

Wrestling fight – between tradition, sport and spectacle

Authors' Contribution:

- A** Study Design
- B** Data Collection
- C** Statistical Analysis
- D** Manuscript Preparation
- E** Funds Collection

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Received: 01 December 2022; **Accepted:** 28 December 2022; **Published online:** 30 January 2023

AoBID: 15908

Abstract

In ancient times, two forms of hand-to-hand combat were cultivated in parallel only partly with one compatible goal – a spectacle to attract the attention of crowds. Healthy emotions and positive social role models were provided by fights based on relatively mild methods and means of achieving a wrestling-type victory. In contrast, boxing and pankration were bloody spectacles that contradicted the ideals of wrestling-type fights.

While in Western culture wrestling forms have been forgotten for nearly 1,500 years, in Far Eastern culture they have guided the development of successive generations by combining physical development with the embodiment of wisdom. This practice, through the unique pupil-master bond, is combined with a duty of respect for the elderly that is also evident today.

The revival of the Modern Games in the 19th century and the creation of the Olympic Charter in 1914 brought about a renewal of the Olympic idea, based on thoughts developed by the ancient Greek philosophers. This gave a new impetus to the development of the society of Western culture; respect for the opponent, the values of equal opportunity and fair play were to contribute to mutual respect for all mankind.

In the early days, this development was in line with the idea of the rediscovered values of the development of spirit and body, goodness and wisdom. Now, once again (as in the era of the Roman Games), widespread social prosperity, the pursuit of profit by satisfying the shallow needs of society in the age of the internet and televised spectacle have led to the promotion of sham and neo gladiatorialism. Once again, virtues such as moderation and frugality have been supplanted by greed and addiction to pleasure. We are becoming a society of free time, consumption, fun and lack of morals.

Keywords: agon • fair play • innovative agonology • kalokagathia • Olympic Movement • pankration

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Conflict of interest: Author has declared that no competing interest exists

Ethical approval: Not required

Provenance & peer review: Not commissioned; externally peer-reviewed

Source of support: Departmental sources

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Agon – in Ancient Greece the term *agōn* meant “a reunion, stadium, sport competitions” (also a rivalry in drama and music). Derivate of this term: *agōnistikós* – “apt to fight, quarrelsome”; *agōnia* – “a struggle for victory in competitions, strain, fear” [37].

Olympic Movement – *noun* all the international sporting federations who abide by the rules of the Olympic Charter [39].

Freestyle wrestling – is a style of amateur wrestling that is practiced throughout the world. Along with **Greco-Roman**, it is one of the two styles of wrestling contested in the Olympic games.

Freestyle wrestling – Olympic sport which consists in a direct combat between two competitors.

Neo-gladiator – a person who trains mixed martial arts (MMA) and similar forms of hand-to-hand fighting that do not meet the definition of sport according to the Olympic Charter [38].

Aggression (in psychology) – is deliberate behaviour by the perpetrator intended to either hurt the opponent, harm or distress him/her in any other way, cause pain (regardless of whether this aim is achieved), or destroy things [40, 41].

Aggression (in praxeology) – is to initiate destructive fight or move in a verbal dispute from material arguments to those causing distress to the opponent [42].

INTRODUCTION

It is now widely accepted that one of the most important factors influencing the health of the population, including life expectancy, is physical activity as part of lifestyle. This relationship is not a unique condition, but is linked to the environment in which we live, genetic factors or modern health care. Of all these factors, lifestyle is the most likely to be shaped. This lifestyle is shaped by appropriate behavioural patterns, in the process of upbringing and socialisation. To the greatest extent this takes place, in the child's early years as a result of interactions within the family, and in adolescence as a result of interactions with peers [1].

The benefits of undertaking physical activity are obvious. It is widely accepted that physical activity is one of the most important categories for the proper functioning of the human body. Systematic physical activity is a fundamental biological determinant of both physical and mental health. Its all-round effect leads to optimal development, secures the needs for movement, improves the flexibility of muscles and joints, strengthens muscles and the human skeletal system [2].

Specific forms of physical activity include exercises associated with hand-to-hand combat in the broadest sense, often associated with combat sports (for Western culture) and martial arts (for Far Eastern culture). However, references to wrestling fights are significant in both cultures. In a sense, we can speak of a universal *agon* culture, regardless of geographical and historical conditions (*agon*: see glossary).

In a cognitive sense, it is legitimate to analyse these fundamental insights into physical activity in a continuum from tradition to the present day, taking into account the diversity of cultures. The aim of this publication is to know about the ancient references to participation in wrestling (for Western culture) and martial arts of the wrestling type (for Eastern culture) and their perception in the age of globalisation.

Between tradition, sport and spectacle

With regard to the fundamental differentiation between sport and various forms of wrestling combat, it is important to point out the relationship of the latter to their military background. A common feature of all forms of wrestling combat, whether Western or Far Eastern, is

the premise of using an explored form of combat for a good purpose. The fundamental problem of wrestling combat arising from the reference to martial arts is its definition. From the point of philosophical consideration, it is precisely the possibility of using martial forms in a non-sporting situation that is the main element separating this group of exercises from sport in the broadest sense (combat sports theory). Sometimes this definition goes so far as to indicate their violent character [3].

An attempt to change such a reference is found in the proposal to define the issue of martial arts in a broader context that takes into account the philosophy of moral conduct as a condition of a true martial arts master. In ancient Greece, this reference involved the development of both body and spirit, striving for the ideal of goodness (*kalokagathia*).

A form of hand-to-hand combat on the programme of the ancient Greek Games that implements this kind of reference is wrestling [4]. In the Asian forms of hand-to-hand combat, each martial art developed its own philosophy but always treating it as a sure model of the path set by the master. There seem to be many more similarities in the perception of ancient forms of hand-to-hand combat between the East and the West.

Ancient Greece is commonly associated with great philosophers, who shaped the image of thinkers who were role models. A characteristic feature of this era is the extremely broad perception of human development in all areas of human endeavour. Reference to ethics, law and religious norms formed the basis for the development of Greek citizens, emanating from a concern for intellectual development and the development of physical fitness. The ideal of the athlete indicated by Plato or Aristotle as the image of the naked athlete, combining sporting beauty with the goodness [5].

A widespread understanding of the emotional and intellectual nature of physical activity was a characteristic element of Greek society, which fundamentally distinguished them from the barbarians.

Wrestling uniquely became a reflection of the aspirations of the Greeks through its connection to mythology. The mythical heroes Peleus, Theseus and Heracles were the first ‘athletes’ to

create ancient sports training. From a sporting point of view, each of these characters is famous for their wrestling skills. [6, 7].

The Greek name for the sport of wrestling 'PALE' is translated as: "gate to the truth", at the same time Plato when indicating the definition of wrestling uses a slightly different reference - "wrestling is the passage through the gate to the heavenly rapture". Both definitions link the possibility of developing physical fitness through wrestling training with spiritual development. Heracles, one of the famous warriors successful in wrestling, became a Greek hero by also winning victories in war. The fact of the extraordinary spiritual nature of the symbolism of wrestling combat is noticeable in relation to the ancient Olympic Games, which included wrestling on the programme and later pankration as a form combining wrestling and boxing. The initial reference of the ancient Greek Games was as a form of sacrificial ritual, and the victorious athletes set an example for the next generation of young Greeks to cultivate the tradition of doing good by shaping physical fitness [8, 9].

The winners of the competition at the Olympic Games, like their mythological idols, set the best example for the younger generation to shape a beautiful body and do good. The competition was so concentrated that winning once was very difficult, and winning repeatedly was remarkable.

Two wrestlers won the boy's competition and then went on to compete in five more open competitions. The most famous wrestler from the Olympic Games was Milon of Croton, who is said to have lifted a 4-year-old bull, killed it with one blow and then ate it in a single day [5,9].

"Hellenism" can be taken to signify a modern cultural construct and a philosophical perspective that spread from Greece through most of the ancient world from 333 BC to 63 BC (when Rome dominated the European world). The ancient Greeks are thus seen as having created a civilisation that valued the practice of the arts and at its core were the ideals of democracy [10].

In the Greek tradition, old age and the elderly are portrayed and valued in a very positive way, as age is associated with wisdom. Respect and support for parents and grandparents was deeply rooted in morality and even considered a sacred duty. The issue of elderly care was an important

part of the functioning of the state, supported by philosophers, artists, writers and, above all, doctors. The attention of so many actors focused on the problems of the elderly led to the creation of systemic care as an independent field of medicine. Hippocrates described the course and treatment of typical geriatric conditions and the methods of treating them. The valuing of old age was so important that it was perpetuated in Greek myths [11].

The development of the ideal of sport as understood in Western culture was halted by the spread of Roman Games, initially associated with the Etruscan custom of worshipping the dead through combat rather than human sacrifice. Gladiatorial combat in Rome probably first appeared in 264 BC at the funeral of the senator Junius Brutus Pera. By the end of the 3rd century BC, slaves were used to fight at the funerals of aristocrats, although the memory of the dead was still revered. Over time, gladiatorial fights (munera) became more of an 'advertisement' for their organisers than an actual tribute to the deceased. Whereas once the fight was watched in silence only by the family of the deceased, now it was mainly a crowd of random people, curious about the bloody spectacle, who loudly 'cheered' the gladiators. Gradually, the so-called religious ritual turned into entertainment for the people.

The Games, established in the Roman Empire, were already basically just aimed at satisfying the shallow expectations of the citizens. The training of gladiators itself, on the other hand, became a mere business from which a fortune could be made. Spectators valued the gladiators' physical prowess, fighting skills or tactical prowess, while overlooking the values of goodness and moral attitudes. It was then that the famous slogan "bread and circuses" was invented [12].

The gradual demoralisation of the rules for organising the Games resulted in increasing brutalisation. The organisers of the competitions outdid themselves with ideas to arouse greater spectator interest. Rome's new position as a world power and general relative social prosperity resulted in the emergence of new diseases as a mass phenomenon. Old virtues such as moderation and frugality were transformed into greed and addiction to pleasure. Thus, the Romans, under the banner of prosperity, degenerated into a society of leisure, consumption, fun and a mentality of rejection [13].

Far Eastern martial arts are defined by Holt [14] as systematic fighting styles and practices, which he defines as ways of embodying wisdom. Understanding a systematic approach to practising an appropriate martial style involves not only the physical exercises to perfectly execute martial techniques but represents a complementary approach to social, physical and health development. In essence, all martial arts present very similar assumptions of the complementary development of body and mind presented by all Far Eastern forms of practising wrestling [15, 16]. Among the many varieties of wrestling characteristic of Far Eastern cultures, it is important to point out the lesser-known Indian wrestling – *kushti*, *khapsagai* – Yakutian wrestling, Mongolian wrestling, Iranian wrestling or the much more well-known sumo (as Japanese wrestling).

The term *kushti* (Hindu wrestling) is translated directly from Hindi from the phrase 'Bharatiya kushti'. In northern India, there are two other terms that are used interchangeably to refer to Hindu wrestling. The most common of these is *pahalwani*, which signifies the definition of two important conceptual domains in the broader sense of wrestling as a way of life. On the one hand, *pahalwani* defines a particular concept of self-knowledge in terms of principles of somatic development of the body, and on the other, it expresses the value of wisdom and ethical principles as a distinct ideology. *Pahalwani* cognition thus means understanding how wrestlers make sense of who they are through the medium of their bodies, while the second term *mallayuddha*, can be literally translated as "wrestling fight" [17].

As in Greek mythology, most of the ancient gods of Hinduism were experts in the martial arts of wrestling – Krishna, Shiva, Kali. We meet one of the heroes of the Ramayana – Hanuman – as an expert in Hindu wrestling. These mythical characters of the Mahabharata were gifted by their ancestors with special skills in the use of variants of wrestling.

Training led to balance, control and flexibility of mind and body. Psycho-physical integration was the basis of self-awareness, leading to exceptional effective performance. The learning process, was conducted as a system of cognition, implementation to the next stages - initiation. The complex training was only for men.

Kushti is one of the most efficient systems for developing body and mind awareness. Cognition, the shaping of body and mind through the Hindu form of wrestling in ancient times, was treated with the same seriousness as reading, writing and arithmetic. For many centuries, it has had a special status in the ritual dimension.

In modern times, the knowledge of Indian self-defence systems has been so much forgotten that only a few have learnt about the knowledge of their specificity, status and ancient origin of this form of wrestling combat [18].

Another example of the development of wrestling combat in extremely extreme conditions is that of *khapsagai* (Yakutia). This republic is the coldest region in the northern hemisphere, which is completely in the permafrost zone. Air temperatures range from +40°C in summer to -60°C in winter [19]. In the north of the Republic, the polar night and polar day have a significant impact on the human body. The harsh climate, specific photoperiodicity, barometric pressure instability, magnetospheric state and radiation levels are not the only characteristics of the extreme conditions of the Republic of Sakha.

Since ancient times, Sacha people have shown a strong interest in hand-to-hand combat, virtually excluding the interaction of large numbers of people [20, 21, 19]. In the education system, people sought and found practical ways to use wrestling techniques that ensured victory with less energy. Gradually, such techniques, passed down from generation to generation, were formed into a system. Fighting under difficult climatic and geographical conditions, constant dependence on nature, difficulties in everyday life, contributed to the fact that in ancient times wrestling had an almost magical significance.

In Western culture, the first Games inspired by the ancient Greek cult of health of body and spirit gave rise to a movement called Olympism, the meaning of this movement was given in 1914 by the first Olympic Charter, which included the basic principles and rules of the Olympic movement. In this historic document written by Coubertin, Olympism became "a philosophy of life exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind" [22, 23].

Olympic philosophy is largely based on a humanist anthropology, such as that advanced by the

classical ancient Greek philosophers. This progression, in the activities of the Olympic movement, has focused on the importance of Olympic values as a basis for the creation of an Olympic philosophy [24, 25].

Among the great ideas of the modern Western world, the Olympic ideal, through its multifaceted nature, is one of the best expressions of our identity. In its reference, it allows us to identify with this idea not only as a European one, but also as a global one, uniting the people and citizens of the world. Through the Olympic Games, this Olympic ideal belongs to the world, to all the people of the world, especially since the Olympic Games now appear as the greatest global mass spectacle [26].

In a historical sense, it is precisely wrestling that is the first combat sport accumulating the most important of the recommended health advantages and offers, in a utilitarian sense, gentle and relatively mild ways of restraining the movements of an opponent (also a potential aggressor), thus also fulfilling the criteria of “fair self-defence”. However, the multifaceted promotion of combat sports and arts is dedicated especially to those of Asian origin. And fights, rightly qualified from the perspective of science as neo gladiatorial, although they do not meet the criteria of sports competition and are a blatant contradiction of the spirit of the “Olympic Charter”, which does not allow depreciation of human dignity, are nevertheless promoted by the contemporary media as extreme sports. Meanwhile, massacring to the delight of others a lying opponent is a denial not only of sport. Demonstrating one’s superiority over an opponent by throwing him off balance and then restraining his movements in accordance with the idea of *fair play* is apparently not enough for the modern *homo agonisticus* [27] either.

Already the Roman civilisation was dominated by the gladiatorial games and they reached such a level of pathology of aggression that the Emperor Constantine the Great banned them by an edict of 326. The extent of the fascination of *homo sapiens* with bloody spectacles, during which people kill each other, is evidenced by the fact that the procedure of banning the gladiatorial games, lasted for more than 350 years – until 681 [28].

As an example of running reference of Roman gladiators, the state of Florida in April 2020, at

the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, allowed a professional form of American wrestling (pro-wrestling) alongside hospitals, law enforcement and grocery shops as an essential service. This led to the creation of a specific type of wrestling bout: a confusion of real fight and film spectacle. An analysis of media demand resulting from professional market assessment led to the production of a series of cinematic wrestling bouts that introduced the narrative of television wrestling, combining various elements of cinematic genres (e.g. action, horror) with the spectacular performance of pro-wrestling competitors. Productions included Firefly Inferno Match, in which John Cena wrestled his way through a nightmarish recreation of his career that appeared to be inspired by the films of David Lynch, and a swamp fight based on films such as Texas Chainsaw Massacre (directed by Tobe Hooper, 1974). One of the basic tenets of producing popular series is to adapt to the desires of their consumers, which was the case when wrestling fans reacted negatively to wrestling programmes in an empty arena. In May 2021, one of the first show-fights (Stadium Stampede) was produced, which combined a recorded film segment with a live wrestling performance. The cinematic segment of the match featured various stunts that could not be performed live, while the live wrestling performance was the centrepiece of the show prepared for an enthusiastic audience response. With the innovations, serialised television wrestling storytelling entered a new phase of production [29].

CONCLUSIONS

Since the dawn of humanity, the agonistic nature of man has fascinated societies regardless of geographical location, economic and military status, cultural heritage etc. When the fate of wars was decided on the battlefields in a direct clash between hostile armies, paradoxically two forms of hand-to-hand combat were cultivated in parallel only partly with one compatible goal – a spectacle to attract the attention of crowds. Healthy emotions and positive social patterns were provided by fights based on relatively benign methods and means of achieving victory [30-32, 5]. Boxing and pankration, on the other hand, were bloody spectacles contradicting the ideals of wrestling-type fights, or even fights fought during ceremonial funeral games, remaining closely related to the combat application, but respecting *fair play* [33].

While in Western culture wrestling forms were forgotten for nearly 1,500 years, in Far Eastern culture they guided the development of successive generations by combining physical development with the embodiment of wisdom. This practice, through the unique pupil-master bond, is combined with a duty of respect for the elderly that is also evident in the present day. For this culture, the elderly are still linked to wisdom.

The revival of the Modern Games in the 19th century and the creation of the Olympic Charter in 1914 brought about a renewal of the Olympic idea, based on thoughts developed by the ancient Greek philosophers. This gave a new impetus to the development of the society of Western culture; respect for the opponent, the values of equal opportunity and *fair play* were to contribute to mutual respect for all mankind.

In the early days, this development was in line with the idea of the rediscovered values of the development of spirit and body, goodness and wisdom. Now, once again (as in the era of the Roman Games), widespread social prosperity, the pursuit of profit by satisfying the shallow needs of society in the age of the internet and televised spectacle have led to the promotion of sham and neo gladiatorialism. Once again, virtues such as moderation and frugality have been supplanted by greed and addiction to pleasure. We are becoming a society of free time, consumption, fun and lack of morals. The recommendations of innovative agonology [34, 35] are the hope for reflection and stopping the pathology of neo gladiatorship. This is the social mission of science and scientists must fulfil it regardless of even unfavourable circumstances – paradoxically social.

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Cite this article as: Kruszewski A. Wrestling fight – between tradition, sport and spectacle. *Arch Budo* 2023; 19: 21-27