

The Retreat from Violence in British Sport from 1666-1866: The Case of Boxing

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ABSTRACT / RESUMEN

In 1866 The Marquess of Queensberry Rules were introduced and transformed boxing; this was the same year in which the Amateur Athletic Club and the Football Association were founded. By this date all three were not only codified under their own rules, they had become part of the British establishment, with members of the universities enthusiastically taking part in them, and with clubs springing up in towns all over the country, they were recognised as socially acceptable – even desirable. Part of this acceptability was the belief that they filled young men's time usefully, built health and character, and reflected the values of a society that promoted order and restraint. That this was possible, when two centuries earlier they had been characterised as unruly, undesirable and even violent, is one of the most remarkable stories of sport.

This paper examines British sport in the mid 17th century (including boxing, athletics and football), and using the example of boxing, traces the movement away from physical violence to a more sanitised, less brutal form of sport. It should be remembered that in the 17th century Britons fought a civil war that in which the legality and social acceptability of sport was a major theme.

This paper asks why 17th century sport contained so many elements of violence (even those where it was not naturally present – e.g. foot-racing) and why it went slowly out of favour in the 18th and 19th centuries. It also examines the specific examples of violence, and examines who participated in sport and why, and who supported and paid for it, and why. This is the story of the slow 'gentrification' of the sport of the common people, and of the people themselves. Over a period of two hundred years sport in Britain so changed its nature and function that from its coarse, and often brutal and violent beginnings, it developed *gentlemanly conduct* and *fair play* as two of its main guiding principles.