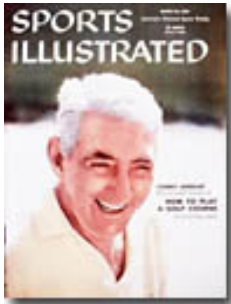


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March 30, 1959

You Could Blame It On The Moms

There is hope of a revival of college boxing, which has fallen into sad and unjustified disrepute

Martin Kane

Less than a dozen years ago, college boxing, which is a beautiful sport to watch, seemed on its way to becoming one of the most popular of minor intercollegiate sports. The effects of boxing's decline may be witnessed next week (April 2, 3 and 4) at the [University of Nevada](#), where the [NCAA](#) championships will be fought. Only 20 teams are entered. Some of this small number are from colleges that no longer field teams in intercollegiate competition. Only one or two of the 20 colleges will present full teams at the championships. Only one intercollegiate team from a college east of the [Mississippi](#) will be represented.

Intercollegiate boxing began in 1919, with a match between [Penn State](#) and the [University of Pennsylvania](#), then caught on in the East, spread to the South and West and in time became popular enough to warrant national tournaments. By 1938, when the National Intercollegiate Boxing Coaches Association was formed, it was booming. Ten years later there were 55 colleges engaged in intercollegiate competition, with others supporting the sport intramurally.

But by 1952 there were only 29 intercollegiate teams, and the number has been diminishing ever since.

The decline is by no means due to apathy among the students, who support boxing vigorously when they are given the chance. Boxing draws better than basketball at the [University of Nevada](#), where the gymnasium, holding about 4,500, probably will be packed on each of the three nights of the [NCAA](#) meet. At [San Jose State](#), with a student body of 10,000, half of them men, as many as 1,300 students have gone out for boxing instruction and in an average year 500 to 600 will take it up. Boxing at [Washington State](#) is part of a physical education requirement that a student be able to swim 50 yards and take part in a "recreational" sport, a team sport and a "combative" sport before he is graduated. Boxing, wrestling and fencing are the "combative" sports, and most [Washington](#) students pick boxing or wrestling in about equal numbers.

In its heyday, college boxing drew extraordinary crowds. On the night in 1940 that [Joe Louis](#) attracted 11,000 spectators to see him knock out Johnny Paychek in [Chicago](#), there were 15,000 to watch the [University of Wisconsin](#) oppose [Washington State](#) at [Madison](#).

The college coaches, now a rather dispirited group, hold that an illsupported attack based on mistaken ethical and physiological grounds

is responsible for the decline.

"You could blame the moms," one coach says. "They've seen boxing on TV, and nothing can persuade them that the college sport is different, that their boy stands little risk of being hurt." What the moms feel, college administrators have acted on.

UNFOUNDED CRITICISM

Ray Chisholm, secretary-treasurer of the coaches' association, has been boxing since he was 4 years old. He boxed for the [University of Wisconsin](#) in 1938, transferred to the [University of Minnesota](#) in 1939 and coached [Minnesota's](#) intramural program for a few years. "The underlying reason for the decline of interscholastic and intercollegiate boxing," Chisholm says, "is the unfounded and unsubstantiated criticisms of boxing in education by the physical educators who mistakenly identify college boxing with the most sordid aspects of professional boxing."

Most college coaches trace the troubles of the sport to a paper, *The Evaluation of Boxing as a College Activity*, published in 1940 in the *Research Quarterly* by three members of the [University of Illinois](#) physical education department. Widely distributed, it raised doubts in the minds of many educators as to the value of boxing in a college athletic program.

The report (by H. E. Kenney, E. A. Thacker, M.D., and H. C. Gebhart) was based on a questionnaire sent to pathologists, coroners, neurologists, psychiatrists, athletic directors and directors of health services, many of whom knew nothing about boxing. It concluded that "boxing should not be included in the sports program of an educational institution," though its data had far more to do with prizefighting than with college boxing. It implied dire things about punch-drunkenness among college boxers, without ever establishing that there was any. It asserted that boxing's most common injuries are "insidious," hinting that hidden brain injury is a usual effect of boxing. It held that college boxing bouts are "impossible to control," though they are in fact remarkably well controlled.

A month after this report appeared the legislative council of the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation adopted a resolution against boxing in high schools. In time college boxing came to be affected.

The [Illinois](#) report implied that 12 universities discovered instances of punch-drunkenness among college boxers. If this were true it might be considered reason enough for a college to abandon boxing, but the report was, to say the least, unfair in this regard. Under the heading "Boxing Casualties," it said:

"1. Number of universities reporting cases of 'punch-drunkenness' resulting from boxing program—12.

"(Types of disorders included—disturbances of equilibrium, vacant look in eyes, headache, dizziness, personality changes, deterioration of concentration and attention, impediment of speech, vomiting, unsteady gait.)"

Individuals at some universities reported instances of single symptoms, as cited, and some of these symptoms are part of the very subtle and complicated "punch drunkenness syndrome." These single symptoms were attributed, without proof, to boxing and then were lumped together in the report in a way that made it appear that actual cases of punch-drunkenness had been discovered among college boxers.

Doctors familiar with boxing will tell you that the punch-drunkenness diagnosis is very difficult to make. There is good reason to believe that the condition is much rarer among professional fighters than is popularly assumed, and that it never has occurred as a result of college boxing. A layman cannot hope to tell whether a given ex-fighter—thick of speech, with shuffling gait—is suffering from punch-drunkenness or tertiary syphilis. It must be noted that, before penicillin, syphilis was not too uncommon among prizefighters. Other ailments, like brain

tumors, can cause the symptoms, too.

Gordon Cobbledick, veteran sports editor of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, reported a couple of years ago that he had "never seen an authenticated case of what is popularly known as punch drunkenness."

"I have known some depressing wrecks of former fighters," he wrote, "stumbling, shuffling, mumbling, dull-eyed and duller-witted hulks who once were men, but I have never known one of whom it could be said with certainty that his condition resulted from blows to the head.

"Many of them had little brain to begin with. They were the get of moronic parents. Their formative years were spent in degrading slums. They were incapable of assimilating education. The ring offered them a livelihood, but when their fighting days were over they hit the skids."

One of the more ardent opponents of boxing, and especially of college boxing, is Arthur H. Steinhaus, Ph.D., dean of George Williams College, *Chicago*, where he is also professor of physiology. He has small patience with statistics that put boxing low on the list of hazardous sports, though the statistics are good enough to satisfy insurance underwriters, who rank boxing seventh in this category—below football, wrestling and crew.

"In boxing," Dean Steinhaus says, "you can be unconscious for 10 seconds and it will not be listed as an injury. In football it would be listed."

His opposition to boxing, the dean said, is "entirely concerned with brain injury." He believes, in fact, that boxing would be all right if the foul line was above the collar, eliminating head blows, instead of below the belt.

"I don't mind a broken nose," he explained, "because it heals. I am for football. My feeling on football is that there are dangers in it, but in football if someone gets hurt both sides are sorry. In football it's a straight accident. In boxing it is part of the sport to injure the opponent. Boxing stands alone in that regard."

Steinhaus looks on the "self-defense" argument for boxing as spurious, since footpads and barroom brawlers don't observe the Marquis of Queensberry rules, and wrestling and judo are actually much more efficient against attackers.

"If boxing is bad," Dean Steinhaus went on, "it is worst for the men in our universities. Their brains must be good, and injury to such brains is a very serious matter. Let's say college boxing is only one-tenth as dangerous as professional boxing. It's still too much of a risk on the top brains of our country. And I don't think I would agree that it is only one-tenth as dangerous."

On the other hand, the University of Wisconsin Medical School, after a four-year study of college boxing, reported that "injuries of immediate serious nature do not occur frequently in this sport," nor was evidence obtained to suggest that any contestants suffered "an injury which will result in residual disability."

With respect to the knockout, far more common in prizefighting than in today's college boxing, opponents of the college sport often quote Edward J. Carroll Jr., M.D., who once speculated: "It is probable that no head blow is taken with impunity and that each knockout causes definite and irreparable damage."

There seems to be little or no evidence to support this view. Franz Schuck, M.D., medical adviser to the Federal Security Agency's Committee on Physical Fitness, pointed out in a study of *Brain Injuries in Boxing* that "a healthy person who is knocked out in boxing is

usually felled by an injury of the 'concussion' type, *i.e.*, without traceable anatomical harm to the brain."

The more serious injuries of prizefighting, many of them attributable to banging of the head against inadequately padded canvas, rather than blows, are "very rare in boxing," Schuck held, and "no more frequent than are grave accidents in, for instance, horseback riding."

"Of course such accidents do happen," he added. "But to say the least, they are *exceedingly* rare in boxing in schools and colleges."

Dr. Anthony R. Curreri, professor of surgery at **Wisconsin**, has been close to boxing, amateur and professional, for many years. Lest his love of the sport be construed as prejudicial, he held himself aloof from the university's boxing study, but he could have foreseen the results.

The electroencephalogram, though not a perfect test for brain damage, was used in brain-wave studies of the **Wisconsin** boxers, just as it has been used elsewhere to study the effects of blows on prizefighters.

"There would be more risk of finding an abnormal electroencephalogram among the general run of students than among the student boxers," Dr. Curreri said. "The boxers have better coordination than the average student. I am firmly convinced that you will find no college boxer with impairment of brain function. There is little chance for a boy to be hurt. It is a calculated risk and the values of the sport are worth it."

Even professional boxing is not as bad as it has been painted medically, according to two doctors, Harry A. Kaplan and Jefferson Browder, who were retained by the **New York State** boxing commission to study the effects of head blows in professional fighting. They studied 1,043 professionals, using electroencephalograms, regular and slow-motion movies, and "clinical observations at ringside."

NOT DANGEROUS

Their conclusions, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, included a statement that "the amount of damage that may be inflicted to the brain by a blow to the head with a gloved fist, during a properly conducted professional boxing contest, rarely produces cerebral changes demonstrable by any test that we have at the present time." There is no evidence, either, they declared, to support the common medical opinion that a knockout is caused by numerous pinpoint hemorrhages in the brain.

The problems certain to arise from college boxing's false identification with prizefighting were recognized by the coaches in the very beginning. Until 1937 the college sport was presented under rules quite similar to the professional game, with eight-ounce gloves a standard, but the etiquette was deliberately different. As in tennis, the roar of the crowd was discouraged. Bouts were stopped if the audience got too noisy. Referees and judges wore dinner jackets. So did most of the men students, for the bouts often preceded dances and the girls wore evening dress.

Even so, there was plenty of blood, and in 1938 the rules began to be modified to get rid of some of it. At present the 12-ounce glove is used and it is filled with foam rubber instead of the hair and felt padding used in professional gloves. The padding is, furthermore, almost entirely on the striking surface, and impact is thereby greatly reduced. The college boxer wears a protective head-guard which not only helps prevent cuts about the eyes (**Idaho State** has not had a single cut since adoption of the headguard) but also reduces the shock of the back of the head banging against the canvas. At some colleges a new ring padding, extremely resilient, is used. You can drop eggs on the stuff without breaking them. It does not impede good footwork and is another safeguard for the head.

But perhaps even more important than these devices is the fact that the rules lay great stress on credit for good defensive work and

great responsibility on the referee to stop a bout the instant it appears that a boxer is clearly outclassed.

BOXING WITH CONFIDENCE

Despite these protective differences, and to an extent even because of them, college boxing is a wonderful sport to watch. There will be more excitement at next week's **NCAA** championships at **Nevada** than you will ordinarily see on television in six weeks of prizefighting. Boxing only three two-minute rounds, college men are not given to pacing themselves to last a distance. They do not stall or clinch. They go into action immediately. On the other hand, aware that points are given generously for good defense, they do not feel committed to a policy of heedless slugging. Aware, too, that the referee will protect them against needless beatings, they box with confidence.

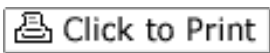
The outlook for college boxing is not altogether black. It is flourishing in the West and seems to be on the upswing there. This year's participation in the championships is, in fact, a little higher than it has been.

The more optimistic coaches still think that college boxing can be saved from annihilation. They believe it has values to make it worthwhile. It is, for instance, one of the few sports that do not reject an athlete for lack of height or weight. Dr. Curreri says the goal of college boxing "is to give these boys some of the confidence they will need in life."

But Eddie LaFond, rules committee chairman of the coaches' association and a professional referee associated with the sport since 1924, probably has expressed it best. "College boxing," he said, "keeps alive an ideal of rugged fitness on which our country was founded."

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