

Log Rolling At Brownstone Bowl

In the sport of log rolling two men stand on a floating log, each using various tricks and strategies to attempt to roll the log in such a way that his opponent falls off the log into the water, thereby losing the contest. Log rolling is also known as birling, from the word "birl," to twist or spin. The sport originated among river drivers, the men who guided or drove logs down the streams and rivers of the north country to the lumber mills. These men possessed great skill in navigating the floating mass of logs to keep it moving and in breaking up the great log jams that inevitably developed. To break up jams they would locate the key log on the front of the jam that was holding it in place, dislodge it, then scramble across the tumbling logs to safety before they were crushed by the on-rushing mass of timbers. To display their skills the river drivers engaged in log rolling competitions, which soon developed into a lumberjack sport. Log rolling became a national sport in September 1898, when the first world championship log rolling competition was held at Omaha, Nebraska, as part of the Lumbermen's Exhibition. In 1924 the World's Championship Association was organized in Eau Claire, with George Glazier, Washburn's resident log roller, elected vice president. Glazier was

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Washburn's all-around daredevil, who made a spectacular "flaming man" slide down a cable from the top of the elevator to the water during the 1909 Labor Day celebrations.

Glazier was probably instrumental in the decision of the association to hold the eighth annual championship competition, in August 1925, in Brownstone Bowl an abandoned water-filled quarry on the property of the Bodin resort, located about three miles north of Washburn. The bowl provided calm and protected water for the sport. Ten thousand people were expected to attend the event from August 9th to 16th, the Omaha Railroad putting on special excursions trains from the Twin Cities and Eau Claire. Extensive preparations of the site were made, including "parking for 3,000 automobiles" and bleachers to provide seating for the spectators. Events began at 1:00PM each day and included, in addition to competitive log rolling, "trick" and "fancy" log rolling, diving, swimming,

and other water sport exhibitions. The large number of competitors, most of them from the upper Midwestern states, battled each other in a series of elimination contests until the final championship matches on Sunday, August 16th. The overall winner and world log rolling champion was a young man from Cloquet, Minnesota, named Joe Mad-way-ash. The Times did not report attendance, but did mention that "between 3,000 and 4,000" attended the final championship event. While attendance was apparently not up to expectations, the Times declared that the event "was the most successful in the history of log rolling in the United States, and as a result future World's Championship matches will undoubtedly be held at this location." The Times prediction proved to be accurate, at least for the immediate future, for Brownstone Bowl was the setting for the championship competitions in August of 1926, 1927, 1928, and 1929. The 1929 championship tournament was a feature event of the first Washburn homecoming.

Silent and sound motion pictures were taken by three major "news reel companies" of the programs at Brownstone Bowl, to be "shown on theatre screens from coast to coast, giving this city publicity worth thousands of dollars," the Times declared. President Calvin Coolidge,

who was spending the summer of 1928 at Brule, was presented with a pair of "specially made birling shoes" and invited to the August competitions, but there is no record that he used the shoes or attended the event.

The large and enthusiastic crowds from all over the upper Midwest attending these championship tournaments encouraged the idea that Brownstone Bowl could become the permanent location for these events. As the Times put it, "log rolling tournaments can be put over in this territory if sufficient time and effort is devoted to publicizing it. An annual tournament in such a unique sport as log rolling, staged in such a picturesque beauty spot as Brownstone Bowl, will be a great thing for this community and the surrounding territory." To advance this idea of Washburn as the home of the annual birling competitions, a group of local enthusiasts organized the American Birling Association to foster and develop the "occupational sport of old-time river drivers, known as birling . . . as one of America's major outdoor sports." But as with so many other grandiose Washburn ideas, enthusiasm for this "unique sport" soon faded, and the city did not become the center for national birling competitions.