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Corresponding author: nikola.mijatov@fzs.edu.rs

PERMANENT BRUTALIZATION: CONTEMPORARY TENDENCIES IN COMBAT SPORTS

Nikola Mijatov¹

Abstract: Combat sports are the oldest form of competitive sports. They originate from ancient Greece, where the Olympic Games included boxing, wrestling, and pankration, a mixture of both fighting systems. In the ancient world, martial arts were extremely brutal, many dangerous techniques were allowed, and instead of gloves, fighters would wear spikes to further injure their opponent. In the 20th century, combat sports were revived, with boxing and wrestling becoming the most popular, and they are also part of the modern Olympic Games. However, they became more brutalized, and kickboxing was invented, then full contact, and eventually MMA was born, which is based on the ancient pankration tradition. The process did not stop there, but new fighting systems, each more brutal than the previous one, are constantly emerging and attracting large audiences with their brutality and their doubtful ethics.

Keywords: Combat sports, Martial arts, Brutalisation, MMA, Ethics

¹ Associate professor, the Faculty of Sport, University "Union – Nikola Tesla", Narodnih heroja 30, New Belgrade, Serbia, Phone number: +381 11 404 40 50, <https://orcid.org/ 0000-0002-6499-4484>; E-mail: nikola.mijatov@fzs.edu.rs; Senior research associate, Institute for Contemporary History, Trg Nikole Pašića 11, Belgrade, Serbia, Phone number: +381 11 33 98 806

Introduction

Among the many sports that humanity has mastered, martial arts stand out. They represent the oldest form of competition, but also the most serious: the only one in which the confrontation with the opponent is direct. Martial arts are among the oldest sports of humanity. The first records date back thousands of years and have come a long way in evolution, both in terms of technique and rules. There is almost no society in the world without its own form of martial arts, and what they all have in common is a refined ethic that defines them but is also subject to change. Simply put, in all corners of the world, people have a need for competition, or the so-called agon.

The ancient Greeks were the first to define agon, the vital need for competition and rivalry that found its manifestation in fighting. Miloš Đurić (1997) defined agon as “One of the most culture-forming features of Hellenic nature was the agonistic instinct, i.e. the instinct for competition, rivalry, and spectacle for the sake of victory, and not for any practical goal, no matter how valuable, nor for any material gain, nor for any cultic or magical goal, but only for reputation and honor, for primacy and distinction, for praise and glory. The essence of agonistic expression consists in the fact that it is fair play, i.e. it recognizes the quality of the opponent, that he is given the same opportunities as himself; only such a procedure makes it possible to get to know the own effort and qualities of each competitor, to properly evaluate them and give them the recognition that the competitor deserves”.

In the ancient world, within the Olympic Games, combat sports had their own place. The ancient Greeks fought in boxing, wrestling, and a combination of the two – pankration. These ancient variants of modern combat sports were particularly brutal – in boxing, instead of gloves that would cushion the blows, boxers used reinforcements to produce exactly the opposite effect. They even put spikes on the wrists of the hands in order to completely incapacitate the opponent. Likewise, the pankration fighting system was extremely cruel where practically anything was allowed – a fight without rules and mercy that would last until the opponent was completely beaten (Ćirković, 2006)

The ancient Greek Olympic Games were first overshadowed by the gladiatorial games of ancient Rome. In them, slaves would fight to the death in arenas. Over time, the audience became bored with the slave conflict, so new attractions were invented. Thus, entire groups of slaves clashed, simulated battles were staged, and animals were introduced. The Romans thus sought entertainment in the fights of elephants, lions, and tigers with humans, but also with each other. The climax was reached when an entire naval battle was simulated inside the Colosseum to the general delight of the audience (Brodel, 2007).

These blood sports of the ancient world were abruptly interrupted by Christianity. Having first begun as a sect, the Edict of Milan of Emperor Constantine the Great allowed Christians to profess their faith for the first time (Острогорски, 1993). A few decades later, Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the only religion and banned pagan customs. The ban also affected the Olympic Games, which, after almost a thousand years of tradition, ceased to exist. With them, the gladiatorial games, which for centuries had shown that brutality was entertaining to the masses, disappeared. The age of Christianity followed, embodied in the Middle Ages, where there was no place for enter-ainment that stemmed from brutality (Crowther, 2007).

Martial arts in the 20th century

The modern era has brought new fighting systems. First and foremost is wrestling, which is part of the tradition of many nations, where competitors mainly competed at fairs. There are variations of wrestling on all continents, and as the oldest sport, it survives even in the modern era (Kasum, Jovanović, Ćirković, 2010).

Boxing also developed in parallel with wrestling. The first records of boxing date back to the Minoan civilization, and this sport reached its peak in the 20th century (Ćirković, 2006). Modern boxing was the choice of the English nobility, which is why it is called a noble art. This sport gained worldwide popularity after World War II with the appearance of Muhammad Ali, whose contribution to this sport is immeasurable, but also to wrestling in general. With his charm, upbringing and charisma, Ali became the first world-famous fighter admired by millions (Marjanović, 2006; Mijatov, Radenović, 2021)

The Olympic movement was important for the development of martial arts. Pierre de Coubertin revived the ancient Olympic Games in a modern guise by opening the first games in 1896. Wrestling and boxing were an integral part of the games. An important aspect of the Olympic Games was the safety of the participants, so as such they were a kind of filter for martial arts: those that were too rough simply could not become part of the Olympic movement. Along this line, judo, karate (shotokan), and taekwondo would become part of the Olympic Games.

At the same time, the 20th century saw the popularization of martial arts and their humanization. Bounded by clear and strict rules, martial arts became humane fighting systems where an individual, through regular training, can safely develop into a true fighter.

It is important to note that modern wrestling and modern boxing have come a long way from their ancient forebears. These sports have been deeply humanized, with the safety of the participants now being taken into account. In ancient Greece, boxers would use gloves, but to further strengthen their fists and inflict greater damage on their oppo-

nents (Crowther, 2007). In modern boxing, gloves are there to protect. As for wrestling, many dangerous moves are prohibited in modern wrestling. The best evidence of this is the ancient sculpture of a wrestler from the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, where the wrestler performs a move that is prohibited in the modern version of this sport.

The path of humanization has also been taken by Japanese martial arts, some of which have become sports. It is a long process of development of fighting ethics that reached its peak in the 20th century. Judo stands out, which became an Olympic sport in 1964 in Tokyo. Its origins are directly from the battlefields of medieval Japan, where samurai used brutal jiu-jitsu techniques in order to defeat their opponents in the most effective and brutal way possible. The founder of judo, Jigoro Kano, selected jiu-jitsu techniques and discarded the dangerous ones, creating a modern humane art – judo (Kano, 2007; Mijatov, 2017).

Korean taekwondo was humanized in the same way. On the battlefields of medieval Korea, the key skill was hapkido, in which anything was allowed and the death or complete incapacitation of the opponent was imperative. From this brutal and all-encompassing skill, taekwondo was created, which is safe for fighters and represents the pinnacle of predominantly foot techniques. As a result, it became an Olympic sport at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney (Choji, 1995).

Permanent brutalization

Humanization seemed to have its limits. Martial arts also took another, opposite path. The 20th century brought a multitude of new skills that stood out for their brutality, which until then had been reserved for old styles.

Karate is an ancient art originating from Okinawa. It was deeply humanized first by the reforms of Ginchin Funakoshi, the founder of the Shotokan style. However, the founder of the Kyokoshin style, Masatatsu Oyama, reintroduced brutal techniques and even more brutal sparring into his idea of karate. When karate rules became more and more considerate of the health of the participants, Kyokoshin cultivated a high level of brutality. The founder of this style, Oyama himself, became famous by fighting a bull, where he showed superhuman strength and technique, but also brutality and ruthlessness towards an innocent animal (Simić, 2005).

The change also came in the skills of grappling. Helio Grace was not satisfied with judo and the range of techniques that this art offers. For this reason, he founded his own art: Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. In practice, Helio reintroduced the long-forbidden techniques of Japanese Jiu-Jitsu that Jigoro Kano had removed from judo precisely for safety reasons.

This rebrutalized version of judo from Brazil would become one of the most recognizable martial arts of the 21st century (Mijatov, 2016).

A sudden change occurred in the 1990s. Combat sports were becoming increasingly monotonous and the audience was eager for fast and brutal action. As a turning point, we can take the brutalization of boxing, where the match between Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield was forever remembered. In the midst of the fight, Tyson bit off his opponent's ear at that very moment, and that match would become the most memorable moment in boxing, even though the act itself transcended the boundaries of this sport. From that moment, that bite, the process of brutalization would gain momentum and cover all fighting sports.

Soon, boxing was not enough and it was precisely in the late 90s and early 2000s that kickboxing suddenly became popular. Along with it, Thai boxing, an exotic art that had mostly remained within the boundaries of Thai tradition, spread around the world because it introduced new dynamics and new brutality into fighting systems. Not only fists but also legs, knees and elbows served as legitimate weapons for fighters. The brutality continued further, where kickboxing transformed into K1, which allowed almost all strikes and, with its three rounds that make up a match, emphasized the dynamics of the fight and quick knockouts.

The new millennium brought the syncretization of all martial arts into a single system known as MMA - mixed martial arts. First through the Pride organization and then through the UFC, this new martial arts sport will attract millions of spectators who will enjoy brutal and bloody fights in the octagon. The combination of punches and wrestling allows for a complete fighter but also new ranges of brutalization that characterizes MMA matches. In addition, the level of destruction allowed in this sport far exceeds both boxing and kickboxing, where when the referee would have stopped the match long ago in these sports, in MMA the referee allows the practical massacre of the opponent, so often the matches end with the entire octagon covered in blood.

The brutality of MMA matches has also led to a new popularization of martial arts. Practically since the time of Muhammad Ali, martial arts have not had this level of popularity. It was only in 2014 that the highest-paid athlete in the world came from the world of wrestling, in the form of Conor McGregor, who became a global star like Muhammad Ali once was (Knight, 2021). Unlike Ali, who captivated with charm, eloquence and culture, McGregor stood out with his grumpiness, swearing and arrogance.

The process did not stop there, but the brutalization continued. For the audience thirsting for blood and quick fun, a clash of two opponents with very few restrictions was not enough, so MMA matches turned into shows of exoticism and brutality. Thus, we also had matches of men against several women, then group fights five against five,

but also mixed categories where several lightweight fighters would clash with one heavyweight (Peters, 2015).

The limits of human imagination in the realm of brutalization seem to exist. In recent years, we have also had fights in telephone booths. Two fighters are tasked with defeating each other in a very small space using all available techniques. In addition, there are fights in cars known as Carjitsu, where the match begins with the competitors sitting in the driver's and passenger's seats, wearing seat belts, and from that position they begin the fight. Finally, as the most direct and brutal form, we have the slapping competition, where the competitors stand still and take turns slapping each other until one falls down or gives up the fight (Mitchell, 2024; Roberts, 2024).

Conclusion

Martial arts, as one of the oldest forms of competition, have undergone a long process of permanent change throughout history. From ancient Greece to the present day, combat sports holds a special place among sports where conflict is direct. In every other sport, there is an intermediary between the participants: most often a ball or some other prop. In many other sports, there is no such thing as contact, such as volleyball or athletics. Only in combat sports is the conflict direct and without intermediaries: a conflict between two fighters whose goal is to completely incapacitate the opponent.

What makes combat sports humane are the rules. They have changed over the centuries, but they have always sought to be considerate of the health of the participants. Even in ancient Greece, boxers would strengthen their wrists to make their punches more deadly. Then came gloves as a form of protection, and today we have modern boxing, which is truly concerned with the safety of the boxer. Once a punch is thrown, it cannot be controlled. Also, even the most experienced fighters cannot control the amount of damage their punch can cause. As a result, it is very important that striking combat sports have very clear rules aimed at protecting the participants.

On the other hand, in wrestling and grappling, dangerous techniques are openly banned, making the fight much safer. However, the trend has also been different. Some martial arts, such as Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, have brought back old banned techniques, thus giving fighters a wider range of options in combat. Finally, MMA has united a multitude of styles into one ruthless fight in the octagon, where almost anything is allowed. With its syncretism of different striking and grappling skills, MMA has attracted millions of viewers with its brutality.

The process did not stop there. The modern era also witnesses slapping competitions, group fights, but also mixed gender fights. The ethics of fighting are in an obvious crisis,

where brutality is increasingly emerging for the sake of popularity and viewership. In an era dominated by mass media, where it is crucial to attract attention and stand out from the crowd, brutality in combat sports has proven to be an extremely powerful tool. Put simply: more brutality brings more viewership, which in itself guarantees more profit for the organizations.

If we take into account the lessons of history, the future is not very promising. As we have already mentioned, in ancient Rome, gladiatorial games occupied a special place among sports. They began with a certain amount of brutality in one-on-one fights. However, ordinary combat quickly became monotonous for the audience, so group clashes were introduced into the gladiatorial games, as well as fights between people and animals, and even entire naval battles. What is worrying is that this process in Rome paralleled the process of decline and collapse of the Roman Empire (Gibon, 2007). Nothing more directly indicated the decadence of an entire society than the brutalization of martial arts. Similarly, today we are witnessing a permanent brutalization that can simultaneously serve as a serious warning of the crisis of the entire society.

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