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DE-SPORTIZATION OF FIGHTING CONTESTS

The Origins and Dynamics of No Holds Barred Events and the Theory of Sportization

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Abstract On the basis of an empirical analysis of the emergence, spread and transformation of No Holds Barred fighting contests during the 1990s, we argue that Norbert Elias's model of sportization represents a fruitful but not sufficiently differentiated framework for understanding the recent development of combat sports and fighting contests. Although the martial arts in the 20th century provide striking examples of processes of sportization and para-sportization, the rise of No Holds Barred events in the 1990s represented an opposing trend, a process of *de-sportization*. The analysis of No Holds Barred contests demonstrates that both sportization and de-sportization trends depend primarily on the interests of the organizers, and in particular on the degree to which they rely on the perspectives of practitioners, spectators, or viewers. The decisive factor for the predominance of the latter perspective was the formation of a new and poorly regulated market for visual material, which emerged with pay-per-view television. This allowed media entrepreneurs to commercialize non-sanctioned events, which depend primarily on the demands and fantasies of viewers who are less interested in the specifics of particular sports or games than in the antinomian excitement produced by the transgression of the rules and conventions of ordinary life. The case of No Holds Barred fighting thus suggests that new markets for visual material are likely to become an important factor in the development of spectator sports and sport-like forms of entertainment. It also suggests that regulatory regimes are an essential feature for the actual outcome of the changes that these new markets may bring about. Public pressure eventually led to the disappearance of No Holds Barred events from the major US cable television networks and from the full contact fighting scene in most Western European countries. In response, various initiatives worked towards a re-sportization of the matches, a process that has led to the transformation of No Holds Barred tournaments into Mixed Martial Arts matches.

Key words • commercialization • (de-)sportization • fighting contests • mediasport • new media • violence

Introduction

On 12 November 1993, the Dutch kickboxer and karateka Gerard Gordeau entered the octagonal cage set up at the McNichols Sports Arena in Denver, Colorado, for an ultimate fight, a fight with virtually no holds barred, against

Teila Tuli, a Hawaiian Sumo wrestler. As soon as the contest had started, Tuli, almost 80 kilos heavier than his opponent, lunged at Gordeau in an attempt to get him in a hold. Gordeau moved back, averted the attack, backed off some more and pulled his opponent toward him, exploiting the other's momentum. Tuli tottered and fell forward onto the mat in a seated position. A little taken aback, he looked up, at which Gordeau promptly dealt him a hard kick with his instep, into his face. A tooth flew through the mesh of the cage and was lost among the spectators. A trickle of blood appeared on Tuli's chin. Gordeau was ready and waiting to carry on but unexpectedly, and contrary to the rule that there were 'no rules', the referee stopped the fight. It had lasted 26 seconds. The arena was alive with excited voices, TV commentators began their analyses, cameramen zoomed in on Tuli's face or tried to get pictures of the winner. The first ultimate fight was over. Eighty thousand homes throughout the United States had witnessed it through their pay-per-view TV channels. They later saw Gordeau winning his next fight, despite a broken hand and a foot injury, but losing the final to Brazilian jiu jitsuka Royce Gracie, who received \$50,000 in prize money for his victory at the first Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC).

The formula for this new type of fighting contest was wonderfully simple. With the exception of biting and eye gouging, anything was permissible in the first few UFCs: kicking and punching, even when the opponent is down and defenseless, chokes, hair pulling, locks and bars, elbow strikes, and head butts. The men fought with their bare hands; the events dispensed with weight classifications, rounds, time limits, juries, and points. The only possible ending was knockout or submission, the latter being signaled by 'tapping out' or by the coach throwing the towel into the mesh-rimmed ring. Exponents of different fighting styles would be pitted against each other in tournaments. The tension built up, as, round after round, boxers, wrestlers, judokas, and kick boxers all competed to resolve the age-old question of who is truly the strongest of the strong.

Yet, in the public presentation of the event, references to the world of sports or to other regulated forms of competition were conspicuously absent. Organizers, on the contrary, went out of their way to emphasize the events' ferocity and ruthlessness. The cage became symbolic of the event's bestiality, something of which marketing companies took full advantage. The videotapes of the first ultimate events displayed bloody photographs and warnings of shocking images. Words and images were all chosen to emphasize that this was the ultimate test of strength: two men facing each other in the ring without any rules. The video covers screamed: 'THERE ARE NO RULES' and 'THEY FIGHT TO SURVIVE,' adding:

The world's most dangerous men fight to survive in the deadly octagon ring. There is no escape. In the ring there is nowhere to hide and nowhere to run. Head butting to the forehead, temple and mouth is legal. Open hand punches are legal. Elbow strikes are legal. There are no rules and there can be only one outcome . . . courageous victory or crushing defeat.¹

Ultimate or cage fighting soon secured a place for itself in the international circuit of full contact martial arts. It was being reported in martial arts magazines all over the world, and videos of matches were passed from person to person. Initiates described the new type of contest as an historical turning point. According to the US

martial arts periodical *Karate/Kung Fu Illustrated*, these 'realistic' contests ushered in a new age in the history of the martial arts (Yount, 1996). The popularity of ultimate fights was reflected in the many new variants that mushroomed around the world. Alongside the Brazilian *vale tudo* (Portuguese for 'anything goes'), these fights came to be known by a whole range of expressions that competed internationally like real brand names: absolute fighting, extreme fighting, cage fighting, world combat, free fight, warrior combat, pancrase, mixed fight, cage wars, millennium brawls, and ultimate combat. As a collective term for all these variants, the term No Holds Barred (NHB) was coined.

When reports of NHB contests began to appear beyond the world of martial arts periodicals and men's magazines such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, in daily newspapers and general weeklies, some countries were soon in the throes of a social and political debate about their admissibility. 'I recently found my son watching a cable-TV show called "The Ultimate Fighting Championship" and was appalled. Men were beating each other senseless. Why is such a thing allowed on TV? And is it legal?' demanded one indignant letter to a US magazine.² The Republican Senator John McCain, himself a life-long boxing fan, took the lead in the political campaign against UFCs in the United States. Having spoken out against the events in public, he wrote to all state governors in 1996 asking them to ban ultimate fighting. The movement to suppress these 'barbaric events' was supported by the American Medical Association and various local and national politicians, with the result that many states outlawed NHB events. The main setback for the organizers came in 1996 and 1997, when several major cable networks succumbed to political pressure and refused to broadcast any more fights. At this point, the lucrative pay-per-view market for NHB contests was in danger of collapse.

The debate about the admissibility of NHB events was not confined to the United States. For example, much the same happened in the Netherlands, a relatively prominent country in the international world of the hard martial arts. In the spring of 1995 a national debate was sparked by a report in a major national daily newspaper, the *Volkskrant*, of the first 'free fight gala' in Amsterdam, accompanied by a photograph spread across five columns showing a close-up of the battered face of one of the contestants. The then State Secretary for Sport, Erica Terpstra, declared that 'revolting' events of this kind did not deserve to be called sport, and that she would not tolerate them. The report and Terpstra's comments generated a wave of media attention that lasted over a year. The prime minister was asked for his opinion, several members of parliament called for a clampdown on NHB events, sports federations felt compelled to speak out against them, and the violence involved was freely conceded by fighters and organizers alike. The losing finalist of the first UFC, Gordeau, described NHB contests, one day after Terpstra's remarks, as a 'ritual slaughter.'³ The Amsterdam wrestler Freek Hamaker, a contestant in the second UFC, called them 'street fights among practitioners of the martial arts.'⁴ And the internationally well-known kickboxing coach Thom Harinck saw NHB events as 'barbaric popular entertainment.'⁵ Even so, all these critics opposed the ban that the authorities and the established sports federations were seeking to introduce.

Ultimate Fighting as a Sociological Problem

Given the relationship between sport and violence, it is likely that NHB contests would have been seized on avidly by sports sociologists (see Dunning, 1999; Messner and Sabo, 1993; Smith, 1988). In fact they have scarcely been studied at all. The few publications to mention them have discussed the rise and development of UFCs primarily in relation to the figurational sociology of sport conceived by Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning. Since the figurational approach is the starting point of our analysis as well, we begin by briefly discussing its theoretical and empirical significance for the understanding of fighting contests in contemporary societies. The main argument we develop is twofold. First, the theory of sportization processes is a fruitful model to understand the development of fighting sports in the (western) world, but that, when extended to the development of (Asian) martial arts, it is not sufficiently differentiated, in particular to account for the rising levels of violence observed with the emergence of full contact fighting since the 1970s (kick boxing, full contact karate, Thai boxing). It was this circuit of full contact fighting which initially provided the social basis and part of the infrastructure for the No Holds Barred events of the 1990s. Second, in order to explain the rise and spread of the latter, we argue that the main factor to consider here is the changing balance of power between organizers, practitioners, spectators, and viewers. No Holds Barred events were produced and distributed by a new type of media entrepreneur who, profiting from the emerging pay-per-view technology, staged events in which the perspective of participants and spectators was subordinated to the perspective of viewers. The vast majority of these viewers were less interested in the technicalities and specifics of fighting disciplines than in the excitement produced by transgressing accepted rules and conventions, thus producing a *de-sportization* of fighting contests.

Sportization of Fighting Contests

The concept of 'sportization' was coined by Elias (1971: 92). It denotes a process that began in the 18th century, in which organizations arose which acquired the power to formulate the rules of sport-like recreations more precisely, strictly and explicitly, oriented around an ethos of 'fair play' and eliminating, reducing and/or more strictly controlling opportunities for violent physical contact. Non-playing officials such as referees, umpires, timekeepers and judges, with an array of sport-specific sanctions at their disposal, also began to be introduced. A characteristic feature of this process was that the national and international organizations sought, through the rules they devised, to accomplish a 'tension balance' between on the one hand creating a high level of tension during contests, and on the other hand providing a reasonable degree of protection in the case of accidents and injuries. This pleasurable 'contest tension' began to be described as 'good sport' (Dunning, 2002: 220).

Elias places the sportization process within the wider civilizing process that occurred from the late Middle Ages onwards in Western European countries, in

tandem with the process of state formation in which ordinary citizens were deprived of the right to exercise force legitimately. Civilization involved a pacification of everyday life; physical violence was permitted only under strict conditions and within enclaves such as boxing and wrestling clubs. In these limited surroundings fighting remained possible, albeit in the exclusive context of tightly regulated contests.

Elias and Dunning (1986: 90) interpret such strictly regulated fighting contests as 'mimetic events' that take place in 'a social enclave where excitement can be enjoyed without its socially and personally dangerous implications.' These mimetic events have an important function. They create a certain tension, the demand for which will tend to increase in proportion to the degree of monotony in the spectators' everyday lives. So according to Elias and Dunning (1986: 88), fighting contests do not release tension but tend to generate it: they produce 'the rise of an enjoyable tension-excitement, as the heart-piece of leisure enjoyment.'

This 'quest for excitement' imposes heavy demands on the tension balance in contests. If there is too little tension, the contest becomes dull and dreary, but if there is too much, the ensuing excitement among the spectators can pose a serious risk to spectators and contestants alike, and the event shifts from the realm of the mimetic to the non-mimetic sphere of serious crisis. Sports organizations are constantly manipulating this tension balance. If a particular sport is becoming too monotonous, the organizers increase the dynamics of the competition, for instance by moving the goal posts and kickoffs (gridiron football), by imposing limits on playing the ball back to the goalkeeper (soccer), or by introducing new scoring systems (volleyball, table tennis). At the other end of the scale, if contests become too brutal, or too hazardous, they take protective measures, such as introducing the mandatory use of helmets (cycling), time penalties for fouls (rugby, hockey), and measures to improve safety (automobile and motorcycle races).

This figurational sociological approach to sport has been widely applied (Dunning, 2002; Dunning and Rojek, 1992): typical examples including the studies of 'fighting' by Howes (1998) and Sheard (1992). The main thrust of Sheard's thesis is that boxing has become subject to more and more specific rules and greater regulation over a long period of time. 'The activity of prizefighting was [. . .] superseded by the more controlled and sportized activities of amateur and professional boxing' (Sheard, 1992: 463–4).

In the critical debate on the usefulness of the theory of civilizing processes to illuminating the development of boxing, John Sugden was one of the first to refer to 'the global revival of free-for-all prize fighting in the form of the UFC.' He commented that the description of UFC was very similar to 'Elias and Dunning's invocation of the ancient Olympic game/contest of pankration, a sport which they claim belonged to a pre-modern and less civilized society.' This leads Sugden to conclude that 'the persistence of violent sports such as UFC [. . .] is hard to square with the notion that society, including its sports, is trundling inexorably along civilization's super-highway' (Sugden, 1996: 176–7).

Although Dunning (1999: 48) defines pankration as 'in effect [. . .], equivalent to what has recently come to be called ultimate fighting,' he does not reply to Sugden's theoretical conclusion. There is a reaction, however, in Sheard's (1998) review of Sugden's (1996) *Boxing and Society*. On the basis of his

doctoral dissertation, 'Boxing in the Civilizing Process' (Sheard, 1992), Sheard reaches the opposite conclusion — that UFCs may be regarded precisely as a corroboration of Elias's theory of civilizing processes — using three arguments: first, that UFCs have only minority appeal, while pankration was a form of mass recreation; second, that bare-knuckle prize-fighting has been outlawed — or driven underground — in relatively civilized societies; and third, that most people in 'our' society find violent sports of this kind 'sickening' and describe those who enjoy them as 'sick' (Sheard, 1998).

In one of the very few empirical studies of UFCs, Howes (1998) examined the reactions to ultimate fights and the effects of the reactions on the further development and regulation of these events in the period 1993 to 1998. He concluded that, in line with the theory of civilizing processes, a 'figuration of disapproval' formed in relation to NHB events, which put organizers under great pressure to make ultimate fights more civilized. He showed that, in response to this pressure, organizers gradually adapted contests under the pressure of a political offensive against them. To avoid facing a ban, the UFC organizers tightened the rules: they outlawed head butts, breaking fingers, hair-pulling, and sticking fingers into the opponent's mouth or nostrils. They also introduced weight classification, replaced the aggressive term 'No Holds Barred' with the milder-sounding 'Mixed Martial Arts' (MMA), and ensured that referees intervened more promptly and that cameras would swivel away from a wounded fighter to the spectators more quickly than before. In short, Howes (1998) concluded: 'with the gradual erosion of elements that were considered "repugnant," the UFC was now firmly in the grip of the sportization of its format'. Although Howes's analysis supports Sheard's view that the emergence of UFCs does not challenge Elias and Dunning's theory, this interpretation leaves important questions unanswered. First, Howes failed to analyze the how and why of the development of ultimate fighting. When viewed in the longer term, this development proves in many respects to be diametrically opposed to the process of sportization as described by Howes for UFCs and Sheard for boxing. In fact, it meets the definition of what we have previously described as the *brutalization* of fighting contests (Bottenburg and Heilbron, 1997a. If the rise of events such as ultimate fights is to be adequately explained, we propose the need for the complementary concept of 'de-sportization'. And, if the long-term development of UFCs displays alternate phases of de-sportization and sportization, how do we explain these changes, and how does this relate to the theory of sportization?

A second objection to Howes's analysis is its narrow focus on what he calls the 'figuration of disapproval.' He leaves the 'figuration of approval' out of consideration, although the dynamics of this figuration have been at least as significant to the further development of UFCs and other NHB events. Furthermore, if we look more closely at the constellation of fighters, organizers, media companies, spectators and viewers, we discover that NHB events developed not in one, but in several different directions. What were these variants, viewed internationally, and what are the underlying dynamics of these trends?

Third, Howes fails to address the questions raised by the large number of viewers and visitors who are drawn to NHB events. In the United States, UFCs were soon among the most popular pay-per-view-programs; the income from

each event was soon exceeding \$10,000,000. In Japan, the first UFC held outside the United States had the highest audience ratings ever recorded for a martial arts tournament.⁶ According to Howes (1998), the video of the first UFC held in Britain rapidly captured the number one slot in the rental market. And in the Netherlands too, the number of spectators and video sales underpinned the commercial success of the first free fights and cage fights that were organized there as variants of the UFC. How should this large market for violent fighting events be interpreted, and how is this market influencing the further development of NHB events?

Methods

We set out to answer these questions using a range of methods. With the aid of students, we conducted 70 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, studied numerous videotapes, and attended some 14 events. We analyzed the content of martial arts journals from the 1970s onwards, and of current websites dealing with international trends in NHB events. Among those we interviewed were former fighters and promoters, and all the Dutch contestants at Amsterdam's first free fighting galas. We also interviewed coaches, organizers, promoters and producers, as well as journalists, researchers, politicians, officials, and the presidents of recognized sports federations. People were interviewed at home, at work, or at their sports clubs. In addition, we designed a questionnaire for the spectators at one of the NHB events we attended, the second 'free fight gala' held in Amsterdam in 1996. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions, some open and some closed. The 259 respondents were asked face-to-face, either before, during or after the event, to give their age, level of education, and occupation, their sports background, their favorite sports, the frequency with which they visited martial arts galas, their motives for doing so, and for their approval rating of the events. The spectators were almost exclusively male (87%), and the few females present were nearly all accompanying their male partner and his friends. Nearly all of the spectators were in the age range 18 to 44 (92%) and employed in lower, subordinate ranks in the market sector, particularly in technical and service industries.⁷ Adding Bourdieu's distinction between economic and cultural capital, we found that among these predominantly lower-class males, there were virtually no representatives of the social and cultural occupations, which require some cultural capital, and, more generally, very few of them were employed in the government sector.⁸ The results were analyzed using descriptive statistics, focusing in particular on the relationship between the appeal of violence and knowledge of, and experience with, martial arts. Since this article focuses on the more theoretical conclusions of the research, we use only part of the data collected (for full accounts of the study see Bottenburg and Heilbron, 1996, 1997a, 1997b).

Varieties of Sportization and Countertrends

Accounts of sportization in the sociology of sport present the picture of a continuous process, which was effected in many sports in the past, including fighting sports such as wrestling and boxing, always in virtually the same way. But when the model is extended to the long-term development of the originally Asian martial arts and the relationships among them, a more differentiated process is observed, one that — partly for this reason — coincided with a trend towards fewer constraints.

The transformation of Asian martial arts into fighting sports practiced at the international level corresponds in many respects to the sportization model. Following the example of judo, many martial arts underwent at least a degree of sportization, especially from the 1960s onwards (karate in Japan, tae kwon do in Korea, wushu in China, bando in Burma, hapkido in Korea, pentjak-silat in Indonesia, and muay thai in Thailand). But the trajectory and the outcome of this process display substantial variations. Some martial arts (such as judo, tae kwon do, and karate) became full-fledged international competition sports and were incorporated into the international sports system. Others (Burmese boxing for instance) remained more or less traditional martial arts with a largely local or national character, and never acquired standardized rules or international organizations. Still others, like muay thai and kickboxing, have gone through a process that is perhaps best described as *para-sportization*. While these fighting contests adopted elements of English boxing — gloves, a ring, and rounds — and had their rules standardized by national and international organizations to enable championships to be held, they nonetheless developed in a separate circuit, outside the recognized sports organizations.⁹ Only in 2006 were the main umbrella organizations of muay thai (IFMA) and kickboxing (WAKO) accepted as members of the General Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF), which represents international acceptance. Martial arts like full contact karate, savate, vale tudo, and shootfighting went through a similar process of para-sportization, but never gained acceptance by GAISF or the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Although the development of the martial arts deserves more attention than this brief outline, there is little doubt that it has resulted in the establishment of two circuits with a limited overlap: on the one hand, recognized, sportized fighting contests such as wrestling, boxing, judo and taekwondo, organized in school teams or sports clubs, which train for contests in structured national and international competitions, the culmination of which is the Olympic Games; on the other hand, non-recognized and only partially sportized contests, organized by primarily commercial sports schools and held in the form of martial arts sports tournaments.

The existence of these two largely separate, and to some extent rival, martial arts circuits helps to explain why the types of fighting introduced later were often rougher than the existing martial arts. After karate-do came full-contact karate, kickboxing and muay thai; in the 1990s these were followed by various forms of 'free' fights: vale tudo, pancrase, mixed fight, ultimate fight, cage fight, extreme fight, and other NHB variants. In this process of deregulation, we witness the

same dynamics at work each time. Since many variants of fighting evolved simultaneously, there was room for controversy not just as to who was the true judo, karate or taekwondo champion, but also as to which of them was the best all-round martial artist and which martial arts school taught the most effective combat system. Who would win if the muay thai champions were pitted against the full-contact karatekas? And what would happen if boxers and wrestlers were allowed to compete too? On the one hand this competition increased the pressure on martial arts schools to develop new training methods and more effective fighting techniques, to train harder and to set up a more professional form of coaching. On the other hand, it led to the development of 'free' fights in which practitioners of various martial arts competed with a minimum of rules. For the organizers, this new trend posed the dilemma of how to strike the balance between generating tension and reducing risks. Resolutions of this dilemma display a parting of the ways: while the recognized martial arts underwent further sportization, several non-recognized forms witnessed a trend towards more permissive contests with higher levels of violence.

Among practitioners of the recognized martial arts a mood of resentment arose in the 1970s about the restrictions imposed by regulations — a resentment that was fueled by the advent of kickboxing and muay thai. In the 1980s, martial arts periodicals frequently published criticism of the established sports:

Everyone knows that tight regulations have ruined the martial arts. [. . .] The general public lost interest in karate ages ago. It simply doesn't provide enough action to hold their attention.¹⁰

The gist of the criticism was that overly tight regulation forced fighting styles too far away from their origins: as exercises for *real* fighting. A street fight did not stop if someone scored a point or a particular throw was used; it just went on until one of the fighters gave in.

This criticism was initially expressed from the viewpoint of contestants: the regulations needed to be changed to increase the pleasure of those taking part by permitting a wider range of techniques. In response, some practitioners of the martial arts developed an early form of mixed martial art in the 1970s that they called barokai — with hindsight an unsuccessful project. Barokai was a combination of different martial arts, not 'a jazzed up form of street fighting':

Technique must always be paramount. It must be a good, clean martial art. [. . .] We have absolutely no desire to be associated with pankration or fighting 'sports' like it, whose aim is to give the opponent a one-way ticket to the hospital. We must prevent this at all costs. Barokai must at all times be a good, fair sport that is beyond reproach.¹¹

In the last decades of the 20th century, this urge for innovation from the practitioners' perspective was reinforced from a totally different point of view. The structure and regulation of the later free fights, UFCs and other NHB events, were inspired less by the viewpoint of those taking part and more by the perspective of the audience.

To obtain a clear understanding of this change it is necessary to distinguish not only the practitioners' perspective from the audience perspective, but also the

perspective of *spectators*, that is, those who actually personally attend a sporting event, from that of *viewers*, that is, those who watch sport broadcasts or videotapes and DVDs (Stokvis, 2003; see also Kenyon, 1969; Wann et al., 2001). With respect to the organization and regulation of sports, the balance of power between these three groups — practitioners, spectators and viewers — shifted in the last decades from the former to the latter.

For a long time, the practitioners' perspective dominated the martial arts, as it did in the world of sports generally. Initially, almost all sports were organized and regulated according to the interests and wishes of the sports participants. However, when sport matches attracted growing crowds in the course of the 20th century, sports organizations became increasingly oriented towards the needs and interests of the spectators. In the last decades, this orientation changed again. The rise of electronic media, and especially the introduction of cable and satellite television, pay-per-view, videotapes, DVDs, and internet, created a new relationship between the sports organizations, media entrepreneurs and the audience, resulting in a series of rule changes in many sports, which were primarily prompted by the interests of the viewers (Coakley, 2004; Sewart, 1987; Stokvis, 2003). In the case of the fighting disciplines this development occurred within a larger context of mediated martial arts practiced in various movie genres and TV programs by stars such as Bruce Lee, Jean-Claude van Damme and Jet Li. The relatively strong presence in the media has probably contributed to an interest in more 'realistic' and more spectacular fighting events than evident in formal organized sports.

As the following section shows, it was media companies that wielded the dominant influence in the organization of the NHB events. Their main concern was to attract as large a viewing public as possible, and they modified their regulations accordingly. What counted was not so much the preferences and enjoyment of contestants, but those of the spectators and viewers. For the benefit of the public, technique and style were subordinated to the sensation that the fights had to offer as *spectacles*. This sensation was achieved by deliberately increasing the level of violence. The organizers focused one-sidedly on the tension end of the 'tension balance' and increased the risks involved in the fights, removing protective measures and structuring rules.

In a certain respect the UFC organizers were radicalizing a trend that had started years earlier. The trend first became visible in the 1970s, when low kicks, and knee and elbow strikes were introduced with the advent of full-contact karate, kickboxing and in particular muay thai. This was followed in the 1980s by the introduction of free fights with greatly simplified rules that permitted techniques involving kicks, strikes, throws, and chokes to be combined. The further development of these free fights led to the first UFC, in which regulations had been reduced to a minimum. Other NHB events had variants of this model (shoot-wrestling, pancrase, rings fight, pride mixed martial arts, cage fight, ultimate combat, extreme fight, superbrawl), with regulations that were minimal and were often agreed for a particular contest or tournament.

Since this trend is the opposite of sportization, it may be called *desportization*. The organizers did not develop a particular activity into a sporting event, but intentionally adapted existing sports into events that approximated real

fighters as closely as possible. They were not concerned with structuring sporting events to make them comparable and to create the conditions for record setting and breaking, which is facilitated by rules in ordinary sports. Nor were they concerned with maximizing the tension balance characteristic of sporting contests.

This *de-sportization* in NHB events manifested itself in four different ways:

- 1) While recognized martial arts organizations expanded the number of rules and deliberately built in restrictions to give a sport its distinctive features, in NHB events there was a reduction of rules and restrictions in pursuit of greater authenticity, blurring the boundary between martial arts and real fighting.
- 2) While recognized martial arts organizations sought to standardize the rules, in NHB events a deliberate effort was made to keep the rules flexible. These rules may be adjusted in each fight or event in response to changed circumstances, contestants' demands, or the presumed preferences of spectators.
- 3) While recognized martial arts organizations constantly tried to achieve a balance between a high level of tension during each contest on the one hand, and protection and containment of risks on the other, NHB events were characterized by an increase in tension by scrapping measures designed to protect and to reduce risks.
- 4) While recognized martial arts organizations, in developing formal rules and informal codes, focus on a sports ethic of fair play, the practice of NHB events tends to cultivate among some contestants an attitude of disregard for sportsmanship and a lack of respect for the opponent, at least in the ring or the cage.

In doing so, the organizers intended to create a new kind of spectacle, which not only produced the tension of an ordinary sporting contest between two fighters, but also the tension of breaking generally accepted norms of violence. The latter form of tension may be called 'antinomian tension' (Collins, 2004: 246). Based on the transgression of common norms, antinomian excitement is produced by going beyond ordinary limits, by showing dramatic knock-outs, 'real' violence or fights between very different fighters or fighting styles. It is based on the experience of what is commonly unavailable and forbidden. Contrary to the tension of ordinary sporting matches, antinomian tension does not require prior knowledge, nor does it imply identification with a specific fighter or fighting style. It is not the excitement of the game, but the excitement of the extraordinary that is experienced when basic rules are broken and the public at large is shocked.

This counter-movement involving *de-sportization* has received little attention in the sociology of sport. The questions to be addressed concern where this counter-movement is to be found, how it should be explained, and how it relates to the process of sportization that is continuing at the same time.

Media Companies and the Viewers' Perspective

If the emergence of UFCs cannot be seen as a process of sportization, we need a different model to explain it. For this we need to investigate the origins of UFCs, the groups that played a role in this early phase and the ways in which they anticipated and responded to the needs and desires of the audience, and the political and media offensive that was launched against NHB events.

A key factor in helping to explain de-sportization in the martial arts is the commercialization of sport and the contrast between recognized and non-recognized sports in this respect. Recognized sports are embedded in an associative structure of clubs and national and international federations. Although these sports have become more and more commercialized during the last decades, it was not their governing bodies who were the main force in this process. As Horne et al. (1999) argue, the established sport organizations were often slow to respond to the process of commercialization. One striking feature of much recognized sport is precisely the way that it is still not organized as a business, despite commercialization pressures. The organizations still represent first and foremost the practitioners themselves, as laid down in the constitutions and regulations that are inherent to their structure. To fulfill this primary task, they ensure that the rules of play are developed and standardized and supervise compliance. The non-recognized sports, on the other hand, originated within a more commercial structure, one in which the organization and regulation of contests are primarily attuned to the preferences of spectators and viewers, who are, after all, their source of income.¹² Here it is the spectators' and viewers' perspectives that tend to be dominant. And this dominance is understandable in light of the interdependencies between the four parties involved in the market of NHB events: media companies, viewers, spectators and contestants.

The relative weight of viewers was reinforced by the emergence of pay-per-view television and related markets for visual material. UFCs were born when US media companies tried to exploit these new markets, among others, by launching an initiative on the periphery of the martial arts world. The concept of an ultimate fighting tournament originated in Brazil. In the 1920s the Gracies, a prosperous family of Scottish descent, founded an academy in Rio de Janeiro that focused on the Japanese art of jiu jitsu. The Gracies crafted their own version, not as a sport but as the most effective form of self-defense. Occasionally they accepted challenges to try out their style of fighting in so-called 'vale tudo' contests, in which they proved almost invincible. In the late 1970s Rorion Gracie moved to California, where he opened a gym to popularize the Gracie form of jiu jitsu. He demonstrated his style whenever he had the chance, and was soon playing parts in martial arts movies and advising directors on the choreography of fight scenes. Ten years after his arrival in the United States he was so well known that *Playboy* published an interview with him, in which he agreed to pay \$100,000 in prize money to anyone who beat him in a fight without rules (Jordan, 1989). Although no one seems to have taken up the challenge, Rorion Gracie's name was established, and his gym was flooded with new pupils. Through Hollywood contacts an initiative was born for a major international *vale tudo* tournament, to be staged as a grand media spectacle. The relatively new pay-

per-view system presented an ideal opportunity, since this was a market with relatively little censorship (Howes, 1998). Just as the advent of the video recorder facilitated the mass dissemination of pornography in the 1980s, pay-per-view television yielded a new form of violent entertainment in the 1990s. Rorion Gracie acted as fighting consultant, former advertising man Arthur Davie was matchmaker, film director John Milius (known from the movie *Conan the Barbarian*) was creative director, and Semaphore Entertainment Group (SEG), a New York company specializing in productions for the pay-per-view market, produced the event and marketed the images (Gentry, 2001).

Howes (1998) rightly emphasizes that the timing was perfect: this was a period of great expansion in the television market triggered by innovations in cable and satellite television. The dominant television networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, and ESPN) owned the rights to the most popular sports events, enabling them to generate a great deal of income from advertising. This forced smaller TV companies such as SEG to open up new markets. One of these was broadcasts of extreme and high-risk sports, such as speed skiing, ice climbing, skydiving, skateboarding, snowboarding and ultimate or extreme fighting. As in the case of other countries and other sports, the established broadcasting corporations were the carriers of traditional sport culture, concentrating on the mass audience sports. The new channels, on the other hand, targeted relatively new sports.

So when SEG established contact with Gracie, the result was a gift from heaven: 'an untapped market, which no one else had even remotely considered' (Howes, 1998). But this situation soon changed as other media companies produced variations on the UFC formula. Peters Entertainment Group, a Hollywood company run by the billionaire Peters family, started by broadcasting the World Combat Championships. Another NHB event, Extreme Fighting, was launched by Battlecade, part of General Media International, whose publications include *Penthouse*.¹³ Its setup too reflects the dominance of commercial considerations: referees, juries and point counters were consistently replaced by people from the media and entertainment industries: the UFC's matchmaker was a former advertising man, creative director Milius was a film director, and the producer and promoter of the event was not a sports association but a pay-per-view television company.

All the media companies involved had one aim in organizing these events: maximizing audience ratings and profit. They knew better than anyone else that stimulating violence was a highly effective way to achieve that goal (Smith, 1988; Young, 2003). This is corroborated by experimental research, which 'clearly indicates that increased player aggressiveness enhances spectators', especially male spectators', enjoyment of watching sports contests' (Wenner, 1998: 258–65). Although the publicity was initially targeted at the martial arts community, the previews and publicity on the pay-per-view channels themselves and the articles in men's magazines soon reached a much larger audience.

Our spectator questionnaire at a free fight gala held in Amsterdam underlines the importance of the distinction between viewers and spectators when discussing the audience perspective. Earlier studies of spectators revealed that the majority of people attending sports events are highly knowledgeable or 'competent' in

relation to the sport concerned; they either practice it or are closely involved with it in some other way. The television market, however, reaches a *mass* audience many times larger than the crowd of spectators. According to Coakley (2004), such an audience consists of many casual viewers who lack technical knowledge about the complex physical skills and strategies used by the athletes. Without this technical knowledge — or in Stokvis's terms (2003) 'sporting competence' — hype and drama become primary sources of entertainment. Casual viewers enjoy situations when athletes take risks and face clear physical danger. Thus, Coakley argues, when a sport increasingly comes to depend on the entertainment of mass audiences, orientations on athletic performance change. The danger of movement becomes important in addition to the beauty of movement; style and expression become important in addition to fundamental skill; and pushing beyond personal limits becomes important in addition to exploring limits (Coakley, 2004). Of course, this does not mean that the viewpoint of the practitioners is no longer important. But it does show that the structure and regulation of the sports contests or competition are increasingly inspired by the audience and especially the viewer's perspective.

Our questionnaire revealed that less sporting competence was associated with a different range of motives for watching contests.¹⁴ The relatively homogeneous group of younger lower-class males who attended the free fight gala can be internally divided according to their degree of involvement in the world of fighting sports. When asked about their motives for attending the NHB event, it became clear that the perspective of insiders — people who practiced a martial art themselves — tended to correspond more closely to that of contestants (see Table 1). When responding to an open question on the most attractive element of the contests, they were more likely to cite reasons relating to their *technical appreciation* of the fights (with phrases such as 'for the sport,' 'good technique,' 'all-round,' 'complete fighting sport'), and were more likely to have said that they had come for a *specific fight* (in which the involvement of friends or acquaintances played a role). Outsiders, on the other hand — those who did not practice any martial art — tended more often to adopt a viewer's perspective. They answered more frequently with terms that can be classified in categories such as *street fighting* ('bash-up,' 'anything goes,' 'no protection,' 'realism') and *violence* ('wounded,' 'blood,' 'aggression,' 'knock senseless,' 'destroy,' 'finish off').

A similar distinction may be made between the answers given by 'newcomers,' those attending their first martial arts gala, and 'initiates,' who had attended such events before. Newcomers were more likely than initiates to use terms in the categories of 'aggression' and 'street fighting,' although these differences were too small to be statistically significant. The newcomers were also more likely to cite motives in the categories of *setting* ('atmosphere,' 'show,' 'day trip,' 'entertainment') and *curiosity* ('great thing to have experienced,' 'get to know it,' 'all the hullabaloo surrounding the event').

The findings indicate that 'insiders' and 'initiates' were more likely than outsiders or newcomers to adopt a *practitioner's perspective*: most of them were interested in the realistic nature of NHB events partly because of the confrontation between different styles and techniques of fighting, partly because they were familiar with some of the contestants whom they supported. Outsiders and new-

Table I Motives of Spectators Attending a Free Fight Gala in Amsterdam (1996)

	Outsiders who have never practiced a martial art	Insiders who have practiced a martial art	Total
Violence	10.8%	4.0%	7.0%
Streetfighting	23.5%	19.2%	21.1%
Sensation	17.6%	17.6%	17.6%
Technical appreciation*	14.7%	32.8%	24.7%
Specific match	9.8%	12.0%	11.0%
Atmosphere	14.7%	9.6%	11.9%
Curiosity	8.8%	4.8%	6.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	

Pearson Chi-Square: 14.473; Asymp. Sig.: .025.

* Also significant as a dichotomous variable.

comers, on the other hand, were more likely to adopt a *viewer's perspective*. They were less interested in the sport dimension and more in violence and aggression. In this regard they probably correspond to the vast majority of TV viewers who watch NHB events at home, or sometimes in bars and clubs. Among this latter group, too, the level of sporting competence can be assumed to be relatively low. Viewers do not watch these events for the sport, but are attracted to the violence that has largely been banished from everyday life. They can enjoy the excitement produced by the transgression of ordinary rules, and perhaps express their aggressive impulses and violent fantasies by watching fights that come ominously close to what is considered to be the harsh reality of street fighting (cf. Elias, 1994).

For media companies it is the viewer's perspective that is most interesting, since this is what generates most of their profit. 'Insiders' constitute a small and reasonably stable group. In the Netherlands, the number of martial arts practitioners expressed as a percentage of the total population has shown only a modest increase over the past three decades, from two percent in 1979 to three percent in 2003 (Breedveld, 2006). To increase revenue it was important to target the much larger group of outsiders and newcomers. Viewers had to be enticed by placing less emphasis on sport and more on a mix of aggression, violence, and entertainment. De-sportization was one way of achieving this. Although UFCs were initially conceived as style versus style contests, their marketers soon found that this was not a significant consideration for most of the people who were actually paying to watch them. According to the UFC match-maker, Art Davie, the vast majority of the pay-per-view-audience were 'guys who enjoyed NFL football, monster truck pulls, and professional wrestling — they wanted action. And they didn't really seem to care about the nuances of martial arts, let alone what styles labeled the combatants' (quoted in Gentry, 2001: 59).

The increase in violence that ensued from this de-sportization could be appreciated and enjoyed, because it did not pose a threat to the public. For spectators and viewers alike, ultimate fights remained mimic events that were

hemmed in by a cage or that took place somewhere remote from the comfort of their living rooms. At the same time, their violent fantasies were stimulated by the realistic nature of the contests. Since there were no artificial rules as in the different fighting sports, the UFCs were presented and could indeed be easily perceived as the most realistic form of fighting. Viewers could abandon themselves in a kind of 'real virtuality' to the extreme tension of a fierce fight that was apparently real and close, but that posed no threat to them whatsoever.

Seen from this perspective, the value attached to the level of violence appears to vary primarily according to people's 'distance' from the event. Insiders, who practice one of the martial arts themselves and know what it is to deal an opponent a blow, and to be on the receiving end of one, or who in any case move within the circles of the full-contact martial arts, identify most often with the fighters, their style, and their skills, and appear less interested in the sensation of unadulterated violence. Those who are the furthest removed from the martial arts world, and who identify least with the fighters and their specific abilities, and their surroundings, evidently have least difficulty abandoning themselves to the excitement of physical violence.

The fighters themselves, on whom all eyes were fixed, obviously saw the contests very differently. For them, NHB events were initially, although not always, real fights with definite risks.¹⁵ Why did they cooperate in the de-sportization of the fighting contests, and why were they prepared to expose themselves to these risks? In line with Young (2003), we argue that both economic and symbolic meanings are at stake here.

First, financial considerations played a role. Besides the sure prospect of an appearance fee and the possibility of taking home the prize money, the men knew that taking part in a NHB event could enhance their reputation in ways that would generate other sources of income (lessons, demonstrations, contracts for other fights, parts in movies or advertisements, and publicity for their own dojos). They were well aware of the dangers, but accepted the risk of injury or loss, since the expected profit counted for more. So the contestants understandably included few young men who were in the prime of their sporting careers or who had recently become world-class fighters. For them, any injury would have a devastating effect on their careers. The contestants consisted almost entirely of former champions in sports in which there was little money to be made. Once they were approaching retirement, it was an opportune moment to make money out of their 'body capital' by way of 'bodily labor' (Wacquant, 1995: 67).

The interviews with the contestants in the two free fight events held in the Netherlands in 1995 and 1996 confirm this picture. Fourteen of the 17 fighters involved were interviewed.¹⁶ Most had little education, and at an average age of 31 they had impressive martial arts careers behind them. They had invested a great deal in physical strength and physical prowess, and many used this bodily capital outside the world of sport as well: two-thirds of them worked as doormen or bouncers, while one-third worked as sports instructors at dojos or gyms.

Second, the men's bodily capital also possessed symbolic value. The contests gave the fighters a certain standing and respectability in the world of martial artists and their audience. The preparations called for sacrifices that few were willing and able to make. Entering the cage was an act of great courage, and the

impressive physique and strength that they displayed amid the spotlights and to the cameras inspired fear and made an enormous impression on everyone watching them. As for the fights themselves — in the words of one UFC fighter:

It's just street fighting, among martial arts guys. I've been in there. I've been in that cage. And I wouldn't have missed it for anything, that's a fact. But I'll tell you this: someone is bound to be killed eventually. He'll be just laid out flat there in the ring, dead. As a sportsman it is pretty fantastic to experience it once in your life. 'Cos you want to know where you stand. It gives you a kick, and a sense of pride, that you can say to yourself, 'I went in there once.' But as a sportsman and as a human being, I'm telling you, ultimate fighting is a bit too crude. I don't think it's right to kick someone in the face when he's lying on the ground. You might just as well say, OK guys, let's have a street fight.¹⁷

In a feminizing society that some claim has precipitated a 'crisis of masculinity,' there are not many ways left to parade 'male qualities' like this. Even full-contact sports like boxing are under threat as the 'last male preserves' (Sugden, 1996: 192–3). For contestants, NHB events provided a rare opportunity to display their masculinity and their strength legitimately in a fight (Hopton, 2002). The importance of the symbolic meaning of this ultimate test of virility is clear from the large numbers of men who signed up, willing to enter the ring for less than \$100.

The Future: Four Possible Scenarios

Elias's theory of civilizing processes predicts vehement reactions to any violation of widely accepted norms of behavior, particularly in the case of violent behavior that is fostered and promoted as openly as NHB events. These reactions certainly came, and they came immediately. Given the small number of serious or fatal injuries in NHB events relative to other sports,¹⁸ the reaction could best be described, according to Hopton (2002), as one of 'moral panic.' Powerful 'figurations of disapproval' arose in several countries (Howes, 1998), with politicians, physicians, established media companies, recognized sports bodies, and the accepted martial arts organizations all joining forces to oppose these 'barbaric practices.'

Politicians such as Senator John McCain in the United States and Erica Terpstra, State Secretary for Sport in the Netherlands, provoked debate by calling for a ban on NHB events. Mainstream journals and magazines raised the stakes in this debate by emphasizing the violence in these fights in photographs, headlines, and reports, and by publishing editorials seeking to 'ban this extreme barbarism.'¹⁹ Fearful of negative publicity, sports bodies soon reacted by drawing a distinction between the activities they represented (i.e. sports) and those such as NHB events, which they classified not as sport but as forms of violent recreation. In the same way, exponents of the established martial arts distanced themselves from the newcomers. They were concerned to prevent any debate arising on the legitimacy of their own activities — a constant risk where boxing is concerned.²⁰

In the United States and Canada, this debate culminated in a ban on NHB

events in several states and provinces, which was achieved by invoking existing legislation prohibiting bare-knuckle fighting and unsanctioned boxing. And states and provinces that did not ban NHB events outright introduced administrative rules that imposed conditions on their organization. These conditions were not just about regulating fights, but included provision for sums of money to be deposited as security and for insurance to cover any medical expenses or hospital admissions. In 1997, when John McCain took over as chair of the Senate Commerce Committee — whose tasks included monitoring the TV cable companies — the major operators stopped airing UFC events to avoid a conflict with the cable operators' lobby in Washington, and the organizers of these events faced financial collapse.

Similar campaigns were waged against NHB events in various countries outside North America, including Puerto Rico and the UK, which had been fixed upon as possible havens for UFCs. In the Netherlands, national and local authorities deliberated on ways of prohibiting the organization of other variants of NHB events. When the refusal of one municipal authority to grant a license for a cage fight was upheld by the highest court of law, new legislation was deemed unnecessary and the authorities decided merely to issue guidelines to all municipal authorities on ways to prevent NHB events being held locally. Meanwhile, the Dutch State Secretary for Sport decided to take action to outlaw NHB events in the framework of the Council of Europe. This led to Recommendation no. R (99) 11, in which the Council of Europe recommends that the governments of the Member States 'undertake all necessary measures to prohibit and prevent free fighting contests such as cage fighting.'

These measures limited the organizers' scope for filling in the details of NHB events as they saw fit and for basing the events on the viewer's perspective. What remained were four partly overlapping scenarios:

1) Abolition and Demise

Under pressure from the 'figuration of disapproval,' some NHB variants — including extreme fighting, World Combat, and cage fighting — have disappeared. Since various countries and US states passed new legislation to ban NHB contests that had already been scheduled, the organizers and promoters of these events (especially in the United States) spent millions of dollars on law suits. Meanwhile, their profits were falling. NHB events in North America were forced out of the mega-arenas into ever-smaller venues in ever more out-of-the-way states: Louisiana, Iowa, and Alabama. Their access to the pay-per-view-market was blocked because the most important operators would no longer air the events.

2) Underground

One popular survival strategy is organizing NHB events underground or semi-legally. Out of sight of the main media and the politicians, smaller promoters and organizers staged NHB contests on a smaller scale: from California to northern Idaho and from Iowa to Texas.²¹ The organizer of cage fights in the Netherlands relocated to places where he could record the events without being so conspicu-

ous to the national authorities, such as the island of Aruba (which is part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands) and St Petersburg in Russia. In addition, NHB fights are sometimes incorporated — out of sight of the authorities — into events that are billed as kickboxing or mixed fights and licensed as such.

3) *Re-sportization*

A third scenario involves regulating the NHB contests more strictly to have them accepted again as sports, to obtain licenses to organize fights, and to regain access to the pay-per-view market. This is the route pursued by the UFC organizers in the United States and Rings Free Fight in the Netherlands. The UFC organizers banned a number of kicking and striking techniques (including head butts, elbow strikes to the neck, and kicking an opponent who is down) and a few other offensive practices (hair-pulling and spitting); they also introduced weight classification, made gloves compulsory, and agreed to disqualify (rather than fining) fighters who break the rules (Howes, 1998). The Dutch Rings Free Fight has gone further still in its adjustment of the rules to the norms of sport, in an effort to gain acceptance by the most authoritative organization in the world of Dutch sport, the NOC*NSF (Netherlands Olympic Committee * Netherlands Sports Federation). As part of this re-sportization, the UFC launched minor leagues located between the fight clubs and the major leagues, while Rings Free Fight started a youth training program in free fighting.

4) *Spectacularization*

A fourth scenario involves a shift of attention away from fighting skills to the show and spectacle surrounding the events. To sell the fights, more and more organizers and promoters of NHB events are focusing on the setting for the event and on the 'stories' behind the fighters. The UFC organizers seem to have taken the World Wrestling Federation as their example: the UFC 40 DVD carries the blurb: 'Both fighters come in to WWF style entrances and it looks like Zuffa [see below] has realized what sells to the American public — hype, fireworks, and glitter.' In the Netherlands too, martial arts galas no longer focus exclusively on the fights. They include light and laser shows, musical stunts, and acrobatics.

The re-launch of Ultimate Fighting Championships in 2001 displayed a combination of these last two scenarios. After a takeover, the rights of the New York firm Semaphore Entertainment Group now belong to the Las Vegas company, Zuffa LLC, which is owned by the casino operators Lorenzo and Frank Feritta. One of the Feritta brothers was a vice-chairman of the Nevada State Athletic Commission, which he left in 2001 shortly before purchasing the UFC. The goal of the Feritta brothers was to bring UFCs within the mainstream of sports events. To accomplish this, they established 'strong, committed relationships with state athletic commissions and other martial arts venues, to elevate MMA [mixed martial arts] to major league status among all sports, build UFC fighters into international stars and to provide the highest quality live event and television production available to entertain consumers worldwide'. In pursuing these goals, Zuffa adopted the dual strategy of re-sportization and emphasizing show and

entertainment: 'The evolution of the sport, fighter safety, the necessity to meet pay-per-view scheduling demands and the efforts to involve state athletic commissions would call for a number of rules changes.'²²

By designing a set of rules in accordance with the expectations of the Nevada State Athletic Commission, Zuffa rapidly succeeded in having its events approved again in Nevada and regaining access to pay-per-view distribution channels. In the first quarter of 2002, UFC 35 had the fourth highest audience ratings of all pay-per-view programs, preceded by three shows of the World Wrestling Federation's *Wrestlemania*. Other State Athletic Commissions followed Nevada's example dropping the ban on Mixed Martial Arts, as it is now called, and the viewership has apparently grown even faster since the UFC in 2005 launched a reality television series, *The Ultimate Fighter*, on Spike TV. At the moment, UFC events are available on television channels like Spike TV and on the pay-per-view market; the international distribution is assured by companies like British Sky Broadcasting in Britain, Entertainment in Scandinavia, Main Event in Australia, WOWOW Inc. in Japan, and Globosat in Brazil.

As long as the TV and pay-per-view markets remain within the domain of political means of pressure, the pressure to stabilize and improve the re-sportization of NHB events will persist. If the pay-per-view market starts to develop more independently of political pressure and social norms, the dynamics of commercialism will regain the upper hand and the world of fighting events may witness new forms of de-sportization.

Conclusions

The dynamics of fighting contests, and in particular the spread of originally Asian martial arts, indicates that sportization as a concept is too undifferentiated to be capable of fully explaining the development of sports and sport-like contests. Besides sportization we also find processes of *para-sportization*, which may lead to a specific rivalry between recognized sports and only partly sportized contests outside the world of the established sports. Where non-sportized or only partly sportized events are commercially attractive, forms of *de-sportization* may occur. Developments of this kind, and the way in which they relate to the dominant trend of sportization, merit more empirical and theoretical attention in the sociology of sport.

We can expect to see de-sportization not just in fighting contests but also in other sports that are witnessing a shift in the balance of power away from organizations of practitioners (associative structures) to commercial and media companies. Exactly where the balance is struck between sportization and de-sportization depends on the degree to which the regulatory organizations take their cue from the perspectives of practitioners, spectators and viewers, and the specific interests that are at stake. In that connection more account needs to be taken of new media and new markets for images, since these play a key role in determining trends in spectator sports and entertainment. Pay-per-view television, the video and DVD market, as well as video streaming and downloading from the Internet make it possible to transgress against social codes and to com-

mercialize non-sanctioned or even illegal events. This dilutes the significance of local and national control mechanisms.

For an adequate understanding of the processes discussed, more sustained attention is also required for the larger context in which these take place. Our analysis of fighting contests does not imply that de-sportization is connected to the same type of macro-dynamics as the process of sportization in Elias and Dunning's theory. The case of de-sportization we have presented is obviously not linked to a simple reversal of the civilizing process or to a sudden demise of state power. Whatever the significance of earlier examples of de-sportization might be, the case of NHB fighting is best understood as a relatively new trend, which is connected to rapid innovations in the poorly regulated global media industry, to processes of commercialization encouraging sports organizations to adjust their sports to entertain a mass audience, and to the fantasies and thrills of specific groups of viewers. These developments have created dynamics of a different kind from the dynamics of sportization, dynamics that require further research and theorizing in order to assess the full implications for the world of sports.

The example of the NHB contests suggests that other new enclaves may arise that permit displays of behavior and feelings that have been banished from everyday life and social conventions. NHB events provided scope for the collective expression of male heroism and use of violence. While these are also expressed in movies, wrestling shows and computer games, they acquire an added dimension through the assumed realism of the NHB fights. Here, as in other areas of life, where the dynamics of pleasurable fantasies is concerned, nothing seems more exciting than what is presented as the ultimate reality.

Notes

1. Text on the cover of the video of the Ultimate Fighting Championship III.
2. 'Walter Scott's Personality Parade', *Parade Magazine*, 10 December 1995, p. 2, quoted in Wenner (1998: 252).
3. Gerard Gordeau, quoted in *De Posthoorn*, 21 February 1995.
4. Interview with Freek Hamaker, Amsterdam, 5 June 1996.
5. Thom Harinck, quoted in *De Volkskrant*, 7 June 1995.
6. Fightnews.com, *Ultimate Fighting Championships History: From Spectacle to Sport*, 2001 [<http://www.ufcfightnews.com/ufc/history.html>].
7. A more detailed presentation of the questionnaire and its main results is given in van Bottenburg and Heilbron (1996).
8. For the relevance of the distinction between economic and cultural capital for the stratification of sports and the sporting public, see Bourdieu (1978, 1988), Clément et al. (1994) and Pociello (1995).
9. For the dynamics of established sports that are challenged by new sports and games, Elias and Scotson's (1965) model of established-outsider relations is a significant complement to the analysis of sportization as presented in Elias and Dunning (1986).
10. *Zendokan*, vol. 4, no. 1, January 1985.
11. *Zendokan*, vol. 4, no. 1, January 1985.
12. This figurational model, which is composed of an associative structure and a market-like or commercial structure, was previously developed by Ruurd Kunnen (2002). He applied it to explain the development of different styles in chess.
13. The same constellation existed, albeit on a smaller scale, in the Netherlands. The first (and to date only) cage fight in the Netherlands was organized by Nikko Toshogu Press, a video pro-

- duction company. The profits were expected not so much from ticket sales as from the sales of the images to Peters Entertainment Group and other international distribution firms.
14. Psychologists have revealed a wide variety of motives and mechanisms involved in the appeal of violent entertainment. But as Jeffrey Goldstein concluded, they have generally been unable to connect these findings to the social conditions under which they occur: 'we know little about the characteristics of the audiences for different forms of violent entertainment' (Goldstein, 1997: 224).
 15. One of the best kept secrets of the world of professional fighting is precisely which fights are not, or not entirely, real. The higher the risk of the fight, the more professional fighters will have an interest in making deals with their opponents about not using certain techniques, about the outcome of the fight or even about its precise course. Since it is also in the long-term interest of the organizers to avoid 'accidents' which would cause bad publicity, there are good reasons to assume that the actual level of violence is lower and more constrained than the publicity suggests. In Japan, for example, which is the one of the most lucrative markets for free fights, fixed fights are very common.
 16. One failed to show up, one could not be traced, and one was in prison.
 17. Interview with Freek Hamaker, a contestant in the UFC 2 on 5 June 1996.
 18. The same applies to boxing. According to McCunney and Russo (1984), there are fewer deaths per thousand practitioners in boxing than in horse racing, mountaineering, or air sports like sky-diving. Even so, the legitimacy of allowing boxing is the object of fierce controversy in many countries, and the debate flares up whenever a professional boxer lapses into a coma somewhere in the world. This debate is fuelled by a sensitivity to physical violence, especially where this violence is deliberately encouraged, as in full-contact sports, and where it is heavily emphasized in the associated marketing. The latter applies very strongly to NHB events. But even in NHB events, aside from a few poorly organized and semi-underground fights in Russia and the United States, no deaths have been recorded (Howes, 1998). Furthermore, whether bare-knuckle fighting is actually more dangerous than fighting with boxing gloves is highly debatable (Sheard, 1992; Sugden, 1996).
 19. *New York Times*, 17 January 1997.
 20. In spite of the sportization of boxing, this sport is the object of an almost permanent civilization offensive, as Stokvis has pointed out (1989). See also Donnelly (1989) and Smith (1988).
 21. David Plotz and Hillel Halkin, Fight Clubbed, [http://bjj.org/editorials/19991117-fightclubbed.].
 22. Fightnews.com, *Ultimate Fighting Championships History: From Spectacle to Sport*, 2001 [http://www.ufc-fightnews.com/ufc/history.html].

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