



LEFT: The Grasmere arena, "shouldered in by crags with famous names"

THE GRASMERE SPORTS

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THE English Lake District—famous for poets, for scenery and for rain—has also its peculiar place in the sporting calendar. Two years after Wordsworth died in his four-poster at Rydal Mount the first official Grasmere Sports were held at Pavement End. Every August since then (with breaks for two world wars) there have been sports at Grasmere, and there is nothing quite like them in England or anywhere else.

For here the oldest traditions of Cumberland and Westmorland—one of the most distinctive regional communities in Britain, still bearing the impress of Norse conquest and settlement—find convivial and lusty expression. The Grasmere Sports decide what is virtually a world wrestling title, but there are no foreign competitors. And the two most spectacular features—the Guides' Race up Butter Crag and the 10-mile Hound Trail—are as local and traditional as John Peel.

Even in a summer when England regained the Ashes and Foxhunter was at the top of his form, the Coronation Grasmere Sports were a major event. More to the point for the New Zealand traveller, and rarer still in this dampest corner of England, they were held on a day of sparkling Wairarapa sunshine that drew cars and motor-coaches from Cardiff, Blackpool and Edinburgh. Nearly 10,000 people came to see the championships of old-style Lakeland wrestling, and what *The Times* with justice calls "the best fell runners in the world."

I suppose the ideal route for Grasmere on sports day would be by Wordsworth's path from Rydal, under the frowning face of Nab Scar. But a thunderstorm that morning had deluged the hills and slowed up the going. So we arrived prosaically by bus, past Town End and Dove Cottage, at the field beyond Grasmere Church, where the head-

stones of Wordsworth, Mary and Dorothy stand facing outwards to the line of the fells.

Superb Setting

It is a simple enough sports ground—a large oval of turf, rimmed by wooden benches. But the setting is superb with the hills rising steeply on one side, and the whole little valley of Grasmere shouldered in by the great pikes and the crags with famous names. Grasmere is "soft" rather than "sheer" Lake country, but the lush meadow-grass and smoothly rounded trees are disciplined by the grey Cumbrian rock that juts sternly from the ridges. Nearly a thousand feet above our heads, as we came into this green saucer crammed with folk and fair-booths and loud with the cries of hawkers and bookies, there fluttered the flag that marks the turning-point for the guides' race. In Coronation year it was the flag of the Stars and Stripes (which, as all Americans and few Britishers know, is based on the arms of an old English family), while a Union Jack nearly 200 feet below marked the turn in the guides' race for juniors under 17. All the way up the hillside were little knots of spectators scattered at vantage points; and amazingly, highest of all, like a scene from *The Borderers*, the heads of a group of fell ponies with their young riders looked patiently over the crest of Butter Crag.

The sports begin at noon, with the ringing of a bell in the centre of the arena. And as they include most of the normal athletic events—foot-racing, leaping, and short-distance cycling hand-caps as well as non-stop wrestling—the main oval is kept busy enough for five hours or more. Conditions for competitors are hardly up to Olympic standard. A pole-vaulter in mid-stride may be staggered by the blast from a shotgun starting a 100-yards heat for juv-

eniles just in front of him; if he still makes his leap, he lands on nothing friendlier than Grasmere turf. The cyclists get their noses to the wheel and sprint perilously over the same damp sward, a bare yard from the front line of onlookers and the resonant brass of the band of the King's Own Royal Regiment. But nothing of this disturbs the wrestlers, who come into the ring as their names are called with the imperturbability and shaggy independence of pit-ponies.

The Wrestlers

Cumberland-Westmorland wrestling may lack the fictitious glamour of more publicised professional sport, but it has the fascination (and the pure style) of a primitive form. A grip is taken with both arms over the opponent's body, left arm under and right arm over the shoulders. Getting a satisfactory grip is often the longest part of the proceedings; when at last the fingers are closed and the judge gives the signal to begin, it may be only a matter of seconds before one of the wrestlers secures a fall. A champion by sheer strength may get his man off balance, lower him almost gently to the ground, shake hands, collect his ticket, and stroll back to the sidelines. But when two champions are matched, in the best of three falls, the excitement mounts as every trick of the game is brought into play. Like steers or elk locked in battle, the linked bodies plunge and sway in a grotesque Danish upspring over the sun-drenched turf. Miraculous recoveries are possible, especially in the light and middle weights; but in the heavy-weights the result has usually the slow inevitability of a glacier calving. And when Ted Dunlinson of Brunstock beat G. Gelleburn of Catterlen in two straight throws to win the Grasmere title (and his eighteenth successive victory of the season) the cheers of the Carlisle contingent might have echoed as far as Iceland, and drawn grim approval from the shadowy elder gods.

To the earth-bound straining of the wrestlers, the guides' race is a perfect foil. J. Gibson, of Burneside, last year's winner, had already clipped 9 seconds off his record in the junior race, when competitors lined up at 3.0 p.m. for the adult race—the main event of the afternoon. The sun was beating down on the arena, where a pathway had been cleared through the crowd to the steep face of the green hillside. To a pistol-shot the runners were off, a close bunch of white and coloured singlets; but the first stiff stretch of going soon sorted them out, as heads and arms came down and the sprinter's dash settled into a shepherd's lope. The knowing were quick to spot the leading figure in white, W. Teasdale, who last

year set a notable record of 13 min. 19 sec. for the course; but an orange singlet was pressing close behind him as the runners approached the first 10-foot stone wall.

Race to the Crag

No cross-country race can be as clearly visible as this to a crowd of thousands, for you watch from below the runners going up a sort of summer ski-run, the incline growing steeper all the way to the upper crags, which must be rounded by each competitor. And here he must hand in his ticket, before beginning the descent by a left-handed loop which brings him back to the stone wall and the last steep stretch of open grass. The going is of all kinds—rough, smooth and treacherous—and only the local sheep-farmers whose daily work breaks them in to such country have ever done well at it. The gruelling climb to the 966-foot fell would finish most conventional athletes; but for the spectator, it is the descent that is the real thrill.

For while the long line of climbers is still painfully winding its way towards the summit, a single figure—in white—suddenly doubles the flag and shoots down the hillside at a pace that opens a gap of yards in the fraction of a second. The exhilaration of this change of tempo is irresistible: soon more and more of the climbing dots have become hurtling meteors, the band strikes up a quickstep, and the shouting rolls down the hill as the pace is really on. I had never known what "light foot on the corrie" really meant until I had seen these dalesmen skimming the crags in their headlong descent. Yet judgment, of course, is still more important than speed—one false step may mean disaster to a runner with a hundred yards in hand.

Teasdale made no mistakes; the white was still well clear of the field as he came like a stag down the last grassy stretch, and the regimental band (well coached for these occasions) played "See the Conquering Hero Comes" with an appropriate flourish on the drums as the compact, swarthy little figure of Lakeland's leading guide breasted the tape.

Hounds Have Their Day

After this, one would have thought, anything must be anti-climax. But the Grasmere hound and puppy trails, the third major feature of this annual meeting, are hardly less spectacular—though, inevitably, less continuously visible. Originally planned as trials for the local fell packs of foxhounds, these races have now become coveted prizes for a special breed of hound—small, lightly-built, but full of dash and courage. It is, on the hound-trails that the heavy betting is done and (if one may believe half the local small-talk) that the real dodges are worked.

First, a trail is laid with a drag of aniseed by a team of fell-runners. I was told that the four men who laid the 10-mile trail got a pound each for their efforts; on that sweltering summer day they certainly earned it. As the last runner comes into the arena with the drag, the hounds are slipped by their owners or trainers, and they flow unforgettably in a low-toned wave through the crowd and out into the dale. There they vanish, for upwards of a quarter of an hour, with only a stray note of hound music carried on a gust of wind.

Meantime the owners of field-glasses are busily scanning the crests of the neighbouring fells, for the last few miles of the trail are apparently conventional, and bring the pack in full view across

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