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Violence in Sports: A Comparison of Gladiatorial Games in Ancient Rome to the Sports of America

Amanda Stern

Gladiatorial games in Ancient Rome and modern sports have more in common than we would like to believe. Violence has been a key component to the success of each of these activities. Many spectators watched as the Coliseum was filled with blood from brutal gladiatorial matches. Today, hundreds of fans watch as two grown men hit one another in a boxing ring. After examining gladiatorial games and looking at modern sports one may notice similarities between the two. These similarities suggest that modern sports seem to be just as violent as games in Ancient Rome.

The Romans believed that they inherited the practice of gladiatorial games from the Etruscans who used them as part of a funeral ritual (Grant, 7). The first gladiatorial games were offered in Rome in 264 BCE by sons of Junius Brutus Pera in their father's honor (Grant, 8). Gladiatorial combat was originally part of a religious ceremony that was intended to insure that the dead would be accompanied to the next world by armed attendants and that the spirits of the dead would be appeased with this offering of blood (Grant, 8). Although this ritual began as a ceremony to honor important men after their death, it began to lose its religious significance and it became a more popular sport. Aristocrats' funerals celebrated their victories and enhanced their reputations. Emperors presented the games to show the public how much power they had.

Among the gladiators were thousands of prisoners of war. The historian Josephus described how Titus dealt with his captives from the Jewish Rebellion. "The number of those destroyed in contests with wild beasts or with one another or in the flames exceeded 2,500" (Grant, 28). The Romans, however, seemed to believe that this kind of treatment was too light a punishment for their enemies (Grant, 28). At times criminals were condemned to work in the mines, but they believed that being a gladiator

was a less severe sentence. Many people were killed in the mines, and they stood a better chance of survival in the arena (Grant, 29).

Some free men even entered the games in hopes of popularity and patronage by wealthy citizens. Some people chose this lifestyle because gladiators were given three meals a day, decent medical care, and if they were good enough they were given their freedom. They may be free, but they could never be citizens (Grant, 29). These men, although they were free, would never be seen as legitimate members of society by the upper class. Upper class citizens saw men who had been gladiators as worthless creatures. They viewed them as they did actors whom emperors sometimes forced to fight in the arena just because they had disgraced themselves already by appearing onstage (Grant, 29).

Another source for gladiators came in the form of women. However, the emperor Septimius Severus in the early 3rd century made it impossible for women to participate. He thought that the very presence of women in the arena suggested a lack of *virtus* (Grant, 32). For men to lose their *virtus* meant that they were no longer seen as masculine and strong. Having women participate in the arena made it seem as though men no longer had these great attributes. If women could do it then it must not be too difficult.

When gladiators signed on, they swore: "I undertake to be burnt by fire, to be bound in chains, to be beaten, to die by the sword" (Grant, 45). Gladiators would begin the fight and continue until one was near death. If one gladiator had control of another the crowd was given the opportunity to express their feelings as to whether he should be finished off (Grant, 45). If the audience members turned their thumbs toward the ground

this signified that the gladiator's life should be spared. On the other hand, if the audience pointed their thumbs to their chest the gladiator was to kill his opponent. After the gladiator was put to death, an attendant with the mask of Mercury came in the arena with a hot iron to make sure that the victim was really dead. Meanwhile, boys entered the arena and spread clean sand over the victim's blood (Grant, 45).

This may seem extremely brutal, but it often was much worse. At times, two criminals would enter the arena, but only one of them would be armed. Wild beasts would be matched against each other or against humans. In 80 AD when the emperor Titus inaugurated the Colosseum, 5,000 wild beasts were killed in a single day (Grant, 45). Seutonius states that, "during gladiatorial shows the emperor Titus would pit feeble old fighters against decrepit criminals; or stage comic duels between respectable householders, who happened to be physically disabled in some way or the other" (Grant, 104).

Emperor Caligula seemed to use violence as a way to punish those that he was jealous of for some reason or another. "Aesius Proculus, a leading centurion's son, was so good-looking that he was nicknamed 'Giant Cupid'. So Caligula had him dragged from his seat and matched with a retiarius and then a secutor. Proculus won both times, but was paraded through the streets in rags and then executed" (Grant, 104). Emperor Claudius was also known to have a very violent side. It is told that he ordered that fallen fighters, especially retiarii, should have their throats cut so that he could watch their faces as they died (Grant, 104). The imperial gladiator Commodus "got together all the men in the city who had lost their feet as the result of disease or some accident, and then, after fastening about their knees some likenesses of serpents' bodies, and giving them

sponges to throw instead of stones, killed them with blows of a club, pretending they were giants” (Grant, 104-5).

Although the gladiatorial games were extremely violent, one modern writer believed that the Romans were not necessarily involved in these games only because they enjoyed killing for fun. Alison Futrell proposes in her book Blood in the Arena, “the amphitheater was a politicized temple that housed the mythic reenactment of the cult of the Roman statehood. The death of a gladiator served as a foundation sacrifice that answered the crisis of empire, validating the Roman struggle for power and offering a model for understanding the basis of Roman power” (Futrell, 170). She believes that the gladiators, who were not wonderful members of society, were given to the gods as sacrifices.

This suggests that gladiatorial events were not violent because they were meant as sacrifices to the gods. It seems to me that sacrifices to the gods could have been made with animals instead of humans. Futrell suggests that this sort of sacrifice was okay because it was meant for the gods, that it was somehow better than murder in any other manner. Killing people in any manner is a violent action even if it is for the gods.

“To explain the widespread popularity of violent sports, anthropologists speculate about innate aggression and violence in human nature, and sociologists theorize about how societies accommodate and we use symbolic and real violence. Violence and blood sports seem to be a universal legacy from the long prehistory of man as a hunter and killer that all societies retain in sublimated or ritualized form. Some suggest that all social order is ultimately based on violence. To reinforce the social order violence must be performed or proclaimed in public, and public violence tends to become ritualized

into games, sports, and even spectacles of death. Rome's brutal inclinations in spectacles give support to theories of violence, vengeance, or sacrifice" (Kyle, 7).

"Sports can also be said to be a form of non-scripted, largely non-verbal theatre, and emotional arousal can be enhanced by spectacular presentation, the emotional 'contagion' which derives from being part of a large, expectant crowd, and from the 'performances' which spectators and not just athletes put on" (Dunning, 3).

The sports of Ancient Rome are commonly viewed as a regression into barbarism. The brutality of the gladiatorial combats, the mock battles, the massacres and the bloodlust of the crowds are well established. Sociologically, these sports are indicative of an attitude to life, death, and the sufferings of others which was very different from that which dominates in the contemporary West (Dunning, 47). It was probably bound up with the centrality of slavery in the economy and society of Ancient Rome.

Dunning is suggesting that gladiatorial combat works in Rome because the Romans held a different view when it came to life, death, and the sufferings of others. Romans knew that their life span was not extremely long so death was not something they feared as we seem to today. Death was all around them. Many of their children died at an early age or at birth, death was a part of their lives. Also, Romans did not seem to care too much about their fellow man, especially those who were in a lower class than they were. Thus, seeing two of them fighting to the death did not seem to bother them because they did not see many of them, slaves and criminals, as people.

According to Peter Marsh nearly all animals are aggressive in some manner and sport is a way for humans to get out that aggression. Marsh suggests:

"Virtually all species of animal are aggressive... for reasons which appear... very

sound. Firstly, aggression allows for the establishment and maintenance of relatively stable patterns of dominance and submission. Secondly, the process is involved in territorial defense, resulting in optimum dispersal of animals in relation to the resources available in their environment. Some species have more rigidly structured dominance hierarchies than others and there is also great variation in the extent to which animals are territorial. But aggression is common to all and it is one of the things which keeps them in the survival game. At the same time, however, it presents a problem because of its destructive potential. Rivals need to be subdued and trespassers repelled. But if such activities regularly resulted in death and serious wounding a species would soon find itself on the verge of extinction. Not only would the population decline as a result of the increased fatality rate but the basic dominance networks would rapidly fall apart. You can't very well dominate another male if you have killed him. And if, in the process, you have also been seriously wounded then an easy task is presented for ambitious rivals. The solution here is ritualization. By turning the whole conflict business into aggressive ritual, fights became stylized games and displays- things which bear an uncanny resemblance to the events... at the football ground". (Marsh, 33-34)

He is suggesting that if it were left up to the species itself the animals would not continue to kill one another because the species would be close to extinction.

Ritualization helps by turning the more violent games into an activity where competitors are not hurt as often as they were before. This can be seen in the game of football. Since the game has been ritualized, people know what is coming next, people are less likely to get hurt. What would these games be like if they had not been ritualized? Since two teams of very large men are knocking one another down it would seem that members of these teams would be getting dangerously hurt.

According to the Encyclopedia of World Sports, "All sports are inherently competitive and hence conducive to aggression and violence, however, in some, such as boxing, rugby, soccer and American football, violence and intimidation in the form of "play fight" or "mock Battle" between two individuals or groups are central ingredients. Such sports involve the socially acceptable, ritualized expression of violence, but just as real battles that take place in war can involve a ritual component, so these mock battles

that take place on a sports field can involve elements of, or be transformed into, non-ritual violence. This may occur when, perhaps as a result of social pressures or the financial and prestige rewards involved, people participate too seriously.”

Take for example, some modern day violent sport stories. Football coaches seem to like it when their defense plays rough football. An Atlanta football coach watched as his special team players slam into each other and remarks “I love it when they knock each other out”. Vicious tackles produce roars of appreciation from the crowd and praise from the commentator. Cincinnati Bengals defensive star Tim Krumie broke his leg in the first quarter in the super bowl and the accident was replayed in slow motion on the television of 90 million people. One of the pitchers for the Cincinnati Reds beamed a Dodger player and then stated, “I threw it at him. He’ll be lucky if I don’t take his head off the next time I’m pitching”. Some pro sports can be extremely violent. Defensive end Sean Jones compares being a pro football player to being a gladiator in a Roman coliseum. Have pro sports been dragged down to barbaric customs of the past? Some Minnesota Vikings say, “It’s not a good business if you care whether blood is bubbling from a guys mouth.” Are modern sports promoting and glorifying violence? (Aeseng, 58-62)

Some people think that players try to hurt each other on purpose as in the case of the Philadelphia Eagles who joked about “Body bags” when they injured Washington quarterbacks Jeff Rutledge and Stan Humphries in a 1990 game (Aeseng, 35).

The acceptance of body contact and borderline violence seems to be based on the idea that sports is an area of life in which it is permissible to suspend usual moral standards. Studies show that athletes commonly distinguish between game morality and

the morality of everyday life. A college basketball player says, "In sports you can do what you want. In life it is more restricted". A football player says "The football field is the wrong place to think about ethics" (Miedzian, 57).

A child who watches acts of violence committed by thieves, murderers, or sadists in films or on TV knows that society disapproves of these acts. The child who watches sports knows that athletes' acts of violence are approved of. It makes sense that sports violence would serve as an important role model for children who tend to be well adjusted socially, while illegal violence on the screen would tend to have a greater influence on the behavior of children who are more psychologically damaged and/or feel more alienated from society (Miedzian, 61). Sports plays a major role in reinforcing the concern with success, winning, and dominance. On the sports field these goals alone justify illegal and violent acts (Miedzian, 62). Children see these images on the field and believe it is okay for them to act in this fashion because their favorite athlete is acting in a violent manner. Competitors in violent sports may not keep the violence on the field. One may recall many stories of the major athlete who comes home only to beat his wife. I do not think this is the kind of example that should be set for the youngsters in our country.

Sports Illustrated took an "unscientific poll of fans" and reported in its August 8, 1988 issue that "everyone who had ever been a spectator at a sporting event of any kind had, at one time or another, experienced the bellowing of obscenities, racial or religious epithets ... abusive sexual remarks to women in the vicinity, fistfights between strangers and fistfights between friends" (Miedzian, 81).

When "60 Minutes" did a program on youth football they found that the emphasis

was very much on winning - to the point that it was no longer fun. The emphasis on winning deprives youth of the pleasure of playing the game. The findings of academic researchers confirm "the obsession with winning is far from infrequent in youth sports". Eventually, integrity takes a backseat to the pragmatic concern of winning games. Players learn that integrity is a rhetorical strategy one should raise only in certain times and places. The adults involved with Little League tend to be oriented toward winning, losing, and competition (Miedzian, 86)

Ironically, instead of focusing on enjoying sports, reaping physical benefits, and instilling a lifelong involvement in athletics, too many of our sports programs are geared exclusively toward winning (and coincidentally destroying bodies and missing out on the fun). Many coaches think it is correct to use techniques of pushing, yelling, dehumanizing the opposing team, etc. Many coaches also teach players to sacrifice their bodies unnecessarily, hide all feelings of fear and vulnerability (however warranted they may be), to sacrifice the bodies of others, and use sexual slurs often to provoke boys to prove their manhood. (Miedzian, 91)

This could be seen in the arena in Ancient Rome when for the longest time women were not allowed to be spectators and they were banned from actually competing. This re-enforced the idea that women were below them. Also seen in Ancient Rome was the idea that men should not fear the fight. They knew that they were going to die and they should face it like men; they should be strong.

A major justification for our nation's enormous investment in competitive sports is that 'sports build character, teach team effort, and encourage sportsmanship and fair play' (Miedzian, 99). Studies indicate that youth involved in organized sports show less

sportsmanship than those who are not involved. One study found that as the children grew older they moved away from placing high value on fairness and fun in participation and began to emphasize skill and victory as the major goals of sport. In several other studies it was found that youth who participated in organized sports valued victory more than non-participants, who placed more emphasis on fairness (Miedzian, 99). Instead of learning fair play and teamwork, too many of our children are learning winning is everything. It is time to regulate children's sports so that youth will really learn the pro-social attitudes and values that they are supposed to learn from sports, instead of the obsessive competitiveness, emotional callousness, and disdain for moral scruples that are so often precursors to violence. (Miedzian, 100)

So, are we any better than Ancient Romans? I do not think so. Our sports may not include murdering one another or killing animals by the hundreds, but they do include violence. Is this the type of example we should be setting for our children or the world for that matter? No. It is easy to sit back and think that we are so much better than any culture that ever was or will be, but that simply is not the case. We are naturally violent people. We just have control. The Romans did not run out in the streets murdering everyone they saw, they had control too. They knew there was a proper place and time to express these types of feelings. We do the same thing. We may not, in our every day life, punch someone in the face for a technical knock out, but when we watch boxing we can pretend to be those people and release our violent thoughts and feelings. However nice it may seem to rid the world of violence it is an impossible feat. Violence is in our world and in our lives to stay.