

The Safety of BKB in a modern age



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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the safety aspects within the sport of Bare Knuckle Boxing (BKB), comparisons can be drawn between BKB and any other combat sport, for the purposes of this paper the comparison is made against Gloved boxing which a direct descendant of BKB.

The Author

I am a writer and a fan of both Bare Knuckle Boxing (BKB) and gloved boxing, I am not by any means an expert in either discipline and am certainly not a medical expert nor do I claim to be. What is set out in this paper are my observations based on facts established throughout my research. My sources of information will be listed in the bibliography at the end of these papers.

Why write this paper?

Over the last few years Bare Knuckle Boxing (BKB) has emerged from the shadows and is becoming one of the fastest growing sports in the UK, but still many people seem to see some kind of stigma about BKB and very often I hear people objecting and belittling the sport on the grounds of safety.

I travel the length and breadth of the country to follow the sport of BKB, much of which is now carried out in rings by two fighters that have very often trained in the same manner or harder than a top flight professional boxer and I am more than happy to be quoted and to go on record as saying the medical care and attention is second to none, equalling and often bettering that of a professional boxing show. Long gone are the days of having a first aider, or a spotty teenager from St Johns ambulance sitting at the side of the ring, BKB uses qualified paramedics, qualified doctors and very often will have a private ambulance on standby just in case.

So what about the actual safety of the sport of BKB, this is something that is very often undermined from those that know nothing about it and often from those in the world of professional boxing but if you look at any academic or medical study that has ever been published a lot of people will be very shocked to find out that Bare Knuckle Boxing is actually safer, yes safer than gloved boxing.

The Safety of BKB in a modern age

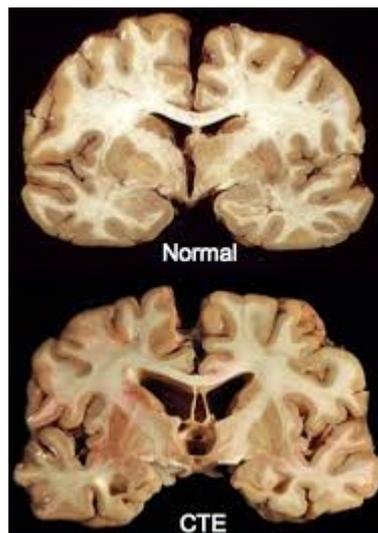
Men doubtless belabouring each other with their fists back in East Africa when homo more or less sapiens emerged as a force to be reckoned with. The first evidence of boxing as a sport dates from around 1500BC in Crete. The Greeks introduced it into the Olympic Games in the 7th century BC, later combining it with wrestling, and it became an established part of military training in ancient Greece. Initially, soft leather thongs were used to protect the knuckles. Hardened leather later transformed this protection into an offensive weapon - albeit not as offensive as the metal-studded version with which wealthy Greeks and Romans obliged their specially trained slaves to fight, often to the death.

Bare-knuckle fights were the norm in Britain from the first recorded fight in 1681, between a servant of the Duke of Albemarle and a butcher. There were initially no rules even hitting an opponent when he was down was permitted. That changed in the mid-18th century, when Jack Broughton, the reigning champion, drew up some basic regulations. The regulations

were first revised in 1839, but then dramatically changed in 1867 with the Queensberry rules. Boxing, both professional and amateur, is nowadays tightly controlled but can still be a dangerous sport, in particular in regard to brain injuries.

Pugilistic Dementia

We have all met an old boxer who's speech is slurred and has memory problems and I suppose its easy to scoff and call him 'Punch Drunk' but this is a very serious and permanent condition which is called Pugilistic Dementia and put simplkiticly this is caused by blows to the head resulting in the brain rattling and moving inside the skull. Some may scoff but this is a very serious neurological condition, and oddly enough is often also seen in alcoholics, caused by repeated cerebral concussions and characterised by weakness in the lower limbs, unsteadiness, slowness of muscular movements, hand tremors, hesitancy of speech, loss of memory and mental dullness, this effects around 20% of professional boxers and can be the causes of debilitating Parkinson's disease, as can be seen with perhaps the greatest boxer of all time Muhamad Ali.



So the questions is? 'What can we do to make the sport of boxing safer?'

The answer? 'Get rid of the gloves'

The Marquis of Queensbury Rules' (1867)

Boxing as most people know it is governed using something called 'The Marquis of Queensbury Rules' and these set of rules from a more than a century ago categorically state that a boxer must wear gloves. Now what is the reason for this? Yes on first hearing this due to the fact that a boxing glove is basically a glorified pad that covers a fist I can forgive you for thinking 'of course, it's for safety' but I can tell you that you are wrong, as crazy as it may seem. Let me explain to you why, and present the facts which will I guarantee change your views on not only the safety of Bare Knuckle Boxing but also of gloved boxing.

Gloves were introduced to make competitions bloodier and briefer. Gloves distribute a blow, and they also add weight to a punch, making it more destructive, The Marquis's of Queensberry rules took off not because society viewed the new sport as more civilized than the old, but because fights conducted under the new guidelines attracted more spectators and the reason for this? Audiences wanted to see repeated blows to the head and dramatic knockouts and that just what they got after the introduction of gloves.

By contrast, the last bare-knuckle heavyweight contest in the US in 1897 dragged on into the 75th round. Since gloves spread the impact of a blow, the recipient of a punch is less likely to have their teeth knocked out or their jaw broken but is more likely to be knocked out. The reason for this? Contry to what a lot of people think, gloves do not lessen the force applied to the brain as it rattles inside the skull from a heavy blow. In fact, they make matters worse by adding at least 10oz to the weight of the fist and spreading the blow over a larger area, so in essence a blow to the head with gloves is distributing a harder more forceful blow across a larger area of the skull which converts into increased velocity of force to the brain and actually rattling it into the inside of the skull. A full-force punch to the head is comparable to being hit with a 12lb padded wooden mallet travelling at 20mph and I don't care who you are, you know that a blow of such magnitude will not do your brain any good at all. In

As the bare-knuckle campaigner Dr Alan J Ryan pointed out: *"In 100 years of bare-knuckle fighting in the United States, which terminated around 1897 with a John L Sullivan heavyweight championship fight, there wasn't a single ring fatality." Today, there are three or four every year in the US, and around 15 per cent of professional fighters suffer some form of permanent brain damage during their career.*

Everyone knows that all forms of boxing, be it Gloved or BKB can be dangerous and nobody is denying this, after all Boxing is a combat sport after all, but has boxing always been this dangerous? The answer is arguably no. Ancient boxing was indeed far more brutal with fighters wearing crude coverings on their hands, sometimes with spikes embedded in the knuckle area, to protect the hands and maximize potential damage to the head and body of the other fighter.

[The London Prize Ring Rules \(1743\)](#)

It wasn't until the 18th century in England with the introduction of bare knuckle fighting or "prize fighting" that the safety of boxing from the fighter's point of view was really addressed. The London Prize Ring Rules (1743) were introduced by bare knuckle heavyweight champion Jack Broughton and gave the fighter two clear safety advantages over their ancient and modern counterparts.

Firstly, each fighter was allowed at any time during the fight to drop to one knee for 30 seconds. During this time the other fighter was not allowed to attack and the resting fighter was allowed to regain composure and continue, if he could. Today the referee is the only person that can stop a bout and only then if he feels that the fight is unfairly matched or

one fighter is unable to continue due to injury or cuts, or if one fighter cannot defend himself. As we have seen this can often result in fighters taking too much punishment before the ref steps in and by then the damage can already be done.

Secondly and most significantly, the fighters wore no gloves which meant that they were far more cautious when going for head shots due to the damage that it did to the hands. Today's modern game has more in common with its ancient ancestors in this regard as gloves now facilitate multiple head shots and the scoring system used also favours head shots.

Looking at these facts it is hard to justify the set-up of modern boxing when talking about safety of the fighters. Would a return to bare knuckle boxing see a reduction in injuries or a reduction in ticket and pay per view revenue? This is possibly where the real issues lie in the modern game and not with the safety of the sport of BKB.

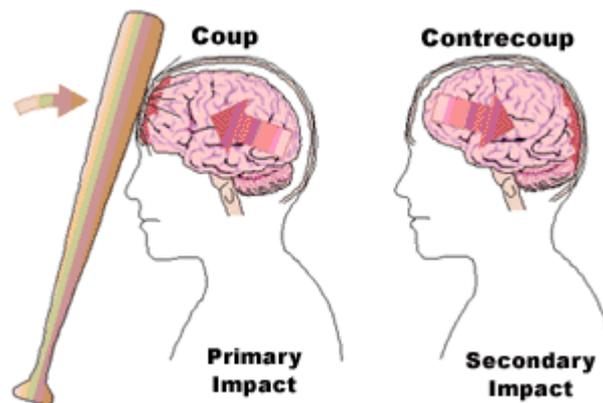
WHEN a young amateur or a journeyman pro is killed in the ring, as half a dozen are in an average year worldwide, there is not much fuss. But whenever a boxer dies after a world championship fight, or is seriously injured, the sport's rule-making bodies come under intense public pressure to make the self-styled "noble art of self-defence" less lethal.

It happened, for instance, when Benny Paret, a Cuban welterweight, died in 1962 after being battered in a televised title fight in New York. It happened again in 1980 when Johnny Owen, a Welsh bantamweight, died in Los Angeles after fighting for a version of that world championship. And it happened once more this week when America's Gerald McClellan lay critically ill in a London hospital where he had a blood clot removed from his brain after being knocked out by Britain's Nigel Benn in a televised fight for a slice of the world super-middleweight title. Although boxing is cursed by an alphabet-soup of competing regulatory boards, most of the changes that have been broadly accepted in an effort to appease the sport's critics make sense. The duration of world title fights has been cut from 15 to 12 rounds. There are mandatory suspensions for boxers who have suffered knock-outs or technical knock-out. Boxers are subjected to comprehensive medical examinations and to test for narcotics. Referees are now much more willing to stop fights to save out-classed contestants from further punishment than they used to be in the bad old days of "Homicide Hank" Armstrong, "Gorilla" Jones and the "Astoria Assassin".

But one change seen by some as making the sport more safe has made it more dangerous: ever-plumper boxing gloves. Heavy gloves (as opposed to mere mitts) were first worn in a world heavyweight championship fight in 1892, since then the regulation gloves have got heavier and heavier until today middleweights and above, not only wear 10-ounce (283-gram) gloves but are also permitted to have each hand wrapped in up to 18 feet (5.5 metres) of bandages held in place by 9 to 11 feet of zinc-oxide tape.

This padding helps the hitter and hurts the hittee. Since the bones in a man's head are stronger than the bones in a man's fists, a bare-knuckle fighter risks damaging himself more than his opponent if he hits as hard as he can when he aims punches at the head. Unless he has unusually brittle hands, a boxer whose fists are protected by cushions has no such

inhibitions. He can hit to the head with full force without much risk of injuring his hands -- and so add to the number of boxers who end up on the slab or with pugilistic dementia.



This can be compared with the illustration above and shows that the secondary impact of the brain hitting the inside of the skull causes the brain trauma, the bigger the projectile the bigger the primary impact and the bigger and more severe the secondary impact. When one relates the projectile as the fist, either gloved or ungloved this makes it very easy to see that an ungloved fist, or projectile, is smaller and size then that of a gloved fist or projectile.

In most other respects prize-fighting in the 19th century under the old Broughton rules was far more brutal than today's professional boxing. Nobody sensible wants a return to the days when pugilists fought to the finish in brawls that sometime lasted for hours. But a return to bare knuckles, or even mitts, would make the sport far safer than it is with boxing gloves.

Summary

To summarise, Nicholas Hobbs (Sports Historian) states that gloves were introduced for two main reasons:

1. To shorten the bouts
2. The audience wanted to see repeated blows to the head and dramatic knockouts

And also stated of Bare Knuckle Boxing, or boxing without gloves or padded hand protection:

1. The reason bare-knuckled boxers took a stance that looks silly to us now is that they were mainly protecting their bodies. The head was not a primary target, since a worthwhile punch to the skull would probably break the puncher's hand. Not so once gloves were introduced
2. Gloves distribute the force of a punch more widely, reducing the instances of broken jaws, knocked out teeth and blindness. (Apparently, slamming one's opponent's head is sometimes worth the broken hand.) But they also add 10 ounces to each

swing making a full on punch “comparable to being hit with a 12lb padded wooden mallet travelling at 20mph

3. With gloves the pain of clobbering a skull significantly reduced, the head has become a primary target. Before, boxing was messier and perhaps more voyeuristically violent. But now it’s deadly

So according bare knuckle boxing may look "more violent", and it may prevent fighters from always being able to throw their full weight behind a punch, and at times prevents fighters from targeting each other’s heads as much and gloved boxing encourages more headshots and yes maybe it ‘appears’ to be less violent violent" but very often causes extensive brain damage, and in general each blow is felt more powerfully and spread-out than before.

So I ask you in all honesty, does BKB deserve the stigma that it seems to have in the UK? My opinion is no.

Whilst this paper many seem to suggest that I am against gloved boxing personally that is not the case, I merely wish to highlight the fact that Bare Knuckle Boxing (BKB) that is stigmatized and is seen by some as inherently dangerous is by far safer than the mainstream sport of gloved boxing.

Bare Knuckle Boxing may break more hands but it breaks fewer heads!

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