

Morals and Maulers: the Ethics of Early Pugilism

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Modern games and sports did not begin life as means to virtue, nobleness of spirit, or even purity of body. Until well into the Victorian age, their immorality was much more apparent than any benefits they might bring. Cricket was “perverted from diversion and innocent pastime to excessive gaming and public dissipation.”¹ Horse-racing-one of John Wesley’s “cruel sports”-attracted such evil company that the police estimated that there were 200 thieves at Worcester Races in 1829, and the magistrates held continuous sittings at the goal throughout the meeting. Some years later even *Bell’s Life*, contemporary sport’s prime apologist, was admitting that in pedestrianism “scarcely a race comes off in which there is not the most barefaced attempts at ‘foul play’ resorted to.”² Yet these besmirched cradles nurtured a human activity which came to epitomise the good and upright life-play could embrace the widest notions of personal integrity, of valour, justice and truth. The cricket field could become “God’s classroom,” presided over by the ONE GREAT SCORER. The sporting verities became absolute and eternal.

This long ideological march had many different participants, and several phases. Some of its features are familiar. The impact of changes in methods of production, class structure, and demography has been rightly stressed by many writers on nineteenth century leisure and sport. Mangan has laid bare both the crudities and pervasiveness of the process in its all-important educational aspect, while Redmond has traced back some of the images of athleticism into pre-Victorian children’s literature. A few isolated landmarks in the ethical progress of organised sport are also well charted—the warning off from Newmarket of the Prince of Wales’ jockey, Sam Chiffney, on suspicion of rigging races in 1791; William Lambert’s exclusion from top-class cricket after 1817 for allegedly throwing a match, and the attempted banning of gambling from Lords in the 1820s.³ They all contributed to the “Pleasing Prospect of

1. (London) *Morning Chronicle*, 23 August, 1774.

2. Wesley reports with approval a letter sent to him protesting of “the pain given to every Christian, every humane heart, by whose savage diversions, bull-baiting, cock-fighting, horse-racing and hunting.” N. Curnock, ed., *The Journal of John Wesley*, 8 vols. (London, 1909), 4:176; *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette*, 24 August, 1829; *Bell’s Life in London*, 1 January, 1837.

3. Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control 1830-1885* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution* (London: Croom Helm, 1980); John K. Walton and James Walvin, eds., *Leisure in Britain 1780-1939* (Man-

Improvement in the Morality of our National Diversions,” as one writer put it in 1821, and are significant sporting manifestations of the comprehensive moral revolution which took place in Britain between 1750 and 1850, so well delineated in its social context by Harold Perkin,⁴ and essential for sport to assimilate before it could enjoy its own revolution in athletic practice in the 1860s and 1870s.

There has been little detailed examination of the early stages of this moral conflict in sport. McIntosh, for instance, gives little attention to the ethics of pre-Victorian spectator sport, and other scholars have concentrated more on the sporting environment than on playing practice. The result is that it is hard to realise how radically sporting morality had to change in order to live easily in the new Puritanism. This was brought home by Cone’s recent paper on the first Molineaux-Cribb prizefight in 1820.⁵ Judgement on whether Tom Molineaux was cheated of victory depends as much on what was considered *fair* in the pugilism of the day as it does upon what actually *happened* in the fight.

The contest was an important one for organised sport as a whole. For the first time ever, native supremacy in an established British sport was meeting an overseas challenge, and a coloured challenge at that. Molineaux, a black American, was fighting Tom Cribb for what was effectively the pugilistic championship of the world-and seen as such. Cone’s resort to contemporary accounts of the fight, while not quite complete, leads to his conclusion that “by a narrow margin Cribb properly retained his championship,”⁶ a verdict which becomes all the more unassailable when due weight is given to the *mores* and practices of early nineteenth century pugilism. What is particularly interesting, though, in some accounts of the fight (and of the return match some months later) is a certain unease over what should be regarded as *fair play*. It is a slight and early glimpse of that greater ethical sensitivity that sport had to achieve to find a role in a modern and more morally stringent world. For pugilism, of all sports, it would be a long and difficult journey.

Complaints over the technicalities of the Cribb-Molineaux fight all centre on such commonplace occurrences as to be much less significant than the feeling in some quarters that Molineaux had, in a broader sense, been treated less than generously. If consciences pricked, they did so largely because of the overwhelming support and encouragement which a highly partisan crowd gave to

chester: Manchester University Press, 1983); J.A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School: Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); G. Redmond, “Before Hughes and Kingsley: The Origins and Evolution of ‘Muscular Christianity’ in English Children’s Literature,” *Sporting Fictions: Proceedings of a Workshop jointly organised by the Department of Physical Education and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1982); P.C. McIntosh, *Fair Play: Ethics in Sport and Education* (London: Heinemann, 1979), p.22; Wray Vamplew, *The Turf Social and Economic History of Horse Racing* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), p. 80; Roland Bowen, *Cricket History of its Growth and Development throughout the World* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1970), p. 81.

4. A correspondent to the *Sporting Magazine* 8 (N. S.) XLV, June, 1821, p. 140; Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 273 281 and *passim*.

5. Carl B. Cone, “The Molineaux-Cribb Fight, 1810: Wuz Tom Molineaux Robbed?” *Journal of Sport History* 9 (Winter, 1982): 83-91.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Cribb. As Cone rightly says, on this particular issue, “home court advantage and home crowd support are simply facts of sporting life,”⁷ but what was novel was that there should be some feeling of *guilt* about it—Cribb himself, as a newcomer from Bristol, had to overcome the same bias and even rougher treatment in his own first fight with the long established favourite, George Maddox, and to little protest.⁸ *Fairness* was beginning to take on wider implications. The concept of *fair play* had been cool, neutral, largely self-contained within the athletic contest, indicating no more than an equality of conditions and opportunities between competitors, and with little reference to the world beyond the sport. It was eventually to become a very positive quality, warm and emotive, embracing both the sporting activity and life itself, assured and evangelical, the epitome of right conduct.

Pugilism—or rather boxing, as it became—was never quite to reach the elevated heights of cricket as a means of moral uplift, but it made high claims to fairness and gave such phrases as “hitting below the belt,” “coming up to scratch,” and “not hitting a man when he’s down,” to the language of behaviour. Boxing would find some acceptance as a means by which bullies were brought to heel, manly pluck displayed, and virtue rendered triumphant. It made, too, its contribution to that whole developed concept *fairness* as a moral attribute, inherent in the game, and inescapably transferred into life as a whole. It was one of those qualities through which sport claimed to promote both personal and public morality. Fair play in sport would inculcate an inalienable allegiance to truth and justice. It was an ideal which went beyond a mere legalism. It meant acceptance of “the spirit of the game” and abiding by that, rather than by any limited requirements of formal rules. It was characterised—even perhaps caricatured—by the early soccer Corinthians’ decision to remove their goalkeeper if penalties for foul play were awarded against them, on the grounds that, in such an unlikely event, their opponents deserved a goal.

This is all a far cry from the much more circumscribed notions of the early pugilists and their circle on *playing fair*. A code of behaviour thought of as belonging largely within sport—even within the individual sport—had to give way to one seen as universal in its application. Fair play had to escape from the shades of the betting-room into the full sunshine of athleticism. The process would inevitably be both long and complex. An examination of this central concept *fairness* in early pugilism should throw light on the original moral attitudes within the sport, and the growing conflict between these attitudes and the changing expectations of society. The period from 1780–1820 saw the first stirrings of the new social morality, and was the acknowledged heyday of English pugilism. The sport was widely reported, often in round-by-round detail, and with frequent editorial and other comment. It already had its own specialist literature, and so such ideals as it might claim, as well as the morality

7. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

8. The crowd caused a general disturbance when Maddox was in danger of defeat, Cribb was hit with a stick, had “just come forward, found but few friends and, consequently was obliged to put up with much unfair play.” Anon., *Paneraia. or a History Of Pugilism* 2nd ed. (London, 1813), p. 219.

embedded in its practices, are alike open to scrutiny. It is an open field, if so far relatively untilled.⁹

The ethos of all eighteenth-century organised sport was two-sided, stemming on the one hand from a concept of “honour”, and on the other from the law of contract. They were apparently very divergent traditions. The notion of honour and self-esteem in sporting combat was at least as old as the age of chivalry, while the legal contract was the new medium through which modern sporting morality found its first expression. The former was customary, largely imprecise and unwritten, felt more than reasoned, and the latter was novel, specific, defined, and objective. Yet there was still sufficient overlap to keep the two together. The subsequent history of the ethics of sport concerns the attempted reconciliation of its two founding traditions.

The extent to which individual honour was still seen to be at stake at the end of the eighteenth century varied from sport to sport. The personal challenge of horse against horse in individual contests was gradually giving way to open races, although the two-horse match was still important—in the 1797 Newmarket First Spring Meeting, for instance, there were as many such challenge rides as there were races in the modern style. Few owners, though, still felt that they had to ride their horses themselves.¹⁰ As cricket became less dependent on noble patrons, considerations of *personal* rivalry became less important, though *corporate* rivalries and motives of financial profit often succeeded them. It was in pugilism—and obviously so, given its directly combative nature—that the idea of upholding personal honour remained as a significant element, but even here it was often more a matter of form than substance. Pugilistic contests certainly still operated within the framework of challenges issued and accepted, with manliness, strength and courage held to be as much at issue as fighting skills. The question of repute, probity, self-esteem, and their defence was made much of by sport’s apologists. Pugilism, according to Pierce Egan, taught men “to admire true courage. . . . to acquire notions of honour . . . and invincibility of soul.”¹¹ The introductory chapter of *Pancratia* puts it less ambitiously, but the final resort to honour is much the same—

Experience has long taught us the impossibility of extinguishing the passions of pride and resentment, which, notwithstanding they frequently surround us with misery, are still the sources of some of our noblest attributes; for, mean and grovelling indeed, must be that soul, which is satisfied to linger on, until its

9. The early literature of the sport includes Capt. Godfrey, *A Treatise on the Useful Art of Self-Defence* (London, 1740); “An Amateur,” *Recollections of Pugilism and Sketches of the Ring* (London, 1801); “Jon Bee” (Jonathan Badcock), *Lives of the Boxers* (London, 1811); Pierce Egan, *Boxiana* 3 vols. (London, 1821); 5 vols. (London, 1828-1829). *Pancratia* 1st ed. (London, 1811) was almost certainly by Bill Oxberry, with the introduction by Badcock. Pugilism was also featured in Capt. Topham’s *The World* (from 1787), the monthly *Sporting Magazine* (from 1793), Bell’s *Weekly Messenger* (from 1796), and the *Weekly Dispatch* (from 1801—and for which Pierce Egan wrote from 1814). *The Daily Register* (which became *The Times* in 1788) and many provincial newspapers reported pugilism extensively. John Ford, *Prizefighting: The Age of Regency Boxmania* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971) is the single—and excellent—social history of pugilism; and J. C. Reid, *Bucks and Bruisers: Pierce Egan and Regency England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971) throws many interesting sidelights on the sport in the period.

10. Edward and James Weatherby, *Racing Calendar*, 25 (1797): 11-18.

11. Egan, *Boxiana* (1821 edition), 3:4.

mysterious dissipation, without having been stimulated by one spark of emulation!¹²

Even the courts recognised this honour element in prize-fighting, if only in the negative sense of enforcing the duelling laws against pugilists. The much-hounded Belcher and Bourke were brought comprehensively before the King's Bench in May, 1803, for conspiring to fight a duel, fighting a duel, unlawful and riotous assembly, and disturbance of the peace! Challenges could be thrown down and taken up in the most extravagant language. Daniel Mendoza accused the irreproachable John Jackson of "opprobrious falsity, brazen impudence, or malignant calumny" and of repeatedly raising the stakes to avoid fighting—"here was courage, here was consistency, here was bottom, and yet Mr Jackson is a man of honour and of his word!!!!" At one stage in the long-running Bourke-Belcher saga, when Belcher had been held up by the police and failed to appear, Bourke, ever felicitous in his choice of words, claimed that he would have "cleaved his calf's head and given him such a chop in the kidneys as would have brought him on his marrow bones." By contrast, many contests were clearly professional sporting arrangements, with no real or pretended personal animosity involved. The business-like correspondence between Gully and Gregson in November 1807 illustrates this well.¹³

"MR GULLY,—It is the wish of myself and friend that I should try my fortune with you in another battle for £200 a-side. If you are inclined to give me the opportunity, I will thank you to say so, and also to name the time when it will be convenient to meet, to put down stakes, and arrange particulars.

R. GREGSON"

and the immediate reply—

"MR GREGSON,—I accept your challenge, but wish you would make the match for £250 instead of £200 a-side. I shall not delay a moment in returning to town to make the necessary arrangements as to time, place, etc.

JOHN GULLY"

A sense of personal rivalry, raised to the level of animosity, or some real or imagined affront doubtless lay behind some encounters. The more important contests, though, were part of a deliberately organised sporting programme, and depended heavily upon wealthy backers who were prepared to wager on their champion. Contestants were, in fact, *marched* and the challenge would be no more than the formal way into the fight. If, after all, the build-up could give an impression of rancour between the fighters it was likely to whet more appetites and increase the takings—a fact as well known then as it is today. Contests which *did* take place in unplanned fashion were not welcome either by those who sought to exploit them financially or by those who thereby missed the chance of watching a good fight. Once more the Belcher-Bourke story has its relevant episode—when they met at Camberwell Fair in August, 1802, some six weeks after their match in Yorkshire had been prevented, through the joint

12. *Pancratia*, p. 24.

13. *Ibid.*, p.176, 79, 140, 299-300

efforts of the magistrates and the Dean of York, they immediately adjourned to a nearby bowling green and began an impromptu fight. To put matters on a slightly more regular footing their “friends” intervened (“Bourke not being quite sober, and Belcher indisposed”) and all agreed to meet next day in Hyde Park to settle the issue. When they did so, few of the gentry supporters were present, not just on account of the short notice but also because so many of them were out of town in August, which made it the least popular month of the year for serious prize-fighting. Although a large crowd gathered, the purse amounted to no more than the 30 guineas a side that could be collected on the spot, and there was no time to erect a stage. The richer patrons of the sport must have been particularly aggrieved, since it was decided afterwards that all the bets depending on the intended Yorkshire battle were to hold good for this Hyde Park fight, which, incidentally, Belcher won in the fourteenth round.¹⁴

The concept of honour in prizefighting was therefore tenuous and unreliable, and sometimes at odds with that other and more solid plank in the sport’s structure—its *contractual* basis. Events in the three relatively developed early eighteenth century spectator sports—horse-racing, cricket, and pugilism—were all regulated by articles of agreement specific to the individual match. By repetition and usage these articles of agreement had, in somewhat different style in each sport, and well before the century was out, become wholly or partly standardised into general rules. It was in horse-racing that the consolidation into regular codes of practices was most complete. The *Rules concerning Horse-Racing in General* were at least as old as *Pond’s Racing Calendar* of 1751 (the ancestor of Weatherby’s, which took over in the early 1770s), and were supplemented by *The Rules and Orders of the Jockey Club* (designed just for Newmarket, but widely resorted to elsewhere), and the Articles specific to King’s Plates. By the 1790s, all three codes were being published at the beginning of the annual *Racing Calendar*. Broadly speaking, some three-quarters of the various racing rules defined the terms for betting, while rules for acceptable racing practices had only limited space. Cricket laws gave consideration to the conduct of gambling as late as the 1830 revision, and individual matches often still had their own specific contracts. For example, one proposed in 1818 between an England XI and a Nottingham XXII, dealt with stake money and expenses for the England team, umpires, and the choice and treatment of wickets.¹⁵ In pugilism, a general body of rules were applied to all organised prize-fights. These were originally intended, like the Jockey Club rules at Newmarket, for purely local application—at Jack Broughton’s boxing emporium on Tottenham Court Road, but were soon widely adopted. Broughton’s rules concentrated on such procedural matters as the time allowed to bring a fighter back “up to scratch” (the square yard marked in the centre of the ring), the barring of everyone from the stage apart from the referee, the boxers and their seconds, and the appointment of umpires—one by each contestant and the

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 154-159.

15. *Sporting Magazine* 3 (N.S.) XII, October, 1818, p. 18. The articles for the match were given in full because there was a dispute over the payment of the All-England team’s expenses.

third chosen by the other two umpires to arbitrate in case of disagreement. As in cricket, rules from any significant contest were soon augmented by individual articles of agreement that usually set out the amount of stake money, the date(s) by which it was to be deposited, the size of the ring, and the umpiring arrangements. Sometimes other strictures were added to the very minimal restraints on the actual *fighting* conditions in Broughton's rules which only stipulated "that no person is to hit his adversary when down or seize him by the hair, the breeches or any part below the waist; a man on his knees to be reckoned down."

The first sporting rules, in short, were designed to provide regular conditions for gambling. The prime object was fair *gaming*, and they only defined playing practice so far as seemed necessary to achieve this. Pointedly, the backers demonstrated a major interest in setting up means for arbitration to try to reach reliable, unbiased verdicts. They had much less interest in the well-being of professional performers. They could lionise the successful, but were often prepared to leave defeated heroes exhausted and bleeding on the side-lines until the supporting fights were over.¹⁶ Protection of pugilists played little part in the rules and practices. The rules were made for the patrons and promoters, not for the fighting men. Certainly, echoes of the honour code remained alive in gambling itself, especially in the unqualified requirement to meet all betting dues. Gambling losses were, of course, "debts of honour" and readiness to pay was the hallmark of sporting gentility—the sign of a man's probity, irrespective of whether he was meeting the bills of his grocer or his tailor. Failure to fulfil sporting engagements meant forfeiting the stake money. "Play or pay" was the unwritten rule, so much so that when a backer demanded the return of his stake before a fight in November, 1822, this gave John Jackson an unimpeachable reason for withdrawing from his central role as organiser of the Prize Ring after its standards had been collapsing during the previous twelve months.¹⁷ Moreover, the pugilist was still notionally his backers' champion, carrying their colours, supported by their guineas and their plaudits. There was no room for pusillanimity, or playing the field, by a backer. This was shown in 1805, when all bets on the proposed fight between Gully and Pearce were called off because one enterprising gamester wagered heavily on Pearce when the odds on him were long, and then even more heavily on Gully as Pearce became favourite, so

16. This happened, for instance, to Joseph Bourke, in 1801, after the second of his three fights with James Belcher—"much cut and dreadfully bruised in the body," he was put into a coach "and very cruelly left there until after the decision of another battle." Nor was this the end of Bourke's misfortunes. He and Belcher were committed for trial "for unlawfully assembling and public lighting," as a result of this contest. Belcher was released on bail but "Bourke was most shamefully deserted and neglected by all his friends and not being able to procure bail, remained in the common gaol of Reading." O'Donnell, after being laid out by violent kidney blows from Caleb Baldwin in October 1803, was left in a coach by his "friends" for nearly two hours without any assistance. (*Paneratia*, pp. 142, 148, 186).

17. His "retirement" from the ring—which was much less sudden or complete than has been assumed—came a month after the blatantly crossed fight between Ward and Abbot, and also, incidentally, just after the Court of Common Pleas had declared even *sparring* exhibitions illegal, "in as much as they are precursors of prize-fights, or breaches of the peace," and a judge at Berkshire Assizes had warned seconds that they were just as likely as principals to face manslaughter charges in the event of death in the ring. (The best balanced accounts of these events are in the *Sparring Magazine*, 10 (N.S.) LVII, June 1822, p. 160, LVIII, July 1822, p. 216; (N.S.), LXI, October 1822, pp. 52-53; LXII, November 1822, p. 101).

that his profit on the contest was guaranteed.¹⁸ The fact that this was considered improper shows that the ethics of the Stock Exchange were not applied wholesale to sporting transactions. Nonetheless, the early articles and rules governing both pugilism and other sports smack more of the commercial contract and the legal agreement than of any moral sense.

This is hardly unexpected. It was not a period which looked to sport for moral lessons, or with ethical expectations. The great majority of the followers of pugilism saw it as neither improving nor degrading—it was just an exciting and pleasurable pursuit. The paradox of an illegal sport governing itself by a code of rules becomes the more explicable when it is accepted that those rules were primarily to facilitate gaming. Even the process by which prizefighting became unlawful was riddled with ethical contradiction. It can be interpreted as an early success in that movement towards liberal sensitivity, which was eventually to improve the lot of slaves and to suppress animal sport—“a general reinforcement of manners and prevalence of humanity among the moderns,” as Strutt descried it in his critical comments on bear-baiting and bull-baiting.¹⁹ However, the single most important event in the outlawing of pugilism—the closing of Broughton’s emporium in 1750—seems to have been the result of pique rather than piety. Neither the Commons’ nor the Lords’ Journals provide evidence for the allegation that it “was closed by act of Parliament” and “by the interference of the legislature,” but almost certainly the Duke of Cumberland (who had demonstrated his ruthlessness at Culloden five years earlier) was instrumental in its closure. A patron of Broughton’s, he had put £1,000 on him to bet the unfancied Norwich butcher, Slack, and Broughton lost the fight after being temporarily blinded by a chance blow, “to the great mortification of the knowing ones, who were rarely taken in”. The Duke had wagered at odds of 10 to 1, and so was “taken in” to the extent of £10,000.²⁰ The banning of pugilism from the organised arena arose not out of moral offence or social outrage—in the usual sense—but because a bet went wrong.

The sport certainly *did* give both moral and social offence to many. They saw it as a danger to public order, a waste of many people’s time (and an occasion for interruption of work), a prostitution of human energies and abilities, and a scandalous and provocative waste of money. Joseph Strutt did not think pugilism worthy of mention, even by the way of the condemnation which he handed out to animal baiting and cock-fighting. As its most tolerant, contemporary newspaper *comment* (as distinct from the enthusiastic and detailed *reports* of matches) seldom rose above the lukewarm. Pugilism might have some benefit to the state—“it must be allowed that to keep up a spirit of military emulation among the lower classes, is an object of national utility.” It might be preferable to duelling as a means of settling disputes, but if it became the fashion fist-fights

18. Mr. Cheesey was “bound to win a MIGHTY *sum*”—*Pancraria*, p. 237.

19. Joseph Strutt, *Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (1801; Bath: Firecrest Publishing, 1969), p. 205.

20. *Pancraria*, p.47; Henry Downes Miles, *Pugilistica* 3 vols. (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1906), 1:27-28.

would become as common "at a gaming house in St James's Street, as at a skittle ground."²¹

Pugilism was the hardest sport to paint in colours of convincing respectability. As distinct from less directly combative pursuits, its very nature pointed towards brutality, harshness, and the most sensational type of violence. It was scarcely the natural material for any but the most simplistic of moralities, and inevitably attracted most of its support from the amoral extremes of the social scale, "from the Lord's barouche to the Westminster cabbage cart." The rising and respectable middle classes (with some important exceptions, which have never been given their true weight)²² generally found it offensive both socially and morally. Apart from its inherent physical coarseness, pugilism's dependence on gambling always laid it open to suspicions of corruption and sharp practice, which not even the influence of wealthy patrons could erase. Indeed, the falling away of gentry support from the 1820s onwards was due as much to the unreliability of prize-fight gambling as to the rising social stigma attached to the fighting itself. Pugilists could demonstrate great endurance and courage (though some of it often stiffened by the brandy bottle)²³ and, for some, sporting success led to social advancement. Outstanding among these was John Gully, who proceeded from pugilist to publican, race-horse owner, punter, country gentleman, member of parliament, and mine-owner. Many more fighters, though, found their way to an early grave, damaged by the often equal ravages of hard bruising and hard drinking.

Pugilism was bound to be an uncertain activity for performers, officials, spectators, and backers alike. As an illegal sport, it was beset with problems of location and crowd control. The thinness of the rules for actual fighting, and the understandable failure to produce even an embryonic governing body for the ring meant that disputes were endemic. Differences or dissatisfactions characterise at least half of the fights recorded. The ideal contest, from the spectators' point of view, was one such as Brewer against Pickard (1789) when both men,

firmly stood up and fought in a most courageous style; here, there was no shifting, or falling back to avoid a hit, and nothing but a real knock-down blow could bring either of the combatants to the floor.²⁴

Often, though, the spectators got something very different, with much clinching, hugging, feinting, and falling without receiving a blow to bring the round to an end to earn a half minute's rest. Far from being refined out of boxing, wrestling holds and throws became more common from the 1790s. Smart throws were applauded (and pugilistic academies promised to teach them) and it was common to land on top of a thrown opponent, which was not considered illegal, though fighters refraining from doing so earned praise for

21. *Daily Register*, 29 March, 20, 21 December, 1787.

22. When, for instance, pugilists had to provide the courts with sureties for good behaviour these invariably came from tradesmen or manufacturers.

23. Reporting on Scroggins' recovery against Martin, for instance, the *Sporting Magazine* remarked, "strange to tell what the effects of Brandy will do." [3 (N.S.) XV, December 1818, p.135].

24. *Pancratia*, p. 93. See also p. 78 for a similar laudatory account of Newton v. Golder (March, 1788).

their restraint and uprightness.²⁵ Many of the throws were in clear contravention of the rule against seizing by “any part below the waist.” Rimmer, for instance, caught Tom Molineaux by the thighs “and threw him in the Lancashire style.”²⁶ Cross-buttock throws were commonplace, and these usually entailed catching “by the hams,” while there were some very esoteric manoeuvring at times—as when Nicholls ran in furiously, got his head between Jones’ legs, grabbed his ankles, and “threw him with considerable violence.”²⁷ Charging at opponents and barging them was not much liked, but it was not thought unlawful. All blows were allowed except those below the waist, and although there were some accusations of low punching these rarely led to forfeiting the fight. In one instance which comes to mind, it took no less than seven “unfair blows” from Watson (and 100 rounds) before Hooper was declared the winner of their 1790 fight.²⁸ Karate-style chops on the back of the neck, blows to kidneys, and holding round the neck with one arm while punching with the other—these were all accepted and admired.²⁹ Whether or not holding by the hair to do the same was within Broughton’s rules is not certain, as there was some doubt over whether they forbade seizing by the “hams” or by the “hair.” Holding the hair might be considered “foul,” but was seldom penalised by umpires, and, incidentally, the proposal that after this had happened in the Jackson-Mendoza fight in 1795,³⁰ boxers subsequently kept their hair cropped³¹ does not square at all with the many contemporary prints of pugilists—hair was nearly always short, and the pioneers, Figg and Broughton, were among the most shorn of them all.

The protection afforded to boxers by the agreed rules was therefore very limited. Such protection as they did appear to give was weakened further by the many uncertainties in their interpretation and application. Even the rule against hitting a man when he was down led to frequent disputes, mainly because pugilists regularly adopted the stratagem of going down without being hit, to

25. In the 11th round of his fight with Bourke, in 1802, Belcher threw his beaten opponent, “at the same time falling on his own hands, not wishing to hurt Bourke more by falling on him, which practice is customary and considered fair in fighting.” (*Pancratia*, p. 157). It was clearly common to jump down and kneel a fallen man, and the only dispute was over whether any parts of his body were immune from such attack. The answer, in practice, was “very few.” When Oliver threw the unpopular Donnelly and fell on him with his knee on the throat, his second complained that if Donnelly had done the same, “you would have roared out foul for an hour.” (Egan, *Boxiana*. 2:86). But the practice seems to have been accepted; e.g. Ned Brown beat Jem Bunn by repeatedly falling on him with his knees on the body and neck. (*Sporting Magazine*, 9 (N.S.) XLIX. October, 1821, p.49).

26. *Pancratia*. p.356. Lancashire had a reputation for rough fighting with few constraints.

27. Miles, *Pugilistica*. 1:118. In the rough Donnelly-Oliver fight (see n.25), Donnelly, after being thrown, raised his legs to kick Oliver and prevent him falling on him—an apparently not unreasonable precaution—but met with cries of “foul” and the expression of “various opinions”! (Egan, *Boxiana*, 2:86).

28. Miles, *Pugilistica*, 2:37; *Pancratia*, pp. 126 and 94. The one puzzling exception was when Jones was disqualified for a single low punch (“somewhere about the waistband of the breeches”) against Tom Tyne in 1788. Jones had boxed in the approved upright, straightforward style, while Tyne had shifted, stooped, and repeatedly gone down on his knees. This seems to have been the cause of the low blow itself. It must be that Tyne was struck on more private and vulnerable parts than contemporary reports were prepared to admit! (*Pancratia*. p.80).

29. Hopping Ned (!) Morgan knocked Donovan “completely out of the ring” with a back-handed blow, with his left hand, on the back of his neck” (1803) and there were no accusations of irregularity (*Pancratia*, p. 191). Many similar instances could be quoted.

30. Snokell caught Greenway by the hair “and struck him several very severe but unfair blows.” Umpires decided that it was no foul when Jackson did the same to Mendoza (*Pancratia*, pp. 117, 119).

31. See McIntosh, *Fair Play*. p. 22.

bring the round to an end. Some, like Will Ward from Bristol, boxed in a very crouching style, dropping one knee near to the floor, so that whenever a blow was coming he could immediately claim to be “down.” The problem was so persistent that the *Articles of Agreement* for some important fights specified that falling without a punch would mean loss of the fight. Humphries actually forfeited his second fight with Mendoza in 1789 under such a clause—the first time it was alleged to have happened the umpires could not agree on whether Humphries took the punch before falling, but on the second he fell while on the retreat, it was described as an “obvious” foul, and Mendoza was the winner “without dispute.” Only a few months later, when Johnson fell without a blow against Perrins, the umpires decided that this was allowable, as the *Articles* “did not specify to the contrary.”³² The tendency of the rules and practices of prize-fighting to become even less restrictive round about the turn of the century is further suggested by accounts of a fight between Belcher and Dutch Sam in 1807—there was much throwing, and Belcher was struck while on his knees. Sam’s backers claimed that a man was not down until his hands reached the floor, and surprisingly (since this was one of the few points on which Broughton’s rules were apparently unequivocal) not only could the umpires not agree, but Lord Say and Sele declined to arbitrate, and “many meetings of the amateurs took place, and the subject of this foul play was very warmly discussed.” The only thing they could agree on was that the bout should be re-fought. On the other hand, while driving a man to the ropes or railings and pummeling him there was allowable, it was common practice for a second to rescue or protect a man entangled in the ropes. Humphries’ second, Tom Johnson, intercepted a blow from Mendoza, in their first fight, because his man was “suspended” on the rails, and was upheld by the umpires who decided that Humphries had to be regarded as “down.” Striking a man while down though did not necessarily bring disqualification. Even after Gowlett had actually *kicked* Symonds when he was on the floor, the “amateurs” decided on a draw because Symonds had gone down without a punch. Wrestling throws brought in a further complication about when a man became immune from punishment, and it was common to fall heavily on a thrown opponent. Matters did not always end even there, as Aaron Mendoza (Dan’s cousin) found in his fight with Packer in 1790—they fell, “and when down, Aaron being uppermost, Packer raised his knee, and so threw him a perfect somerset against the railings,” which decided the issue!³³

The notion of abiding by rules was certainly there, as well as an allegiance to some ill-defined concept of fairness, which might even on occasions seem at odds with the rules themselves. Humphries could go down several times without a blow, in his third fight with Mendoza, in defiance of the Articles, and still get away with it, “as his general manners placed him above the suspicion of

32. *Pancratia*, pp. 71-72, 86,91. Even at the end of the period there was dispute, with the view sometimes being put forward that a fall did not have to be the result of any particular blow, so long as some blows were struck in the round (*Sporting Magazine* 7 (N.S.) XXXVIII, November, 1820, p. 91).

33. *Pancratia*, pp. 292-294, 75, 104; Miles, *Pugilistica*, 2:76.

cowardice.” The many examples from actual fighting practice, though, show how limited and unreliable “fair play” could turn out to be. Fine words of noble virtues fade away against the bloody realities of the ring itself, where fighters like James, against Gamble in 1800, could have his nose “cut dreadfully” in the fourth round, his collar-bone broken in the 20th, his jaw broken in the 21st, and still fight four more rounds before falling.³⁴

The immediate management of contests could be as haphazard and irregular as the fighting itself. Seconds were all-important. They were nearly always pugilists themselves, and their influence could be powerful. One of their common functions was to hold up the fight to give their man longer to recover between rounds, they usually took the lead in making accusations of foul blows, and altercations between rival seconds were frequent. By the early 1820s attempts were being made to bring them under firmer control.³⁵ They seem, incidentally, to have acted on a purely professional basis without any fixed allegiances or implacable antagonisms. The coloured boxer, Bill Richmond, who brought on Tom Molineaux and acted as his second in the two fights with Cribb, had been in Cribb’s corner a few years before and, perhaps more remarkably, the same Ward who was accused of holding up the first fight in Cribb’s interests was seconding Molineaux less than three years later.³⁶ Even commoner agents in interrupting fights were the spectators themselves, who repeatedly broke the ring, sometimes merely as a consequence of the general tumult surrounding fights, but often to give respite or even escape to a boxer who was having a hard time of it. It is a reflection of the general tone of the prize-ring that horse-whips were often used on spectators to “beat out” the ring, and a symptom of what had to pass for organisation in the sport that one of the first acts of the Pugilistic Club was to provide its own whips, with specially carved handles!

Before the 1820s, when cheating became commonplace, actual rigging of fights was probably only occasional, in spite of frequent cries of “cross” from disgruntled spectators. Two of Tom Belcher’s early contests in 1805 did give rise to suspicion when his opponents quit well before they were beaten³⁷—it would be by no means the only instance in boxing history of the artificial build-up of a young fighter’s reputation. Manipulation of the odds was probably more common, and the raising of doubts over the first Cribb-Molineaux fight, on the eve of the second encounter, was doubtless done at least in part, to keep the odds

34. *Pancratia*, pp. 98, 132.

35. The umpires (including “an Hon Baronet”) and the referee only agreed to officiate in the Spring-Burns fight in May, 1820, on condition that the seconds retired to their corners when the men “set to” and did not speak to them during rounds. Much irritation was said to have been caused by such interference in recent fights, it was “highly improper, unfair and unmanly,” and “in direct opposition to Broughton’s rules.” (*Sporting Magazine* 6 (N.S.) XXXI, May 1820, p. 79. See *Ibid.*, 7 (N.S.) XLIII, April 1821, p. 9; XLV June 1821, p. 150).

36. *Pancratia*, p. 221 and supplement, p. 10. The role of seconds is particularly well described in Ford, *Prizefighting*, pp. 114-116.

37. Tom Belcher was Jem’s younger brother and well placed to make a protected entry into the pugilistic world. In his second light, O’Donnel “PLAYED CROSS, and GAVE IN at a time when all the spectators considered he had the best of it,” and in his third Ryan surrendered “not without a suspicion of cross play.” (*Pancratia*, pp. 229,230). A duel was actually fought over the allegation that the Randall-Martin fight was rigged. (*Sporting Magazine* 8 (N.S.) XLVIII, September 1821, p. 287).

competitive by boosting Molineaux's capabilities. There is no clear indication that this manipulative element in pugilism worsened appreciably during the period, but the large sums at stake in bets—often over £100,000³⁸—must have prompted temptations, and practice certainly failed to keep pace with raising expectations in society at large as to what constituted acceptable behaviour. It was a sense of this failure, and of the increasing precariousness of the sport, which led “an association of Gentlemen” to join together, in 1814, “for the support of gymnastic exercises,” in particular to provide purses for prize-fights, and bring some general regulation into the sport.³⁹ The appearance of this “Gymnastic Club” is significant, coming just at the time when the MCC and the Jockey Club were both being increasingly appealed to as arbiters in their respective sports. All were indicative of the tentative search for a surer basis for play. All were seeking to establish more clearly what was to be held *as fair play*. The immediate objects might well still be to make *gaming* more certain, but there are growing signs that, while the challenge and the stake money persisted, as the accepted framework for the sporting match, they were increasingly being overlaid by notions of athletic competition for its own sake. Within a few years, for instance, the contestants in the first Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race (1829) were to be stressing that no stake money was involved. The Pugilistic Club (as it soon became known) was more concerned with increasing stake money than abolishing it, but it did aim to bring more order into what was fundamentally in legal terms, at least—a disorderly sporting activity. A contribution to this better order would be a fuller and stricter adherence to the rules of pugilism, and there is considerable evidence of attempts to do this in the years on either side of 1820, but the club came too late and proved too transient to have lasting effect⁴⁰

None of the efforts at control ever amounted to much more than *maintaining* the standards of the past. The practices of the prize-ring had a built-in tendency to degenerate, and so put the sport more and more at odds with a society dedicated to moral improvement. The uneasy comments on the Cribb-Molineaux fight reflect the sport's dilemma. Whether or not they actually happened, the “incidents” in the fight-entanglement with the ropes, spectators breaking the ring, delaying by seconds, collisions—were all frequent enough in contemporary prize-fighting to not constitute a serious irregularity by the standards of the day. And yet there was still some feeling that Tom Molineaux, while he might have been dealt with according to the rules, had been unfairly beaten in a broader—and newer—sense, in terms of his reception by the crowd.

Inherent in this feeling must have been the realisation that the rules and practices of the prize-ring allowed so much latitude on so many points that the mood of the moment could be a deciding factor in their interpretation. There must also have been an awareness, however little acknowledged, that foul play,

38. Individual bets of over £10,000 were being made in the 1780s—see Miles, *Pugilistica*, 1:63-84. Wagers were made not only on the result, but also on “first blood,” and on the first knock-down, which again could give rise to disputes.

39. *Pancratia*, supplement, pp. 28, 32.

40. Only seven turned up for the annual dinner of the Club in 1820, where 60 or 70 had been present a few years before. (*Sporting Magazine* 6 (N.S.) XXXIII, June 1820, p. 150).

in spite of all the cries against it, very rarely led to the upsetting of a verdict. Such realisations must have been gaining strength, as the changing nature of pugilism's support in the 1820s would show. The final disquiet over this particular fight lay in the suspicion that fairness may have yielded to racial prejudice. The fact that Molineaux was not only a newcomer, but a *black* newcomer was again not, of itself, of great importance. The prize-ring was accustomed to coloured pugilists. Bill Richmond, in particular, stood well in sporting circles as a successful boxer and trainer. The Jew, Dan Mendoza, had been a popular and admired champion. The racist comments which such pugilists inspired (in an age when race aroused few passions in England) generally held rather less malice than comments directed at politicians or the royal family. *The Daily Register*, noted typically that Mendoza's boxing school was, "consistently with his character as a Jew," near the Bank!⁴¹ Towards black pugilists, the typical attitude was patronising and condescending rather than antagonistic.

What was new in the Cribb-Molineaux contest was that an overseas boxer was challenging for the *championship*, a circumstance in which the customary bias against newcomers—whether from Ireland, Bristol, or America—was prone to exaggeration. Bill Oxberry's account (to which Cone makes no reference, although it appeared only a few months after the fight) is prefaced by the revealing remark that "the NATIVES felt somewhat alarmed that a man of colour should dare to look forward to the championship of England."⁴² Oxberry was almost certainly at the two fights, and was probably responsible for some of the reporting in both the *Sporting Magazine* and *The Times*. Lacking Pierce Egan's flashy, graphic, racing style, he was the more sensitive observer, and much the more reliable according to Henry Downes Miles, who himself reported on pugilism for most of the Victorian age, and who made heavy use of Oxberry in his own influential *History of British Boxing*. These sources provide the shadow, but no substance, for subsequent allegations of sharp practice from later generations seized by stricter expectations of fairness or an enthusiasm to correct the white balance of history.

These expectations of fairness in all sports had been appreciably raised during the period covered by this survey, and were soon to be raised still higher. Even Pierce Egan, whose own earlier accounts of the 1820 fight had not alleged any irregularities, wrote very significantly of Molineaux a decade later that "it will not be forgotten, if justice hold the scales, that his colour alone prevented him from becoming the hero of that fight."⁴³ What had happened in the fight itself had not changed, but the view of it from a later perspective reflected the changing mood. There was some carry over from the new moral climate into the limited serious speculation about the nature and purpose of pugilism. The sport's moral environment, however, remained so circumscribed that even its

41. *Daily Register*, 20 December 1787. Racist comment against continentals in general, and the French in particular, was much more vimperative!

42. *Pancraria*, p. 246.

43. Egan, *Boxinna*, 3:493.

most imaginative Regency propagandists were modest in their claims. They concentrate on qualities such as *manliness*, *nobility*, *healthy exercise*, *agility*, *courage*, and *generosity*. Fair play, obedience to rules, not attacking a man when he is down, and making peace after a fight—all are referred to, but not given special prominence.⁴⁴ The most serious statement of what Pierce Egan used to call the “Philosophy of Pugilism” comes from a debate at Jeremy Bentham’s “Society for Mutual Improvement” in April 1820. The alternative propositions before the meeting asked whether magistrates were to be censured or praised for their laxity towards prizefights. A discussion of pugilism within the context of “Improvement” was remarkable enough, and the leading proponent of sport (who has come down to us only as Mr. M.) acknowledges that it constitutes a departure from the Society’s usual scientific and literary debates, that sport is “a subject on which superstition and hypocrisy will be very likely to be active” but equally that it is proper that the Society’s investigations should be diversified.⁴⁵ In what was probably the first serious debate on a national sport within the context of “Rational Recreation,” there was certainly some elevation of the moral claims for pugilism.

Many of the arguments are familiar from the previous century—it has military value, attunes the national character, provides a regulated safety valve for anger, and is infinitely preferable to duelling. But M. goes beyond this. Pugilists, for the spectators, are “actors on the stage of valour,” are playing a “glorious part.” The fighters themselves feel that “the eyes of all that are *noble*, *heroic*, and *scientific* in the kingdom, are fixed on them.” It goes, though, beyond this theatrical rhetoric to look, if only distantly, towards the ideals of athleticism:

There is something fair and *honourable* in an appeal to pugilistic strength and science. It is done so openly, not in secret; it is the presence of umpires to see justice done; no foul blow must be struck; a man is not to be struck when he is falling; he is helped up and time is given him to recover, and when he allows himself to be pronounced vanquished, his person is secure against all further violence. *Voltaire* was much delighted with the sight of a pugilistic combat in London, and in his works describes⁴⁶ it as a decisive proof of the love of justice and fair play in the British populace.

M. damages his credentials by his support of bull-baiting (on the grounds that it constitutes natural behaviour in the animals involved) but in his winding up speech of the debate, he gets further carried away. “Every man who looks on,” at a prize-fight, “is as good as a Lord Chief Justice and special jurymen, and will see that the law on the case is fairly and duly administered.” He concludes by commending “the triumphs of boxing” for “the principles of honour, justice, and humanity, it never fails to produce and support.”⁴⁷

44. For contemporary general statements on the nature of pugilism, see *ibid.*: 3:iv.vi; *Pancretia*, pp. 23-28; *Sporting Magazine* 6 (N.S.) XXXIV, July, 1820, p. 174; 9 (N.S.) XLIX, October 1821, p. 24, etc.

45. Egan, *Boxiana*, 3:4-5, 557.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-97.

This is all pointing toward an idealised concept of the moral effects of sport, embodying the idea of a justice wider than a limited adherence to the internal rules of the game. It attempts to set pugilism—an unlikely prime candidate for the role—in a more acceptable moral environment, extending the notion of *fairness* well beyond the function of regulating wagers, refurbishing sport's image for its re-emergence into a new moral world. But it was asking a great deal of pugilism to expect it to live up to those standards in practice—it was an illegal and fugitive sport, by its very nature a violent activity, that had to be opportunistic. *Fair play*, for all the claims on its behalf, was ill-defined, the rules of the sport were sketchy, and even where they were clear they were frequently broken. Nor significantly, was there much refinement of pugilistic conduct over this period. As expectations were raised, so they left the actual sporting practice further and further behind.

There was little positive reaction in and around the prize-ring itself. Cricket and horse racing, the other two well-established spectator sports, were taking their first tentative steps towards accommodating their practices to a new morality. They were, in the process—and almost accidentally—developing central organisations which could exert some influence, however patchy and minimal at first, on their sports' well-being. The absence of any such central body in boxing, apart from the short-lived Pugilistic Club, was only one of the severe handicaps under which the sport laboured. Boxing's illegality may not have unduly interfered with the practice of prize-fighting—but did seriously hinder its development. An illegal sport was bound to spend most of its energy maintaining its position, leaving little to pursue a better public image. By the 1820s it had become more and more preoccupied with avoiding magistrates and police. The ethics of pugilism and of society were being pulled further and further apart.

The man-to-man fight to exhaustion had no place in the coming age of respectability. Jem Broughton's rules, for his own time, had represented a considerable civilising of previous practice. By the 1820s the rules began to seem less than minimal controls on a primitive and barbarous activity. The *Sporting Magazine*, at the up-market end of the specialist press, had already rejected bull-baiting and was becoming apologetic over cock-fighting. Robert Surtees was to rank pugilism along with both and to bar it from his *New Sporting Magazine* in 1831. At the same time, sparring matches and exhibitions wearing “mufflers,” and which were within the law, were tame fare for fans reared on the prize-ring—no more than an aperitif for the real thing, and their growing popularity at the Fives Court and other venues irritated the devotees of the bare-knuckle fight to a finish.

The flourishing but neglected history of pugilism over the next forty years was to be within the context of a declining, but still potent, artisan ethic with strong tendencies towards both personal hedonism and labour anarchy. It would be an environment within which concepts of honour would be further attenuated, and greater reliance placed on the contractual element to maintain such control as the nature of both the sport and contemporary society admitted.

Symptomatically, by 1853, *The Rules of London Prize-Ring* had become intensely detailed and legalistic, with twenty-nine specific requirements on the conduct and practice of contests. The received notion of honour in sport had itself changed considerably by this time—it was no longer a matter of meeting financial obligations but of competing *without* any such obligations or possibility of reward. The “honour” came to be embedded within the sporting activity itself, there to be won by those who played the game with spirit and a new, all-pervasive “fairness.”⁴⁸ This was a hard climate for a poor man’s sport, where the few guineas stake money⁴⁹ were its major incentive.

There was to be much *more* organised pugilism in the 1830s and 1840s than there had ever been in the Regency days,⁵⁰ but its social and economic environment was greatly altered. The sport became regional and local, diffused over the country through the strata of society within which it could, on new terms, still flourish. There remained severe limits on its further development within the increasingly dominant morality propagated from the middle classes—a morality obsessed by order, industry, and paternalistic responsibility. Cricket and horse-racing would have their years of crisis, but they had the capacity (and influential leadership) to evolve successfully into modern and morally acceptable forms. The road for pugilism was too long, too arduous, and too unguided. The fight game, once it had slipped quite out of the ethical mainstream, would need a sea-change—a transmutation into a totally new form—before it could even begin to claim a place on modern society’s sporting roll of honour.

48. The similarities and differences between the concepts of honour in sport in the England of the Industrial Revolution and the Antebellum southern United States leave scope for interesting speculation. Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s analysis in *Southern Honour: Ethics and Behaviour in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) suggests that southern planters were often the spiritual cousins of the Tory squires of the eighteenth century, and there was certainly common ground in their attitudes towards gaming.

49. Of the 59 fights of which full details are given in Bell’s “Chronology of the Ring for 1855” (many more are mentioned), only four were for stakes of above £30. (*Bells Life in London*, 30 December 1855).

50. In 1843, for instance, there were 122 reported contests and also “many minor fights took place during the year.” (*Bell’s Life in London*, 7 January 1844, *Supplement: Review of 1843*).