

The Root of Credit (and Blame)

There is no doubt that the hottest martial art in the culture today (circa 2010) is not a martial art at all, but what is euphemistically called Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). A euphemism is a word that is used in place of a term that might be considered too direct or offensive. We don't call MMA "cage fighting", although that's what it is, because cage fighting leaves the impression of desperate men fighting for money with blood-hungry spectators, some gambling, some not, leering over the contest. That seems seedy, so we give it the dignity of calling it an art. Since it is not boxing, wrestling, karate, traditional ju-jitsu, or even kickboxing, but draws from all of the above, we call it mixed. Mixed is better, of course, since calling anything pure sounds a little racist. The cultural bias toward prize-money mayhem is therefore clothed in the cultural bias never to use a dysphemism. A dysphemism is calling something by a term that sounds derogatory. Our culture's attempt to be politically correct and not offend any group has resulted in using terms that, at best, are inexact. At worst, these terms blind us to changes in our culture that, described neutrally, would sound dysphemistic.

We didn't get here all at once. To trace back (admittedly in a simplistic manner) the path of succession, we will start with the invasion of the Gracies. An honorable and supremely well-trained family of Brazilian Jujutsu players, the Gracies re-introduced judo-based mat-work to the martial arts in the 1990s. The Gracies applied Western analysis to Eastern judo while attempting to recapture judo's martial roots so that it could be used not only for self-defense, but also for ring combat. Ground grappling had been the weak link in full-contact fighting, which itself had been a reaction to the point fighting of the 1960s and 70s. Almost every martial artist knows that the current popularity of MMA both in the ring and in cages is the direct outgrowth of the Gracies' open challenge to all other martial arts and the subsequent organization of The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC).

Before the Gracies picked out a blatant weakness in martial artists who were not holistic in their skills, Bruce Lee picked out another weakness. In essence, it was this: if you don't actually fight, you don't know who will actually win. Seems pretty obvious now, doesn't it? His observation is that martial arts contend with each other *theoretically*, according to the biases taught within each art. When they contend with each other *physically*, it is in a tournament for which the rules may be slanted toward one type of art, and/or no one makes actual contact. Trying to defend one's martial tradition was, therefore, an exercise in frustration. You hated the dojo/dojang/kwoon down the block because they applied different technical preferences. Since you wanted to be the baddest dude in the city, your martial art must be the superior martial art! Those other guys are just fantasizing about their prowess. You have the real thing. Bruce Lee essentially said, "Put up or shut up."

So when someone gets permanently injured or dies in the battle cage, we have Bruce to blame, right? Well, not quite. Let's go back a little further.

Before Bruce Lee came into prominence, the badass dudes were the guys who consistently won non-contact tournaments, the Chuck Norrises, Bill Wallaces, and Joe Lewises. They were consistent winners in a sport that simulated a one-on-one fight. Without contact, however, no one could tell who would really win, so full-contact karate and kickboxing came into being. As it turns out Wallace and Lewis were able to transfer their styles into contact prominence. But full-contact karate would not have come into being without non-contact matches and non-contact matches would not have come into being if it were not for the American penchant for sport.

When U.S. troops occupied Japan at the end of World War II, the martial arts were not looked upon as arts, but as martial practices that had prepared Japanese youth for war. The practice of all martial arts was banned. Karate and judo managed to slip under the barbed wire because they were considered sports. Judo had long been a sport, but karate had adopted a sporting aspect only since 1939, just before the war broke out. It was this sporting aspect that karate-ka emphasized to the occupying American authorities in order to escape the ban. It is also this sporting aspect that began to be practiced by American troops stationed in Korea and Japan, troops like the aforementioned Norris, Wallace and Lewis.

Prior to the Second World War, Asian martial arts were practiced for self-defense and personal development. In many cases, “personal development” was not the same personal development we think of in the twenty-first century, but meant “with a nationalistic spirit”, so martial arts were not, in general, done as sports (with the obvious exceptions of judo and kendo).

Still earlier, martial arts were for self-discipline. Earlier still, they were the arts of war. The trigger that converted martial arts for combat to martial arts for self-defense-and-self-development was a peaceful nation. The trigger that converted self-defense and self-development to sport was the American occupation of a previously belligerent nation. And the trigger that converted an Eastern sport to a Western sport was the presence of American troops in Asia.

Martial arts were not intended to be sports. They were wrenched into sports by the Westernization of Japan and Korea before WWII and immediately thereafter. Ironically, that belligerent Japan whose war-like tendencies were put-down at that time by the relatively peaceful United States, produced sports that were tough, honorable, but only *simulated* combat. The West, especially the U.S., has gradually converted those sports to the most combative sport since Romans fought in the coliseum. U.S. serviceman did their share, then Bruce Lee, then the Gracies, but what supported them all was not the American love of sport, but the American love of worshipping the Alpha Male.

More on this next time.