

## PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND HISTORY OF PHYSICAL CULTURE

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### The Martial Science of Boxing and its Contribution to Military Close Combat

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#### Abstract

This paper will examine the more obscure aspects of Boxing as a martial science. It will illustrate that the martial history, tradition and virtue of boxing is an undeniable fact albeit one that is rarely, if ever, seriously acknowledged and understood. It will concentrate upon the military applications rather than the normal sporting elements (although it will touch upon certain aspects of sporting competition where deemed appropriate) demonstrating how it has been an integral part of the training of a warrior since ancient times, how it was used to develop “fighting spirit” and how it has continued to provide a major contribution to the origins and development of modern military close-combat techniques in much the same way as certain oriental martial arts.

#### Introduction

Competition has probably always been an integral part of the human condition. Indeed, isn't evolution itself, with its law of “Natural Selection” a competition to see who is the fittest, fastest, strongest and most suited to survive?

Competition amongst the human race takes many forms with two of the most important ones being sport, whereby friends can compete with one another and, at the other end of the spectrum, war, whereby enemies can compete against each other.

Boxing seems to have played an important role in each of these avenues of competition, and continues to be a popular sport both at the amateur and professional level. Not to mention the thousands of illegal bare-knuckle prize fights that take place every year in different countries around the globe.

However, it is worth as a strictly military art of self defence seems to have become somewhat neglected and ignored. This is a great pity because, as we shall see from the following paper, it was for centuries one of the most important tools in the shaping and training of a warrior and, even in these modern days of “smart weapons technologies” it still has potentially a lot to offer when it comes to instilling skill, determination and the fighting spirit into the hearts and minds of contemporary soldiers.

#### The ancient world

Boxing is one of the most ancient of all the martial arts, and has quite a clear and traceable history when compared to some other forms of combative systems. The term “boxing” itself derives from the “box-like” shape of the closed hand or fist. In Latin, the fist is called “pugnis” so hence the alternative term: “pugilism”. Pugnis itself derives from the Greek “pugme”, meaning “fist.”

Boxing was practiced in one form or another by most of the classical civilisations of antiquity including those of Egypt, Sumer (a form of boxing can be seen in Sumerian Carvings from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, while an Egyptian relief from about a thousand years later actually shows both participants and spectators. In each case the boxers are bare-fisted) and Crete (where it is even possible to see boxers depicted wearing a primitive type of glove). Even more ancient than this, in 1927 the famous archaeologist, Dr Ephraim Avigdor Speiser, discovered a Mesopotamian stone tablet while excavating an ancient temple at Khafaje, which is situated very close to Baghdad, Iraq, that depicted two men preparing for a boxing match. This tablet is believed to be some 7000 years old!

Fighting with the fists is also described in several ancient Indian texts including the Vedas,

the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In addition, evidence has been found in certain excavations carried out at the site of two ancient cities called Mohenjodaro and Harappa in the Indus valley.

However, although fighting using the closed fists would seem to come naturally to most human beings, it was perhaps in Greece that both the sport and science of Boxing began to gather widespread popularity and was organised and developed accordingly.

It was in Greece that Boxing became an Olympic sport (688 BCE), and it was also in Greece that it was refined and recognised as being a valuable tool in the training of the warrior. Boxing is mentioned by Homer in the 13<sup>th</sup> book of the Iliad (Circa 675 BCE) wherein it is described as being part of the competitive games the Mycenaean's used to honour their dead.

At this time, while there were some rules (such as forbidding any clinching or wrestling) there were absolutely no weight divisions, no rings, no rounds and certainly no referee. Boxers would simply pummel each another until one was eventually knocked out or gave up. Consequently, serious injuries and even death were not that uncommon. Pythagoras of Samos, who won the boxing crown at the 48<sup>th</sup> Olympiad (588 or 584 BCE), is recognised as being the first truly "Technical Boxer", for he was a relatively small man standing about 5ft7in and weighing in at only 160 pounds who, never the less, beat numerous much larger contestants.

As might be expected, it was the warlike Spartans who were to capitalise most with Boxing, recognising it as an effective means of instilling the fighting spirit in the recruit through not only building up levels of courage and tenacity, but also using it as a means of teaching the basics of fighting with the sword, spear and shield. In this manner boxing training became not only an effective unarmed fighting style in its own right, but also served in complimenting the effective use of certain weapons as part of an integrated system of combat training.

Spartan society was extremely martial, and they trained hard and long to be efficient soldiers on the battlefield. It is said that they were almost as dangerous unarmed as they were with a weapon. Indeed, this fact is remarked upon by the great historian Heroditus in his account of the battle of Thermopylae, wherein he says: "Those that had them fought with their spears and, when their spears broke, they fought with their swords. When their swords broke, they fought with tooth, nail and fist".

As the popularity of boxing grew it gradually became split and divided, with one branch maintaining the martial aspect in order to compliment the armed prowess of the Hoplite, and the other concentrating

upon more sporting applications (albeit quite brutal ones!). Thus, you had the professional soldier on the one hand and the sportsman on the other. Even Homer tells us of the difference between combat sports and actual combat when he describes the lament of the champion boxer Epeius who pleaded that his incompetence on the battlefield be excused because of his success in sport boxing, saying that it was not possible to be good at all things and that the only place where he was not able to fight well was the battlefield itself! (Iliad XXIII) However, he is also credited with designing and building the Trojan horse with the help of Athena, as is told in the (Odyssey IV.265ff and Odyssey VIII.492ff) so, perhaps the poor fellow had a point after all, and we should let him off!

The Etruscans were particularly fond of boxing and were actually the very first to introduce the term "Pugilism" a word that has long since become synonymous with the science and which continues to be used right up to the present day.

Later, Boxing became an integral part of the training regime for the Roman Legionaries, with a particularly savage form being adapted for use in the so called "games" of the Arena. It eventually became popular throughout Rome, with all types of people participating including members of the aristocracy (a fight between the agile Dares and the towering Entellus is described at length in the Roman national epic "Aeneid", the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE).

In 500 A.D., boxing was banned altogether by Holy Roman Emperor Theodoric the Great as being offensive to the creator as it disfigured the face which was, after all, supposed to be the image of God. However, this edict had little effect outside the major cities of the Eastern Empire and, therefore, boxing continued to evolve as both a sport and a method of self defence throughout all of Europe but particularly in Italy and especially in the British Isles.

### Prize fighting era

Boxing resurfaces in strength in England during the early 18th century as "Bare-Knuckle Boxing" sometimes also referred to as "prize-fighting". The first documented account of a bare-knuckle fight in England appeared back in 1681 in a newspaper called "The London Protestant Mercury" with the first English champion being James Figg in 1719. As well as being the first boxing champion of England, James Figg was also a very adept cudgel-fighter and swordsman and was to play a pivotal role in the boxing renaissance. When he opened his school in London in 1719 Figg made a reasonable living out of teaching young gentleman the art of self-defence by applying the precepts of modern fencing—footwork,

speed, and the straight lunge—to fist-fighting. This is interesting in that, as you will recall, Boxing was originally used in order to augment and enhance training with weapons in ancient Greece, whereas now, Boxers learned to throw straight punches, the basis of modern boxing, from fencers. To some extent, it could even be said that boxing replaced duelling with swords and pistols, allowing men of all social classes to defend themselves and their honour without necessarily having to severely maim or kill each other. Despite this connection with fencing, boxing encounters during this early modern era were largely unstructured and highly uncivilized. Boxers fought bare-knuckle (without gloves), and wrestling, choking, throwing, gouging, and punning (kicking and stomping on one's opponent with spiked boots) were commonplace so that, in some respects at least, it bore far more of a resemblance to the ancient Greek Pankration or Japanese Jiu-Jitsu than to the sport we all now know and accept as being boxing today.

Also, again like its early predecessor, prize-fighting had no written rules: There were no weight divisions, round limits, or referees. In general, it was extremely savage and very chaotic. The first boxing rules, called the London Prize-Ring Rules, were introduced by the heavyweight champion Jack Broughton in 1743 in an attempt to safe-guard fighters from serious injury and even death. Under these rules, if a boxer was knocked to the ground and was not able to continue after 30 seconds, then they would be considered to have lost the bout. In addition, striking an opponent while they were down and grappling below the waist were strictly prohibited.

Although bare-knuckle fighting was in almost every aspect far more brutal than modern boxing, it did allow the fighters a single advantage not enjoyed by today's boxers: The London Prize Rules permitted the fighter to drop to one knee to begin a 30-second count at any time. Thus any fighter realizing he was in trouble had an opportunity to recover to a certain degree in this manner. This is in stark contrast to the modern sport of boxing, wherein intentionally going down will cause the recovering fighter to lose points in the scoring system. Furthermore, as the contestants did not have heavy leather gloves and wrist-wraps to protect their hands, a certain amount of restraint was required when striking to the head. It is perhaps due to this that, although severe injuries were sometimes incurred by the fighters, there were no actual deaths ever recorded from “bare knuckle” fighting. This would later change drastically with the introduction of the boxing glove, which protected the fighters hands so well they were able to execute full-force punches to the head, with the result sometimes proving fatal.

In 1838 the London Prize Ring rules were expanded and were subjected to further revision in 1853. These were eventually replaced by the famous Marquis of Queensberry rules in 1867

It was the introduction of this modern set of rules, together with a High-Court ruling in 1882 which declared that bare-knuckle matches were “an assault occasioning actual bodily harm”, (despite the very clear consent of the fighters), that saw the gradual demise of prize fighting eventually giving birth to what we know as “modern boxing”.

That said, the effectiveness of even this modern, refined boxing as a martial science cannot be denied. For example: On December 31, 1908, in Paris, France, heavyweight boxer Sam McVey knocked out Jiu-Jitsuka Tano Matsuda (Jiu-Jitsu) in ten seconds. And, in another bout held on January 12, 1928, in Yokohama, Japan, Packey O’Gatty, a bantamweight boxer, knocked out another Jiu-Jitsuka called Shimakado with a single punch in less than four seconds!

### **BARTITSU or BARITSU**

Mention must also be made here of a certain gentlemen by the name of Edward William Barton-Wright who, after returning to the UK from three years in Japan, incorporated certain boxing techniques into his new, exciting and eclectic martial art which he called “Bartitsu”.

This was, perhaps, the original “mixed martial arts” (although its main goal was that of self-defence rather than any kind of sporting application) and was trully an ingenious inovation that incorporated ideas and techniques from fencing, wrestling, Jiu jitsu, savate, cane, boxing and even how to use your Bowler hat as a self defence tool!

“Bartitsu”, (later to become known as “Baritsu”) provided people with a trully integrated form of self defence and became quite popular for a short period of time at the turning of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it was this martial art that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle chose to arm his great literary creation Sherlock Holmes with. In “The Adventure of the Empty House” Holmes tells Watson about his victory over his nemesis and arch-enemy Professor Moriarty during their fateful encounter at the Reichenbach Falls, explaining it was thanks to “Baritsu, or the Japanese system of wrestling, which has more than once been of use to me”.

It is thanks to this misspelling that “Bartitsu” came to be remembered as “Baritsu”, and that the western influences such as that of boxing, were almost completely disregarded in favour of the Oriental. Even so, this brief historical episode is still

yet another endorsement to the continuing use of boxing as a martial art rather than simply a combat sport, and that is why I have alluded to it here.

## The military

It was this obvious effectiveness, together with its strict set of “Gentlemanly rules” that caused the military, and especially the officer class, to recognise boxing as being of some very real worth in the basic training and battlefield prowess of their soldiers. However, there was one particular officer who saw even further: Captain William J. Jacomb.

The First World War has gone down in the records as being the worst managed conflict in history. This was largely due to the fact that most of the senior officers involved had undergone their basic training and fought their first military campaigns in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

That meant they had cut their soldierly teeth upon massed cavalry charges and infantry organised into lines and squares, and so had thought that they could continue to engage the enemy in this manner in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even with its machine guns, air support, communications, mustard-gas and modern artillery pieces. These outdated and obsolete strategies and tactics were to soon turn the battlefields of World War One into muddy, bloody acres of “no-man’s-land”, honeycombed with thousands of trenches that actually ended up interlocking in some cases.

In such an inhospitable and dangerous type of terrain it was not uncommon for patrols from opposing sides to “bump” into each other with little or even no warning. Consequently, the fighting was often of a very desperate nature, taking place at extremely close-quarters. It is as a direct result of this that both sides began experimenting with various hand to hand combat systems including Japanese Jiu Jitsu, in order to help provide their troops with that much needed “edge” on the battlefield.

William J. Jacomb was an officer in the Canadian army who had a lot of experience as a boxing coach at various universities as well as in the military. It had come to his attention that it was the soldiers who had a basic knowledge of boxing who also seemed to make the best bayonet fighters. He immediately started to design a programme of instruction for the army that combined standard boxing drills with the efficient use of the bayonet and put forward a proposal to his superiors that this training should be made available to as many troops as possible.

In 1916, Jacomb was appointed as an instructor to the Bayonet fighting and Physical Training Staff

of the Canadian Army in order to teach his methods of boxing/bayonet to a specially selected group of soldiers most of whom already possessed a certain amount of boxing training and experience, with the idea being that they would then return to their individual units as instructors in close-quarter combat. The students were divided into classes of 20 with each course being of 21 days duration during which time a lot of material had to be covered and learnt. Jacomb himself says:

“Physical courage is perhaps the most common of virtues, but the courage of a soldier, and especially in the bayonet fighter, is a courage borne of confidence and ability to fight and to defend himself. I do not believe there is any other form of exercise which develops this as quickly as the practice of boxing. Secondly, and fortunately, bayonet fighting is so near akin to boxing that the practice of boxing develops skill in bayonet in less time, with less expense, and with fewer casualties.”

As already stated, the urgent need and importance for effective hand to hand fighting (particularly Bayonet) had already been identified and acknowledged due to the nature of the conflict and the appalling conditions in which it was fought, so Jacomb’s endeavours in this area were both supported and encouraged. The official 1916 manual on Bayonet Training says that: “The spirit of the bayonet must be inculcated into all ranks so that they will go forward with the aggressive determination and confidence in superiority borne of continual practice, without which a bayonet assault will not be effective.”

From the outset, Jacomb’s course was well received and deemed to be an outstanding success turning out as it did confident and competent instructors for the army. Later, in 1918, Jacomb published a book entitled “Boxing for Beginners” outlining his methods. It consisted of three parts with the first describing how to box, the second describing the relationship of boxing to bayonet fighting and the third on how to organise a boxing tournament. In his conclusion to the chapter regarding the relationship between boxing and bayonet fighting, Jacomb states the following: “Every man who is going to carry a rifle and bayonet should learn to box to help him use the bayonet. He should be taught by men who have had experience in boxing. His bayonet fighting should be taught by a teacher of that subject. If the instructor is good at both, so much the better. The pupil must always be taught that the point of his bayonet is the best end of his weapon.”

This is very similar to telling a boxer to keep his opponent on “the end of the left-jab” or to concentrate on long-range “Outfighting”. However, Jacomb did also demonstrate and teach how “In-

fighting" boxing tactics and techniques could be adapted for use with a rifle and bayonet, especially by utilising the butt-end of the rifle to deliver "Hooks" and "Upper-Cuts" to dispatch a foe quickly and efficiently. Captain Jacomb's training courses were very well received, being a resounding success with the troops who found what they learned helped to keep them alive in the trenches.

## Conclusion

Boxing or, as it is sometimes (very rightfully) known: "The noble art of self defence" is, without a doubt, a true martial science. It has contributed to the training of soldiers almost since the beginning of recorded history. Whether it be aiding a Hoplite in effective sword and shield drills, affording the officer class a non-lethal alternative to duelling, or enhancing the use of the bayonet in the 20<sup>th</sup> century warfare. It has demonstrated its effectiveness on the battlefield, in the sporting arena (against other martial arts) and as an effective means of self defence, as taught by James Figg and others.

Indeed, to this day, an extremely savage form of boxing known as "Milling" is used to help select soldiers for the elite airborne units of the Parachute Regiment in the United Kingdom, with similar applications being employed in the units of other armies around the world.

I, myself, have experimented with boxing drills as a means teaching basic short-blade techniques, and have found this to be extremely worth-while. As a martial science that has proven itself consistently over literally thousands of years, it is my opinion that boxing still has a great deal to offer. At the very least, it is a fantastic method for keeping fit, healthy and focused and also improves balance, coordination and confidence in the individual. Thus, by learning boxing a person will be far more able to defend themselves both on the street and in battle (we should remember here that successful bayonet charges have been recorded in both the Falklands (Guards Birgade/ Parachute Regiment July 1982) and Iraq (Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders, May 2004)).

Boxing should be regarded as being much more than the sport we see. It is a bono fide martial science, and should, therefore be accepted, respected and appreciated as being such.

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## Nauka wojenna o boksie i jej wkład do wojskowej walki wręcz

**Słowa kluczowe:** boks, sztuki walki, walki wręcz, wojskowe *bare knuckle*, walki o pieniądze

### Streszczenie

Praca dotyczy badań nad bardziej mrocznymi aspektami boksu jako nauki o sztuce walki. Ilustruje ona, że historią, tradycją oraz zaletą boksu jest niezaprzeczalny fakt, że jest to sport z rzadka, jeśli w ogóle, uznany i zrozumiany. Sztuki walki zawsze istniały z relacji społeczno-kulturowej i grały główną rolę w sporcie, religii oraz w czasie prowadzonych działań wojennych. Przez tysiące lat inspirowały do wynalazków pomagając ludziom zarówno podbijać, jak i odpierać ataki, chronić i niszczyć inne kultury oraz narody. Duży wpływ na sztuki walki i *vice versa* miała inżynieria, technika i filozofia. Doprowadziło to do powstania zasad moralnego zachowania i postępowania, potocznie zwanego „kodeksem wojownika”. Od wojownika wymagano honoru i właściwego postępowania, co nie jest łatwe gdy przychodzi do walki w czasie wojny. W walce, która może być brutalna powinny brać udział ludzie przeszkoleni i tylko

tacy, którzy spełniają pewne warunki. Stąd nauka walki wręcz może przygotować psychicznie i fizycznie do roli walczącego. Autor koncentruje się na militarnych zastosowaniach raczej niż na normalnych sportowych elementach (choć dotyczy pewnych aspektów sportowej rywalizacji, tam gdzie wydają się to być odpowiednie) demonstrując jak boks był integralną częścią treningu wojowników od czasów starożytnych, jak był używany do rozwoju „ducha walki” i jaki był jego znaczny wpływ na początki i rozwój współczesnych militarnych technik bezpośredniej walki *close-combat* w podobny sposób do pewnych orientalnych sztuk walki. Boks z całym swoim przywiązaniem do detali i wkomponowaną dozą agresji jest idealny dla początkujących wojowników. Uczy bardziej strategii oraz taktyki niż polegania jedynie na brutalnej sile i technice. Aby pokonać przeciwnika wymagane jest poświęcenie, pokonywanie trudności i bólu. Boks może być dobrą lekcją na polu walki od szeregowca po głównodowodzącego. Boks rozwijał się na przestrzeni wieków, chociaż wydaje się, że w ostatnich czasach stracił na popularności na rzecz wschodnich sztuk walki. Celem autora tekstu było zwrócenie uwagi na fakt zaniedbywania boks, który w pełni może być uznawany za sztukę walki.