

Implications of Long Gone NCAA Boxing for Competition in Sport in American Higher Education Today

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It has been over 28 years since the NCAA sanctioned intercollegiate boxing. While the sport continues today at two score or so colleges and universities on a club basis, it is doubtful that it will ever return at the level of recognition and competition realized during the period from 1932 to 1960 when the NCAA sponsored national tournaments. College boxing on a “big time” basis represented a brief and colorful chapter in the history of intercollegiate athletics and it also played an important part in the lives of some persons who gained substantial recognition in American society. The manner in which it was conducted has important implications for the humanization of intercollegiate competition today. The practices and goals of coaches and athletic administrators, in their efforts to counteract negative aspects of a physically violent endeavor, have significance when attitudes, animosities, and injuries are raising questions concerning the value of contact sports in American higher education today.

The intent of this paper was to present some of the color and uniqueness that the sport represented and what it meant in the lives of some persons who have made significant contributions as leaders in politics, government, business, law, medicine, education, and the military. Most importantly, however, was a desire to explain how the spirit of the sport and efforts to have competitors relate to each other as human beings might be relevant for placing current contact sports in a perspective that allows for competition of the highest quality but also facilitates humane and fair play-spirited interaction among competitors.

College boxing was unusual and those involved in the sport constitute a “fraternity,” many members of which are still in contact with each other. This conclusion is based upon three years of research, including: (1) contacts with 70 of the 155 persons who won NCAA championships, 15 of the men who coached those champions, and other knowledgeable persons; and, (2) an examination of newspaper accounts, boxing guides, tournament programs, and other written records.

Because “big time” boxing was constantly under attack from faculty members and others who opposed its physical violence, coaches, officials, and athletes banded together for self-protection and survival. More importantly, coaches and officials sought continuously to make the sport safer and they encouraged a British rugby type fraternization between opponents before and after matches. Friendships were established that remain to this day. Another factor resulting in a common bond among boxers was the sharing of the traumatic experience of being alone in the ring and having only one’s own physical and mental resources to rely upon. This experience is regarded as unique and of life-long significance by many former college boxers who have made important contributions to society in various fields.

Boxing, like many other sports, contributed to the development of people, but, as conducted in colleges from 1932 to 1960, it also has implications that should be recognized for contact sports today.