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## ***MDs and KOs: The Medical Community's Response to Boxing***

This paper examines the response of the medical community to the sport of boxing over the last century. Boxing elicits polarized responses from society. Some find the sport an atavistic anomaly, others see grace in its less savage moments. However it is received, boxing continues to fascinate the legal, literary, and medical communities, among others.

Because it has so often been illegal, boxing presents many challenges to those who would study its history, challenges that the likes of Michael Isenberg and Elliot Gorn have met well. Through their work we see that boxing proponents sought to make the fistic spectacle more acceptable to mainstream society by eliminating its more brutal aspects. To this end, gouging, biting and wrestling were gradually removed. The standardization and modernization of rules, in concert with the rise of modern sporting forms, was accompanied by the institution of timed rounds and the use of padded gloves. From the outset, though, gloves were only meant to protect the hands, not heads.

As boxing left its roots in society's underbelly and gained at least tacit acceptance from the 'better elements,' the neurological consequences of the newer fight rules were

slowly becoming evident. As early as 1928, an article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* noted that some boxers with long careers were “punch drunk”; that is, they showed signs of neurological degeneration. Since then, numerous studies have demonstrated a correlation between boxing and chronic traumatic encephalopathy, the structural degeneration of the brain arising from subconcussive blows to the head. The purpose of this paper is to explore the medical community’s various responses to the problem. These have ranged from calling for a reform of rules and advocating tighter medical regulation or federal control, to urging a total ban on the sport.

The major sources for the paper are the proceedings of the medical societies which have addressed this issue, journal articles, and materials from the archives of the American Medical Association. Particular attention is given to the integrity and structural flaws of the neurological studies, the place of medicine within sport, the role of the bureaucratization of boxing, and the sport’s failure to meet the challenges of the medical community and preserve the health of boxers.