

Martial Sport and the Alpha Male

Men are competitive. They learn to be competitive growing up. While girls either naturally or culturally find comfort in socializing and groups, boys are trying to find out who will lead the pack. Attribute this to biology or enculturation, whichever you think is the stronger influence, but until some huge social/biological upheaval occurs, it will be so.

It is because of competition for top dog status that we care who is the current heavyweight champion of the world. Have you noticed that since boxing has broken up into multiple “leagues,” and has been eclipsed by cage fighting, there is less deference paid to the champ, partially because he is one of many and partially because there apparently tougher dudes in the valley. We care who wins the 100-meter dash in the Olympics because he becomes “the fastest man in the world”. There is a fastest woman in the world, too, but until she is faster than the fastest man, we don’t seem to remember her name.

Guys gather at the local watering hole to argue about which football team has the best quarterback, wide-end, or running back. They get vicarious pleasure when “their” team wins, even though they can’t afford a share of actual ownership. They own the jersey, the beer mug and a few ticket stubs, though. That’s enough to have earned fantasy possession of the whole team. They are one of many, but it doesn’t seem to matter so long as they have a vicarious chance of momentary pseudo-alpha maleness.

Men, young, strong, and tough enough to compete, aim at Olympic gold or professional status or league dominance, or at least a winning season this year. Those whose disposition has a combative side may join a mixed martial art club to get ready for the ring, octagon or cage. There they can show that they are top dog. Men, too old, weak, or soft to compete, adopt a favorite from some MMA roster and follow his career. His style becomes the best not only because he wins, but also because they have made him their own. If they are to be alpha in their own minds, *he* must be alpha. Alphas always have the best style, skills, strategies, don’t they? Otherwise they would not be on top.

All of this is good fun and is a relatively non-violent way to satisfy bio-culturally instinctual drive. Sport exists to harness the competitive instinct in more or less civilized ways. I don’t dislike it or disapprove of it. What makes me uneasy however is when MMA and the competitive alpha-maleness that goes with it become emblematic, in people minds, of “the martial arts”.

MMA is no more representative of the martial arts than rap is representative of music, or abstract expressionism is representative of fine art. MMA is a very small piece of a much bigger puzzle. It is one aspect of the sportive side of the martial arts. The fact that it gets all the press is a testament to the West’s love affair with the alpha male. The fact that a huge number of traditional martial arts and martial artists are sloughed aside because they do not favor alpha-male-ness, but emphasize personal achievement and cooperation, is a testament

to how much a culture can co-opt the independent thinkers who, not too long ago, use to aspire to becoming not alpha-males, but better human beings through studying traditional, not so mixed, non-competitive martial arts.

So here we are with more than a decade of a still growing sport that has overcome the popularity of boxing and *budo* alike. It's only competitor for the TV audience is pro-wrestling. Why? Because the fantasy violence of pro-wrestling offers showmanship, alpha males, and a masculine version of a soap opera, to boot. It would be interesting to see how many fans of pro-wrestling are also fans of cage-fighting. I can see the fans taking sides now. The cage-fighting fans will point to the obviously set up techniques in the squared circle explaining how helpless John Cena or the aging Undertaker would be in a real fight against Brock Lesnar or the aging Randy Couture. Whoops. Lesnar used to be a WWE guy. Maybe the cage-fighting fans ignore how tough it is to even fake a 10-minute WWE match. In the other corner, the WWE fan will complain that one has nothing to do with the other. He is right, just like the UFC and other No-Holds-Barred contests have nothing to do with the self-defense and self-development of traditional martial arts. So why call them Mixed Martial Arts?

Unless you are on a college campus, if you refer to "wrestling", people think WWE or one of its branches. Unless he is a boxing fan, when someone refers to a fight, you think of UFC. That's why scholastic wrestling and boxing are not as popular as they once were. WWE has nothing to do with schoolboy wrestling, but it satisfies the Western need for thrills, chills, and worshipping the alpha male. UFC has nothing to do with martial arts, but it satisfies the Western need for thrills, chills and worshipping the alpha male. As a result, the sportive and character building aspects of wrestling and boxing are on the wane, replaced by showmanship on one hand and toughness on the other. Traditional martial arts is not about worshipping the alpha male, but about self-improvement on one's own level, by one's own definition, in one's own little world. It is much more private than WWE or UFC, but that personal work at self-improvement benefits people, and, as Kano, Ueshiba and Funakoshi expected, indirectly benefits the world.

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