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THE FIELD AND THE STAGE
PUGILISM, COMBAT PERFORMANCE AND
PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING IN ENGLAND
1700 – 1980

BENJAMIN LITHERLAND

SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

FEBRUARY 2014

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

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SUMMARY

Speaking to a local radio station in the 1960s, with the glitz, glitter and glamour of televised professional wrestling at its height, one old, retired Cumbrian wrestler declared that ‘wrestling...was a game for the field not the stage’. This statement, condensed and potent as it is, could stand in for the questions this thesis asks and seeks to answer: why did wrestling develop as a professional, performed ‘sporting entertainment’? To answer this question, existing theories of social and sports history are combined with cultural studies methods and applied to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of fields.

Chapters one and two surveys the birth of a fielded society and the growth of spectator and professional sport as part of a wider cultural field in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Considering many sports during this time had relationships with the theatre, circus and fairground, the seemingly logical expansion of professional sport was closer to that of professional wrestling. Sport, however, did not develop in this way. Chapter three explore the reasons for this and posits that the genesis of the sporting field, demonstrated by the growth of sporting bodies and the perpetuation of amateur ideal, dominated the field. Control of wrestling, however, for various reasons, was not gained in this manner. Chapter four examines the consequences of this when professional wrestling became a fully performed sport in the interwar years. Finally, chapter five assesses the relationship between the sporting field and television in the late twentieth century.

Wrestling as a ‘sporting entertainment’ is of interest precisely because it displays a ‘discarded possible’ of how professional sport may have grown had it not been for the institutions and ideologies active within the field during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century. It also demonstrates the often precarious nature of fields and concludes that sport’s meanings, pleasure and values are not as consistent as are first assumed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Researching and writing is always a form of collaboration. The following work has been discussed and dissected in detail, with family, friends, colleagues, conference delegates, and taxi drivers. I want to thank them all for their interest. I have considered their questions, comments and queries and I hope I have addressed them here. Rachel Wood, my partner with whom I share a flat, has had to endure an intensive and greater burden than most. Her loving support, positivity and pragmatic advice continues to council the little, and sometimes large, emergencies that seem to characterise postgraduate study. The Wrestlemania-weekend friends are dedicated and passionate fans of professional wrestling and I remain in awe of their knowledge and expertise; they remind me, more importantly, that watching wrestling remains something which should be pleasurable. My family, Mum, Dad, Hannah, William, have provided sustained financial and emotional support, even when slightly bemused by the idea of a thesis about wrestling.

While the supervisions and proof reading duties are not technically 50/50, both my supervisors, Andy Medhurst and Lucy Robinson, are equally inspiring reminders that academics should be political, challenging and, every so often, troublemaking. I respect and admire their work and feel privileged to have had them involved with this project. In particular, Andy has read multiple drafts and his feedback is always precise and greatly appreciated. Andy and his partner, Phil, have spoiled us to wine we could never afford and food I would never have dared taste: life is all the richer on both counts. More generally, the staff and PhD community in Media, Film and Music is a productive, exciting and genuinely interdisciplinary place to work. Evenings spent debating, gossiping and laughing has meant that the postgraduate experience has been anything but solitary.

I am grateful to the staff at the University of Sussex library, Mass Observation Archive, National Fairground Archive, London Metropolitan Archive, ITA/IBA/Cable Authority Archive, and the Carlisle Archive Centre. They have responded to endless enquiries, and occasional absented mindedness (I often forget a pencil), with patience and professionalism. Finally, the Arts and Humanities Research Council have provided funding for the work produced here. Needless to say, this thesis would not exist without them and I hope that they long continue to support scholars who would otherwise not be able to work at this level.

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Figure 1: Professional wrestling on the fairground, c.1970

INTRODUCTION

Wrestling, in its multitudinous and varied forms, runs throughout English culture. References to wrestling have appeared in the plays of William Shakespeare and the films of George Formby; the sport's traditions are of central importance to the local identities of Cumbria, Lancashire, Cornwall and Devonshire; and professional wrestling contests have appeared on the stages of the Alhambra Music Hall and on the screens of Independent Television. This thesis is a study of how regional forms of wrestling, pugilism and prize-fighting interacted with the circus, fairground and music hall in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and produced professional wrestling, a 'sporting entertainment',¹ in the twentieth.

Considering the sport's ubiquity, not to mention the dedication, energy and excitement surrounding studies of leisure, popular culture and British sport in the decades following the emergence of 'from below' social history and cultural studies in the 1960s, it seems remarkable that an extensive academic history of professional wrestling in England or the U.K. has never materialised until now. Sports history has

¹ Letter from H.W. Abby, Dale Martin Promotions, to Lew Grade and Howard Thomas, 21 Jan. 1966, Sporting Events "Wrestling" vol.1, IBA, Box 01097.

seen multiple texts produced on, for example, association football,² horse racing,³ boxing,⁴ rugby,⁵ and many other sports. Elsewhere, economic histories⁶ and historical overviews⁷ have been produced and well received. In 1989, Richard Holt wrote *Sport and the British: A Modern History*, a detailed investigation of sport from the eighteenth century onwards, a work which remains the key text in the field.⁸ Out of this historiography important themes have been established: rational recreation;⁹ the relationship between sport and media (print in the nineteenth century, television in the twentieth); the role of the public schools and muscular Christians;¹⁰ commercialism; and the all-important, and in some ways all-encompassing, questions of amateurism and professionalism.¹¹ Why, then, has a study of English professional wrestling – a fascinating case study which both supports and complicates these themes – not been forthcoming? The answer, as is to be expected, is complex. There are pragmatic reasons and there are the unique and more complicated theoretical difficulties that are specific to the sport and its histories.

An immediate problem for professional wrestling in England or the U.K. is that home-produced versions of the sport have not been a regular feature on British screens since the 1980s.¹² British professional wrestling's popularity, moreover, peaked in the mid-1960s. Both in and outside the academy, writers and, more importantly, editors and publishers are attracted to 'fashionable' histories and thus fashionable sports. The best, most detailed historical study of (professional) wrestling in England and Europe, by

² Tony Mason, *Association Football and English Society 1863 – 1915*, (Brighton, 1980); Matthew Taylor, *The Leaguers: The Making of Professional Football in England, 1900 – 1939*, (Liverpool, 2005).

³ Mike Huggins, *Flat Racing and British Society, 1790-1914*, (London, 1999).

⁴ Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History*, (London, 2008); Dennis Brailsford, *Bareknuckles: A Social History of Prize-Fighting*, (Cambridge, 1988); John Ford *Prizefighting: The Age of Regency Boximania* (Devon, 1971); Kenneth Gordon Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process* (Cambridge, 1992);

⁵ Tony Collins, *Rugby's Great Split: Class, Culture and the Origins of Rugby Football League*, (London, 1998); Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: A Sociological Development of Rugby Football*, (New York, 1979).

⁶ Wray Vamplew, *Pay up and Play the Game: Professional Sport in Britain, 1875 – 1914*, (Cambridge, 1988).

⁷ Mike Huggins, *The Victorians and Sport*, (London, 2004); Martin Polley, *Moving the Goalposts: A History of Sport Since 1945*, (London, 1998); Neil Tranter, *Sport, Economy and Society in Britain 1750 – 1914*, (Cambridge, 1998).

⁸ Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History*, (Oxford, 1989).

⁹ Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830 – 1885*, (London, 1978): pp.124-146.

¹⁰ J.A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, (London, 1986).

¹¹ Norman Baker, 'Whose Hegemony? The Origins of the Amateur Ethos in Nineteenth Century English Society', *Sport in History*, 24/1, (2004) pp.1-16.

¹² Elsewhere, I have explored American wrestling's dominance in the U.K. See Benjamin Litherland, 'Selling punches: Free Markets and Professional Wrestling in the UK, 1986-1993', *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 4/4, pp.578-598.

Graeme Kent, was written for a general audience and published in 1968 at the height of its televised fame.¹³ It is a useful text, but the lack of footnotes and reflection on primary material can be frustrating. One recognises anecdotes from autobiographies with no comment on the source. This is perfectly acceptable given the book's purpose, an attractive pictorial history for a passionate wrestling fan in the 1960s, but can be frustrating for the more thorough needs of an academic researcher. Also reflecting on professional wrestling's televised 'golden era' is Simon Garfield's *The Wrestling*.¹⁴ The book is a fantastic popular oral history account of professional wrestling on television with nostalgic flourishes and the ability to capture the colourful and at times bizarre world of wrestling. The text is a goldmine for interviews and quotes but the statements remain deliberately uninterrogated by the author. Neither are particularly concerned with the methods and interests of social or sports history nor the theoretical insights or concerns of cultural studies.

The World Wrestling Entertainment's (WWE) dominance in North America and Europe since the 1980s has unsurprisingly offered a wider range of historical works about the sport. Books by Gerald W. Morton and George M. O'Brien,¹⁵ and Scott M. Beekman¹⁶ have produced interesting and engaging accounts of America's professional wrestling history. Both hint at developments in England and English wrestling styles – as will become clear, it is near-impossible for histories of professional wrestling to not discuss the English music hall stage – but their overriding concern is with America. Both are well-researched and provide a good deal of detail and offer some primary material, though they lack a wider interest in what professional wrestling can tell us about sport, its history and its uniqueness as a cultural form. More recently, there have also been attempt to redress the imbalance of American-centric texts with a detailed examination of *lucha libre* or Mexican professional wrestling.¹⁷ Tellingly, there is still no detailed English language academic study of Japanese professional wrestling, a popular form with Japanese audiences and global wrestling fandom.

The very fact that these national styles exist, each with their own traditions and nuances, hints at another difficulty a history of English professional wrestling has to

¹³ Graeme Kent, *A Pictorial History of Wrestling*, (London, 1968).

¹⁴ Simon Garfield, *The Wrestling*, (London, 2007)

¹⁵ Gerald W. Morton and George M. O'Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*, (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1986).

¹⁶ Scott M. Beekman, *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America*, (Westport, 2006).

¹⁷ Heather Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity*, (Durham, 2008).

address. Wrestling was one of the first truly international professional sports while simultaneously remaining a highly localised and regional tradition. The professional and amateur versions share little in common but their histories are intertwined and one cannot explain the former without reflecting on the latter (and vice versa). To understand the development of professional wrestling one first needs to understand the multiple local styles that are found across England, both historically and contemporarily. Wrestling is an umbrella term for hundreds of various competitive combat sports that exist across counties, countries and historical contexts; the professional version is a child of these wide-ranging styles. Without existing, dedicated studies about England's major wrestling styles, it would be difficult to write the thesis presented here. The past decade has seen work produced by Mike Huggins¹⁸ and Michael Tripp¹⁹ in Cumbrian and Cornish wrestling histories respectively. A major history of Lancashire's catch style has yet to be written, so where possible I have provided details from that county gleaned from contemporary newspaper articles and secondary sources. Huggins and Tripp's studies prove invaluable for understanding the wider, national context in which professional wrestling occurs.

Needless to say, sport remains a cultural form in which the complexities of local, national and international identities and borders are explored, as demonstrated by anyone trying to explain or define why they like to see Scotland lose in the football but enjoy seeing Britain winning medals at the Olympics. The decision to write this thesis as a history of English wrestling rather than British wrestling has been a difficult one. Growing up as a wrestling fan, I have always spoken to other fans about 'British professional wrestling'. ITV could be received across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; Hackenschmidt wrestled at Ibrox; and Big Daddy even attired himself in a union flag. With that said, this thesis does not consider any Scottish or Welsh local wrestling traditions which have their own distinctive characteristics and histories. Big matches, when taking place in the U.K., almost always took place in English stadiums and on English stages. Further work may reveal that Gaelic styles played a role in the growth of combat performance in the early nineteenth century, but for now I hesitantly present this as a history of England as part of Great Britain, with all the contradictions such a study heralds.

¹⁸ Mike Huggins, 'The Regular Re-invention of Sporting Tradition and Identity: Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling c.1800 – 2001', *The Sports Historian*, 21/1, (2001): pp.35 – 55.

¹⁹ Michael Tripp, *Persistence of Difference: A History of Cornish Wrestling*, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, (Exeter, 2009).

The many components – local, national and international – needed to explore professional wrestling history also render archival work problematic. Characterised by the ephemeral nature of historical documentation, archives are notoriously trying at the best of times. Wrestling presents its own unique dilemmas, in addition to the difficulties faced by all social historians: as a regional sport it left scattered and incomplete accounts, and as a national and international entertainment it has never had anything resembling a national organisation with a set of central governing bodies, clubs, or formal structures. The closest the sport came to such a group, Joint Promotions in the second half of the twentieth century, still consisted of regional wrestling organisations and did not have a monopoly over the sport in the same way that other sporting bodies retained. Furthermore, professional wrestling promoters have never been the most diligent with regards to company finances or paperwork,²⁰ not least because until very recently professional wrestlers have maintained that their sport was legitimate (a practice referred to as maintaining *kayfabe*, an old carnival term to instruct performers to continue the performance in everyday life). Leaving detailed reports of the fakery and trickery involved in the performance might easily have caused promoters problems given the fact that newspapers were often eager to provide evidence for such accusations.

Consequently, the archives that I have used for this work reveal the relationship between wrestling and other institutions. The ITA/IBA archives have internal correspondence as well as letters with Joint Promotions and other wrestling groups. The sources, as fantastic as they undoubtedly are, can be frustrating. They are incomplete conversations and, more often than not, betray the interests of the broadcasting institution rather than the wrestling groups. Elsewhere, the riches of the Mass Observation's Worktown project have produced an on-going assessment of sport in the inter-war years. Robert Snape has used the all-in wrestling files to assess Bolton's wrestling heritage, material that I also use in chapter three.²¹ Snape's work is the most thorough account of professional wrestling and its audiences yet produced, but it focuses primarily on Bolton. While we both arrive at similar conclusions regarding the attractions and pleasures of the sport, chapter three of this thesis is also supplemented by lengthy reports produced by the London County Council (LCC) in the 1930s.

²⁰ Fiona A.E. McQuarrie, 'Breaking Kayfabe: "The History of a History" of World Wrestling Entertainment', *Management & Organizational History*, 1/3, (2006): p.242.

²¹ Robert Snape, 'All-in Wrestling in Inter-War Britain: Science and Spectacle in Mass Observation's "Worktown"', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 30/12, (2013): pp.1418-1435.

Likewise, Mike Huggins and I have both utilised Cumbrian record archives for their extensive wrestling notes on the local style. Finally, the thesis uses newspaper reports and (auto)biographies. The pitfalls of these sources are fairly apparent, doubly so knowing the showmen involved and their renown for hyperbole and ballyhoo. Where relevant these dangers are signposted, but such texts have proven to be a rich quarry for many writers before me and they continue to be useful here.

Frankly, though, the caprices of academic publishing and the problems of archives have not stopped work being produced about less popular, niche sports. Simply put, there is something off-putting to sports historians about professional wrestling. Its questionable sporting status seems to have an important function in this unease: professional wrestling is a performed and theatricalised version of sporting competition which controllers at the ITA described as a ‘sporting entertainment’.²² Individuals at the BBC were blunter, explaining to the national press, ‘We don’t look on wrestling as a sport. Wrestlers are entertainers’.²³ Historians, at least on first sight, appear to have agreed with this assessment, and this has influenced the manner in which wrestling has often been approached.

A QUESTION OF SPORT?

Sports histories have not naturally gravitated towards sports that challenge the perceived internal logic of sport. Some games might occasionally throw up an intriguing pub table debate between friends (‘is darts *really* a sport?’). Likewise, cultural anthropologists and historians, engaged in their own version of this dispute, have asked questions about the differences between play and sport and how this establishes itself in non-capitalist and capitalist societies.²⁴ But what constitutes sport for modern, Western audiences is apparently common sense: a competition between individuals or groups testing physical skill, speed, accuracy or strength. For the most part, this common sense definition has adequately served historians. In Wray Vamplew’s excellent book on the economics of sport, for example, he refuses to even engage in the debate, claiming that ‘except on the fringes, sport is generally recognisable and that any attempt...to further classify or delineate...runs the risk...of confusing the goalposts with the bedposts’.²⁵ I do not think

²² Letter from H.W. Abby, Dale Martin Promotions, to Lew Grade and Howard Thomas, 21 Jan. 1966, Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.1, IBA, Box 01097.

²³ Clifford Davies, ‘Ring Stars Join Variety Union: Wrestlers Fight for Bigger TV Purse’, *Daily Mirror*, 23 Apr.(1962): p.11

²⁴ Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*, (New York, 2004).

²⁵ Vamplew, *Pay up and Play the Game*, p.xv.

it would prove to be wildly controversial to suggest that professional wrestling is on the fringes. But on the fringes of *what*?

Sharon Mazer has argued that ‘to watch wrestling and then to write about performance is to attempt to confront and come to terms with the significance of a highly popular performance practice as it intersects, exploits, and finally parodies the conventions of both sport and theatre’.²⁶ Despite the intersection, the most sustained academic arguments about professional wrestling have been developed by those working broadly in Theatre Studies or Media Studies.²⁷ They have often focused on the performed nature, following Roland Barthes’ suggestion that, ‘wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle’.²⁸ Influenced by Barthes, and often taking a semiotic approach, at their core most of these studies are attracted to professional wrestling’s ‘fakery’, its illusions, spectacle and dramatic tendencies and the meanings, representations and ideologies therein. This can be seen in the ways in which theorists have attempted to claim professional wrestling as a form of melodrama,²⁹ identity drama,³⁰ ritual drama,³¹ passion play,³² contact improvisational dance,³³ *commedia dell’arte*,³⁴ and televised carnivalesque.³⁵ Critics have often been drawn to the forms of dramatic representation – specifically between good and evil – and the operation of stereotypes within the text.³⁶

I do not want to dismiss these readings and analyses out of hand. All offer, with varying degrees of understanding and insight, appropriate comparisons to other cultural forms. It is hard not to watch a televised professional wrestling match from either side of the Atlantic from the past fifty years without encountering or recognising the high

²⁶ Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*, (Jackson, 1999): p.3.

²⁷ See Nicholas Sammond (ed.), *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, (Durham, 2005).

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Annette Lavers (trans.), (Reading, 1993): pp.15-25.

²⁹ Henry Jenkins, “‘Never Trust a Snake’: WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama”, in Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd (eds.), *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media and the Politics of Identity*, (Bloomington, 1997): pp.48-81; Gerald Craven and Richard Moseley, ‘Actors on the Canvas Stage: The Dramatic Conventions of Professional Wrestling’, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 6/2, (1972): pp.326-336.

³⁰ Thomas Henricks, ‘Professional Wrestling as Moral Order’, *Sociological Inquiry*, 44/3, (1974): pp.177-188.

³¹ Michael R. Ball, *Professional Wrestling As Ritual Drama in American Popular Culture*, (Lewiston, 1990).

³² Gregory P. Stone, ‘Wrestling – The Great American Passion Play’, in Eric Dunning (ed.), *Sport: Readings From a Sociological Perspective*, (Toronto, 1971): pp.301-335.

³³ Cynthia J. Novack, ‘Looking at Movement as Culture: Contact Improvisation to Disco’, *The Drama Review*, 32/4, (1988): pp.102-119.

³⁴ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.17.

³⁵ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, (London, 1989): pp.83-102.

³⁶ John W. Campbell, ‘Professional Wrestling: Why the Bad Guys Win’, *Journal of American Culture*, 19/2, (1996): pp.127-132; Jeffery J. Mondak, ‘The Politics of Professional Wrestling’, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 23/2, (1989): pp.139-149.

degree of theatrics and dramatics alluded to by these writers. These insights have undoubtedly been a useful starting point, both for the study of professional wrestling at large and the work presented here. For much of the twentieth century, professional wrestling has not been a sport by any modern definition: there is no legitimate competition, gambling is a rare feature or attraction, and the ideologies of sport are disregarded or even inverted. On a textual level professional wrestling certainly exists on the cusp of the sporting and the theatrical. The problem with such a reading is that it risks taking sport, and for that matter theatre, to be an unchanging, natural phenomenon. Sport, like any text or practice, is a highly structured, socially reproduced cultural form that is the product and result of specific economic, cultural and social conditions and historical processes.

As such, this thesis does not offer a formalist or essentialist description of sport, dance or theatre while testing professional wrestling as a text against such definitions. Evidently, though, theatre and sport are different cultural forms with their own distinctive histories. To escape this quandary, Pierre Bourdieu's notion of field has been of immense value. In keeping with Bourdieu's work more generally, fields are surprisingly simple concepts grounded in dense empirical work.³⁷ At its most basic, a field is an autonomous and unique social space, 'having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy...endowed with particular institutions and obeying specific laws'.³⁸ Like Raymond Williams,³⁹ Bourdieu is adamant that a field cannot be understood by one-dimensional, economic readings of the base and superstructure. Changes in one field, though, may cause changes in another, functioning 'somewhat like a prism which refracts every external determination: demographic, economic or political events are always retranslated according to the specific logic of the field'.⁴⁰

During his prolific career, Bourdieu turned his attention to sport on several occasions,⁴¹ and his emphasis on the uniqueness of the sporting field is important. One of sports history's greatest achievements in the last thirty years has been to establish the

³⁷ See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Randal Johnson (trans.), (Cambridge, 2012); Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Susan Emanuel (trans.), (Cambridge, 1996).

³⁸ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p.162 -163.

³⁹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism*, (London, 2005): pp.31-49.

⁴⁰ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p.164.

⁴¹ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Sport and Social Class', *Social Science Information*, 17, (1978): pp.819-840; Pierre Bourdieu, 'The State, Economics and Sport', *Culture, Sport, Society*, 1/2 (1998): pp.15-21; Bourdieu writes about the Olympics as a field of production in *On Television*, (New York, 1996): pp.79-81.

distinctiveness of sport while placing it in a larger frame of social and historical development. As Bourdieu claims,

[T]he history of sport is a relatively autonomous history which, even when marked by the major events of economic and social history, has its own tempo, its own evolutionary laws, its own crises, in short, its specific chronology.⁴²

More recently, Jacques deFrance has illustrated the worth in thinking about fields in relation to sport.⁴³ In his work he suggests that in France in the twentieth century sport and exercise became a field in its own right as groups from the medical, military and educational fields came together to define and shape sport as a separate space in society and culture. In England a similar process can be described from around 1850 onwards, and I would add the cultural field to the list of major contributors to the establishment of the field of sport. While it retained many of these older links, sport became an autonomous cultural form separate to other fields in society, imbued with its own histories, politics and institutions, and valuing its own skills, capitals and talents. Moreover, contained within each field are subfields which, like fields, contain a unique set of ‘logic, rules and regularities’ while still observing the forms of capital inherent in the field.⁴⁴ Within the sporting field as a whole there exists smaller subfields – usually individual sports – that have *their* own histories and politics, governing bodies, values and capitals. Changes in the wider field, as Bourdieu was always careful to stress, differentiate themselves ‘in each sport according to each sport's own internal logic’.⁴⁵

Rather than having to classify and categorise cultural forms, thinking in terms of fields offers an opportunity to observe historical participants and their own policing and maintaining of boundaries and those who pass through them. Using these measurements, professional wrestling in the twentieth century, as chapters three, four and five will explore, belonged to the sporting field. Professional wrestling looked, felt and was experienced like a sport. It was used as an example in debates about the role, purpose and meaning of sport. Professional wrestling was displayed in grounds and stadiums created and maintained by other sports. Many ex-amateur wrestlers became pro-wrestlers, agents, or promoters. Until the 1930s, professional wrestling was covered

⁴² Bourdieu, ‘Sport and Social Class’, p.821

⁴³ Jacques deFrance, ‘The Making of a Field with a Weak Autonomy’, in Philip S. Gorski (ed.), *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*, (Durham, 2013): pp.303-326.

⁴⁴ Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, (Chicago, 1992): p.104.

⁴⁵ Bourdieu, ‘The State, Economics and Sport’, p.16.

in sporting magazines and in the sporting pages of the mainstream press. From the 1930s onwards, professional wrestling appeared as part of televised sports broadcasting.

Before the twentieth century, however, professional pugilism also interacted with and was influenced by the cultural field, namely the fairground, circus and music hall. Chapters one and two argue that pugilism and combat performance, as part of a wider professional, commercial sporting culture, belonged to the cultural field until at least the 1860s. For wrestling, and to a lesser degree boxing, these overlaps in the field of cultural production and the sporting field were retained until the 1920s. The connotations of professional wrestling with performance emerge around 1900 on the stages of the music hall, an argument developed in chapter three, but chapter one and two argue that precursors to the music hall presentation of wrestling exist in many professional, commercial sports, especially in combat sports, at earlier periods. This included wrestling, but more regularly involved prize-fighters and boxers performing sparring contests and other entertainments in theatres, circuses, fairground gaffs, public houses and singing saloons, among others. There is no straightforward line to be drawn between eighteenth century sparring and televised professional wrestling in the twentieth, but to not cover such histories would be to lose context about the growth of professional wrestling as a sporting entertainment. In describing such events I have borrowed Lucy Nevitt's useful phrase 'combat performance', a description she uses to describe jousting tournaments in the late medieval period and compares to contemporary professional wrestling.⁴⁶

Certainly, boxing historians have discussed combat performances in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but they have often been written with a certain amount of disdain and the assumption that such moments were mere diversions from boxing's longer, inevitable march to gloved, Queensberry contests as part of the establishment of the sporting field.⁴⁷ More recently, there has been an interest in the development of sport as an entertainment in the first half of the nineteenth century and

⁴⁶ Lucy Nevitt, *Combat Performance: A Study of the Structural and Ideological Codes of Tournament Drama and Professional Wrestling*, unpublished thesis, (London, 2006).

⁴⁷ Brailsford, for instance, claims that 'sparring exhibitions could give some impression of the sport's skills, if little or nothing of its excitements', *Bareknuckles*, p.153. Sheard writes that 'the type of exhibition boxing which was starting to develop...although it provided a "safer" foundation for the development of the sport also ran the risk of becoming relatively predictable. It is my contention that eighteenth century boxing - in a similar fashion to the forms of twentieth century wrestling described by Stone - was in danger of becoming almost a branch of "show business", and therefore potentially boring for spectators and, more to the point, completely unsuitable for the gambling with which it was so intimately connected', *Boxing in the Civilising Process*, p.140-141.

the struggles to disassociate sport from the stage upon the advancement of the amateur sporting bodies in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸ Professional boxing, for example, continued an uneasy relationship with the stage and screen well into the twentieth century;⁴⁹ there were failed attempts to create an indoor, music hall managed football tournament at the turn of the twentieth century;⁵⁰ and pedestrianism retained strong links with the circus until the onslaught of amateurism.⁵¹

With characteristic insight, Raymond Williams' study of television describes that many of the skills and pleasures to be found in the music hall and circus share a relationship with the skills and pleasures of spectator sport.

Television is said to be the medium and probably the cause of "spectator sport", but this is a simplification. There have always been some kinds of spectator sport, from gladiators to bearbaiting, and there is a real overlap between the circus – itself a relatively modern form drawing upon older skills of physical display and animal-training – and the variety theatre: an overlap which is repeated in television... It is now often said that gladiators, bear-baiting, the skills of the circus, are not sport but 'entertainment'. "Sport" is a description of other kinds of organised physical exercise.⁵²

Hippodramatic horse riding, rope dancing, tumbling, trapeze artistry, tightrope walking, juggling, sword throwing, and many other physical activities that can be witnessed on the circus and variety stage use similar or even identical skills and bodily actions to those found in sport. One can quite conceivably imagine such displays, with a tweak here and there with regard to showmanship and performance conditions, as Olympic events. Conversely, in their report for the ITA, Dobie and Wober playfully offer an account of what tennis in the 1970s might have looked had it followed a comparable progress to wrestling.

Indoor tennis is a spectacle which might potentially have parted from its sporting roots had this not been vigorously opposed. With a travelling circus of players belonging to a single management, and the development of role stereotypes along the lines of embryonic Nastase – Connors – Ashe – Borg dimension

⁴⁸ Adrian Harvey, *The Beginnings of a Commercial Sporting Culture in Britain, 1793 – 1850*, (Aldershot, 2004).

⁴⁹ Dan Streible, *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema*, (Berkeley, 2008).

⁵⁰ Andrew Horrall, *Popular Culture in London c.1890 – 1918*, (Manchester, 2001).

⁵¹ Samantha Oldfield, 'Running Pedestrianism in Victorian Manchester', *Sport in History*, 34/2, (2014): p.233.

⁵² Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, (London, 2003): p.64.

of villain or hero, tennis could have become something more like wrestling.⁵³

It is an intriguing proposition. It does not take large amounts of imagination to whisk away the whites of Wimbledon, the polite applause between points, and the handshakes at the end of the match and replace them with brightly coloured costumes, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characters, and competitive points replaced by long, exciting rallies designed to elicit loud responses from the audiences (not dissimilar to the exhibition rallies performed by Mansour Bahrami on the senior circuit, perhaps). In many ways, spectator sport performed in this mode makes more sense than the way sport actually developed. Asking audiences to part with their money to watch an event in which quality and entertainment are left to chance seems an improbable business model in a century which saw ever-increasing Fordism and standardisation across cultural and economic commodities.⁵⁴ Even the most passionate sports fan will be able to recall turgid 0-0 draws, lifeless test days being deadened by defensive batsmen, and one horse races delivering the most predictable results conceivable. As fun as imagining tennis in this way might be, however, such a fantasy does not necessarily sit comfortably. That is simply not sport as we understand it. Fair play, competition and handshakes just seem *natural*.

Natural they are not, though. These elements are the result of a hard fought competition between actors, agents and institutions looking to control sport’s meanings, rules and values. Boundaries between sport and the theatre exist, but they are socially, politically and culturally reproduced and policed by both fields. One of the most important questions this thesis seeks to answer, then, is not ‘why did professional wrestling develop in the manner that it did?’ but ‘why did no other sports develop in a similar manner alongside it?’ Again, Bourdieu’s fields are useful here. In his work, fields are conceptualised as being akin to a game or a battle in which actors, agents, groups, institutions and subfields compete with one another to control the field’s capitals, meanings, ideologies and boundaries (and those who might cross them). In this regard, much sport and social history has been interested in similar debates, framed slightly differently, and much existing work can be modified and applied to this Bourdieusian model:

⁵³ Ian Dobie and Mallory Wober, *The Role of Wrestling as a Public Spectacle: Audience Attitudes to Wrestling as Portrayed on Television*, Independent Broadcasting Authority, (London, 1978): p.14.

⁵⁴ Garry Whannel, *Fields in Vision: Television Sport and Cultural Transformation*, (London, 1992): p.84.

[T]he social definition of sport is an object of struggles, that the field of sporting practices is the site of struggles in which what is at stake, inter alia, is the monopolistic capacity to impose the legitimate definition of sporting practice and of the legitimate function of sporting activity - amateurism vs. professionalism, participant sport vs. spectator sport, distinctive (elite) sport vs. popular (mass) sport.⁵⁵

The past forty years of sports history scholarship has proven that these struggles are central historiographical themes. In order to conceptualise these struggles, the first generation of sport, leisure and cultural historians explored these conflicts through the lens of class. With Marx's conception of class conflict as a driving force of history, this view articulated the destruction of older, pre-industrial forms of leisure by a toxic mixture of industrialism, urbanisation, and the growth of a capitalist middle class. Paying particular attention to the industrial revolution and the nineteenth century,⁵⁶ early writers suggested that a pre-industrial festival calendar was destroyed by violent effects of industrialisation on the lives of the working classes. The most prominent of these writers, Robert W. Malcolmson, argued that the industrialisation of English society in the latter half of the eighteenth century shattered older forms of traditional sports and pastimes.⁵⁷

In their place, such texts argued, commercialised forms of leisure – the circus,⁵⁸ spectator sport, the music hall,⁵⁹ the seaside holiday, and so on – were born in the mid-nineteenth century. In these terms, this was a 'culture of consolation' (a phrase too quotable for its own good),⁶⁰ socially conservative, and conducive to producing a docile working class. From these Victorian and Edwardian commercial and capitalist cultural forms there arose the twentieth century's mass produced culture industries and their

⁵⁵ Bourdieu, 'Sport and Social Class', p.826.

⁵⁶ For a detailed overview of the industrial revolution and popular culture historiography see Emma Griffin, 'Popular Culture in Industrializing England', *The Historical Journal*, 45/3, (2002): pp.619-635.

⁵⁷ Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society 1700 – 1850* (Cambridge, 2007).

⁵⁸ Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society*, (Charlottesville, 2005); Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire: Circus History and Representation*, (Manchester, 2000); Marius Kwint, 'The Circus and Nature in Late Georgian England', in Rudy Koshar (ed.), *Histories of Leisure* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 45–60; Marius Kwint, 'The Legitimization of the Circus in Late Georgian England', *Past & Present*, 174/1, (2002): pp. 72–115.

⁵⁹ Peter Bailey (ed.), *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure*, (Milton Keynes, 1986); Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, (Cambridge, 1998); Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict*, (Cambridge, 1996).

⁶⁰ Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Working Class Culture and Working Class Politics in London, 1870 – 1900', *Journal of Social History*, 7/4, (1974): pp.460-508.

supposedly beguiling control over the masses:⁶¹ the cinema, recorded popular music and the radio, and then later television. Fairly quickly, however, this narrative of leisure hit complications and challenges. Stresses on change, argued most convincingly by Hugh Cunningham⁶² and most forcibly by J.M. Golby and A.W. Purdue,⁶³ tended to overlook the large amount of continuity expressed. Many sports and leisure activities, they argued, flourished throughout the industrial revolution. The working classes took sport with them into the city. Elsewhere, the idea that a singular industrial revolution could be written about was overtaken by studies that stressed regionality.⁶⁴

From the mid-1970s onwards, Antonio Gramsci was seen to be a particularly beneficial theorist in debates about social control raging across the sub-disciplines. The use of Gramsci allowed for aspects of social control and power while simultaneously allowing room for working class agency, operating as a middle-ground between structuralism and culturalism.⁶⁵ Theories of hegemony moved notions of power away from something that was merely wielded to something that was coercive and manifested in a number of subtle ways. Using this model, ‘the bourgeoisie can become a hegemonic, leading class only to the degree that bourgeois ideology is able to accommodate, to find some space for, opposing class cultures and values’⁶⁶. In this reading, ruling groups were able to control the ideological meanings of sport and leisure without necessarily producing class conflict or coercion in the sense of physical violence or threat thereof. Through a mixture of different forms of control, the model of sport and leisure being controlled by the bourgeoisie was retained, but at the same time the working classes had a role in the ways in which sport and leisure was remade.

At its most polemical, however, the hegemony model continued to have a tendency to see power structures as part of the social control thesis, albeit with the might of the police force, magistrates and industrialists being swapped for a more nuanced description of cultural control.⁶⁷ As noted by Richard Holt, ‘if crudely handled the idea of hegemony simply degenerates into a bland proposition about the

⁶¹ This attitude was held across the political spectrum. See John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880 – 1939*, (London, 1992); Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture*, (Manchester, 1990).

⁶² Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*.

⁶³ J. M. Golby and A.W. Purdue, *The Civilisation of the Crowd: Popular Culture in England 1750 – 1900*, (London, 1984).

⁶⁴ John K. Walton and James Walvin (eds), *Leisure in Britain 1780 – 1939*, (Manchester, 1983).

⁶⁵ Tony Bennett, ‘Popular Culture and the “Turn to Gramsci”’, in Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (eds), *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, (Milton Keynes, 1986): pp.xi-xix.

⁶⁶ Bennett, ‘Popular Culture and the “Turn to Gramsci”’, p.xv.

⁶⁷ John Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture*, (Oxford, 1986).

manipulation of the masses by controlling cliques'.⁶⁸ Thus, since the 1990s, class, always a broad category, has been broken and divided into more nuanced competing class fractions and sub-hegemonies.⁶⁹ To think simply in terms of bourgeoisie and proletariat is to misunderstand how sport was experienced by such groups. Mike Huggins' work on horse racing, for instance, has demonstrated that class in relation to sport has never been as simple as was perhaps first assumed:

[V]ertical ties of common interest often bound competing groups, and there were only limited examples of class conflict or hegemonic practice. Not all leisure forms were a focus for class conflict, while a study of racing also suggests that notions of leisure cultures need much further refinement and that the hitherto accepted relationships between social classes and some forms of leisure are more problematic than has been realized.⁷⁰

One of the main advantages of using Bourdieu is his ability to think about power and control without falling into the simplistic trap of reductive categories of proletariat and bourgeoisie. Class is conceptualised as ownership of particular forms of social, cultural and symbolic capital. In a comparable formulation to E.P. Thompson,⁷¹ those with similar amounts of cultural and economic capital (or 'proximity in social space') will likely share similar interests, desires and motives.⁷² But as Bourdieu is at pains to stress, 'this does not mean that they constitute a class in Marx's sense, that is, a group which is mobilized for common purposes, and especially against another class'.⁷³ Rather, different individuals and groups compete with one another to control the subfield and field, but subfields and fields compete with one another in the field of power.⁷⁴

This is a position close to that of Stephen G. Jones.⁷⁵ Drawing on Gramsci, while at the same time recognising his limitations with regard to gender, race, age, nationality, regional belonging, sexuality and other markers of identity, Jones offered a

⁶⁸ Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.363.

⁶⁹ For an overview of the field see Baker, 'Whose Hegemony?'

⁷⁰ Huggins, *Flat Racing and British Society*, p.11.

⁷¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (London, 1991): p.9.

⁷² Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, (Cambridge, 2001):p.10-11.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, (Cambridge, 1996): pp.261-336.

⁷⁵ In support of his argument, Jones references Mike Featherstone, himself drawing on Bourdieu's instantly recognisable lexicon: 'At any rate, there was no monolithic national cultural and intellectual leadership; rather... "a structured social space in which various groups, classes and class fractions struggle and compete to impose their own particular tastes as *the* legitimate tastes, and to thereby, where necessary, name and rename, classify and reclassify, order and reorder the field', in *Sport, Politics, and the Working Class*, (Manchester, 1988): p.56.

summary of the ways in which compromise and control operated in sport while simultaneously folding other forms of power and identity into his reading.

Human agents from ruling cliques such as landowners, amateur gentlemen and churchmen to organised labour movements, spontaneous crowds, and players and athletes themselves have been able to bring their own meaning, culture, concerns and emotions to sports. Once again it should be recognised that certain agents have greater leverage over the structures they have created: football chairmen have had more influence over the game than the average, individual supporter. Also here, the notion of social agency needs to be fragmented to take into account the diversity of interests from class to age and gender, the plurality of issues, and the level of agency – public or private, national or local.⁷⁶

Sport is a social space, unique in many ways but linked to other fields, in which control over meanings, structures, ideologies, and bureaucratic bodies are contested. To capture the many ways in which such control is disputed, Bourdieu conceptualises fields as being ‘simultaneously a *space of conflict and competition*, the analogy here being with a battlefield’.⁷⁷ This analogy, as useful it may be, contains one of the few problems that I have had in using Bourdieu’s field theory, namely that it stresses conflict between competing groups, institutions and agents. In my own study, I have found thinking about fields solely in terms of conflict and competition to be lacking. As such, like Jones above, the greatest contributions Gramscian-inspired cultural studies has made to this thesis is the language of struggle. Stuart Hall offers a summary of the ways in which individuals experience power: ‘incorporation, distortion, resistance, negotiation, recuperation’.⁷⁸ At any given time, subfields and fields may compromise in order to mutually profit; negotiations may delay or disrupt the war; and incorporation may be a key tool for survival. A field may well be a battlefield, but it simultaneously contains both guerrilla tactics and advanced methods of negotiation and peacekeeping.

It is also a battlefield which is shaped by previous encounters. Those who have control over a field can scar and mark the field and provide advantages in future skirmishes. Writing about changes to the artistic field, Bourdieu argues that:

The direction of change depends on the state of the system of possibilities...inherited from history. It is these possibilities

⁷⁶ Stephen G. Jones, *Sport, Politics, and the Working Class*, p.10

⁷⁷ Bourdieu & Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, p.17.

⁷⁸ Stuart Hall, ‘Notes on Deconstructing the Popular’, in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, (London, 1981): p.236.

which define what it is possible or not possible to think or do at a given moment in any determined field.⁷⁹

Continuity is actively reproduced by those it already favours, and advantages in the struggles are bequeathed to those who support its structures. While change can be produced by new entrances into the field, or existing agents and institutions combining their capitals to mount challenges, transformation still exists within a limited set of historical possibilities. Ultimately, control over the field is a set of conflicts or compromise mounted by different individuals or agents bringing with them all their available forms of capital, both in the field itself and elsewhere, played out in the structure and rules of the field as it exists. These battles are tactical and predominantly, though crucially not always, won by those with the most forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, symbolic and derivatives thereof).

DISCARDED POSSIBLES

Conflicts and competition *within* the field and the boundaries, edges, overlaps and gaps *between* fields offer, like tectonic plates moving underfoot, a productive way in which to examine the fault lines of society and history. Moments of possibility, of doing things differently and enacting change, are perpetually fought and negotiated. Writing a history of a sport in chronological order, of course, runs the danger of creating an easy, uncomplicated, Whiggish line from present to past. Sport's control, ownership and meanings have been intensely fought over, but I want to avoid assuming that the results of these contests were straightforward or the outcomes fixed. Writing about the development of the modern state, Bourdieu has claimed that a (re)examination of history can be one of the more productive ways in which we might rediscover these lost potentials.

This is why there is no more potent tool for rupture than the reconstruction of the genesis: by bringing back into view the conflict and confrontations and therefore all the discarded possibles, it retrieves the possibility that things could have been (and still could be) otherwise. And, through such a practical utopia, it questions the "possible" which, among all others, was actualized.⁸⁰

In order to understand why wrestling developed in the mode that it did, and more importantly to examine why other sports did not, I am interested in bringing back into view these conflicts, confrontations and discarded possibles. With just a slight alteration

⁷⁹ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p.206.

⁸⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field', in George Steinmetz (ed.), *State/culture: State-formation After the Cultural Turn*, (New York, 1999): p.57.

to the structure of the field, common sense notions of sport (competition, fair play, the celebration of strength and power, playing for the love of the game, and so on) might today look radically different. It is for these reasons that this thesis examines the history of (professional) wrestling, pugilism and combat performance over a 280 year period. Though changes to a field are often sudden, examining the structures that allow for such changes requires a longer, detailed overview. Each chapter loosely represents a crucial moment in which the sporting field, an associated field around it, or the subfield of wrestling undergoes an important transformation.

Chapter one explores the growth of a fielded society in the eighteenth century. According to Bourdieu, for a society to consist of fields is to trace a moment in which a society becomes differentiated enough to sustain them.⁸¹ For sport, Bourdieu describes this as ‘the moment from which there began to be constituted a field of competition within which sport was defined as a specific practice, irreducible to a mere ritual game or festive amusement’.⁸² The chapter aims to analyse the beginnings of sport as separate to festive amusements. In so doing, the chapter describes the changes from a rural, local festival culture, in which wrestling very much belonged, to the beginning of an urban national culture. Important to this transformation was the birth of commercial, prize-fighting venues in London during the eighteenth century. The chapter assesses the growth of sporting celebrity in relation to the burgeoning media field as part of a wider, independent commodity and industrial culture. By 1780 an urban, commercial popular culture was mushrooming.

Until the 1860s, wrestling and prize-fighting, and many other professional sports, firmly belonged to this commercial popular cultural world. Chapter two explores sparring in circuses, fairgrounds and theatres and the ways in which these cultural forms influenced combat performances. Shows needed to be entertaining and provide audiences with value for money. Combat performers often drew on other skills and talents – singing, dancing and so on – to maximise their opportunities. While sporting competition was not eschewed completely, and prize-fighters still fought legitimate contests, such fights were often the start of a longer, more sustained career on the stage. The continued growth of the press, moreover, turned fighters into melodramatic performers – embodying good or bad characteristics – which were then embellished and

⁸¹ George Steinmetz, ‘Bourdieu, Historicity, and Historical Sociology’, *Cultural Sociology*, 5/1, (2011): p.54.

⁸² Bourdieu, ‘Sport and Social Class’, p.821

exaggerated with costume and performance techniques on the stage. The Fancy, an influential group of backers in this popular cultural world, did all they could to curb such relationships, a process which would ultimately result in the establishment of amateur sporting clubs.

Chapter three discusses the genesis of the sporting field in the second half of the nineteenth century. The coming together of the education, military, medical and cultural fields gave birth to a distinctive and unique sporting social space; the creation of poles – dominant and dominated, professional and amateur – produced the major fault line for the field's confrontations, battles and challenges between 1860 and 1914. In general, by the turn of the twentieth century, most modern sports were run by a bureaucratic body, or at most several compromising bureaucratic bodies, with control over rules, regulations and the organisation of leagues and competitions. Particularly in the first decades of the field being established, the ideologies of the amateur ideal permeated players, teams and groups. The amateur ideal, however, almost all-encompassing in the middle of the century, had to negotiate quickly with those who sought to profit from sport. Such agents, moreover, often had the economic, social and cultural capital to sustain a lengthy battle with the well-connected amateur bodies. Negotiation, between players, sporting bodies, stadium builders, and audiences resulted in what had once been 'strict' amateur groups accepting a limited form of professionalism. Commercialism very quickly came to be tolerated, albeit in different degrees in different sports, with the values of amateurism, in theory if not in practice, maintaining a hegemony in how sport should be played and its political role in society. This compromise, importantly, manifested itself differently in different sports.

For reasons that chapter three will explore in more detail, wrestling retained links with the circus and music hall stage, and earlier values displayed in sparring contests continued in wrestling performances. Wrestlers became fictionalised characters who embodied villainous or heroic roles. Exhibition matches were performed for dramatic effect and wrestlers learned to add showmanship and panache for audience approval. Needless to say, muscular Christians and amateur sporting groups were appalled and attempted to regain control over the sport, but ultimately failed. Like prize-fighting earlier in the century, wrestlers were still sportsmen but there was still sufficient overlap between the field of sport and the field of commercial popular culture to fundamentally alter professional wrestling's history. In this regard, we might consider wrestling a discarded possible, a model for the ways sport might have developed if the

professional and commercial advocates in the sporting field had ‘won’ more battles with muscular Christians and advocates of amateurism.

While the ties with the music halls were cut by the 1920s, chapter four will posit, their influence would be felt throughout the remainder of the twentieth century. By the late-1920s and early 1930s, ‘all-in’ was a sport, continuing to exist in the sporting field, in which no legitimate sporting competition remained. Taking its cue from America, professional wrestling displayed performed fights that were loud, bloody and humorous. Audiences flocked to boxing halls to watch them and the chapter examines the pleasures and specificities of all-in at this time. The popularity of the sport attracted local and national authorities, and the sheer lack of control demonstrated by the sport led to continued campaigns by the press and local government, particularly the LCC, to attempt regulation. After the Second World War, and in an attempt to curry favour with reformists a cartel of promoters, Joint Promotions, seemed to offer a semblance of a national governing body. The group promised that they would rescue professional wrestling from the world of entertainment in addition to sanitising and appealing to family audiences.

Chapter five examines the relationship between professional wrestling and commercial television and the continuity and change that television production heralded for audiences at home. As a group of national promoters with a seemingly obvious monopoly, Joint Promotions were well placed to dominate television contracts in the second half of the twentieth century. Ultimately, television drastically altered the balance of power within both the media and sporting field. Again, such changes were felt differently in different sports, and wrestling experienced such changes in complex ways. In particular, Joint Promotions member groups were bought with the hope of converting wrestling to pay-as-you-view events in the 1960s. In general, however, many sports were being positioned closer to professional wrestling than they had been since the 1860s: bureaucratic and amateur sporting bodies were losing ever greater control over professional and spectator sport and in their place, sponsors, advertisers and television producers were stressing entertainment and excitement.

Speaking to a local radio station in the 1960s, with the glitz, glitter and glamour of televised professional wrestling at its height, one old, retired Cumbrian wrestler declared that ‘wrestling...was a game for the field not the stage’.⁸³ This statement,

⁸³ Clicker wrestling notes, 16th Feb., 1973, Cumbria archive centre, DSO 48/25.

condensed and potent as it is, could stand in for the questions this thesis asks and seeks to answer: why did wrestling develop as a performed ‘sporting entertainment’?⁸⁴ More interestingly, why did no other sports develop in this way? Where does wrestling, or, for that matter, any sport, belong? In short, why fields, why stadia, why stages?

⁸⁴ Letter from H.W. Abby, Dale Martin Promotions, to Lew Grade and Howard Thomas, 21 Jan. 1966, Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.1, IBA, Box 01097.

1

CARNIVALS, BEAR GARDENS AND
PRIZE-FIGHTING AMPHITHEATRES

C. 1700 - 1770

England during the early modern period was predominantly an unstructured society. For those who lived outside of London, and except for the occasional travelling theatrical troupe, entertainment was generally produced by and in the local community. Existing as part of this society, two types of popular culture can be identified: everyday cultures, which were often spontaneous, with commercialism, if existing at all, revolving around the ale house; and festival and carnival cultures, which were often related to the seasonal and annual rhythms of agricultural life. This was an oral, rural and local culture which reflected the society in which it had been produced. Wrestling was a sport popular in many regions of the country, and due to its simple nature it could be practiced during festivals or as part of the everyday. Section I of this chapter examines the meanings, pleasures and associations of festival culture and why sport might have belonged to these particular events.

One of the problems of writing about early modern culture is the paucity of sources. Without the structuring effect of fields and the institutions which they produce (and inevitable paperwork alongside them), understanding the society in which popular culture was produced can be difficult. Those sources that have survived – diary and journal entries – were written by literate men not belonging to the communities in which were performing the popular cultural forms. As Peter Burke has written:

We want to know about the performances, but what have survived are texts; we want to see these performances through the eyes of the craftsmen and peasants themselves, but we are forced see them through the eyes of the literate outsiders.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, (Burlington, 2006): p.65.

Of all the sports, eighteenth century prize-fighting has likely received the most attention from historians. Numerous writers have explored boxing's roots,⁸⁶ and the sport's most successful performers – James Figg, James Stokes, Jack Broughton – are names that consistently reappear throughout these texts. The reason for this attention might be found in the richness of the sources surrounding this particular pastime: prize-fighting is one of the earliest examples of a fully commercialised sport with professionalised performers. These performers used newspapers to spread their names to a growing audience, wittingly and unwittingly helping future historians to spread their name further. In fact, the archives surrounding eighteenth century prize-fighting can seem deceptively abundant. Newspaper advertisements and reports, which constitute the core of most of the studies available, are complemented by scattered diary accounts, pamphlets, poems, and trading cards.

This explosion in sources (at least when compared to previous centuries), this chapter argues, is related to an important aspect of the eighteenth century. The development and structuring effect of modern capitalism and its development of autonomous fields: particularly the economic field, the cultural field and the media field (the sporting field, as we will see, developed later). These changes were first seen in London in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. By 1800, as the next chapter will argue, boxing had a national theatrical touring system, a complex commercial leisure industry, a dedicated sporting press, and a sports star system. During the eighteenth century a number of sports – prize-fighting, horse racing, and cricket in particular – would adopt and adapt early forms of commercialism to a professionalised sporting spectacles across England. Section II and section III illustrate these developments. Pierre Bourdieu has described the emergence of the sporting field as being 'the moment from which there began to be constituted a field of competition within which sport was defined as a specific practice, irreducible to a mere ritual game or festive amusement'.⁸⁷ While the sporting field's genesis does not belong in this century, many of the tensions about sport's meanings and role in society, and structures of how sport is governed, are produced here and therefore play an important role in the creation of the field. Wrestling

⁸⁶ Boddy, *Boxing*; Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*; Dennis Brailsford, 'Morals and Maulers: The Ethics of Early Pugilism', *Journal of Sport History*, 12/2 (1985): pp.126-142; Peter M. Briggs 'Daniel Mendoza and Sporting Celebrity: A Case Study', in Tom Mole (ed.); *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750 – 1850* (Cambridge, 2009); Ford, *Prizefighting*; Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process*; Vanessa Toulmin, *A Fair Fight: An Illustrated Review of Boxing on British Fairgrounds* (Oldham, 1999); John Whale, 'Daniel Mendoza's Contests of Identity: Masculinity, Ethnicity and Nation in Georgian Prize-Fighting', *Romanticism*, 14/3 (2008): pp. 259 – 271

⁸⁷ Bourdieu, 'Sport and Social Class', p.821

offers a useful case study in which to assess the problems of regional sports having to adopt to a national, commercial sporting culture

I. CARNIVAL

Although arguably not qualifying as sport in the modern sense,⁸⁸ games and physical competition were activities that dominated both the festival calendar and quotidian lives during the early modern period. Certain sports were heavily associated with particular holidays, but sport was also something that might be played in the afternoons, Sundays, and evenings on fields or greens. The alehouse, an institution which played a central role in the everyday of many villages, was the closest resemblance to formal organisation or commercialisation.⁸⁹ Alehouses were a prevailing venue for the organisation and display of sporting events. It's difficult to compile a complete catalogue of sports that may have been played, but Tony Collins and Wray Vamplew do a good job of listing the main sports historically linked to the alehouse during this period: 'skittles, quoits, bowls, boxing, wrestling, tennis, foot-racing, cricket and any number of activities featuring animals'.⁹⁰ In many locales, landlords were organisers and promoters of sporting events,⁹¹ arranging matches and providing prizes; they were bookmakers; and, of course, they also benefitted from the trade generated. On the whole, though, sporting contests maintained a certain degree of spontaneity.

Pugilism was of great import to sporting life across many regions of England during the period. Whether fist-fighting or wrestling, combat sports, due to their simplicity and basic appeal, would have been common in many areas. Wrestling, with its stresses on holds and technique rather than impact, punching and kicking, was popular in many regions. In its everyday form, wrestling was practiced outside alehouses and on village greens or it might simply be children playing in a manner not dissimilar to today of children kicking around a football in the park. In Cornwall, John Graham Rule writes, it was the former that was most prevalent: 'because of the nature of the sport it did not have to wait for holidays to be staged'.⁹² Similarly, Michael Tripp, in his dedicated account of wrestling in the same county (though they are applicable to other regions as well) lists the three types of contest fought: 'informal matches,

⁸⁸ For a discussion about the problems of categorising sport in 'pre-industrial' societies See Thomas S. Henricks, *Disputed Pleasures: Sport and Society in Preindustrial England*, (London, 1991): pp.5-7.

⁸⁹ Golby & Purdue, *The Civilisation of the Crowd*, p.35.

⁹⁰ Tony Collins and Wray Vamplew, *Mud, Sweat and Beers: A Cultural History of Sport and Alcohol* (Oxford, 2002), p.5.

⁹¹ Peter Clark, *The English Alehouse: A Social History, 1200-1830*, (London, 1983): p. 234

⁹² John Graham Rule, *The Labouring Miner in Cornwall c. 1740 – 1870*, (Warwick, 1971), p.307.

tournaments and challenge matches'.⁹³ The list is reasonably self-explanatory, with tournaments and challenge matches often being heavily associated with particular holidays, festivals and events. For obvious reasons, of the three, informal matches were the most frequent.

It is important to stress that early modern sport was a regular feature at all times of the year. In the historiography of eighteenth century sports there is sometimes a danger in celebrating and focusing on festivals and ignoring the more banal versions.⁹⁴ While this can be an easy trap to fall into, it is a trap that is perhaps easy to understand: festivals were big, boisterous and colourful affairs that captured the attention of visitors, surveyors, diarists and antiquarians. For these reasons, festival culture is the best documented and most vivid form of archival evidence of popular culture. Festivals were a disruption from the hard working lives of the rural poor and were an event that brought most, if not all, the local community together to laugh and play. They were, by their very definition, irregular and thus worthy of documentation. It is important to stress the existence of everyday forms of sport, but it is also difficult to ignore the festival's importance in pre-modern society.

'Festival' is a deliberately broad term which umbrellas a number of events conducted under various names and institutions. Peter Burke, whose observations on popular culture up to 1800 remains a definitive text, offers an overview of festival culture across Europe. He lists four types of festivals: individual or family festivals; community festivals; annual festivals; and carnivals.⁹⁵ The latter three are of most intrigue here and the ones most commonly associated with sport. The most easily identifiable holidays were seasonal or annual and reflected the agricultural context that they were invariably conducted in.⁹⁶ Celebrations, like the arrival of spring or the conclusion of harvest, stressed the intense affiliation between farming communities and the commemorations and popular cultural forms of the day. Festivals, at their most simplistic, celebrated the beginning or end of an intense period of work. Other events and celebrations intertwined with older pagan rituals and newer religious celebrations, organised or associated with the local church. Christmas and Easter were of particular importance in this regard, themselves relating to cyclical festivities. Easter, moreover, was a part of the wider Carnival merriments. Finally, fairs, too, had a complex

⁹³ Tripp, *Persistence of Difference*, p.102.

⁹⁴ Collins & Vamplew, *Mud, Sweat and Beers*, p.5.

⁹⁵ Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, p.178.

⁹⁶ Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations*, p.14.

relationship to festivals, allowing hiring, firing and trading to be conducted while simultaneously providing entertainment and sporting competition. In short, festivals before the eighteenth century offered a structure to the working year while providing an organised form of popular culture and entertainment.

Given the broad description that carnival and festival encompasses, and the local rituals and meanings that would likely be enacted at each, offering a definitive list of sights, sounds and smells encountered at these events is tricky. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White offer a good starting point, though:

Carnival in its widest, most general sense embraced ritual spectacles such as fairs, popular feasts and wakes, processions and competitions....comic shows, mummary and dancing, open air amusement with costumes and masks, giants, dwarfs, monsters, trained animals and so forth.⁹⁷

The rituals, symbols and imagery of festivals celebrated the visceral, carnal pleasures divorced from the harsh lived experiences of agricultural labour. Carnival punctuated the calendar providing an abundance of food, sex, laughter and a subversion of power that would not have been permissible at other times of the year. There is a good reason that Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelaisian carnivals⁹⁸ has been so widely applied to historical and contemporary popular cultural texts.⁹⁹ At their most basic, the pleasures of the carnival are the pleasures of popular culture, and it is not difficult to draw a connection between the fairs and festivals of Medieval and early modern Europe and the theatres, circuses and music halls of the nineteenth century.

Considering sports centrality in pre-modern popular cultures, it should be unsurprising that it often played a major role in festival cultures. Depending on the locale, time of year and traditions, sport, in one way or another, was played and watched as part of the wider carnival tradition. Football and rugby historians have long stressed inter-village matches played on Shrove Tuesday as being the pre-industrial antecedents of their modern counterpart.¹⁰⁰ Other sports were related to particular occasions. Like football, cock throwing was closely linked to Shrove Tuesday, for example.¹⁰¹ Pugilism

⁹⁷ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, (New York, 1986): p.8.

⁹⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Helene Iswolsky (trans.), (Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1984).

⁹⁹ Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, pp.69-102; Stallybrass & White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*.

¹⁰⁰ Dunning & Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players*, p.30

¹⁰¹ Mark Judd, "The Oddest Combination of Town and Country": Popular Culture and the London Fairs, 1800 – 1860", in John K. Walton and James Walvin (eds), *Leisure in Britain 1780 – 1939*, (Manchester, 1983):p. 13.

and wrestling tournaments were regularly conducted as part of the larger festival event, offering prizes for the winners and entertainment for audiences. In 1758, William Borlase described the relationship in Cornwall between festivals, feasts and wrestling traditions.

Every parish has its annual feast, and at such time (however poor at other times of the year) everyone will make a shift to entertain his friends and relations on the Sunday, and on the Monday and Tuesday all business is suspended, and the young men assemble and hurl or wrestle, or both, in some part of their parish of the most public resort.¹⁰²

In this passage, Borlase laments the wrestling's fading popularity in the (recent) past, a common refrain in much antiquarian writing. He also singles out two other carnival pleasures, 'frolicking and drinking immoderately', as tainting the ancient celebrations.¹⁰³ For all his distaste, however, in all likelihood such amusements were as traditional as the wrestling itself. What was a carnival, after all, *without* gaiety, pranks and laughter washed down with excessive boozing?

Another activity might be asked to this rhetorical question, what was a carnival without lasciviousness? Sex, both symbolically and in actuality, and carnival were fused together in the imaginations of those taking part. Sex and sexuality were expressed in a diverse number of ways, in the rituals, customs, songs and imagery of the event: long nosed masks, say, and sausage processions or the celebration of grotesque bodies.¹⁰⁴ More pragmatically, marriages took place as part of carnival or festivals and fairs were an important time for meeting potential partners. 'For the young', E.P. Thompson writes, 'the sexual cycle of the year turned on these festivals'.¹⁰⁵ In this regard, the sexual cycles of the young and natural cycles of the land chimed with one another, with imagery of birth and consumption, death and renewal, all operating as important themes.

In line with this, sport, and specifically wrestling, and sex were not necessarily incongruent. Firstly, save some notable exceptions, wrestling was a man's sport. It was a sport that celebrated and displayed masculine values and (young) men's bodies. When supporters defended it they focused on its ability to reproduce masculinity. In his pamphlet on wrestling in 1713, the first publication to formally record the rules of the

¹⁰² William Borlase, *The Natural History of Cornwall*, (Oxford, 1758): p.301.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, p.183.

¹⁰⁵ E.P. Thompson, 'Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture', *Journal of Social History*, 7/4, (1974): p. 392.

sport, Sir Thomas Parkyns claimed wrestling was linked to strength, health, courage and virility, working in direct opposition to cowardice and weakness. As we will see in later chapters, during the nineteenth century the exclusion of women in combat sports and the conflation of strength and power with men's bodies would be even further inscribed within the sporting doxa. Parkyns further noted an argument that would be taken up and advanced by rational recreationists and muscular Christians in the coming centuries: sports, and in particular combat sports like wrestling, were useful in the building of strong, warring nations. Parkyns declared, 'I have endeavoured to make the Hands, Feet, Body, and all the Members of your Subjects more useful in your Army on future Occasions'.¹⁰⁶

The act of wrestling was masculine, then, but that does not mean that women were excluded from spectating and participating as audiences. Women and older men regularly took enjoyment in watching festival sports.¹⁰⁷ The visceral thrill of watching a fight between two half-naked bodies was not lost on those watching, nor out of place in the carnival landscape. Care should be taken in taking Parkyn's proffering on face value (this text was meant to, after all, promote wrestling to men outside of Cornwall), but Parkyn's pamphlet made clear the association between wrestling, sex, courtship and carnival.

For the most Part our Country Rings for Wrestlings, at Wakes and other Festivals, consist of a small Party of young Women, who come not thither to choose a Coward, but the Daring, Healthy, and Robust Persons, fit to raise an Offspring from: I dare say, they sufficiently recommend themselves to their Sweet-hearts, when they demonstrate that they are of hail Constitutions, and enjoy a perfect state of Health, and like the Fatigue of that Day, fit on occasion any Time, to Undergo bodily Exercise.¹⁰⁸

The final visceral, carnival pleasure – in addition to sex, food and drunkenness – was that of violence and disorder. Burke argues that, 'aggression...destruction, [and] desecration' permeated the carnivals and festivals of Europe.¹⁰⁹ He continues to list the ways in which violence might be performed, 'ritualised in mock battles, or in football matches, or it was displaced on to objects which could not easily defend themselves,

¹⁰⁶ Sir Thomas Parkyns, *The Inn-Play; or Cornish Hugg Wrestler*, (London, 1800):p.12.

¹⁰⁷ Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations*, p.56; Douglas A. Reid, 'Beasts and Brutes: Popular Blood Sports c. 1780 – 1860' in Richard Holt (ed.) *Sport and the Working Class in Modern Britain*, (Manchester, 1990): p.13.

¹⁰⁸ Parkyns, *The Inn-Play*, p.20.

¹⁰⁹ Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, p.187

such as cocks, dogs, cats'.¹¹⁰ Other animals, too, would be baited as part of the festival culture, including bears, bulls and badgers. Sport provided an important avenue of expression for anger and violence while maintaining the boundaries of licensed disorder as opposed to outright illegality. Wrestling had the potential to be a highly ferocious affair with blood, broken bones and even death. Holt offers one description of a fight in Lancashire which records:

[P]arties mutually agreeing to fight 'up and down', which includes the right of kicking on every part of the body and in all possible situations, and of squeezing the throat or 'throttling' to the verge of death. At races, fairs and on other public occasions contests of this nature are watched by crowds of persons who take part on each side...that death often occurs in such battles will not be extraordinary.¹¹¹

Yet for all the excited rhetoric of this account, excessive violence was likely to be the exception rather than the rule. In practice, wrestling was closer to Harvey's conclusions about folk football: 'most games appear to have been comparatively good natured....[and] good humoured rather than violent'.¹¹² It was physical, and blood might be spilled, but the matches themselves were rarely about settling scores or attempting to do permanent damage to one's opponent. Frustration and anger was contained to the match itself and remained spontaneous and easily passed. Richard Carew recorded the proceedings of a typical fight:

For performing this play, the beholders cast themselves in a ring, which they call making a place; into the empty middle space whereof the two champion wrestlers step forth, stripped into their doublets and hosen, and untrussed, that they may so the better command the use of their limbs, and first shaking hands in token of friend ship, they fall presently to the effects of anger; for each striveth how to take hold of the other, with his best advantage, and to bear his adverse party down.¹¹³

Wrestling was a form of violence, but, in keeping with other celebrations at the festivals, it was as much symbolic as actual. That Carew draws on theatre imagery to describe the wrestling match is particularly telling. In the performance of wrestling, the participants played characters that transcended their individual self. Like the carnival more broadly, gendered, working or local identities were embellished or exaggerated. Interpersonal fights between men were pregnant with intense symbolism and meaning.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.18.

¹¹² Adrian Harvey, *Football: The First One Hundred Years, The Untold Story*, (Oxon, 2005): p.9.

¹¹³ Richard Carew, *Carew's Survey of Cornwall*, (London, 1811): p.199

Wrestling matches, for instance, provided an outlet for local rivalries, and competitions were often fought between villages. In other instances, prize-fights were fought between men of different trades.¹¹⁴ Sport offered one of the clearer markers at festival time between performer and performance. The carnival tradition of spectators and participants blending into one or knowing no footlights,¹¹⁵ however, was maintained by the cheering crowd and the fact that those wrestling often stood in for larger identities.

Which is not to say that those competing did it all for communal glory. Winners of wrestling matches would often win a prize, perhaps an animal or some gold or silver.¹¹⁶ Social standing in the local community, furthermore, was an important attraction for those taking part. Malcolmson claims that ‘sports provided channels for gaining personal recognition. In fact, they were among the few kinds of opportunities which labouring men had to perform publicly for the esteem of their peers’.¹¹⁷ Successful wrestlers would have been well known and respected in their town and village, as long as they maintained a grounded attitude to their local status. As early as 1601 Carew names a wrestler who ‘graceth [his renown] with a good fellowlike, kind, and respectful carriage’.¹¹⁸ If it was worthy to record the wrestler’s grace, it is tempting to posit that other successful wrestlers did not carry their renown with similar humility. In Cumberland, an archive note suggests, ‘villages had their local champions and it was custom for the new champion after winning at one of these brideswains to parade to Church next Sunday decked in the long decorated leather belt’.¹¹⁹ Critically, however, wrestlers were still ensconced within their local community and, while enjoying some of the benefits of renown, the performers were not separate to the rest of the village or town. Even the most talented wrestlers had to work the same jobs, and had access to the same opportunities, as those around him. A different form of celebrity, as we will see in the next section, would make its appearance in the eighteenth century.

Early modern carnivals and festivals, then, display shared characteristics in which can be inferred general meanings and pleasures while caution should be taken in being overly prescriptive. Lacking the voices of participants, there is a danger of

¹¹⁴ Thompson, ‘Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture’, p. 396; Reid, ‘Beasts and Brutes’, p.20.

¹¹⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.7.

¹¹⁶ Isaac T. Gate, *Great Book of Wrestling References, Giving the Last Two, Three and Four Standers of about 200 Different Fights in all the Principal Rings in England from 1838 to the Present Day*, (Carlisle, 1874): p.iv.

¹¹⁷ Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations*, p.85.

¹¹⁸ Carew, *Survey of Cornwall*, p.200

¹¹⁹ Clicker wrestling notes, 16th Feb., 1973, Cumbria archive centre, DSO 48/25.

misrecognising acts that might have had particular meanings for those involved.¹²⁰ More importantly, thinking about European or English popular cultures is to risk extrapolating local cultures to an (inter)national reading. The most defining feature of the period was the continued stress on local and regional identities. Malcolmson suggests that ‘the peculiarities of local customs and circumstances exercised a very great influence on the recreational activities of the common people’.¹²¹ Festivals were a time for groups to reaffirm and express local identities and rituals. Echoing this view, Golby and Purdue argue that throughout this period it is ‘local worthies and local institutions that [matter], whether in the economic, social or political spheres’.¹²²

Unsurprisingly, sport followed this pattern and was distinctly regional in its nature. Villages or towns had their own traditions, rules and versions for sports.¹²³ In Cumbria, for instance, two local villages hosted a particular wrestling event depending on the festival: the village of Langwathby held a meeting on Christmas day and Melmerby repaid the favour by hosting on Mid-Summer’s Day.¹²⁴ With the villages only 6 miles apart, presumably both events attracted participants and spectators from the adjoining areas. For the most part, rules were often verbal in nature. Styles were passed down from one generation to the next with little need for written records.¹²⁵ Issues of regionality raise peculiar challenges in categorising and defining the sports recorded. Sports recorded as ‘football’ in one part of the country would have not been understood as such in another. An intense tactical nuance displayed by those playing could easily be mistaken for a violent mob by witnesses unfamiliar with the sport.

Records of wrestling can be found scattered across the country, though certain areas were famed for their styles: Malcolmson lists ‘Cornwall, Devon, Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire, Norfolk, Cumberland, and Westmoreland’,¹²⁶ to which I would add Lancashire where the catch style was popular and influential in professional wrestling circles in the late nineteenth century. When Joseph Strutt, a folklorist writing at the turn of the nineteenth century, described wrestling he was keen to point out, ‘the entirely different systems of wrestling developed in different parts of the kingdom is a slight but

¹²⁰ See Clifford Geertz’s discussion of thick description, *The Interpretations of Culture*, (London, 1993): pp.3-32.

¹²¹ Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations*, p.34.

¹²² Golby & Purdue, *Civilisation of the Crowd*, p.22.

¹²³ Susan Easton, Alun Howkins, Stuart Laing, Linda Merricks; and Helen Walker, *Disorder and Discipline: Popular Culture From 1550 to the Present*, (Aldershot, 1988): p.66.

¹²⁴ George Ion, *Cumberland and Westmoreland Wrestling* (Kendal, 1955): p. unknown.

¹²⁵ Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.13.

¹²⁶ Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations*, p.43.

genuine proof of the great variety of nationalities and tribes that were involved in the making of England'.¹²⁷ Though they shared the most basic of rules (attempting to throw or keep an opponent on the ground), the differences were perhaps more noticeable than their similarities. In the Lake District, Cumberland and Westmoreland, wrestling matches started with a unique hold where '[e]ach man places his chin on his opponents right shoulder and grasps him round the back. The left arm is over the opponent's right and the right arm under the opponent's left arm'.¹²⁸ In Cornwall and Devon participants wore a jacket which provides a focus for holds and wrestling on the ground is forbidden, but the former allowed kicking where the latter did not.¹²⁹ Lancashire wrestling had a reputation for being particularly violent, with kicking and choking and a tendency to be fought on the ground.¹³⁰

Taken together, one could say that in the centuries preceding the eighteenth century England was a reasonably unstructured, undifferentiated nation that was predominantly a rural society, intensely local and deeply attached to the festival cultures outlined above. Sporting cultures reflected these rhythms. Big structures, like economic trade and politics, as well as cultural artefacts, like newspapers and sport, were presided over by an obvious power structure incorporating Royalty, its immediate court, the landed elites they sponsored, and the church. Political and economic power congregated in the hands of a limited few, and the possibility of separate, functioning fields did not exist because, according to Steinmartz's summary of Bourdieu's historical work,¹³¹ 'undifferentiated societies...do not have fields that are relatively autonomous from the dominant powers'.¹³² Likewise, Craig Calhoun writes that, according to Bourdieu, 'the creation of...modern society [is seen] by the differentiation of state and market power and more generally the making of fields'.¹³³

By 1700, there were the earliest signs of changes to these power structures. By the last quarter of the century, these signs had transformed into national revolutions. Between 1700 and 1775, economic, religious, cultural and political fields emerged.

¹²⁷ Joseph Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, (London, 1801): p.69.

¹²⁸ W.R. Mitchell in Ian Ward, *Lakeland Sport in the Nineteenth Century*, unpublished doctoral thesis, (Liverpool, 1985): p.47

¹²⁹ Tripp, *Persistence of Difference*, p.86-87

¹³⁰ Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.18.

¹³¹ Bourdieu's most sustained analysis of this can be found in 'Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field', *Comparative Social Research*, 13, (1991): pp.6-7 and *Rethinking the State*.

¹³² Steinmetz, *Bourdieu, Historicity, and Historical Sociology*, p.54.

¹³³ Craig Calhoun, 'For the Social History of the Present: Bourdieu as Historical Sociologist', in Philip S. Gorski (ed.), *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*, (Durham, 2013): p.37.

Douglas C. North and Barry R. Weingast, in their influential study, suggest that the 1688 Glorious Revolution played a major role in the development of private markets that were divorced from the arbitrary power of the crown, facilitating the commercial revolution that followed by stabilising the market and public and private debt, allowing for investment and commercial expansion.¹³⁴ Dramatic changes to the private market, and incentives to trade and loan, were accompanied by industrial innovations and the eventual restructuring of the workforce and subdivision of labour, first in London and then elsewhere. As argued by E. P. Thompson, developments in the autonomous economic field saw a shift from a participatory festival and agricultural culture to a commercial culture which demonstrated sharper divisions between work and leisure.¹³⁵ Those employed saw a more dramatic distinction between 'their employer's time and their "own" time'.¹³⁶ Peter Burke, building on this argument, posits that the traditional rhythms of agriculture, which gave birth to the festival and carnival culture, morphed to 'regular doses of daily or weekly recreation'.¹³⁷ This, he suggests, resulted in a growing commercialisation of leisure which reflected the growing commercialisation of the wider culture.¹³⁸ The subdivision of labour, combined with a commercialised culture, also produced early forms of theatrical and sporting celebrity.

By the end of the century there was a shifting attitude towards leisure which moved it away from localised, semi-rural and communal pleasures to an increasingly urbanised,¹³⁹ national, professionalised, institutionalised, and profitable commodity sold in a competitive, commercial marketplace. In short, from 1770 onwards there was an autonomous field of culture in which spectator and commercial sport closely belonged. For the rest of the chapter I want to trace these transformations.

II. EFFUSIONS OF BLOOD AND BEAR GARDENS

At the end of the seventeenth century, London was undergoing intense social, economic and political change. The population had swelled from 400,000 in 1650 to around

¹³⁴ Douglas C. North and Barry R. Weingast, 'Constitutions and Commitment: The Evolution of Institutions Governing Public Choice in Seventeenth-Century England', *The Journal of Economic History*, 49/4, (1989): pp.803-832

¹³⁵ E. P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past & Present*, 38/1 (1967): pp.56-97.

¹³⁶ Thompson, 'Time Work-Discipline', p.61.

¹³⁷ Peter Burke, 'The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe', *Past & Present*, 14/1 (1995): p.148.

¹³⁸ Burke, *Invention of Leisure*, p.148.

¹³⁹ Michael Harris, 'Sport in the Newspapers Before 1750: Representations of Cricket, Class and Commerce in the London Press', *Media History*, 4/1 (1998): p.24.

575,000 by 1700.¹⁴⁰ Those moving from rural to urban settings often brought forms of their recreation with them, albeit adapting to the specificities of London.¹⁴¹ As the city grew so too did the city's consumer habits. The vast majority of skilled labourers and apprentices and an increasing number of unskilled workers in London and the south of England enjoyed higher living standards than their contemporaries in the rest of the country and existed in a 'high wage economy'.¹⁴² Improvements in wages allowed for an increasing number of commodities to be bought with surplus money after basic needs had been met.¹⁴³ Inventories of the poor find an ever growing number of commercial products,¹⁴⁴ and 'cloth, ceramics, glassware, paper, cutlery,' T.H. Breen asserts, 'transformed the character of everyday life [and] the domestic market hummed with activity'.¹⁴⁵ Changes in levels of consumption would be matched by changes in distribution, with proliferating shops becoming a regular feature of London life, competing and increasingly overtaking the importance of the market and fair.¹⁴⁶

Transformations in the economy were also beginning to alter entertainment in the city. The bear gardens of London had been an important feature of London's entertainment landscape for much of the early modern period and remained – like animal baiting in the towns and at the country fairs – an immensely popular diversion for the public. Outside of London, animal baiting, as we have seen, took place at local festivals, stressing its communal and rural nature. In London, animal baiting was also popular, but its display became increasingly commercialised throughout the latter half of the seventeenth century, adapting to urban quotidian life.¹⁴⁷ In the city baiting retained some of its original appeal and meanings, particularly regarding the relationship between humans and animal, but was also separated from the festival and agricultural culture of other regions. Rather, events were held frequently and admissions

¹⁴⁰ E. Anthony Wrigley, 'A Simple Model of London's Importance in Changing English Society and Economy', *Past & Present*, 37 (1967): p.44.

¹⁴¹ Harris, *Sport in the Newspapers*, p.24.

¹⁴² Robert C. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective*, (Cambridge, 2009): p.45.

¹⁴³ Neil McKendrick, 'The Consumer Revolution of Eighteenth Century England', in Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb (eds), *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England*, (London, 1982): p.24.

¹⁴⁴ John Mullan and Christopher Reid, *Eighteenth-Century Popular Culture: A Selection*, (Oxford, 2000): p.19; Roy Porter, 'English Society in the Eighteenth Century Revisited', in Jeremy Black (ed.), *British Politics and Society From Walpole to Pitt 1742 – 1789*, (Basingstoke, 1990): p.39.

¹⁴⁵ T. H. Breen "'Baubles of Britian": The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, 119, (1988): p.7.

¹⁴⁶ Breen, 'Baubles of Britain', p.77; Hoh-Cheung Mui and Lorna H. Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping in Eighteenth Century England*, (London, 1989): p.51;

¹⁴⁷ Tobias Hug, "'You Should go to Hockley in the Hole, and to Marybone, Child, to Learn Valour": On the Social Logic of Animal Baiting in Early Modern London', *Renaissance Journal*, 2/1 (2004).

were charged. Audiences at the bear gardens were drawn from all the classes with pricing structures to reflect social standing.¹⁴⁸ At the venues, as the name suggests, one would encounter bear baiting, as well as other animal baiting, including monkeys, bulls, leopards and lions.

As well as animals, men would also perform, sometimes as supplementary entertainment and at other times as the main attraction. It is difficult to ascertain who owned and directly profited from the venues. Considering audiences would likely have been well-provided with alcohol, and that the immediate local publicans would have enjoyed rampant sales on the days of performances, it might not be too wild to speculate that the 'theatre' was owned and operated by one (or more) closely linked to the alcohol trade. In many ways, the Bear Gardens were merely an intensification of the role that alehouses had provided for centuries. Yet there were signs that the functions of leisure, festivals and fairs, slowly at first and then with a fresh intensity in the second half of the century, were being changed by the establishment of the economic field.

How much the pugilists earned remains questionable. Prizes were often awarded to winning competitors, but such rewards were often small and infrequent. Many competitors seemed to have retained jobs in 'everyday' employment. While far from a definitive list, advertisements give a sense of the trades occupied by those fighting: 'Felt maker',¹⁴⁹ 'Butcher',¹⁵⁰ 'Carpenter',¹⁵¹ and former members of the 'troop of horse guards'.¹⁵² Fighters likely earned much of their wages from aristocratic stake money¹⁵³ or, in a similar manner to the travelling showmen of the period, from collections made by the audience at the end of the fight.¹⁵⁴ Because they were reliant on the collection pugilists were inclined to provide as much of an entertainment as possible. *The London Post's* report of a fight at the turn of the century describes in great detail the drama of the event.

Terrewest received only one wound, but Hesgate 5 or 6, so that he lost the day. Whilst they were a fighting, Davis, commonly known by the name of the Champion of the west, got upon the

¹⁴⁸ Hug, "'You Should go to Hockley in the Hole'; Allen Guttman 'English Sports Spectators: The Restoration to the Early Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Sport History*, 12/2 (1985), p.115; Thomas S. Henricks, 'The Democratization of Sport in Eighteenth-Century England', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 18/3 (1984): p.14.

¹⁴⁹ Classified advertisement, *Post Boy*, 6 Apr., (1700).

¹⁵⁰ Classified advertisement, *Post Boy*, 5 Apr., (1701).

¹⁵¹ Classified advertisement, *Flying Post or The Post Master*, 20 Sep., (1701).

¹⁵² Classified advertisement, *Daily Courant*, 1 Feb., (1710).

¹⁵³ Ford, *Prizefighting*, p.90; Guttman, *English Sports Spectators*, p.117.

¹⁵⁴ Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, 21 Jul., (1712).

stage, and refused to go off again, challenging Terrewest, to fight him for offering to put him off, and afterwards challenged to fight any man there, whereupon one Gorman... Jumped upon the Stage, and proffered to take up this bold challenger, and accordingly they both stript, and went to it, and at first bout Gorman wounded the Champion in the throat, and at second bout received a wound himself, in the side, but gave the Champion so great a wound on his forehead, that he swooned away; and many thought he had been killed, however he was so far disabled, that he could not try the third bout.¹⁵⁵

What is most striking about this description is the brutality and bloodiness. The combatants fought with a range of weapons that had the potential to cause death or serious injury. An advertisement taken from a newspaper in 1699 lists the tools with which the fighters would duel: 'Back-Sword, Sword and Dagger, Sword and Buckler, Single Falchon..., Quarter-Staff'.¹⁵⁶ On other occasions wrestling was performed, but predominantly weapons were retained as the central attraction.

The Bear Gardens offered many of the attractions, sights and sounds of the carnival: shouting and cheering, violence and blood, all infused with its own ritual meanings and rich symbolism, but with a developing commercialisation and quasi-professionalization. If wrestling in the counties had an element of performance, then the London fighting dramas were positively theatrical. Colour, costume, music and drama were all used to present an exciting performance to the crowds. The more interesting and engaging the performance, the more profitable for those involved. Richard Steele, a playwright charged in 1714 with reforming the London stage, was particularly qualified to comment on the theatrics of the fights. His 1712 *Spectator* description of a visit to the Bear Garden at Hockley is permeated with theatrical codes and conventions.

James Miller came on first, preceded by two disabled Drummers, to shew, I suppose, that the prospect of maimed Bodies did not in the least deter him... Miller had a blue Ribband ty'd round the Sword Arm; which Ornament I conceive to be the Remain of that Custom of wearing a Mistrel's Favour on such Occasions of old.¹⁵⁷

The drama of the fight itself is captured with equally breathless prose.

It is not easy to describe the many Escapes and imperceptible Defences between the two men of quick Eyes and ready Limbs; but Millar's Heat laid him open to the Rebuke of the calm Buck, by a large cut on the forehead. Much Effusion of Blood covered

¹⁵⁵ Anon., *London Post*, 17 Jul., (1700).

¹⁵⁶ Classified advertisement, *Post Boy*, 21 Oct. (1699):

¹⁵⁷ Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, 21 Jul., (1712).

his eyes in a moment, and the Huzzahs of the crowd undoubtedly quickened the anguish...The Wound was exposed to the View of all who could delight in it, and sowed up on the stage. The surly Second of Millar declared at this time, that he would that Day Fornight fight Mr. Buck at the same Weapons.¹⁵⁸

Millar's confrontation, and the promise of a fight in the future, indicates a form of promotion that boxers and professional wrestlers would draw on for the coming centuries. This was a form of advertising which stressed the importance of attracting audiences. Other forms of promotion were used, too: on the day of performances there would be a procession through the surrounding area, much to the annoyance of some local residents. Their irritation has left us with a vivid description. In 1701 presentment of the grand jury in Middlesex described what preceded these performances:

We having observed the late boldness of a sort of men that stile themselves masters of the noble science of defence, passing through this city with beat of drums, colours displayed, swords drawn, with a numerous company of people following them, dispersing their printed bills, thereby inviting persons to be spectators of those inhuman sights which are directly contrary to the practice and profession of the Christian religion ... we think ourselves obliged to represent this matter, that some method may be speedily taken to prevent their passage through the city in such a tumultuous manner, on so unwarrantable a design.¹⁵⁹

Processions retained the colour and noise of festival culture. They were clearly designed to garner attention and attract audiences, but their reach was limited. Processions, after all, could only attract those within the immediate vicinity. The blossoming newspaper business, however, had influence across the whole city, and in some cases country.

The growth of newspapers was due to the lapsing of the Licensing (Printing) Act in 1695 and continued failures to establish a replacement in 1697, 1698, 1702, 1704 and 1712. Where the Printing Act required pre-publications to be approved by the King's licenser, its failure to be reinstated with any meaningful laws meant publishers had freedoms previously unknown. Investors were coming to realise that newspapers could offer a profitable business.¹⁶⁰ Newspapers and journalists at the beginning of the eighteenth century were establishing themselves as an important field, then, separate to the economic and political fields to which it had been attached for so long.

¹⁵⁸ Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, 21 Jul., (1712).

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in William A. Boulton, *The Amusements of Old London*, (London, 1901): p.4.

¹⁶⁰ Jeremy Black, *The English Press: 1621 – 1861*, (Stroud, 2001): p.8.

The final years of seventeenth century saw a host of London papers, published weekly or thrice a week, which were available both in the city and, increasingly as the century continued, in the provinces. Shortly after in 1702 the *Daily Courant* was launched as the first daily newspaper followed by a surge of daily papers.¹⁶¹ With such a competitive and relatively unstable market place, publishers were realising that advertising could provide additional and welcome revenue to offset printing and distribution costs.¹⁶² Newspapers were a celebrated attraction and feature of the coffee houses, themselves a signal of the increasing availability of 'luxury' items.¹⁶³ The advertisements newspapers contained encouraged and maintained the material and commercial culture that was developing around them. During the final few years of the seventeenth century the number of newspapers being produced had mushroomed, and it was during this time that the newspaper transformed in its presentation, style, and tone.¹⁶⁴ The press demonstrated the increasing spending power of some groups. Advertisements for an ever-growing number of commercial products could be found in newspapers, and this in turn was changing how commercial products were presented to the public. The advertisement was crystallising around exaggeration, hyperbole and puffery.¹⁶⁵ The advertising of leisure, and in particular prize-fighting, was influenced by the developments taking place around it. Pugilism became a commercial product promoted by the press.

III. THE USUAL WEAPONS

By the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the journalistic field had been established and there were the roots of cultural field (incorporating literature, theatre, circus, and sport), eschewing older models of sponsorship, patronage and festival culture. The Bear Gardens, offering festival culture's blood sports to a working, urban audience were vulnerable to reform and restructuring. That the position and role of animals in eighteenth century life, both politically and philosophically, was quickly changing did not appear to help matters; that a growing chorus of voices and campaigns against blood sports, for their alleged breaches of morality and distractions of workers, seemed to doom the venues. In 1724, newspapers were reporting that 'the Justices of the

¹⁶¹ J.H. Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century England*, (Reading, 1974): p.6.

¹⁶² Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, p. 222.

¹⁶³ John Brewer, "'The Most Polite Age and the Most Vicious'" Attitudes Towards Culture as a Commodity', in Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (eds), *The Consumption of Culture: Image, Object, Text*, (London, 1995): p.348

¹⁶⁴ Mullan and Reid, *Popular Culture*, p.22.

¹⁶⁵ McKendrick, *Consumer Society*, p.148 -149.

Peace for the City of Westminster and County of Middlesex, are about to suppress those publick and scandalous nuisances the Bear-Gardens'.¹⁶⁶ Their closures did not signal the end of blood sports in the capital nor country.¹⁶⁷ They did, however, represent a changing attitude to animals in performance, with cruelty eventually being replaced by display and admiration, culminating with circus in the 1760s and 1770s.¹⁶⁸

Yet fighting between men (and sometimes women) remained a popular attraction. It also had enough continued support from the aristocracy, both financially and rhetorically, as well as other members of the community, to defend the entertainment against the growing cacophony of voices in opposition to sport-as-commercial-spectacle. Prize-fighting in London, alongside cricket and horse racing, emerged as the first commercial spectator sports in England in the first half of the century. With the Bear Gardens closing down or facing sanctions, dedicated prize-fighting amphitheatres began to replace the older mode of performance. By all accounts, both contemporary and historical, Figg's Amphitheatre appears to have been the first opened in 1724. The opening was closely followed by Stokes' Amphitheatre in 1726. It is difficult to be sure where the money for such ventures was provided from, but the possibility of loans from the wealthy seems possible. There is concrete evidence that Figg's amphitheatre was operated by the man whose name was given to the structure: in 1726 there was a hearing with the master of the rolls between Figg and his landlord, Mr Bouch, 'concerning the Amphitheatre built by the said Mr. Figg at his House...without Leave or Lease from his said Landlord'.¹⁶⁹ This seems to be an important point: from the 1720s onwards men who often competed in sporting competitions themselves invested in dedicated venues to display weekly sporting competitions for personal profit. While by no means a sporting field in and of itself, it was an important step in the move away from festival sports to an autonomous field.

In the amphitheatres, sword play and weapons were increasingly replaced by fist-fighting. Fist fighting, as dramatic departure as it may have been, retained many of the pleasures associated with swords, particularly the visceral thrill of watching individuals fight. As grandiloquent as such venues may have sounded, the 'amphitheatres' were in fact semi-permanent wooden structures, 'a cross between a

¹⁶⁶ Anon., *Weekly Journal or British Gazette*, 29 Aug., (1724).

¹⁶⁷ Reid, 'Beasts and Brutes', pp.12 – 28.

¹⁶⁸ Kwint, 'Circus and Nature', pp.45–60.

¹⁶⁹ Anon., *London Journal*, 26 Nov., 1726.

large fairground booth and a theatre'¹⁷⁰. Byrom records in his journals that entrance cost 2s. 6d,¹⁷¹ the equivalent of about the average worker's day's wages.¹⁷² For some critics, these prices are proof that the venues were designed in order to keep the establishment exclusive.¹⁷³ Indeed, there remains a wealth of evidence that Figg encouraged patronage from the upper classes, but its exclusivity is doubtful. Allen Guttmann presents a number of diary extracts which suggests Figg's attracted audience members from across the classes.¹⁷⁴ Thomas S. Henricks maintains that most prize-fights in the capital offered differentiated admissions prices which separated the classes, with the cheapest in the pit 'to prevent the gentleman the inconvenience of having a performer fall off the stage into his lap'.¹⁷⁵ What is important to note is that all venues competed to provide a sense of comfort and safety to paying customers.¹⁷⁶

Attracting audiences from across the social spectrum, the amphitheatres flourished in popularity and profit. To maintain this status they relied on advertising, like other goods and services, to foster and sustain audiences. Newspaper promotion was not born at the amphitheatres, though. As the press had grown, small notes promoting the forthcoming fights at the bear gardens became prominent in the classified advertisement pages, replacing the procession through the city as the primary form of promotion. One advertisement, with the text likely a word-for-word copy of the handbills handed out on the processions declared:

This present Tuesday, being the 26th of September, will be perform'd (at His majesty's Bear Garden in Hockley in the Hole) a trial of skill, between John Anderson the Famous highlander, and John Terwest of Oundle in North-Hamptonshire, at all the usual weapons.¹⁷⁷

Compared to what advertisements were to become the tone is subdued. The names are listed, as is one hometown, but otherwise there is little information to be taken. There is certainly no sense of personal resentment between the two men. The colour of the event itself – the blood, costume, characters and drama – is absent. Over the next two decades promotion would gradually take on a more sensationalised tone and would litter the

¹⁷⁰ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.4.

¹⁷¹ John Byrom, *Selections from the Journals and Papers of John Byrom: Poet – Diarist – Shorthand Writer, 1691 – 1763*, (London, 1950), p.66.

¹⁷² Guttmann, 'English Sports Spectators', p.115.

¹⁷³ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.4.

¹⁷⁴ Guttmann, 'English Sports Spectators', p.115.

¹⁷⁵ Henricks, 'The Democratization of Sport', p.14.

¹⁷⁶ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.4.

¹⁷⁷ Classified advertisement, *Post Boy*, 23 Sep., (1699).

classified pages of daily and weekly newspapers. In the early 1720s one newspaper advertisement for a prize-fight at the Bear Garden read:

Whereas I Edward Sutton, pipe-maker, from Gravesend in the county of Kent, Master of the noble Science of Defence, thinking myself to be the most Celebrated master of the noble Science of Defence, thinking myself to be the most Celebrated Master of that kind in Europe, hearing the famous James Figg, who is call'd the Oxfordshire Champion, has the character to be the onliest Master in the World, do fairly invite him to meet me, and exercise at the usual Weapons fought on the stage, desiring no favour from the hero's hand, and not question in the least but to give such satisfaction, that has not been given for some years past by that Champion. I, James Figg, from Thame in Oxfordshire, Master of the Said Science, will not fail to meet this celebrated Master, at the place and time appointed; and to his request of no favour, I freely grant it, for I never did, nor will show any to no man living, and doubt not but I shall convince him of his own brave opinion.¹⁷⁸

The challenge and acceptance that had been used on the stages of the bear gardens and transferred to the press in the early decades of the century now utilised a greater range of promotional hyperbole and ballyhoo. In the above, Sutton is convinced of his superiority where Figg implies his challenger is arrogant and egotistical. Dennis Brailsford describes that contests operated 'within the framework of challenges issued and accepted, with manliness, strength and courage held to be as much at issue as fighting skill'.¹⁷⁹ Within the columns of the newspapers, promoters were becoming more adept at capturing the drama audiences were used to seeing on the stage. Honour, in its melodramatic form, was used as a device to generate interest in the reading and listening public. Brailsford rightly suggests that if 'the build-up could give an impression of rancour between the fighters it was likely to whet more appetites and increase the takings'.¹⁸⁰ The added spice of rivalry that the promoters constructed in the press successfully maximised the profits of the promoters and pugilists, who benefited financially from larger attendances.

Advertisements had become the accepted form of promotion for prize-fighting. Considering the competition with other entertainment and commercial products, the pugilist's drive to promote the venture with ever-growing excitement becomes understandable. Other entertainments and products were advertised with increasing

¹⁷⁸ Classified advertisement, *Daily Post*, 10 Apr., (1723).

¹⁷⁹ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.129

¹⁸⁰ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.130.

frequency, and products needed to stand-out in order to attract the largest possible audience. Promoters and owners of entertainment institutions had to be creative in their approaches. In 1725 Figg's was advertising a fight between an Italian, the 'Venetian Gondolier', and an Englishman, Whitacre. The prospect of the international fight created huge interest in the press and presumably the reading public. Figg and those involved in the fight further encouraged this speculation in inventive ways. There even appears to have been an early form of 'press conference' conducted at a local coffee-house with the sole intention of stoking further gossip in the papers, encouraging higher ticket prices, and generally promoting Figg and his enterprise:

The combatants have had an interview, when the English Champion took the Italian by the hand, and invited him to one bout for love (as he termed it) before-hand; but he declined it. In a word, the publick daily enter into this affair with so much passion for the event, and gentlemen are so warm on both sides, that it looks like a national concern.¹⁸¹

As we have seen, men in wrestling and pugilism contests had long since represented their village, town or trade in the fights that would be conducted as part of the festival. Here were men performing a national identity for the sole purpose of gaining increased interest from the press. The fight, therefore, represented an important development in the manner of how 'characters' would be used in the promotion of combat sports. It was a form of promotion that boxing and wrestling entrepreneurs would use with frequency over the coming centuries.

It is for such publicity that Figg has often been recorded as the most famous prize-fighter of the period. At the very least, advertisements attest that he was the first prize-fighter to own/manage an eponymously titled amphitheatre. He was by no means the only prize-fighter to do so, though, and the success and popularity of Figg's spawned similar ventures. In 1726 James Stokes opened his own amphitheatre. Stokes and his wife, Elizabeth, nee Wilkinson, had been a husband and wife team that had performed against other men and women at the bear gardens and at Figg's. Upon moving to their own venture this unique selling point moved with them. Kasia Boddy offers a timely observation that advertisements on female pugilists focused more on the 'scanty dress rather than the skill of the participants'.¹⁸² Rarely were men's outfits described in detail. Authors of advertisements for female pugilism clearly saw the clothing the women would wear to be an important selling point, though this may have

¹⁸¹ Anon., *The London Journal*, 16 Jan., (1725).

¹⁸² Boddy, *Boxing*, p.28.

served a dual purpose: to deflect criticism from some quarters who considered the fights to be salacious – after all, they were wearing *something* – whilst surreptitiously announcing the nature of the fight.

After Figg's death in the 1730s, George Taylor took over the running of the amphitheatre. Like his predecessor, Taylor was acutely aware of the power of marketing, perhaps even more so. His advertisements, according to Brailsford, 'were lurid with the promise of combat, mayhem and gore'.¹⁸³ When Jack Broughton's Great Booth went into direct competition with Taylor's amphitheatre in 1743, he used advertising to rival Taylor. In all advertisements Broughton was quick to stress the comfortable and grand surroundings of his booth.¹⁸⁴ In addition, he did all he could to undermine his rival: the amphitheatre was practically next door to The Great Booth; the advertisements described it as near Figg's,¹⁸⁵ playing on Broughton's connection to the old amphitheatre as a student of Figg. Broughton's opening night coincided with an important fight between Taylor and Field,¹⁸⁶ leading Taylor to complain that, 'in order to injure me [Broughton] maliciously advertised to open his amphitheatre on that day',¹⁸⁷ and thereafter all performances clashed with Taylor's. Prices at the new amphitheatre were drastically reduced in comparison to what had been standard admission costs – 'no person,' one advertisement declared, 'is to pay more than a shilling'.¹⁸⁸ Moreover, in boxing history texts Broughton is most famously remembered for being the first boxer to use gloves (or mufflers) and the first boxer to commit to paper rules to be observed across the sport.¹⁸⁹ While they were informal, and there was little sense of even regional control, committing rules to paper represented an important step in the establishment of a national sporting culture. It also highlighted the centrality of gambling for many of the audiences watching, attempting to codify and reassure the gambling public.

The allure of gambling, gore, blood and sex were promised to eager audiences, but the advertisements also refer to previous matches and on-going rivalries, with the presumption that audiences would be familiar with such accounts. In nearly all the advertisements for the various amphitheatres there is an acknowledgement – sometimes

¹⁸³ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.6.

¹⁸⁴ *The Sporting Magazine* in Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process*, p.118.

¹⁸⁵ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.7.

¹⁸⁶ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.7.

¹⁸⁷ Pierce Egan, *Boxiana; or Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism Vol. 1* (London, 1830): p.50.

¹⁸⁸ Quoted in Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.7.

¹⁸⁹ Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process*, pp.127-129; Boddy, *Boxing*, p.29.

implicit, sometimes explicit – that readers have already heard about those taking part. Indeed, Figg, Stokes, Broughton and Taylor's relied on the fact that their names were recognisable enough to attract audiences to their amphitheatres. For all the gimmicks, press conferences, ticket discounts and general commercial puffery, there is one thing that remains crucial to all these accounts: celebrity.

While early histories of fame often posited that celebrity was a peculiarly twentieth-century phenomenon, more recently revisionist histories have challenged this view by declaring celebrity a product of the eighteenth.¹⁹⁰ Though such work has offered a rich and much needed re-evaluation of the eighteenth century, such accounts often place their case studies in the second half of the century rather than the first. However, it is in those first decades that we see the conditions that enable the emergence of celebrity culture, although I use that phrase tentatively. Simon Morgan, in his article discussing celebrity studies and their possibilities for historians, has described the difficulties in providing an adequate definition of celebrity.¹⁹¹ Fame and prestige clearly pre-date the period in question. His summary of the literature, however, does provide two important factors that are particularly pertinent for the study of prize-fighting in the early eighteenth century: the emergence of a (national) media and the development of a commodity culture.

Crucially, newspapers were able to report the happenings of an individual sporting star to a much larger audience than the small numbers in attendance at a particular event. Increasingly, an 'imagined community' of nation,¹⁹² and some London papers clearly had a national readership in mind,¹⁹³ were able to keep up-to-date with the activities of individuals who they had likely never met. Francesco Alberoni has written that celebrity exists when 'each individual member of the public knows the star, but the star does not know any individuals'.¹⁹⁴ Some of the prize-fighters of the period appear to have partly met this definition. Newspaper reports and advertisements would

¹⁹⁰ Elizabeth Barry, 'From Epitaph to Obituary: Death and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century British Culture', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11/3, 2008, pp.259-275; Fred Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity*, (Princeton, 2010); Mole, *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture*.

¹⁹¹ Simon Morgan, 'Celebrity: Academic "Pseudo-Event" or a Useful Concept for Historians?', *Cultural and Social History*, 8/1, (2011): p.96-97.

¹⁹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991). For a wider discussion of the relationship between nation and celebrity in the eighteenth century see Jason Goldsmith, 'Celebrity and the Spectacle of Nation', in Tom Mole (ed.), *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750 – 1850*, (Cambridge, 2009): pp.21-40.

¹⁹³ T.R. Nevett, *Advertising in Britain: A History*, (London, 1982): p.17.

¹⁹⁴ Francesco Alberoni, 'The Powerless "Elite": Theory and Sociological Research on the Phenomenon of the Stars', in Dennis McQuail (ed. and trans.), *Sociology of Mass Communications: Selected Readings* (Middlesex, 1972): p.77.

have reached some households across England. Their fame, moreover, had surpassed simply those who had witnessed him fight first hand. A poem by John Byrom claimed of Figg, 'To the towns, far and near, did his valour extend, And swam down the river from *Thame* to *Gravesend*'.¹⁹⁵ We might be critical of Byrom's reasons for extolling Figg, but his poem may have been attempting to capture a particular historical moment where fame was being distributed across the country with help from the press.

Similarly, just as newspapers were indicative of the commercial culture that was growing around them, many theories of celebrity posit that 'celebrity culture is irrevocably bound up with commodity culture'.¹⁹⁶ For Morgan, a subject's marketability is the moment that marks modern celebrity: 'the point at which a public person becomes a celebrity is the point at which a sufficiently large audience is interested in their actions, image and personality to create a viable market for commodities carrying their likeness'.¹⁹⁷ In this reading, celebrities are products in themselves as well as being used as a selling point in order to attract paying audiences to a particular entertainment. One of the reasons the amphitheatres developed when they did may have been because of the increasing attraction to named individuals rather than the broader appeal of animal baiting. Celebrities are also devices to sell newspapers, periodicals and pamphlets. By the end of the century this had expanded to biographies and auto-biographies. Finally, celebrities' images are used to create and sell merchandise for other products destined for the market. In the eighteenth century prints commemorating various sporting occasions and sporting celebrities were being produced by various entrepreneurs,¹⁹⁸ not least by the sportsmen themselves. On January 19th 1731 newspapers were advertising the publication of:

The Stage Gladiators: A Clear Stage and No Favour, with the effigies of the Champions curiously engraven on copper. Printed for Messieurs Figg and Sutton, and sold by the Pamphlet-mongers of London and Westminster. Price 6d.¹⁹⁹

Figg and Sutton were supposedly sworn rivals, yet here they were seemingly working in partnership to profit from their rivalry. We might posit that this is merely a business relationship, but there is the very real possibility that the sworn enemies presented in other advertisements were simply the products of promotion. Historians at the turn of

¹⁹⁵ John Byrom, *Miscellaneous Poems Volume 1*, (Manchester, 1773): p.43.

¹⁹⁶ Chris Rojek, *Celebrity*, (London, 2001): p.14.

¹⁹⁷ Morgan, *Celebrity*, p.97.

¹⁹⁸ The selling of prints with cricket as the subject matter has also been noted by Harris, 'Sport in the Newspapers', p.27.

¹⁹⁹ Classified advertisement, *London Evening Post*, 19 Jan., (1731).

the nineteenth century, looking backwards, were convinced that the fights at the amphitheatres were in fact choreographed performances.²⁰⁰ Thornbury posits that fights were ‘often arranged beforehand, and the losing man often undertook to receive the cuts, provided they were not too many or too deep’.²⁰¹ In that case, the performers become closer to the fictional representation – or at the very least highly mediated performance of self – that would characterise celebrity in the coming centuries.²⁰² Furthermore, the advert draws attention to the centrality of images in the distribution and dissemination of celebrity culture. Images allowed individuals to be recognised by those who had no personal interaction with the celebrity,²⁰³ reinforcing the distance between performer and audience that was simultaneously being created by the press.

Images of boxers could be found elsewhere, not least in the trade cards distributed to promote their schools of arms. Trade cards were another important form of promotion of early eighteenth century commerce, and though they advertised particular services, often spoke to a ‘universe of commodities’.²⁰⁴ James Figg’s trade card (see fig 1) has been a source of confusion, long thought to be the work of William Hogarth the work has more recently been credited to Anna Maria Ireland.²⁰⁵ Mistakes about the designer’s identity are easy to understand: Hogarth included Figg in his *Southwark Fair* print and designed the imagery for George Taylor’s headstones. More importantly, perhaps, these trade cards were deliberately designed to reference ‘images familiar across other types of print culture’.²⁰⁶ Indeed, it might have been purposely designed to appear like a Hogarth. Such references not only highlight the vibrancy of that visual culture for the period but also the importance of a visual culture for celebrity.

²⁰⁰ Walter Thornbury, *Old and New London: A Narrative of Its History, Its People, and Its Places Vol. 2*, (London, 1878): p.308.

²⁰¹ Whilst the thought of performers deliberately bleeding in order to enhance the performance may sit uncomfortably to modern readers, the process of pre-arranged bleeding, by use of (blunt) weapon or concealed blade persists in modern professional wrestling, British and otherwise. See Lucy Nevitt, ‘Popular Entertainments and the Spectacle of Bleeding’, *Popular Entertainment Studies*, 1/2 (2010): pp.78 – 92

²⁰² Joshua Gamson, ‘The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth Century America’, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 9/1 (1992): pp.1-24.

²⁰³ Elizabeth Barry, ‘Celebrity, Cultural Production and Public Life’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11/3 (2008): p. 253; Morgan, *Celebrity*, p.103.

²⁰⁴ Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Oxford, 2005): p.275.

²⁰⁵ Stephen Hardy, Brian Norman and Sarah Sceery, ‘Toward a History of Sport Branding’, *Historical Research in Marketing*, 4/4 (2012): p.487.

²⁰⁶ Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*, p.275



Figure 2: James Figg's trade card, c.1720s

By the middle of the eighteenth century, prize-fighters were using trade cards, alongside newspapers – which carried advertisements and their accompanying hyperbole, press conferences and performances – to create a brand,²⁰⁷ a marketing concept that was itself becoming an important role in the commercial culture of eighteenth-century England.²⁰⁸ The prize-fighter's brand was crucial to the promotion of the amphitheatre. Even when Figg was not fighting, like at the international match, his presence as a second was used in much of the advertising while the fight took place at his named venue. The Figg brand was used by performers to make profits in other ways. When the venues were not being used for exhibitions it doubled as an equally extravagantly named 'school-of-arms'. At these schools prize-fighters taught the use of weapons to upper-class patrons. Some spectators met and trained with these professionals in the amphitheatres as a training gym on days they were not being used as sporting arenas.

For all the forms of (self-) promotion, commercial products, and written rules, prize-fighting still relied on aristocratic patronage as a form of protection against laws governing popular entertainments in the capital. In the 1750s, prize-fighting lost the support of many leading members within the sport making it vulnerable to laws it had previously been immune to. The most important moment in this regard, at least according to both popular legend and boxing historians, revolves around Jack Broughton and his sponsorship by the Duke of Cumberland in a fight with Jack Slack. Cumberland had placed a £10,000 bet, and when Broughton lost he was accused of losing the fight on purpose. Broughton was ruined and not soon after his amphitheatre, the remaining leading venue offering commercial combat sport, was shut down. In 1754 the satirical newspaper, *The Connoisseur*, wrote, 'I cannot but lament the cruelty of that law, which has shut up our Amphitheatres: and I look upon the professors of the noble art of boxing as a kind of disbanded army'.²⁰⁹ Writing about the Broughton and Cumberland affair, Boddy succinctly argues, 'a more striking demonstration of the dependence of the sport on aristocratic patronage can hardly be imagined'.²¹⁰

The sport did not disappear overnight, and London retained some smaller fighting venues while taverns and inns on the outskirts of the city continued to offer

²⁰⁷ Hardy, Norman & Sceery, 'History of Sport Branding', p.487.

²⁰⁸ Nevett, *Advertising in Britain*, p.24.

²⁰⁹ 'Mr Town', *The Connoisseur*, 22 Aug., (1754).

²¹⁰ Boddy, *Boxing*, p.37.

some fights into the nineteenth century.²¹¹ But the loss of the amphitheatres meant a loss of a central locale in which to organise the sport, it damaged the sport's already dubious reputation, and deprived its participants of commercial profits. Fights continued to be fought as a quasi-legal status in the fields around the country. In the late 1780s, these fights in the fields regained popularity; when the sport re-emerged in the city it found itself in the relative safety of the cultural field, in circuses, fairgrounds and theatres.

CONCLUSION

The ways in which pugilism developed throughout the eighteenth century were indicative of the ways in which politics, the economy and culture were changing around it. English society, in short, was becoming a fielded society. The economy was maturing, commercial products were proliferating, and newspapers and the press had, for the first time, a degree of freedom from the crown. All these factors helped to produce a very early, commercial spectator sport that was growing alongside, and at times part of, an autonomous cultural field. Sport, for the most part, was still ensconced as part of older festival traditions, and I think it is hard to claim that sport became a field in and of itself in this particular period. In particular, wrestling continued to be part of local and regional festivities well into the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, many important milestones were reached that would help to produce a sporting field in the nineteenth century: written rules were committed and competitions became a financial and commercial prospect. For the first time, some sportsmen derived all their income from their sporting (and marketing) skills, and in the process an informal celebrity economy was being built around them. This latter point is crucial: sport, like culture and media, was separating itself from patronage and establishing prototype forms of capital that would define the field in the coming two hundred years.

By the 1790s, spectator sports and the commercial cultural field were fast becoming intertwined. Boxers and wrestlers, in one form or another, were as much showmen as they were sportsmen. Many of the values surrounding spectator sport – showmanship, hyperbole, drama, performance – that were continued into the nineteenth century had been established in the prize-fighting amphitheatres of London and were soon adopted by wrestlers. In the next chapter, we will see how.

²¹¹ Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process*, p.157.

2

ASSAULT OF ARMS ENTERTAINMENT C. 1770 - 1860

Two revolutions loom over England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: in England, the industrial revolution, and across the channel, the French Revolution. Both were transforming England's political, economic and cultural fields. Building on the changes to the economy made in the early- to mid-eighteenth century, this was a period in which many of the fields of modern society were born or blossomed and there were dramatic consequences for art, culture, and sport. Sporting practices which belonged to festivals and carnivals survived, but they were fast becoming a residual culture. The eighteenth century's commercial roots and shoots were beginning to bloom into urban, professional popular cultures. Theatres, in London and in the country's towns and cities, multiplied. Circus was devised and, shortly thereafter, crystallised as the defining entertainment of the age. All took advantage of large audiences that industrial cities were producing. Critically, patronage, the older model of artistic and cultural production, in the arts, literature and sport, was being replaced by entrepreneurs with a market orientated attitude towards cultural production. Prize-fighting, this chapter will argue, belonged to this field.

The creation of a fielded society was essentially the moving, grinding tectonic plates establishing the social map. It was bound to cause frictions and earthquakes. Politics, business, bureaucracies, education, literature, theatre, medicine and many other fields and subfields were defined in relation to one another in the field of power. Fields were emerging as autonomous and institutions, groups and agents were actively attempting to shape the boundaries while policing the capital, and exchange rates, available within. Section I of this chapter examines historiographical themes most commonly associated with the early phase of industrialism, namely that of social control. In relation to sport, leisure and exercise, animal rights groups, the newly formed police, and local factory bosses placed an intense focus on what we might call 'festival' or 'traditional' culture. Many sports or entertainments found they had no home in the

city. Without the relative safety and protection afforded by fields, and with the removal of patronage and lack of interest from cultural entrepreneurs or sometimes even audiences, many traditional pastimes did not survive the century. Plenty of sports, however, like prize-fighting, wrestling, cricket and horse racing, flourished. This was not because they lacked opposition but because they maintained financial and cultural support from across the classes. Prize-fighting, and to a lesser extent wrestling, found refuge and support from the commercial entertainments that the cities had given birth to: the theatres, circuses and pleasure fairs of Regency and early-Victorian life.

These relationships may seem incongruous to modern observers. If not for the ideology and discourse of amateurism later in the century, and its high degree of influence at the genesis of the sporting field, this form of spectator sport – married to the popular and commercial stage – may have quite feasibly been the dominant sport today. In this chapter we will see the stage's continued effects on archery, cricket, wrestling, pedestrianism and prize-fighting. The meanings, pleasures and possibilities of sport were still open to interpretation. Section II of this chapter seeks to detail the relationship between prize-fighting and the stage. It examines the various ways in which sparring, the performance of boxing to paying audiences in theatres, circuses and fairgrounds, became the most-watched sport of the period. Section III explores the influences of the stage and the press on these performances. Prize-fighters' and wrestlers' primary purpose, in this regard, was to entertain. Many acquired other skills and talents in order to maximise their saleability. The press, moreover, created 'melodramatic' sporting celebrities that were then performed on the stage.

Not all on-lookers and fans of the sport were best pleased by these developments. Section IV examines the reaction from certain members of the Fancy who decried the shift into the theatres away from the rural performances of sporting competition. Numerous sporting bodies and groups were formed in the hope of wresting control of the sport away from the cultural entrepreneurs and prize-fighters and back to a model of patronage and sponsorship. An inability by some of these individuals to (re)gain regulation over the sport would lead, in some instances at least, to the establishment of new sports and institutions later in the century, a point that the next chapter will explore in greater detail.

I. CONTROLLING CULTURE

Questions about social control have permeated historical accounts of sports, leisure and popular culture in the industrial revolutions.¹ Influenced by Marxist traditions, and most forcibly argued by Robert Malcolmson, much of the earliest leisure history work written focused on dimensions of social control and attacks on the customs and cultures of the poor and working classes. The last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth proved to be a rich quarry for case studies. While the details continue to be debated, it is hard to deny that this was a period of intense social and cultural change. Two interlinked causes are seen to be particularly pertinent with regard to popular culture. First, industrial capitalism was spreading across the country, but particularly in the north. Here, it was assumed by Malcolmson, the enclosure movement in the countryside restricted access to open fields for play and broke down traditional working patterns.² In the city, and under the eyes of capitalists and factory bosses, sharper conceptions of time and work brought an end to more casual forms of leisure and play.³ As such, the key denunciation about traditional forms of popular culture was that they tempted workers away from employment and destroyed the discipline that was needed for modern industrial production.⁴

Related to this, the emergence of an industrial bourgeoisie brought tensions about violent and disorderly sports and popular cultural pastimes. Traditional festival folk football games, for example, had the potential to damage commercial properties in towns. The emergence and spread of Methodism and Anglicanism petitioned against bodily pleasures such as drink and sport. Elsewhere, middle-class groups campaigned against blood sports. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to animals, founded in 1824, made up of notable middle class commentators, successfully lobbied parliament to outlaw animal sports in the 1830s. Facing such arguments and also the threat and fear

¹ This emphasis is reflected in the titles and subtitles of work: Peter Bailey's *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830 – 1885*; A.P. Donajgradzki's edited collection, *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain*; Eileen Yeo and Stephen Yeo, 'Ways of Seeing: Control and Leisure versus Class and Struggle', in Yeo, Eileen and Yeo, Stephen (eds), *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590 – 1914: Explorations in the History of Labour and Leisure*, (Sussex, 1981): pp.128-154.

² Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations*, p.107.

³ Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline', pp.56-97; Burke, 'The Invention of Leisure', pp.136-150; Joan-Lluis Marfany, 'Debate: The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe', *Past & Present*, 156/1, (1997): pp.174-191.

⁴ Easton et al., *Disorder and Discipline*, p.56; Sidney Pollard, 'Factory Discipline in the Industrial Revolution' *The Economic History Review*, 16/2, (1963): p.256; Douglas A. Reid, 'The Decline of Saint Monday 1766 – 1876', *Past & Present*, 71/1, (1976): p.84; Judd, 'The Oddest Combination of Town and Country', p.13.

of revolutions and the working classes more broadly, many blood sports lost influential backing of wealthy sponsors.

Shortly I will address some of the criticisms of such arguments. The picture is not nearly as clear as Malcolmson first suggested and nor do simple class binaries capture the complexity of the situation. There was, however, an intense focus on the leisure activities of all classes, but the working-classes often, if not always, lacked the power, cultural, social or economic, to resist these tensions. Various fairs across the country were successfully suppressed and many animal and blood sports were banned or driven underground. Rational recreation, a key theme in the following chapter, was finding its discursive resonance.

Pugilism, both prize-fighting and wrestling, was not immune from such denunciations. How could they be? The sports encouraged many of the qualities deemed unworthy of a civilized mind: booze, betting and bloodlust. Prize-fighting remained a popular and regular distraction for workers, and the sport's relationship with Saint Monday remained strong throughout the first decades of the nineteenth century. It was for good reason that George Davis' dedicated his poem *Saint Monday: Scenes From a Low Life* to the prize-fighters Tom Johnson, Richard Humphreys (sic) and Daniel Mendoza.⁵ When arguments against prize-fighting were aired in public they often stressed the 'distracting' nature of the sport for workers. Edward Hyde East, MP and judge, warned that prize fights appealed to, and in some ways produced, the 'idle' and 'disorderly'.⁶

Such criticisms were sung in harmony with claims that the sport was violent and degrading. The Rev. Edward Barry argued in 1789 that it was a 'direct violation of every law, of humanity, and common decency'.⁷ Occasionally, but certainly not always, magistrates and the police stopped matches, dispersed crowds and arrested boxers, before, during and after the fight. Boxers, their seconds, promoters, and individual audience members could potentially face prosecution. Prosecutions were most common when, tragically, fighters were killed or injured. After the 1830s and 1840s, with policing established, prize fighters and their organisers also faced convictions for indicting riots, unlawful assembling, and breaching the peace.⁸ Controls and convictions

⁵ Reid, 'Saint Monday', p.79

⁶ Edward Hyde East, *A Treatise of the Pleas of the Crown Vol.1* (London, 1803): p.270.

⁷ Edward Barry, *A Letter on the Practice of Boxing* (London, 1789):p.7

⁸ Jack Anderson, 'Pugilistic Prosecutions: Prize Fighting and the Courts in Nineteenth Century Britain' *The Sports Historian*, 21/2, 2001, pp.42-44; Judd, 'Popular Culture and the London Fairs', p.23

were unevenly applied, though. Competing in a prize-fight was no guarantee of arrest and prosecution. In fact we might even say that, judging by the plethora of reports about prize-fights during the period, the interruption of fights was rare. At worst, all taking part were acutely aware of the risks and these risks were seen as part of the job. For those in attendance, the hazards may have provided an element of frisson.

Wrestling also suffered censures. As opposed to boxing, and like the sport itself, these were often more local in nature. Where disapproval was expressed, it was precisely because wrestling was seen to be a local tradition that worked against newer religious groups and their values. In Cornwall, with its strong Methodist leanings, ministers frequently denounced wrestling competitions. An 1829 letter explained why local miners should not be tempted by the sport:

Why do you not go to the wrestling?...Because I can employ my time better. Because it is throwing my money away. Because I wish not to be seen in bad company. Because I would not encourage idleness, folly and vice. Because I should set a bad example. Because God has forbidden it.⁹

Sentiments like these, in fact, offer a good summary of why many factory bosses and religious groups opposed sport and festival cultures. Be that as it may, how popular or successful were such denouncements? Prize-fighting had been operating on dubious legality from at least the mid-eighteenth century onwards and criticisms of blood sports and the distracting nature of popular cultural forms stretch back into the early modern period.

Revisionist accounts, led by Cunningham¹⁰ and Golby and Purdue¹¹, proposed that such attacks were less concentrated and powerful than first presumed. These writers argued that many entertainments continued throughout the nineteenth century. Early suggestions that industrialising Georgian England existed in a popular cultural vacuum were increasingly difficult to support. As lofty as some of the reforming rhetoric undoubtedly was, prize-fighting and wrestling did not seem to particularly suffer a decline. For all the arguments about the policing of the proletariat's entertainments and moral force of rational recreation, Yeo and Yeo argue that debates over popular culture were a complicated discourse that did not fit comfortably into simple class binaries; the control of leisure was never simply 'a contest between proletarians in the red corner and

⁹ Rule, *The Labouring Miner*, p.326.

¹⁰ Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*.

¹¹ Golby & Purdue, *The Civilisation of the Crowd*.

bosses in the blue'.¹² Further, there has been some revision about the unevenness of such pressure, the regional dimensions of such debates, and the speed with which sports responded to these controls.¹³ Animal rights groups may have sought to ban fox hunting or horse racing, but these sports, and those members who felt enough belonging and fraternity to them to offer their support, had enough social, economic and cultural capital to resist outside challenges. Blood sports such as bear baiting and cock throwing, on the other hand, often lacked the capital to sustain such threats. There was no unified resistance from the working classes and few culturally, socially or economically rich backers provided sufficient support. It is a mistake to view these scuffles as being simply about class, but those sports that did not survive often lacked the capital needed to offer a continual or successful resistance.

Those who wished to suppress wrestling met with limited triumphs. Wrestling continued across the country throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In both Cumbria and Cornwall there is some reference to a decline in wrestling in the final decades of the eighteenth century, but it is hard to accurately assess what this actually means. In 1807, one reverend claimed wrestling in Cornwall was a 'very rare occurrence'.¹⁴ A similar decline was recorded in Cumbria in the 1770s.¹⁵ As Tripp asks, though, were contemporaries referring to 'overall numbers...those entering tournaments, or simply the absence of informal wrestling so prevalent in Carew's day?' He then adds, 'another possible interpretation is that these writers were referring to a decline amongst their own class'.¹⁶ Just as anti-sports reformers were often eager to embellish their perceived successes, pro-sport arguments, from folklorists and other antiquarians, often imagined and romanticised the past in order to pass comment on the passing from the age of innocence to experience. There is little evidence of any dramatic withdrawal of patronage. In Cumbria, the Earl of Lonsdale was still regularly contributing to wrestling prizes,¹⁷ and in Cornwall wrestling was petitioning subscriptions from local gentlemen throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ The sport also found investment and support from publicans

¹² Yeo and Yeo, *Ways of Seeing*, p.143.

¹³ John K. Walton and Robert Poole, 'The Lancashire Wakes in the Nineteenth Century' in Robert D. Storch (ed.) *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England* (London, 1982): p.101; Griffin, 'Popular Culture in Industrializing England', p.623.

¹⁴ Tripp, *Persistence of Difference*, p.109.

¹⁵ Huggins, 'Regular Re-invention', p.38-39.

¹⁶ Tripp, *Persistence of Difference*, p.109.

¹⁷ Letter to Earl of Lonsdale, 14th Sep., 1813, Cumbria archive centre, DLONS/L/1/3/152.

¹⁸ Tripp, *Persistence of Difference*, p.123-124.

and other commercial interests. Any semblance of decline in the final years of the eighteenth century seemed to be matched by a revival of popularity in the first decades of the nineteenth.

Wrestling, then, continued in the counties. It also adapted to city life. For those who had travelled from Cumberland to work and live in London there were informal wrestling competition meetings on Good Friday from approximately the late eighteenth century onwards. To supplement these informal meets, The Cumberland and Westmoreland Wrestling Society was officially formed in 1824.¹⁹ Outside of London, Cumbrian wrestling meets were held in Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle.²⁰ Devonshire wrestling, too, was held in London from the late 1820s at venues like the Eagle Tavern.²¹ These events offered immigrants and emigrants in the city the chance to reproduce and maintain their local identities and customs in the face of a growing national and urban culture.²²

Prize-fighting's apparent illegality did not stop it flourishing in the 1790s, 1800s, and 1810s, and again in the 1860s. During one of pugilism's especially prominent periods in the 1790s, a trilogy of fights between Daniel Mendoza and John Humphreys attracted and excited thousands of spectators and dozens of newspaper reports. Other prize-fighters were well-known names across the country. Legitimate contests were a common occurrence in the south and other fights took place, albeit with less frequency, all over England. In order to legally by-pass its dubious status, legitimate fights would be held in the countryside with large crowds dutifully following the event.²³ More often than not, fights would pass without incident. The Fancy, the group of predominantly wealthy, fashionable young men who made up a subculture that was passionate about sport and rough popular culture, leant their passionate support alongside other fans from across the classes. Patronage and sponsorship returned, but as we will see, its importance was faltering. The ability of the landed classes to restrict a sport, as had been demonstrated in the 1760s, simply did not exist to the same degree.

The press of the day, growing in stature and reach, is pervaded by evidence of the richness of prize-fighting, wrestling and sporting culture in general. Indeed, Adrian

¹⁹ Walter Armstrong, *Wrestliana; or the History of the Cumberland and Westmoreland Wrestling Society in London Since the Year 1824*, (London, 1870): p.vi-vii.

²⁰ Huggins, 'Regular Re-invention', p.43-44.

²¹ Devonshire Wrestling, *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 2nd Jun. (1833): p.2; See Tripp, *Persistence of Difference*, p.138.

²² Huggins, *Regular Re-invention*, p.43-44.

²³ William Hazlitt, *William Hazlitt: Selected Writings*, (Oxford, 2009): p.117-128.

Harvey has used these accounts to paint a detailed and vivid picture of the complex commercial sporting cultures that existed between 1793 and 1850.²⁴ One cannot overstate the enduring legacy the journalistic or media field would play on sport throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There had been hints of dedicated sports reporting in the first half of the eighteenth century, but these had often been restricted to advertisements or occasional treatises or political opinion pieces. Aware of this, prize-fighters had used advertisements as shop windows, celebrating individuals and in their own way conjuring stories about heroic individuals. As a promotional technique, it brought with it limited achievements. But it also spoke of a predominantly and overwhelmingly metropolitan culture. It also lacked a mode of reporting that we are familiar with today. Regular and dedicated descriptions detailing the match as it took place were wholly absent. Bibliographical anecdotes were practically non-existent. This would change dramatically in the final quarter of the eighteenth century.

Short advertisements, characteristic of much of newspaper coverage hitherto, were replaced by longer advertisements, illustrations and reports.²⁵ From the 1780s, magazines and newspapers were featuring 'vivid accounts of boxing matches...particularly with the development of a star system round boxers such as Mendoza'.²⁶ In the following decades there was a spate of dedicated sporting periodicals, or at the very least periodicals with a heavily skewed interest in sport, including *The Sporting Magazine* (1792) and *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle* (1822). Magazines and newspapers helped to disseminate the commercial sporting culture to growing national audiences: rules were written down and distributed, and histories, results and forthcoming events were recorded. Betting hints were given, and events, products and tickets advertised and promoted.²⁷ Improvements in travel, aided by better quality roads, more efficient coach travel and eventually the coming of the railways in the 1830s and 40s, allowed spectators the opportunity to travel to sports taking place outside of their immediate vicinity.²⁸ Travel and transport, in turn, allowed for improvements in communications, with the growth of the General Post Office culminating in the penny post in 1840. Now reasonably up-to-date reports could be filed

²⁴ Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture in Britain*.

²⁵ Black, *The English Press*, p.59.

²⁶ Ibid, p.60

²⁷ Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.33-34.

²⁸ Vamplew, *Pay up and Play the Game*, p.11

by reports and audiences alike and newspapers were distributed more quickly and further afield than earlier in the century.

These periodicals also habitually featured reports on the stage and circus. Crucially, they thus presented a flattened out and unified world of popular culture and their associated celebrity. Other newspapers of the period hinted at or explicitly stated the shared theatrical and sporting worlds, like *Pierce Egan's Life in London and Sporting Guide* (1823). Elsewhere, publican and theatrical newspapers, like *The Era* (1838), regularly featured sporting information. The worlds of theatre, circus and sport often shared a common stage, both in practice and in the minds of the reader. In this period we might struggle to claim that there existed an autonomous sporting field, but I think we can claim that there was an autonomous cultural field in which popular culture and many spectator sports, most obviously spectator prize-fighting, belonged.

This point, that a commercial culture existed as a distinct pole in the field of culture, is perhaps the most persuasive argument against the aforementioned decline of sports and popular cultures. Rather than being actively suppressed and resisted, popular cultural forms merely (re)emerged in different contexts and performance conditions reflecting changes in the social structure. Popular culture not only survived but flourished, albeit in a commercialised manner. Evidence for this urban popular culture in the Georgian and early-Victorian abounds. Industrialism created an urban audience eager for entertainment and leisure. Cultural entrepreneurs, free from older forms of sponsorship and patronage, provided these audiences with their cultural wares.²⁹

By the 1820s, over one hundred theatres had been built across English urban centres.³⁰ Circus, arguably the defining Georgian and early-Victorian entertainment, was born in London in 1773. In the early 1800s, nine cities across England could boast of a permanent or semi-permanent wooden structures that could perform circus. In the 1820s, London alone had nine circuses.³¹ During the middle of the century, permanent and semi-permanent circuses were supplemented by American tenting tours. Those fairs and wakes that survived into the nineteenth century, and these were plentiful, became more entertainment focused and continued to offer professional theatre booths and

²⁹ Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840*, (Cambridge, 2007): p.148.

³⁰ Hugh Cunningham, 'Leisure and Culture' in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950 Volume 2: People and their Environment*, (Cambridge, 1993): p.294.

³¹ Stoddart, *Rings of Desire*, p.16

gaffs.³² Commercial entertainments borrowed and adapted existing and older cultural forms.³³ A diverse range of amusements that had previously been offered by itinerant performers were presented at the circus or fairgrounds.³⁴ Now, however, they were presented with a sleeker and professionalised mode and display.

The contemporary, commercial popular culture did not completely avoid criticism. Entrepreneurs, showmen and audiences regularly had to defend themselves against magistrates and law enforcement officials. The theatre Licensing Act of 1737 remained in operation until 1843, directly policing what could be considered 'high' and 'low' culture. 'Straight' drama was restricted to two officially approved stages in London and one or two stages in other cities around the country. The Disorderly Houses Act of 1752, too, sought to have some control by licensing for 'places of Entertainment for the lower sort of People'.³⁵ Performers had to be careful not to fall afoul of 'public decency' (though they often tested and pushed up against what was considered good and bad taste). Cultural entrepreneurs demonstrated a propensity for policing their own places of entertainment, partly to maintain licenses, partly to keep police officers out of their establishments, and partly because their own profits relied on the security of audiences.³⁶

Once again, though, we should be careful not to exaggerate social control aspects of these laws. Simplistic readings about proletariat versus bourgeoisie struggle to capture the intense series of compromises and competition within the field of culture. F.M.L. Thompson, I think, captures the role that entrepreneurs and audiences played in these negotiations.

The capitalist system itself, therefore, operating through the openings which the entertainment market presented to entrepreneurs, emerged as the guarantor of popular sovereignty over the abuse of leisure. Admittedly this sovereignty was not absolute. It was limited by the rules which the suppliers had to observe, laws governing public entertainments and meeting places, conventions about public decency; and it was limited by the ability of the customers to pay. Within such limits, however, control of popular leisure was in the hands of the people

³² Walton & Poole, 'The Lancashire Wakes in the Nineteenth Century', p.112-113; Robert Poole, 'Oldham Wakes' in John K. Walton & James Walvin (eds), *Leisure in Britain 1780 – 1939*, (Manchester, 1983): p.79.

³³ Plumb, 'Commercialisation of Leisure', p.12; Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, p.33-34.

³⁴ Stoddart, *Rings of Desire*, p.13; Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society*, p.2.

³⁵ Kwint, 'The Legitimization of the Circus', p.81.

³⁶ F.M.L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain, 1830 – 1900* (London, 1988): p.288.

themselves, protected from the imposition of the middle-class values by the collective power of the working-class purse.³⁷

The cultural field existed as a negotiation between specific subfields, agents and groups. After a century in which patronage was slowly removed or withdrawn, writers and actors settled into specific groups, schools and genres. Economic capital, in no way being an ultimate form of power, was an important bargaining tool for both entrepreneurs and audiences. Specific laws limited what sort of stage productions could be performed, but artists, theatre owners and showmen learnt to be creative in their storytelling and entertaining. The strict separation between legitimate theatres and other forms of entertainment created a rich and diverse range of popular cultural forms: melodrama, circus and pantomime all prospered as cultural forms that bypassed the narrow legislation.³⁸

Prize-fighters, and to a lesser degree wrestlers, became an important feature of this urban, commercial popular culture. It was a common and expected sight to see prize-fighters on the stage, at fairgrounds and at the circus. It seems strange that, given the frequency in which contemporary audiences would encounter these performances, sustained and thorough analyses have been lacking. Indeed, as early as the 1980s Hugh Cunningham was frustrated by many historians' inability to connect the world of sport with the world of theatre and circus.

Historians with an apparently insatiable compulsion to compartmentalise have seen...different forms of entertainment in isolation from one another – there are histories of sport, of drama, of the pantomime, and of the circus. Yet what is most striking is the connections between these different forms of entertainment, connections so strong that one can speak of this world of entertainment as part of one close-knit popular culture. All these forms of entertainment were frankly commercial in nature, all aimed to attract spectators, all employed professionals...It was no accident that wrestling could be seen at the Eagle Tavern, soon to become the Grecian Saloon, and not simply coincidence that Pierce Egan was at home in both the theatre and the prize-ring, nor that so many of these forms of entertainment could be witnessed at the horse race or fair.³⁹

To understand commercial sporting practices in the Georgian era, one first has to understand the multifarious interactions sport had with the growing commercial culture. When one begins looking for connections, in fact, one finds an intense network of

³⁷ Thompson, *Rise of Respectable Society*, p.289

³⁸ Bailey, *The Business of Pleasure*, p.iv.

³⁹ Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, p.36.

related agents and institutions with a seemingly shared set of values, ideologies, languages, capitals and beliefs. Cunningham's call for historians to resist viewing cultural forms in isolation, however, has not necessarily been met with a cavalcade of research. Outside of Adrian Harvey's work, this form of analysis has been limited to boxing historians who have been forced to acknowledge that many prize-fighters were predominantly theatrical entertainers. In acknowledging this, though, there is almost always an air of disdain. Performance and entertainment, for these writers, is a corruption of sport in an otherwise linear path to Queensberry rules.⁴⁰ In the following section, I want to take seriously the 'discarded possible' by exploring the complex bond between sparring and the stage.

II. MOCK ENCOUNTERS AND SCIENTIFIC SPARRING

Prize-fighters were a popular and regular feature of the Georgian and early Victorian stage. Their performances were not sporting contests but displays that were referred to by contemporaries as *sparring*. The primary purpose of sparring was to entertain while providing a simulacrum of the sport. Pierce Egan, the most famous and prolific journalist of the Fancy, offered a pithy summary of what he considered sparring to be. It was, he wrote, a 'mock encounter; but, at the same time, a representation, and, in most cases, an exact one, of real fighting'.⁴¹ His description hints at the tensions between the sport proper – that is legitimate competitions that took place in the fields – and its theatrical equivalent. Advertisements for sparring often stressed their realness. One advert, for example, claimed:

[T]he exhibition is a novelty in the catalogue of such displays, inasmuch as the men set-to on a stage fifteen feet square, attired in their flannel drawers and colours as near as possible to represent the real conflict.⁴²

If it was worthy of mention then we might assume that rival exhibitions were not close enough to how the sport looked in the fields. For some audiences, though, seeing prize-fighters in person was more important than the verisimilitude of the event. Sporting celebrities, like other theatrical performers, became the most important attraction. Writing about actors, Michael Baker suggests that from 1800 theatrical star salaries demonstrated, 'a dramatic upward movement quite out of proportion to other theatrical

⁴⁰ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.153; Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process*, p.140-141.

⁴¹ Pierce Egan, *Boxina; or Sketches of Modern Pugilism...Vol. 2*, (London, 1824): p.16-17. Egan further explains that sparring is best used as training for legitimate contests.

⁴² Classified advertisement, *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 13th Mar. (1842): p.1

earnings'.⁴³ This growth of income for performers was partly due to their ability to undertake provincial tours.⁴⁴ In particular, audiences were keen to see the performers and prize-fighters whom they had read about in the sporting and theatrical newspapers and magazines. The press, therefore, served to report and disseminate information about sport, theatre and circus to a national reading public; the country had the infrastructure to move individuals from one city to another with relative ease; and the cities had the commercial entertainment venues to hold such events. Where Figg's name had travelled from 'Thames to Gravesend', theatrical tours allowed boxers to travel in person on dedicated tours. At towns, cities and their theatres, popular boxers were met by audiences eager to see the performer they had read about. According to Mendoza:

[A]n occurrence happened, which will serve to shew the popularity I at that time possessed. The inhabitants, having, by some means, gained information of my being in the chaise, surrounded us, on our entrance in the town, in such numbers, that we were actually prevented from proceeding on our journey, till after Sir Thomas had addressed them, and proposed that in order to gratify their curiosity, we should stand for some time on one of the benches in the market place.⁴⁵

Allowing for the cynicism with which one is expected to read showmen's autobiographies, the anecdote illustrates why cultural entrepreneurs might have been eager to engage popular prize-fighters in their venues. Circus and theatre owners already had a reputation for offering topical and newsworthy performances. The advantages in hiring prize-fighters seemed simple: they were popular, their fights were written about frequently, and the images of the boxers circulated in commercial products – like pots, statues and prints – and were thus easily identifiable figures. Up and down the country, audiences paid to see them perform in the flesh. Legitimate contests continued to be held in the fields around London, but they were difficult to attend and audiences faced the possibility of criminal prosecution. Theatrical performances offered audiences the opportunity to see these prize-fighters without the criminality that went along with it.

These were the advantages for audiences, but what of the advantages for performers? The most glaring points are that sparring was both safer and more profitable. Broughton's rules offered a bare minimum of laws. Legitimate competitions

⁴³ Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London, 1978): p.117.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Daniel Mendoza, *Memoirs of the Life of Daniel Mendoza Containing a Faithful Narrative of the Various Vicissitudes of his Life and an Account of the Numerous Contests in Which he has Been Engaged, With Observations on Each*, (London, 1816): p.165.

posed the very real possibility of injury or even, perhaps, death. Even the most successful fighter faced a professional career that, by default, would never stretch into old-age. Prize-fighting was a sport that privileged speed and endurance. No matter what a fighter did to cover the blows, there were only so many times that they could suffer repeated impacts to the head. At best, there were opportunities for a few boxers to remain in the sport after retirement, as trainers, seconds, and referees. But the real potential to earn enough to retire comfortably was greatly enhanced by the prospect of theatrical exhibitions. Exhibition fights were gloved affairs, serious damage was restricted, and the brutality of the long legitimate contests was almost completely removed.⁴⁶ Though we should maintain a certain amount of scepticism with regards to crowd sizes at prize-fighting fights in the country,⁴⁷ estimates of thousands or tens of thousands hoping to see the fight do not seem wildly misplaced. Contemporary and historical source's difficulty in recording accurate attendances – the lack of tickets, turnstiles and stewards – also made charging for the events problematic. While there were occasional attempts to collect money from spectators at the big open-air events,⁴⁸ the probability is that for the vast majority of the crowd the biggest financial outlays were travel, alcohol and betting. None of these costs, though, were likely to find their way to the participants involved (unless, of course, one fighter had a particularly nefarious relationship with a bookie). Prize-fighting sometimes offered big purses, but these were one-off payments.

Theatrical exhibitions offered a solution for prize-fighters to gain money from their skills. One newspaper report suggested that an exhibition in 1806 was attended by 700 patrons, each paying 2s6d,⁴⁹ about a day's wage for an unskilled labourer. This seems to be a good indicator of audience sizes and admission costs.⁵⁰ Harvey estimates that it was not uncommon for a successful and well-known prize-fighter to earn £50 to £100 a week,⁵¹ an estimate that is not far away from Mendoza's claim of earning 25 guineas a night for a three night-run in Manchester.⁵² Compared to skilled labourers, a pugilist's week-long engagement with a theatre might be equivalent to a year's wages.⁵³ Admission charges and tickets, then, or at the very least extended contracts with big

⁴⁶ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.132.

⁴⁷ Guttman, 'English Sports Spectators', p.114.

⁴⁸ Ford, *Prizefighting*, p.98.

⁴⁹ Anon., 'Sparring Contest', *The Morning Post*, 30 Apr., (1806): p.3.

⁵⁰ Ford, *Prizefighting*, p.141.

⁵¹ Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.200.

⁵² Mendoza, *Memoirs*, p.167.

⁵³ Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.200.

theatres and circuses, were a much more direct way for the pugilists to profit from their labour. It also offered a lucrative and regular form of employment that might also extend their short careers.⁵⁴

This is not to say that sparring exhibitions had completely overtaken legitimate competitions. Prize-fighters were still expected to compete in fights in order to prove their worth. Success in the fields, though, would likely correspond to success on the stage. One big fight or victory that caught the public's attention might be enough to sustain several years of performances. Often, a fight that managed to garner press and public attention would be a catalyst for a theatrical tour. It was not unheard of for the two participants of a fight to undertake a tour in order to capitalise on the recognition the two brought together. *Bell's Life*, for instance, reported that 'Barney, in company with Arthur Matthewson, his late successful antagonist, are exhibiting their *accomplishments* at Cheltenham, in their progress on a *sparring* tour'.⁵⁵

Proliferating entertainment venues, in London and the provinces, meant there were plenty of places for prize-fighters to spar and plenty of demand for their skills, from both theatrical managers and audiences. In his autobiography, Daniel Mendoza recorded where he performed throughout the 1790s, and I think the range of venues is indicative of the sorts of venues where the most popular prize-fighters were hired. At the height of his fame, Mendoza received, 'from the proprietors of various country theatres very liberal offers of engagement'.⁵⁶ He was, apparently, 'engaged...on very liberal terms for three nights, to exhibit the art of self-defence at Covent Garden Theatre, and had the satisfaction of experiencing, each night, the most flattering reception from the audience'.⁵⁷ In 1790, he toured Lancashire and Scotland's theatres. Soon after, Mendoza was employed by Astley to perform in Dublin and Liverpool, two of the many circuses he had established across the country.

Mendoza, though certainly one of the most recognisable prize-fighters of the period, was not unique in this regard. Without the space to offer an exhaustive list, a brief description of the pubs, theatres and circuses which displayed sparring during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century offers a glimpse of the coverage given to the entertainment: the Peahen Tavern⁵⁸, Sadler's Wells,⁵⁹ Garrick Head,⁶⁰ Royal

⁵⁴ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.146; Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process*, p.140-141.

⁵⁵ Anon., 'Life in the Prize Ring', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 1st Aug (1824): p.246.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.175.

⁵⁷ Mendoza, *Memoirs*, p.135.

⁵⁸ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.46.

Circus,⁶¹ the Lyceum,⁶² , Sans Souci Theatre,⁶³ Howes and Cushing,⁶⁴ Ginnett's,⁶⁵ and Pablo Fanque's.⁶⁶ Prize-fighters appeared in large cities and smaller provincial towns. Tenting circuses, after the introduction of American circuses in the 1830s,⁶⁷ took these entertainments even further afield. By the late 1820s, pugilists were appearing in so many different locations in so many cities around the country that *Bell's Life in London* could produce a half-joking, half-serious poem titled *Movements of the Pugilistic Stars*, listing where particular boxers might be on any given day.⁶⁸ Wrestling, although to a lesser extent, could also be found on the stage and in the circus ring. These included the Grecian Saloon (an early precursor to the music hall),⁶⁹ Pantheon Theatre,⁷⁰ and later in the century P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth (see chapter three).

Circuses and theatres were the domain of the well-known star performers. For lesser-known pugilists there were the prize-fighting exhibitions which toured the fairgrounds and horse racing meets. In these booths, sparring exhibitions were supplemented by open challenges for locals to last a predetermined time in the ring for a prize (a gimmick that professional wrestling would continue on the music hall stage). In his memoirs, David Prince Miller, performing in a boxing booth for the first and last time, records touring the fairgrounds of Yorkshire. He had, he complained, 'all the rough customers to contend with...during the first day's exhibition...a great strong butcher came into the place to show off his pugilistic talents'.⁷¹ At Bartholomew fair, one newspaper clipping recorded 'a man who had hired a room for the purpose, bellowed aloud to the mob as follows: "Walk up, Gentlemen and Ladies, to see the wonderful boxing. Here's sparring in the most fashionable and scientific style'.⁷² Boxing booths and wrestling booths, performing sparring exhibitions or invited

⁵⁹ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.46.

⁶⁰ Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.170.

⁶¹ Anon., 'News', *World*, 22 May. (1789): p.2.

⁶² Classified advertisement, *World*, 19 Jan. (1790): p.1.

⁶³ Anon., 'Liverpool Fancy', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, May 20, (1832): p.3.

⁶⁴ Classified advertisement, *Liverpool Mercury*, 3 Jul., (1861): p.1

⁶⁵ Anon., 'The Ring', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 30 Mar., (1862); p. 6.

⁶⁶ Anon., 'The Ring', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 15 Sep., (1861); p. 6.

⁶⁷ Stoddart, *Rings of Desire*, p.22.

⁶⁸ Anon., 'Movements of the Pugilistic Stars', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 23 Aug., (1829): p.3.

⁶⁹ Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, p.36.

⁷⁰ Anon., 'Wrestling and Other Athletic Amusements', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 03 Jan (1836): p.3. See also Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.174.

⁷¹ David Prince Miller, *The Life of a Showman and the Managerial Struggles...With Anecdotes and Letters of Some of the Most Celebrated Modern Actors and Actresses...*(London, 1866): p.17-18.

⁷² Bartholomew, *Frost and Suburban Fairs: Consisting of Portraits, Rare Views, Cuttings, Music etc 1718 – 1890*, Guildhall Library.

challenges, were a regular feature of many fairs and would remain so throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth-century.⁷³

Sparring exhibitions proved to be so popular that a dedicated venue for sparring and exhibition was opened in 1802. The Five Courts in London became the unofficial home of such events, operating on an almost weekly basis. In 1820 this was joined by another rival regular exhibition space, The Royal Tennis Court.⁷⁴ Both the Five Courts and the Royal Tennis Court provided the link between the competitive fights in the fields and the exhibitions on the stage. The venues primarily offered sparring exhibitions rather than legitimate fights for members of the Fancy rather than a general entertainment audience. As such, they attracted the attention of magistrates. Upon prosecution of events at the Tennis Court, Mr Justice Burroughs suggested that such exhibitions merely served as demonstrations for The Fancy to analyse ‘the comparative strength and skill of the parties, who may be afterwards matched as prize-fighters’.⁷⁵ They thus accordingly aided future violence and illegality. Sparring, then, could serve a promotional function for upcoming legitimate bouts, and it would not be uncommon for legitimate matches and dates to be fought to be announced on the stage.

Stage performances would also occasionally fall foul of legal opinion. In a frustrated tone, Daniel Mendoza wrote about one sparring performance being closed:

[A] stop was put to my publick days at Capel Court, by the entrance of two city marshalls, who siezed the persons exhibiting at the time. Thus was one great source of my subsistence destroyed. The circumstance rendered me the more uneasy, as there appeared no just reasons for such an act of severity. The exhibition of sparring could not be proved to be productive of personal injury to any man; for it displayed all the art of boxing without any of its danger. It could not be objected to as encouraging idleness, without subjecting plays, concerts, and all other public amusements to a similar charge.⁷⁶

Like legitimate prize-fights, prosecutions of sparring exhibitions by magistrates can best be described as uneven and arbitrary. Just as other forms of popular culture repressions were dependent on local enforcement and inconsistent interpretations of law, so too were prize-fighting exhibitions. Charles Dibdin, a writer and manager of theatres who had performed with Mendoza briefly in the 1790s, complained that his license was only

⁷³ In *A Fair Fight* Vanessa Toulmin provides a good overview of boxing on the fairground in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and a comprehensive assessment of boxing booths in the twentieth century.

⁷⁴ Ford, *Prizefighting*, p.138

⁷⁵ Quoted in Anderson, ‘Pugilistic Prosecutions’, p.41.

⁷⁶ Mendoza, *Memoirs*, p.138

threatened when a popular exhibition at a benefit night continued to an extended run.⁷⁷ There is little evidence of theatres and circuses around England suffering similar threats when displaying exhibiting, however. Similarly, exhibitions at the Five Courts continued with little or no interference from magistrates,⁷⁸ perhaps because they continued to operate under the benefits system, at least in name. Though Capel Court had been closed, Mendoza, in his tenaciousness, continued to exhibit elsewhere in the city.

As the Lord Mayor...had refused me his permission receive money for publicly exhibiting the art of self-defence, I employed a man, who was a freeman of the city, to sell an engraved portrait of myself, at least half a crown, and directed him to invite each purchaser into the exhibition room, and to mention at the same time that no money was required for seeing the performance.⁷⁹

In so doing, Mendoza was able to further his self-promotion by selling portraits and side-step any legal fine points. Exhibitions of pugilism did not fall into any straightforward definition of illegality. More crucially, prize-fighting exhibitions were hugely popular, easily attended and a central entertainment of the popular culture circuit.

III. GRECIAN STATUES, HIGHLAND FANDANGOS AND BOXING BURLESQUES

In sparring performances, Harvey succinctly notes, 'providing entertainment was a presiding concern'.⁸⁰ In this section I want to assess the manner in which prize-fighting exhibitions interacted with, and were influenced by, the performance traditions they appeared alongside. Many of the modes of performance and pleasures available at the theatre, circus and fairground, as will become clear in later chapters, would continue to have ramifications for the manner in which professional wrestling was performed throughout the twentieth century. Sparring exhibitions, importantly, were ensconced in the world of theatricality. Much Georgian popular culture exhibited the variety elements that would characterise the music hall later in the century. At the circus, sparring was part of the wider bill and would be performed next to the acts that were fashionable at the time. On the fairground, boxing booths were competing with other gaffs and stalls

⁷⁷ Charles Dibdin, *Professional and Literary Memoirs of Charles Dibdin the Younger: Dramatist and Upward of Thirty Years Manager of Minor Theatres*, George Speaight (ed.), (1956, London): p.48-49.

⁷⁸ Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.73.

⁷⁹ Menodza, *Memoirs*, p.139.

⁸⁰ Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.174.

for the audience's attention, evidenced by the Bartholomew fair caller's bellowing to audiences. On the stage, at both public houses and theatres, sparring was presented alongside other performances. Examples include sparring being presented at the Lyceum next to a 'variety of entertainments; with music and singing'.⁸¹ At an 1822 show sparring featured next to a romantic melodrama, a scene from *Tom and Jerry*, the playing of a fiddle, a performance of tricks with ladders, and a comic pantomime.⁸² Harvey records that, 'sport was presented as a number of attractions at pubs, such as the mixture of songs, comedy and boxing held at the Garrick Head'.⁸³

Appearing next to other forms of performance influenced the manner in which sparring exhibitions were presented. In keeping with the clowning and physical comedy that could be seen at the circus, one review of a sparring exhibition in 1819 described how two boxers 'performed a 'burlesque set-to, which excited much laughter'.⁸⁴ In one of the first national tours in the 1790s Mendoza travelled and performed with a famed comedian who offered comic routines and impersonations of famous boxers.⁸⁵ At the Royal Circus sparring was presented as the centrepiece of the pantomime, *The Spirit of the Fancy*. Little information about the performance has survived except for a short review which described it as 'undoubtedly the best of its kind that has been produced on that stage'. This, if nothing else, hints that boxing melodramas were not uncommon.⁸⁶ In one of Mendoza's tours, he 'paired up with a Mr Stretton in a show mixing instruction in self-defence with popular songs and sketches by composer and entertainer Charles Dibdin'.⁸⁷

Adapting to the entertainment environment in which they found themselves, prize-fighters and wrestlers possessed and displayed other skills. Acting talent was required for pantomimes like *The Spirit of the Fancy*. At one sparring performance, Tom Hickman danced a 'Lancashire Clog Hornpipe in Real Clogs'.⁸⁸ David Prince Miller is not a typical example of a boxing-showmen, but his adaptability suggests something of the culture that produced him: at various points in his career he was, '[an] impersonator of a black giantess, prize-fighting sparer, conjurer, equestrian, fortune teller, employee of Wombwell, magician, [and] manager of the Royal Adelphi Theatre,

⁸¹ Classified advertisement, *World*, 19 Jan., (1790): p.1.

⁸² Classified advertisement, *The Morning Post*, 7 Sep., (1822): p.1.

⁸³ Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.170.

⁸⁴ Anon., 'Sparring', *The Morning Chronicle*, 24 Mar., (1819): p.3.

⁸⁵ Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process*, p.142.

⁸⁶ Anon., News, *World*, 22 May., (1789): p.2.

⁸⁷ Briggs, 'Mendoza', p.112.

⁸⁸ Classified advertisement, *The Morning Post*, 7 Sep., (1822): p.1.

Glasgow'.⁸⁹ Miller's own description of his engagement in a fairground boxing booth hints at the ease in which a sparring exhibition might borrow other showmen and women from other performances.

I next proceeded to Halifax, in Yorkshire, where there were several shows, and, among other entertainments, an exhibition of sparring. The arrangements for this affair were not completed, and, being at the time a strapping fellow, I had the offer of an engagement, which I accepted, and figured as the Warwickshire Champion.⁹⁰

Actors, entertainers and pugilists shared a stage. Royalty, actors, authors and prize fighters also shared the pages of the newspapers and magazines. Lord Byron, arguably the most (in)famous poet of the day was a regular attendee of boxing exhibitions, and he trained, like many of his peers, with a famous pugilist, John Jackson.⁹¹ Jason Goldsmith describes newspapers of the period operating in 'a networked structure...and [an] economy of personal anecdote'.⁹² To watch a prize-fighter on the stage was to enter the circuit of celebrity culture. The most famous example of this network was demonstrated when prize-fighters, including Mendoza, were hired as pages with the explicit advice to keep out Queen Caroline from the Prince Regent's coronation. The event caused a fever pitch of gossip in the newspapers, and it is telling that famous prize-fighters were involved in the narrative.⁹³

Reflecting on this event, Thomas W. Laquer has influentially argued that the reporting of the Queen Caroline affair freely borrowed conventions of theatrical melodrama. As a genre, melodrama is easily understood and identified but sometimes difficult to define. Booth's relatively comprehensive list offers a good starting point:

[S]trong emotion, both pathetic and potentially tragic, low comedy, romantic colouring, remarkable events in an exciting and suspenseful plot, physical sensations, sharply delineated stock characters, domestic sentiment, domestic settings and domestic life, love, joy, suffering, morality, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, p.36.

⁹⁰ Prince Miller, *The Life of a Showman*, p.17

⁹¹ Leo J. Henkin, 'Pugilism and the Poets', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 8/1, (1947): p.69-70.

⁹² Goldsmith, 'Celebrity and the Spectacle of Nation', p.23.

⁹³ Krzemiński, Edward D 'Fulcrum of Change: Boxing and Society at a Crossroads', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 21/2, (2004): p.166.

⁹⁴ Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge, 1991): p.150-151.

When reporting on the Queen, then, Lacquer argues that newspapers wrote about her ‘as if she were a fictional character’.⁹⁵ Newspaper reports presented their narratives as fiction and freely borrowed from melodrama. This form of reporting, furthermore, was not restricted to members of the royal family. By the latter half of the eighteenth century, most newspaper articles focused on sensationalised accounts of murders, crimes and, according to one contemporary writer, ‘discoveries of the most shocking, audacious, and unheard of villainies’.⁹⁶ For Raymond Williams, one can only understand the nineteenth century press by understanding the Sunday paper and its relations to other commercial and urban popular cultural forms of the day, in particular the illegitimate theatre and the circus.⁹⁷ In particular, Sunday papers and melodrama share common themes, especially the ways in which ‘crime, adventure and spectacle were staples of the [newspaper] form’.⁹⁸

Influenced by Raymond Williams and Peter Brooks,⁹⁹ other historians working in the cultural materialist and new historicist mode have attempted to analyse nineteenth century society in relation to melodrama.¹⁰⁰ Elaine Hadley has gone so far to suggest that the themes of melodrama played ‘a significant role, along with other appearances of the melodramatic mode (in politics, journalism, and the novel) in the formation of modern culture’.¹⁰¹ There is a criticism, perhaps a valid one, that writers who have written about the melodramatic mode pay scant regard to melodrama as it was actually performed and experienced, ignoring generic evolutions over time.¹⁰² However, it is hard to deny that many newspaper reports adopted this style, including sports reporting. Melodramatic (mode) reporting influenced the manner in which boxers were represented to the public. David Snowden, too, sees a relationship between the stage

⁹⁵ See Thomas W. Lacquer ‘The Queen Caroline Affair: Politics as Art in the Reign of George IV’ *The Journal of Modern History* 54/3, (1982): p.458.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Black, *The English Press*, p.51-52.

⁹⁷ Raymond Williams, ‘The Press and Popular Culture: An Historical Perspective’ in George Boyce, James Curran and Pauline Wingate (eds), *Newspaper History from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day* (London, 1978): p.41.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p.44.

⁹⁹ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, (New Haven, 1976).

¹⁰⁰ See Rohan McWilliam, ‘Melodrama and the Historians’, *Radical History Review*, 78 (2000): pp.57-84.

¹⁰¹ Elaine Hadley, *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in the English Marketplace, 1800 – 1885* (Stanford, 1995): p.8.

¹⁰² McWilliam, ‘Melodrama and the Historians’, p.71.

and sports reporting, writing that ‘theatrical entertainment focused on variety and spectacle, and this was imitated in *Boxiana*-style reports’¹⁰³

Pierce Egan, the original author of *Boxiana*, was the greatest proponent of this form of writing, and his style and breathless prose was copied by other aspiring sporting writers of the time. A reporter’s job, at least in Egan’s mind, was not just to convey how the fight was fought but to capture the drama of the spectacle. In many ways, the report itself may have been more dramatic than the actual contest. One problem with all sporting competitions, after all, is that they have potential to be lifeless or dull affairs. Egan’s reports could never be accused of this, perhaps because, according to some critics, Egan was often guilty of exaggeration or outright fabrication.¹⁰⁴ Audiences did not want truthful reporting, according to Egan, at least. Instead, reports of sports in general, and prize-fights in particular, sought to capture the intrigue and visceral excitement of the event. A typical report would set the scene, describing in detail the location and the crowd; fighters’ colourful entrances would be explained, detailing their costumes, their interactions with the audience; and inner monologues and insights would be recorded. Finally, the reports would be generously littered with stylistic subcultural language that folded readers into that world.¹⁰⁵ In short, via newspaper reports, prize-fighters were turned into performers acting in a very particular form of (melo)drama.

A key feature of sporting magazines was to supplement information about fights with ‘personal’ information about the competitors. Most famously, Pierce Egan’s three volumes of *Boxiana*, described in great detail the lives of celebrated boxers of the day. Newspaper biographies were supplemented by the appearance and subsequent growth of sporting (auto)biographies. In 1816, the *Memoirs of the life of Daniel Mendoza* offered a tone and narrative that would be recognisable in many modern sports auto-biographies, cataloguing childhood difficulties and later triumphs.¹⁰⁶ Pierce Egan, moreover, often exaggerated and embellished pugilists, describing the boxers ‘in dramatic, fictionalized terms, elevating them to immortal status’.¹⁰⁷ Newspaper descriptions emphasised any hint ‘of nobility of character in the pugilist’ which was

¹⁰³ David Snowdon, ‘Drama Boxiana: Spectacle and Theatricality in Pierce Egan’s Pugilistic Writing’, *Romanticism on the Net*, 46 (2007); para 25.

¹⁰⁴ Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process*, p.80.

¹⁰⁵ Snowdon, ‘Drama Boxiana’; Gregory Dart, ‘Flash Style: Pierce Egan and Literary London, 1820 – 28’, *History Workshop Journal*, 2001/58, (2001): p.191; Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.37.

¹⁰⁶ Matthew Taylor, ‘From Source to Subject: Sport, History and Autobiography’, *Journal of Sport History*, 35/3, (2008): p.477.

¹⁰⁷ Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.38.

then ‘lauded to the skies’.¹⁰⁸ Grandstanding was even reflected in the names that the press christened fighters: ‘The Gasman, the Wheeler Black Diamond, Master of the Rolls, Colonel, Blackee, Massa and African’.¹⁰⁹ Jon Bee’s wonderfully titled dictionary of slang explained that such grandiloquent names were often ‘put upon them by the slang-whang reporters, who, when a new man appears, inquire “what name he will go by?”’.¹¹⁰ Ford, reflecting on this in 1971, accurately commented that these traditions had been passed on to professional wrestling in the twentieth century.¹¹¹

Most writing on celebrity and stardom posits that a celebrity can act as a lightning rod for particular fears and/or desires. Richard Dyer’s widely influential work on stardom posits stars provide a prism in which society’s ‘instabilities, ambiguities and contradictions’ are refracted.¹¹² These observations refer to Hollywood film stardom, but they have been applied more widely to celebrities in this period.¹¹³ Likewise, Peter Brooks, on his seminal analysis of the melodrama genre, suggests that nineteenth century melodrama ‘expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue’.¹¹⁴ Considering the immense changes that were taking place during the period in question, the French Revolution and French wars, the decline of religion, the decline of the court and king, the tensions between classes, the growth in capitalism, and the adaption to living in an urban setting – in short, the fielding of society – it is unsurprising that the period’s dramas, both on the stage and in the press, looked to explore the themes of morality, domesticity and class using melodrama.

The relationship between stardom and melodrama, furthermore, has not gone unnoticed. Christine Gledhill, again referring to Hollywood film, suggests that, ‘melodramatic characterisation is performed through a process of personification whereby actors – and fictional characters conceived as actors in their diegetic world – embody ethical forces’.¹¹⁵ Via a melodramatic mode of reporting, prize-fighters almost

¹⁰⁸ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.32.

¹⁰⁹ Jon Bee, *Slang: A Dictionary of the Turf, the Ring, the Chase, the Pit, of Bon-Ton and the Varities of Life, Forming the Most Completest and Most Authentic Lexicon Balatronium Hitherto Offered to the Notice of the Sporting World...Interspersed with Anecdotes and Whimsies, With Tart Quotations and Rum Ones...* (London, 1823): p.203.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ford, *Prizefighting*, p.55.

¹¹² Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (London, 1998): p.31.

¹¹³ Goldsmith, ‘Celebrity and Spectacle’, p.30.

¹¹⁴ Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, p.20.

¹¹⁵ Christine Gledhill, ‘Signs of Melodrama’, in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, (London, 1991): p.120.

always embodied ethical characteristics or stood in for wider political tensions. Sports performers representing wider identities was not necessarily new. In festival wrestling matches, the previous chapter demonstrated, participants had stood in for local identities, representing their village or trade. Figg's promotion of the fight between an Englishman and the Venetian gondolier also hinted at developments that would be reached in the nineteenth century. The melodramatic mode of reporting accentuated and exaggerated these characteristics. Newspaper reports and magazines amplified characteristics surrounding their performer, projecting the concerns and fears of race, gender and class into the bodies of the fighters.

For Karen Downing, the French wars produced pertinent questions about gender in industrialising England.¹¹⁶ While a crisis in masculinity may never be far from the surface in a patriarchal society, such a crisis seems to have been felt particularly acutely in the Georgian and early Victorian period. Undoubtedly the wars with France had played a role in politicising the role of masculinity at a time of 'national security'. The industrial revolution, it was believed, 'increased the amount of men in sedentary occupations; and consumerism, consumption, and luxury goods were thought to have 'effeminising' consequences rendering "men weak and effeminate".¹¹⁷ Boxing seemed to offer an antidote of raw masculinity as manifested in muscle.

Similarly, national identity proved to be a popular and enduring way for fighters to be characterised. A newspaper report described a fight between English and Irish fighters as 'a kind of war between England and Ireland'.¹¹⁸ Peter Radford has demonstrated that pugilism played an important role in cementing national identity during the moral sapping French wars. Pugilism was lauded as an English sport with English values.¹¹⁹ Radford pays particular attention to the 1810 and 1811 fights between England's Tom Cribb and the African-American Tom Molineaux. He acknowledges it, but I think Radford too easily dismisses the undoubted racial element that structured the newspaper arguments around the fight. He is right, however, to maintain that this was not just a fight about race. The 1811 fight came at a particularly low point of the war and a crisis point for the British monarchy (the unpopular prince would be declared Prince Regent in January of that year). When newspapers suggested that 'some persons

¹¹⁶ Karen Downing, 'The Gentleman Boxer: Boxing, Manners, and Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century England' *Men and Masculinities*, 12/2 (2010): p.340.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p.333-334.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Guttman, 'English Sports Spectators', p.120.

¹¹⁹ Radford, 'Lifting the Spirit', p.254.

feel alarmed at the bare idea that a black man and a foreigner should seize the championship of England',¹²⁰ it was difficult to tell whether the race or nationality of Molineaux alarmed boxing fans the most. To prize-fighting fans Cribb's eventual victory over the African-American confirmed England's moral, national and 'racial' superiority.

In legitimate sporting competition, in line with melodramatic and circus performances of the era, there was an emphasis on strong, patriotic characters.¹²¹ When prize-fighters performed their theatrical and circus sparring tours, they were performing these already exaggerated melodramatic characters which were then further embellished by the conventions of the stage. A newspaper report from 1836, for instance, describes a wrestling performance of Cornish, Devonshire, and Cumbrian wrestling at the Pantheon theatre. It captures the manner in which representations of race and local identity, so regularly performed in the pages of the press, were then re-performed and caricatured on the stage for paying audiences.

Jack Adams danced a Highland fandango, in regular costume, during the evening; and that Sambo Sutton did a little pankey punkey business, by dancing on his head, and beating time with his feet. A female in the pit was so delighted with the extraordinary agility of the Black, that she rose from her set, and exclaimed, "Here's sixpence, my lad!"¹²²

The performance, particularly the ways in which race was represented, suggests another sideshow entertainment that had an enduring legacy on sparring exhibitions: freak shows. Freak shows, PT Barnum being the most famous propagator, were the most prominent attraction of the circus and fairground in nineteenth century America and Britain. Just as sporting celebrities in the melodramatic mode were used to ease tensions surrounding political tensions, Barnum, an influential figure in wrestling's development, and his fairground freak shows were spaces which explored 'political' and 'scientific' questions about race, gender and nationality. The freak show's display of bodies utilised modes of spectacle and performance that ran through Victorian culture,

¹²⁰ Quoted in Paul Magriel, 'Tom Molineaux', *Phylon*, 12/4, (1951): p.331.

¹²¹ Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society*, pp.48-61; Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, p.152.

¹²² Anon., 'Wrestling and Other Athletic Amusements', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 03 Jan (1836): p.3. See also Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.174.

emphasising bodily difference and Otherness, specifically the display of disability and/or non-whites.¹²³ Sparring continued these forms of performance.

Following a tour of America in the 1840s, Ben Caunt, a popular English prize-fighter, returned with Charles Freeman. Freeman had been displayed as a giant at Barnum's American Museum. Upon arrival in England, he performed as a sparring partner for Caunt in Manchester, Liverpool and London. The press wrote excitedly about the tour. 'We went, we saw, and stood astonished,' reported *The Era*, before adding:

When Charles Freeman entered, the audience seemed in actual doubt whether he was a human being, or one from the other side of the Styx. He marched forwards to make his bow, and the applause was deafening – the house echoed with plaudits – and there he stood, the finest man of the age, side by side with England's own brave champion, who looked a mere pigmy by the side of the Colossus.¹²⁴

During the shows Freeman lifted weights, flipped summersaults and sparred with Caunt. It was clear that Freeman's height, rather than his pugilistic skill, was the main attraction of the show. His pugilistic skills, in fact, were non-existent. Like Miller, Freeman had no fighting experience and fought two legitimate prize-fights, both against William Perry the Tipton Slasher, during his time in England. Upon completion of the fights, Freeman returned to the stage, co-starring in a specially commissioned play with Nano the dwarf, another actor who had drawn acclaim in America before travelling to England.¹²⁵

Even without the appeal of an unusually large frame, bodies were a big attraction in the sparring performances and the performance traditions they were being presented next to. In the circus, for example, men's and women's bodies were used to titillate, inform and/or horrify. Adah Isaacs Menken, whose marriage to the prize-fighter John Heenan produced international press attention, provided one of the most notorious

¹²³ Roslyn Poignant, 'The Making of Professional "Savages": From P. T. Barnum (1883) to the Sunday Times (1998)', in Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Petterson (eds), *Photography's Other Histories*, (Durham and London, 2003): p.56; Eric Fretz, 'P. T. Barnum's Theatrical Selfhood and the Nineteenth-Century Culture of Exhibition', in Rosemarie Garland Thomson (ed.), *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, (New York, 1996): p.101.

¹²⁴ Anon., 'The Ring', *The Era*, 3rd April, (1842):p.10.

¹²⁵ Alvin Goldfarb, 'Gigantic and Miniscule Actors on the Nineteenth-Century American Stage', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 10/2, (1976): p.269.

examples of how nudity, implied or imagined, could help to facilitate international fame.¹²⁶ Assael argues that in the circus ‘emphasis on the materiality of the body meant that it traded in excess’.¹²⁷ Sparring was nothing if not excessive. Prize-fighting had always offered the display of men’s bodies as an attraction. On the stage and in the circus, with stage lighting and costume, this appeal was amplified. At the Five Courts the African-American boxer Bill Richmond began to spar with his shirt off ‘in order that the spectators might admire the muscular development of the fighters’.¹²⁸ In his circus tours, Jem Mace posed in Grecian statue routines. The statues, first perfected by Andrew Ducrow in the 1820s, shifted the emphasis of strength, seen by earlier strongmen, to simply the display of bodies.¹²⁹ Sandow the Magnificent, later in the century, continued the tradition on the music hall stage.

The appeal of sparring for female audiences did not go unremarked. Pierce Egan claimed that, ‘the manly art of boxing would be displayed, divested of all ferocity...conducted with the utmost propriety and decorum, that the female part of the creation might attend, without their feelings being infringed upon, or experiencing any unpleasant sensations’.¹³⁰ The Grecian statues and exhibition contests displayed the lean, muscular bodies to admiring audiences. The space of exhibition, the ‘respectable’ circus, or later the ‘respectable’ music hall, allowed the presence of ‘respectable’ women,¹³¹ and for that matter ‘respectable’ men, the pleasure in watching chiselled, sexualised bodies on display.¹³²

Writing about Barnum’s role in histories of celebrity and promotion, Joshua Gamson has observed that Barnum’s ‘subjects were superlatives – the best, the strangest, the biggest, the only’.¹³³ Like professional wrestling’s pleasures later in the century, Barnum understood that deception could be entertaining because an audience’s enjoyment could be found in dissecting where performance and reality met.¹³⁴ It did not

¹²⁶ Renée Sentilles, *Performing Menken: Adah Isaacs Menken and the Birth of American Celebrity*, (Cambridge, 2003).

¹²⁷ Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society*, p.8.

¹²⁸ Ford, *Prizefighting*, p.138.

¹²⁹ Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent*, p.138; Maria Wyke, ‘Herculean Muscle!: The Classicizing Rhetoric of Bodybuilding’, *Arion*, 4/ 3, (1997): p.54.

¹³⁰ Quoted in Briggs, *Mendoza*, p.107-108.

¹³¹ Dagmar Höher, ‘The Composition of Music Hall Audiences 1850 - 1900’, in Peter Bailey (ed.), *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure*, (Milton Keynes, 1986): p.81

¹³² Graham Gordon, *Master of the Ring: The Extraordinary Life of Jem Mace, Father of Boxing and the First Worldwide Sports Star*, (Lancashire, 2007): p.66.

¹³³ Gamson, ‘Assembly Line of Greatness’, p.4.

¹³⁴ Marion Wrenn, ‘Managing Doubt: Professional Wrestling Jargon and the Making of “Smart Fans”’, in Craig Calhoun and Richard Sennett (eds), *Practicing Cultures*, (London, 2007): p.165.

matter whether audiences believed the stories they were being told, Neil Harris writes, audiences ‘delighted in debate’. He continues, ‘amusement and deceit could coexist; people would come to see something they suspected might be an exaggeration or even a masquerade’.¹³⁵ As Harris alludes to, critical to the publicity and debate about performance and ‘truth’ were the press. Barnum’s skill was to whip national and regional newspapers into a frenzy, spreading gossip and intrigue. *The Times* would describe, re-printing a report from an American newspaper, and not without disdain, that ‘[Barnum] sends paid agents about in all directions to get up excitement. The papers report the excitement as news; the report produces a new excitement among readers...other papers copy the report, and thus multiply it over the land.’¹³⁶ Barnum and other entrepreneurs of the era displayed an acute understanding of how to create local, national and international publicity in order to further their own or their performer’s celebrity.

The greatest of Barnum’s manifold influences on modern culture, I would suggest, was his ability to sell celebrity. Barnum recognised that celebrity was defined by an interest in performers’ private lives, but he also recognised that private lives could be fictionalised and embellished in order to create further public interest. Here, Barnum’s mode of publicity chimed with the melodramatic mode of reporting that had dominated the Georgian and early Victorian period. Care should be taken when discussing this point, however: biographers, newspapers and, not least, celebrities themselves in the Georgian period and earlier had recognised the power in this, but there had always seemed to be some continuation and correlation between the public and private representations. Where the press previously had amplified existing qualities that they believed to see in its celebrities, Barnum was willing to abandon any resemblance to ‘truth’ altogether. Barnum understood that the private lives were not only of interest, but in fact helped to structure an audience’s relationship with the performer on the stage.¹³⁷ This ultimate divorce of individual agent and performer would have a great influence on professional wrestling in the twentieth century.

IV. PUGILISTIC CLUBS

Sparring performances were popular among cultural entrepreneurs, pugilists and audiences alike. They did, however, cause mumblings of discontent from the Fancy.

¹³⁵ Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, (Chicago, 1981): p.62.

¹³⁶ Anon., ‘Jenny Lind, Her Showman and the American Press’, *The Times*, 28 Oct. (1850): p.5

¹³⁷ Gamson, ‘Assembly Line of Greatness’.

From around 1810, many members of the Fancy, and the assorted sporting presses, were becoming increasingly concerned that allure of exhibitions could do permanent damage to legitimate competition. The attraction of theatrical tours and exhibitions, combined with the attractive financial benefits for performers, were seen to be discouraging active competition.¹³⁸ Referring to the ‘benefits’ taking place at the Five Courts and Tennis court, Egan claimed, ‘the real judges and grandees of the prizing assert that [sparring] prevents actual combats, while the glove market affords such plentiful harvest’.¹³⁹ When the two London sparring venues were closed down, due in part to the competition between the two, ‘after 1831 pugilism lacked a central venue in London, thus depriving itself of the revenue and organisation vital to the propensity of an illegal sport’.¹⁴⁰ We might posit that this distaste was driven by members of the upper-classes frustration of the sport moving out of their control. As prize-fighters became independent via commercial means their reliance on elite sponsorship, a control that had been dwindling for much of the eighteenth century, was becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.¹⁴¹

Government laws and reforms were made to have material consequences with the 1839 Metropolitan Police Act, whose ‘major objective’, according to Robert Storch, ‘was the closer and more efficient regulation and organisation of quotidian life’ which had ‘profound’ implications for popular culture.¹⁴² The establishment of a police force proper and changes in local and national government created a more intense focus on the sport, a focus that, without influential voices, could not so easily be deflected.¹⁴³ Bell’s magazine was warning audiences attending fights to ‘pay prompt obedience to the powers that be, and to disperse from receiving orders, even from a single constable’.¹⁴⁴

Even when the police didn’t turn up, legitimate contests suffered difficulties about inconsistencies with gambling. When legitimate fights did take place, there was an increasing tendency for fighters to cheat and ‘because of temptations arising from wagering,’ Gray explains, there were ‘too many crooked fights [that] were disgusting

¹³⁸ Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.200.

¹³⁹ Egan in Ford, *Prizefighting*, p.143.

¹⁴⁰ Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.169.

¹⁴¹ Krzeminski, ‘Fulcrum of Change’, p.166.

¹⁴² Robert D. Storch, ‘Persistence and Change in Nineteenth-Century Popular Culture’ in Robert D. Storch (ed.) *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England*, (London, 1982): p.14.

¹⁴³ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.99

¹⁴⁴ ‘The Ring’, *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 29 Aug., (1852): p.7.

backers and bettors'.¹⁴⁵ Tom Spring argued that 'the business of match-making has fallen into the hands of publicans and others, who back men not for the sake of sport itself, but for the sake of personal advantage of their own house, or the sums which they may risk on the issue of the battle'.¹⁴⁶ Early attempts to control the sport's relationship to gambling were constituted by the Pugilistic Club in 1814. With a treasurer, secretary and subscribers, the club was run by a mixture of retired boxers, publicans, bookies and members of the Fancy, moving control even further away from the control of sponsorship and patronage model.¹⁴⁷ Any successes to control corrupt fights were certainly limited and arguably intangible. In a letter to *Bell's Life*, 'one of the fancy' suggested 'either regenerating the Old Pugilistic Club, or of establishing a new one, with the view of chucking that system of *crosses* which has of late years disgusted the old patrons'.¹⁴⁸ In 1825 the Pugilistic Club was disbanded.¹⁴⁹ By the early 1830s, one of the sport's supporters, sensing its falling popularity, decried that 'the ring exhibits a vast falling off in its own members'.¹⁵⁰

A central organisation was deemed to be the only way of 'rescuing' the sport. The importance of such an organisation was outlined by a letter to *Bell's*.

The first – the most important and essential step to restore the Ring is to for a pugilistic club – this is indispensable....The club should have the direction and management of all ring affairs. The first step should be to establish a staff of paid commissaries, ring-keepers &c, &c; all referees and umpires should be chosen from the club; all disputes should be referred to the club; no man should be allowed to enter the Ring who was not enrolled by the club; no sporting-house should be patronised of which the landlord was not enrolled; and, above all, a convenient locality should be established by the club for sparring benefits, and purses should be given by the club to be contended for.¹⁵¹

There were continued, and failed, attempts to create appropriate and effectual ruling group: the Fair Play Club in 1828 and the Pugilistic Benevolent Association in 1852.¹⁵² Other attempts to regain control of the sport by various groups were a touch more successful but not particularly sustained. The London Prize Rules of 1838 hoped to

¹⁴⁵ W. Russel Gray, 'For Whom the Bell Told: The Decline of British Prize Fighting in the Victorian Era' *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 21/2, (1987): p.56.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.166.

¹⁴⁷ Krzemienski, 'Fulcrum of Change', p.174.

¹⁴⁸ Anon., 'New Pugilistic Club', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 8 Aug., (1824): p.253.

¹⁴⁹ Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process*, p.196.

¹⁵⁰ Anon., 'The Ring', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 4 Sep., (1831): p.3.

¹⁵¹ Anon. letter, 'Can the Ring be Revived?', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 15 Feb., (1846): p.6.

¹⁵² Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.98.

banish the seedier aspects of fighting, like head-butting and biting, and wrestling holds; the ring became a standard size; and clarifications were made about what constituted 'coming up to scratch'. For Boddy, the most important aspect of these changes was that the new rules 'decreed that if the contest was undecided all bets were off'.¹⁵³

The lack of prize-fighting's central organisation, however, was continuing to cause problems. Jem Ward's retirement in 1832 created thirty years of confusion about champions and championships.¹⁵⁴ Titles and championships, as Mendoza had learnt forty years previously, were profitable props for national theatrical and circus tours. In 1835, it was decreed that a 'champion must always accept a challenge of £200 a side'.¹⁵⁵ The £200 clause, it was hoped, would prevent champions declining to meet fair competitors, but would have little real impact. If, as Mike Huggins posits, 'a key mark of any authoritative sport regulatory body is its ability to formulate rules and impose them on the sport as a whole',¹⁵⁶ then the Pugilistic Club, Fair Play Club or Pugilistic Benevolent Association was far from authoritative.

Problems of control were exacerbated by the tendency of British boxers to seek fame and fortune in the United States of America. During the 1840s and 50s, a vast number of British boxers were being tempted by competition and, more importantly, lucrative touring possibilities in the United States. 'Victorianism', according to Daniel Howe, 'was a transatlantic culture'.¹⁵⁷ Then, as now, a shared language helped to sustain a shared culture;¹⁵⁸ industrial innovations like steam were making long-distance travel by sea a safer, cheaper and quicker option, not least for many travelling, commercial entertainers and sportspeople. In America, prize-fighting and various regional wrestling styles had become all the rage in this period. In particular, Irish immigrants escaped famine back home and took their love of pugilism with them to New York and beyond. In America, pugilism 'assumed a vigorous working-class accent, became even more thoroughly urbanised, ventured into new territories and became enmeshed with the growing range of providers of popular entertainment, with pugilists themselves among its main promoters'.¹⁵⁹ In America, as in England, it was

¹⁵³ Boddy, *Boxing*, p.91-92.

¹⁵⁴ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.95.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Huggins, *Flat Racing and British Society*, p.179.

¹⁵⁷ Daniel Walker Howe, (1975) 'American Victorianism as a Culture', *American Quarterly*, 27/ 5 (1975): p.508

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 520-521

¹⁵⁹ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.145.

increasingly difficult for the sport to be untangled from its relationships with commercial, theatrical popular cultures.

Yet even with the influential voices removing themselves from the self-identified Fancy set, and the clear problems facing the sport, arguments about the demise of prize-fighting should not be overplayed.¹⁶⁰ Legitimate contests, often with large crowds, remained a regular feature throughout the mid-Victorian period. Publicans and members of the working class continued to support, and find enjoyment in, prize-fighting. Sparring in the circuses and theatres, moreover, continued as a popular attraction. The Fancy, while influential, were never the only supporters. The Fancy had their own reasons for exaggerating the prize-fighting's decline, not least because of their unhappiness in not being able to fully control the sport. Indeed, prize-fighting would enjoy another surge of popularity in the 1860s, beginning with the hotly anticipated fight between the English champion Tom Sayers and American champion John Heenan in 1860. Against the backdrop of the Crimean war that had been fought five years earlier, the fight presented an opportunity for jingoism and the reaffirmation of masculine identity. Sayers vs. Heenan was international in outlook and scale, attracting attention from newspapers and capturing the imaginations of readers on both sides of the Atlantic.

The hotly anticipated match, however, highlighted the problems the sport faced. In order to attend the fight, crowds had to avoid police officers set up in order to stop them and navigate hills and fields upon arrival. During the eighty-eight brutal and bloody rounds, the ropes were cut and the ring invaded by the crowd with accusations of cheating shouted from both corners. The police finally broke up the fight and the contest was eventually called a draw.¹⁶¹ After the long, bloody and ultimately unrewarding result, there were calls for a rematch, but Heenan and Sayers decided that an exhibition tour across Britain and Ireland with Howes and Cushing's 'the famed American' circus would be better for their health and wallets. It was a similar refrain, and one that would continue for the next decade. After beating Sam Hurst for English championship in 1861, Jem Mace 'resolved to hold on to the crown for as long as possible with the least possible hazard'.¹⁶² Only two legitimate contests were fought in the following two years. Like others before him, the championship was a decorative title

¹⁶⁰ Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, p.26

¹⁶¹ Anon., 'The Fight For The Championship', *The Times* 18 Apr., (1860): p. 9.

¹⁶² Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.152.

that aided his celebrity and earning potential. There was a great deal of frustration from other competitors who wished to fight for the prize. In 1861 he spent a month with Howes and Cushing where he sparred with Tom Sayers, finished the summer season with Pablo Fanque, and at the beginning of 1862 he toured with Ginnet's circus. In the same year Tom Sayers created and toured with his own circus. The next year, Mace also advertised for his own clowns and acrobats to accompany him on a tour with his own circus.

Prize-fighting was not the only sport to have a close relationship to the world of circus and theatre. In fact, interactions between sport and the stage could be traced across the urban, commercial popular culture. Archers dressed and exhibited in American Indian costumes.¹⁶³ A cricket match, specifically designed to elicit laughter, was held between disabled men.¹⁶⁴ In pedestrianism, Samantha Oldfield has noted the arrival of the America star, Louis 'Deerfoot' Bennett, in 1849.¹⁶⁵ On arrival, he toured as part of his own circus-athletic troupe which featured a display of sporting acts and exhibitions. Like prize-fighting exhibitions, the show drew on popular troupes associated with circuses and fairgrounds, including characterisation and costume. Accounts of the tour indicate that the show was about entertainment first and foremost.

[Wearing] native clothing with "wolfskin cloak" and "buckskin moccasins", his racing apparel being "tights, and wearing a girdle richly ornamented with floss silk and feathers, and also a slight belt, to which several small bells were attached". Deerfoot would present his war-cry, a "yell so shrill, ear-splitting, and protracted" when he defeated his opponents and the performance element of the races added to their entertainment value.¹⁶⁶

Pedestrianism, then, faced many of the issues that prize-fighting faced. The Fancy were distrustful and disliked the sport. In other words, cultural entrepreneurs, publicans and sportspeople had control over sport and were stressing entertainment and profit over betting and competition. 'By the end of the 1840s', Harvey argues, 'there was a substantial commercial sporting culture that was almost as sophisticated as its successors of forty or so years later. It was the onset of the "amateur" ideal that was to impede this progress. The upper and middle classes, far from promoting and fostering

¹⁶³ Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.174.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Oldfield, 'Running Pedestrianism', p.233.

¹⁶⁶ Oldfield, 'Running Pedestrianism', p.234.

commercial sport, came to oppose it bitterly'.¹⁶⁷ The next chapter will examine the establishment of the sporting field and the battles fought and compromises made. Harvey is correct, the amateur ideal interrupted the progress of many commercial sports. Professional wrestling, however, was one of the few sports which continued its trajectory as a theatrical and sporting entertainment into the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated the influence and interaction between prize-fighting and wrestling and other performance traditions central to commercial entertainment in the industrial cities and towns. Pugilism was an important facet of this popular culture; pugilists were just as comfortable performing on the stage or in the circus ring as they were fighting legitimate sporting contests in the fields. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, many professional spectator sports – separate to exercise, military training, private school sports and festival games – were part of the broader cultural field. This field shared actors, agents and institutions. Crucially, the 'common sense' notion of what sport is, and what sport is separate *from*, did not always exist as such. Indeed, an important aspect of fields, as Calhoun stresses, is 'the definition of each field embodies a cultural arbitrary, a historically achieved demarcation that did not have to exist in that form'.¹⁶⁸

Professional prize-fighters, thus, shared values and capitals with the circus performers, legitimate and illegitimate actors, and fairground entertainers. Putting on a good show, providing value for money, and creating and sustaining forms of celebrity were central tenants of the prize-fighting and sparring profession. The press of the day wrote about the (popular) cultural field as a whole. Prize-fighters, poets, actors and so on shared stages and newspaper pages. The culture produced cross-pollination: freak show giants boxed; prize-fighters displayed Grecian statues; magicians sparred; and wrestlers danced. Prize-fighters were billed as sportsmen, but they were, first and foremost, performers and showmen. They were adept at the spectacle and self-promotion that one had to master in order to survive in a competitive entertainment business. In short, this was a very different sporting culture to one that would be produced and reproduced by the amateur ethos, athleticism and the growth of an autonomous sporting field in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is to these values, and the formation of the sporting field, that we now turn.

¹⁶⁷ Harvey, *Commercial Sporting Culture*, p.180.

¹⁶⁸ Calhoun, 'Social History of the Present', p.51.

3

MASS ENTERTAINMENT: SPORT AND THE MUSIC HALL C. 1860 - 1920

The dominant historiographical narratives of leisure in the Victorian and Edwardian period can be summarised by two themes: rational recreation and commercialisation. Early industrial rulers and religious groups were broadly distrusting of leisure practices, and had often done all they could to restrict leisure hours and traditional ways of playing. From the 1830s and 40s onwards, however, there was a growing consensus amongst the ruling classes that leisure could be beneficial to urban class relations and to the health of workers.¹ With the establishment of the wider social field, by the mid-century many factors – the continued ballooning of industrial towns and cities, increased holidays, shorter working hours, the introduction of the Saturday half-holiday, higher pay for many workers, and the arrival of railways – had created and contributed to the acceptance of a leisure culture.²

The expansion of leisure time was accompanied by pressure in how leisure time was spent. The result of these debates and compromises between different groups – religious, bourgeoisie, governmental, trade union and otherwise – was the ideology of rational recreation. Rational recreation was an acknowledgement that time away from work could be a positive aspect for the lives of both the working and middle classes, but with the requirement that pursuits were physically and intellectually healthy and nourishing.³ Leisure, therefore, was meant to offer quiet, reflective and uplifting activities that removed vice and temptation from all classes. It particularly concerned itself, of course, with how workers were supposed to spend their time when not overseen by factory bosses. More recent surveys of the period have stressed that such

¹ For two excellent summaries of these positions see Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England* and Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society*.

² Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure and Culture*, pp.279-340, offers a good summary of the literature and debates surrounding leisure in the second half of the century.

³ Chris Waters, 'Progressives, Puritans and the Cultural Politics of the Council, 1889 – 1914' in Andrew Saint (ed.) *Politics and the People of London: The London County Council, 1889 – 1965*, (London, 1989): p.51.

arguments may need revaluating in order to assess just *how* respectable the respectable classes of Victorian social life were,⁴ but it is hard to argue that there were not concerted efforts to quell particular aspects of popular culture while encouraging more ‘wholesome’ pursuits, even if such attempts were met with varying degrees of success.

The culture that produced the philosophy of rational recreation was also a culture that valued capitalist enterprise. The greatest challenge to rational recreation, aside from the fact that the working classes were not an acquiescent group eager to be told how to spend their free time, was the on-going commercialisation of culture. Some members of the middle class, with enough social and symbolic capital to have influence, argued for rational recreation, but there were equal numbers who saw leisure as an economic and commercial possibility. It was the latter group, with the working classes understandably on side, who would ultimately triumph over the course of the century. The mid-Victorian and early Edwardian period is a defining period in the maturing of industrial capitalism and the crystallisation and growth of a fully developed commercial entertainment market. This, of course, did not spring up overnight; circuses, theatres and fairgrounds, described in the previous chapter, stretch back into the eighteenth century and beyond. But it is fair to say that their growth became sustained and intensive, producing a cultural landscape that modern observers might be familiar with. Singling out the 1880s as a key turning point, Stuart Hall, writing in the 1980s, and attempting to explain capitalism’s role in the mass entertainment market, described this as the moment where ‘*our* history—and our peculiar dilemmas – arise’.⁵ Many of the cultural forms that we recognise today were either institutionalised or born here. The seaside holiday, moving pictures, a popular picture press, and two important features of this chapter, the music hall, and mass spectator sport, all have their roots in the period in question. These were the years, to put it bluntly, where the cultural field became big business. The rewards for cultural entrepreneurs rocketed and investment increased.

Evidence of the expansion of leisure and culture can be found littered throughout the Victorian period. This chapter will look in closer detail at two forms indicative of this expansion: spectator sport and the music hall. Growing out of festival culture, commercialism, education and the military fields, sport was transformed into a centralised, nationalised and institutionalised field run by middle-class groups and

⁴ Mike Huggins ‘More Sinful Pleasures? Leisure, Respectability and the Male Middle Class in England’, *Journal of Social History*, 33/3 (2000): pp.585-600; Mike Huggins and J.A. Mangan, *Disreputable Pleasures: Less Virtuous Victorians at Play*, (Oxon, 2004).

⁵ Italics in original, Hall, ‘Notes on Deconstructing the Popular’, p.229.

peddling a very particular ideology: amateurism. Shortly thereafter, this ideology was then (re)challenged by professionalism and commercialism. Section I analyses the birth of the sporting field with attention paid to the various competing discourses and ideologies prevalent at the time. By the end of the century the two competing positions, amateurism and commercialism, had reached a compromise. Modern sport was born.

Different sports responded to the formation of the field in different ways. Section II and section III, therefore, are concerned with how prize-fighting and wrestling reacted to these changes and diversified in significant ways for the first time. In boxing, the Queensberry rules were created and the National Sporting Club (NSC) provided some semblance of control for the professional form of the sport. As the qualifying adjective alludes to, the development of professional wrestling is particularly interesting because it remains one of the few sports that most strongly resisted the amateur ethos. Reasons for this are multifarious. The most pertinent reason for this remained the inability to establish a national sporting body to control the sport. Lacking this opposition to compromise with, professional wrestling continued to be displayed on the stages of the music hall. Cultural entrepreneurs in the Edwardian period continued the values that had been central to the commercial sporting culture in the previous century.

Emerging out of public houses and singing saloons, by the end of the century Music Hall had become the defining feature of Victorian urban leisure cultures. Offering a number of entertainments, the halls became a stage for professionalised popular culture. Intriguingly, they also became the stage in which professional wrestling was a premier attraction for the first decade of twentieth century. Unlike other sports, which, under pressure from amateurism, were distancing if not divorcing themselves from the circus, fairground and theatre, wrestling was adopted by, and adapted to, the music hall. Section IV outlines this particular history, drawing on newspaper reports and showmen autobiographies. It also analyses the continued influence that the music hall had on the sport, detailing costumes, narrative devices, non-legitimate matches, and wrestler characterisation.

I. PROFESSIONALS AND AMATEURS

In the second half of the nineteenth century sport emerged as a distinctive and autonomous field. In so doing, it brought together the disparate sporting activities that had previously belonged to other fields: the cultural field, the educational field, the

military field, and the medical field. Writing about France in 1900, but recognising the earlier genesis in England, deFrance posits that:

As all these activities lost their original way of being performed, they tended to get closer to each other, to aggregate, to be incorporated into a common space, and to acquire some common features...gymnastics, sports and other forms of bodily exercises confronted one each other and began to search for common principles and common forms of organization. We can speak, in that case, of a field of sports and physical activities.⁶

During the coalescence of these groups into a shared space, debates, challenges and confrontations about how the field was to be structured were a common occurrence. In the establishment of the field, a divergent group of agents looked to control, dominate and legitimate the various ideological, political and social meanings of sport. As Mike Huggins has explained about the period, although not in relation to Bourdiesian field theory, 'ownership of particular sports, their core values and the place of competition and winning were all debated'.⁷ It was, to put rather simply, a time of great upheaval: some sports were created, others ceased to exist. Emotional and personal arguments persisted.⁸ The boundaries of the field were established and policed. By the outbreak of the First World War, the potential and possibilities of sport had been established. In general, what we understand today as 'sport' existed as 'common sense'.

The largest, most dramatic confrontation in the formation of the field existed between those who viewed sport as a commercial, audience and entertainment orientated, spectacle, and those who saw sport as a way of instilling moral and physical education for participants. The former has been well-covered in the thesis this far. The latter, growing out of military training, private school education, and a better medical understanding of the human body, grew exponentially in the 1830s. Sport was openly embraced as one of the key pillars of rational recreation.

The role of the Victorian middle- and upper-class, and their influence in the development of amateur sport, has been a central theme and preoccupation in sports history literature.⁹ Without the space to fully address the nuances of this history, the now fairly well established narrative posits that, sometime around the beginning of Victoria's reign, public schools, and in particular Thomas Arnold's Rugby school, were

⁶ deFrance, 'The Making of a Field', p.307.

⁷ Huggins, *The Victorians and Sport*, p.51.

⁸ Collins, *Rugby's Great Split*, pp.112-154.

⁹ For a summary of these arguments see Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.75-134; Tranter, *Sport, Economy and Society*, pp.32-78; Baker, 'Whose Hegemony?', pp.1-16.

looking to reform and modernise schooling. Sport was a key component in these plans. Sport, always popular with some students, became something to be retooled and embraced rather than outlawed and policed. In giving games rules, sport was considered something that would keep the boys out of trouble. From the riots and uprisings that had periodically undermined power structures through to keeping the boys' thoughts 'pure' and hands from exploring their own or each other's bodies (or at least only on the field and not in the dorm rooms),¹⁰ competitive team sports were seen by heads as antidotes to some of the 'disciplinary' problems encountered in the school.¹¹ Sport, in line with rational recreationist arguments, was celebrated for the moral and ideological traits it could instil in their pupils: community, competition, healthiness in mind and body, robustness, stoicism, and good grace in victory or defeat. Sport was designed to train the future leaders of England, empire and industry.¹²

The sporting ethos being taught at some of the public schools was, by the 1850s, adopted by advocates of Evangelicalism and Anglican moralists. Like public school masters – and a great number of people who signed up to this ideology were ex-public school boys – muscular Christians saw in sport the potential for character and nation building. In addition to the qualities that the public schools believe sport could imbue, muscular Christianity railed against the damaging effects that were supposedly infecting modern, urban living. Sport could create healthy, clean, masculine men rather than the dirty, sickly and effeminate men that city living and industrialism was believed to be creating. It was an argument that heavily borrowed from the previous generation's Fancy. Muscular Christianity encouraged a very particular type of masculinity that was firmly placed within Victorian, industrialist culture: it encouraged self-discipline¹³ and 'moral' standing and was the missionary wing of public-school sports. After completing their studies and embarking on their professional careers, and with sport now a well-respected pastime that stood as pillar of English masculinity and morality, old boys were looking to continue playing the sports that had been a formative part of their childhood and adolescent years.¹⁴

¹⁰ Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.91.

¹¹ Mangan, *Athleticism*, pp.22-28.

¹² Mangan, *Athleticism*, p. 142.

¹³ Donald E. Hall, 'On the Making and Unmasking of Monsters: Christian Socialism, Muscular Christianity, and the Metaphorization of Class Conflict', in Donald E. Hall (ed.), *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, (Cambridge, 1994):p.56.

¹⁴ Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.84.

Public schools and muscular Christians' influence on sports would be unparalleled in the nineteenth century. With their combined social, cultural and economic power, these groups very quickly established control of the forming sporting field. The discursive and ideological power of amateur sport (playing sport for sport's sake and eschewing profit and capital), combined with the bureaucratic power of the middle-classes organising competitions and events, was enormous. Festival sports were far from lawless. The public schools, however, created a set of rules which were then distributed through 'the middle-class administrators who could secure them almost immediate national recognition through that intimate community of interest which the English know as the old-boy network'.¹⁵ The old-boy network, and the power they were beginning to exert, was institutionalised in the ruling and governing bodies that were formed over the course of the 1860s. Ruling bodies and administrators were designed to sustain, protect and distribute these new versions of sport. They served to encourage and organise competition between members; helped to police disputes; publicly promoted the ethos and ethics of sport and their rational recreation; and attempted to control, with differing degrees of success, commercialisation. With a set of rules that could be observed across the whole of the country, sports became nationalised and regional teams competed against one another without the inconveniences of squabbles about regional and/or school variations.

As well as codifying rules, the establishment of the sport was accompanied with a potent and powerful discourse about how sport should be played. Tony Mason offers a strong summary of what was considered the amateur ideal:

[P]laying for the side and not for the self. Being modest and generous in victory and staunch and cheerful in defeat. Playing the game for the game's sake: there might be physical and moral benefits but there should be no other rewards and certainly not prizes and money. No player should ever intentionally break the rules or stoop to underhand tactics. Hard but fair knocks should be taken and given courageously and with good temper.¹⁶

Who decided how a sport was played, and what it meant to the people playing and watching, was the central debate while the sporting field established its autonomy. A particular group, with shared tastes, values and aspirations, sought control of how sport should be watched and played. In order to do so, they brought all their power – symbolic, economic, and cultural – to bear in the field. This was a very specific attempt

¹⁵ Bailey, *Leisure and Class*, p.138.

¹⁶ Mason, *Association Football*, p.223.

to control sport, both financially and culturally, with the conscious goal of limiting the influence and dominating professional sportsmen, spectator sports audiences, and the theatrical and circus managers. They did not succeed totally in this regard, but their attempt was successful insofar as establishing the field's capital and doxa, both *on* the sport's field and *in* the sporting field. The guardians of each subfield, the sporting bodies outlined above, provided the centralised, bureaucratic power of these conventions and heavily policed the rules of the game.

Those who encouraged muscular Christianity and the discourse of amateurism often argued that it was 'grounded in a belief that it served to promote social stability by diverting men from drink, crime and political agitation or increasing the extent of social class intercourse'.¹⁷ Increasing social intercourse may have been named by some of the participants involved, but for others the amateur ideology was just as much about keeping the classes separate rather than bringing them closer together. At times, amateurism was merely a concerted effort to gain control of sport and exclude and limit those taking part in the field. The Amateur Athletic Club famously excluded:

Any gentlemen who has never competed in an open competition or for public money, or for admission money, or with professionals for a prize, public money, or admission money, and who has never, at any period of his life taught, pursued, or assisted in the pursuit of athletic exercised as a means of livelihood, or is a mechanic, artisan or labourer.¹⁸

It was a deliberate policy to restrict access to the field. It was also the most obvious indicator of controlling the values of the field. Amateurism, then, stood in stark contrast to what contemporaries considered to be professionalism. The amateur gentleman, who played for the love of the game in his spare time, was an obviously classed figure. These views were excused by arguments which positioned professionalism as a threat to the spirit in which sport should be played. Moreover, so it was argued, how was the amateur who practiced after work supposed to compete with someone who practiced daily and made their living from the sport?¹⁹ Other critics felt that professionalism would lead to players being open to bribery: 'men who were paid to win,' Vamplew summarises a prevalent view of the time, 'could also be paid to lose'.²⁰

¹⁷ Tranter, *Sport, Economy and Society*, p.38.

¹⁸ Anon., 'Amateur Athletic Club', *Sporting Gazette Saturday*, 28 Mar., (1868): p.247.

¹⁹ Mason, *Association Football*, p.230.

²⁰ Vamplew, *Pay up and Play the Game*, p.197

Sporting bodies who subscribed to the amateur ideal faced a problem: the appeal of spectator sports for both audiences and those seeking to profit from sporting competition. Amateurism was a powerful discourse for various sporting associations in the mid-Victorian period, but the economic reality meant that the ideology, at least in its purest form, was short lived. In his highly influential account of commercialised sport, Vamplew describes that the working classes were not overly keen on playing sport, but ‘they did not mind watching others play and, as entrepreneurs were quick to realise, they were even willing to pay for the privilege’.²¹ They were not just quick to realise this, the structures had been in place for over one hundred years, and the sporting bodies struggled to completely excommunicate these members from the field. Spectator sports drew angered responses from some commentators and reformers, particularly those versed in the public school and amateur ideology of what sport should be. Instead of helping to promote the healthy bodies and healthy minds for industry and empire that the muscular Christians had hoped to promote in the previous decades, spectator sport supposedly encouraged idleness and passiveness.²² But despite some disgruntled voices, commercialism was nurtured and encouraged. Simply put, there was too much money to be made from professional sports, and those with the economic capital with the ability to enter the field (in building stadiums and setting-up clubs) would likely have other forms of capital (social, economic and cultural) to challenge the dominant amateur ethos.

Thus, there were a number of ways in which entrepreneurs and investors might have hoped to have drawn a profit from investing in organised sport in the late Victorian era, from the more traditional organisers of sport publicans and bookmakers to the caterers, property developers, and commercial sponsors of big contests. Holt and Vamplew have expressed some doubt about profit being the sole reason for investment, and their contributions have served to muddy earlier assumptions about economic factors being the primary motive of sporting entrepreneurs.²³ Such individuals were clearly interested in acquiring cultural, social and symbolic capital as well. Tranter, summarising these views, however, declares that ‘a desire to make money out of sport

²¹ Vamplew, *Pay up and Play the Game*, p.197

²² C. F. G. Masterman provides a damning critique of football fans in *The Condition of England* describing the sport as being an escape from their ‘own drab life into the adventurous and coloured world of “makebelieve”’, (London, 1909): p.134.

²³ Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.282.

was clearly an important, perhaps even the most important, motive for participation'.²⁴ It is hard to disagree. Growing numbers of spectators at football matches, cricket games and athletic meets were matched by the building of purpose built stadiums designed to hold thousands of people, an expansion that could be witnessed in the parallel growth of variety theatres and music halls discussed later in this chapter. Fifty-eight football clubs moved into purpose built stadia between 1889 and 1910. Belle Vue, a zoological and botanical gardens of the mid-Victorian period, opened its Athletics stadium in 1887. In the interwar years the stadium would be an important professional wrestling arena.

The level of investment, and potential profit, effected the number of professionals involved in sport. Audiences and crowds, it was believed by entrepreneurs and club directors, came to see a talented team win a tight-run match.²⁵ Talented players needed to be paid in order to train and avoid the distraction of work. Professionalism and commercialism went hand in hand. Holt summarises that, 'professionalism was the limited form through which amateurs permitted market forces to enter the world of sport'.²⁶ Sporting bodies, reluctantly perhaps, allowed limited forms of spectatorship and professionalism on a condition: sporting authorities managed, restricted and maintained bureaucratic control over the sport, competitors and associated competitions. It was a compromise that would be preserved across most sports until after the Second World War, when the media field – rich with money invested by television – would tip the sporting field further in favour of professionalism and commercialisation (see chapter 5).

Subfields will respond to the establishment and changes in a field in different ways.²⁷ Virtually all agents and institutions in the sporting field felt the consequences of amateurism and the growth of commercialism, but the compromises and changes bore out differently in different sports. Association football, a popular spectator sport that had deep roots in working class communities, allowed professionalism from the mid-1880s onwards,²⁸ albeit with professionalism restricted by wage caps until the 1960s.²⁹ Tensions and compromises in rugby, as Tony Collins has persuasively identified, resulted in the sport to split in two, with League in north being professionalised and

²⁴ Tranter, *Sport, Economy and Society*, p.60-61.

²⁵ Vamplew, *Pay Up and Play the Game*, pp.77-78.

²⁶ Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.281.

²⁷ Bourdieu & Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, p.100-101.

²⁸ Mason, *Association Football*, pp.70-72; Taylor, *The Leaguers*.

²⁹ See Polley, *Moving the Goalposts*, pp.116-118, for a detailed discussion of football and professionalism and the end of the wage cap.

Union in the South continuing to support amateurism.³⁰ The rest of the chapter will assess how the establishment of the field changed prize-fighting and wrestling.

II. THE MARQUESS OF QUEENSBERRY RULES

Boxing, as we understand it today, was a product of the establishment of the sporting field. Bare-knuckled, endurance prize-fights held in semi-illegality around the fields of England were challenged, and then ultimately replaced, by gloved fights with time limits and imbued with the values of amateurism. Though sharing a name, boxing would have looked vastly differently to observers from the start and end of the century. The biggest changes to boxing were produced between 1867 and 1885 when the Marquess of Queensberry lent his title and social prestige to a challenge cup and set of rules that had been designed by John Graham Chambers. The new rules stipulated that boxing gloves should be worn at all times, introduced timed rounds, and finally banned wrestling holds; they privileged the 'scientific' style of boxing rather than the brute strength and endurance; gloves allowed respectable men to compete without the worry of bloodied and bruised faces. The new sport belonged to the amateur athletic landscape, and Queensberry cups were competed for as part of the Amateur Athletic Club's yearly championships.³¹

In 1891 the NSC became home to the organisation of boxing in England. The club awarded titles and, from 1908, Lonsdale belts. Like other sporting bodies of the period, the NSC attempted to control professionalism in the sport by attempting to limit competitors to fighting at their venues. All major championships in England were fought at The NSC, at least until the early years of the twentieth century.³² The NSC's control over the sport, however, was never fully realised. It was never seen as the central authority over boxing in the same way that the Football Association exerted power over football. One of the NSC's major problems was that the sport was international in scope and had been for some time. As was becoming increasingly clear for all sports, the agreement and application of internationally agreed rules and regulations was necessary. For prize-fighting in particular, which had a strong transatlantic tradition that had manifested itself throughout the Georgian and Victorian eras, it was vital. Queensberry rule's territory only extending to England was not enough to establish control over the sport. It was not without reason that Chambers and

³⁰ Collins, *Rugby's Great Split*.

³¹ Stan Shipley, *Boxing*, in Tony Mason (ed.), *Sport in Britain: A Social History*, (Cambridge, 1989): p.81.

³² Charles B. Cochran, *Cock-A-Doodle-Do*, (London, 1941): p.200.

the Marquess of Queensberry set off for the United States because, according to his grandson, 'agreement with American supporters of the game was essential'.³³ Enthusiasm for Queensberry rules in America was not nearly as forthcoming as it had been in England.³⁴ It was not until John L. Sullivan was persuaded to box in the Queensberry rules that prize-fighting underwent the process which it had done in England earlier in the century. Tensions existed not just between classes but between nations: American promoters, operating a commercial sport, resisted English middle-class reformers hoping to perpetuate the amateur ethos.

One of the most enduring legacies of the Queensberry rules was the mostly successful attempt to 'rescue' boxing from the performance tradition that it had become firmly associated with. The character of the professional boxer who won his championship at all costs and then retreated into the world of the fairground, carnival and circus was the very antithesis of what amateurism was supposed to stand for. A divorce between boxing and entertainment industries was never straightforward, though, and there was never any instantaneous rupture. The Lonsdale belts could add prestige to a fighter, but, as Horrall argues, 'not surprisingly the Lonsdale belts failed to keep boxers within the NSC's stable...Though British champions could only be crowned at the NSC, they refused to grant its directors monopolistic control of their careers and were enriched elsewhere'.³⁵ Horrall also highlights the ways in which boxers looked to earn money for their professionalism, and they were remarkably similar to what prize-fighters had been doing in the Georgian period. John L. Sullivan, the first world champion of Queensberry rules, followed a tradition of rarely defending his title. Instead, he starred in stage melodramas and music hall sparring exhibitions across America before visiting England briefly in 1888. When he was finally defeated by Gentleman Jim Corbett in 1892, Corbett followed a very similar pattern to Sullivan, touring theatres and music halls.³⁶

Yet for all these continuing relationships with the stage, and the continuing influences on boxing, there existed an element of control by a sporting body. Importantly, boxing had something that resembled a national organisation. There was an agreed upon set of rules and an expectation that boxers should act a certain way, even if they often fell short of those expectations. The NSC may not have had complete control

³³ Boddy, *Boxing*, p.92.

³⁴ Beekman, *Ringside*, p.32.

³⁵ Horrall, *Popular Culture*, p.127.

³⁶ Streible, *Fight Pictures*, p. 36-37; Horrall, *Popular Culture*, p.128.

over the sport or its sportsmen, but it had *some* control, and could regulate contests, especially for English championship matches. This was a delicate and precarious agreement, but it did seem to curb some of the more grandiose relationships with the stage that had been present in boxing 50 years earlier. In the next chapter we will see that further gains were made in the 1920s and 1930s when the British Boxing Board of Control (BBBC) became trustee of the sport, consolidating power over the sport in the hands of a central body. But for the time being it is enough to say that the choreographed and performed exhibitions of earlier in the century were now limited. In the field of sport, a negotiation between amateurism and professionalism, the agents and institutions who advocated these positions, and cultural, social and economic capital involved, had been reached. In turn, this had played out in the subfield of boxing in its own particular ways.

III. 'CAN THE ANCIENT SPORT BE REVIVED?'

Throughout the nineteenth century, sports were undergoing the process of codification while undergoing the stresses of different groups competing for sport's meanings: rational recreationists and proponents of amateurism in one corner with commercialists and professionals in the other. Debates and changes manifested themselves in various ways in different sports, but by 1900 many sports had found a negotiated structure that satisfied most sporting bodies, investors, players and crowds. In this regard, wrestling offers an interesting case study for a number of reasons, particularly because its development is not as clear as other sports. Where sports like football, rugby and cricket all embraced national bodies and leagues, local wrestling styles resisted such developments, remaining highly local in both organisation and competition. Wrestling in Cumbria consisted of several local groups (often by town or village) who organised the annual competition but exerted little control over the sport as a whole.³⁷ In the face of highly bureaucratised and nationalised sporting bodies, local wrestling groups retained hyper-local organisation.

Wrestling, discussed in the previous chapter, had also had some successes in London and other cities throughout the nineteenth centuries, particularly for immigrants to the industrial centres.³⁸ Competitions were held in the Cumberland style in Manchester, Liverpool and at the Islington Agricultural Hall in London and in the Cornwall style in London throughout much of the nineteenth century. Organisers,

³⁷ Huggins, 'Regular Reinvention', p.43.

³⁸ Ibid.

however, still kept the sport regional. The Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Society, based in London, restricted competition to ‘natives of Cumberland and Westmoreland, and at the discretion of the committee to other North-country men, to whom suitable prizes shall be given to be wrestled for’.³⁹ The exclusion of non-northern counties competitors was a rule that expanded to all wrestling events competing in the Cumberland and Westmoreland style, be it in London or at the local fairs. There was clearly a reluctance by local groups to establish a national competition or series of leagues.

In opposition to the values of amateurism, wrestlers in Lancashire, Cumbria and Devonshire had always competed for prizes. But debates about professionalism, different to that in amateur sport more widely, materialised in local wrestling tournaments. In 1864, the two most successful wrestlers in Cumbria’s history, Jameson and Wright, were banned from competing at an event.⁴⁰ Arguments and explanations were familiar. Claims abounded that athletes who trained all year would always be likely to win in competition against those who practiced sport as a hobby:⁴¹ Jameson and Wright had started to travel round the country entering all competitions in the Cumberland and Westmorland style. It was nearly always one of the two of them who won the large purses. The most damaging rumour, though, was that the pair had been ‘barneying’, throwing falls for bets backed on oneself. This was widely disregarded by those who wrote letters of support to the local press (not necessarily a resounding declaration of innocence, but important nevertheless).⁴² The fact remained, however, that it was distinct possibility. Similar arguments about ‘faggoting’, Cornish wrestling’s equivalence of barneying, plagued the sport in the south-west.⁴³ In the southern counties, this distrust was said to be one of the main causes of wrestling’s decline in popularity.⁴⁴ In the north, a newspaper report similarly blamed barneying for the disinterest in the local sport.

Wrestling is a game of the past. One by one tournaments of the north...have been allowed to drop out of existence. The professors of the sport have themselves mostly to blame. What is known as “barneying,” or “liging doon,” became much too

³⁹ Armstrong, *Wrestliana*, p.213.

⁴⁰ Anon., ‘Wrestling’, *Bell’s Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 5 Mar., (1864): p.6.

⁴¹ Cumberland and Westmoreland Wrestling Society, *Famous Athletic Contests*, p.119. CRO, DSO 48/156.

⁴² Ibid, p. 115-116.

⁴³ Tripp, *Persistence of Difference*, p. 175.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

prevalent; real rivalry languished, and the sport dropped and died.⁴⁵

The Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Society, based in London, was disbanded in 1887 due to these problems.⁴⁶ It was the closest the sport had to a national organisation. Cornish, Lancastrian and Cumbrian wrestling events and tournaments were demonstrating a fall in entrants and attendance in the final decades of the century. In 1886, Ben Cooper, a respected and much decorated but retired champion, remarked,

[T]hat the taste or the inclination for wrestling is dying out cannot be denied; I have been watching this for years and when I compare the numbers of first-class wrestlers of my time of wrestling with the few and scanty numbers of the present day, I can come to no other conclusion.⁴⁷

Barneying and faggoting aside, writers, both contemporary and historical, have offered other possibilities for the decline in local wrestling events. Cumbrian local press blamed national sports, particularly boxing and football, for appealing to the younger generation at the cost of older, traditional sports.⁴⁸ Lyn Murfin places such assimilation over a longer period but comes to a similar conclusion: 'increasing integration of Cumbria into a national sporting culture, in which boxing figured, but Cumberland and Westmoreland style wrestling did not, must have been an important factor in wrestling's decline'.⁴⁹ Tripp attributes the appearance of cricket and Rugby to Cornwall's decreasing interest in its local wrestling tradition.⁵⁰ He also cites the crystallisation of mass leisure industries and the success of the time/work discipline as further factors.⁵¹ In an historical context in which many sports were formed and then flourished, local wrestling traditions were struggling in the face of a national sporting culture supported by large capital investments and secure sporting government bodies. Within the sporting field there were few agents or institutions supporting local wrestling traditions. Those that did often lacked the economic, social or symbolic capital needed to establish the sports as national events.

For the few observers sympathetic to the sport, the decline in wrestling presented a problem to be fixed. A *Daily Mail* editorial in 1898 cheerfully declared 'an idea prevails, however, that a revival of the sport can be brought about by means of

⁴⁵ Anon., 'The Wrestling Art: Can the Ancient Sport be Revived?', *Daily Mail*, 1 Jan., (1898): p.6.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ben Cooper, *The Science of Wrestling*, (Carlisle, 1886): p.1.

⁴⁸ Huggins, 'Regular Re-Invention', p.39.

⁴⁹ Lyn Murfin, *Popular Leisure in the Lake Counties*, (Manchester, 1990): p.109.

⁵⁰ Tripp, *Persistence of Difference*, p.176.

⁵¹ Ibid, 176-177.

amateur competitions'.⁵² An obvious place for wrestling to be 'rescued' as a respectable amateur sport was in the newly formed Olympic movement. The initiation of the Olympics was both a testament to ideologies of amateurism and its acceptance and dissemination to the Western world. After observing the playing of sports in the English public schools, Pierre de Coubertin was determined to create an international sporting event that reproduced the values of athleticism. The Olympics was strictly for amateurs only, and in no uncertain terms did de Coubertin condemn both professionalism *and* the sporting authorities who had allowed professionals, no matter how many restrictions were placed on them, into their sports. He reasoned in 1894:

We must uphold the noble and chivalrous character of athleticism, which has distinguished it in the past, so that it may continue effectively to play the admirable role in the education of modern peoples that was attributed to it by Greek masters. Human imperfection always tends to transform the Olympic athlete into a circus gladiator. A choice must be made between these two incompatible approaches to athletics. To defend against the spirit of gain and professionalism that threatens to invade them, amateurs in most countries have established complex legislation that replete with compromise and contradiction.⁵³

When the modern Olympics were introduced in 1896 wrestling was included out of a dutifulness to an preconceived idea of the Greeks rather than an passionate desire to involve the sport. The history of the Greek Olympics clearly stressed the involvement of wrestling, and the Victorians often went to great lengths in order to find validation for their interests in the 'classics'. Despite its obviousness for inclusion, many of the difficulties which had stalled the creation of a national amateur wrestling group were replicated in the creation of an international sporting body. The best and most talented wrestlers across Europe had already competed for prize-money: the allure of professionalism remained strong for wrestlers. Where boxing had done all it could to establish international agreement, there was no agreed set of international wrestling rules controlled by a single governing body. French wrestling, known as Greco-Roman, and popular across Europe, had failed to catch on in America and England.⁵⁴ Compounding these problems, no rules were published until 1937. According to Leyshon, 'all Olympic competition up to 1948 was held under any rules that the host

⁵² Anon., 'The Wrestling Art: Can the Ancient Sport be Revived?', *Daily Mail*, 1 Jan., (1898): p.6.

⁵³ Pierre de Coubertin, *Olympism: Selected Writings, 1863-1937*, (Lausanne, 2000): p.299.

⁵⁴ Donald Sayenga, 'The Problem of Wrestling Styles in the Modern Olympic Games – A Failure of Olympic Philosophy' *Citius, Altius, Fortius*, 3/3, (1995): p.19.

country could foist off on the visitors'.⁵⁵ The slow process of creating an amateur international wrestling organisation began in 1911, taking a full decade to crystallise as Fédération Internationale des Lutttes Associées (FILA)⁵⁶ in 1921. That FILA's own official history can only speculate about the exact year that an official international wrestling body was formed, detailing the different groups and affiliations that preceded it, probably serves as a testimony to how confused the central organisation of wrestling remained at the beginning of the twentieth century, at a local, national and international level.⁵⁷ On the one hand, professional wrestlers, of course, were not welcome at the games. On the other, wrestlers proficient in their local styles were discouraged from entering a competition with alien rules, and the best had all competed for cash prizes at one point or another, deemed professional in the Olympic organisers strict definitions of amateur. At the first games, only five men entered and in 1900 wrestling was not competed at all. In short, the Olympics and their national and international bodies demonstrated little control over the sport.

It was amid these confusions that professional wrestling developed. At the beginning of the 1880s, professional wrestling was still operating in a manner similar to prize-fights earlier in the century. Big competitions took place: in fields, sporting arenas and theatres, with the terms of the fight agreed upon by the competitors and backers beforehand. Prizes were given and betting remained a central attraction for crowds. The professional circuit was international in scope and set-up, but New York appears to have been the unofficial centre of professional wrestling at this time. The most successful and talented wrestlers from across the world were drawn to the city. Two particularly talented Lancashire catch wrestlers, after exhausting potential competitors in England, moved to America. In 1882 Joe Acton, Lancashire's most successful wrestler of the period, was requested to visit America to face Edwin Bibby, for the American catch champion.⁵⁸ Tom Cannon followed two years later.⁵⁹

The manner of these competitions encapsulated the lack of organisation that wrestling more generally often displayed.⁶⁰ Matches were contested under a hodgepodge of styles and rules prevalent in America at this time. Collar and Elbow had been the preferred wrestling style in America, but Lancashire fighters brought their

⁵⁵ Glynn A. Leyshon, 'Capricious Rules and Arbitrary Decisions' *Citius, Altius, Fortius*, 2/2 (1994): p.24.

⁵⁶ International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles.

⁵⁷ Rayko Petrov, *100 Years of Olympic Wrestling*, (Lausanne, 1997): p.61.

⁵⁸ Anon., 'A Big Wrestling Match Arranged', *New York Times*, 8 Jun.(1882): p.8.

⁵⁹ Anon., 'Ross Defeats Cannon', *New York Times*, 10 Dec. (1884): p.1.

⁶⁰ Morton & O'Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin*, p.37.

form of Catch wrestling with them, Japanese wrestlers added their own judo holds to the sport, and Greco-Roman remained the most popular style of wrestling on continental Europe. Other wrestlers, like Jack Carkeek, visited English counties to fight in the local style. When matches took place, Beekman argues, ‘matches occurred in seemingly endless combinations of catch, Greco-Roman, collar-and-elbow, side hold, back hold, and sumo’.⁶¹

If this lack of organisation flew in the face of modern sporting bureaucracies then the sport’s attitude to professionalism was even further out of step. Between fights wrestlers were attracted to the other commercial opportunities of display and performance on the stage. As it had been one hundred years earlier, the allure of the stage was powerful: the stage offered relative safety from injury, its money was more consistent, and theatrical tours aided the distribution of a wrestler’s celebrity. Where boxing and other sports were doing all they could to purge this side of professionalism from their sport, albeit with differing degrees of success, wrestling failed to receive nearly as much pressure. William Brady exhibited matches at theatres in New York⁶² and William Muldoon starred in a wrestling sequence in *The Gladiator* on stages across America.⁶³ Other wrestlers found it profitable to offer other entertainments: Farmer Burns had a fairground sideshow where he could display wrestling and his other act of whistling yankee-doodle-dandy while being hanged by a rope round his neck.⁶⁴ More generally, a plethora of wrestlers doubled as circus and vaudeville strongmen. Wrestling troupes also toured the fairgrounds and circuses across America and England.⁶⁵ William Muldoon toured, for example, with his own troupe for much of the 1880s.

Never to be outdone, P.T. Barnum and his *Greatest Show on Earth* added wrestling to his already large ensemble of attractions. The tour accounts only list two wrestlers, Ed Decker and John McMahon.⁶⁶ Primary evidence is lacking about the form and manner of the wrestling that took place. Morton and O’Brien, though, argue that the wrestlers wore brightly coloured costumes. Crucially, their matches were pre-arranged and over the course of their two year tour they did not fight a legitimate contest.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Beekman, *Ringside*, p.24.

⁶² William A. Brady, *Showman*, (New York, 1937): p.219.

⁶³ ‘Bruisers in Buskin’, *The Era*, 16 May, (1891): p.12.

⁶⁴ Marion Wrenn, ‘Professional Wrestling Jargon’, p.165.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.25.

⁶⁶ Alvaro Bentancourt, *My Diary or Route Book of P. T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth and The Great London Circus for the Season of 1883*, [Available from www.circushistory.org/History/PTB1883.htm], Accessed 7/06/13.

⁶⁷ Morton & O’Brien, *Wrestling to Rasslin*, p.29.

Further humbuggery was added to challenge matches. Promoters and circus owners sent wrestlers ahead of schedule, an old Barnumian trick used to whip up local anticipation, have them make a name for themselves in the local community, and then ‘[generate] excitement over a match...when the athletic company arrived’.⁶⁸ At other times, members of the troupe pretended to be a local, fought an exciting match lasting the full amount of time, making it seem an easier task than it was, and allowing other audience members feel they were in with a chance. Edward Van Every, a biographer of William Muldoon, claimed the practice:

[W]as merely by way of setting the stage for the appearance of the champion, and also, in the event of no local champion being able to screw up sufficient courage to go against the great Muldoon, that there would be some sort of opponent.⁶⁹

It is hard to argue that the practice was not a carefully constructed performance designed to entertain an audience and profit performers and cultural entrepreneurs. For the first time, though, fighting exhibitions were not being used to demonstrate and perform celebrity with audiences aware that the exhibition was a performance. Instead, audiences were now lead to believe that the fight was legitimate.

It was in this context, with wrestling firmly ensconced in the world of showmen, which the sport developed. Music hall and variety had a great affinity with the circus and fairgrounds. It was no surprise that wrestling became an attraction on the music hall stage. There, in the first decades of the twentieth century, professional wrestling became a national and international phenomenon.

IV. THE WRESTLING CRAZE

Histories of the music hall have been reasonably well-documented.⁷⁰ Born out of public house back rooms and singing saloons,⁷¹ Charles Morton and the Canterbury Hall’s grand opening in 1851 is generally regarded as a turning point in its development. The mid-century represents a key evolutionary moment in the music halls, moving away from singing as being part of a public house’s weekly entertainments and becoming a professionalised, specifically built, daily, and entrance fee charging venue.⁷² The success of the Canterbury and other halls in London, as well as the continued triumphs

⁶⁸ Beekman, *Ringside*, p.25-26.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Beekman, *Ringside*, p.25-26.

⁷⁰ Bailey, *The Business of Pleasure*; Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge, 1998); Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall*. For a history of Scottish music halls see Paul Maloney, *Scotland and the Music Hall 1850–1914*, (Manchester, 2003).

⁷¹ Kift, *Victorian Music Hall*, p.19.

⁷² Kift, *Victorian Music Hall*, p.18.

of concert rooms in the provinces, sparked a similar set of builds across the country over the coming decades. By 1875, the hall's successes were accompanied by an increasing scrutiny from local government. In 1878, the Metropolis and Management and Building Act required safer fire regulations. It simultaneously forced a lot of smaller halls out of business and forced managers to invest new amounts of capital.⁷³ Because of the amounts of money involved in these new businesses, music hall artists became increasingly professionalised, employing managers and contracts. The management of halls were taken over by 'directors rather than proprietors, and more often accountants than publicans'.⁷⁴ Music halls became chains owned and operated by central agencies.⁷⁵ The halls became progressively lavish in building design, with the bar and auditorium separated. By the 1880s, the halls were serious business. Bailey places the completion of this transformation at the reopening of the London Pavilion in 1885.⁷⁶ In London alone, 'fourteen million visits were paid each year to thirty-five of London's music halls'.⁷⁷ Music halls were transformed from back rooms in pubs to the grand Variety theatres that the word music hall now connotes.

Seeing the music halls as part of a larger entertainment and leisure industry, Gareth Stedman Jones, utilising the social control thesis, posited that the halls were part of a dominant system in which the bourgeoisie sought to control the working classes. Writers since have rightly argued that the music hall could be a place for 'exchange and negotiation',⁷⁸ in which dominant systems and everyday life were critiqued, gently mocked and 'chronicled'.⁷⁹ Even in the more 'respectable' variety theatres, performances pushed questions of 'taste', celebrated the everyday lives of the working classes, and gently mocked and parodied the aristocracy and upper middle classes.⁸⁰ Scripts had to be submitted in advance, but there was little authorities could do about an improvised comment or a well-timed wink.⁸¹ The variety theatres were more established and 'respectable' than the singing saloon equivalents from earlier in the century, but they still walked a tight-rope of risqué material.

⁷³ Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, p.170.

⁷⁴ Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance*, p.95.

⁷⁵ Kift, *Victorian Music Hall*, p.34

⁷⁶ Bailey, *Business of Pleasure*, p.xi.

⁷⁷ Waters, *Politics of Popular Culture*, p.1.

⁷⁸ Bailey, *Business of Pleasure*, p.xvi.

⁷⁹ Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English National Identity*, (London, 2007): p.65.

⁸⁰ Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution*, p.173.

⁸¹ Alison Oram, *Her Husband Was a Woman!: Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture*, (London, 2007): p.43.

Perhaps, as Medhurst acknowledges, a fairer criticism made by historians was that the halls often expressed a particularly conservative, patriotic and jingoistic – a word that is derived from a music hall song – ideology. Songs often sang the praises of the British armies abroad, particularly during the Boer wars⁸² and racist caricatures and jokes regularly featured. Music hall was clearly not the only guilty party in this regard: such features, in one form or another, were common to the fairground sideshows, newspapers, and magazines.

Much of the work on music hall has focused on the comic songs, with a particular focus on the lyrics.⁸³ The reasons for this seem obvious. In many cases, as the name indicates, music was a key attraction for audiences. For historians, music has been better documented, first in print and later on record, than other ephemeral performances. With that said, to assume that the halls consisted solely of songs would be to do a great disservice to the concept of variety and its associated allure. The halls continued traditions of the fairground, circus and illegitimate theatres. Speciality acts, including acrobats, ‘conjurers, jugglers, illusionists and ventriloquists’,⁸⁴ all featured at one time or another. Sport, and in particular forms of pugilism, retained strong links to the music halls. Keith Gregson and Mike Huggins’ correctly highlight that sport’s relationship with music hall has been a somewhat neglected area of research,⁸⁵ though they are drawn, like other music hall historians before them, to music rather than other modes of performance. Songs about football matches and appearances by sporting professionals were not uncommon. Andrew Horrall, too, has done a good job of teasing some of these multifaceted relationships between the music hall and the field of sport.⁸⁶ Professional boxers, against the wishes of the NSC, continued to find work in sparring exhibitions, melodramas, and the burgeoning moving picture industry, an entertainment that had its roots in the music hall and fairground.⁸⁷ Professional wrestling and strongmen acts were the ultimate sporting success story of the late Victorian and Edwardian music hall stage, though. The relationship would impact not just on the

⁸² Penny Summerfield, ‘Patriotism and Empire: Music Hall Entertainment, 1870-1914’, in John M. Mackenzie (ed.), *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, (Manchester, 1989): pp.17-49.

⁸³ Cunningham, *Leisure and Culture*, p.311.

⁸⁴ Lois Rutherford, “‘Managers in a Small Way’ The Professionalisation of Variety Artistes, 1860 – 1914’ in Peter Bailey (ed.) *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes, 1986): p.96.

⁸⁵ Keith Gregson and Mike Huggins, ‘Sport, Music-Hall Culture and Popular Song in Nineteenth-Century England’ *Culture, Sport, Society*, 2/2, (1999): p.82.

⁸⁶ Horrall, *Popular Culture*.

⁸⁷ Dan Streible provides a fascinating history of boxing and early cinema in *Fight Pictures*.

fringes of the sport but would play a role at the heart the sport's subsequent development.

Wrestling acts, offering a mixture of strongman routines and open challenges to the audiences (see fig. 3), became a mainstay of the English music hall stage in the first decade of the twentieth century. The popularity of wrestling in America in the 1890s rejuvenated interest in England. This was, in part, due to the return of English wrestlers fresh from their American tours. In 1895, the Alhambra exhibited a wrestling tournament that lasted for the week and included famed wrestlers from across England and Europe, including Atonio Pierri and Tom Cannon.⁸⁸ It was a legitimate series of competitions, but it signalled the start of a long relationship. American wrestlers, from the 1890s onwards, were tempted to tour the English stages. In 1897, *The Sporting Mirror and Dramatic Music Hall Record* described the arrival of Strangler Lewis.

[F]resh arrivals...continue to flock from the States. This time it is a famous wrestler; but regardless of recent attempts to give wrestling a fillip by variety managers, it has fallen back into its old groove. Whether the appearance of amongst us F. Lewis...will infuse fresh life into the sport remains to be seen.⁸⁹

Whether we can attribute Strangler Lewis's tour as the driving force is difficult to say with any certainty, but names that had dominated the professional wrestling circuit in America began more frequently to appear on the English music hall stage. Jack Carkeek, in 1900, provided an exciting and popular music hall turn. *The Era* promoted it in a celebratory manner, guaranteeing the show 'be a new London sensation... He offers a £10 note to any man he fails to defeat in fifteen minutes'.⁹⁰ Just as prize-fighters had adapted when performing in the circus or the stage one hundred years earlier, wrestlers in the halls had to engage the audience with patter and entertainment. According to Charles B. Cochran, a showman who would become an influential wrestling promoter, Carkeek was an 'experienced and clever showman with a most convincing line of talk and a quick and often witty response to remarks [from the audience]'.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Classified advertisement, *The Standard*, 04 Jul. (1895): p.4.


⁸⁹ Anon., 'Boxing', *The Sporting Mirror and Dramatic Music Hall Record*, 31 May (1897): p.3. F. Lewis should refer E. Lewis.

⁹⁰ Anon., 'Music Hall Gossip', *The Era*, 22 Dec. (1900): p.18.

⁹¹ Charles B. Cochran, *Showman Looks On*, (London, 1945): p.273.

THE
OXFORD, OXFORD STREET,
 LONDON, W.
 (Adjoining Tottenham Court Road TUBE STATIONS and all the
 principal Omnibus Routes).
 Manager - - - - - **Mr. BLYTH-PRATT**

Monday, April 18th, 1910
AND EVERY EVENING.



“ APOLLO ”
Presents—
JOHN
LEMM

THE FAMOUS WRESTLING CHAMPION.
 Specially Engaged after his Triumphs in AMERICA.
JOHN LEMM will forfeit the sum of FIVE POUNDS
 to any man whom he FAILS TO DEFEAT in
TEN MINUTES.
JOHN LEMM will also pay to any man who defeats him £50.

STRICT CATCH-AS-CATCH CAN STYLE
 NO CHALLENGES WILL BE ACCEPTED FROM THE FRONT OF THE HOUSE.
 All Wrestlers who wish to challenge **LEMM** must send in their
 challenge in writing to Mr. BANKIER (APOLLO), before 7-15 each day.
ANDRE CHERPILLOD is not included in the above challenge.
 A Special Match has been arranged on
MONDAY AFTERNOON, APRIL 25th, at 3, between
LEMM v CHERPILLOD
At the OXFORD.

Oldfield & Co., Printers, Gamberwell New Road, S.E.

Figure 3: Poster for wrestling at The Oxford, 1910.

Carkeek, and other lesser known wrestlers, pursued reasonably popular tours of the halls for the next two years. One name in particular stands out as the most successful professional wrestler of the period, however. He was certainly responsible for sparking what would eventually become dubbed ‘the wrestling craze’ (see fig. 4): George Hackenschmidt. After winning a large number of contests, tournaments and competitions on the continent, Hackenschmidt moved to England in 1902.⁹² He immediately made a name for himself by dramatically accepting one of Carkeek’s open challenges at the Alhambra music hall. On this particular night, Hackenschmidt entered the stage, stripped from his evening clothes to reveal his wrestling costume and muscular body.⁹³ Carkeek refused to accept the challenge, declaring that Hackenschmidt was a professional from Europe and that Carkeek wanted to fight fair contests with Englishmen. Hackenschmidt was eventually removed from the stage by the police. Unsuccessful in gaining the desired match, the kerfuffle generated the publicity that it was intended to. More importantly, the publicity stunt caught the attention of a theatrical and music hall entrepreneur, Charles B. Cochran. Cochran became Hackenschmidt’s manager and a monumental influence in Hackenschmidt’s career and the subsequent development of professional wrestling as performance.

Like Barnum before him, Cochran was acutely aware that securing press interest was of primary importance, especially in disseminating the stories and photographs of Hackenschmidt to a national audience. One of Cochran’s first acts as manager of Hackenschmidt was to secure an article in the *Daily Mail* entitled ‘Is Great Strength Genius?’⁹⁴ The gushing article, noting Hackenschmidt’s body, good grace and his act, served as a feature-length advertisement. ‘Take such a man as Georges Hackenschmidt now appearing at the Tivoli Music Hall,’ the article chimed, ‘He shows you natural born strength in all its wonderful supremacy.’⁹⁵ This newspaper coverage secured the first months of Hackenschmidt’s employment as a music hall turn, but despite this initial burst in interest the wrestler took some time to settle as a successful performer. Hackenschmidt’s reasoning for this does not seem overly convincing: ‘the English

⁹² See Hackenschmidt’s autobiography, *The Way to Live: Health and Physical Fitness*, (London, 1908): p.145.

⁹³ Cochran, *Showman Looks On*, p.273; Hackenschmidt, *The Way to Live*, p.145.

⁹⁴ Cochran wrongly claims the article was featured on the front page. It was actually featured on page 4. Mary Nugent, ‘Is Great Strength Genius?’, *Daily Mail*, 2. Apr., (1902): p. 4.

⁹⁵ Mary Nugent, ‘Is Great Strength Genius?’, *Daily Mail*, 2. Apr., (1902): p. 4.

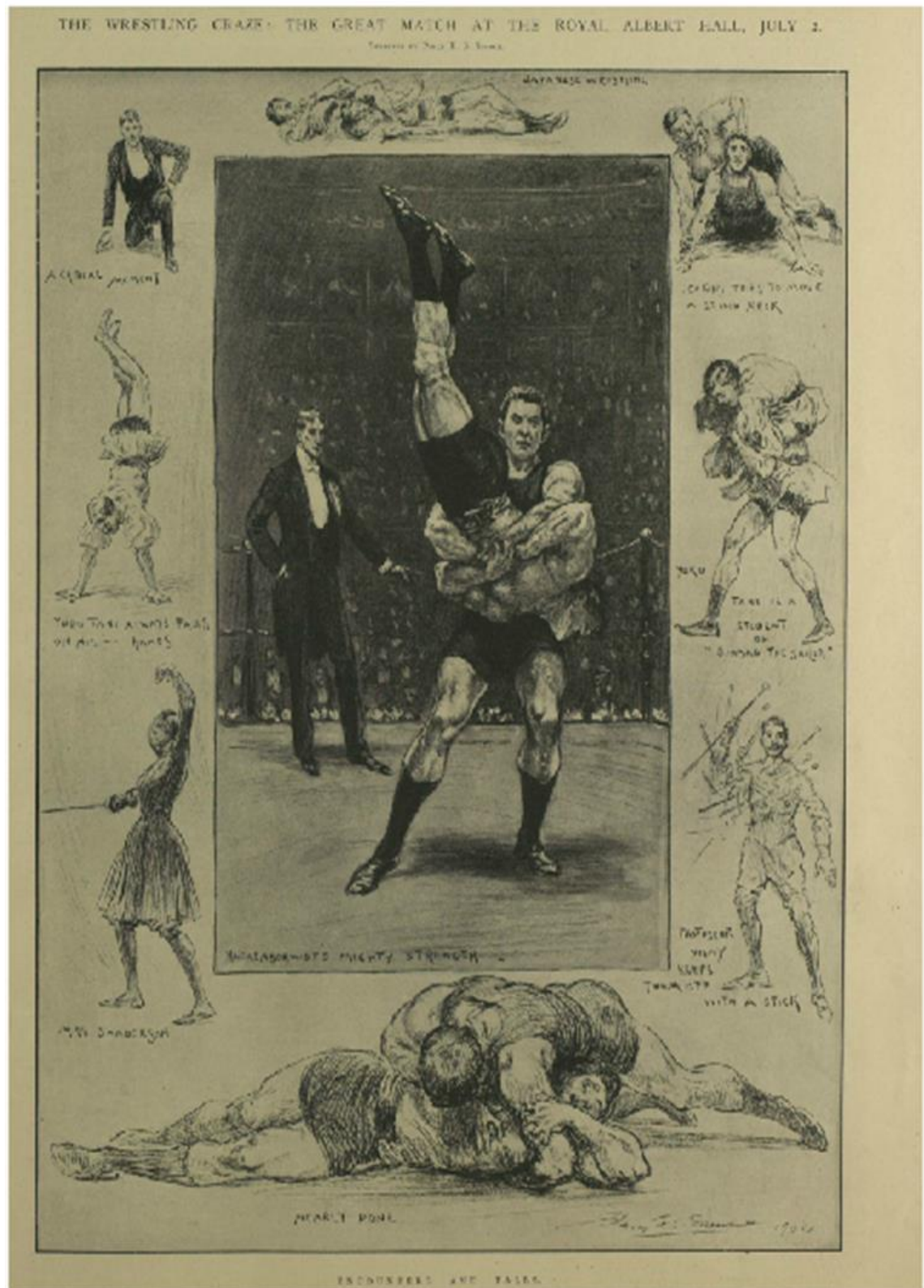


Figure 4: 'The Wrestling Craze', 1904.

public took but scant interest in wrestling, or at any rate, in the Greco-Roman branch of the Art, since few first-class exponents of this system had as yet visited Great Britain'.⁹⁶

More probable is Cochran's suggestion that, after inviting individuals to last a specific amount of time in the ring, audiences 'got bored with seeing mountains of men put with their shoulders to the carpet in anything from thirty to forty or fifty seconds'.⁹⁷ It was not until Hackenschmidt learnt showmanship, toying with competitors to make it seem like they had a chance, that his fame and popularity really exploded. 'The public did not want straight wrestling – they wanted a "show" and a "show" they were given,' Cochran proudly claimed.⁹⁸ In defending the practices of wrestlers performing in this period, Cochran reminded 'them who would condemn this deception that it was only, after all, a music-hall show....The audience wanted thrills, even though they were artificial'.⁹⁹

Unsurprisingly, there were plenty willing to condemn the 'deception'. The appeal of the stage, to wrestlers and audiences alike, exasperated commentators who hoped to bring wrestling back into the 'proper' sporting fold and field. In 1904 the *Daily Mail* wrote a scathing piece about the professional wrestling craze.

[O]rganisations, with a firm grip of the sport, can be the only road to a proper recognition of wrestling as a sport and pastime. The present boom, started by rival music halls and rival sporting newspapers with no central authority of control, and leaving the competitors to practically make their own rules, possesses no real elements of prosperity.¹⁰⁰

In reply, and writing under the fantastic pseudonym of 'clerical collar' (he had clearly learnt *some* showmanship from the sport), a Westmorland clergymen, still reasonably enamoured with muscular Christian belief, agreed.

Are there not enough manly Christian men, be they Westmorland, Cumberland, Lancashire, Cornwall, or Devonshire men, ready to form an "Amateur Wrestling Association"[?]. It will be a miserable weakness on the part of our universities, public schools, and other amateur athletic clubs if wrestling is allowed to become dubbed the "music hall" sport from sheer want of energy to take this wholesome recreation in

⁹⁶ Hackenschmidt, *The Way to Live*, p.144-145.

⁹⁷ Cochran, *Cock-A-Doodle-Do*, p.175-176.

⁹⁸ Charles B. Cochran, *The Secrets of a Showman*, (London, 1925): p.110.

⁹⁹ Cochran, *The Secrets of a Showman*, p.111.

¹⁰⁰ Anon., 'A Neglected English Sport: Need of a Controlling Power in the Wrestling Pastime', *Daily Mail*, 13 Jan., (1904): p.6.

hand under a properly-qualified and strong minded committee.¹⁰¹

Amateurism, and a powerful sporting body, was seen to be the antidote to the 'problems' of professional wrestling. There was some stirring to answer the clerical collar's request. In 1904 the London Amateur Wrestling Society was formed with an aim to 'arrest the decay of wrestling in England'.¹⁰² Likewise, in 1906 the National Amateur Wrestling Association was formed and provided some wrestling competitions in conjunction with other amateur sporting bodies.¹⁰³ Finally, in 1906 there was a proposal for a central governing body to control the numerous and informal wrestling organisations scattered around the North counties: 'The idea was to have an authority similar to the Football Association,' they were quoted as saying, 'if they suspended a wrestler in one ring he would be debarred from wrestling in the ring of any other club or association affiliated with the governing body.'¹⁰⁴ The groups, however, met with limited success. The local organisations, by their very remit, were resistant to embracing a national set of rules controlled by a centralised bureaucracy. Their very survival as a local tradition proceeded on their active resistance to such a movement. In Cornwall, in fact, no such group was established until the 1920s.¹⁰⁵ The national amateur wrestling groups were attempting to control a sport already established and firmly in the control of the showmen.

More importantly, the showmen had the power and money to match and resist challenges from outside groups. The NSC's control over boxing was highly precarious but at least there existed a centralised body under which the sport paid limited accordance. Competing schools, groups and agents within wrestling never reached a satisfactory agreement or compromise. Professional wrestling, until at least the outbreak of the First World War, continued to be contested under a myriad set of rules in which dozens of local and national groups all claimed to represent. More importantly, older beliefs about spectator sport – value for money, entertainment, and so on – were emphasised as key values. Wrestling continued to be dubbed the music hall sport.

¹⁰¹ Anon., 'A Neglected English Sport: Clerical Proposal to Form a Wrestling Association', *Daily Mail*, 15 Jan., (1904): p.6.

¹⁰² John E. McLachlan, 'A London Amateur Society', *Daily Mail*, 15 Jan., (1904): p.6.

¹⁰³ Anon., 'The World of Pastime', *The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, 2 Jun., (1906): p.340

¹⁰⁴ Reproduction of 'A Governing Body Formed' taken from *The Carlisle Journal*, in Roger Robson, *Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling: A Documentary History*, (Carlisle, 1999): p.57.

¹⁰⁵ Tripp, *Persistence of Difference*, p.44.

Professional wrestling was a sport where competitors fought legitimate contests. A successful professional wrestler's life, in fact, was not dissimilar to that of a prize-fighter earlier in the century: regular employment as music hall turns mixed intermittently with big fights at sports grounds (football stadiums in Britain and baseball stadiums in America),¹⁰⁶ sports halls or even The Royal Albert Hall. Problems, for those concerned at least, lay in the difficulty of establishing an agreed upon set of rules, the pervasive influence of managers looking to control their interests, and the showmanship and excited press reporting that happened in the lead-up to big fights. The latter point is no better illustrated than the most anticipated match of the period at the Royal Albert Hall between Hackenschmidt and Madrali. The match began life, as it had done with Hackenschmidt's debut on the English stage, with a wrestler appearing in the stalls of the Canterbury to agree to the open-challenge. In this case, the roles were reversed: Antonio Pierri, The Terrible Greek who had thrilled audiences in the 1880s and 1890s, shouted at Hackenschmidt. He claimed that he had found someone who could easily beat him, his protégé the Terrible Turk. The fight culminated in one report coining the term 'the wrestling craze' to describe the eager anticipation that audiences awaited the fight (see fig. 4).¹⁰⁷

The continued relationship between wrestling and music hall would alter the manner and mode of presentation of the sport. A good music hall turn, after all, required more than just athleticism. I have already described Hackenschmidt playing with his opponents before pinning them and Carkeek talking to audiences in an amusing manner. Adding to techniques from the circus and fairground, music hall traditions influenced professional wrestling. One of the main things to consider in this regard was the hall's opposition to the supposed 'respectable' culture of rational recreation. Kift explains:

The values propagated in the music hall – hedonism, ribaldry, sensuality, the enjoyment of alcohol, the portrayal of marriage as a tragic-comic disaster, and the equality of the sexes at work and leisure...were dramatically opposed with those propagated by and attributed to the Victorian middle-class: asceticism, prudery, refinement, abstinence, a puritanical work ethic, marriage and the family as the bedrock of social order.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Matthew Lindaman, 'Wrestling's Hold on the Western World Before the Great War' *The Historian*, 62/4, (2000): p.786.

¹⁰⁷ 'The Wrestling Craze: The Great Match at the Royal Albert Hall', *Illustrated London News*, 09 Jul. (1904): p.51.

¹⁰⁸ Kift, *Victorian Music Hall*, p.176.

Music hall wrestling performances were anything but prude. Bodies continued to offer a distinctive pleasure for crowds. Hackenschmidt, for example, posed and displayed his muscles to what he referred the 'Famous and Renowned POSES PLASTIQUES'.¹⁰⁹ It was a show reminiscent of Sandow the Magnificent. During the 1880s and 1890s, Eugene Sandow, billed as Sandow the Magnificent, became an international celebrity for his weightlifting routines. Sandow's claim, that he and other strongmen of the era were 'theatrical athletes', is probably an apt description for professional wrestlers.¹¹⁰ Indeed, strongmen acts and wrestling acts had a great deal of crossover: Sandow had started his career as a wrestler and it was not uncommon for wrestlers to use Grecian statue routines in their performances. Sandow's successes were in part attributed to the photographs that were sold that were deliberately designed to appeal to women and gay men.¹¹¹ Sandow even performed private backstage shows for women who would be able to feel the strongman's muscles, at a price of course.¹¹² Elsewhere, films of boxing and sparring also made appearances at both the halls and the fairgrounds. Musser and Hansen argue that these films allowed women to pursue 'well-trained male bodies in semi-nudity'.¹¹³ When wrestling debuted on the English music hall stage similar comments were made about its ability to attract women. 'Wrestling appears to us a fine art,' one article claimed, 'and has proved itself attractive not only to the sportsmen of London but to the fair sex, there being no trace of vulgarity or brutality in the exhibitions'.¹¹⁴ Women-as-wrestling fans were a defining characteristic of the sport as the twentieth century continued.

Wrestlers performing villainous or dastardly roles was one of the music hall's most influential and enduring legacies. At the height of his acclaim, Hackenschmidt toured with a troupe of wrestlers. One was specifically designated as the villain who would fight Hackenschmidt. Cochran describes how 'a German named Shackmann, played the role of a brutal wrestler, who would not listen to the referee though repeatedly warned about foul tactics'.¹¹⁵ Another wrestler in the troupe 'threw the referee...into the orchestra'.¹¹⁶ The brutal and bullying wrestler who refused to follow

¹⁰⁹ John Rickard, "'The Spectacle of Excess': The Emergence of Modern Professional Wrestling in the United States and Australia' *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 33/1 (1999): p.130

¹¹⁰ Chapman, *Sandow*, p.67.

¹¹¹ Chapman, *Sandow*, p.34

¹¹² Chapman, *Sandow*, p.75.

¹¹³ Quoted in Streible, *Fight Pictures*, p.87.

¹¹⁴ Anon., 'Music Hall Gossip', *The Era*, 22 Dec. (1900): p.18.

¹¹⁵ Cochran, *Secrets of a Showman*, p.110.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.120.

the rules would become a central wrestling archetype. Like other music hall performances, this aspect of professional wrestling parodied, pastiched and satirised the discourses that had circulated during the codification of sports. According to Kift, the master of ceremonies took up the image of the middle class gentleman while gently mocking his affectations.¹¹⁷ Wrestling acts followed a similar pattern, exaggerating, mocking and laughing at the seriousness and pretentiousness of the amateur ideal. It is worth, for a moment, comparing and contrasting the role of the referee in the music hall against the role of the referee at the NSC. In boxing matches, 'No jibes or cat-calls greeted [the referee's] appearance; he was no longer considered - like some music-hall chairmen - a man with whom one could take minor liberties for the price of a drink'.¹¹⁸ Professional wrestling took beliefs about professionals already in circulation – that they were cheats who were willing to do anything in order to win – and exaggerated them. In music hall wrestling, respecting the referee, style and grace, playing for the love of the game, and gentlemanly sportsmanship were inverted for both comic and dramatic effect.

Furthermore, the use of 'villainous' wrestlers in this way demonstrated Cochran's understanding that audiences were just as willing to pay to see a wrestler they hated lose as they were in paying to see a wrestler they liked win.¹¹⁹ One wrestler was apparently especially skilled in this regard:

The British hated [Zbysco] as cordially as they liked Hackenschmidt. Nevertheless he was a great drawing card. Whereas they came with the hope of seeing Hackenschmidt win, they came hoping to see Zbysco beaten. He was a splendid showman, and gave the public exactly what they wanted.¹²⁰

Promoters like Cochran saw the potential and profit in having villains antagonise the English public in order to fill the seats when they wrestled. It would be too simplistic to suggest that there was a clear dividing line where foreigners were simply awarded the villainous role (after all, Hackenschmidt was billed as the Russian Lion). But, while there is no consistent uniformity in this, Cochran was more than willing to spread rumours about the inherent dishonesty of foreigners. In a match between Zbysco and Suliman in 1908, newspapers were duly informed about the tendency of Turkish wrestlers to spread themselves in grease before the match. Cochran would later state, most likely writing with a smile, '[I] insisted that the contestants should have a warm

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p.22.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process*, p.246-247.

¹¹⁹ Cochran, *Secrets of a Showman*, p.299.

¹²⁰ Cochran, *Secrets of a Showman*, p.117

bath in the theatre before taking to the mat'.¹²¹ The contestants were given a bath the day of the match, much to the delight of the press.

Even when the 'foreigner' was not directly playing a villain, his Otherness was emphasised and exaggerated. Photographs of the performer in their 'national dress' were circulated in newspapers and magazines. The showmen's influence in this regard was obvious. In his autobiography, William Brady explained how, in America, he encouraged the use of costume and characterisation to generate interest in the press:

To replace his ragged clothes I took him to a theatrical costumer's and laid in the fanciest Turkish costume money could buy – red turban, baggy green, gold-laced jacket, fez and all the rest of it...The reporters had been duly tipped off to be on hand and the next morning the Terrible Turk – my new nickname for him – was on every front page in the country.¹²²

Both Promoters and journalists in England continued this tradition. Madrali wore a 'long heavy fur coat and a Turkish fez'.¹²³ Ali Hassan wore a turban, dark eye make-up and a cape. Indian magicians using highly Orientalised imagery had a long history on the English stage. In these performances, Sarah Dadswell asserts, 'the stereotypical, orientalist British perspective upon the East or Orient was not particularly discerning and rarely respected national, cultural, or geographical boundaries'.¹²⁴ Professional wrestling promoters, and we should remember that Charles Cochran also managed Harry Houdini,¹²⁵ were clearly taking influence from these fashionable Orientalist images popular elsewhere on the stage. The sheer numbers of Terrible Turks and Terrible Greeks that featured on English stages, all adhering to similar characteristics, is testament to this fact.

The press, too, were clear in the pleasures these might offer their audiences. When the Great Gama 'the champion wrestler of the punjab' visited England in 1910 he fought the American Dr. B.F. Roller, an ex-American footballer. *The Times* hoped the match 'would throw some light on the question much discussed of late years, of the relative merits of the Oriental physique and that of the Occidental strong man'.¹²⁶ Photographs of Gama which circulated in the British press had him standing on the hide

¹²¹ Cochran, *Secrets of a Showman*, p.119.

¹²² Brady, *Showman*, p.215-216.

¹²³ Cochran, *Showman Looks On*, p.275.

¹²⁴ Sarah Dadswell, 'Jugglers, Fakirs, and Jaduwallahs: Indian Magicians and the British Stage', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 23/1 (2007): p.9.

¹²⁵ In fact, one of Houdini's first short films (1906) was entitled *Houdini Defeats Hackenschmidt*, See Mathew Solomon, *Silent Film, Houdini and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century*, (Chicago, 2010): p.152-153.

¹²⁶ 'Wrestling: Roller v. Gama', *The Times*, 9 Aug (1910): p.14.

of a leopard carrying a gada (an Indian ceremonial mace).¹²⁷ Orientalist imagery would be a regular feature of professional wrestling, on both sides of the Atlantic, throughout the coming years (see chapter four and five).¹²⁸

A potent mix of promoters, managers and wrestlers, working in tandem with the press, gave wrestlers characterisations that were larger than life. Georgian sports reporting, characterised by Egan earlier in the century, had emphasised and embellished a singular character trait. In the Edwardian period, promoters were using costumes and characterisation knowing full-well the press would report that specific characteristic and then exaggerate it further. The divorce between the individual and their celebrity image was being stretched to breaking point. Wrestling in this period, then, served as a half-way point between the puffery of nineteenth century journalism which embellished, exaggerated and emphasised character traits and rivalries and the outright characterisation that professional wrestling would use later in the twentieth century.

This mode of presenting professional wrestling created consequences for the sport. Mixed reactions, from audiences and the press, were best demonstrated by the biggest match of the decade between Hackenschmidt and Frank Gotch. In 1908, Hackenschmidt was regarded by the English press as the best wrestler in Europe. While he had toured America on one occasion before in 1905, defeating Tom Jenkins at Madison Square Garden, he had, depending on which account you believe, deliberately avoided or had never been matched with Frank Gotch.¹²⁹ Gotch's career mirrored Hackenschmidt's on the other side of the Atlantic, emerging at the turn of the century before finally being almost universally recognised as the 'best wrestler in the world' by their respective country's newspapers and fans. Finally, the two were matched at Dexter Park Pavilion, Chicago, in front of a crowd of 20,000. The contest was disappointing. Gotch was overly defensive and used moves that were banned. The first fall lasted two hours. Following a short break, Hackenschmidt refused to restart the match and conceded the contest. He later accused Gotch of greasing his body to gain an unfair advantage.¹³⁰ Neither competitor left the match awash in glory. Legitimate prize-fighting contests, like the Heenan and Sayers fifty years earlier, faced difficulty in living

¹²⁷ For a discussion of Indian masculinity and its relationship to wrestling see Joseph S. Alter, 'Subaltern Bodies and Nationalist Physiques: Gama the Great and the Heroics of Indian Wrestling', *Body & Society*, 6/2, (2000): pp.45-72.

¹²⁸ Arguments about portrayals of race in modern American professional wrestling have been discussed in Campbell, 'Why the Bad Guys Win', pp.127-132 and Mondak, 'The Politics of Professional Wrestling', pp.139-150.

¹²⁹ Cochran, *Secrets of a Showman*, p.117.

¹³⁰ Beekman, *Ringside*, p.47.

up to the hype surrounding a big fight that had been sold in an ostentatious manner by showmen and promoters.

Here were the problems of legitimate wrestling contests: they could end abruptly, sometimes in a matter of seconds, with paying audiences furious about the lack of drama; or matches could last for hours on end, with holds and counter holds not providing any drama at all. Cochran even went as far as to suggest that when a legitimate competition did take place the crowd felt they were being fleeced by the slow moving action, believing that the wrestlers had fixed the match for a draw. Referring to a match between Pederson and Aberg, he described how:

The audience cried “fake”...Now this match was entirely genuine...the public knew so little about wrestling that they thought it was a *fake*. I found this was generally the case where straight matches were concerned; whereas, when a good exhibition wrestler would allow his opponent to slip away, and get out of dangerous-looking holds, with extraordinary head-spins and all sorts of monkey tricks which were nothing more or less than showmanship, the audience would go mad with excitement.¹³¹

Unfortunately, apart from taking Cochran’s word, we are left with scant material about how audiences felt about exhibitions that took place in the music hall. Were audiences, like they were with magic and the strongman acts, cynical about the truthfulness of the performance but content to enjoy the show? Did audiences expect showmanship, encourage it, even, on the music hall stage but demand legitimate competition in sporting stadiums?

We can say with some certainty that from around 1908 professional wrestling demonstrated a noticeable drop in popularity. Questions of authenticity and fakery appeared to play a role in these concerns, according to the press at least. The match between Zbysco and Suliman, aforementioned and famous for the bath both wrestlers were forced to take beforehand, acted as a lightening rod for the press’s concerns. A few days after Zbysco and Suliman’s fight, *The Sporting Life* ran an expose on the match, claiming the fight was fixed, bathing only a publicity stunt, and the wrestlers corrupt. The reaction is worth quoting at length.

We cannot deny that there is a certain element of humour in the situation. Here are two foreign wrestlers hoaxing the British public as it has not been hoaxed for many a long day. There were challenges and counter challenges, affected quarrels,

¹³¹ Cochran, *Secrets of a Showman*, p.114.

threatened breaking off of negotiations, meetings at the *Sportsman* office, the deposit of money on behalf of Mr. 'Constantin Papiani,' who does not exist, charges of skin-greasing, and to crown it all, hot water baths for the two friends who were soon to be in each other's deadly embrace. How these two fellows must have enjoyed their baths – with their tongues in their cheeks, while the deluded British public were rolling up in their thousands to pay for admission to see the wrestling. It is more like a bit from a comic opera than anything we have ever heard of in the world of sport. While we admit to the humour of the situation, we cannot shut our eyes to the seriousness of the matter, and we ask, how long is the generous-hearted supporter of wrestling to be imposed upon by these gentlemen from the continent? If a state of matters exist such as we have shown existed between Zbyszko and Suliman, what confidence can we have that when the men, after due palaver, do meet, we are to have real honest wrestling? Both at the Pavilion and the Holborn Zbyszko and Suliman gave good 'shows', but the story we have disclosed of Zbyszko paying for Suliman's board and lodging since he stayed in Kennington Road does not reassure us that the two men were really trying. Is this wrestling farce never to end?¹³²

An attempt to counter the 'problem' was pushed by interested members. A Professional Wrestling Board of Control was set-up in 1908 with an aim to 'arrange and govern' the sport, creating matches and hoping to force wrestlers into legitimate contests with one another.¹³³ The board sat thrice, writing to Hackenschmidt and Gotch, whom they had apparently matched with Zbysco and Lemm. Hackenschmidt and Gotch failed to even reply. The group disbanded three weeks after its first meeting claiming it had 'found it impossible to perform the duty for which it was elected – viz, the promotion of straightforward matches'.¹³⁴ It was an understatement. The NSC also offered a catch-as-catch-can open wrestling tournaments at the Alhambra between 1908 and 1910.¹³⁵ Though reasonably well-attended, the events did nothing to gain control over the sport as a whole. As they had done with amateur sporting and wrestling bodies in the preceding years, wrestlers, promoters and showmen were able to resist outside agents and groups looking to alter the subfield of professional wrestling.

The lack of control, however, was continuing to cause problems in the sport. Two years after the Zbysco and Suliman debacle, Zbysco was the protagonist in another

¹³² Quoted in Graham Noble, "'The Lion of the Punjab' – Gama in England, 1910", *InYo: The Journal of Alternative Perspectives on the Martial Arts and Sciences*, [Available from http://ejmas.com/jalt/jaltart_noble_0502.htm], Accessed 13/03/13.

¹³³ Anon., Untitled note, *Daily Mail*, 20 Nov., (1908): p.9.

¹³⁴ Anon., 'Wrestling', *Daily Mail*, 8 Dec., (1908): p.9.

¹³⁵ Anon., 'Wrestling: The Recent Tournament', *The Times*, 16 Feb., (1910): p.20.

fight that caused outrage among commentators and wrestling fans. One letter to a magazine went as far to call the match a 'farce'.¹³⁶ A newspaper report claimed the match to be a '*reductio ad absurdum* of the catch-as-catch-can game in its present form'.¹³⁷ In a contest for the championship of the world, a title that had little but decorative value, Zbysco spent almost the entirety of the two-and-half-hour match on his belly refusing to fight.¹³⁸ In the rematch a week later, Zbysco simply failed to turn up and Gama was awarded the contest. Once again, the press focused on the lack of control by an (amateur) sporting body and the absence of centralised rules.¹³⁹ Similar problems materialised in the 1911 rematch between Hackenschmidt and Gotch which took place in Chicago at Comiskey Park baseball ground in front of 25,000 spectators. Countless newspaper articles were written about the match, and moving pictures of the fight were made to be sent around America and to be played back in England.¹⁴⁰ If the first match had been disappointing then the return match would do significant harm to professional wrestling.¹⁴¹ Hackenschmidt wrestled with an injury. There were calls in the American press that Hackenschmidt did not intend to wrestle the match properly and planned to forfeit as quickly as possible.¹⁴² The English responded by claiming the match was not fought in the spirit of the game.¹⁴³

The continued disappointments encapsulated what many felt wrong with professional wrestling. It was too ensconced in the world of showmanship and music hall performance, it was too far away from the real values of sport, and when big, legitimate competitions took place one could not be sure which aspects to believe. After failing to attract much of an audience, a 1911 match at the Crystal Palace between Bux and de Riaz summoned the following reaction from the press: 'evidently professional wrestling will not regain its popularity yet awhile'.¹⁴⁴ It was a fair prediction: professional wrestling would not be a popular performance in England for another two decades.

¹³⁶ Anon. letter, *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 24 Sep., (1910): p. 410.

¹³⁷ Anon., 'Wrestling: Gama v Zbysco', *The Times*, 19 Sep., (1910): p.15.

¹³⁸ Anon., 'Wrestling: Gama v Zbysco', *The Times*, 12 Sep., (1910): p.14.

¹³⁹ Anon., 'Wrestling: Gama v Zbysco', *The Times*, 12 Sep., (1910): p.14.

¹⁴⁰ Lindaman, *Wrestling's Hold*, p.791

¹⁴¹ Beekman, *Ringside*, p.49.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Anon., 'Toe Screwing', *Penny Illustrated Paper*, 16 Sep. (1911): p.1.

¹⁴⁴ Anon., 'Wrestling: Ahmud Bux v. De Riaz', *The Times*, 25 May, (1911): p.17.

CONCLUSION

The largest debates and power struggles about the role of sport circled around professionalism and amateurism and spectator and participatory sports. These two positions, roughly represented by public schools, muscular Christians, and adherents of Olympism in one corner, and professional players and capitalists in the other, had given birth to the sporting field in the late nineteenth century. The resulting compromises between the agents and institutions produced the spectator sports that dominated England and beyond for the twentieth century. Nearly every sport broadly subscribed to the amateur ideals, privileged the ideologies of fair play, but allowed room for some profit to be made via entrance fees, spectatorship, all the while restricting and policing professional players.

Critical to this transformation were the sporting bodies that had bureaucratised, centralised and codified rules. Groups policed sportsmen and women and provided national competitions and a national sporting culture. Glimpses of what sports might have been earlier in the century – sprinting as part of circus troupes complete with costumes and characters, cricket games involving the physically disabled for amusement – had, for the most part, been greatly restricted. Pockets and glimpses of these discarded possibles still appeared, though, in the charity matches between music hall showmen and sportsmen or the appearances of sportsmen on the music hall stage.¹⁴⁵ In 1905/06, Horrall argues, ‘an ambitious syndicate’ attempted to launch an indoors football association to rival the football league: ‘the Olympia project threatened the FA because it was not simply a stage representation of the game, but a profit making rival competition run at the same time of year. Within two months the FA council banned the new game and all current players from taking part’.¹⁴⁶ It was precisely the control, rightly or wrongly, that wrestling lacked.

Boxing and wrestling, two subfields closest together in the field, responded in different ways to the formation of the field. When war hit Europe in 1914, professional wrestling and professional boxing, though sharing a common history, were to follow very different directions. The NSC retained limited control over the sport were able to imbue, if only by osmosis, some of the amateur ideals. By the 1920s, the British Boxing Board of Control would oversee an even greater regulation over the sport. When

¹⁴⁵ Horrall, *Popular Culture*, pp.106-185.

¹⁴⁶ Horrall, *Popular Culture*, p.158.

professional boxing faced crises professional wrestling was used as a warning to promoters and boxers alike.

May I call to the minds of any boxers who may be inclined to take liberties the wretched fate which befell professional wrestling? That sport is dead, never to rise again, and the same doom awaits professional boxing if those who live by it fall into the same bad habits as did the wrestlers.¹⁴⁷

Local wrestling groups resisted the influence of amateur sporting groups for much of the century. Professional wrestling remained in the control of circus, fairground and music hall entrepreneurs. Their influences were seen across the way professional wrestling developed, stressing costume, character and entertainment over competition and fair play. While being part of the wider sporting field, professional wrestling was developing as a spectator sport which valued entertainment and pleasure for audiences over the amateur ideal. It was a sport which resisted the dominant ideologies of the field. In fact, it openly taunted the earnestness of fair play and honest competition. In the next chapter we will see how this non-discarded history produced a radically different sport for the remainder of the twentieth century.

¹⁴⁷ Berkley, 'The "No-Contest" Boxing Match', *Daily Mail*, 10 Oct., (1919): p.7.

4

ALL-IN WRESTLING C. 1920 – 1955

Mass produced, mechanically reproduced, and new media define leisure and culture in the interwar and post-war years of England. The gravitational pull of those old Victorian cultural institutions – the fairground, circus and the music hall – weakened and many of its satellites broke out of their orbit and settled quite comfortably as their own subfields or fields. Cinema is the most obvious example: what had once been a sideshow novelty and variety show turn had blossomed into an industry with dedicated theatres, star systems, sound and colour. Recorded music and gramophones facilitated popular music and dancing fads that could be performed in the growing dance halls.¹ Radio began broadcasting in the 1920s. Television, briefly before the second world and with gusto in the 1940s and 50s, was taking its place as the centrepiece of both the living room and national culture. Sport saw ever-increasing and budding commercialism, aided by the pools, growing crowds, and developments in the mass media. In the 1930s, for instance, association football's Wembley FA cup final became a national institution, listened to on the wireless and watched on newsreels by millions.²

New commodities and entertainments, however, drew on older cultural forms. How could they not? With their powers drastically lessened, the music hall, circus and fairground's influence continued to be felt in many of the entertainments it had produced. These forms, moreover, did not disappear overnight. In the 1920s and 1930s professional wrestling, formerly a music hall turn with occasional big contest legitimate fights performed in theatres and sports stadiums, became an entertainment divorced from these older cultural forms. The mode of representation, pleasures and structures established on the music hall stage continued to be felt in professional wrestling,

¹ Mark Hustwitt, "Caught in a Whirlpool of Aching Sound": The Production of Dance Music in Britain in the 1920s', *Popular Music*, 3, (1983): p.8; Selina Todd, 'Young Women, Work, and Leisure in Interwar England', *The Historical Journal*, 48/3, (2005): p.803; Adrian Horn, *Juke Box Britain: Americanisation and Youth Culture, 1945 – 60*, (Manchester, 2009): pp.14-20.

² Stephen G. Jones, 'The Economic Aspects of Association Football in England, 1918 – 39', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 1/3 (1984): pp.286-299; Mike Huggins, 'BBC Radio and Sport 1922–39', *Contemporary British History*, 21/4 (2007): pp. 491-515; Mike Huggins, 'Projecting the Visual: British Newsreels, Soccer and Popular Culture, 1918 -39', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 24/1, (2007): pp.80-102.

however. Section I of this chapter details the contexts in which this happened, paying particular to attention to the importation of the sport from America.

During the inter-war years, all-in wrestling was a massively popular entertainment attracting large crowds in many urban centres. As a result of its successes, two archives have left us with a particularly vivid and detailed account of the performances in the period: the Mass Observation's (MO) Worktown project and the London County Council's box concerning all-in wrestling. The MO grew out of a desire to understand the pleasures and cultures of the urban working classes. A detailed study of Bolton's various everyday practices were conducted in the 1930s. In a sharp break from earlier chapters, the MO provides the first detailed set of personal responses from audiences and their reasons for watching the sport. In keeping with other MO methods,³ Bolton's all-in wrestling fans were invited to write to the project answering the question, 'What do you like about all-in wrestling?' Entrants, local newspaper advertisements suggested, could 'make it short and snappy or long and argumentative. Anything you like. The Prizes will go to those whose replies are judged to be the most straightforward and sincere'.⁴ Clearly, this was a self-selecting sample, and considering the judges were the all-in wrestling promoters, those writing to the competition may have been inclined to write positive reviews, although some attendees used the opportunity to complain about the conduct of wrestlers and audiences. The MO provides a reasonably detailed overview of the multifarious, at times contradictory, ways audiences could read and enjoy all-in wrestling. Through these records, as well as using film footage from the period, we are able to (re)construct a detailed account of the performance and pleasures experienced by audiences. Section II of this chapters looks at the form, structure and content of all-in wrestling; it assesses the reasons for its popularity and the meanings contained in the performance.

In a theme now familiar, reformers, amateur sporting bodies, the national press, and local government were critical of all-in wrestling. Specifically, the London County Council (LCC) placed the sport under a large degree of scrutiny. The council's accounts, detailing complaints, letters and internal memos, offers a snapshot of a sport lacking the support of its wider field. Attempts to regulate wrestling have left a comprehensive critical view of wrestling. Debates about popular culture and rational

³ Ian Gazeley and Claire Langhamer, 'The Meanings of Happiness in Mass Observation's Bolton', *History Workshop Journal*, 75/1, (2013): p.166.

⁴ Ibid.

recreation were felt across the twentieth century, although the changing terrain of the cultural landscape produced new targets of panic: mechanical, mass, and American forms of media. All-in wrestling managed to bridge the gap between old concerns (sex, blood and violence) and new (Americanisation). No wonder it was so popular. Section III draws on LCC accounts to offer an analysis of these attitudes, continuities and changes.

Finally, section IV details the Mountevans committee and emergence of Joint Promotions after the Second World War. Professional wrestling had never had an obvious, understandable sporting body or institution. The sport, furthermore, flagrantly abused, mocked and subverted the values of the sporting field. In theory, the Mountevans committee's job was to rehabilitate the sport, banishing seedier elements and showmanship. It was the institution other sporting groups had been clamouring for in wrestling since the 1890s. In reality, the group transformed the image of wrestling to an extent, but in the process showmanship and performed contests continued and a practical monopoly of promoters, Joint Promotions, was born. The group monopolised wrestlers and buildings. When television restructured the power within the sporting field, Joint Promotions were in pole position to acquire lucrative broadcasting contracts.

I. SLAM BANG

To fully understand professional wrestling's development in England in the interwar years we must first look at professional wrestling in America.⁵ Just as the Victorian period saw transatlantic culture arrive in various forms, in the first half of the twentieth century it became increasingly difficult to untangle British culture from its American counterparts. Hollywood films were the most popular in cinemas, jazz music could be heard in the dance halls, and American consumer products garnered an iconic status.⁶ American sports, too, began to find receptive audiences and participants on this side of this side of the Atlantic, though its impact and legacy was perhaps less clear-cut than Hollywood's dominance in British cinemas. The 1930s especially witnessed a number of sports which were imported from America, or perhaps more accurately drew inspiration from their American counterparts. American influenced sports would enjoy mixed destinies in terms of lasting popularity in England, but the decade saw the introduction of speedway, the professionalization and league formation of a North

⁵ Snape, 'All-In Wrestling', p.1421.

⁶ Ted Collins, 'The North American Influence on Food Manufacturing in Britain, 1880 – 1939', in Yves Segers, Jan Bieleman and Erik Buyst (eds), *Exploring the Food Chain: Food Production and Food Processing in Western Europe, 1850 – 1990*, (Turnhout, 2009): p.155.

American inspired hockey league, and the boom years for Baseball after decades of mixed successes.⁷ Later in this chapter I will explore the political response and criticisms of American cultural texts, but for now it is important to place professional wrestling's re-emergence in the 1930s in this context. Though professional wrestling is not a product of any one nation, what was being presented to audiences in the 1930s was self-consciously selling an apparently American cultural text to audiences increasingly familiar with America through a myriad of popular cultural texts.

Needless to say, I do not have the space to write a full history of professional wrestling in America in the years following the First World War. What is important to highlight is that promoters were recognising that the performance elements that had been introduced on the music hall and vaudeville stages were central to professional wrestling's continued success. Marcus Griffin's 1937 book, a journalist in a long line of writers who would 'expose' wrestling's 'secrets', claims that by the 1920s the gold dust trio, composed of Ed 'Strangler' Lewis, Billy Sandow and Toots Mondt, had taken hold of American wrestling. According to Griffin's rather excited account, Toots Mondt took inspiration from the style of fighting employed by Figg in London, and felt that a professional wrestling should 'take the best features of boxing and the holds from Graeco-Roman, combine these with the old time lumber camp style of fighting and call it "Slam Bang Western Style Wrestling"'.⁸ Slam Bang Western Style wrestling, as the name suggests, was more interested in excitement, hyperbole and action rather than rules and amateur ideals. Drawing on the methods and styles that had been established on the fairgrounds, circuses and music hall stage, all matches were controlled by promoters, narratives were of principal import, and larger than life characters were presented to eager audiences.⁹ Professional wrestling had survived its post-war slump and, with a renewed energy, become a profitable and exciting attraction.

Developments in theatrical entertainments that were selling out vaudeville theatres in America were likely to be tested on English audiences within a few years. Towards the end of the 1920s English audiences were (re)introduced to this 'new' American wrestling style. Newsreels featuring the exploits of American wrestlers were

⁷ Osmo Kivinen, Jani Mesikämnen, and Timo Metsä-Tokila, 'A Case Study in Cultural Diffusion: British Ice Hockey and American Influences in Europe', *Sport in Society*, 4/1, (2001): pp. 49 – 62; Daniel Bloyce, "'Glorious Rounders": The American Baseball Invasion of England in Two World Wars – Unappealing American Exceptionalism', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25/4, (2008): pp.387-405.

⁸ Marcus Griffin, *Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce*, (Chicago, 1937): p.27.

⁹ For a thorough history of American professional wrestling in this period see Beekman, *Ringside*, pp.51-71.

featured before the main features at cinemas, and there was a positive response from the public that had not been shown towards the sport for over a decade. Atholl Oakley, reflecting on the impact of American wrestling on English cinema audiences, described:

In London, in 1929, I saw the film of Sonneberg's defence of his title. There was no doubt concerning its impact on critical West End audiences. They literally gasped at the speed and ferocity of the champion – a master of the spectacular flying tackle and a former all-American footballer.¹⁰

Considering the transatlantic culture that had developed in the nineteenth century, and the apparent excitement that newsreels of American matches were having on the British public, it seemed inevitable that the 'new' style wrestling would be launched in England. After a chance encounter and impromptu match between Atholl Oakley and the American Ben Sherman, Oakley and Henry Irslinger decided to present professional wrestling to English audiences.¹¹

On December 15th 1930, all-in wrestling was introduced to the English public in two cities on the same evening: at the Olympia in London and at Belle Vue in Manchester.¹² The two locations were telling. The Olympia had grown in the 1900s and 1910s as England's first large scale boxing arena. According to Sheard, 'before the development of Olympia, boxing in this country had been largely restricted to relatively small halls and clubs and its commercial possibilities were correspondingly limited'.¹³ These commercial developments in boxing were doing a great deal to undermine the National Sporting Club's (NSC) already limited control over boxing. As we will see later in this chapter, the NSC were instrumental in the formation of the British Boxing Board of Control in 1918 which was then reformed in 1929 to offer complete control over the professional version of the sport.¹⁴ Belle Vue in Manchester had been opened in the nineteenth century as a pleasure gardens and zoo and during the first quarter of the nineteenth century opened sporting stadiums and halls. It was one of the first stadiums in England to adopt speedway and greyhound racing, Australian and American imports that were popular with working class audiences. All-in wrestling became immensely popular throughout the 1930s and Oakley and Irslinger became just one set of promoters in a competitive market. All-in wrestling exhibitions found they could tour

¹⁰ Oakeley, *Blue Blood*, p.28.

¹¹ Ibid, p.30

¹² Ibid, p.36

¹³ Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process*, p.289.

¹⁴ Matthew Taylor, 'Boxers United: Trade Unionism in British Boxing in the 1930s', *Sport in History*, 29/3, (2009): p.459-460.

and make use of the growing commercial venues and boxing halls around the country.¹⁵ Places like the Turton Street Stadium in Bolton, the White City Stadium in Hull, the Winter Gardens in Clapham, and St James Hall in Newcastle could all provide boxing and wrestling exhibitions while occasionally doubling-up as other places of leisure (particularly dancing halls and bingo halls). In the following section I want to analyse why all-in wrestling was so attractive to these audiences.

II. ALL-IN

All-in wrestling continued pleasures and forms of presentation that wrestling and sparring performances had developed in circuses, fairgrounds and music halls of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Codes and conventions unique to professional wrestling were also crystallised at this time. The most crucial influence on wrestling, and it is one that is sometimes easy to forget, was sport. All-in wrestling represented and sold itself as a legitimate sport. It drew on the language of sport, traded on the capital and ideology of sport (strength, bravery, and so on). It used boxing halls and other sporting arenas, and local and national government treated it and licensed it as a sport. Finally, it existed in the sporting field relationally to other sports. The central narrative of an all-in wrestling match pitted men and women, as either individuals or teams, against other men and women in a physical competition. In all programmes, audiences were reminded of the rules of wrestling.

A fall is deemed to have been obtained when a man's shoulders have been pinned or held flat to the mat for a period of three seconds counted by the referee. A match is decided in favour of the wrestler who obtains two falls, or two submissions, or one knock out.¹⁶

In addition to this basic structure, further rules and regulations were listed, including the disallowing of oiled bodies, warnings against wrestling outside of the ring, the use of foreign objects to hit opponents with, and assaulting the referee. In reality, though, many of these rules were a tantalising glimpse of what one could *expect* to see as part of the show.

These most basic rules underpinned professional wrestling narratives for the twentieth century. Their simplicity was one of the reasons for wrestling's popularity during this time. Everyone – men, women and children – could attend a wrestling match and understand the rules, narrative form and structure. Professional wrestling was, first

¹⁵ Taylor, 'Boxers United', p.461.

¹⁶ 'Rules of "Free Style" Wrestling' reproduced in Potts, *Headlocks and Handbags*, p.8.

and foremost, a sport that could only be defined as a spectator sport; the possibility of amateur professional wrestling, in the 1930s at least, seems laughable. Bourdieu has claimed that spectators who have played a sport in the past are privileged watching it insofar as their knowledge provides them with insight. ‘The “connoisseur”’, he argues, ‘has schemes of perception and appreciation which enable him to see what the layman cannot see’.¹⁷ Amateur wrestling and professional wrestling’s divorce at this time allowed *all* audiences to enjoy the spectacle that was being presented. Bourdieu also claims that:

The more superficial the perception, the less it finds its pleasures in the spectacle contemplated in itself and for itself, and the more it is drawn to the search for the “sensational”, the cult of obvious feats and visible virtuosity and, above all, the more exclusivity it is concerned with that other dimension of sporting spectacle, suspense and anxiety as to the result, thereby encouraging players and especially organisers to aim for victory at all costs.¹⁸

The ‘cult of obvious feats’ rings rather neatly with Barthes’ famous and oft-quoted assertion that all-in wrestling is a ‘spectacle of excess’.¹⁹ All audience members were equal at an all-in contest. No one could draw on memory or experience to appreciate the subtleties of the game. The grand gestures of all-in were specifically performed so that the ‘layman’ could appreciate and understand. Connoisseurs, those who had grown up playing the games at elite public schools, simply did not exist. There were no excessive rules and regulations. The sport did not get involved in discussions on regional wrestling holds and variations. Technical nuances were removed completely. Gone were the encumbering ‘rules and fine points,’ one audience claimed in his postcard to the Mass Observation, ‘such as in the case in boxing and catch-as-catch can wrestling’.²⁰

All-in wrestling continued to be attractive for many of the reasons that had made spectator sport popular in the previous centuries, but removed some of the barriers for entry and appreciation. The sport was the product of a history in which amateur ideals, sporting bureaucracies and muscular Christians had managed little impact; here was a sport that was solely about spectacle and spectators. If the most popular spectator sports, like boxing football and rugby, promised action, then so too did all-in wrestling. Now, though, promoters and wrestlers could control the length and pace of a match,

¹⁷ Bourdieu, ‘Sport and Social Class’, p.829.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.15.

²⁰ Correspondence, MO, box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

heightening the pleasure for all those present. Cochran and other showmen had identified the problem earlier in the century: often a wrestling match could disappoint audiences. While he had done all he could to minimise this, in big fights there was still a tendency for long tedious matches that could last for hours or matches that lasted minutes, with audiences feeling short changed on both counts. All-in removed this problem completely by making sure *all* contests were performed. Matches contained everything that made an exciting sporting contest and attempted to remove the unknown variables that competitive sporting competitions suffered. In a wrestling match, as Jenkins notes about 1990s American wrestling, ‘events are staged to ensure maximum emotional impact, structured around a consistent reversal of fortunes and satisfying climax’.²¹ One respondent to the MO claimed that they enjoyed wrestling because it was ‘so fast and full that one cannot release attention for a second’.²²

The visceral thrill of violence, that sporting attraction that the Victorians had done so much to regulate, was placed back into all-in and then intensified. With the risk of permanent injury curbed, although by no means removed completely, professional wrestling revelled in blood and mayhem. Violence, as this chapter will expand on shortly, was something that captured the attention and imagination of moral reformers in the interwar years. But to not acknowledge the pleasures of this would risk not fully understanding all-in wrestling. For one audience member it was these aspects that were not present in other sports which were part of all-in’s appeal. ‘The bowl on each other’s heads’, he wrote, and wrestlers ‘breaking the stool’ were two of the reasons why he went to watch the wrestling.²³ In a particularly revealing passage, Atholl Oakley summarised how audiences responded to a typical contest.

[I]n All-in Wrestling it was not done to fall down on the floor of the ring screaming “Foul” every time anyone got hurt. Nor were the fights stopped because of blood. In fact at Newcastle if the fights did not get rough the fans used to chant “We want blood, we want blood”.²⁴

²¹ Jenkins, ‘Never Trust a Snake’, p.40.

²² Correspondence, MO, box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

²³ Correspondence, MO, box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

²⁴ Oakley, *Blue Blood*, p.38.

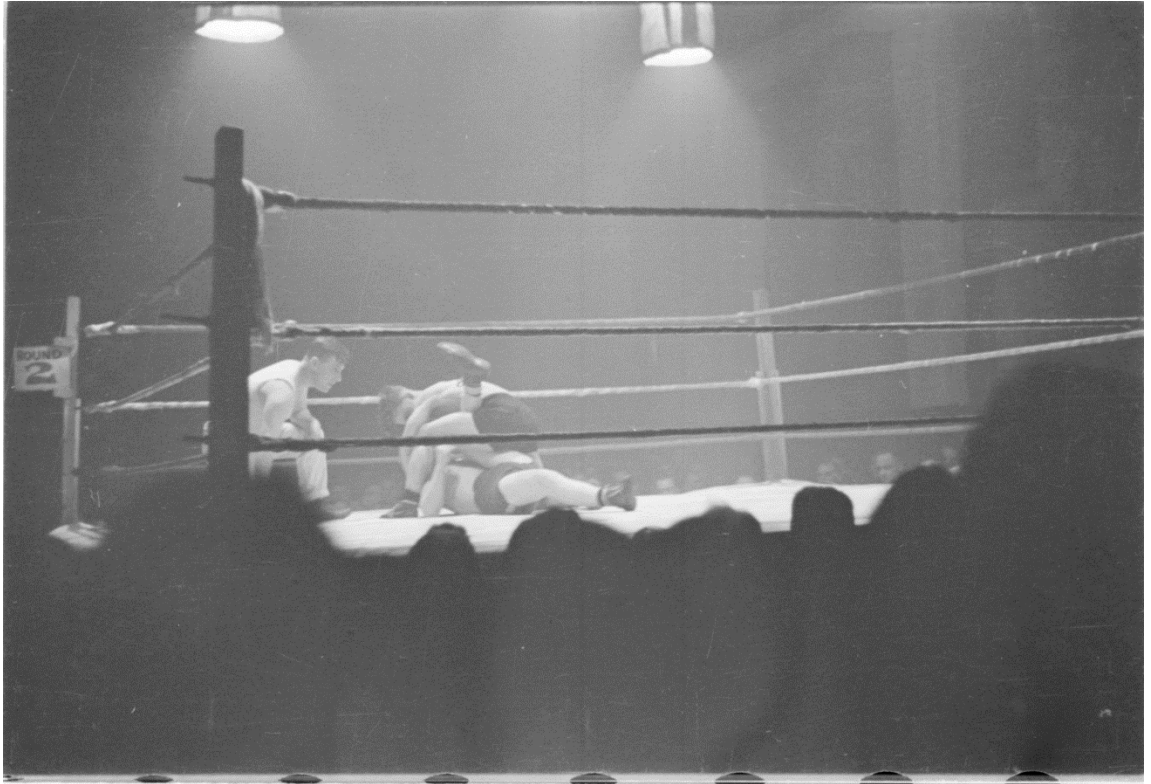


Figure 5: All-in wrestling at Bolton 1, 1937.

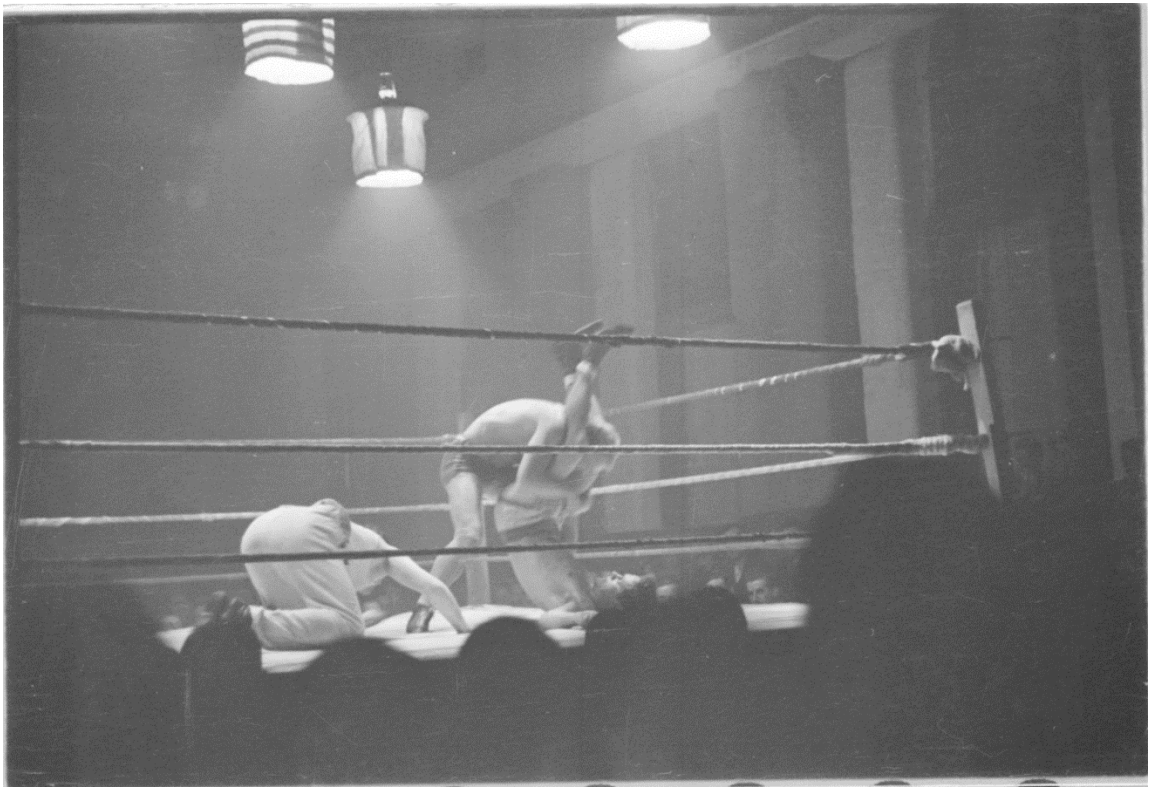


Figure 6: All-in wrestling at Bolton 2, 1937.

With the knowledge that wrestling is performed we are able to understand that blood was an attraction of the spectacle. It is hard to say for sure how blood was generated in these contests, but in wrestling in the second half of the twentieth century it was produced by concealed razor blades cutting the top of the forehead. Just as blood was a key appeal for the bear garden and amphitheatre audiences in the eighteenth century, blood on the stage offers a diverse set of meanings and produces a range of responses in audiences. Lucy Nevitt captures the multifarious meanings that blood in professional wrestling elicits. Blood ‘is striking, noticeable, intriguing, disconcerting...[it] generates physical, emotional and psychological responses’.²⁵ Violence and blood, even in the contained and performed context of the all-in wrestling ring, produced an exciting and visceral reaction for those in attendance. This was true in all sports. But in professional wrestling, blood is used as a deliberate prop and a narrative device rather than a by-product of the contest itself.

The violence, blood and mayhem of the all-in wrestling contest stood in direct contrast to the amateur ideal that had been established in the previous century. As we have seen, the music hall stage provided a venue in which classes were parodied and mocked.²⁶ Music hall wrestling used villainous wrestlers and all-in continued this approach. Where amateurism encouraged respect for the rules and the referee at all times, in an all-in match cheating seemed to be a common refrain and weapons were used indiscriminately. There was little respect for the regulations, even if they were printed on the back of programmes; the publishing and distribution of rules may have in fact served to inform the audiences *which* rules were being broken. Sportsmanship and fair-play, those grandiose pillars of amateurism, could not be found on a typical night at the wrestling. With a distance that only a mass observer could muster, they described the antics of one match: ‘P—still has stool so B—picks up water bowl and with a terrific bang lands it on P—’s head. P—drops almost unconscious’.²⁷

Not all wrestlers broke the rules, though. All-in wrestlers, in another development inherited from the music hall stage, played very specific roles in which good or villainous characteristics were embodied. Audiences always found villains to be a highly popular aspect of the show.²⁸ Roland Barthes, in his exceedingly influential

²⁵ Nevitt, ‘Popular Entertainments and the Spectacle of Bleeding’, pp.78 – 92

²⁶ Andy Medhurst, ‘Music Hall and British Cinema’, in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: Ninety Years of British Cinema*, (London, 1986): p.172.

²⁷ Report, MO, box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

²⁸ Oakley, *Blue Blood*, p.95.

description of wrestling in 1950s France, claims that the roles of the wrestlers were clearly marked: 'As in the theater, each physical type expresses to excess the part which has been assigned to the contestant'.²⁹ Costume, stance, body shape, and a number of other theatrical devices, all served to clearly mark the separation of heroes (or 'blue-eyes') and villains. This is certainly true of English wrestling in the interwar years. Clearly, those wrestlers who cheated would almost always be playing the role of villain. One respondent to the MO described the pre-match rituals that took place: 'wrestlers [refused] to fight until their opponents nails have been cut, or grease wiped off his back, this latter act causing intense excitement before the fight has commenced'.³⁰ Other accounts describe wrestlers, 'challenging and spitting on the audience, dancing, shouting and gurning across the ring in a temper'.³¹

A popular marker of villainy was the 'foreign menace'. The 1930s produced an intriguing mixture of the Orientalist images that had developed during the music hall years and characters pertinent to inter-war England. One respondent for the MO described the villainous performers he enjoyed seeing: 'a German wrestler giving the "nazi" salute and getting the "rasberry" in return. "Ali Baba" taking out his mat and praying to "Allah"'.³² It was hardly nuanced political debate, but the world of wrestling is hardly the forum for such discussions. Instead, Jenkins argues that 'each character stands for something [and] draws symbolic meaning by borrowing stereotypes already in broader circulation'.³³ This was palpable during wrestling contests in Bolton.

The performance of identities was a continuation of how pugilism had been displayed in earlier centuries. During the early modern period, wrestlers and boxers had represented their local villages or professions. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the most successful prize-fighters used the discourse of England vs. *Other*. By the twentieth century, costumes had been added to aid these performances of nationality, race and Otherness. With professional wrestling's outright exaggerations, these themes found manifestations in which popular political anxieties could be played out in a near-pantomime manner.

²⁹ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.18.

³⁰ Correspondence, MO, box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

³¹ Correspondence, MO, box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

³² Correspondence, MO, box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

³³ Jenkins, 'Never Trust a Snake', p.57.

Henry Jenkins, in his discussion of modern American professional wrestling, is right:³⁴ the sport is a form of melodrama, but one not necessarily directly influenced by theatrical melodrama. Rather, melodrama had influenced sports reporting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, turning sportsmen and women into celebrities-cum-quasi-fictional-characters. Often, these celebrities allowed for tensions about race, nationality, class and gender, as well as debates about historically specific questions, to be projected and explored. Thereafter, in the circuses, fairgrounds and music halls, in keeping with other performers of the day, these characters were displayed to audiences with an embellished and exaggerated manner, performing the quasi-fictional characters. Until the early 1930s, wrestlers-as-celebrities continued this arrangement, with the public persona loosely matching and mapping onto a private persona. Newspaper reports discussed and described wrestlers and their matches. Madrali, while still occupying a theatrical villainy and exoticised Otherness, was assumed to exist outside of the text. His character was an embellishment rather than an out-and-out fiction. When all-in wrestling became a cultural form in its own right, newspapers were increasingly reluctant to report on a 'sport' that was not a sport at all. For the first three years of the 1930s, *The Times* had reported on all-in wrestling, but as it became apparent that the sport was 'fixed' newspapers became wary and reports were stopped, claiming:

All-in wrestling is, after all, only a variation of acrobatics, and acrobatics especially of the transatlantic type, are the staple diet of the music hall today. Let us admit then that these champions (and there are a vast number of them) have properly heroic names – Atholl Oakeley and the Black Devil, for instance, might have walked straight out of the pages of romantic fiction – but their wrestling is too lacking in the graces and too redolent of what looks like, but probably in reality is not, crude brutality to be included in the catalogue of heroic sports.³⁵

Thereafter, it was increasingly only dedicated magazines which carried articles and reports. Such publications furthered wrestling narratives and characterisations. Wrestling celebrities increasingly became fictionalised characters.

Professional wrestlers, then, were celebrity at its most condensed form. It was impossible for audiences to link private and public persona because the text denied the very existence of the wrestler's private persona. This separation was at its most potent in masked performers. Masks operated as pure symbol. There were no autobiographical notes in newspapers and no sense of the performer outside of the text. Peter Gotz, an

³⁴ Jenkins, 'Never Trust a Snake'.

³⁵ Snape, 'All-in Wrestling in Inter-War Britain', p.1423.

amateur champion of the sport, decried the fact that ‘the promoters chief aim is to secure the services of big, muscular well built young men, regardless of their wrestling knowledge’. Further, he claimed, ‘they are often then billed as champions of this or that country, county or continent with such prefixes as;- Butcher, Killer, Phantom or Devil’.³⁶ Audiences were provided with this information by an introduction that was almost always entirely fictional. Wrestling announcers, in fact, were not far removed from the fairground and freak show professors, asking audiences to suspend their disbelief and enjoy the show. Enjoyment, though, just as it had done on the fairground, often took the form of picking apart the performance. One writer to the MO explained that what they enjoyed most about the wrestling was ‘trying to determine what or who is beneath the costumes and masks, which several wrestlers appear in’.³⁷

Villainous wrestlers could also be identified by their relationship to the referee. One writer to the MO excitedly, and not without glee, described wrestlers ‘tearing the referees shirt off, jumping on it, and then throwing the referee out of the ring’.³⁸ Another commentator explained with frustration that matches were frequently returning ‘a verdict of “no contest”’. Why. Because the referee as been unable to five one, he has been “out” himself struck by one of the contestants, or thrown of the ring’.³⁹ No contests were a useful promotion technique for professional wrestling because it allowed for a wrestler to record a moral victory while generating excitement and interest in future fights. Yet we shouldn’t underestimate the joy some spectators took from watching a referee being abused. Disrespect for the referee also served another purpose: it mocked the loftiness of authority figures and parodied the amateur ethos of the Victorian and Edwardian period.⁴⁰ Just as wrestlers were trained to garner particular responses from excited audiences, the referee had a particular job in the performance: to be abused by wrestlers and audiences alike. There were elements of this in other sports. Ross McKibbin explains English football crowds were well-known for being ‘contemptuous of the...referees eyesight, hearing and mental capacity’.⁴¹ That referees seem to have taken the brunt of abuse in both sports is telling: the opportunity granted to disenfranchised members of society to laugh at, mock, and shout insults at an authority figure without recourse must have, and remains, part of the appeal of some

³⁶ Letter from Peter Gotz to Clyde Wilson, 20th March, 1933, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

³⁷ Correspondence, MO, box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

³⁸ Correspondence, MO, Box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

³⁹ Correspondence, MO, Box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

⁴⁰ Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.303.

⁴¹ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures, England 1918 – 1951*, (Oxford, 1998): p.343.

organised spectator sports. All-in wrestling upped the stakes further, however, and it was unlikely for a night of wrestling to pass without the referee falling victim to physical violence.

Noise and commotion were another appeal of spectator sport. The football crowds described by McKibbin took great pleasure in shouting abusive but undoubtedly amusing comments about opposing players and the referee,⁴² a point which had always, naturally, upset the amateur and athleticism purists. All-in actively encouraged audiences to get involved. Before the contests began there would be cries of ‘bring out the bulls’.⁴³ Throughout the matches there were shouts and catcalls from the audience. Wrestlers often indulged in ‘gouging, punching and kicking whilst on the floor amongst the audience’.⁴⁴ In an interview with the MO, a promoter described the skill needed in order to generate the appropriate reactions during the night. ‘The crowd is really tricky,’ he claimed, ‘first thing to give them is a favourite, so long as they can cheer him and boo the opponent everything is alright and they enjoy themselves thoroughly’.⁴⁵ In some ways, wrestling maintained the participatory culture that had engendered in the eighteenth century fairground and crystallised in the nineteenth century music hall. At the very least, all-in audiences were a big part of the performance.

Amid the screams and shouts and reverberating around the hall, laughter also had its place on a night out at the wrestling. While it would never have been openly discussed in this manner, wrestling promoters were keen to offer the variety of an evening’s entertainment that could compete with rival leisure venues. Comedy, a woefully under-theorised component of sport spectatorship, was an important part of an all-in wrestling performances. Barthes acknowledges this in his work, but does not dwell on it, suggesting that, all-in wrestling is akin to pantomime: ‘some wrestlers, who are great comedians, entertain as much as a Moliere character’.⁴⁶ Most wrestling cards had one ‘comedy bout between a couple of lightweights’.⁴⁷ Professional wrestling’s longer relationship with circus and music hall had clearly had influence on its presentation: all-in wrestling cards contained an element of variety, incorporating different performance styles and traditions into matches. The sport’s adoption of physical clowning and comedy, moreover, could also be seen in other entertainers and

⁴² McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.343.

⁴³ Report, MO, Box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

⁴⁴ Letter from Peter Gotz to Clyde Wilson, 20th March, 1933, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Snape, ‘All-In Wrestling’, p.1426.

⁴⁶ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.19.

⁴⁷ Correspondence, MO, box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

entertainments that had emerged out of the halls.⁴⁸ The boxing scenes perfected by Charlie Chaplin were not, stylistically, far from the comedy wrestling matches one would typically see at a night out at all-in.

The final pleasure and performance technique carried over from Victorian popular culture was the display of bodies. Here, sparring exhibition and wrestling's longer history of incorporating Grecian statutes and strong-man acts into their performance is important: men and their muscles were an enticing aspect of the show, attracting both male and female audiences. One man enjoyed the show because it took him back to his 'young days when men were men! and not the namby-pamby...artificial-hair-curling variety that is most prevalent in the present generation'.⁴⁹ Masculinity's perceived crisis, that men in the past were real men which can now only be seen in the ring, was part of the attraction, for this audience member at least.

More generally, the display of men's bodies, half-naked, muscular and oiled, might have accounted for a report which suggested, not without some bemusement, that 'a good proportion of those present included women'.⁵⁰ One respondent to the MO suggested she attended 'to see *real* men'.⁵¹ Another offered that 'no other sport has such fine husky specimens of manhood as wrestling. I find it such a change to see real he-men after the spineless and insipid men one meets ordinarily'.⁵² Roger Silverstone is right to claim these pleasures as erotic, using the all-in wrestling descriptions to write with his usual aplomb about the attraction of popular culture: 'when the raw and physical excitement of life, of the live, the explosion of strength or skill or beauty transcends the normal and placid routine pleasures'.⁵³ Moreover, the performance might be read as both a celebration of masculinity and a pastiche of it. The music hall had always had a reasonably playful attitude to gender, marriage and sexuality, allowing and encouraging performances in drag.⁵⁴ Describing professional wrestling in the 1990s, Sharon Mazer argues that, 'to some degree, a professional wrestler is always in drag, always enacting a parody of masculinity at the same time that he epitomizes it'.⁵⁵ This might have been part of the appeal for women. Considering all-in wrestling used

⁴⁸ Robert James, 'Popular Film-going in Britain in the Early 1930s', *Journal of Contemporary History* 46/2 (2011): pp.271-287.

⁴⁹ Correspondence, MO, box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

⁵⁰ Confidential statement sent to Captain Bertram Mills, May 1933, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

⁵¹ Emphasis in original, correspondence, MO, box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

⁵² Correspondence, MO, box SxMOA1/5/E/8.

⁵³ Roger Silverstone, *Why Study the Media?*, (London, 1999): p.50-51.

⁵⁴ Oram, *Her Husband Was a Woman!*, p.35-43

⁵⁵ Mazer, *Sport and Spectacle*, p.100.

humour to pastiche that traditional pillar of middle-class masculine seriousness, amateurism and sport, I do not think it is outside the realm of possibility that some women and men took pleasure in watching those values be lampooned.

All-in wrestling, then, offered a broad set of pleasures. It shared a mode of display and performance from a diverse set of cultural forms. It both drew on and parodied spectator sport, retained and embellished its music hall roots, and offered men's, and to a lesser extent women's, bodies for consumption in an eroticised manner. It revelled in violence, blood and mayhem. Professional wrestling was anything but rational. It wilfully eschewed discourses of fair play and openly embraced professionalism in its crudest form. For its critics, it retained and encouraged the worst excesses of the music hall, circus and fairground, excelling in sex and violence. Inevitably, it captured the attention of reformers in interwar England. It is these responses to which we now turn.

III. WRESTLING VS REFORMERS

Cultural forms, subfields and social groups that exist on the fringes of a field, challenging the dominant views without ever seeking to gain ultimate control, will almost always distress other members of that field. Before we consider the sex, violence, and excited audiences that the performance encouraged, all-in wrestling's positions on the fringes of the field of sport, and its history with the music hall and theatres, was always going to concern dominant sporting powers and the elite in the field of power. Professional wrestling did not have a national controlling body, it did not conform to how prominent voices felt sport and sportsmen should behave, and, for many, it was a sign of the corruption that was engendered in sport by showmanship, professionalism and spectatorship. Professional wrestling, as the clerical collar had written in the first years of the century, had proven to be a miserable weakness on the part of the universities and public schools. Throughout the 1930s, it attracted criticism from other sporting bodies and institutions, sports journalists, and members of local and national government: questions were asked in the House of Commons, and internal panels were set up in the London County Council (LCC).

To illustrate the disapproval registered by the sport, it is worth contrasting the fates of professional wrestling against its sibling, professional boxing. Professional boxing, never held in great esteem by local or national authorities, had gone some distance, first in 1918 and then fully in 1929, to gaining a degree of respectability from

some quarters by replacing the old-boys style National Sporting Club and instituting the British Boxing Board of Control (BBBC). The BBBC was created to help ‘tackle some of the abuses of the sport’.⁵⁶ The BBBC had arose over a complex and fraught period in which the NSC’s powers had diminished ever more quickly as boxing emerged as a viable and commercial spectacle.⁵⁷ Licensing boxing competitions on strict conditions was the central concern of the BBBC during its early years. When an American attempted to promote a fight at the Royal Albert Hall outside of the BBBC’s control, *The Times* responded by claiming:

All that is best among the professionals themselves and all that is in the best interests of the boxers and their craft will, automatically almost, range itself on the side of control. Even the promoters, or anyway those who have a vision extending beyond the pay boxes of today and tomorrow, will realise that, in the end, professional boxing will fizzle out like professional wrestling and all other uncontrolled sports if anyone can do anything if there be money in it.⁵⁸

The remarks made clear that sport pursued simply in the name of profit and spectatorship was a habit that needed to be curbed. A controlling body’s role was to upkeep the rules and regulations while discouraging the excesses of commercialisation. In other words, institutions maintained, or at the very least managed, the sporting field’s precarious and negotiated structures of power. Commercialism was gaining traction within the field but it almost always had to be in a limited and controlled form.

Professional wrestling did not, and never really had, a board of control or other such governance. This had been, and continued to be, viewed as evidence of wrestling’s ‘corruption’. The British Wrestling Association, set up by Henry Irslinger, was the closest the sport came to a central body in the period. It was, for all intents and purposes, a business organisation that operated under the grandiose guise of a respectable ruling organisation.⁵⁹ Oakley claims anyone who applied for a license to wrestle was granted one from the association.⁶⁰ More obviously, rival wrestling companies produced shows without a licence from the group.

Requests were made to sporting bodies by the LCC to take over the control and running of all-in wrestling. Their national structures, established bureaucracies, and

⁵⁶ Stephen G. Jones, ‘State Intervention in Sport and Leisure in Britain between the Wars’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 22/1, (1987): p.169; McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.366

⁵⁷ Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process*, p.287-230.

⁵⁸ Quoted in *ibid*, p.303.

⁵⁹ Oakley, *Blue Blood*, p.40.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.86.

respectable members, it was hoped, would be able to bring wrestling back in line with the wider sporting field. The National Amateur Wrestling Association, a group that had been conceived decades after other amateur sporting groups, had neither the desire nor jurisdiction to take control over the professional circuit. In 1933, the LCC asked the National Amateur Wrestling Association, who had previously written to the council asking for all-in to be banned,⁶¹ whether they would be willing undertake control of all-in. They refused.⁶² In April 1934 the LCC asked the BBBC to regulate professional wrestling. They also refused. Considering that the BBBC had banned all-in wrestling from its cards in 1933,⁶³ this seems to have been wishful thinking on the part of the LCC rather than a realistic offer. It was a situation that distressed local government. In a 1934 letter to the House of Commons, an LCC clerk argued,

Unlike other forms of public entertainment such as music, dancing, stage plays, boxing and cinematograph entertainments, “all-in” wrestling or any other form of wrestling is at present uncontrolled either by the council or any other authority.⁶⁴

The types of audience attracted to all-in appears to have further worried observers. Rational recreation, in various guises, was still an influential ideology in debates about entertainment, popular culture and pleasure.⁶⁵ All-in wrestling attracted the types of audiences – the working-classes, women, and the young – considered to be most at risk from the corrupting influences of mass and commercialised culture.⁶⁶ It was certainly an attraction that catered, if not exclusively, then predominately, for the lower-middle and working classes. Venues that displayed wrestling often featured other working class entertainments: boxing and bingo being two obvious examples. In addition, these venues were often in working class, urban areas.

Perhaps less obvious was the role gender played in constructing all-in wrestling fandom. After the monumental changes to society that followed the First World War, Robert James has identified women, notably working class women, as being the ‘main beneficiaries of...changes to society’s consumption patterns’.⁶⁷ Of course, such statements should be accompanied by large caveats. Studies continue to stress that women, particularly married working-class women, had less leisure time than their male

⁶¹ Letter from The National Amateur Wrestling Association, Mar. 1933, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

⁶² Letter from The National Amateur Wrestling Association, May 1933, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

⁶³ Anon., ‘Boxing: Board of Control Meeting’, *The Times*, 7 Oct. (1933): p. 7.

⁶⁴ Clerk’s letter to Hyde, 21 Mar., 1934, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

⁶⁵ Jeffrey Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth Century Britain*, (Basingstoke, 2002): p.61-62.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.61-62.

⁶⁷ Robert James, *Popular Culture and Working-Class Taste in Britain, 1930 – 39: A Round of Cheap Diversions?*, (Manchester, 2010): p.15.

counterparts, with domestic labour still occupying a central position in their lives.⁶⁸ Writers indicate, however, that women, especially younger women who had not yet married and thus did not have quite the same domestic duties as Mothers and housewives,⁶⁹ were avid consumers of commercialised popular cultural forms.⁷⁰ Sporting consumption habits of working class women in this period have been less documented, in part because of an inaccurate assumption that sport remained as the sole domain of men.⁷¹ With that said, there is some evidence to suggest that working-class women's gambling on sports increased in this first half of the twentieth century.⁷² Moreover, some sports promoters, like their cinema counterparts who they were in direct competition with, recognised this emerging market. In Manchester, speedway and greyhound racing offered discounted ticket prices to female spectators.⁷³ Yet we should be wary not to overstate women's involvement as sporting spectators. Jones goes so far to suggest that 'the football ground, boxing hall and speedway track remained firmly and unquestionably male preserves'.⁷⁴ However, we can also acknowledge that some sporting promoters were willing and eager to attract women, even if they were not wildly successful.

All-in promoters were part of this wider campaign to attract female spectators. Their campaigns, moreover, were more successful than other sporting entrepreneur's attempts. In Bolton, women were offered half-price tickets, much to chagrin of one writer to MO who took the opportunity to complain that, 'women should not be allowed in at half price. They take much of the enjoyment out of the bouts with their "cat-calls"''.⁷⁵ According to one committee at the London County Council, and described not without disgust, advertising deliberately targeted female consumers declaring all-in to be "The Men's Sport Women Adore".⁷⁶ Another commentator to the LCC claimed that 'a good proportion of those present included women who were as voracious in their

⁶⁸ Stephen G. Jones, 'Working-Class Sport in Manchester Between the Wars', in Richard Holt (ed.), *Sport and the Working Class in Modern Britain*, (Manchester, 1990): p.73.

⁶⁹ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.419.

⁷⁰ James, *Popular Culture and Working-Class Taste*, p.15.

⁷¹ Polley, *Moving the Goalposts*, p.89.

⁷² Rachel Dixey, 'Bingo in Britain: An Analysis of Gender and Class' in Jan McMillen (ed.) *Gambling Cultures: Studies in History and Interpretation*, (London, 1996): p.128.

⁷³ Jones, 'Working-Class Sport in Manchester', p.73.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Correspondence, MO, box SxMOA1/5/E/8

⁷⁶ Entertainments Committee's discussion with reps of the Met standing joint committee, 11th Dec, 1935, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

demands for the all-in system as many of the men present'.⁷⁷ The role of women in professional wrestling fandom has not gone unobserved in scholarship about the sport. Chad Dell, while placing his study in America in the late 1940s and 1950s, has also described in fascinating detail women's pleasures in the sport – his grandmother, as my own great-grandmother, were both devotees of the televised format. As well as the enjoying the display of men's bodies, as noted above, he suggests that the inherent melodrama of the performance, pitting flamboyant characters representing good and evil against one another, was a cultural and narrative form recognisable to women.⁷⁸ Promotional techniques like these, combined with the pleasures available in the text outlined above, meant that working-class women continued to offer a sizeable proportion of wrestling audiences for the much of the century.

Finally, adolescents and young people grew as an important demographic for a large number of popular cultural texts in this period. In his revisionist history of teenagers, David Fowler has persuasively argued that the emergence of adolescents as a distinct economic and social, and thus marketable, category was not the generally accepted 1950s but in fact the interwar years.⁷⁹ Like women, fears of the degrading effect mass and popular culture would have on the young were a recurring theme in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century.⁸⁰ Such debates can clearly be rooted in the interwar years. Young people, particularly in the 1930s, were attracted to all-in wrestling. In a 1935 meeting of the LCC's entertainment committee one representative summarised a particular view, arguing that 'it is a performance we think it is degrading; we have seen queues outside and the class of person who attends there in my cases are adolescent people, who we feel are likely to be influenced by this and influenced for the worse'.⁸¹

If the working-classes, women, and the young were perceived to be at risk from the corrupting forces of popular culture, what were they exactly at risk from? An immediate and striking point is that denigrations of all-in chimed with wider discourses about the degenerative effects of 'mass' culture that had grown in the 1920s and 1930s. The 'Americanisation' of English culture was a prominent fear amongst the middle

⁷⁷ Confidential statement sent to Captain Bertram Mills, May 1933, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

⁷⁸ Chad Dell, *The Revenge of Hatpin Mary: Women, Professional Wrestling and Fan Culture*, (New York, 2006): p.19.

⁷⁹ David Fowler, *The First Teenagers: The Lifestyles of Young Wage-Earners in Interwar Britain*, (London, 1995).

⁸⁰ Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture*, p.115.

⁸¹ Entertainments Committee's discussion with representatives from the Met standing joint committee, 11th Dec, 1935, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

classes, both on the left and right.⁸² Matthew Hilton, summarising the *Scrutiny* editors view, encapsulates a predominant opinion of the working classes: ‘slavish and unthinking followers of commodity capitalism; indeed, mechanization, modernity, America, suburbia and the ‘adman’s civilisation’ had promoted their own system of corrupt ethics’.⁸³ The prominence of American cinema was seen to be a particular threat. The fear of Americanisation had already resulted in the film Quota Act of 1927 that demanded a percentage of films shown in British cinemas to be of British origin. These consequences were felt in the ‘the rapid Americanization of vocabulary and idiom’,⁸⁴ and in 1927 the *Daily Mirror* captured this argument, ‘we have...several million people, mostly women, who, to all intents and purposes, are temporary American citizens’.⁸⁵

Criticisms of the Americanisation in all-in wrestling may not have been as pronounced as the criticisms that circulated around the cinema. However, the relationship between the two, not least because it was sometimes billed as American all-in and had first been seen in American newsreels, made it difficult to be ignored. If not in a literal sense, for many all-in wrestling simply *felt* American. Or, to put it another way, one critic posited that the spectacle was ‘wholly un-English’.⁸⁶ Similarly, *The Mirror* claimed in a report about all-in wrestling: “I don’t like the game AND I HOPE IT DOES NOT CATCH ON OVER HERE’.⁸⁷ It was for a good reason that Gerald Kersh, in his novel about a young English pimp, Harry Fabian, who unsuccessfully tried to make his millions in the all-in wrestling business, let the character speak with an exaggerated American accent.⁸⁸ This view of wrestling fans as wannabe-Americans who had been intoxicated by the glare of glossy and unsubstantial American culture was not dissimilar to Richard Hoggart’s famous formulation of working class lads in the 1950s:

[W]aggle one shoulder or stare, as desperately as Humphrey Bogart...their clothes, their hair-styles, their facial expressions all indicate – [they] are living in to a large extent in a myth-

⁸² Horn, *Juke Box Britain*, p.19.

⁸³ Matthew Hilton, ‘The Legacy of Luxury: Moralities of Consumption Since the 18th Century’, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 4/1, (2004): pp.101-123

⁸⁴ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, p.434.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p.427.

⁸⁶ Letter from The National Amateur Wrestling Association to the LCC entertainments council, Mar. 1933, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Oakeley, *Blue Blood*, p.67.

⁸⁸ Gerald Kersh, *Night and the City*, (London, 2007). In 1950 the book was made into a film featuring Stanislaus Zbyszko.

world compounded of a few simple elements they take to be those of American life.⁸⁹

In addition to being criticised for corrupting the English language, the content of American films were perceived to be morally dubious.⁹⁰ In American gangster films and melodramas, for instance, villains always got punished for their misdeeds but there was a sense of celebration and anti-hero status that accompanied the stories.⁹¹ At all-in contests, audiences clearly enjoyed villains. Many enjoyed booing and hissing these characters, but there were those who laughed cheered along their cheating. One promoter claimed that the crowd ‘want a dirty wrestler and though they shout ‘foul’ and boo a lot...it is dirty wrestling which gives them a thrill, makes the excitement and brings them back’.⁹² Moreover, as Barthes observes about the French version of the sport, goodness in the world of wrestling did not always triumph.⁹³ In fact, cheating often resulted in victory. If, according to Hargreaves, ‘sport...gives convincing substance to the ideology that the ambitious, hardworking, talented individual...may achieve high status and reward’,⁹⁴ in all in-wrestling this ideology was turned on its head, with cheats and the villainous just as likely to benefit.

A reoccurring theme in the condemnations was that the violence pandered to an animalistic enjoyment of participants’ pain that could destroy empathy and civility. The National Amateur Wrestling Association expressed it thus:

A real service to sport will be done if the present “all-in” be done away with. It admits most fouls, it is brutal and crude, not scientific, it panders to the “blood lust” and it is everything but sport...it is a disgusting and degrading dog-fight.⁹⁵

Another writer echoed these views, adding:

The attempts to gull the public by throwing their opponents out of the ring and continuing the fight on the floor of the hall, and the usual tricks on the mat to create the appearance of bloodthirstiness, succeeded to a great extent, and it is this

⁸⁹ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, (London, 1992): p.248.

⁹⁰ James, *Popular Culture and Working-Class Taste*, p.40.

⁹¹ Dominic Strinati, “The taste of America: Americanization and popular culture in Britain”, in Dominic Strinati, and Stephen Wagg (eds), *Come on Down?: Popular Media Culture in Post-War Britain*, (London, 1992): p.65.

⁹² Quoted in Snape, ‘All-In Wrestling’, p.1427.

⁹³ Barthes, *Mythologies*, p.18.

⁹⁴ Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture*, p.111.

⁹⁵ Letter from The National Amateur Wrestling Association to the LCC entertainments council, Mar. 1933, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

connection that the present “all-in” systems gives rise to unhealthy and sadistic satisfaction.⁹⁶

The parallels between twentieth-century commentators and the rational recreationist’s views on blood sports in the eighteenth and nineteenth century are hard to ignore. Blood sports during the nineteenth century had been curtailed partly because of a concern they stirred an unhealthy set of feelings in those participating. All-in wrestling’s celebration of blood, gore and violence generated similar worries.

Other instances of unsettled debates that had been central in the previous centuries returned with gusto. Despite the general consensus on the benefits of leisure time for a fit and healthy work force, Sunday retained its controversial status as a day that should not encourage commercial entertainments. Local government was often anxious to please moralists and sabbatarians in not granting licences for Sunday entertainments. Acts that had been used in the eighteenth century curb the popular cultures of their day found new life in twentieth century. The Lord’s Day Observance Act of 1780 was repeatedly used to close cinemas, dancehalls and other offending entertainments.⁹⁷ Wrestling was no different. The LCC thought that the application of the Lord’s Day Observance Act might be one way of curtailing the successes of the sport: after 1935, boxing and wrestling halls that disobeyed the act found themselves in court facing summons and prosecutions.⁹⁸

The lack of license and regulation for performers also caused concern. Professional wrestlers were often not trained to a high standard and in many cases were not trained at all.⁹⁹ The lack of training became most apparent in tragic circumstances, and two cases caught the attention of the press. On March 3rd 1933 at the Attercliffe Central Hall, Sheffield, George ‘Strangler’ Johnson collapsed in a dressing room and died in a taxi en-route to the local hospital. At this point, the coroner’s jury described that all-in was ‘not a clean sport and ought to be prohibited’.¹⁰⁰ Four years later, another wrestler died after a contest. According to the promoter, ‘Flack was not sufficiently strong or healthy to wrestle...Flack had not been wrestling under Mr Gregory for some months, but it was believed that he had been augmenting his income by wrestling on his

⁹⁶ Confidential statement sent to Captain Bertram Mills, May, 1933, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

⁹⁷ Fowler, *The First Teenagers*, p.126.

⁹⁸ Anon., ‘All-in Wrestling Match: Summons Under Sunday Observance Act’, *The Times*, 16 Nov. (1935): p. 7.

⁹⁹ Potts, *Headlocks and Handbags*, p.17.

¹⁰⁰ Anon., ‘“All-in” Wrestling Condemned’, *The Times*, 16 Mar. (1933): p. 16.

own account'.¹⁰¹ It appears that Flack's death might have been prevented if a central organisation had existed to license a wrestler's involvement with some consideration made about their health. It was a task that the BBBC was then undertaking in professional boxing. At the very least, the deaths continued to add negative publicity that had been circulating around all-in for most of the decade, with a strong sense of the sport being violent, anarchic and out of control.

The use of women wrestlers also added to this feeling. In the House of Commons, the Home Secretary was asked to comment on the growing tendency of women to wrestle on all-in cards. He responded by saying, 'in my view public exhibitions of what is called "all-in" wrestling between women are open to the strongest objection'.¹⁰² Reactions like these indicate how entrenched sport and masculinity were in the vast majority of the public's minds. Even the slightest deviation from the established rules of the field in a fringe sport was enough to warrant question in parliament.

Finally, the fact that professional wrestling was performed was a major worry for local and national government officials. In their MO responses, not many writers dwell on wrestling's performed nature, although several certainly acknowledge it and are aware that this might have been an issue. For now it is enough to say that newspapers, MPs and local councils were inclined to believe that the sport was fixed and it was this aspect which appeared to appal them.

I know about it in Chelsea and there the people of Chelsea object to this class of sport going on and the reason why they object to it is that they don't consider it a genuine sport at all...They consider that it is really a kind of performance and it is rehearsed before and it is not really a bona fide sport and so much of it is a performance.¹⁰³

The issue, it seemed, was not so much the performance itself but the concern that the 'masses' would be deceived by the performance unknowingly and unthinkingly. Though the performance – masks, rituals, characters, and so on – might have been a key pleasure for some audiences, both local and national government were uneasy about this duplicity and felt that the young, the working classes and women were being tricked by the alluring nature of commercial popular culture.

¹⁰¹ Anon., 'Wrestler's Death in Hospital', *The Times*, 30 Dec. (1937): p.5.

¹⁰² Anon., 'Women and "All-in Wrestling"', *The Times*, 31 Mar. (1933): p. 7.

¹⁰³ Entertainments Committee's discussion with reps of the Met standing joint committee, 11th Dec, 1935, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

By the late 1930s all-in wrestling's glory days were over. Resistance from within the field and unease from the outside produced tensions that the sport's controllers were unable to weather. Importantly, the LCC were able to gain some control of the sport. From 1938 onwards all-in wrestling was heavily restricted in London, or LCC controlled, halls. What had made the shows popular – violence, comedy, rowdiness – came under strict supervision and close scrutiny. Shows that broke Sunday's licensing laws were prosecuted with greater urgency, and licensees that featured women wrestlers or excessive violence were likely to have their licenses revoked.¹⁰⁴ Professional wrestling survived, but the promise of all-out action that had made the shows so popular to begin with was curtailed.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, combined with the sport's dwindling popularity, all-in wrestling was to have a relatively inactive few years. Oakley withdrew his business citing that if strong men could wrestle in public for money, they could also fight for their country'.¹⁰⁵ Other promotions continued to exhibit wrestling, albeit with reduced numbers and in a less flamboyant manner.¹⁰⁶ It was not until the 1950s that professional wrestling, in one form or another, witnessed the popularity it had achieved in the 1930s.

IV. THE MOUNTEVANS COMMITTEE

When all-in wrestling was re-introduced after the war, problems that had plagued the sport throughout the 1930s continued. Its re-launch in the mid-1940s was met with a familiar set of complaints and censures. One writer to the *Picture Post* encapsulated a view that had been repeated consistently since 1930.

The proposal by certain county councils to ban all-in wrestling in their areas will be welcomed by a large number of wrestling fans who have steadily grown sick of the degenerate trend that this sport has taken...the introduction of buffeting and limb-twisting (with all mock heroics well rehearsed), has turned all-in wrestling from a sport to a music-hall act.¹⁰⁷

The sport, for some commentators at least, needed to be reformed and sanitised. It was a view that was at least fifty years old. The excesses, blood, violence and sheer disregard for authority needed to be lessened. Entrusted with this job, The British Wrestling Board of Control was formally launched on January 10th 1947. They were infinitely

¹⁰⁴ Summary of file, date unknown, LCC, box CL/PC/01/026.

¹⁰⁵ Oakley, *Blue Blood*, p.147.

¹⁰⁶ Potts, *Headlocks and Handbags*, p.17-19; Anon., 'Only Slight Drop in Entertainments', *The Daily Mirror*, 5 Feb. (1940): p.5.

¹⁰⁷ R. Wardle, 'Let's Have "All-Out" Wrestling' *Picture Post*, 3 Feb. (1945): p.26

more successful than the Professional Wrestling Board of Control had been forty years earlier. Headed by the Admiral Lord Mountevans, the board featured the Member of Parliament, Maurice Webb; Commander Campbell, a respected broadcaster on the BBC; and Norman Morrell, an amateur wrestler who had appeared at the Olympics.¹⁰⁸ Morrell would play a particularly important role in the group and would be forming member of Joint Promotions. With such a respectable collection of men, the board was clearly trying to imitate the Marquess of Queensberry's intervention. Considering local and national government had been uneasy about the lack of control seen in professional wrestling since the early 1930s, this development served as a critical intervention for the sport.

Thirty years later, Norman Morrell wrote that the board was formed 'with a view to establishing a style of wrestling acceptable to public and local authorities free from the excesses of the so-called "all-in" style prevalent before the war'.¹⁰⁹ In a newspaper report published at the time, according to Webb the board wished to help assist the "ancient and honourable sport".¹¹⁰ In less grand tones, the group set out a list of rules that would be abided by all competitors, it streamlined championships, and created stricter weight categories and awarded Mountevans championships, not dissimilar to the Lonsdale belts. At the first press conference of the board they also indicated that they would help to arrange permits for visiting international wrestlers and would be initiating a benevolent fund for retired wrestlers.¹¹¹

The board was a key milestone in assisting the development of a British wrestling style separate to American, Japanese and Mexican professional wrestling. British wrestling was less violent, retained the three falls and a finish sporting structure that American wrestling phased out in the 1950s, and encouraged submission moves and mat work (as opposed to the more gymnastic *lucha libre* wrestling in Mexico).¹¹² The Mountevans rules garnered positive press – the first of its kind since the early 1930s – and offered a semblance of control that had been lacking in professional wrestling since the mid-nineteenth century.

It is unclear whether every member was aware that the board's role was about restoring confidence to the press and the public rather than reforming performed aspects

¹⁰⁸ N. F. Berry, *Wrestling: The Lord Mount Evans Style*, (Halifax, 1951): p.2.

¹⁰⁹ Letter from Norman Morrell to Mr Rook, 9 Nov. 1975, Sporting Events "Wrestling" vol.4, IBA, Box 01097.

¹¹⁰ Anon., 'Wrestling Board's Aims', *The Guardian*, 11 Jan. (1947): p.5.

¹¹¹ Anon., 'Wrestling Board's Aims', *The Guardian*, 11 Jan. (1947): p.5.

¹¹² For a brief history of Mexican professional wrestling see Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre*, pp.22-26.

of the sport. Legitimate competition was certainly not restored under Mountevans. Some of all-in's excesses, however, were curbed. The overt violence, blood and outright disrespect for the referee was restricted while retaining villainous and blue-eyed characters and a certain degree of showmanship. Importantly, when asked, promoters were able to claim the Mountevans group as symbolising a fresh start. Professional wrestling promoters distanced themselves from the all-in tag and were adamant that the Mountevans wrestling was a world away from the unfettered violence, spectacle and performance that had plagued the sport before the war. Bill Best, a Joint Promotions manager, was asked by a *Guardian* reporter in 1960, 'Do you fix the results?'. He replied, 'the bad days are over'.¹¹³ The article, following Best's suggestion continued, 'since 1946, when Lord Admiral Mountevans gave his name to a code of rules now accepted nationally, Mr Best felt that the sport had begun to become respectable and appeal to family audiences'.¹¹⁴

Insofar as the Mountevans committee set out to provide a sense of control, the group were a success. The Mountevans committee's most lasting impact, though, would be, as one report at the time innocently claimed, 'the framing of regulations to protect existing promoters against unfair and uncontrolled competition'.¹¹⁵ The committee's thinking, perhaps, focused on how a free market had led to a rapid increase in violence and gimmicks during the 1930s. The consequence of such regulations, however, created an environment in which a monopolistic syndicate, Joint Promotions, could emerge and dominate the sport until the 1980s. Like its American counterpart, the National Wrestling Association (NWA),¹¹⁶ Joint Promotions was made up of constituent wrestling promotions who ran regional shows via the protection of a national group. Broadly speaking, the south was run by Dale Martin Promotions;¹¹⁷ Lancashire and Merseyside were run by Bill Best; operating out of Bradford and running Yorkshire and the Midlands was Norman Morrell, the amateur wrestler who had served on the Mount Evans committee,¹¹⁸ and Ted Beresford; and Relwyskow and Green Promotions ran the midlands and the north.

¹¹³ Anon., untitled, *The Guardian*, 3 Nov., (1960): p.19

¹¹⁴ Anon., untitled, *The Guardian*, 3 Nov., (1960): p.19

¹¹⁵ Anon., 'Wrestling Board's Aims', *The Guardian*, 11 Jan (1947): p.5.

¹¹⁶ See Tim Hornbaker, *National Wrestling Alliance: The Untold Story of the Monopoly That Strangled Pro Wrestling*, (Toronto, 2007).

¹¹⁷ Doddy Hay, 'Sport or a Crude Burlesque?', *The Observer*, 18 Mar. (1962): p.18.

¹¹⁸ Kent Walton, *This Grappling Game*, (London, 1967): p.20.

Such instances of regionality serve as useful reminders that producers and distributors of national and international popular culture were aware that local tastes needed to be accounted for.¹¹⁹ This had been apparent in the music halls in the 1900s, the cinemas in the 1930s, and would play an important role in the commercial television franchising in the 1950s. What might have worked in one area of England might not necessarily work in another, and performances, films, television and other popular cultural forms would be promoted accordingly. One of the strengths of the Joint Promotions system was that promoters were able to respond to their local audiences – providing styles and wrestlers that appealed to these audiences – while securing the safety of a national monopoly.

Those on the inside of Joint Promotions claimed the monopoly provided the control that had been lacking in earlier decades. After all, what was the football league and other such sporting bodies if not a licensed cartel, at least from the outside looking in?¹²⁰ For those involved in the creation of Joint Promotions, a monopoly was precisely what was needed to secure professional wrestling's respectability. *The Guardian* summarised Norman Morrell's argument as it was presented to them.

[T]he syndicate had put British wrestling on a controlled and workable basis. "Until [Joint Promotions] came along wrestling was an utter farce." During their fifteen years' management of one of the biggest arenas the referee had never once been struck by a wrestler'.¹²¹

For those on the outside of Joint Promotions, the group had simply used the Mountevans committee as a spring board to set-up a monopoly on buildings and wrestlers for financial gain. Oakley, who, it must be remembered, had his own reasons to dislike the new group, contended that, 'wrestling was now being run as a closed shop, with rights of admission strictly reserved, so eliminating outside challenges'.¹²² Wrestlers and promoters outside of the Joint Promotions syndicate were unhappy with the arrangement. In 1958, a collection of wrestlers, complaining of low pay and unfair working conditions, formed a union in order to campaign against the monopoly system. Gentleman Jim Lewis described the situation: 'A wrestler's got to go on his knees to

¹¹⁹ Mehurst, *A National Joke*, p.15.

¹²⁰ Vamplew, *Pay Up and Play the Game*, pp.112-153.

¹²¹ Anon., 'Wrestlers Approach Problems the Trade Union Way: Dealing With Promoters' Syndicate', *The Guardian*, 21 Oct., (1958): p.2.

¹²² Oakeley, *Blue Blood*, p.148.



Figure 7: Outside of Ron Taylor's Boxing and Wrestling Booth, c.1960/70s

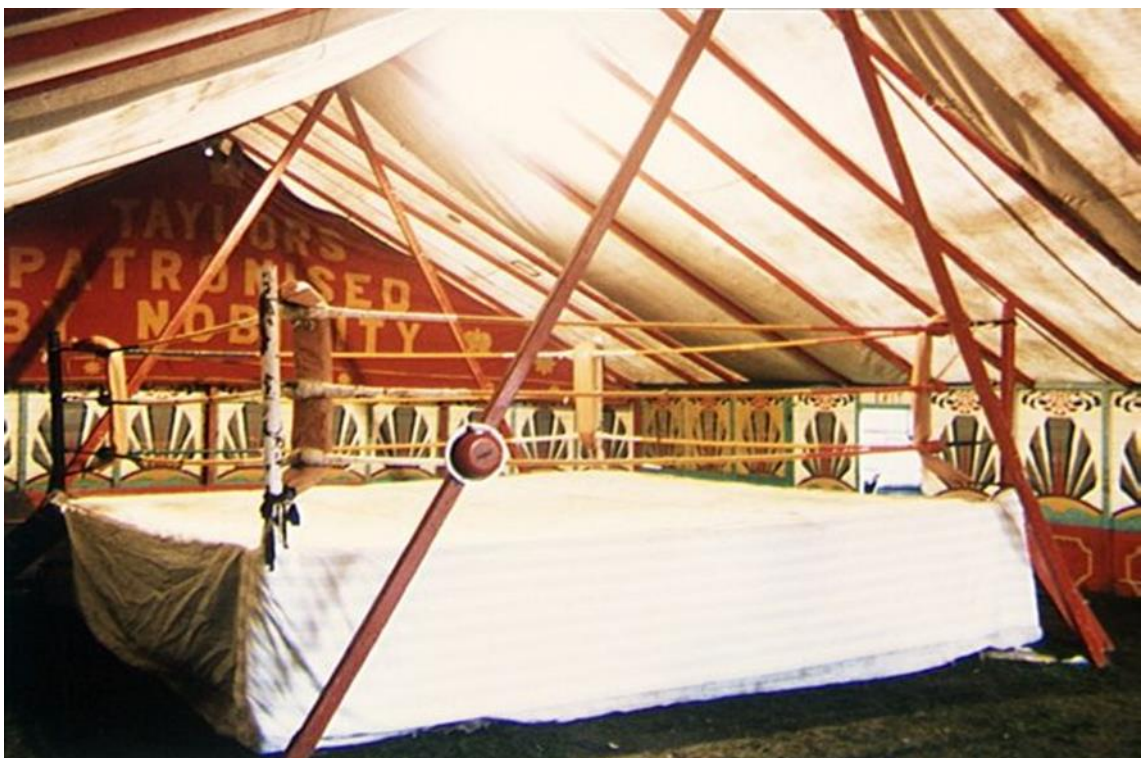


Figure 8: Inside of Ron Taylor's Boxing and Wrestling Booth, c.1960/70s

some of these promoters if he wants a square deal'.¹²³ The response from Joint Promotions argued that the group 'had enough proficient wrestlers on their books without needing to call upon the trade unionists'.¹²⁴ Wrestlers, as Oakley rightly claimed, were prohibited from "working" for any promoter who was not a member of this organisation'.¹²⁵

The problem was not that there were insubstantial numbers of non-cartel promotions. Nor were there insufficient locations in which to tour. Professional wrestling continued its long and rich history with the fairground, offering performances in boxing and wrestling booths (See Fig. 7 and Fig. 8). When the BBBC tightened regulations in 1947 about members performing in the booths on the fairgrounds, professional wrestling in the following decades became ever-more present in such entertainments.¹²⁶ Similarly, holiday towns and camps continued to exhibit professional wrestling in the summer seasons. Butlin's provided weekly wrestling exhibitions as part of their broad entertainments. The central problem for wrestlers and promoters not associated with Joint Promotions was that the group, with the ability to claim they were the heirs to the Mountevans rules and the general feeling that the group were a sporting body like the BBBC, were in a prime position to dominate television contracts. By the 1960s, the vast majority of audience's primary engagement with professional wrestling was on television. Television became, as the next chapter will describe, a shop window and advertisement for Joint Promotions and their roster. In short, televised professional wrestling was professional wrestling and televised professional wrestling was Joint Promotions.

CONCLUSION

The interwar years is where professional wrestling, as a fully performed sporting contest separate and discrete from the music hall stage, is conceived. Many of professional wrestling's performance techniques, although owing a great deal to the cultural forms from which they had emerged, crystallised in the 1930s. The most important of these was that professional wrestling was completely and wholly a performed sport. Many of the codes and conventions that we normally associate with wrestling were born during

¹²³ Anon., 'Wrestlers Approach Problems the Trade Union Way: Dealing With Promoters' Syndicate', *The Guardian*, 21 Oct (1958): p.2.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Oakeley, *Blue Blood*, p.148.

¹²⁶ Toulmin, *A Fair Fight*, p.22-23.

this time: wrestling masks, a lack of reporting from the mainstream press, bumbling referees, wrestlers performing easily identified moral roles, and so on.

A lack of any meaningful central body willing or able to police the sport was of primary importance in this regard. Practically every other British spectator sport that had grown in the first half of the twentieth century paid heed to the demands of amateur sporting bodies while maintaining a growing form of commercialism. Professional wrestling had never had such a body. All-in wrestling was the net result of decades of showmen and promoters entertaining paying audiences. The Mountevans committee and Joint Promotions, the closest the sport had managed to resemble a controlling body, illustrated the fact perfectly. Joint Promotions operated as a cartel, driving wrestler's wages down. Critically, when commercial television was launched in 1955 they were in a beneficial position: they ran most of the halls across England, operated a cartel in which many wrestlers had little bargaining power, and offered a competitive rate to ITV while freezing other wrestling promotions. The final chapter examines the role of television and the media field on sport and professional wrestling.

5

GREETINGS, GRAPPLE FANS: TELEVISION C. 1955 – 1980

The standard narrative of post-war England describes the shift from the gloom of post-war rationing to the post-war consensus and advancement of commodity capitalism in the 1950s: universal employment, abundant credit and the growing availability of mass produced consumer products all pointed towards a nation ‘never having it so good’.¹ Accompanying such changes was the growth and celebration of the home. Though the discourse of domesticity had been present in the middle-classes for much of the nineteenth century, the twentieth century, and particularly in the first decades following the Second World War, saw the democratisation and dissemination of a home-based leisure.² Crucial in both regards, as products of the consumer revolution and at the heart of leisure in the home, was television. Drawing on codes and conventions already established by other mediums and cultural forms, television fast became the primary and most influential entertainment form in English society. In a short space of time, television vastly altered the structure and texture of leisure in Britain. The medium has been charged with causing declining attendances at communal entertainments such as the music halls, cinemas and sporting grounds, and though this narrative might be more complicated than first appears, it is broadly indisputable that television became the primary and immediate means of consuming popular culture for much of the nation.³

Both the introduction and industrial and institutional development of television were ideological and political decisions about the role of mass media in a liberal democracy.⁴ Like other fields, then, the media field consists of a series of contested power relations internally and externally. From the 1920s, the British Broadcasting

¹ Deborah Philips and Alan Tomlinson, ‘Homeward Bound: Leisure, Popular Culture and Consumer Capitalism’, in Dominic Strinati and Stephen Wagg (eds), *Come on Down?: Popular Media Culture in Post-War Britain*, (London, 1992): p.11.

² Perkin in Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture*, p.102-103

³ John Corner, ‘Television and British Society in the 1950s’, in John Corner (ed.), *Popular Television in Britain: Studies in Cultural History*, (London, 1991): p.2.

⁴ The best work and most comprehensive work on non-linear media histories is Brian Winston’s, *Media, Technology and Society A History: From the Telegraph to the Internet* (London, 1998).

Corporation (BBC) maintained a monopoly over broadcasting in the U.K. This monopoly obviously included sports broadcasting. As a public service broadcaster, the corporation's values echoed middle-class values of rational recreation. Established sporting bodies retained a relaxed relationship with the broadcaster. The introduction of commercial television in 1955, however, radically altered the media field. By the 1960s, television was the most dominant subfield in the media field and was changing other fields. Having always had a close relationship to journalism and media, the sporting field was affected by these changes almost simultaneously. Sport became an important attraction over which the BBC and ITV competed. For much of the second half of the century, professional wrestling was a popular staple of ITV on Saturday afternoon's *World of Sport*.⁵ Section I of this chapter sketches the consequences of commercial television's impact on the sporting field.

Television's appeal lay in its ability to continue and borrow from older cultural forms – news, drama, variety, sport, etc – while dramatically altering audiences' engagement with the text. Section II looks at the pleasures of professional wrestling that had been retained from their interaction with the stage, fairground and circus in the previous century that were then presented on television. It is important, I think, to stress that audiences watching televised professional wrestling enjoyed wrestling in a manner similar to those in arenas. It is also important to stress, on the other hand, that the experience in the arena was not directly transferable into the home. Watching an event live and watching an event on television were, at the risk of pointing out the obvious, different experiences. Camera technology, editing, commentary, and presenters and other conventions of television production crystallising at this time provided a highly mediated version of sport consumed by audiences in domestic circumstances. Section III examines these changes.

For the media historian, television archives have proven to be a double-edged sword. Where nineteenth-century circus historians have often relied on written descriptions, television potentially by-passes such problems. In reality, though, this has not proven to be the case, particularly for the earliest television recordings. Many of television's earliest broadcasts have been lost. This is true with regards to professional wrestling. The vast majority of early broadcasts, particularly from the 1950s and 1960s,

⁵ John Ellis, "Importance, Significance, Cost and Value: Is an ITV Canon Possible?", in Catherine Johnson and Rob Turnock (eds), *ITV Cultures: Independent Television Over Fifty Years*, (Maidenhead, 2005): p.43.

were not retained. Recordings from the late 1960s and 70s, however, are more readily available. Being an audio-visual medium, where television wrestling matches have survived, they leave a vivid record of the performance as it was seen, if not experienced, by audiences at home. This chapter, particularly section II and III, utilises such recordings to describe matches and wrestlers as they were performed. Where earlier recordings are not available, written descriptions compared and contrasted to surviving recordings are examined.

Compared to fairly comprehensive studies of the BBC, both textually and institutionally, ITV has received less attention, although there has been a growing number of works that look at the histories of ITV.⁶ This has no doubt been aided by availability of the IBA/ITA archives now housed at Bournemouth University. The absence of professional wrestling archives – a consequence of the sport's lack of structure and apparent controlling bodies – means that understanding the working structure of Joint Promotions is difficult to ascertain with any accuracy. Simon Garfield's interviews are often illuminating but also plagued by inaccuracies and the strong hint that old rivalries are being settled.⁷ Similarly, British wrestler biographies maintain the illusion that professional wrestling is a competitive sport.⁸ This is interesting in itself but are not wholly useful for the questions this chapter deals with. The exception, in this regard, is Kent Walton's autobiography which provides some insight into the fields of both sport and television, even if he too maintains wrestling's kayfabe.⁹ IBA/ITA's detailed written archives provide records of ITV and professional wrestling's relationship. The archive documents audience letters, internal correspondence, external correspondence with Joint Promotions, and minutes of meetings. The group also conducted quantitative audience research by Ian Dobie and Mallory Wober.¹⁰ It goes without saying that these works are invaluable to this chapter. But they also provide some limited sense of the internal power relationships in the group. Furthermore, the documents offer evidence of the television's power over the

⁶ See Catherine Johnson and Rob Turnock (eds), *ITV Cultures: Independent Television Over Fifty Years*, (Maidenhead, 2005). The most comprehensive history remains ITV's official histories - see Bernard Sendall, *Independent Television in Britain Volume 1: Origin and Foundation, 1946 -62*, (London, 1982); Bernard Sendall, *Independent Television in Britain Volume 2: Expansion and Change, 1958 – 68*, (London, 1983); Jeremy Potter, *Independent Television in Britain Volume 4: Companies and Programmes, 1968 – 80*, (London, 1990). Bernard Sendall worked for the ITA during the 1960s and was thus active, to a certain degree, in shaping the histories he would later write about.

⁷ Garfield, *The Wrestling*.

⁸ See, for example, Al Marquette, *Two Falls, Two Submissions or a Knockout*, (Manchester, 2004).

⁹ Walton, *This Grappling Game*.

¹⁰ Dobie & Wober, *The Role of Wrestling*.

sporting field generally and professional wrestling specifically. Section IV of this chapter documents the demands made by ITA and ITV controllers, political economic changes within the world of wrestling, and their display on screen.

I. GIRLS, WRESTLING, BRIGHT MUSICALS, QUIZ SHOWS AND REAL LIFE DRAMA

In the decades following the Second World War, television became the most ubiquitous and well-practiced leisure pursuit in English society. The manner in which the vast majority of people were entertained the vast majority of the time moved from the cinema screens, stages of variety theatres, pitches of football stadiums, and rings of the circus to living rooms in the home. This was not, of course, an instantaneous transformation. Radio had laid the ground work earlier in the century. For the purpose of the study at hand, however, radio and wrestling were never particularly well-matched. Professional wrestling performed complicated moves, often in quick succession, with a specialised terminology.¹¹ Professional wrestling was predominantly a visual sport which a detailed spoken explanation would struggle to keep up with. Rugby union, football, rowing, cricket, and Wimbledon were better suited to radio's demands, and these sports were providing the blueprints for the style and form of presenting and commentating on sport via mass media.¹²

Since its nationalisation in 1927, the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) radio output had, as Hill argues, continued 'a notion of cultural improvement that had been developed in the nineteenth century by intellectuals such as Matthew Arnold, and which had since then been at the root of many concerns expressed about the nature of popular leisure'.¹³ Here was rational recreation reformatted for the mass media age. Lord Reith's 'long shadow',¹⁴ the notion that a public broadcasting should uphold cultural values and stress morally uplifting programming, loomed over radio. The shadow stretched to experimentations with television in the 1930s. Until the 1950s, television and radio were operated by the BBC. The organisation had their own institutional values and structures and were presided over, in theory at least, by the state. Taking into account the almost continuous problems and scuffles all-in wrestling suffered from 1933 onwards, it seems remarkable that the BBC even considered broadcasting wrestling, but broadcast it they did. In 1938 the BBC screened short

¹¹ Beekman, *Ringside*, p.83.

¹² Huggins, 'BBC Radio and Sport', pp.491-515.

¹³ Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture*, p.98.

¹⁴ Holt & Mason, *Sport in Britain 1945 - 2000*, (Oxford, 2000): p.98.

exhibitions of matches in the catch style. These matches, judging by the *Radio Times* descriptions, were very much in the style of exhibition and presentation rather than out-and-out professional matches.¹⁵ Throughout 1938 and 1939, forms of exhibition wrestling were presented on the still prototypal television channel, and they were often presented alongside other forms of fighting, notably boxing and fencing. As the *Radio Times* argued, 'television can provide something better than a ringside seat'.¹⁶ Just as wrestling had been suited to the music hall because it was contained, compact and easy to light, wrestling was well-suited to television's early experiments with sport. Its difficulties in broadcasting on radio made it ideal for television.

Experiments with television before the outbreak of the Second World War were limited to small geographical areas and by minimal television ownership. Television had little impact within the field of media and even less impact on the sporting field. After its re-launch, television's popularity and ubiquity rocketed: between 1946 and the launch of commercial television in the 1950s licenses grew from 15,000 to 4.5 million.¹⁷ In media historiography the Queen's coronation and the Stanley Matthews cup final in 1953 play a near-mythical role in securing television as *the* medium of the late twentieth century.¹⁸ The introduction of a British commercial television channel was a crystallisation of television as a powerful sub-field and, consequently, a vigorous restructuring of power within the media field.

Discussed in the 1950s, the possibility of adding a second channel funded by private companies was finally introduced in 1955. The arrival of commercial television focused debates about the role of mass media, commercialization, popular culture and fears of Americanisation.¹⁹ The Television Act was passed in 1954 on the understanding that the Independent Television Authority (ITA) would govern regional companies that composed Independent Television (ITV).²⁰ ITV was an intriguing case study of the ways in which competing fields and parties negotiated and compromised: ITV was to be funded by commercials and was able to be profitable, thus pleasing those entrepreneurs

¹⁵ Anon., 'Television', *Radio Times*, 4 Mar. (1938): p.29

¹⁶ Anon., 'Cures for Interference', *Radio Times*, 10 Mar. (1939): p. 15

¹⁷ Edward Royle, 'Trends in Post-War British Social History' in James Obelkevich and Peter Catterall (eds) *Understanding Post-War Britain*, (London, 1994): p.13

¹⁸ Martin Johnes and Gavin Mellor, 'The 1953 FA Cup Final: Modernity and Tradition in British Culture', *Contemporary British History*, 20/2, (2006): pp. 263-280

¹⁹ Jonathan Bignell, 'And the Rest is History: Low Grade, Creation Narratives and Television Historiography' in Johnson, C. and Turnock, R (eds), *ITV Cultures: Independent Television Over Fifty Years*, (Maidenhead, 2005): p.61; Strinati, 'Taste of America', p.59; Janet Thumim, *Inventing Television: Men, Women and the Box*, (Oxford, 2004): p.17.

²⁰ In 1972 the ITA was restructured and renamed as the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA).

who wanted to profit from the potential of new mediums. However, the state exerted a control over rules and regulations for programming – including a limit on American imports – as well as occasionally producing reports outlining how the channel should proceed in the future (the most famous of which, The Pilkington Report, could demand changes to programming and content).²¹

The introduction of a second commercial channel almost immediately altered the institutional and political set-up of broadcasting.²² For the first time there existed a competition for audience share, doubly so because ITV's operating budgets and profits relied on audiences watching advertisements between programmes. The BBC had its own charter and responsibilities to fill. So, too, did ITV. The situation created institutions with differing attitudes to what made, and what should be deemed, successful television. From its conception, ITV was expected to provide a range of programming for a diverse, 'mass' audience. It was designed to be more closely aligned to the economic field and less central than the London-centric BBC. When Associated-Rediffusion (AR) started officially broadcasting in September 1955, it was clear from the start that the channel was going to be different in its tone, style and content. 'From the very beginning the new channel gave notice', Bernard Sendall writes in the official history of Independent Television, that the channel's 'approach to the viewing public was to be different from that of the BBC'.²³ When other regional broadcasters joined AR later in the year, the tone was set for how the channel would be perceived for much of the next twenty years. It was an unfair criticism, but one sceptical BBC employee described ITV programming as 'wobble dances, give-aways, panels and light entertainment'.²⁴ If internally some controllers were not confident with the sort of programming the channel was producing, the channel was cautiously populist.²⁵

The introduction of a commercial channel dramatically altered sport,²⁶ although the impact was not recorded immediately. Sport did not register highly on the ITV's priorities for the first five years of its existence. The BBC had already built up extensive

²¹ Rob Turnock, *Television and Consumer Culture: Britain and the Transformation of Modernity*, (London, 2007): p.22.

²² For a discussion of field in relation to television history see Bourdieu, *On Television*, p.41-22.

²³ Sendall, *Independent Television in Britain Volume 1*, p.319.

²⁴ Asa Briggs in John Mundy, 'Spreading Wisdom', *Media History*, 14/1, (2008): p.59.

²⁵ Garry Whannel, 'The Price is Right but the Moments are Sticky: Television, Quiz and Game Shows, and Popular Culture' in Dominic Strinati and Stephen Wagg (eds), *Come on Down? Popular Media Culture in Post-War Britain*, (London, 1992): p.183

²⁶ Richard Haynes, 'A Pageant of Sound and Vision: Football's Relationship with Television, 1936-60', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 15/1, (1998): pp.211-226

contracts with sporting organisations.²⁷ The old boy network of the BBC complimented the old boy network of amateur sporting bodies. The BBC's head of outside broadcasting claimed that the organisation and Wimbledon's cosy relationship existed as a 'deliberate policy of an amateur sport towards a public service'.²⁸ The regional structuring of ITV, as opposed to the London focused BBC, further complicated relationships between the channel and sporting bodies often situated in the city.²⁹ Bernard Sendall later noted that in the early years, 'ITV handled sport rather gingerly; coverage, compared with the BBC's, seemed sparse, random, and sometimes amateurish'.³⁰ Early attempts to create a sporting programme on the channel resulted in the London based AR's *Cavalcade of Sport*'s one hour programme that ran on Wednesday nights. For the most part, *Cavalcade* was disappointing, haphazardly thrown together at the last minute,³¹ and 'promising rather more than it gave'.³² Its lasting legacy, it would turn out, was its televising of professional wrestling which began on the 9th of November 1955 with a match of Bert Royal v. Cliff Beaumont and provided by Dale Martin Promotions for the wider Joint Promotions.³³

Professional wrestling, aside from the small problem that it was not a sport in any commonly understood way, ticked nearly every box of John Bromley's conditions for televised sport:

[T]he sport must have simple rules and be easily understood; it must be visual; it must be possible to televise without involving too much extra work and expense, i.e. it must be practical to televise it; and the event must be capable of drawing a reasonable crowd at the venue.³⁴

Wrestling was indoors, it was easily lit, and, as we have already seen, sporting connoisseurship was neither required nor particularly desired. It could also attract an audience, on television and at arenas. Added to these considerations, English professional wrestling had an organisation who had a near monopoly over the sport. With the arrival of television in the 1950s, Joint Promotions were perfectly poised to use their monopoly to become the premiere and sole provider of televised wrestling. The benefits of Joint Promotion's exclusive contract with Associated Rediffusion and

²⁷ Sendall, *Independent Television in Britain Volume 1*, p.324; Whannel, *Fields in Vision*, p.45-46.

²⁸ Quoted in Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.321.

²⁹ Whannel, *Fields in Vision*, p.49.

³⁰ Sendall, *Independent Television in Britain Volume 1*, p.324.

³¹ Walton, *This Grappling Game*, p.11.

³² Sendall, *Independent Television in Britain Volume 1*, p.323

³³ Walton, *This Grappling Game*, p.11

³⁴ Whannel, *Fields in Vision*, p.78.

later ATV were enormous. Howard Thomas at the ITA claimed, ‘televised wrestling has become a sort of “shop window”’.³⁵ Having weekly exposure on national television allowed its performers to become popular cultural icons whose names could be used on touring posters. Their closed shop deal, which had been in operation since the Mountevans committee, meant the group had exclusive contract rights over these popular performers. *The Guardian* reported that ‘a wrestler who fights on Joint Promotions bills is most unlikely to appear on anyone else’s’.³⁶ Using television as a shop window, and dividing the country into distinct touring locales, Joint Promotions were ‘promoting wrestling in a big way, with sometimes 70 or 80 shows a week’.³⁷ By any measurement, wrestling was big business.

The exclusive contract held by Joint Promotions and its members would cause a number of complaints from other wrestling organisations *without* access to the shop window. Throughout the 60s and 70s, organisations not affiliated to Joint Promotions complained to the ITA about the monopoly. In a 1967 letter, Tom Charles Wrestling and Boxing Promotions wrote:

Ever since the Independent Television began to present professional wrestling twice weekly in their programmes it has been very difficult, at times almost impossible for the independent Promoter in this Country to make a living owing to the fact that weekly television appearance of the few wrestlers has made them Stars and household favourite and their services are denied to the Independent Promoters due to the monopoly conditions created by a group of promoters who are for some reason or other chosen by your television Authority.³⁸

The response from Lew Grade, the charismatic show business mogul, was blunt: ‘the exposure of wrestling on television has done an enormous amount to make this a popular form of entertainment...I fail to understand why the popularity...precludes the smaller promoter from capitalising [on this]’.³⁹ Wrestling companies and wrestlers that were not part of Joint Promotions were to left work with halls that had not already been colonised by Joint Promotions or were to left work locations, such as the fairground or holiday camp, that might previously have been associated with wrestling. Despite his

³⁵ Letter from Howard Thomas to Bernard Sendall, 21 Jan., 1966, Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.1, IBA, Box 01097.

³⁶ Arthur Hopcraft, ‘Black and Blue Wrestlers’, *The Guardian*, 10 May (1962): p.9

³⁷ Letter from Howard Thomas to Bernard Sendall, 21 Jan., 1966, Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.1, IBA, Box 01097.

³⁸ Letter from Tom Charles to ITA chairman, 15 Mar. 1967, Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.1, IBA, Box 01097.

³⁹ Letter from Lew Grade to Bernard Sendall, 28 Mar. 1967, Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.1, IBA, Box 01097.

protestations, Lew Grade probably knew better than most that television was radically altering sport.

By the mid-1960s, sport had become a crucial form of programming in which the BBC and ITV competed for viewers. *World of Sport* was conceived as a direct competitor to *Grandstand*, the BBC's own Saturday afternoon sports magazine show. Like the sporting newspapers and magazines in the nineteenth century, these programmes helped to delineate the field:⁴⁰ *World of Sport* literally gave a 'unity [to] the world of sport'.⁴¹ The problems that had initially repelled ITV from sport persisted, however: the BBC still had a majority of sporting contracts, they continued to have expertise in filming and presenting live sport, and they were not burdened by advertisement breaks.⁴² *World of Sport* was good news for Joint Promotions, though, and from its launch wrestling found its home on ITV. Wrestling remained by far the most watched sport on ITV on a Saturday afternoon. Given the rivalry between the two stations and professional wrestling's popularity, there were occasional suggestions that the BBC might attempt to screen professional wrestling themselves. The head of BBC's Outside Broadcast had other ideas. 'We don't look on wrestling as a sport,' he told one newspaper, 'wrestlers are entertainers'.⁴³ Away from the glare of the press, in private the BBC *were* worried about wrestling's successes on the rival channel denting *Grandstand*'s ratings. Some went so far as to internally petition for the channel to produce their own version of professional wrestling. Lew Grade described that:

The BBC who are quite keen to do wrestling could of course have gone to some of the other independent promoters, but they must apparently be of the opinion that they could not put on wrestling programmes of calibre otherwise I am sure they would have approached them.⁴⁴

Joint Promotions closed-shop approach certainly caused the BBC problems, but more realistically the 'governors remained adamant that professional wrestling was not a suitable sport for the BBC'.⁴⁵ Aside from a single BBC broadcast in May 1965, there was a symbiosis between professional wrestling and commercial television that felt somehow natural. Wrestling's celebration of professionalism, its earlier associations

⁴⁰ deFrance, 'The Making of a Field', p.301.

⁴¹ Whannel, *Fields in Vision*, p.37.

⁴² Whannel, *Fields in Vision*, p.52.

⁴³ Clifford Davies, 'Ring Stars Join Variety Union: Wrestlers Fight for Bigger TV Purse', *Daily Mirror*, 23 Apr.(1962): p.11

⁴⁴ Letter from Lew Grade to Bernard Sendall, 18 Apr. 1967, Sporting Events "Wrestling" vol.1, IBA, Box 01097

⁴⁵ Whannel, *Fields in Vision*, p.49.

with America, and its tradition of performance on the music hall stage, made commercial television and professional wrestling well-matched. It is now almost mandatory for those writing about commercial television in the 1960s to use Roland Gillet as a shorthand for how ITV positioned itself and its programming:

Let's face it once and for all. The public likes girls, wrestling, bright musicals, quiz shows and real-life drama. We gave them the Halle orchestra, Foreign Press Club, floodlit football and visits to the local fire station. Well, we've learned. From now on, what the public wants, it's going to get.⁴⁶

Professional wrestling attracted the large, working-class audiences that critics claimed the channel too eagerly pandered to. After attending several shows in 1969, an ITV programmer described the live audience as being composed of 'decent working/lower middle class'.⁴⁷ Dobie and Wober found a similar class make-up when they examined the television audience a decade later.⁴⁸

Professional wrestling's status as television institution, and the culmination of Joint Promotion's rehabilitation of the sport, arrived in 1961: professional wrestling matches featured before the F.A. Cup Final and wrestling on cup final day became a tradition for the next two decades. The event was British wrestling's biggest day of the year and offered the culmination of the year's biggest rivalries. The FA cup final, since the early days of being a featured event in newsreels and the radio, demonstrated how central to the sense of a national culture television and sport had become since it began to be televised in the 1950s.⁴⁹ Here was sport as a national event and professional wrestling was at the centre of it. Of particular note, on Saturday May 25th 1963, before the match between Manchester United and Leicester City, Jackie Pallo and Mick McManus demonstrated how popular televised professional wrestling had become. 'Believe it or not', the *Daily Mirror* positively explained, 'more ITV viewers will watch this contest than the Cup Final'.⁵⁰ By this point, many people's primary experience of sport was through a television. How did this change audience experiences of the performance? It is this question the following section explores.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Sendall, *Independent Television in Britain Volume 1*, p.328;

⁴⁷ Internal memo from J.E. Harrison, 17 Mar. 1969, Sporting Events "Wrestling" vol.2, IBA, Box 01097.

⁴⁸ Dobie & Wober, *The Role of Wrestling*, p.3.

⁴⁹ Johnes & Mellor, 'The 1953 F.A. Cup Final', p.265; Holt & Mason, *Sport in Britain*, p.97.

⁵⁰ Roy Blackman, 'The Duel at 1.20pm: It's the Fight They Wouldn't Put on for Prince Philip This Week', *Daily Mirror*, 25 May (1963): p.9.

II. THE MUSIC HALL TRADITION

Television adopted and adapted existing cultural forms while simultaneously and fundamentally changing audience's view and understandings of these texts. John Corner argues that television reworked 'cinematic, theatrical, radio, newspaper or music-hall precedents, [while reshaping] the material in ways which used the medium to best possible advantage'.⁵¹ Similarly, Andy Medhurst has described the influence of the 'music hall tradition' on English popular culture and the multiple ways in which this tradition manifests itself in film and television.⁵² This could be seen across a number of ITV's initial output. Most obviously, television offered filmed performances of variety shows broadcast from the music halls. Using Lew Grade's history and contacts with the world of variety,⁵³ *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* became one of ATV's, and ITV's, biggest hits. Performers who had made their names and developed their skills on the variety stages found their homes in light entertainment. Less obviously, quiz shows drew their inspiration from the fairground⁵⁴ or the participatory nature of the old music hall acts who invited volunteers on to the stage. If we expand Medhurst's music hall tradition to include fairgrounds and circus – which, after all, shared a common set of audiences, performers and influences – then professional wrestling fits relatively neatly into this reading.

The following section will assess the essential differences between viewing wrestling on television and watching wrestling in the arena. For now, though, it remains important to examine the continuities of pleasure that the two forms of viewership shared. Dobie and Wober, in their report on televised wrestling audiences, drew parallels between the live and broadcasted form.

All observers agree that participation by comment, applause, jeering, with the possibility of having a wrestler land upon or close to one's person, or of throwing things at the ring is an important facet of being a wrestling spectator...it may be that the viewer obtains, in lesser measure, similar experiences as does the "live" spectator.⁵⁵

One of the pleasures in watching professional wrestling, and also one of the pleasures most heavily analysed by cultural theorists when discussing the sport, revolve around questions of 'fakery'. A 1965 *The People* article ran an exclusive 'exposure' – an

⁵¹ Corner, *Television and British Society*, p.13

⁵² Medhurst, 'Music Hall and British Cinema', p.168.

⁵³ Bignell, 'And the Rest is History', p.63; Mundy, 'Spreading Wisdom', p.66.

⁵⁴ Whannel, 'The Price is Right', pp.179-185.

⁵⁵ Dobie & Wober, *The Role of Wrestling*, p.10.

exclusive exposure in a long line of exclusive exposures – headlined, ‘The Great Wrestling Fiddle: Now Referees Admit It...“We DID Fake the Bouts!”’.⁵⁶ The article caused a minor controversy at the ITA who had always had an uneasy relationship with the sport. During a meeting in the wake of the publication, a group of executives devised a list of questions they wanted to know the answer: “Is there a controlling body for wrestling not connected with the promotion of individual matches?...Who investigates charges of malpractice?...Are the bouts rigged?”.⁵⁷ Rather bizarrely, a good proportion of those working at the ITA during the 1960s could not say for certain whether professional wrestling displayed legitimate sporting contests. One controller, after a meeting and lengthy letter writing process with Dale Martin Promotions (who denied everything), tentatively offered that ‘these wrestlers are as much showmen as athletes...[and] they have to give the spectators a show for their money. This doesn’t mean rigging a result’.⁵⁸

A fear that had driven many of the reforms by the LCC, and one of the reasons why promoters had signed up so eagerly to the Mountevans rules, focused on a concern for (mass/working-class/young/female) audiences being conned, unable to tell the difference between ‘real’ sport and performance. It is a wonderful irony that for all the confusion shown by some broadcasters across the departments of the ITA, audiences deemed ‘at risk’ were more attuned to the nuances of professional wrestling. Dobie and Wober found that ‘nearly three quarters of the whole sample (and a greater proportion among those interested in wrestling) considered that results of matches are fixed’.⁵⁹ As valuable as much of Dobie and Wober’s analysis is, even the questionnaire’s wording could not adequately describe professional wrestling’s presentation. Might the results have been higher if the question claimed pre-determined rather than fixed?

The previous chapter described how unpicking the performance and hazarding guesses as to who were behind masks was an attraction of all-in wrestling. This form of engagement continued during the television period. Marion Wrenn, writing about modern American wrestling, claims a direct influence between these audience doubts and P.T. Barnum’s performances in the nineteenth century. Drawing on Harris, she

⁵⁶ Michael Gabbert, ‘The Great Wrestling Fiddle: Nor Referees Admit It...“We DID Fake the Bouts!”’, *The People* 1 Aug., (1965): p.4

⁵⁷ Anon., ‘Points to be raised at the meeting on wrestling’, 20 Jul., 1966, Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.1, IBA, Box 01097.

⁵⁸ Letter from Dale Martin Promotions to Howard Thomas, 6 Apr., Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.1, IBA, box 01097.

⁵⁹ Dobie & Wober, *The Role of Wrestling*, p.5.

argues that ‘Barnum knew there was money to be made in the confusion enjoined by certain entertainment forms’.⁶⁰ Barnum had learnt it one hundred years earlier: there was something enjoyable about being ‘tricked’. A *Guardian* article, written at the height of professional wrestling’s popularity, captured this complicated relationship best:

All were cynical about wrestling: to come and remain undeceived by the most extravagant antics seems to be an attraction in itself. Too much showmanship – when a fighter falls as if struck by a steam-hammer when he has obviously not been touched – leaves the Belle Vue connoisseur amused but undismayed.⁶¹

P.T. Barnum would not have put it better himself.

The music hall stage and its influence manifested itself in other ways. Super-heavyweights, most famously Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks, so-called because of their enormous bodies, can be traced to an older performance tradition: the freak show. Here was a chance to look at and stare at fat bodies. Fat ladies, and to a lesser extent fat men, had been a regular feature of the Victorian fairground as well being an attraction on the music hall stage.⁶² Men’s bodies more generally, muscled and toned, had been derived from circus and variety traditions. As we have seen, critics since the nineteenth century had commented that various forms of performed fighting all seemed to attract substantial audiences of women. Professional wrestling on television was no different. One controller at ITA exclaimed, ‘I’m at a complete loss to understand a person such as the pleasant, gentle elderly [woman]...who claimed wrestling as her favourite TV entertainment! What frightful needs are satisfied there?’⁶³ Dobie and Wober recorded that four out of ten viewers liked to ‘admire the strength and power of the wrestlers’ bodies’.⁶⁴ Televised sports, and wrestling in particular, provided images of men’s bodies where normally only ‘incidental bits and pieces [are] offered in patriarchal culture’.⁶⁵

On television, professional wrestling’s inherent comedy continued. Tellingly, Dobie and Wober found that nine out of ten audience members enjoyed the sport

⁶⁰ Wrenn, ‘Professional Wrestling Jargon’, p.165.

⁶¹ Anon., no title, *The Guardian*, 13 Nov., (1960): p.19. For a more detailed discussion of professional wrestling fan’s complex position with regards to fakery see Sharon Mazer, “‘Real Wrestling’/‘Real’ Life”, in Nicholas Sammond (ed.), *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, (Durham, 2005): pp.67-87.

⁶² Anne Hole, ‘Fat History and Music Hall’, *Women’s History Notebooks*, 7/1 (2000): pp.3-7.

⁶³ Internal memo from J.E. Harrison, 17 Mar. 1969, Sporting Events “Wrestling” Vol.2, IBA, Box 01097.

⁶⁴ Dobie & Wober, *The Role of Wrestling*, p.3.

⁶⁵ van Zoonen quoted in Catherine Salmon and Susan Clerc, “‘Ladies Love Wrestling, Too: Female Wrestling Fans Online’ in Nicholas Sammond (ed.), *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, (Durham, 2005): p.75.

because it was ‘funny and amusing’ and watched it for its ‘comic character’.⁶⁶ Potentially, all matches could be read as comedic. Professional wrestling had retained its music hall roots, playfully mocking the seriousness of other sports. The referee, as he had in the interwar years, missed blatant fouls and rules being broken. Victorian anxieties about professionalism, an anxiety that continued to loom over twentieth century sport despite commercialism’s ever more prominent role, manifested themselves in wrestling matches and performers. The sheer sight of grown men play fighting was arguably funny in itself. Despite this, some wrestlers had a specific role, and indeed talent, in playing the clown. Les Kellett was the most famous and enduring character in this mould.⁶⁷ A typical Kellett match involved him toying with his opponent, staggering around the ring wildly missing punches, and interacting with the referee and audience.

Television did little to rescue long-suffering referees. Disrespecting referees and rules were, if nothing else, an easy way for villains to be delineated from blue-eyes. One viewer complained to the IBA:

Realising the difficulties to which the referees are subjected I am reluctant to criticise their actions but surely it is time their rulings should be obeyed immediately. Contestants should be required to remain in their corners and await the signal for the bout to begin and failure to obey the ruling of the referee should call for an immediate warning and if repeated disqualification.⁶⁸

Professional wrestling pastiched and parodied the amateur ideal. Only now, the sport had moved out of the halls and into the peak and prime viewing time of British sport, on Saturday afternoons. It sat as the crown jewel of ITV’s sporting output while lightly mocking the sports around it.

Furthermore, the music hall and fairground’s influence could be found in the manner in which race was represented. In previous chapters we have seen that non-white wrestlers were almost always defined by their Otherness. Characters in Joint Promotions continued this trend. Performances embellished exoticism and played with racial stereotypes that circulated in other media texts and discourses about non-white men in the second half of the century. Depictions of wrestlers from the middle-east, like the Terrible Turks before them, remained highly Orientalist and collapsed national borders and boundaries. A description by Kent Walton for Sheik El Mansour captured a

⁶⁶ Dobie & Wober, *The Role of Wrestling*, p.3 & p.6.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Garfield, *The Wrestling*, p.38.

⁶⁸ Letter from Lancelot Keay to ITA, 19th Feb. 1968, Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.1, IBA, box 01097.

central appeal for many of these wrestlers: ‘a truly exotic figure...He is a genuine Arab, a genuine wrestler and a genuine champion’.⁶⁹ African-Caribbean wrestlers during the 1960s and 70s did not stray too far away from the characterisations black prize-fighters had been christened in the 1820s and identified by Jon Bee: ‘Blackee, Massa and African’.⁷⁰ Masambula, for instance, performed as an African witch-doctor. Johnny Kwango was described as having ‘boiled-egg eyes and “lethal” nut’.⁷¹ Other representations included Zando Zabo, the ‘wrestling gypsie’; and Billy Two Rivers, the Native American. Just as William Brady had added costumes to professional wrestlers at the turn of the twentieth century, Masambula entered the ring wearing the fur of a tiger and performed tribal witch dances. Billy Two Rivers performed an ‘Indian’, with full ceremonial headdress, reminiscent of the Western film genre. Kendo Nagasaki, arguably the most striking and memorable wrestler of the time, conjured images of Japan, including symbolic masks, ceremonial entrances and incessant rumours about how the wrestler had lost his finger.

We have already seen that Critics of American professional wrestling have often pointed towards these problematic representations and suggested that Otherness is often a marker of villainy. In British professional wrestling in the 1960s and 70s there was no direct correlation, although that is not to say that audiences did not have implicit and explicit political reactions towards these characters. A guardian journalist recorded a reaction at a live event where a middle-aged woman shouted ‘There’s no need to hit him in the face like that even if he is black’.⁷² What was clear was that wrestler’s whiteness, in whichever form it took, was never a key character trait. Dale Martin Promotions were always quick to dismiss ‘comments on “gimmickry” and “phoney foreigners”,⁷³ but in reality such wrestlers were as likely to come from Stoke-on-Trent as the mystical, Oriental East.

Professional wrestling’s representations of gender and sexuality, finally, were a source of amusement for audiences, both live and at home. Drawing on Mazer’s work on wrestling in the 1990s,⁷⁴ the previous chapter suggested that professional wrestling was often a parody of masculinity. These histories found new life on the British

⁶⁹ Walton, *This Grappling Game*, p.43.

⁷⁰ Bee, *Slang*, p.203.

⁷¹ Walton, *This Grappling Game*, p.43.

⁷² Anon., no title, *The Guardian*, 3 Nov., (1960): p.19

⁷³ Letter from Dale Martin Promotions to Howard Thomas, 6 Apr., Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.1, IBA, box 01097.

⁷⁴ Mazer, *Sport and Spectacle*, p.100.

television screen. Ricki Starr, a former ballet dancer, wore pointe shoes and pirouetted before, during and after matches. He garnered a mixed reaction of both laughter and derision, the comedy in the situation derived from the juxtaposition between the hyper-masculine and popular cultural world of contact sport and the supposedly feminine and 'high art' (ballet) dancing. Ballet dancing would seem mild in comparison to Adrian Street who debuted in the 1970s. Street drew equal influence from America's first television professional wrestling star, Gorgeous George,⁷⁵ and glam rock. With long, bleach blonde hair, and wearing a combination of make-up, glitter, feather boas, and sequins (he never wore the same outfit twice, naturally), his entrances drew audible gasps, laughter and catcalls. In an interview with the *Daily Mirror*, Street outlined his (in character) reasoning for the mixed reaction he often received: 'I'm hated because I am so lovely. Some think I'm a poof, but I'm not really. I'm just very conceited...Women do fancy me. Maybe they're curious or want to convert me'.⁷⁶ Away from the world of *Top of the Pops*, Street offered a radical representation of gender in the hyper-masculine world of sport.

This section has demonstrated that television palpably drew on older cultural forms – most notably the theatre (dramatic, music hall and so on), the cinema, journalism, radio, and sport. Many of professional wrestling's pleasures move quite easily from the music halls to the screen. In this period, however, television was experimenting and professionalising;⁷⁷ as the subfield matured, institutional features, changes in technology, and the crystallisation of presentation techniques had lasting effects on the way professional wrestling was enjoyed and experienced by audiences. It is to these developments that we now turn.

III. HAVE A GOOD WEEK...TILL NEXT WEEK

It is difficult to ascertain how many viewers watching wrestling on a television screen had seen a variant of wrestling live. Given its ubiquity at fairgrounds, summer camps and seaside resorts, presumably many had *some* experience of watching the performance in person. From the 1960s onwards, however, television provided audiences with their primary experience of the sport. Dobie and Wober, for instance, recorded 'one in twenty of the adult sample claims to have attended a live wrestling performance in the last twelve months. Among those who are interested in wrestling,

⁷⁵ John Capouya, *Gorgeous George: The Outrageous Bad-Boy Wrestler Who Created American Pop Culture*, (New York, 2008).

⁷⁶ 'Why Wrestling has a Stranglehold on Women', *Daily Mirror*, 21 Nov., (1970): p.9.

⁷⁷ Turnock, *Television and Consumer Culture*, pp.29-44.

this rises to one in eleven'.⁷⁸ This was the primary difference between electronic mass media and older forms of popular culture: first via photography, then cinema, and perfected by television, audiences were positioned as 'witnesses' to a broad range of events which they did not have access to before.⁷⁹ In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, if one did not attend a live sporting event then one would rely on a newspaper or magazine report to receive information about the result. Journalism of this kind influenced television's mode of reporting. An emphasis on up to date and early reports, moreover, had been a primary concern of sports reporting since a dedicated sporting press had emerged at the end of the eighteenth century.

But the immediacy of television became the form's earliest and most obvious attractions:⁸⁰ 'What you see is happening now, as you see it,' Thumin explains.⁸¹ Most of television's output in the 1940s and 1950s was live: drama, advertisements, news, and of course sport. Eventually, during the 1960s, technology and production practices allowed for the recording of adverts, dramas and sitcoms. Liveness, though, retained its importance in being able to provide the action as it happened to a national audience, particularly in sport and news events. Liveness manifested itself in other ways. Jonathan Bignell has described how *Palladium* oscillated between the 'here and there' of private and public, drawing on the tensions between live audience and home audience. He argues that the programme did this in particular ways:

The combination of star performers, the avuncular host, and the presence of "ordinary" audience members on stage posed *Palladium* as both a recognition of the medium's domestic familiarity and ordinariness, and also a means of access to a spectacular world of celebrity. The effect was to frame the programme as a mediating format between public entertainment space, signified by its liveness, auditorium setting and mix of turns, and on the other hand the regularity of broadcast, address to home audience, and the multi-camera shooting techniques that characterized *Palladium* as a programme and not just a relayed performance.⁸²

Like *Palladium*, professional wrestling attempted to capture the 'here and now' of the performance. It remained live for the first fifteen years it was on television. Importantly,

⁷⁸ Dobie & Wober, *The Role of Wrestling*, p.3.

⁷⁹ John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, (London, 2000): pp.6-38.

⁸⁰ Charles Barr, "'They Think It's All Over': The Dramatic Legacy of Live Television' in John Hill and Martin McLoone (eds), *Big Picture, Small Screen: The Relations Between Film and Television*, (Luton, 1996); See Ellis's arguments about histories of the media and 'witness' in *Seeing Things*, pp.17-39.

⁸¹ Janet Thumin, "'A Live Commercial for Icing Sugar.' Researching the Historical Audience: Gender and Broadcast Television in the 1950s', *Screen*, 36/1 (1995): p.48.

⁸² Bignell, 'And the Rest is History', p.63-64.

audience members, who had always been an important of the show, remained an active part of the spectacle. In a different context, John Fiske has described American wrestling audiences in the 1980s as being carnivalesque, disobeying the rules of footlights and sharp divide between audience and performer.⁸³ This is true for British professional wrestling in the 1960s and 70s. The most popular wrestlers – Bert Royal, Mick McManus, Jackie Pallo, Les Kellet – continued to interact with the live audience, talking to and antagonising them directly. In many respects this was simply a continuation of wrestling's longer history: prize-fighting's theatrical tours, circus performances and wrestlers in the music hall had all relied on certain amount of audience participation. Home audiences clearly did not have access to the performance in this manner: watching a televised sports event was not the same as watching that event in a public space. These programmes used the conventions of television, itself reliant on industrial and technological changes, to offer a mediated reconstruction of the live event for home audiences.

According to Richard Cashman, and like television more generally, 'television sport did not emerge in a vacuum. Art, print media, radio, film, photo journalism have all contributed to new meanings and forms of sport. Television sport drew on all previous constructions of sport developed through other media forms'.⁸⁴ Televised events had developed from sports reporting which had always drawn on the process of 'selection, dramatizing, interpretation and reflection'.⁸⁵ Television sports reporting added commentators, producers, presenters, and editing techniques. Professional wrestling, then, used these televisual conventions to add another layer of mediation to the live performance. The sport started life on television as a fairly static affair with one hard camera relaying the performance. By the mid-1960s, improvements in technology were helping to construct the narrative in particular ways.⁸⁶ Kent Walton described,

Today we have platform mountings where the "zoom" lenses really come into their own providing us with exiting close-ups from above the ring. True, we still get shots at canvas level but the new, modern techniques mean these are selected by, instead of forced upon, the Director.⁸⁷

⁸³ Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, pp.83-102

⁸⁴ Richard Cashman quoted in David Rowe, 'The Global Love-Match: Sport and Television', *Media, Culture & Society*, 18/4, (1996): p.567.

⁸⁵ Holt & Mason, *Sport in Britain*, p.94.

⁸⁶ For a discussion about how this operated in relation to other media events see Turnock, *Television and Consumer Culture*, p.61.

⁸⁷ Walton, *This Grappling Game*, p.15.

In line with developments across television production, the use of three cameras and zoom technologies allowed the performance to be seen in ways that were impossible with the human eye. Audiences at a live sporting event had a fixed viewpoint from the stands, audiences at home could be directed towards particular moments considered by the director to be of interest. Television, thus, could direct the home audience's attention to particular narratives as they developed (a close-up of the face of wrestler in a submission, perhaps). Not all viewers were necessarily thrilled about this. One viewer wrote to the ITA complaining that editing techniques meant audiences 'lost trends of fights when all we get is sweating faces and behinds – all very dramatic but can't follow sport that way'.⁸⁸ It is a criticism one could make of television sports editing more generally.⁸⁹ But, as the writer attests to, editing did complement particular narratives and highlight individuals in the match. Thus, the director became an important purveyor of meaning for the wrestling spectacle.

Another purveyor of meaning were commentators who provided yet another layer of dramatization and interpretation. A commentator addressed audiences personally and warmly, balancing reporting with entertainment and blending texture with explanation.⁹⁰ Commentary was a vital component of televised professional wrestling's success. The sound of Kent Walton's voice as he introduced another week of action became as identifiable for audiences as the wrestlers themselves. In some ways, Walton's job was similar to that of sports commentary more generally. He needed to provide a knowledgeable understanding of holds, wrestlers and continuing narratives. Garry Whannel has contended that, as televised sport adopted technical advancements like close-ups and slow-motion, commentary 'brought analysis to the foreground' and often privileged former professionals with experience and expertise in the sport.⁹¹

Professional wrestling, interestingly, did not follow this trajectory. In professional wrestling, if a commentator explained technique and helped the audience understand how movement or body shape were used to create the performance they would be giving away the secrets of the wrestling ring. The commentator's job in professional wrestling, then, was to draw attention to the distractions and sleights of hand used to help camouflage the cooperative movements used by wrestlers. One ITA

⁸⁸ Internal memo about viewer complaint, 11 Jan. 1965, Sporting Events "Wrestling" vol.1, IBA, Box 01097.

⁸⁹ Holt, *Sport and the British*, p.317; Whannel, *Fields in Vision*, pp.93-97.

⁹⁰ Whannel, *Fields in Vision*, p.27-28.

⁹¹ Whannel, *Fields in Vision*, p.31.

member wrote to another to explain the commentator's function: 'by means, of a variety of unsubtle devices, [the commentators] would have us [believe it is real]. It is curious how successful these methods can be'.⁹² On the one hand, professional wrestling commentary was developing alongside other practices of television reporting, on the other, there was still an element of fairground barker who exaggerated and embellished and were part of the performance as much as commenting on it. Commentators and television presenters had another role. They were television personalities rather than the television star. If 'personalities are distinguished for their representativeness, their typicality, the 'will to ordinariness' to be accepted, normalized, experienced as familiar',⁹³ then Walton's role as personality was used to juxtapose the wrestler's larger-than-life celebrity. His role, and in a similar manner the television presenters, too, was to be ever-present and reassuring. Wrestlers might come and go, but Walton provided continuity from one week's episode to the next.

Local and national newspapers had stopped reporting on professional wrestling in the interwar years. For the most part, this had produced a set of performers who predominantly existed, for audiences at least, simply as the character they played in the ring. Where other forms of star and celebrity hinged on an interest in the 'private' life, or at the very least a sense of a 'real' person informing their star or celebrity persona, professional wrestling attempted to obscure that relationship. Television's specific economy of celebrity confused that history. Some wrestlers resisted or even failed to acknowledge a private self. Kendo Nagasaki embodies the difficulties faced by celebrity theory when attempting to analyse professional wrestlers as celebrities. He was, or at least his mask was, instantly recognisable, appearing on the front of the *TV Times* in 1976, for example. There existed, moreover, an intense amount of rumour and speculation about the man behind the mask. Peter Thornley from Stoke-on-Trent was kept as an intense secret that few people knew. In an interview with Simon Garfield, Max Crabtree explained:

From the moment he arrived at the hall he'd have the mask on.
But when he got in the dressing room, because he often went on

⁹² Letter from F.W. Bath to F.H. Copplestone, 30 Aug., 1967, to Sporting Events "Wrestling" Vol.1, IBA, Box 01097.

⁹³ Langer in James Bennet, 'The Television Personality System: Televisual Stardom Revisited After Film Theory', *Screen*, 49/1(2008): pp.32-50. See also Andy Medhurst, 'Every Wart and Pustule: Gilbert Harding and Television Stardom', in John Corner (ed.), *Popular Television in Britain: Studies in Cultural History*, (London, 1991): pp.60-74.

third, and might be there for a couple of hours, he'd lift the mask...Keeping intact was an obsession'.⁹⁴

In some ways, Kendo Nagasaki was similar to a celeactor as posited by Rojek, 'a fictional character who is either momentarily ubiquitous or becomes an institutionalized feature of popular culture'.⁹⁵ Nagasaki was the celebrity, Thornley was not.

As such, professional wrestling's relationship with newspapers remained complicated. Regular reports about matches remained absent from the press. The new found popularity heralded by television, though, begun a limited interaction between newspapers and wrestling which had not happened in any meaningful way since the early 1930s. Modes of reporting established throughout the twentieth century to cover sports and sporting celebrities seemed inadequate in the face of professional wrestling.⁹⁶ There was an understanding from journalists that the sport was not a sport in any commonly understood sense, but at the same time professional wrestling was a popular entertainment that they had to write about. Celebrity reporting, sporting or otherwise, almost always focused on the possibility of capturing the 'real' performer in their day-to-day lives. Roy Blackman, in the lead up to McManus and Pallo's big FA Cup day match in 1963, produced a report which attempted to apply the codes and conventions of sports reporting to professional wrestling: he visited the wrestlers at their homes and at the gym and explored the men 'behind' the characters. In order to bypass the (fairly) obvious conclusion that the match was a performance, the report speculated that, despite understanding that the match was not competitive, there really existed a rivalry between the two:

They won't be shaking hands. They won't even be civil. In fact you can bet your last half-crown they'll be downright nasty....[and I am] prepared to believe it. Kidding aside, I thought they really don't like each other.⁹⁷

With his tongue firmly in his cheek, the report was keen to stress that Pallo and McManus genuinely held a grudge against one another. Indeed, this seemed to fuel the eagerness with which the public awaited the match. Pleasures of speculating who was under a mask maintained the focus of audience's engagement with wrestling, but this

⁹⁴ Garfield, *The Wrestling*, p.128.

⁹⁵ Rojek, *Celebrity*, p.23.

⁹⁶ For a discussion on new forms of reporting and celebrity that crystallised in the 1960s, see Garry Whannel, *Media Sport Stars: Masculinities and Moralities*, (London, 2002): pp.109-129.

⁹⁷ Roy Blackman, 'The Duel at 1.20pm: It's the Fight They Wouldn't Put on for Prince Philip This Week', *Daily Mirror*, 25 May (1963): p.9.

was confused by the national press and television's manner of presenting sporting celebrities.

Finally, the presenter's job was to help manage the 'flow' of television.⁹⁸ As we have seen, television drew on a number of different cultural forms that existed alongside each other. Turnock explains that television 'was a unified cultural form that placed discrete and separate cultural activities in a direct relationship with each other. News programmes could now coexist alongside sitcoms, opera alongside variety, [and] drama alongside music'.⁹⁹ Part of television's appeal was its ability to move audiences from location to location, drawing together disparate entertainments and popular cultural forms. The magazine television format in particular, and television in general, served a similar purpose to the dedicated sporting press of the Georgian period. The magazine format was ideally suited to television because broadcasting 'depends on attracting and securing a mass audience....hence the imperative to develop programme forms...without alienating too much of the potential audience for too long'.¹⁰⁰

Sports broadcasting followed the magazine format for much of the twentieth century.¹⁰¹ Eamonn Andrews or Dickie Davies, *World of Sport's* presenters, linked disparate sports from various locations. They serve as a useful illustrations of how television presenters were used to manage the flow of television. Television presenters, being recognisable celebrities, also operated across programming, further helping to manage the flow of the medium. Eamonn Andrews in particular is a good example of this. Andrews made his name presenting the BBC panel show that had popularised Gilbert Harding, *What's My Line*. Later he became a presenter on *World of Sport* and was also given his own show *The Eamonn Andrews Show*, a programme that borrowed heavily from America's established celebrity interview late-night shows.¹⁰² If the magazine programme spoke of a unified world of sport then particular television celebrity-cum-presenters offered a unified world of television. On a particularly famous episode in January 1967, Mick McManus and Jackie Pallo rekindled their long-running feud with a dramatic argument, linking the Sunday night show to the Saturday afternoon sports programme in more ways than one (as well as giving the two wrestlers, Joint Promotions and World of Sport publicity).

⁹⁸ Williams, *Television*, p.77-120.

⁹⁹ Turnock, *Television and Consumer Culture*, p.67-68.

¹⁰⁰ Thumim, *Inventing Television*, p.4.

¹⁰¹ Whannel, *Fields in Vision*, p.37.

¹⁰² Francis Bonner, *Personality Presenters: Television's Intermediaries With Viewers*, (Farnham, 2011): p.80.

At its most simplistic, the most obvious change to wrestling in the late twentieth century was that a screen was placed between the action and the audience. The codes, conventions and mode of address altered how people saw and watched particular text. The structured field of television, and their associated institutions and agents, also fundamentally changed the sporting field. The following section will examine the relationship between Joint Promotions and ITV while assessing the overall changes in the sporting field.

IV. SPORTING ENTERTAINMENTS?

Television's influence over professional wrestling was exerted beyond simple questions of technology and reception. The most immediate impact was that Joint Promotions, the body who had established themselves as having an almost monopolistic control over professional wrestling in England in the immediate post-war years, were now answerable to the outside influence of the ITA. The ITA had been set up as state-sanctioned overseer of ITV's output. As an institution, their role was to police and regulate advertisements and programming and to make sure that 'offensive' and 'inappropriate' content was kept to a minimum. Despite, or perhaps precisely because of, wrestling's popularity on ITV, a vast swath of those employed by ITA were at best ambivalent and at worst openly hostile to its place as ITV's most watched sport. Wrestling continued to be one of the channel's most popular programmes, but for many at the station it was an embarrassment. University educated programmers and staff at the ITA were often keen to distance themselves from enjoyment of the show. 'Personally', one member of staff offered, 'I would never watch wrestling unless I had to'.¹⁰³ It was an intriguing dynamic in which those employed to regulate the content of the channel had little sense of why and how people enjoyed one of its most popular programmes.

Despite Joint Promotion's intentions to keep wrestling more 'family friendly' than it had been in the interwar years, the nature of professional wrestling itself denied it the possibility of ever being an abundantly 'respectable' sport enjoyed by those rich in cultural capital. At the same time as television developed and matured, and with commercial television decidedly moving away from the Reithian values first created by the BBC, cultural critics began to fear the materialisation of the worst excesses they had imagined commercial television might bring. As Jeffrey Milland succinctly describes,

¹⁰³ Internal memo from J.E. Harrison, 17 Mar. 1969, Sporting Events "Wrestling" vol.2, IBA, Box 01097.

‘ITV had become hugely popular precisely by showing the kinds of programmes which offended its critics’.¹⁰⁴ Audiences who were not necessarily familiar with professional wrestling, and who had would never have paid to watch wrestling in a hall, posed a serious challenge to Joint Promotions.

Complaints about sex and violence on television, and the quality of commercial television in general,¹⁰⁵ had gathered pace throughout the late 1950s and 60s. Concerns about the corrupting influence of mass and commercial media were retained from older periods. Hoggart, a vocal critic of mass and American popular culture, served as a member on the Pilkington Report, a licensed judgement on ‘the nation’s culture’.¹⁰⁶ The Pilkington Report did not look favourably on commercial television and decreed that the ITA should play a greater role in distributing ITV’s content. The ITA would now ‘plan all programming and sell all advertising time. The programme companies would still make the programmes, but under the ITA’s direction, and sell them to the ITA at prices enabling a surplus to go to the Exchequer’.¹⁰⁷

Many of the complaints made in the nineteenth century about the circus, the fairground and the music hall resurfaced. In this context, professional wrestling was inevitably criticised by certain sections of the public. One writer objected to the level of violence and the disregard for the rules displayed by the wrestlers. ‘I am concerned,’ he wrote, ‘about the impression and spectacle that comes across the television screen...and its effect upon the millions of children and adolescents then watching television’.¹⁰⁸ Worries about young people and popular culture, of course, had a long history.¹⁰⁹ In a similarly revealing and impassioned complaint about the behaviour of Mick McManus, one viewer wrote that the:

Continual deliberate fouling seems to be his chosen policy. He gives many indications that he thinks cheating is clever. He swings his opponent around to unsight, so that he may handicap that opponent by deliberate fouling and if possible weaken him so that McManus may win. Under the auspices of the Authority sheer swinedom is being paid substantial sums for cheating

¹⁰⁴ Jeffrey Milland does a good job of describing the hostility faced by commercial television in *Paternalists, Populists and Pilkington: The Struggle for the Soul of British television, 1958-1963*, unpublished thesis, (Bristol, 2005): p.4.

¹⁰⁵ Milland, *Paternalists, Populists and Pilkington*.

¹⁰⁶ James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility: The Press, Broadcasting and New Media in Britain*, sixth Edition, (London, 2003): p.173.

¹⁰⁷ Milland, *Paternalists, Populists and Pilkington*, p.1.

¹⁰⁸ Letter from S. J. Stock to Lord Hill, 17 Jul. 1967, Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.1, IBA, Box 01097.

¹⁰⁹ John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta Rap, 1830-1996*, (New York, 1998).

endlessly....No person, young or not so young, who thinks savagely of others can be uninfluenced by this behaviour...This can do nothing but harm the state of the nation where already so much violence lurks near the surface.¹¹⁰

The ITA received a torrent of similar letters (from concerned MPs, reverends and members of the public) on a near-weekly basis throughout the 1960s and 70s. Frequently, the ITA wrote to, and met with, Joint Promotions in the hope of better policing the sport. For one meeting, the ITA listed all the possible questions and concerns that the institution had. It read like a consolidated list of worries that had plagued the sport since 1880.

1. Is there a controlling body for wrestling not connected with the promotion of individual matches, e.g., BBBC, FA?
2. Who investigates charges of malpractice? How many investigations were there in 1965?
3. The point was made that there was no gambling associated with wrestling? All other professional sports seem to attract the gambling industry, who not wrestling?
4. Are the bouts rigged?
5. What are the qualifications of referees? Do they pass any practical or written tests? Is there a central governing body who appoints referees? Are they, as in other sports, subject to regular reports?¹¹¹

Joint Promotions reliance on ITV to reproduce its near-monopoly status within professional wrestling, and the importance of television in society at this time, meant that Joint Promotions had to pay heed to suggestions and warnings. The ITA could encourage and/or discourage content, the use of certain wrestlers, the development of narrative, and the manner in which representations were used. Joint Promotions sent out a letter addressed to all component groups pointing out ‘the necessity of a uniform interpretation of the rules’.¹¹² Discontent with Joint Promotions even produced the possibility of using promoters outside of the stable, although this was resisted by Lew Grade.¹¹³ In the 1970s, with continued failures to address the problems, it was decided that, in the hope of appeasing concerned viewers, wrestling would be pre-recorded so

¹¹⁰ Letter from J.S. Malloch to Lord Aylestone, 3 Apr., Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.2, IBA, box 01097.

¹¹¹ Internal notes for a meeting between Mr. Sendall, Mr. Copplestone and Howard Thomas, 15 Jul., 1966, vol.1, IBA, box 01097.

¹¹² Letter from Joint Promotions to all promoters and referees, date unknown, Sporting Events “Wrestling” Vol.2, IBA, Box 01097.

¹¹³ Anon, internal memo, 19 Apr., 1967, Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol. 1, IBA, Box 01097.

that ‘the bouts screened could be selected and the most unsavoury incidents eliminated’.¹¹⁴

Despite the backdrop of concerned correspondence and meetings, however, professional wrestling was ultimately one of television’s most popular sports. Attracting an audience had rarely been a problem for wrestling promoters. From the early 1960s onwards, wrestling regularly gained higher audience figures than BBC’s *Grandstand*.¹¹⁵ As Jeremy Potter later wrote, ‘large numbers of people liked to watch but serious-minded condemned. Was it innocent fun or an endorsement of savagery? Society was divided between those who wanted more wrestling on television and those who demanded less’.¹¹⁶ This simple fact – that wrestling was one of the limited success stories with regards to sport on ITV – gave Joint Promotions a certain degree of leeway. ITA, perhaps against their gut instincts, were willing to defend the sport against demanding outsiders. At the end of the 60s, a letter seemed to sum up the position at which the institution had arrived:

Admittedly, opinions on professional wrestling are sharply divided and indeed are equally vociferous both for and against. It is a fact, however, that there is a large and enthusiastic audience for these programmes, and while the Authority keeps a watchful eye on all performances so as to ensure that they do not contravene normal programme standards, it considers them acceptable as part of the pattern of television entertainment.¹¹⁷

This popularity of televised professional wrestling, and thus the potential profit the sport might receive under the right political economic structures, produced changes in ownership of Joint Promotion members. Max Crabtree was not exaggerating when he told Simon Garfield that ‘there were lots of deals over the years’.¹¹⁸ In 1964, Jarvis Astair, under the Hurst Park Syndicate, bought Dale Martin Promotions¹¹⁹ and then shortly after Best Wryton Promotions and Morrell and Beresford.¹²⁰ *The Observer* would later write that ‘under the ample Astaire wing lies most of what you can see in the halls and all of what you see on the box’.¹²¹ The main purpose for buying these wrestling promotions was a consequence of the granting of a temporary license pay-as-

¹¹⁴ Potter, *Independent Television in Britain Volume 4*, p.282.

¹¹⁵ Whannel, *Fields in Vision*, p.49; Potter, *Independent Television in Britain Volume 4*, p.282.

¹¹⁶ Potter, *Independent Television in Britain Volume 4*, p.282.

¹¹⁷ Letter from F.H. Copplestone to Mr. Coombs, 12. Jun. 1967, Sporting Events “Wrestling” Vol. 1, IBA, Box 01097.

¹¹⁸ Garfield, *The Wrestling*, p.148.

¹¹⁹ Anon., ‘Hurst Park Forms Pay-TV Offshoot’, *The Times*, 12 Aug., (1964): p.12.

¹²⁰ Garfield, *The Wrestling*, p.148

¹²¹ David Hunn, ‘They all Dance to Astaire’s Tune’, *The Observer*, Apr. 8, (1973): p.25.

you-view television across several English cities. The Hurst Park Syndicate, operating under the Viewsport banner, possessed a deal to provide sport for the London and Sheffield Pay-TV channel operated by British Home Entertainment and British Relay Wireless. Viewsport also conducted experiments with live, big screen football games at stadiums and theatrical exhibitions of live boxing matches. Over one million pounds had been spent by Pay-TV in the hope that the channel would be rolled out nationally upon the experiment's completion.¹²² Despite promises to contrary, the Pay-TV experiment was never expanded past its first three years. Though Astaire was said to be a wrestling fan, and often defended wrestling to journalists, professional wrestling was only one of 22 companies held under Hurst Park. Professional wrestling had clearly been bought with the expectation that the field of television would be changed dramatically by the introduction of subscription-model television.¹²³ It was a sign of how dramatically money invested by television companies could inexorably change the power and ownership structures of a sport and subfield.

Such were the trials faced by most spectator sports. Money and television were challenging even the staunchest advocates of amateurism, the Olympic Organising committee.¹²⁴ In 1956 television rights to the Olympic Games were sold for the first time. To demonstrate how quickly television became a central funder of the games, Michael R. Real declares that in 1960 television provided 1 in 400 dollars; by 1984 that had shrunk to 1 in 2 dollars.¹²⁵ For those sports that were television friendly (reasonably easy to follow, action orientated, and so on), television had the potential to offer a financial boom. Football, for example, the greatest beneficiaries of television's changes to the English sporting field, faced an intense competition for exclusive and live broadcast rights in the 1960s. Yet despite the large amounts of money involved not all the football clubs were thrilled about the offer. Burnley's chairman, Bob Lord, famously likened live televised football to a 'possible cancer...because it has the effect of keeping people away from the matches themselves'.¹²⁶ Some commentators in the press agreed. In his *Daily Mirror* column, arguing against the BBC, ITV and Viewsport's competitive negotiations for football contracts, Peter Wilson argued that:

¹²² Anon., 'Pay Television Stakes Its Claim', *Illustrated London News*, 15 Jan., (1966): pp.10-11.

¹²³ Anon., 'Hurst Park Forms Pay-TV Offshoot', *The Times*, 12 Aug., (1964): p.12.

¹²⁴ Stephen R. Wenn, 'Growing Pains: The Olympic Movement and Television, 1966-1972', *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, 4, (1995): pp.1-22.

¹²⁵ Michael R. Real, 'MediaSport: Technology and the Commodification of Postmodern Sport', in Lawrence A. Wenner, *Mediasport*, (1998, London): p.14.

¹²⁶ Anon., 'BBC's £781,000 Bid for TV Football', *The Times*, 14 Mar., (1967): p.3.

Once the idea catches on that EVERYTHING is eventually going to find its way on the goggle-box the sense of “occasion” will rapidly drain away from sport...What I fear is that sport – and soccer is the obvious target – will sell out wholesale, dazzled by the admittedly vast sums at the disposal of the TV authorities.¹²⁷

The football league rejected initial deals for live rights to particular games, but continued to receive large amounts of money for pre-recorded games. The rejection simply delayed the inevitable.

In the wake of Pay-TV’s failures, in order to maximise their presence on the high street, the Hurst Park Syndicate were obtained by William Hill in 1971. The same year, William Hill were acquired by Sears Holdings Limited.¹²⁸ According to Crabtree, wrestling was never a major concern for William Hill.¹²⁹ Given the fact that Sears had broad interests (including shoe making and high street fashion), William Hill were focused on expanding the high street, and Hurst Park Syndicate had diverse companies, it is perhaps a given that Joint Promotions were not a priority for Astaire or other members of the company. While initially Joint Promotions kept original management and organisation structures, they eventually retired or bought out and were replaced by ‘secretaries’, at least according to one wrestler at the time.¹³⁰ By the mid-1970s, Max Crabtree, who had spent much of the 1960s working outside of the Joint Promotions monopoly, found himself as managing director of the group.

Conflicts between the ITA and Joint Promotions, the reasonably frequent changes in ownership, and the developments in television technology were all producing noticeable alterations to the televised professional wrestling product. Specifically, the age old question persisted: was wrestling an entertainment or a sport? As the older generation of sporting promoters who had agreed to the Mountevans committee rulings retired or were bought out, showmanship was beginning to be accentuated again. Elements of all-in that the Mountevans had been so desperate to restrict were creeping back in the televised spectacle. Not everyone was a fan of the new style. In an interview with the 1979 World of Sport annual, Kent Walton warned of the dangers of moving too far away from the sporting pleasures of wrestling.

¹²⁷ Peter Wilson, ‘TV Spells Danger’, *Daily Mirror*, 15 Mar., (1967): p.27.

¹²⁸ Andrew Davenport, ‘Betting on the Bookmakers: Sears Holdings’ Bid for William Hill’, *The Guardian*, 25 Nov., (1971): p.24. For a summary of turnovers and takeovers of bookmakers during this period see Roger Munting, *An Economic and Social History of Gambling in Britain and the USA* (Manchester, 1996): pp.89 – 116.

¹²⁹ Garfield, *The Wrestling*, p.148.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, p.153.

[F]licked wrists, dropped shoulders and Boston crabs [had once] ruled, black masks, stomachs the size of saucepans and glittering gowns have barged in. And wrestling's great worry now is that all the razzamatazz and showmanship that has appeared will take over from the proper stuff.¹³¹

It was not difficult to see who these criticisms were directed at. For some, Big Daddy, Max Crabtree's brother, was an embodiment of everything that was wrong with wrestling. In 1979, one irate viewer pleaded to the IBA, 'Please let us have good class wrestling as it used to be. None of your "Big Daddys". That's not wrestling'.¹³² Another viewer (or perhaps rival wrestler) suggested that Big Daddy's 'performance was...awful, having got on the canvas he had great difficulty in getting up'.¹³³ They further argued that Max Crabtree's nepotism and relationship with his brother had created a situation in which Big Daddy 'was kept...on his feet' with matches only lasting 'about 2 mins'.¹³⁴ Adrian Street's suggestion that Max Crabtree did this in order to run down the business and buy it off Astaire seems a little harsh,¹³⁵ and such damning criticism of Shirley Crabtree similarly mean spirited. Such assessments, however, did point to a wider problem with televised wrestling in the latter half of the 70s. It was an old problem: should professional wrestling be presented as a legitimate sporting competition? Should skill and talent in the ring be emphasised over entertainment?

Promoters who had always been at great pains to protect professional wrestling's secrets and promote the performance as genuine sporting competition also came to be critical of the sport's less believable showmanship. In particular, Norman Morrell, who had played such a pivotal role in the creation of the Lord Mountevans style and Joint Promotions, found himself increasingly disillusioned with professional wrestling on television. In a long series of letters to the IBA from 1975 to 1980, Morrell, who was always quick to point out his previous involvement with the sport, decried the current situation: 'TV originally paid lip service to....Mountevans and Joint Promotions Ltd [exercised] a degree of uniformity of control amongst their members'.¹³⁶ He further added 'the necessity of presenting ITV wrestling to look like a sport in the world of

¹³¹ Peter Bills, 'Beware: Too Much Showmanship Could Ruin Wrestling, says Kent Walton', *World of Sport Annual*, (London, 1979): p.unknown.

¹³² Unsigned correspondence, date unknown, Sporting Events "Wrestling" Vol.5, IBA, Box 01097.

¹³³ Unsigned correspondence, date unknown, Sporting Events "Wrestling" vol.6, IBA, Box 01097.

¹³⁴ Unsigned correspondence, date unknown, Sporting Events "Wrestling" vol.6, IBA, Box 01097.

¹³⁵ Garfield, *The Wrestling*, p.153.

¹³⁶ Letter from Norman Morrell to Mr Rook, 5 Nov. 1975, Sporting Events "Wrestling" vol.4, IBA, Box 01097.

sport is both common sense and good business'.¹³⁷ He disliked a match between Freeman and Catweazle that was 'obviously played for laughs'.¹³⁸ He also drew attention to the perennial problem of sporting control, now nearly a century old.

As it is with no effective Board of Control – Promoters, officials and wrestlers conduct themselves as they like without fear of penalty. Good Television presentation is the easiest way to attain an acceptance of high standard wrestling presentation around the halls in the absence of Control.¹³⁹

Aside from a few letters in reply, his calls for the ITV bosses to take a more active regulation over televised wrestling fell on deaf ears. In 1980, his frustration was such that he accused Joint Promotions of being, 'no longer a body of independent promoters [having ceased] to have authority and [are] just another subsidiary in the great conglomerate'.¹⁴⁰ In the same letter, the IBA were branded a puppet for, 'the mammoth commercial empire that owns Joint Promotions [and their]...destruction of wrestling as any form of sport'.¹⁴¹ It is easy to dismiss Morrell's criticisms as being the rant of an ex-employee and promoter, no longer active in the subfield but still wanting to maintain a degree of control over the sport. His argument is especially confusing considering his role in the formation of Joint Promotions and its monopolisation of professional wrestling. Though the Mountevans committee were instrumental in creating a more polite and respectable sport, professional wrestling, even in the late 1940s and 50s, still maintained characters, comedy and showmanship. Television had undoubtedly encouraged this further, however.

Morrell's concerns, moreover, echoed other commentator's fears about the direction professional sport was taking. Spectator sport, in short, was increasingly commercial and spectator driven; television dramatically sped up that process. Improvements in production technologies and practises (editing, commentary, camera, slow motion replays and so on) and broadcasting technologies (such as international live broadcasts) combined with political considerations (the expansion of channels and broadcasting times) brought more and better quality sport into the homes of audiences.

¹³⁷ Letter from Norman Morrell to Mr Rook, 5 Nov. 1975, Sporting Events "Wrestling" vol.4, IBA, Box 01097.

¹³⁸ Letter Norman Morrell to Mr Weltman, 29 Nov. 1975, Sporting Events "Wrestling" vol.4, IBA, Box 01097.

¹³⁹ Letter from Norman Morrell to Mr Rook, 5 Nov. 1975, Sporting Events "Wrestling" Vol.4, IBA, Box 01097.

¹⁴⁰ Letter from Normal Morrell to Michael Gillies and Teresa Newberry, 16 Jul. 1980, Sporting Events "Wrestling" Vol.6, IBA, Box 01097.

¹⁴¹ Letter from Norman Morrell to Micahel Gillies, 23 Apr. 1980, Sporting Events "Wrestling" Vol.5, IBA, Box 01097.

There was money to be made, by media entrepreneurs, sporting bodies and players alike.¹⁴² Sports that did not seem particularly spectator orientated, including squash, archery and billiards, desperate to not be left out of the commercial bonanza, changed their rules in order to be television-friendly.¹⁴³ Across many sports, any lasting restrictions on professionalism were lifted. Between 1880 and 1950, most sports had operated via a compromise between agents, sporting bodies and institutions. Limited commercialism was permitted as long as ‘amateur’ sporting values and institutions had ultimate control. The large sums of money heralded by television moved control away from the amateur ideal, a control that had been slipping since the interwar years, ever more closely to commercial interests.¹⁴⁴ While the amateur ethos retained some of its discursive power, sport had become first and foremost a commodity which was produced for national and global television audiences.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of television producers and controllers into the field of sport, especially after 1955, was the most dramatic restructuring since the genesis of the field in the late nineteenth century. For the first time in sport’s existence, spectator sports were not played for the enjoyment of those taking part nor performed for the crowds in stadiums. First and foremost, professional sports were now predominantly about securing and sustaining television audiences. Professional wrestling, in this regard, was no different. Joint Promotions, operating a monopoly of sorts over buildings and talent, were well placed when ITV were looking to expand their sporting output. Television changed professional wrestling. Ownership over various wrestling groups were predicated on their investment and audience potential.

By the 1980s, the amateur ideal, so central to muscular Christians in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, was all but a vague value alluded to but never strictly enforced. In 1988, the Olympics, one of the last strong-holds of strict amateur sport separation, allowed professionalism. Television’s role in these decisions cannot be understated. Wrestling had historically emphasised spectator’s entertainment and commercial values since professional wrestling’s inception one hundred years earlier. In many respects, wrestling had the least distance to travel to meet the demands of television. While many sporting bodies would be aghast to think about it in these terms,

¹⁴² Haynes, ‘A Pageant of Sound and Vision’, p.220-222; Rowe, ‘Global Love Match’, p.571.

¹⁴³ Whannel, *Fields in Vision*, p.81.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, p.69.

a good deal of sports moved closer to the capital, pleasures and values of professional wrestling. Televised sports needed to be engaging, entertaining and commercially viable.

CONCLUSION

It is worth returning briefly to the retired Cumbrian wrestler and his declaration that ‘wrestling...was a game for the field not the stage’.¹ While one can empathise with amateur wrestlers the world over who have to clarify the rather large differences between the amateur and professional branches of the sport, the question of where wrestling belongs is neither straightforward nor obvious. Tensions, conflicts and negotiations about its belonging have characterised pugilism, combat performance and professional wrestling from at least the mid-eighteenth century. Since the growth of capitalism and industrialism, and alongside it the professionalization and commercialisation of sport, many have debated the right and proper way to practice and perform fights. Is wrestling a game for the field or the stage? The wrestler posing the question was by no means the first nor last to ask.

In thinking about both the development of sport and the development of professional wrestling, this thesis has found beneficial Bourdieu’s notion of field and its application to existing sports history literature. As with all theoretical models, fields do not offer a magic conceptual bullet and nor have I used it in this work in a dogmatic manner. In his conclusion to the study of the sporting field in France, deFrance uses a self-reflexive argument from Bourdieu about the usefulness of the theory.

The notion of field does not provide ready-made answers to all possible queries...Rather, its major virtue...is that it promotes a mode of construction that has to be thought anew every time. It forces us to raise questions: about the limits of the universe under investigation, how it is “articulated”, and to what degree, etc. It offers a coherent system of recurrent questions that saves us from theoretical vacuums of positivist empiricism and from the empirical void of theoretical discourse.²

This thesis has explored why the sporting field developed in the ways that it did in the nineteenth century, who influenced these decisions via questions about power, control and capital (in various forms) and how these operate in society, sport and professional wrestling. Such questions are clearly central to the wider sports history and cultural studies projects, and as such I have borrowed the language of resistance and negotiation so important in Gramscian-inspired analysis in the 1970s and 80s. Critically, fields have allowed the work to consider how professional wrestling exists relationally to other

¹ Clicker wrestling notes, 16th Feb., 1973, Cumbria archive centre, DSO 48/25.

² Bourdieu in deFrance, ‘The Making of a Field’, p.325.

sports and, indeed, theatrical entertainments. While scholars have often been eager to describe it as a theatrical entertainment, this thesis has outlined that, in England at least, professional wrestling has always belonged to the sporting field, albeit on the fringes.

The emergence of a sporting and exercise field in the second half of the nineteenth century involved the convergence of primarily the education, military, medical and cultural fields. Various agents and institutions competed and compromised in order to control the meaning and structures. The conflicts and compromises exerted between various agents, groups, institutions and so on throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century offer an overview of the ideological tensions that have manifested themselves in sport and which have been identified by historians since. Is sport for participating or spectating? If the former, are the benefits of sporting competition based around gambling, entertainment and laughter, or the latter healthiness, morality and leadership? Should sportsmen and women receive a wage for their time and troubles or does payment represent professionalism and a threat to the amateur ideal? Should sport be played by everyone in local fields and parks or be watched on stages and televisions? In many cases, deliberations and disputes about the purpose of sport rage to this day. Today many of the debates about sport seem settled, but that does not automatically qualify them as such, an argument to which I will return shortly. Certainly, questions about the role of sport and the extent to which commercialisation should be permitted in competitions is not fully resolved, but they are not as passionately contested as they were at the turn of the twentieth century. As has been established elsewhere, this was a period in which arguments raged and outcomes were experienced personally.³

The manner in which sport developed was at the expense of the established, professionalised version which, as chapter two demonstrated, was firmly established during the early nineteenth century but often belonged to a broader field of popular culture. An important argument developed in this thesis is that sport, given the structures and control demonstrated by cultural entrepreneurs at this time, may have developed in a similar fashion had it not been for the amateur ideologies and associations that grew in the second half of the nineteenth century. This is, at best, speculative, but I think there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the medical, military and educational establishments did all they could to limit sport's involvement with the cultural and entertainment industries. Very few historians will disagree that, if not for

³ Collins, *Rugby's Great Split*, pp.112-154.

the involvement of the public schools, universities and muscular Christians, sport would look very different today. Sport might, in fact, more closely resemble professional wrestling.

Ultimately, as chapter three examined, different sports and subfields responded in different ways to the formation of the sporting field. Some embraced limited forms of professionalism and commercialism while others refused to even consider the notion. They positioned themselves relationally, locating other sports and institutions as allies or rivals. Professional wrestling has always existed at the top of the commercial axis of the sporting field, but it has been a perpetual source of embarrassment and shame to those most committed to values of amateurism. To again quote the Clerical Collar, the Cumbrian clergyman determined to ‘save’ wrestling from itself:

Are there not enough manly Christian men, be they Westmorland, Cumberland, Lancashire, Cornwall, or Devonshire men, ready to form an “Amateur Wrestling Association”[?]...It will be a miserable weakness on the part of our universities, public schools, and other amateur athletic clubs if wrestling is allowed to become dubbed the “music hall” sport from sheer want of energy to take this wholesome recreation in hand under a properly-qualified and strong minded committee.⁴

Made-up of middle-class men, and with the support of clergy and government, sporting bodies policed those who would take part, formalised and nationalised rules and, crucially, formulated an ideology about how sport should be played.

For various reasons, wrestling did not follow this pattern in any straightforward or meaningful way. It was one of the few sports which continued, reasonably unrestricted, older relationships with the circus and variety theatres. The lack of a national, centralised sporting body played an important factor in this. During the genesis of the sporting field, most sports acquired at least one or two sporting bodies with a genuine claim to national control. Without the ability to pressure wrestlers or debar them from a national league or the most prestigious competitions there was little to stop showmen encouraging and stressing entertainment over competition. Wrestling, perhaps more than other established spectator sports, appeared to suffer from potentially short and/or tedious matches. Bear hugs and sleeper holds were not particularly thrilling things to encounter as a spectator. Without the leadership of a governing body to tweak the sport in favour of spectatorship while maintaining the original values and appeal of

⁴ Anon., ‘A Neglected English Sport: Clerical Proposal to Form a Wrestling Association’, *Daily Mail*, 15 Jan., (1904): p.6.

the sport, wrestling fell into the hands of showmen more interested in profit and entertainment. There were attempts, though, to create a national wrestling organisation on several occasions, but the professional version of the game was too entrenched in the world of the stage. Showmen, moreover, had the economic and cultural capital to resist these challenges.

Why had a national body failed to materialise for wrestling but not for other sports? The answer lies somewhere, somewhat contradictorily, between the regionalism of wrestling and its international appeal. Those counties that were famed for their distinctive wrestling styles were reluctant to open the sport to national competitions. For much of the nineteenth century, Cumbrian wrestling in London refused entry to any non-Northern men. Problems of regionalism were exacerbated when we consider the international picture. Unusually, but by no means exclusively, wrestling was an international sport and there was little shared agreement about what could or should constitute an international set of rules. Prize-fighting, the only other sport to have the same international outlook during the nineteenth century, adopted Queensberry rules at an earlier date and this fast became the trans-Atlantic standard.

In the absence of these failed compromises and noticeable lack of a national governing body, wrestling continued combat performances and entertaining exhibitions in theatrical venues. The music hall and variety theatres displayed performed versions of the sport that were specifically designed to entertain audiences. Many of the tropes that professional wrestling remains famous for crystallised in the first decades of the twentieth century, albeit while drawing on older forms of promotion and taking influence from cultural forms around them: evil villains positioned opposite noble and good heroes; incompetent referees; orientalist imagery; and fixed fights complemented by showmanship. Being on the music hall stage, the qualifying adjective of professionalism deliberately parodied and pastiched the grand and supposedly dignified aims of amateurism. While not all matches were combat performances per se, the subfield's structures had been sufficiently altered to allow for the changes that took place in the 1920s and 30s.

Taking their cues from across the Atlantic, all-in wrestling was introduced in the 1930s and represented the first moment in which professional wrestling was completely performed. Without a formal and 'respectable' governing body that was seen to be in control over wrestling, politically and ideologically, the sport faced mounting pressure during the 1930s as described in chapter four. Excess blood, the continued disrespect of

referees and the nagging suspicion that all was not as it seemed led to local councils, best recorded by the LCC, mounting a serious challenge against the sport. It was not until the Mountevans committee and the forming of Joint Promotions that something was done to appease concerned governments and cultural commentators. A centralised, bureaucratic organisation offered a mirage of respectability and control that has been noted as absent since, at the very least, the 1890s, if not before. The group gave the impression of providing a central office, a set of codified rules and management structures which policed refereeing and competitors alike. Lew Grade, however, was wrong, knowingly or not, when he claimed that Joint Promotion was ‘a group of small independent promoters who formed themselves into one Association, just as the football companies have combined under the banner of the football association’.⁵

Since their inception, many sporting bodies have done all they could to limit and control creeping commodification and professionalism in their particular subfields. This is not to say, however, that those seeking to establish spectator sport as a commercial endeavour were fighting a losing battle. Amateurism faced opposition almost immediately by those who sought to profit – or in the case of players earn a living wage – from sport. A series of negotiations between various agents, groups and institutions found a compromise manifest itself in each sport, or subfield, accordingly. Limited forms of professionalism had been accepted in many sports by the middle of the twentieth century.

As the twentieth century continued, those seeking to profit from sport gained an ever-growing degree of control over the sporting field, aided almost entirely by changes in the media field. Sport and the media have an intense and entwined relationship and it is impossible to understand histories of the popular press or radio without also understanding histories of sport. Prize-fighting in London in the first half of the eighteenth century coincided with the mushrooming of newspaper production, and boxing entrepreneurs were keen to promote themselves to audiences using hyperbole. This was continued throughout the nineteenth century and reached its logical conclusion in the manipulation of the press to sell almost entirely fictionalised professional wrestlers on the music hall stage. Television, though, has had the greatest, traceable influence on sport since the 1950s. As chapter five assessed, the medium’s sponsors and advertisements flooded money (or the possibility thereof) into sporting clubs and

⁵ Letter from Lew Grade to Bernard Sendall, 28th Mar. 1968, Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.1, IBA, Box 01097.

institutions, and new audiences, nationally and internationally, were created. Not all chairmen and governing bodies were immediately convinced by the arrival of television and the beneficial changes it promises - in some cases there was even active resistance. But as the century continued it became difficult for many sports to resist the riches promised by televisual exposure.

Professional wrestling, unsurprisingly, was a highly willing participant in the television experiments in the 1930s and this eagerness transferred to the coming of commercial television. For those of a certain generation, wrestling was the epitome of commercial television. It is hard to deny that the wrestling and ITV were well-suited. The sport drew big audiences, was easy to film and did not have existing, chummy contracts with the BBC. More importantly, perhaps, it was brash, exciting, colourful, seemingly American-influenced, and part of a longer music hall tradition that commercial television revelled in, much to the chagrin of cultural commentators and governments. Unashamedly popular, in other words. The combination of television as technology combined with a lucrative sport made wrestling a viable economic investment. Joint Promotions member groups were bought and exchanged on the possibility and promise that pay-per-view matches were close to becoming a reality. Evidence for such thinking abounded. During the Pay-TV experiments in London and Sheffield in the 1960s, the possibility of subscription television seemed to offer so much potential. When the experiment failed to materialise, Joint Promotions were left with little stewardship nor capital to further invest. The failure of Pay-TV did not kill televised British professional wrestling but it hampered its expansion in the coming decades.

Twenty years later, in the hands of a Tory government intent on subjecting television to the free market, multi-channel broadcasting by satellite and cable was introduced nationally.⁶ Professional wrestling remained a popular selling point on the Sky and then BskyB networks, but it was imported American wrestling rather than the English or British produced variety. The introduction of the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) via Sky television was not solely responsible for the cancellation of televised British wrestling in 1989, but it played a significant part in its demise.⁷ On the wrestling front, Joint Promotion's aging roster of wrestlers, the (over) reliance on the likes of Big Daddy and the lack of reinvestment meant home grown wrestling looked dated in

⁶ See Peter Goodwin, *Television Under the Tories: Broadcasting Policy 1979 – 1997*, (London, 1998).

⁷ I have explored these arguments in greater detail in *Selling Punches*.

comparison to sharper, more colourful American version. Within the media, the competitive environment of televised sports contracts, best characterised by the formation of the Premier League, the declining ratings for *World of Sport*, the changing demographic targeted by ITV, and the WWF's willingness to sell their wares at a knock-down price meant Joint Promotions were caught in broad economic and changes to the media field.

The WWF, now WWE, is the premier wrestling promoter in the world. After stints with Channel Four, WWE is still a regular fixture of Sky Sports. The company is a multimedia, slick, publicly traded global brand that is synonymous with the 'sport'. English professional wrestling still exists, of course. There is an active and passionate 'independent' wrestling scene, and there have been notable instances in which these federations have been broadcast to a national audience. The Wrestling Channel, rebranded as The Fight Network, appeared on Sky television between 2004 and 2008, offering, amongst other things, taped British wrestling events. Every so often there are also rumours and speculations that ITV will bring back British wrestling. Considering the broadcasting environment television now finds itself in – competitive, digital, multi-channel – wrestling, for the same reasons that historically made it so appealing to producers, would make sense: it is cheap to produce, there are multiple wrestling promoters to deal with that have not already been snapped up by Sky or BT, and it would likely attract an audience. Until that happens, however, the most talented and ambitious British wrestlers move to America with the hope of making a name for themselves in the WWE.

Just as television had profound consequences on both professional wrestling and professional sport in the decades immediately following the Second World War, the restructuring of broadcasting in the 1980s has had similarly dramatic effects.⁸ The deregulation and expansion of globalised markets combined with a continued flux of money into competitive sport is still altering ownership structures while calling into question the legacy of control sporting bodies wield. Writing about sport shortly before his death in the shadow of France's hosting of the soccer World Cup, Bourdieu illustrated the many actors and agents that had become increasingly-active in the sporting field.

⁸ See, for example, Anthony King, *The End of the Terrace: The Transformation of Football in the 1990s*, (London, 2002).

Sport as spectacle, in the form that we know it as televised sporting spectacle, presupposes a system of competition in which, alongside sporting actors transformed into objects of spectacle, there are other actors. These are sports industry managers who control television and sponsoring rights, the managers of television channels competing for national broadcasting rights (or rights covering linguistic areas), the bosses of major industrial companies such as Adidas or Coca-Cola competing with each other for exclusive rights to link their products with the sports event, and finally television producers.⁹

In the glare of 24 hour news cycles; million pound contracts for players and billion pound contracts for clubs, leagues and organising committees; and red-button, multi-camera, multi-angle television, professional sports are closer to the position historically occupied by professional wrestling than they have ever been before. The most famous, renowned professional sports people exist in the world of celebrity, with characteristics concentrated into a strange sort of moral, melodramatic story.¹⁰ The image of David Beckham perpetuated in the press is not quite as obviously and coherently fictionalised as that of Kendo Nagasaki, but the differences are not as accentuated as they may first appear.

Even at Wimbledon or the Olympics – those old bastions of public school, amateur spirit – television has added its own dramatic tensions, character vignettes and wider narratives. Advertising hoardings remain absent, conspicuously so in many ways, but the 24 hour drama of modern sports, complete with characters and stories and morals, is firmly entrenched. In the 2013 Wimbledon final, breaks between sets were filled with short highlights cut over dramatic music, an American way of sports broadcasting in which wrestling lead the way.¹¹ Elsewhere, in their attempts to make sports more palatable and better suited to television, sporting bodies have been willing to change rules and playing times in order to encourage more entertainment, quicker matches and more spectacle.¹² It was a scenario that did not go unmissed by wrestling promoters. When required to defend their sport against criticisms from the ITA, Dale Martin Promotions, as part of Joint Promotions, were quick to highlight the modifications being undertaken in other sports.

⁹ Bourdieu, 'The State, Economics and Sport', p.17-18; Bourdieu, *On Television*, pp.79-81.

¹⁰ Whannel, *Media Sport Stars*.

¹¹ Joseph Maguire, 'American Football, British Society, and Global Sport Development', in Eric G. Dunning, Joseph Maguire, and Robert E. Pearton (eds), *The Sports Process: A Comparative and Developmental Approach*, (Champaign, 1993): p.210.

¹² Whannel, *Fields in Vision*, p.81.

Most professional sport is presented with the major object of attracting large crowds, and to do this, it has to entertain the public who will not otherwise pay to watch it. In this respect, one merely has to bear in mind the campaign which has been mounted for brighter cricket in the face of decreasing attendances, or the cry for less defensive football in the interests of halting the decline in its support.¹³

Professional wrestling, they reasoned, not unfairly, was merely part of a wider movement to make sport more interesting and engaging for those watching and for those seeking commercial contracts – wrestling had just been ahead of the curve.

It has become increasingly difficult to separate televised sports from other television genres.¹⁴ Programmes like *The Krypton Factor* (ITV, 1977-1995) or *Total Wipeout* (BBC, 2009 -2012) have used the structures of sport in combination with the codes and conventions of light entertainment and quiz shows.¹⁵ Shows like *Bullseye* (ITV, 1981-1995), *Big Break* (BBC, 1991–2002), *Dancing on Ice* (ITV, 2006-2014), *Splash* (ITV, 2013-present), *The Jump* (Channel Four, 2014) have taken existing sports and re-formatted them specifically for weekend prime time. In the 1990s, *Gladiators* (ITV, 1992-2000) and *Ice Warriors* (ITV, 1998) invented what appeared to be their own sporting competitions, as uncomfortable as many would be calling them that, replete with two-dimensional fictional characters existing in a morally dualistic world.¹⁶ If one were to imagine what a new and invented sport might look like today, then it would almost certainly be closer to professional wrestling than amateur sports of the Victorian and Edwardian era.

Professional wrestling thus remains the siren call for those who wish to warn of the dangers of sport deemed to be veering too closely to entertainment and preoccupied with money. As we have already seen in chapter four, in the 1920s *The Times* warned that ‘professional boxing will fizzle out like professional wrestling and all other uncontrolled sports if anyone can do anything if there be money in it’.¹⁷ When contemporary sports journalists want to express their distaste for hype and hyperbole in modern sporting culture, professional wrestling continues to be the comparison made. In February 2012 at a Dereck Chisora vs Vitali Klitschko post-match press conference in

¹³ Letter from H.W. Abby, Dale Martin Promotions, to Lew Grade and Howard Thomas, 21 Jan. 1966, Sporting Events “Wrestling” vol.1, IBA, Box 01097.

¹⁴ Garry Whannel, ‘Winner Takes All: Competition’, in Goodwin, Andrew, and Whannel, Garry (eds), *Understanding Television*, (London, 1990): p.113.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Garry Whannel, ‘The Lads and the Gladiators: Traditional Masculinities in a Postmodern Televisual Landscape’, in Edward Buscombe (ed.), *British Television: A Reader*, (Oxford, 2007): pp.293-295.

¹⁷ Quoted in Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process*, p.287-230.

Munich, Chisora and David Haye exchanged insults and wound up in a brawl in front of the world's press. Later that year, a fight between the two was announced despite the BBBC not licensing the match. In the press conference leading up to the event, a steel fence was placed between the two competitors. Sports columnists were, on the whole, appalled by the proceedings. Professional wrestling, albeit American, was again used as a comparison.

Many WWE [World Wrestling Entertainment] elements were there – key action taking place outside the ring, for instance, and Chisora's nice line in unconvincing mawkishness...If not quite WWE then it was boxing's version of structured reality, the term used to describe cultural offerings such as *The Only Way is Essex* and *Made in Chelsea*.¹⁸

Such comments have not been restricted to boxing, a sport that has always been reasonably close to wrestling in the field. In football, Martin Kelner has designated reporting and coverage of the final few games of the season as the 'time of the year when football adopts the language of WWE wrestling, when every day is Judgment Day'.¹⁹

This conclusion is meant as neither a grave warning nor cheerful celebration of the changes in sport which have been witnessed in the last thirty years. What is intended, however, is to stress that the values, pleasures and meanings inherent in sport which sometimes feel timeless are anything but. They are the product of endless compromises and competitions between groups who have political and ideological reasons for the field to stay the same or to change. Professional wrestling is not a fake, corrupted or broken version of an otherwise legitimate and honourable history of sport. Its past is one that other sports might very easily have followed, and the possibilities of sport's future may in fact be gleaned by studying professional wrestling. The question of whether *sport* is a game for the field or the stage is a question that has no guaranteed answer.

¹⁸ Marina Hyde, 'Why Frank Warren's Chisora-Haye Plot Line Saw Boxing Hit Rock Bottom'. *The Guardian*, 9 May, 2012, [Available from www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2012/may/09/frank-warren-haye-chisora], Accessed 3/10/2013.

¹⁹ Martin Kelner, 'Relegation Hyperbole Reaches a New Level of Massiveness', *The Guardian*, 11 May 2009, [Available from www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2009/may/11/premier-league-relegation-battle], Accessed 3/10/2013.

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IMAGES

Figure 1: Professional wrestling on the fairground, c.1970.

- The National Fairground Archive, University of Sheffield, image ref. 00270016.

Figure 2: James Figg's trade card, c.1720s.

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Figure 3: Poster for wrestling at The Oxford, 1910.

- The National Fairground Archive, University of Sheffield, image ref. 178T1.150.

Figure 4: 'The Wrestling Craze', 1904.

- 'The Wrestling Craze: The Great Match at the Royal Albert Hall', *Illustrated London News*, 9.Jul., (1904): p.51.

Figure 5: All-in wrestling at Bolton 1, 1937.

- Humphrey Spender, copyright Bolton council, image ref.1993.83.07.03.

Figure 6: All-in wrestling at Bolton 2, 1937.

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Figure 7: Outside of Ron Taylor's Boxing and Wrestling Booth, c.1960/70s.

- The National Fairground Archive, University of Sheffield, image ref. 00440161.

Figure 8: Inside of Ron Taylor's Boxing and Wrestling Booth, c.1960/70s.

- The National Fairground Archive, University of Sheffield, image ref. 00780379.