EDITORIAL

Combat and Empty Hands

Man has always been exposed to combat situations from the beginning of time. In the early days there was the necessity to defend himself and his family against wild animals and other men. When communities developed young men grouped together to defend their land against others. They therefore trained to fight with and without weapons developing a warrior class (1). As civilization progressed further it no longer became necessary for all individuals to worry about protecting themselves, employing instead the police and armed forces to do this for them. Nevertheless you only have to see young boys having friendly impromptu wrestling bouts to realise that the instinct remains.

One of the early ways of catering for this in young men was boxing. In Europe this had few regulations until 1743 when a man by the name of Jack Broughton laid down the rules which were for a long time regarded as fair play, for example do not hit a man below the belt or when he is on the floor. Knuckle fighting as it was then called was brutal. No gloves were worn, a round ended when a man was knocked down and the fight only finished when one or both of the participants were unable to continue when it was time for the next round. Damage to both contestants was often severe. As a result in 1866 the Marquess of Queensberry drew up the now widely accepted rules of modern boxing.

During the early part of this century boxing came into its own. It was encouraged in schools as it was felt that it developed fitness, self confidence, discipline, clean living and sportsmanship. There was also a feeling that it helped combat juvenile delinquency by catering for the fighting instinct but ensuring that it took place in a disciplined environment.

In 1928, however an American pathologist by the name of Martland coined the term 'Punch Drunk' drawing attention for the first time to what he called 'a peculiar condition among boxers' (2). Those most at risk were noted to be those who had started young often fighting in booths. They fought many more fights than any boxer would be allowed to fight today. The boxer who could 'take a punch' being most at risk. The syndrome was insidious in onset and showed features often very similarly to Parkinson's Disease. Definite brain

abnormalities such as septum pellucidum perforations, enlarged ventricles, corpus callosum thinning, cerebral and cerebellar scarring were observed at post mortem (3). As a result of these findings arguments arose and continue to this day with some medical groups condemning the sport absolutely, whereas others feel that to ban boxing would merely drive it underground with the loss of the present strict controls.

In November 1994 martial arts became formally recognised by the Army offering traditional karate (KARATE, Empty hands) as an alternative fist art to those so inclined. The traditional form should not be confused with full contact forms or kick boxing, where the risks are probably greater than boxing and the overall control less strict. In traditional karate competition fighting forms only a small voluntary part of training catering for the younger practitioners who wish to test themselves. Under the World Union of Karate Organization (WUKO) rules scoring is on the successful application of skillful techniques without deliberate heavy blows particularly to the head. In fact excessive contact can result in points lost or disqualification. Accidents of course do still happen even in all sports but personal experience in providing medical cover for several local, national and international tournaments suggest that in this form of the sport, if strictly controlled, the injury is low compared to many collision or contact sports. In Japan the incidence of accidental facial contact has been reduced further in university karate by the introduction of full facial perspex masks. Perhaps therefore traditional karate could be offered as an acceptable alternative, catering for man's combative instincts and keeping many young men of the 90's out of trouble, as did boxing during the recession in the early part of the century.

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