



THE ULTIMATE FIGHTING CHAMPIONSHIP IS MORE THAN
THE BIGGEST, MOST VIOLENT SPECTATOR SPORT OF
THE PAST 10 YEARS. IT'S THE NEW ART OF KICKING ASS

¡NO MÁS!



The world, we see, is interested in soccer, and the United States, as a real, if reluctant, part of the world, is beginning to take notice.

In my day, however, we played football. For a lad to have expressed a preference for soccer would have been tantamount to his asking Santa for a sundress.

I grew up in a more pugnacious time. We boys came home from school regularly a bit smashed up. And even the organizations charged with our care—the Scouts, the Y—would suggest an otherwise insoluble difference of opinion might be addressed by “putting on the gloves,” and the *ultima ratio* of kids, as of kings, was taught as “What part of a punch in the nose don’t you understand?”

As both an ex-boy and the father of a son, I’m all for it. Yes, I know that a hard glance from one kid to another may have the folks at school calling the cops, but I believe in what used to be known as the manly art of self-defense. Our teachers and our parents taught us that it was wrong to pick on someone smaller than oneself, but it was the schoolyard that taught us to extend the proscription to someone larger. In the boxing and the wrestling rings or on the football field, we learned that getting hurt was not the same as dying, that in order to make one’s point, sometimes it is necessary to put something at risk, that there is such a thing as *will*, and that often it will, as Kipling told us, win out when heart and nerve and sinew are gone.

In the contact sports it became clear that the big tough-looking fellow is as subject to the laws of inertia and gravity as the little

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PHOTO BY JAMES IMBROGNO

guy—that most alleged absolute attributes come at a price (gain bulk and lose speed), that the race is not always to the swift, that many people fight dirty when the ref ain't looking, that one must protect oneself in the clinches and that everybody bleeds red.

There was and is a cost for these lessons, as for any worthy of the name, and our postmodern society has largely, it seems, agreed that the cost in litigation, in parental anxiety, in the risk of serious injury may be too high. And so we have forgotten the distinction between rowdiness, high spirits and crime—and treat all as the last.

Boxing has faded from its preeminent position as an American spectator sport, its fall counterbalanced by the rise of professional “wrestling.” This, of course, was and is not wrestling at all but a not unenjoyable, many times diverting charade of personal combat. The wrestlers, actually stuntmen, stage a scripted and/or improvised morality play: Good is down-trodden but eventually triumphs over evil.

On one hand this wrestling show addresses the human desire to enjoy the spectacle of a couple of guys pounding the spit out of each other. We may decry this desire as vicious bloodlust and say boo hoo, but there is another aspect to professional wrestling’s popularity. When kids fight or fought on the playground, when guys fought in the bar or parking lot, the *casus belli* was fundamentally a philosophical dispute. Traditionally, one party asserted something as fact, which the other suggested should be reclassified as either opinion or error. The disputants, discovering they had no mutual vocabulary capable of allowing them to address the problem logically, pressed home their point by other means. That put forward as fact, granted, was usually something on the level of “Your mother’s a whore,” rather than “Any right-thinking being would prefer Tolstoy to Dostoyevsky,” but the fight was understood, by the combatants, *au fond* as a search for truth.

Curiously, it was also so understood by the onlookers. How do we know? This is the essence of professional wrestling. Here again, a philosophical proposition is stated—“Good, being *better than*, must eventually overcome evil”—and we, the audience, are entertained by the working out of the proofs. If both participants in the charade are “good,” and they aren’t actually fighting, what the deuce are we looking at? Big hunks doing backflips off the ropes. It is the playing out of the philosophical proposition that interests us. The human combatant

feels not only “I will prove I am stronger than you” but “I will thus prove I am right.” And that’s what we spectators experience vicariously at any staged combat.

We look back at the fight and say, “Of course, X lost *because* he trained too hard, not hard enough, he wasn’t confident enough, he was overconfident, he was too offensive, too defensive, he is too old, he is too inexperienced,” etc. Note that any of these seen to be probative *after* the fight might have been predicted *before* the fight, but their truth could not have been known *until the trial in the ring*.

We do not say, “The one guy beat the other guy up,” but rather, “This goes to prove the following

universally true proposition: In a fair fight, a good big man will beat a good little man every time.” “My hockey player can beat the shit out of your honor student” appears to make a lot of sense. The actual truth, however, can’t be known until after the matchup.

Asian martial arts for centuries addressed the proposition of the big guy versus the little guy. The observant noted that indeed the good big man was an odds-on favorite to beat the good little man and addressed the problem. All right, they reasoned, *why* should the big man usually win? Because if he is as skilled as the little man and can move as quickly, his blows, as he is heavier, must fall harder.

But then, they observed, if the big man cannot deliver blows, if he can neither punch nor kick, what happens to his advantage?

It disappears.

The West became enamored of the Asian striking forms (kung fu, karate, etc.) in the 1950s and 1960s with Akira Kurosawa films and Bruce Lee as Kato in *The Green Hornet* (1966 to 1967), and in

the 1970s as the delighted audience of David Carradine’s TV show *Kung Fu* (1972 to 1975) and the films of Chuck Norris and Lee. The grappling forms, judo and jujitsu, largely stayed beneath the national consciousness. Why? Because they are difficult to film.

In jujitsu the combatants will generally both tie up and go to the ground early. The struggle to gain an advantage may then take up quite a bit of time and involve the laborious or skillful repositioning of an elbow, arm or leg, during which struggle the canny viewer will probably go get a beer. A fight, to be *dramatic*, must allow the viewer to see the combatants now coming together, now separating (vide: boxing, wrestling). Jujitsu, the art that allows the smaller and weaker to defeat the larger, involves tying up—that is, closing the (continued on page 194)



Top: Royce Gracie and Matt Hughes battling in UFC 60 at L.A.'s Staples Center on May 27, 2006. Middle and bottom: Pieces from Mamet's collection of vintage jujitsu how-tos and ads.

INO MÁSI!

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distance and *keeping* it closed, thus prohibiting the opponent from striking. It is not dramatic. It is just effective.

So the American public saw the Karate Kid, *Kung Fu*'s Caine and Steven Seagal doing aikido. These forms are beautiful but substantially ceremonial, as compared with the grappling form.

How do I know? Chuck Norris brought the Gracies, the jujitsu dynasty, up from Brazil in the 1980s, and they kicked the ass of everyone from every discipline who got into the ring with them.

The Gracies—including Royce, Rorion and Rickson—their cousins the Machados, and Renato Magno went forth from their mat-lined garages outside L.A. and showed the fighting world (the wrestlers, boxers and kung fu and karate fighters) the value of what quickly came to be known as Brazilian jujitsu.

This was jujitsu (wrestling, in the main, ground grappling) adapted from the traditional Japanese form and filtered through the experience and wisdom of the elder Gracies in Brazil, Helio and Carlos.

Boxing, we will recall, was generally regarded as fixed (probably because it is fixed) and professional wrestling as a subspecies of modern dance. The world, as always, wanted to see the two guys in the arena.

Well, then, the Gracies observed, why not take that same storefront-dojō contest that brought us our deserved notoriety and *stage* it in an arena? Why not mix the forms? Thus the UFC.

America had known of the Japanese forms of jujitsu and judo since the late 19th century. Teddy Roosevelt, when police commissioner of New York City, studied jujitsu and had his teacher teach it to his cops. They may have learned a thing or two, but jujitsu in the main languished in the American imagination as a subspecies of orientalism, akin perhaps to opium eating, something pursued only after dark and in a part of town smelling of incense.

One finds adverts from the turn of the century through the 1960s in the back

of magazines, in proximity to the coy and forbidden: "Learn Jujitsu," "Secrets of Picking Up Girls," "50 Beautiful Art Poses," "Magic Explained" and so on. The line drawings and photographs show various moves—chokes, throws, trips, come-alongs—and they are remarkable, to me, for their impracticability.

The moves described *might* be effective on an opponent who was (1) somnolent, (2) completely ignorant of one's intentions or (3) compliant. Perusing these drawings, a contemporary practitioner of Brazilian jujitsu would have to conclude that the Japanese understanding was outmoded and/or that the Japanese were keeping the good stuff to themselves.

According to Helio Gracie's book *Gracie*

moves they learned from Esai Maeda, their refinements—those they found in books, on the street and those they imagined—were tested, developed and refined *practically*, for use in the real world, against a determined and skilled opponent. Q: How may one develop a front headlock from which one absolutely cannot escape? Q: Now how may one escape from that headlock?

What is the underlying principle?

That there is no situation from which one cannot escape, that *any* opponent may be defeated through skill, endurance *and the courage to hold to these first principles*.

A man off balance, confused, distracted, panicked or exhausted is defeated. The man who can hold out longer can, at the moment of his opponent's weakness, employ his submission skills to defeat him.

So the Gracies went forth and conquered, both in Brazil and America.

And the GIs in the 1940s came home from the Pacific having learned a thing or two themselves.

We cannot underestimate the influence of the Pacific war on the American notion of personal combat. The Japanese did not surrender—they fought until they killed or were killed, and the methods of close combat to the death, always understood but never politely acknowledged, became part of the American lexicon of fighting.

These were classed, in my youth, under the head "Dirty Fighting" and included, notably, kicking in the balls and eye gouging; and, on level two, head butting and strikes with the knees and elbows—the techniques, in short, that could maim or kill.

Brazilian jujitsu evolved as the particular expression of that level of combat falling between the purely formal (boxing) and the intrinsically lethal (trench warfare)—and known, generally, as street fighting. That is, yes, this conversation may proceed to the death, but the unstated (though sometimes violated) rule is that it will not: Friends will separate us should the contest devolve past the understood limits, or the fistfight in the street will end when one opponent has been

Jiu-Jitsu, "It wasn't until the early 1900s that a seed from the strong Japanese jujitsu tree found its way to South America. Mitsuyo Maeda was a jujitsu teacher who was aiding a Japanese immigration colony in northern Brazil. Gastao Gracie helped Maeda get established in his new land. To express his gratitude, Maeda introduced Gastao's eldest son, Carlos Gracie, to the principles of Japanese jujitsu."

What did the Gracies have? The best of all things an artist may possess: time and a laboratory. Carlos, his brother Helio and their families and students had first one, then several, academies devoted to the perfection of this mystery with which they were in love. The

knocked unconscious (and perhaps received a salutary kick or two); the jujitsu fighter will release an opponent who has "tapped out" (surrendered) or will walk away when he has been "choked out" ("given a little nap").

The Gracies employed their particularly evolved system of street fighting (based on jujitsu, that is, a grappling form), and they defeated the American strikers and codified and capitalized on their garage challenge by inventing the phenomenon of mixed martial arts: Take whatever you got, get into the cage, and let's talk about it. We Americans recognized the idea that formal personal combat had perhaps evolved too far from the fight on the street, the close combat of war—the reality—and so the "philosophy" had been taken out of the thing, and we missed it.

And then we said, "...but wait." And here, I think, is the beauty of America: We love invention. Our industrial and technological might has always stemmed not from the elite philosopher, scientist or mogul but from the shade-tree mechanic ne'er-do-well and misfit who had a better idea (Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Bill Gates, Ulysses S. Grant, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Muddy Waters). And, I will add, Matt Hughes, who defeated Royce Gracie in the main event of the May 27 Ultimate Fighting Championship.

Matt Hughes is 32, with a mixed-martial-arts record of 40-4-0. He is very aggressive and is known as a striker. He was pitted against one of the great grapplers of all time, Royce Gracie (39 years old, 13-1-2), one of the creators of mixed martial arts—the first and most celebrated champion of "the cage" (the arena of the UFC).

It was, we at ringside informed each other, going to be a test of opposing techniques: If Hughes got in close enough to hit, he'd odds-on pound Royce Gracie into mint jelly; if Royce could close, tie up and take Hughes down to the mat, Hughes didn't stand a chance.

The UFC put on a great show. The Staples Center in L.A. was full; there was a lot of enjoyable overhead projection of

video promotion, background info, advertising and guff from the fighters. Hughes: "I'm going to send him home or back to school." Gracie: "I built this house."

On the undercard Mike Swick beat Joe Riggs in the first round, with a simple blue-belt guillotine choke; Brandon Vera beat Assuerio Silva with the same beginner's move—straight-up jujitsu.

Dean Lister went to the ground, pulled guard (that is, went to his back and put the other guy between his locked legs) and beat Alessio Sakara with a triangle (put the guy on top's head and one arm between your legs, lock one of your legs behind his head and behind your other knee, pull his head down, continue till he passes or taps out). In the welterweight bout Diego

Here comes Matt Hughes down the aisle: He has trained down, all shoulders, no waist; he looks like an American college wrestler. And here comes Royce Gracie, lean and rather sleek like many of the Brazilians, built more like a long-distance swimmer. They enter the cage of the UFC, of which venue Royce said, "I'm not part of the history; I *am* the history," and Matt Hughes gives him a spanking.

How did he do it? He took Royce to the mat. When Royce tried to escape from Matt's side control, Hughes went to the back, with Royce facedown, and proceeded to whomp him till the ref called the fight at 4:39 of the first round. Hughes, the striker, in short, beat Royce using jujitsu.

There was for the friends, admirers and students of the Gracies—myself included—little joy in Mudville, until one reflected, after some hours of head shaking and lubrication, that they had, most absolutely, been vindicated.

Not only had their physical technique been shown to be successful, the superiority of their philosophy had been proved: For, to take the macro view, Hughes, employing a first principle of jujitsu, "used the other fellow's strengths against him."

The Gracie challenge to America was "Use any form you please," and Hughes observed, studied and responded, "I'll use yours."

Q: Is fighting "a good thing"?

A: Training to fight is a good thing; if involved in a fight, winning is a good thing. Lest we forget.

Our American spirit loves the zero-sum game. We frontier folk like our sport a bit more blunt (whoever got spiked in cricket?) and will continue to hold to our preference for some semblance of two guys in a bar.

The brawl got bifurcated 60 years ago into wrestling (honest pretense) and boxing (honest crime).

The two discredited rings will now, for a while, be supplanted by the cage, and mixed martial arts will be acknowledged as the correct venue for the study of philosophy.



Sanchez went to the back of John Alessio, was choking him out when the last round ended and he got the decision.

What was common to all of these fights?

Each group of two guys was allowed to do to each other most anything under the sun, and each won by employing the simplest, most basic, learn-it-in-the-first-month moves of Brazilian jujitsu. (The moves can be demonstrated in five minutes; to be able to employ them effectively, on an opponent who would rather you did not, and to be able to recognize the opportunity for their employment, takes a certain amount of dedication.)

But how would the tale unfold in the main event?