

“Should a sport as brutal as boxing be allowed to exist in civilized society?” This was indeed the first line in the lead commentary article in the Journal of the American Medical Association, in May 1986, entitled “ON BOXING AND LIBERTY”. The argument has been raging since the advent of time, and indeed the sport of boxing goes back to the millennium before the Greek empire. It can perhaps be argued simplistically that there are but three schools of thought in respect of boxing. There is the protagonist who believes it to be a sport in its purest form that must be preserved, the antagonist who sees it as a barbaric throwback which should be banned, and the majority of the general public whose view is ambivalent, and who really do not care one way or the other.

If society were more clearly divided into those for and against, then the media would be more concerned with discussing the need for boxing to continue or to be banned. Sadly the media are interested only in what sells papers and raises viewing figures, Thus the interest in boxing as a beautiful sport generates the massive coverage of high profile fights such as Lewis /Tyson. At this time the dangers of boxing are not discussed at great length, so as not to detract from the main selling point.

Conversely tragedies such as the injuries to Michael Watson generated massive media discussion on the dangers of boxing, at this time "the sweet science" was not discussed at great length, so as not to detract from the main selling point.

So who should decide whether boxing has a place in society?

Should it be the politicians? After all they were elected into office to represent the views of the people. But this is a question of morality, and should they be left to decide on moral issues. This is perhaps outside the realms of this discussion.

In simple terms boxing exists in its present form because society as a whole finds it to be acceptable behaviour. Men want to box and people want to watch. The fact it is condoned is witnessed by the viewing figures of major fights that attract millions. Those who argue that only the big fights generate this interest, and as such the following of boxing as a sport is a small minority perhaps need look no further than the viewing discrepancies in modern football. Worldwide boxing has a massive fan base.

For many people boxing occupies the very outer limit of morally acceptable behaviour. The intent to injure the opponent is to them abhorrent. If we accept that boxing occupies this very limit, then what happens if boxing were banned? In time another sport would

occupy the outer limit of what is morally acceptable, should this then be banned for the same reasons? If we are to continually draw in the limits where do we stop? Ultimately society will say, "No, that is far enough what we have now as sport is acceptable in terms of risk, danger, and moral acceptability". This is not a theoretical point in the future, but that is the situation now. We have drawn the limits, and society as a whole says that boxing is all right.

Boxing will stop quite simply when men do not want to box, and people do not want to watch.

What of the arguments for and against that may sway public opinion?

For many years the British medical association have carried the banner for those who would have the sport banned. They claim to have a mandate from the medical profession to pursue a ban on boxing, and that they are representative of the, majority of doctors. The reality of the situation was discussed in an article written following the publication of the BMA s last booklet entitled "The boxing debate".

The claims that they represent the majority of doctors are untrue. The original motion was put forward back in the early eighties.

Since then two things have happened. Firstly the BMA have vigorously pursued the ban on boxing claiming this mandate, secondly they have resisted calls to ballot their membership to gauge the true views of all doctors.

They had begun with the conclusion that boxing caused significant and unacceptable brain damage, they then sought the evidence by selectively filtering through the available evidence. Scientific fact that supported their view was included, that which did not was ignored. The accepted scientific model of hypothesis, research, evidence and theory was ignored. It can only be concluded that the British medical association pre supposed that its readership would agree with all the points raised, and as such let its own high standards drop, resulting in the publication of a document that has now been discredited. If these statements appear inflammatory then ask yourselves why the BMA have scaled down their opposition to boxing.

Those who would support boxing have an equally difficult argument. It can be argued that it is a sweet science, and an art, but the expression of these quaint terms involves the brutal reality of a sport that can involve inflicting deliberate injury with the possibility of serious injury and death.

Those who wish to box do so out of choice, and the freedom to choose is a basic principle that is enshrined in the human rights act. Man is a competitive animal. That need to compete is reflected in many ways. Gentle intellectual pursuits such as chess that entail the ability to outwit your opponent, sports such as mountaineering that involve incredible strength resilience and courage in the face of danger, ice skating that requires amazing skill, dexterity and timing, or boxing that encompasses all of the previously mentioned attributes. The problem that boxing faces is that it entails behaviour that is dangerous, deliberately dangerous and to many morally unacceptable. But the reality is that those who box do so in the clear knowledge of the risk they are running as they pursue their goal. And it exists as a sport that people wish to watch. When these two elements disappear, so will boxing. A forced ban on boxing is an infringement on the rights of an individual to express him, or herself.

Those of us actively involved in boxing know the risks only too well. That is why in recent years the medical supervision of boxing has been tightened up more than any other sport. The preparticipation screening that is required involves a full physical examination; blood tests to screen for hepatitis and HIV, and a

magnetic resonance scan (MRI), with angiogram. Other than the angiogram all of these tests are repeated annually. Ringside care now entails the presence of doctors trained in the management of the unconscious head injured boxer, with resuscitation facilities and dedicated paramedical ambulances solely for the use of the boxer. The only similarity between modern boxing and that seen 50 years ago, is the physical contact in the ring. The safety provision before, during and after is second to none, we in boxing are proud of our achievements in raising safety standards to protect our boxers. This highlights the flawed reasoning in the BMA argument.

The evidence put forward by the BMA to suggest that all boxing causes brain damage, and cites pathological specimens to support their statements. What they fail to point out to the casual reader is that the histological specimens they refer to are from boxers who fought in a bygone age, over 50 years ago. These specimens, some 25 or so preserved boxers brains are part of the pathological collection held in the Runwell hospital in Wickford in Essex. These specimens are relevant to boxing 50 years ago, but not the modern sport. Yes, it still causes injury and death, but the modern sport is heavily monitored to minimize, but not eliminate this risk.

Many within boxing have relied on the misfortune of other sports to defend what we do. This is a somewhat misguided approach. We do not need to compare the dangers of horseracing, formula one, skiing and so on to detract from the dangers inherent in boxing. They are dangerous pastimes that must look after their own, as we in boxing have done. What unifies all dangerous sports and pastimes is the freedom of the individuals to choose and to express themselves. Society has a duty to preserve this freedom that is far more important than any need to ban boxing. Boxing has a place in modern society.