Blood Sport in Pittsburgh: An Analysis of Prize Fighting and Cock Fighting in an American Industrial City

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The liquid movements of a fighter in training and the self conscious strutting of a barn yard rooster may not appear to be laden with cultural meaning at first glance. To the modern viewer they may seem to be totally unrelated, separate entities, fitness activity verses food. And yet this was not always the case. For at the turn of the end of the nineteenth century and the dawn of the twentieth century the United States underwent a number of dramatic changes. Cities grew rapidly due to their status as industrial centers. Middle class values struggled to retain their dominance in communities altered by industrialization and immigration. Men wrestled with definitions of masculinity that demanded that males be aggressive, passionate, and competitive in order to fulfill their role as providers within their families and compete in an industrial world.1

All of these factors worked to affect the popular entertainments of the time, and a class struggle arose over what kind of activities were worthy of legitimization. At the center of this conflict were blood sports (of which both prize fighting and cock fighting were components). Typically such events drew an all male, working class crowd, and were characterized by violence and gambling. These factors threatened middle class ideas of purity and emotional control. Tensions inevitably arose, and urban areas were frequently the sites in which these two points of view collided. Industrialization probably had its greatest effect in urban environments. People from a wide variety of social backgrounds congregated there as a means of procuring employment. Therefore, it follows that middle class values would collide with other belief systems in cities. Such is the case with Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania between the years 1885 and 1920. It is my contention that Pittsburgh, as an urban/industrial center, was a place of convergence, where beliefs regarding proper and improper masculine entertainment came into conflict. The history of blood sports—cock fighting and prize fighting in particular—illustrates how society made compatible the sporting styles of two different social classes.
Victorian ideology demanded that middle class men control their emotions and direct anger towards productive ends. The popularity of sports like prize fighting and cock fighting, where gambling and flagrant displays of angry and competitive behavior prevailed, naturally threatened notions of emotional control. The gathering of men at a cocking main or a boxing ring was loaded with danger for members of Pittsburgh’s polite society. The excessive emotion, excitement, and the certainty of violence at these events may have implanted fears in the minds of those opposed to such happenings that the spectators would work themselves into a frenzy.

On the other hand, Pittsburgh because of its many mills had a large population of young men during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This group did not entirely fall into accordance with what the middle class considered proper behavior or entertainment. Male laborers provided a rowdy and receptive audience for early prize fights and cock fights. Perhaps this can be attributed to the nature of urban working class life at the time. Mill work was characterized by danger, long hours, and relatively low compensation. Writing in 1911, James Forbes pronounced that the city’s “surplus of males is only less that of a barracks or mining town.” Recreational opportunities were not prevalent, and as a result, blood sports, prostitution and gambling proliferated. This set of circumstances made Pittsburgh a city where blood sports could easily find an audience.

The appeal that blood sports held for the working class is clear. Such pastimes acted as an outlet for working class discontent. Promoters recognized that by pitting two pugilists of a different race, ethnicity, or even occupation against one another, working class interest in the matter would be magnified. The realities of urban working class life, the long shifts, the small pay, the threat of industrial accidents created a volatile atmosphere. Outsiders were viewed with suspicion. Class, race, and ethnic resentments were great. Sports like boxing and cock fighting not only reflected these phenomena, they ritualized them. At a cocking main, in a boxing ring, there was equal opportunity, and the blood letting served as a mechanism which helped drain frustration.

The evidence suggests that this dynamic existed in the Pittsburgh area. The Pittsburgh Post reported on a fistic contest in which one contestant was white and one was black on the premise that the event came about as the result of a racial issue. In another instance, a Pennsylvania town was the site of a contest in which a twenty-five year old man fought a bare knuckle match against a fifty year old man in order to resolve a personal dispute. The battle was to fall under the guidelines set up by the London Prize ring.

In an attempt to control this working class behavior, the middle class demanded that blood sports be outlawed. State legislatures and local governing bodies throughout the North-East viewed prize fighting as both degrading and potentially dangerous. Contestants were prosecuted under anti-riot and assault laws in the early 1800’s in New York and New Jersey. However, these actions were for the most part ineffectual. In Pittsburgh, local police actively
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pursued the spectators who attended these outlawed events. But such activities persisted. The urban working class was largely alone in its admiration of blood sport, but that did not dampen its allegiance to such pastimes. Victorian insistence on moral purity had little affect on the attitudes of labouring people.

The middle class did have grounds upon which to base their fears. Newspaper coverage during the late 1800s suggests that although cockfighting and prize fighting were frowned upon by the authorities within the city of Pittsburgh (who followed middle class values), there was a high demand for such events. For example, the July 1, 1890 issue of the Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette describes how a large contingent of fight fans boarded a Lake Erie and Western train at six o'clock in the morning, and traveled to a point outside the city (and far from the reach of the authorities) where a prize fight took place. The author describes how "a 24-foot ring was pitched on a level place, and after the referee and timer were chosen, the men stripped and entered the ring." The article goes on to explain that although the two pugilists were supposed to fight under the Marquis of Queensbury rules, the size disparity was so great between the two fighters (one weighed two hundred and forty five pounds, the other one hundred and sixty two) that the contest degenerated into an out of control beating of one contestant by the other. In the end a member of the losing boxer's party ended up attacking the victor with the blunt end of an ax.

The results from Pittsburgh area cockfighting mains at the time were similar. The Pittsburgh Post reported in 1885 that at a cock fighting location near the city "The belligerency of the fowls seems to have inspired the same spirit among the spectators, and it is alleged a free-for-all fight ensued." One combatant was reported to be shot in the neck. Once again, violence erupted at an event where a blood sport was the main attraction. Such happenings surely must have fueled the arguments of those opposed to blood sports in general. The invention of the revolver made concealed weaponry an increasing problem in the cities of the late nineteenth century, and brawls, gunplay, and murders were not uncommon when large groups of men gathered in a social environment. Polite society associated such gatherings with mayhem, and in return labeled them unacceptable.

This is not to say that the allegiance to blood sports in Pittsburgh during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was solely a working class phenomenon. On the contrary, prize fighting and cockfighting appealed to men of property as well. However, their support was not often vocal. During the 1880's while a segment of middle class men may have been interested in such sports they were inhibited by their social standing, and they often shielded their interest in such matters from the women in their lives. In such cases, moral upbringing and societal rules of what could be categorized as proper behavior took precedence over outward expressions of support for pugilism and cock fighting.

In the eyes of working class as well as middle class men, blood sports
provided a needed getaway in which they could revel in one another company and assert their masculinity. Mark C. Carnes argues in his "Middle-Class Men and the Solace of Fraternal Ritual" that because many men had to leave the household to work, their sons were left without solid examples upon which to base their masculinity. In response, when these men became adults, they separated themselves from the female world they had been raised in by seeking out male friendship and camaraderie.\textsuperscript{15} The gathering of men at sporting events may be symptomatic of this phenomenon. Blood sports reinforced masculinity.

It is also possible that the attraction of blood sports was in part due to the nature of these kinds of games. They were not sanitized. Sports like dog fighting, bird shooting, cock fighting, and sometimes even prize fighting culminated in the death of one contestant. Unlike bicycling, tennis, and golf, such sports are dirty, bloody, and a matter of life and death. Blood sports did not sit well with Victorian notions of purity and control. Perhaps that was their appeal. They were not at all a part of the female world. Blood sports catered to men and offered the opportunity to reaffirm masculine self images. Events like cock fighting owed part of their success to the desire on the part of many nineteenth century men to learn the manly arts—the pastimes that their fathers may have engaged in.\textsuperscript{16}

The fascination with blood sport remained, middle class interest in and working class acceptance of blood sports was evident in the newspapers of the era. Such events were often covered with regularity in the sporting sections of the Pittsburgh papers. The July 16, 1890 issue of the Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette reported under the caption "Sporting Notes" that "at a cocking main near Braddock Monday between Braddock, Woods Run, Swissvale, and Sharpsburg birds, the Woods Run party captured most of the money." In the same issue, it is mentioned that the Scottsdale authorities were pursuing the parties concerned in a cock fight that occurred there. On August 18th, 1890, the same paper reported that in Wheeling, West Virginia’s Eighth Ward, a saloon hosted "a rattling Prize fight for a purse of [fifty dollars]." It goes on to mention that the police were on the trail of the participants and onlookers.\textsuperscript{17} While such events may have been illegal (the papers reported them as such) they were given quite a bit of paper space. Despite the fact that blood sports are not generally accepted by middle class doctrine and local authorities, the publishers of the Pittsburgh papers recognized that a market existed for stories and articles pertaining to these events.

Indeed, the coalition against blood sports was not indestructible, and by the turn of the century things began to change. Reports on cockfighting started to disappear from area papers, and reports on prize fighting proliferated. This was largely due to the transformation of middle class thought regarding the virtues of boxing. More and more Americans looked to the sport as a way of achieving physical fitness. Prize fighting did not necessarily
have to lead to out of control behavior and vice. It could be harnessed as an outlet for natural male aggression. It could invigorate and condition a person's body—making that individual even more masculine in physical appearance. It could counter the dreaded trend towards over refinement. Boxing lessons were thought to help boys direct their anger away from destructive routes, while simultaneously keeping their emotions in tact. The physicality of boxing, its controlled use of force, its set of strict rules were seen as positive frameworks upon which to build a boy into a man. The cultivation of boxing as a health measure added to its attractiveness. Bodies made soft by desk work could refine themselves into more effective versions. Once again nineteenth century ideas about masculinity and the need to be competitive provided a foundation that supported the discipline of boxing. Boxing was removed from its position as an underground entertainment, and received ever increasing amounts of attention.

The middle class modified their views of boxing to make the sport more palatable to the larger society. During the early years of the twentieth century prize fighting advocates played up the scientific and strategic aspects of the sport. "Footwork, the angling of shoulders, arms, and chin and the delivery of certain types of blows were carefully analyzed." By investigating mechanics, the brutality and danger of the sport faded into the background. Science had purpose. Science was controlled. It was not swayed by emotion. As a result, middle class attitudes were transformed.

Prize fighting was compatible with working class and middle class respect for courage and honor. Perhaps this was symptomatic of both the degradation involved in urban industrial life and the need to assert masculinity in light of Victorian gender definitions. Young male Pittsburghers sometimes posted challenges to potential opponents in area newspapers. For example, in an advertisement that appeared in the February 20, 1900 edition of the Pittsburgh Dispatch, Billy Dicken challenged "any ninety pound boy in western Pennsylvania—Billy Barret preferred." In another such advertisement, Buzz Auber offered to fight "any 115 to 120 pound man for a preliminary or main event." In announcing a willingness to fight all comers, the aspiring prize fighter made a claim to courage. The realities of a dangerous occupation or a small stature were put aside, and the fighters rose to a higher status. Bravado demanded respect and such newspaper challenges were attempts to illustrate masculine virtue. Both working class and middle class males responded.

Cock fighting on the other hand did not enjoy this kind of elevation. It as a pastime could not transform men's bodies from weakened versions to virile ones. It did not require discipline and courage and endurance. The middle class recognized these facts, and saw no reason to legitimize the sport. Cock fighting remained an activity relegated to back rooms and alleys. By the year 1900 Pittsburgh newspapers gradually dropped any mention of it from the sports pages.
Change was gradual. Even though more and more members of polite society began to view boxing in more pleasant terms, old ideas about the sport’s tainted quality persisted. Laws did not immediately change. For example, on July 4, 1893, the *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette* published an account of a prize-fight that took place in New Castle during the early morning hours. The article mentions that the atmosphere of the room was unpleasant due in part to the great crowd, and the fact that the windows of the club had to be covered so that local authorities would not put an end to the event. It goes on to mention that many young men from Pittsburgh attended the match who “would not care to have there names mentioned in connection with a prize fight.” Middle class resistance was beginning to break down. The fact that the fight took place at a New Castle athletic club (the Nashannock Athletic club) suggests exclusivity. The article mentions that the attendees had to be invited and paid a fee to enter. This was not an event geared towards a poor or working class audience. The fact that middle and upper class males began to organize fistic contests for their own enjoyment suggests that the full scale rejection of boxing by polite society was beginning to waver by the end of the nineteenth century, and yet the fact that the event was held in secrecy attests to the lingering stigma associated with the sport.

Gradually the city of Pittsburgh began to experiment with the sanctioning of prize fighting events. However, the city proceeded very cautiously. For example, at one event held within the city limits during the winter of 1900, the Superintendent of the Bureau of Detectives (joined by a number of city officials) positioned himself at ringside to make sure that any inappropriate behavior did not take place. When one of the contestants began to hit his opponent while in the clinches, the police took precedence over the referee’s discretion and ordered the fighter’s to refrain from that style of fighting. In another instance, the Superintendent stopped a fight because it appeared that one man was in danger of being knocked out.

But the tide was turning, and prize fighting because of its appeal as a masculine pastime gained ground toward respectability. The development of athletic clubs in Pittsburgh helped expedite the general acceptance of prize fighting as a legitimate sport. Spurred on by increased amounts of leisure time among upper and middle class men, such organizations frequently sponsored athletic contests in turn of the century Pittsburgh. In doing so these clubs threw the weight of money and respectability behind the fistic pastime, and community acceptance followed. Organizations like the New Castle Athletic Club, the Northside Club, the Lawrenceville Athletic Club, and the Union Athletic Club frequently sponsored boxing matches and in doing so enhanced Prize fighting’s reputation around town.

After 1900 and more so after 1905, prize fighting gained ground quickly in the as a legitimate activity. Press coverage expanded greatly, and boxing frequently dominated the area’s sporting pages. By 1910, Pittsburgh had become a regular venue for fistic contests. Newspapers advertised such events as “high class attractions,” and events were often staged in the old city...
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Fighters took on favorable descriptions in newspaper accounts and were referred to as "classy" and "clever." During World War I, The Pittsburgh Dispatch pronounced that boxing was useful "in training soldiers for war, therefore, boxing and wrestling have met with approval of the governmental authority." Prize fighting took on status not only as a scientific discipline and physical fitness measure, but as patriotic activity as well.

Satellite communities remained viable venues and even made use of the sport for fund raising purposes. The town of Tarentum in 1910 organized a night of prize fighting in an attempt to raise money to pay off the fire department's mortgage on a hose house. Gone were the days when bouts were relegated to back rooms and barns. Fighters had attained legitimacy and its stigma as a vile and degrading sport had diminished.

The ultimate success of prize fighting and the failure of cock fighting is rooted in a change in thinking on the part of the middle class. In the eyes of respectable society, cock fighting did not offer anything that could be used to enhance life in Pittsburgh. No calculation on the part of man could affect a cock fight's outcome. No training was involved. The lure of the cocking main owes much to the lure of gambling. The wagering of money on fighting cocks was just not attractive enough for society as a whole to assimilate the pastime into the arena of socially acceptable entertainment. Because prize fighting could help attain new levels of physical fitness, because it was compatible with middle class interest in controlled aggression, discipline, and courage, prize fighting rose to legitimacy.

Notes

2. Stearns p. 128.
4. Ibid.
7. *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Sept. 28, 1885. This event occurred in Reading Pa, and although it is distant from Pgh, the fact that it was reported on is significant in that it attests to the area's interest levels in such events.
8. Ibid. p. 66–68.
10. Ibid.
12. *Pittsburgh Post*, 1885 (month and day unknown) "Shot at a Cockfight."

14. I make this assumption in light of evidence gathered from contemporary newspapers. particularly the *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, July 1, 1890 “A Bloodless Battle”, and July 4, 1893 “Malone Knocked Out”. In addition, the of articles in newspapers from the time concerning pugilism and to a degree cock fighting attest to a widespread interest for the two pastimes. Concerning the shielding of women from such matters, Bertram Wyatt-Brown’s *Southern Honor* (p. 166) provides evidence for this behavior.


19. Ibid. p. 139


23. *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, Feb. 27, 1900—“McEldand and Sullivan Were Winners”.


27. Ibid. Jan. 17, 1911.


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