

Wrestling, Self-defense, and Popularization

For background, see the article series [*Positioning for the Future*](#).

In the elementary schoolyard, our only acceptable means of settling an argument (if no adult were around) was wrestling. Even if someone picked on you and you decided to resist, either you'd end up on the grass trying to pin the bully's shoulders for a count of three or he'd try to make you say "Uncle". Wrestling was civilized self-defense compared to the big city guys who'd have a stand-up slugfest to avoid rolling around on a playground where the grass never grew but broken glass managed to accumulate.

Add rules to this sort of self-defense and it became "schoolboy wrestling", replete with mat, headgear, wrestling shoes, and singlet. The formalization of wrestling made it a combat sport, rather than self-defense, but you still wouldn't want to mess with the lean, muscular dudes that trained for it. Sport wrestling had a professional side that, during my upbringing, became more showmanship and less combat skill. Before the 1950s, any showmanship ended when the referee's clinch began. After the '50s, it flipped over: what was called Pro Wrestling became carnival. Although you still wouldn't want to mess with Killer Kowalski or Dick The Bruiser ("Fifty Megatons in Each Arm"), you knew that wrestling had become a caricature of itself.

Even the carnival of pro wrestling started to decline until fully embraced by Vince McMahon and his iterations of the WWE when it gradually became the most watched "sport" on television. Now it's Smash-mouth Cage-fighting's (a.k.a. MMA's) turn. The Super Bowl will draw more viewers than the biggest WWE or UFC event, but The Super Bowl occurs only once a year. Your favorite football team plays only once a week for one season a year--okay, two seasons since they don't know when to stop anymore--while WWF and UFC events are on at least twice a week, in addition to several pay-per-views per year. MMA is passing WWF because it gives much of the same build up and drama, its own sort of characters, much of the same violence, while being believable. Tired of phony fights that are challenging more in their athleticism than in their combat, many people turn to "real" fights, just like you and the other guys turned to a schoolyard altercation in the middle of recess.

Will MMA end up a caricature of itself like Pro Wrestling? I don't think so. You see, MMA is the logical extension not just of contact karate but also of WWE-type wrestling. Pro Wrestling isn't really wrestling anymore; it is mixed pseudo-martial arts. There are plenty of pseudo-punches, -elbows, and -kicks, throws and grappling, and plenty of bloodied foreheads. MMA differs only in that the fighters are without a script, pay attention to the referee, and can't jump off the top rope. (They do bounce their opponents off the cage, however.) Sure, there is a circus atmosphere around both events, but cage fighters have more at stake than the Hemispheric Intercontinental Champion Kingship. More at stake means more drama, so we watch it.

But watch it! Things have a way of overdoing themselves. Even the Roman coliseum became too bloody for some. Even schoolyard fisticuffs got tiresome and stomach-turning if you expected them every recess. The

WWE has to invent new storylines every month to keep the drama going. The contests themselves won't do it. The UFC creates an equivalent storyline by comparing and contrasting the athletes in the upcoming PPV championship, and they put that storyline on a half-dozen half-hour up-close-and-personal TV shows, heightening the drama to boost the box office. The hawkler doesn't call out through a megaphone at the carnival's entrance, but speaks into a Lavalier microphone or as a voice-over.

It seems martial artists are at the same juncture as in Japan during the middle of the 19th century or in the West in the late 20th century. In 1800s' Japan, traditional ju-jutsu systems had fallen into disrepute. They were archaic and unnecessary to a modern nation. Some *ju-jutsu-jin* tried to earn their living by taking their arts to the very people who had rejected them, offering to take on all comers in sideshows. In the late 1800s, Jigoro Kano, between the ages of 18 and 22, studied Tenjin-shinyo Ryu and Kito-ryu Ju-jutsu. As an anglophile, he was learning to speak English. He wanted to save the traditional Japanese martial arts by modernizing them and teaching them more rationally and openly. But in order to prove his art to the nay-saying traditionalists who, despite their greater experience, were slipping into disrepute, he had his students compete against them in sport contests. Although rougher than the current judo contests, since judo rules had not been formalized, they were not knockdown drag-outs, either. His students, some of them former ju-jutsu practitioners, won. Kano saved the reputation of ju-jutsu, by eclipsing ju-jutsu. He saved the traditional martial arts by creating a martial sport. In other words, in order to save the art, he unintentionally destroyed it.

After a hundred years of judo as a sport, it had completely abandoned its self-defense roots. Karate and kung-fu supplanted its popularity. In fact, the first death knoll came when judo was accepted as an Olympic sport. Gradually judo enrollments decreased while karate's increased. People believed that karate/kung-fu was real self-defense and a gentle way of life, as well, and that real self-defense, without sacrificing one's gentle side, was needed in this violent society.

In the 1990s, when the Gracies came along, both traditional ju-jutsu and its grandchild judo had waned in popularity. To his credit, Helio Gracie took his judo roots, studied them, modified them, and tested them in a way that reverse-engineered judo back into a self-defense art known as Brazilian ju-jutsu. In order to prove his art to the nay-saying traditionalists, his students entered sports contests. Their wins transformed both sport and martial arts. No one would ignore ju-jutsu again, that is, they wouldn't be able to ignore Brazilian ju-jutsu. Traditional, non-sportive ju-jutsu was lost in the shuffle. They saved the traditional martial art by creating a martial sport. In order to save the art, they unintentionally destroyed it.

After twenty years of ju-jutsu as a sport, it has nearly abandoned its self-defense roots, but no traditional art has yet supplanted its popularity. People believe that what they see in the cage is real self-defense and, because they no longer care about a gentle way of life, they feel what they see is what they need in this violent society.

More about this violent society and its broken culture next time.