewise, strength historian David Willoughby referred to a troupe of Indian wrestlers who toured America in the 1930s. Several of them, he wrote, "engaged in shooting matches with ordinary (not champion) American wrestlers and were held to draws, or even defeated." Willoughby also mentioned a letter he had from an Indian wrestling enthusiast, who gave his opinion that the "Hindu [e.g., Indian] system of training produces only obese, sluggish individuals, good only for wrestling, overeating and sleeping."

As for Gama, judging from assorted old clippings, his later years were troubled. He had five sons and four daughters, but all the sons died young. In 1945, Jalaluddin, his last son, died aged just thirteen, and Gama was so heartbroken that for awhile he lost the power of speech. In 1947, like millions of others, he was caught up in the bloody partition of India and Pakistan, losing most of the wealth and property that he had accumulated in his long wrestling career. Over the next few years he had to sell six of his seven silver victory maces. In 1951, apparently, he wrote to his old opponent Stanislaus Zbyszko about the possibility of staging international wrestling matches. Nothing came of that, but in the same year, in Karachi he took out a loan from the Refugee Rehabilitation finance corporation to buy a bus and set up the "Gama

Transport Service." The company struggled for a couple years before he gave it up and returned to Lahore. A wrestling exhibition tour of Kenya and Uganda with Imam Bux in 1953 was financially unrewarding and had to be cut short when the 73-year-old Gama took ill and began spitting blood.

In 1955 he issued a final, sad challenge to an indifferent world, saying that he would wrestle anyone, anywhere, at any time. In the same year the government of Punjab gave him some land to support himself, his wife, and their two unmarried daughters, and he had the first of his heart attacks. Three more followed, and the cost of treatment for his heart, high blood pressure, and asthma reduced him almost to penury.

An industrialist, C.D. Birla, heard about Gama's plight and gave him a grant of 2,000 rupees and a pension of 300 rupees a month for a year. Others rallied round. The West Pakistan Health Minister had Gama admitted to the Mayo Hospital at public expense, and other government departments and supporters helped. You like to think that after all his troubles, the old champion had some small measure of rest and comfort in his last few years.

Longtime wrestling fan Walter Steinhilber wrote about his 1960 trip to India and Pakistan, and his meeting with Gama in *Strength and Health*, March 1961. The old wrestler was then a patient at the Mayo Hospital in Lahore. "The Chief Physician," wrote Steinhilber:

led the way through what seemed miles of antiseptic-reeking corridors – ward after ward. At last we were ushered into a cold, dark and dank cot-crowded room. And here, wrapped in a blanket, squatting on his high hospital bed, I found the 'Great Gama' in the flesh. What flesh there was left was arthritis-racked.

In his hospital wardrobe and a woollen scarf wrapped as a turban, there was little to remind one that here, as a fact, was one of the giants of all time... The Indian wrestler who had dispatched the great Zbyszko in a matter of minutes... whose majestic pose, carrying the mace of mastery, left one awestruck.

Through an interpreter Steinhilber was told about Gama's famous bouts with Zbyszko and others. But it seems that Gama himself was weak and confused: "The details and records," wrote Walter Steinhilber, "have become clouded by time and faltering memory... Only in the handshake could I detect the power that had once resided in this now withering hulk."



Gama, ca. 1960

The visit was quite a formal occasion, since Steinhilber was accompanied by a military attaché and other VIPs. Photos were taken and then the attaché presented the old champion with baskets of fruit and flowers and a cheque for 1,200 rupees, worth about \$400 then, apparently. As he took the gifts, Gama's eyes were filled with tears.

When he returned home, Walter Steinhilber wrote to Pakistan for copies of the photos. The copies arrived with a note from the Director of Public Relations. It simply read: "Gama died 5/22/60. With the passing of this man ends an epic."

VIII

After the Shepherd's Bush Stadium debacle, Stanley Zbyszko wrestled throughout Europe and America. He seemed to spend most of 1911 in the USA and Canada. In February he lost a match with Maurice Deriaz (the same Maurice Deriaz he had beaten a year earlier when he was being built up as the leading challenger to Gotch), and then on February 9, 1911, a match with George Hackenschmidt finally came about in Madison Square Garden before a crowd of 8,000 or so. Hackenschmidt undertook to throw (pin) Zbyszko twice in an hour, and although he was described as the cleverer and stronger wrestler, he was unable to do that (or throw Zbyszko even once). Therefore, although it was actually a draw, by the terms of the contest Zbyszko had won. I assume it was a work: an American paper reported that "when the match was made a prominent sporting man expressed a willingness to bet 1,000 dollars there would be no fall, but he couldn't find a taker."

Zbyszko continued to wrestle, and in 1914, by his own account, he was in Russia when the First World War broke out. He remained there, continuing to wrestle until the start

of the Russian Revolution. He often told the story of how he had been accused of being an Austrian spy and ordered to wrestle the well-known Alexander Aberg in front of a murderous crowd of armed Bolsheviks who threatened to execute him if he lost – and of how he beat Aberg after two hours of wrestling, threw the winner's purse of gold coins into the crowd, and made his getaway as the soldiers scrambled for the money.

Zbyszko returned to America in 1920. If his name was remembered, it was as someone from that distant, pre-war world of pro wrestling. He began wrestling across the country, several matches every week, to try to reestablish his presence on the American scene. Before long he was a contender, and in 1921 he beat Ed "Strangler" Lewis to become World champion. He lost the title back to Lewis the next year, but continued to wrestle at the top level for the next three years. Consequently, when Lewis "lost" the title to Wayne Munn, a big ex-football player with limited real wrestling ability but a good box office draw, Zbyszko was there as an opponent for Munn.



Stanislaus Zbyszko, 1920s

The first time the two men met, Zbyszko lost, but then a couple of months later, April 15, 1925, in Philadelphia, they met again. The inside story of this match, at least according to Marcus Griffin's *Fall Guys*, is that Zbyszko agreed beforehand to lose, but then took Munn down repeatedly and pinned him twice – in eight minutes and then four minutes – to regain the World Championship. "The Zbyszko victory over Munn," wrote Griffin, "was one of the epochal doublecrossings of matdom."

Zbyszko's second reign, however, didn't last any time at all: just a few weeks later he lost the title to Joe Stecher in St. Louis and that marked the beginning of the end for his long run at the top. In 1928, he went to India for the second Gama match, and although he continued to wrestle for several years after that, he was now out of the championship picture. According to Nat Fleischer in *From Milo to Londos*, Zbyszko retired from

active wrestling in 1935, and subsequently took up promoting in Argentina. Antonio Rocca was reportedly one of his discoveries there.

After that, I don't really know, but Zbyszko seemed to remain involved in the game as a manager and trainer. He appeared in the ring one more time, in *Night and the City*, Jules Dassin's 1950 *film noir* set in a seedy subculture of pro wrestling in postwar London. In this Richard Widmark vehicle, Zbyszko played the role of Gregorius, a legendary grappler from the old days and the last remnant of true wrestling in a corrupt and degraded modern world. Towards the end of the movie, during an evening training session, Gregorius begins to argue with the modern day champion, The Strangler, played by Mike Mazurki. This escalates into a real fight, and as they lock into holds, an onlooker says, "The only way to stop them now is to shoot them like mad dogs!"

Since both Zbyszko and Mazurki were veteran wrestlers, they were able to produce one of the best fight scenes in movie history. It's put together as a contrast in styles, with Gregorius opposing his old style pure wrestling against The Strangler's modern, brutish, all-in methods. As the advantage swings from one to the other, there are no flashy techniques, just basic moves and a real sense of physical struggle. Both men seem to put forth the utmost effort and determination in a desperate battle to gain the upper hand. Interestingly, the action seems to anticipate the no-holds-barred fighting of the 1990s, and that makes it almost unique in the history of movie fight scenes.

Anyway, old Gregorius is strangled, hit by punches, forearm smashes, chops, and elbows, but he keeps wrestling, and gradually he gains the advantage. When he is able to get The Strangler in a "bear hug," he squeezes all the breath out of him and then lets him fall unconscious to the mat. As he exits the ring, he sees The Strangler's promoter (who ironically is his very own son), and tells him: "That – is what I do to your clowns."

He walks back unsteadily to the changing rooms. He lies down to recover his strength, and after saying a few words – "My son, Graeco-Roman, great art... great beauty. Must fight to keep... I have good life." – he dies in his son's arms. It's kind of corny, and yet even after watching the film several times, I still find these scenes oddly touching. Zbyszko wasn't an actor, but his gnarled charisma and broken English made him a perfect choice for the noble, enigmatic, and completely fictitious Gregorius.

There was an unusual sequel to this, which was played out, not in the ring, but in the English law courts, the King's Bench Division, before Mr. Justice Pritchard. It was October 1950, and the 72-year-old George Hackenschmidt was suing *News Review* for defamation. In June 1949, apparently, Hackenschmidt also had been approached by 20th Century Fox regarding the role of Gregorius. He had bought wrestling kit, learned the lines, and then, of course, the role went to Zbyszko. That would have been annoying in itself, but Hackenschmidt then read an article in *News Review* that implied that he had been beaten by Zbyszko in a wrestling match forty years before. The article included the lines, "When Stanislaus Zbysco, the world champion wrestler, topped the London Pavilion forty years ago, one of his most formidable victims was

Hackenschmidt. Last July, seventy year old Zbyszko again beat Hackenschmidt and fifteen other aspirants for the role of Gregorius, the Greco-Roman wrestler, in *Night and the City*."

Hackenschmidt, his counsel explained, was a writer on philosophy who had lectured at various universities, including Yale. He had written several books, and was now working on his autobiography. His 1911 Madison Square Garden match with Zbyszko was referred to, being correctly described as a draw, although Hack failed in his stated objective of throwing Zbyszko twice in an hour. But Hack had never been "a victim" of Zbyszko.

Judgment was given in Hackenschmidt's favour, and *News Review* was ordered to pay him £300 in damages, which was a fair amount of money in those austere postwar years. (An [equivalent](#) award today would be in the neighborhood of £5,800.) *News Review* had probably picked up something Zbyszko had said, without checking the facts. Zbyszko seemed to regard that 1911 draw as some kind of technical victory, and in a 1927 *Health and Strength* article a short list of his notable victories again included George Hackenschmidt's name. But I don't suppose Hack ever saw that issue.

In his later years, Stanislaus Zbyszko retired to [Savannah](#), Missouri, from where, like a real life Gregorius, he railed against the degeneracy of modern professional wrestling. In July 1953, for example, he told Arthur Daley of the *New York Times* that modern pro wrestlers were "carnival clowns." He could not understand why "the public not only seem to like it but pays for this disgrace, this insult to common sense. If the public would refuse to be cheated, the promoters would be compelled to turn to useful work. Maybe then these stupid 'rasslers' would stop their disgraceful stupid shenanigans which were drilled into them before each and every show."

In 1957, Robert W. Smith, researching wrestling history, wrote to Stanislaus Zbyszko, and he replied at length, albeit in a letter full of typing errors and broken English. ("Hope only you will survive the torture of reading my typewriting – but that's the best I could do.") Zbyszko wrote about his life, and also commented on some of the characters he had met in his decades-long wrestling career.

"The Pearl Harbor day for wrestling," he wrote:

[was] when Ed Strangler Lewis good defensive wrestler succumbed to offer of [Paul Bowser](#) the Boston manipulator wrestling promoter of \$115,000 to lose the match with the Championship to one [Gus Sonnenberg](#) great Dartmouth tackler, but it had to be created 10 rater class in order to place Sonnenberg in any class. Stratagem of Bowser was simple. He taught him in few weeks how to apply his TACKLE in the ring . He knew that he could pay Sonnenberg at his will pocketing most of the money in his pocket, and if Sonnenberg would try not to take orders he would be most easily replaced.

... [Jack] Curley and Co. seeing the money Bowser was making they selected Jim Londos to make him 'WORLD'S CHAMPION.' He looked more muscular than Sonnenberg, was better as wrestler goes, than Sonnenberg. He was afflicted with yellow streak, Londos simply could not wrestle on the level. I imagine it would be easier for him to [face the] electric chair than genuine opponent. Still in gymnasium he was pretty clever small man. Then the other Promoters seeing how State Athletic Commissions were willing and ready to cooperate in faking of wrestling and jibbing the public of money. Then they started to make their own champions, every hall subsequently had its Worlds Champion.

Worlds Champion nickel a bushel. That's the downfall of this noble sport of wrestling, just to be like rotten apple a rotten apple for rest of the sports.

His toughest bouts, Zbyszko told Smith, had been the ones both in London, against Poddubny (a "Giant of Strength") and Gama ("that magnificent athlete from far off India, the tiger of Punjab"). Of the Indian style of wrestling, he wrote that the Indians "are superbly trained their system is attack furious with abandon attack charging – they never think of serious opposition never are pressured properly if they find themselves in real danger... danger is unknown to them." He explained that, because of this characteristic of the Indian style, he had waited for an hour before trying to counter-attack in the match with Gama in London.

Zbyszko added some new information on this 1910 contest, writing that Gama "issued challenge to everybody including Hackenschmidt to throw him twice in twenty minutes."

Dr. Roller accepted the challenge it lasted few seconds when Gama leaped for the midriff of Dr. Roller squeezed breaking few ribs and it was all over. I trained with Doc. Doc was first class man, well conditioned. I knew I had work on my hands. Finally in September 1910, we come grips, at London Stadium. The match started at 3 p.m., and lasted until the darkness came only then was stopped it lasted over three hours. Time 2 hours and 47 minutes. I was on defensive waiting until Gama would show sign of weakness that was my strategy which paid so well with Poddubny. After one hour of wrestling I went to attack and lifted Gama bodily high in the air and Gama went flat on his shoulders which constituted legitimate fall. But referee did not accept it as fall only as mitigation for a throw because I was on defensive.

It was Zbyszko's view that, after the bout, Gama made the decision not to meet Frank Gotch, as a few months earlier Gotch had pinned Zbyszko twice in less than an hour. "Gama calculated wrongly talking as basis of my match with Gama and my match with him [Gotch] and decided to return to India. Would he wrestle Gotch if Gotch would accept him wrestling never would itself in this miserable position as it is today."

"In 1926 [*sic*]," Zbyszko continued:

I was invited by Maharajah of Patalia to Lahore India to finish my match with Gama. Maharajah treated me royally there were present about 23 other Maharajahs. It was

banquet with them it was elephant hunting everything in grandest style. When the date of the match neared Maharajah called me to ask me to change conditions of the match instead of wrestling catch as catch can, to wrestle INDIAN STYLE. It consisted to wrestle on loose soil. That was specially prepared soil, with some preparation that I don't know of, for foot and a half about 18 inches deep, just loose soil, slippery and if contestant touches any part of his body that soil, it is considered the fall. I never wrestled under such conditions never knew even of them. It did not take long for Gama to throw me off balance and the fall was called immediately.

Smith also asked Zbyszko to compare Gama and Gotch. After the 1910 match Zbyszko had told Tromp Van Diggellen that Gotch would beat Gama in ten minutes, but now, in his interesting reply, he gave a somewhat different view:

Gama was supreme in standing position wrestling. I doubt that wrestler existed who could stand in front of him any length of time. He was endowed with prodigious energy ferocious strength marvellous coordination between speed and strength and energy. Gotch was better mechanic craftsman and master in holds. But could he apply those things against that prodigious strength of that true tiger of Punjab is problematical. Could Gotch get him the mat is doubtful. How could he hold Gama under him is another question mark and then apply any hold, will be most difficult to stretch to that imagination. Year before my match with Gama while novice at catch as catch can I freely mixed with Gotch. With Gama later I could not simply get myself going was obliged to be on defensive only after hour gathering all resources that I had stood up lifted with body slam flat on both shoulders. Referee taking my defensive attitude up until that moment refused to acknowledge that fall, and used that point to call the bout a draw.

Stanislaus Zbyszko died in September 1967 at the ripe old age of 88. According to wrestling promoter Jack Pfeffer, who described him as "one of the greatest wrestlers of all time, holder of degrees from the University of Vienna, master of eleven languages, a lawyer and a philosopher," Zbyszko died broke, and that was something Pfeffer found hard to believe. Pfeffer also wrote, "when I last saw the brothers [Stanislaus and his brother Wladek] they were living in a cottage near Savannah, Mo. I was amazed when I saw how Papa Zbyszko was living."

Pfeffer's puzzlement was understandable since Zbyszko was one of the biggest earners in pro wrestling in the early 1900s. Even if, as the stories say, his wealth was wiped out in the First World War, he was able to start a new career in 1920s America and win the World Championship twice. A *Health and Strength* article of 1927 stated that he "owns farms in America and estates in Russia, has real estate in New York and owns a large summer hotel at Old Orchard, Maine." Maybe his later years were lean, or he lost money in managing and promoting, or his accumulated wealth was just gradually used up in the course of his long life.

One by one they had all passed from the scene. Frank Gotch was the first to go, in 1917. Only 39, he had been in poor health for months, and died of uremic poisoning (or, some say, of syphilis). Little attention was paid to the death of Gotch's one-time mentor, Farmer Burns, in 1937. "He was a very remarkable old fellow," Jack Curley wrote in a memoir of Burns published in *The Sporting Arena* in March 1937.

Up to a year ago he used to hang around the corner of Sixteenth and Farnum Streets in Omaha, which is the main corner, and everybody for miles knew him and used to like to listen to him talk about wrestling. He was a die-hard, too. Right up to a year ago, when he got so sick he couldn't walk and had to go to his sister's house in Council Bluffs, where he died, he insisted that there were not any good wrestlers any more. He said the wrestlers of today were nothing but a lot of fakers and that, as old as he was, he could throw them as fast as they came at him.

There were a lot of people who never knew him except as a gabby old guy on that street corner, but I knew him when he was a real good wrestler.

A couple of sentences in the August 1949 issue of *Strength and Health* informed readers that "Ivan Poddubny, a former champion heavyweight wrestler of the world," had died on August 9, 1949, at the age of 78. According to the biography of Poddubny by Dimitry Zhukov (*Their Way to the Top*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), Ivan had a bad fall at the age of 77, breaking his thigh. He tried using herbs and forced himself onto crutches, but his leg kept swelling. Then his heart began to give way and he died at six in the morning of August 7 [*sic*] from myocardial infarction. His tombstone bore the inscription "Here rests a Russian giant."

Tom Jenkins, who once had that see-saw rivalry with Gotch, and who had pretty much wrestled them all, from Youssuf the Terrible Turk to George Hackenschmidt, died in 1957, at the age of 85. Gama, of course, died in 1960, and now Zbyszko too was gone. Only the old Russian Lion remained. The 90-year old George Hackenschmidt was living quietly in London with his wife, and when he too passed away on February 19, 1968, the curtain finally came down on professional wrestling's turn-of-the-century Golden Age.

ENDNOTES

EN1. According to D.C. Mujumdar, writing in *Encyclopedia of Indian Physical Culture* (Baroda, 1950), the dimensions of a pit varied from 14-20 feet square. "Earth therein is scientifically prepared by the mixture of earth and ochre. The mixture is made soft by adding sufficient quantity of sesamum [sesame] oil. In order to make it more soft[, a] good deal of butter milk is added to it. Besides, camphor, lemon-juice, rose-water, rose-essence and other articles of scent are mixed with this special earth."