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## **'The Man in the Middle': Mixed Martial Arts Referees and the Production and Management of Socially Desirable Risk**

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# 'The Man in the Middle': Mixed Martial Arts Referees and the Production and Management of Socially Desirable Risk

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## Abstract

Mixed martial arts (MMA) competition involves one-on-one, full-contact fighting, most often held within the spatial confines of a steel cage and in front of a paying audience. The spectacular entertainment value of this sport, as well as its intrinsic psychological appeal to competitors, is steeped in risk. While the perspectives of athletes and fans on this issue are reasonably well-researched, little is known about a crucial third party in the production and maintenance of risk in competitive fights: that of the referee. In this paper, I attempt to bridge this gap by arguing that referees' work is centrally important in the construction of socially desirable forms of risk. Specifically, their role involves protecting fighters' bodies from the damaging excesses of the action which otherwise constitutes the sport's *raison d'être* in the eyes of competing athletes and paying fans; but at the same time, this action is something which referees themselves both facilitate and promote. As such, this work sees referees navigate a core tension residing at the heart of MMA, as with other high-risk sports: how and when to define dangerous action as either desirable or undesirable; as exciting or excessive. The paper concludes by highlighting some wider contextual factors shaping referees' work, which may bear consideration in future studies of the production of risk in sport.

**Keywords:** Combat Sport, Mixed Martial Arts, Officials, Referees, Risk

Sports officials perform vital roles in enabling sports practice to take place. In almost all competitive athletic encounters, referees, judges, umpires, and their various assistants facilitate play, adjudicate outcomes, enforce rules and, at times, protect athletes' welfare (Plessner and MacMahon, 2013; Webb, 2020). In this paper, I draw on interview and observation data to discuss the work of referees in the combat sport of mixed martial arts (MMA). Specifically, I attend to the ways in which their role sits at the intersection of two competing priorities, concerning the facilitation of action within a dangerous sport on the one hand, whilst minimising the damaging impacts of that action on the other. I posit that while navigating this problem, referees operate at the juncture between tangible, objective hazards and socially constructed, subjectively understood risks, inasmuch as their perceptions of which hazards are permissible and which are not serve a key role in constructing the excitement constitutive of the sport's core action and appeal. Thus, as the idiomatic 'man in the middle'<sup>1</sup>, MMA referees' role places them not only in the literal middle of the cage, but also at the conceptual centre of key tensions that define the essence of this sport.

In the following sections, I outline a theoretical conception of risk as a social construction arising from the interplay between objective conditions – things that happen – and subjective definitions – the meanings people give to those things. I discuss how these two interrelated phenomena bear particular

significance to sport-related risk, then apply this to a brief discussion of sociological research literature on MMA.

## Theorising Sporting Risks: Perceptions, Realities and Desires

Since there are many possible avenues for theorising risk, it is useful to begin analyses of this issue by sketching out exactly how risk is conceptually defined in the study at hand (Atkinson, 2019). Given this project's focus on the efforts of people who are charged with managing risk, I begin with a differentiation between *dangerous things* – or 'hazards' – and *people's recognition of those things as dangerous* – the perceptual, definitional and evaluative work which constitutes them as 'risks' in the minds of affected parties (Leopkey and Parent, 2009; Piekarz, Jenkins and Mills, 2015). This perspective foregrounds the importance of human perception and cognition in translating hazards into risks, rendering them knowable and thus actionable by the human agents who must confront or manage them. For the purposes of the present paper then, I define risk as the *human understanding of the capacity of identified hazards to cause particular types of harm* (see Piekarz et al., 2015). This perceptually-focused definition has several crucial implications for theorising risk and risk-related behaviour in sport.

Firstly, the impact of the social world in shaping humans' ability to perceive, recognise and rationalise reality means that subjective interpretations of objective hazards may depend upon culturally and situationally specific assumptions, biases, and preferences (Paek and Hove, 2017). Various sociological factors impinge upon our ability to formulate understandings of risks, and thus adopt stances or undertake actions towards them in meaningful ways. One social group may experience and act towards a particular hazard in a completely different way to another group, regardless of the objective dangers it poses to either of them. While individual people rationalise risk to themselves or others in sociologically differentiated ways, third parties (such as sports governing bodies, medical practitioners, or media commentators, etc.) may also play a key role in constructing and normalising different schema for understanding risk<sup>2</sup> (Atkinson, 2019). In any such situation, whoever assumes the ability to define hazards as 'risky' potentially wields power over how others' relationship to that risk and exposure to its dangers are managed (Frey, 1991). In these cases, critical attention should turn to examining the criteria that such people use to make these decisions; how well placed they are to recognise hazards and classify them as risks; and on whose behalf such actors' construction of hazards-as-risks eventually works.

Secondly, while emphasis may rightly be placed on the subjective, cognitive, socially constructed and culturally relative ways in which people understand risk, it is vital to remember that the objective reality of hazards persists independently of humans' ability to conceive of them (Piekarz et al., 2015). In this way, ignorance of dangerous phenomena, blasé attitudes towards hazardous behaviours, or deceptive constructions of hazards as not-really-risky potentially places people in danger by preventing them from adequately recognising risk. In sports contexts in particular, physical dangers to athletes' bodies constitute a major problem when they are normalised or trivialised within particular 'risk cultures' (Atkinson, 2019) or dismissed as 'just part of the game' (Matthews and Channon, 2017). Moreover, in line with Atkinson's (2019) observation that risk is an inherently relational process, steps taken to minimise risks in one domain – such as the risk to a sport's commercial appeal through 'boring' passages of play – may unintentionally exacerbate hazards elsewhere – such as increasing the likelihood of athletes sustaining injuries through more frequent exposure to intense action (Kalman-Lamb, 2018). Accordingly, analyses of risk should remain sensitive to the tangible consequences of risk perception and management processes, asking how and to what

extent hazardous outcomes may result from the ways in which risk is understood and engaged with – or not – by various actors.

Thirdly, while much of the work associated with risk assessment and management involves an orientation of aversion to risk, and concurrent efforts to minimise the impact of hazards, risk-taking is not always or uniformly constructed as undesirable behaviour (Piekarz, Jenkins and Mills, 2015). The common maxim of ‘no risk, no reward’ is illustrative of how most risk management processes involve balancing undesirable hazards against desirable outcomes that may result from exposure to them (Collins and Collins, 2013). This is true of all competitive sports (Frey, 1991), such that the chance for victory requires entertaining the possibility of defeat, or of injury sustained during the course play. However, while injury is often constructed as a wholly undesirable outcome (unlike defeat, which is necessary to give victory meaning), in certain sports the risk of injury actually takes on an autotelic quality itself (Lyng, 2019). That is, activities such as skydiving, mountaineering, and even MMA (see Channon, 2020) are rendered meaningful with respect to the ways in which they test participants’ capacity to handle immensely dangerous hazards. Without the threat posed by these hazards, such activities fail to provide the rewarding experience of being-at-risk, and so lose their special meaning to participants (Lyng, 2019). Thus, it is pertinent to question how the construction of a desirable risk experience is characterised by decisions about which hazards are appropriate and permissible, and which are not.

### **Risk in MMA: Constructing Meaningful Hazards**

These observations and critical questions have particular relevance for the sport of MMA. From its modern inception in the early 1990s, proponents of MMA have framed the sport as a solution to dissatisfaction among martial arts aficionados with the overly-regulated and restrictive action of many other combat sports – such as boxing, judo, or wrestling (Downey, 2014; Sánchez García and Malcolm, 2010). By combining different fighting techniques and broadening the rules of competition, MMA involves stripping away the contrivance of order represented by much of institutionalised sport, purportedly bringing competitors and spectators closer to the chaos of ‘real’ physical violence than any alternative can. Unsurprisingly, the sport’s open-endedness and full-contact format results in relatively high injury rates, and near-constant experiences of pain for its practitioners (Green, 2011; Spencer, 2012). While frequent incidences of brain injury are of particular contemporary concern (Bernick et al., 2020), fighters routinely run the risk of fractures or broken bones; muscle, tendon, and ligament injuries; damage to their other organs; and other problems besides (see Lystad, Gregory and Wilson, 2014; Ross et al., 2021).

Courting the danger represented by much of these outcomes is an integral element of the sport. Importantly for its commercial success, fans and commentators of MMA place value on fights which showcase not only athletes’ skills, but also their physical and mental toughness. Principally, this translates into bouts where evenly matched and technically proficient fighters visibly damage each other, but continue fighting regardless (Brett, 2017). When one fighter absorbs and survives the damage of another’s attacks, particularly before making a comeback, fights are judged to hold high entertainment value due to their drama and unpredictability. This has been identified as a key factor in MMA spectators’ enjoyment of the sport (e.g., Cheever, 2009; Zembura and Žyško, 2015). Moreover, while some fans may prefer fights to end decisively in dramatic knockouts (Downey, 2014), matches that ‘go the distance’ and are seen to showcase athletes’ character – through their ability to survive gruelling, drawn-out battles – are often held up as ‘instant classics’ or ‘epics’ (Brett, 2017). As

well as being entertaining, such bouts also signify the moral fortitude of the athlete(s) and so confirm a positive moral identity for the sport as a whole (see Borer and Schafer, 2011).

While spectator and media interest in MMA clearly embraces the physical dangers associated with full-contact, mixed-discipline fighting, the risks these represent also feature strongly in fighters' own attachment to the sport. An ability to successfully overcome risks, including those encountered while training and competing (Spencer, 2011), but also those associated with the practice of weight cutting (Pettersson, Pipping Ekström and Berg, 2013), is considered central to MMA fighters' construction and confirmation of identities as athletes (a process common to other sports; see Atkinson, 2019). Moreover, the intensity of fights, and in particular the physical pain associated with training and competing, constitute significant personal and social meaning for MMA practitioners (Green, 2011; Spencer, 2011; Sugden, 2021). Without the ever-present hazard of being thrown to the ground, placed in a painful joint lock or knocked unconscious, fighters would not be able to access what is variously described as the transcendental, therapeutic, self-actualising or even life-affirming experience that the sport is seen to provide (Channon, 2020; Green, 2021; Sugden, 2021). Having the opportunity to take these risks, and use them to engage in deep, reflexive introspection, is therefore a primary motivating factor for engaging with the sport at all.

With these points in mind, MMA can be understood as a space wherein physical danger is constructed as a psychologically and commercially valuable object with which athletes repeatedly interact. The staging and organisation of competitions facilitates this interaction in both tangible and symbolic ways (Stenius, 2011). For instance, fights take place inside steel cages, which serve the dual purpose of reducing breaks in the action (as fighters cannot slip off wrestling mats or fall through boxing ring ropes), whilst simultaneously being rich in semiotic meaning as structures otherwise associated with the control of dangerous entities such as violent criminals or wild animals. The promotional culture of the sport – whereby athletes' careers depend upon promoters booking them for fights – incentivises fighting styles that appeal to paying spectators, often requiring an emphasis on hard-hitting strikes that produce exciting knockouts, or refusing to quit when losing badly (Downey, 2014). Moreover, rule changes to the sport as it developed through a process of 'sportisation' (Sánchez García and Malcolm, 2010) facilitated increasingly dynamic and fast-paced action, through features such as time-limited rounds, scoring criteria that rewarded attacking, and the referee's ability to restart fights once a stalemate develops (the 'stand-up' mechanism, discussed below).

Such features as these illustrate the ways in which MMA operates as a context for the deliberate construction of socially desirable risk, primarily articulated via objective hazards imposed upon its fighters' bodies. Yet as with any sport, the dangerous nature of its action necessitates the simultaneous construction of limits regarding how much risk is considered permissible and enjoyable by those within it. As Brett (2017: 20) astutely demonstrates in his analysis of MMA journalism, clear aesthetic boundaries are constructed around this issue by community insiders, who sharply contrast "palatable practices" with "excessive violence". Whereas the former is a necessary constituent of legitimate MMA, the latter is constructed as repugnant and profane. As noted above, exactly who makes such decisions, against which criteria they make them, and in whose interests those decisions work, are key questions for any critical analysis of how risk is produced and managed in sport. For the remainder of this paper then, I focus attention on the role played by referees in these processes. As I will illustrate below, referees are charged with the practical work of both facilitating *and* limiting the exposure of fighters to the physical hazards comprising this sport, making them central players in the management and maintenance of socially desirable risk.

## Methodology

Data discussed in this paper were initially part of a larger project that I conducted with Christopher Matthews and Mathew Hillier on the work of medical professionals managing risks to athletes' health within a variety of combat sports (Channon et al., 2020; 2021). This study employed an interpretivist epistemological frame and utilised an ethnographic design. Whilst undertaking this research, serendipitous contact was made with several MMA referees, who acted initially as gatekeepers to the field. Over time, it became apparent that referees had their own important stories to tell about risk in the sport, and subsequently they became research participants in their own right.

Ethnography was chosen as the method for this study given its emphases on immersive presence in a field over time; foregrounding the experiences and subjectivities of the people who constitute that field and define its practices; and building richly detailed, contextually specific empirical understandings of the social world (Atkinson, 2012; Næss, 2020). Very few researchers of either sports medics or officials have adopted such a method before, tending to rely on static, one-off interviewing, quantitative forms of observation, or self-report surveys (Channon et al., 2021; Hancock et al., 2021). Meanwhile, research on MMA has consistently employed ethnographic methods, although this work has exclusively focused on researchers' active participation in the sport itself (e.g., Green, 2011; Smith and Atkinson, 2017; Spencer, 2012). This paper represents my attempt to extend this trend, generating an ethnographic understanding of the sport from beyond the perspectives of fighters alone, while also developing an empirically richer study of the work of sports officials more broadly.

To begin, I entered the field via my existing contacts with gym owners, seeking permission to visit competitive events they organised. Once I had attended, observed, and 'hung out' at a few events in my local MMA scene, I met and became familiar with the staff who worked at them. This included referees, who were often curious about my presence backstage and cageside, were interested in the idea of social science research on the sport, and often enthusiastic to help with the study. I kept in regular contact with these referees throughout the course of the project. I did so to source access to further events, ask them to explain (other referees') controversial decisions from high-profile fights, or check in with them after hearing rumours about trouble at shows they'd worked. At the suggestion of one referee, I began training in Brazilian jiu jitsu (BJJ), one of the core disciplines of MMA. I used my early experience in this martial art to better understand some of the technical points they raised with me, but also as a means of building rapport via our now-shared experiences of suffering through BJJ's gruelling routines (Dincovici, 2012; Green, 2021). In addition, I took part in a referees' and judges' training seminar run by another of the interviewees, gaining insight into how MMA officials formalise and pass on their knowledge, and would eventually work as a cageside judge at three MMA shows towards the end of the study. Such experiences and interactions, although not always explicitly geared towards data gathering, helped to further embed me within the social milieu of competitive MMA in the UK.

With the benefit of this immersion in the field and development of strong rapport with participants, I eventually conducted formal interviews with 7 referees, 6 of whom had extensive, international experience refereeing MMA bouts and regularly worked at the highest levels of the sport. 5 of the referees were primarily based in the UK, with one based in the USA and one in Australia. They were all men, aged between 31 and 54, and their experience officiating in MMA ranged between 6 and 15 years at the time of interview, with an average of 10.2 years. In most of their estimations, this accounted for thousands of competitive rounds of experience each. In addition, all of them had had previous careers as MMA fighters before becoming referees; each of them continued to train in either

MMA or BJJ; and had each also worked as judges, commissioners, and/or coaches in the sport. As such it is reasonable to suggest that this sample, although small, represents an extraordinary repository of knowledge about the sport of MMA. Most of the referees I spoke with were interviewed once, although two gave a second, follow-up interview. The interviews lasted between 34 and 74 minutes in length, with an average time of 50 minutes, and were conducted either on-site at competitive events prior to the start of matches or later via video calls. They were guided by an interview schedule that was developed following a review of academic literature on MMA and other research on sports officials' work, as well as the nascent findings from the wider study, including field observations.

In undertaking these observations, I directly shadowed the referee teams at 4 separate competitive shows, sitting cageside during fights and discussing events as they unfolded between matches. Informal field interviews were a common element of these observations, allowing for elaboration on both formal interview discussions and in-situ explanations of events unfolding around us. I was also able to observe referees whilst shadowing medical teams at a further 12 MMA events. During this time spent in the field, I observed each of the referees interviewed, as well as 10 other MMA referees who were not included in the interview sample but who did talk with me informally at most of the shows I visited. These observations took place contemporaneously with the semi-structured interviews, allowing for an iterative dialogue between observation and interview as the study unfolded. Each interview was digitally recorded, while field notes were taken during each observation episode, including notes of informal conversations. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, while field notes were written up within 48 hours of observations taking place.

This combined data set was then subject to thematic analysis, as described by Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016). Drawing on what these authors refer to as the 'big Q' qualitative approach, I adopted a constructivist position emphasising my own active and creative interpretation as analyst, systematically building a series of abstract conceptual descriptions that would, in my view, best account for the phenomena I witnessed. This process involved both inductive and deductive analysis (Braun et al., 2016); that is, while I allowed the data to 'surprise me' with unanticipated insights, I also remained particularly sensitive towards my stated interest in risk and its management throughout.

The practical steps I took to analyse the data began with a comprehensive familiarisation: creating, and then re-reading, transcripts (observation write-ups totalling 71,000 words; interview transcripts 52,000 words). I then set about creating a broad range of primary codes, eventually generating 311 different primary codes across the dataset. These codes were then reviewed and reduced where possible to eliminate repetition, before being organised around both semantic and conceptual similarities into second-order 'clusters' of codes. These variously described elements of referees' practical work; skills and attributes needed to manage these tasks; observations about the wider context of the sport; and so on. I then wrote out short summary statements for each cluster (themselves typically composed of ten or more codes), which together constituted the start of my 'analytic narratives' (Braun et al., 2016) of the work of MMA referees. I then re-coded these statements to create seven abstract, higher-order conceptual themes that best described the underlying principles that could explain these stories. Finally, I wrote out further short statements that explained these themes' meanings, enabling me to verify the integrity of my analytic process by checking these summaries against the preceding levels of analysis, as well as my own (by now) deep familiarity with the raw data and feedback from two of my interviewees who were happy to review them for me.

Two of the themes that were constructed during this process are reported on below, by means of a reconstructed analytic narrative: the referee as risk manager, and the referee as risk facilitator. Pseudonyms are used to anonymise all interviewees and certain other people they refer to, in line with the conditions of this study's ethical approval. Years of experience as an MMA referee is indicated at the first mention of each participant.

## **The Management and Mitigation of Risk**

When discussing the role of the referee, interviewees highlighted that they held numerous different responsibilities with respect to the organisation and running of fight events – a claim confirmed via field observations of how they worked, both backstage and frontstage, at various shows. However, each time I asked about the purpose of their jobs, consistent emphasis was placed on the primary concern of the referee being to protect the safety of fighters. This was largely defined in terms of the outcomes of fights involving minimal lasting harm, ensuring that fighters were able to continue with their regular daily routines (of work, family life, and training or competing) after each fight. As one participant described it, “we do a lot of things but at the end of the day, the referee's main objective is fighters' safety” (Ali, 10 years).

This preoccupation with safety translated into numerous responsibilities, but largely involved the work of the referee in the cage, during fights. Here, referees are tasked with closely attending to the unfolding action, watching and interpreting the movements and gestures of fighters in order to know when to call a break in the action or to stop a fight altogether. In line with the various iterations of MMA's 'unified rules', such 'stoppages' are enacted when a fighter is determined to no longer be able to compete (ABC, 2019; IMMAF, 2021). This is often interpreted by referees in terms of fighters' ability “to defend themselves. When they can't defend themselves anymore, we have to do it for 'em” (Jon, 7 years). Typically, this will occur when a fighter is knocked out or choked unconscious, injured, or receives multiple strikes without making any attempt to defend, escape, or counter. As such, stoppages are made when it is apparent that the fight's 'natural' course has concluded, such that the winner is already apparent. In these moments, the continued exposure of fighters to physical danger is no longer defined as desirable, and instead becomes “excessive and unnecessary” (Kevin, 8 years) according to the cultural norms of the sport.

Enacting stoppages is perhaps the most direct and important exertion of the referee's influence on a fight. Discussing how they arrive at these decisions highlighted the interplay of physical and perceptual skills, intense focus, sound technical knowledge of MMA, and rapid decision-making – all within a high-pressure, time-sensitive context. As one interviewee succinctly put it, “I make a one-time call, all the time” (Hugh, 15 years). Here, referees' own martial arts knowledge – particularly in BJJ – was considered crucial for executing safe and effective stoppages:

You have to know what's going on, so it's important for you to train, or at least to have trained before. [I] have to know how to break that hold or that lock as the third person. I've gotta intervene to alleviate [the hold] without making it worse. You know, if your arm's getting ripped and I grab this guy's elbow and push it down, I'm actually gonna break your arm! So, I've gotta know how to do everything, but in reverse. (Noel, 10 years)

Given that decisive, technically precise and speedy intervention may be needed at any moment, referees are constantly moving and watching, studiously ignoring everything else around them. The following field note, covering several fights on one evening, captures this well:



Ali moves constantly around the cage: one moment ducking and leaning to spot illegal blows from just the right angle; the next, dancing nimbly away to keep the right distance from fighters' strikes; then moving close and dropping to one knee, intently studying the arcane, somatic grammar of bodies locked in jiu-jitsu exchanges, watching for tap-outs while checking the progression of positions and joint locks. In another fight, when one fighter suddenly drops back, knocked out cold on his feet, Baz recognises the moment at once and dramatically dives across him, clearing away his assailant with a spectacular bodycheck before the victor can follow his unconscious opponent down and continue striking. In yet another, Baz resolutely ignores a large, loud and probably drunk man who stands less than ten feet from him at cageside, gesticulating wildly and shouting at him to stop the fight... Despite this and other distractions, both referees are transfixed on the fighters alone throughout each match, expertly reading the action while awaiting their moment to act. (MMA event, April 2018)

As well as these physical and perceptual skills, deciding on when to call a stoppage involves a difficult weighing of probabilities. Referees must interpret the severity of strikes being landed, the condition of an apparently losing fighter, their chances for recovery, and whether or not their movement and posture indicates a continuing attempt to fight back. While the need to "minimise unnecessary damage and keep them as safe as I can within the confines of the rules" (Kevin) may remain their primary concern, referees are also cognisant that these rules require they only stop fights which have effectively reached their competitive conclusion. They are aware of the impact that an early stoppage would have on both the integrity of the match and the career of the fighter who was stopped unnecessarily. These tensions were the source of some anxiety for the interviewees, adding an emotional burden to the perceptual and physical demands of the job. Specifically, they grappled with the problem of not misusing the power inherent in their role, even if doing so was borne of the intention to protect a fighter's wellbeing:

There is a point between when the fight is no longer competitive, and the fighter is no longer able to defend themselves, when I feel there is this awful zone, sometimes. Where I don't feel like it's an appropriate time for me to take the fight away from someone. It makes me very uncomfortable... I've often thought to myself, I wish this guy [being badly beaten] would just stop, just for one second, and I can send him home. (Jon)

Echoing the (reluctant) paternalism noted here, all of my interviewees affirmed that fighters are "too tough for their own good" (Noel), who may therefore need "saving from themselves" (Baz) by beneficent intervention. Given that the norms of competitive fighting often involve formally absolving opponents from the moral responsibility to look out for each other's welfare (see Channon and Matthews, 2021), the preservation of any individual competitor's safety thereby becomes the responsibility of either their coaches, or the referee:

In MMA there is an aesthetic, a kind of expectation that the fight doesn't end until someone's on the floor... I was in despair watching the Lombard-Magny fight<sup>3</sup>, when [Lombard's] corner sent him back in and the referee didn't stop that from happening, I was incensed. You have got to save fighters from themselves, it's that simple, they are too stubborn, too brave, too fucking dumb for their own good. And their corner won't do it, you can't rely on them, they want wins. And then when [another referee] David is defending [the decision of the referee in charge of Lombard-Magny], saying 'well, fighters have got to be warriors', I just went, 'oh, mate! I can't help you'. (Hugh)

'Late stoppages' such as the one Hugh describes here will often see referees come in for fierce criticism for failing to adequately protect fighters; yet they may also be defended by others for choosing to prioritise fighters' agency or respecting their courage as 'warriors'. Conversely, losing fighters are often very upset when they feel a stoppage came too early – as are spectators. The implication here is that fighters have been unjustly robbed of a competitive opportunity, which is particularly important for professionals given the economic implications this holds for their careers. Moreover, fighters and fans alike have been deprived of the exciting and dramatic risk experience central to MMA's unique appeal. This indicates that the power of the referee to define risk as desirable or excessive is constrained, at least in part, by broader cultural norms and prevailing social consensus within the sport's wider communities.

Indeed, referees seen as guilty of early stoppages can receive significant abuse for it. During the training seminar I attended, I was told by one of the attendees that her car had been badly vandalised following one such incident in a low-level amateur fight (most other stories of negative reactions tended to centre on social media abuse – see Webb, 2020). As such, all participants spoke of learning to handle vitriolic insults and occasional crowd disturbances while standing stoically by their decisions, again indicative of the need for emotional resilience in the face of what could often become a socially isolating and overtly hostile context. In those cases, while acknowledging that mistakes can be made and should be learned from, moral vindication could be found in emphasising one's concern for safety, wearing this as a badge of honour and strong indication of professional integrity:

I've always [acted] in [fighters'] best interests and in the interests of their safety... Sometimes you do make mistakes and it might be too early or whatever, it happens. But in that moment in time there's only one thing that I'm thinking about and it's not that I care whether a fighter wins or loses, it's that I care whether the little bit of control that I have over their safety is used to protect them. Like, that's what's paramount to me. (Kevin)

In sum then, referees assume significant responsibility for protecting fighters during their matches. Their subjective interpretation of the sport's hazards as either desirable and exciting, or constituting excessively harmful risks, weighs heavily on the role, requiring a specialised skillset to manage effectively. More specifically, this framing of risk is dependent on context-specific judgements that draw on the prevailing cultural logic of the sport the referees are immersed in. As a consequence of this specific interpretive frame, when referees describe working within the rules to protect fighters from *unnecessary* harm, this highlights an expectation that they should not shield them from *all* harm. This serves as an important reminder that the hazardous action of MMA is (or can be) objectively harmful, regardless of how participants, referees, or other players in the field subjectively define it; an observation I return to below. Thus exists the need to 'save fighters from themselves', since fighters rarely define any of the sport's dangers as 'excessive', or act accordingly in their own interests.

Moreover, while referees must make decisive, timely interventions to protect fighters once they judge the situation to require it, such action may be received very poorly by others in the MMA milieu, illustrative of social constraints on the power inherent in referees' formal authority to define risk. This places referees under a clear degree of pressure, and they must successfully manage this in order to keep fighters safe according to their own best judgement. However, while it may be tempting to view referees as working to reduce risk within limits generated by such external forces, there are other aspects of referees' work which, ironically, simultaneously help to produce and maintain athletes' exposure to the hazards constituting these risks. It is to these points that I now turn.

## The Production and Maintenance of Risk

As discussed above, physical risk is integral to the sport; it is the very ‘stuff’ of MMA’s appeal to practitioners and spectators alike, generating “intense emotions” (Kevin) that “set a high-water mark” (Jon) of human experience. Referees are expected not to undermine this; accordingly, the view that evacuating *all* danger from MMA was undesirable and inappropriate was shared across the sample. As Baz succinctly put it, “I can’t just stop a fight from the first punch”<sup>4</sup>. In this sense, MMA referees determine that a specific range of hazards – the physical actions permitted within the rules, while the fight remains competitive – constitute acceptable, even socially desirable, forms of risk. Indeed, as subcultural insiders within MMA, referees shared a desire for risk with others in and around the sport, as evidenced through their expression of close identification with the sport and enthusiasm for its action:

Obviously I fell in love, from the first day I went to training I received a black eye and I just turned around and said, you know, this is it. I fell in love with the sport... the adrenaline, the buzz it gave me, I was like wow, this is amazing. (Baz)

Listen, look, they can’t see, the way I am now, you heard me last week, I’m impassioned for this sport. I’m in love with this sport, and if I wasn’t I wouldn’t do what I did. (Hugh)

At the same time as professing such feelings, the referees broadly acknowledged that the action comprising their beloved sport can result in damage to fighters, both superficial and serious. Below, Ali reacts to a doctor who wanted to stop a fight because of a profusely bleeding cut, while Hugh reflects on the probability of a fighter dying in the cage. In both cases, the fact of MMA being ‘a combat sport’ is explicitly cited as the key reference point for explaining the inevitability of physical harm:

I was like, ‘you’re worried about a little cut? Clearly you haven’t been to *a combat sport* before.’ Like, ‘no shit he’s bleeding! *It’s a fight!*’ Hah! (Ali)

*It’s a combat sport.* The risks are real, etcetera, and we know that, heaven forbid, touch wood, the worst can happen. (Hugh)

In the context of a sport whose core action is thereby defined around encountering danger, preserving fighters’ safety was always held up as the referee’s top priority, as discussed above. Yet each of the referees also highlighted another vital aspect of their role: facilitating competition in this inherently dangerous sport. Frank (15 years) described this by saying that “no matter what, my job is to facilitate good fights”; Jon discussed the importance of being “independent and unbiased”; and Hugh outlined the need to “mediate the fight” without unduly interfering in it. This was echoed by all interviewees, who explicitly highlighted the ideal of being involved as little as possible in bouts. This was characterised as necessary to protect the integrity of unfettered competition between two fighters, rather than reducing matches to the kind of over-regulated combat sports that MMA stands in contrast to:

It isn’t like boxing, you’re involved a lot more in boxing... in an ideal world the only times I’ll intervene or say anything [in MMA] will be ‘start’ and ‘stop’ at the end of a round. That’ll be a perfect fight. You wanna be as little part of it as you can. (Kevin)

[I need] to control the fight without dictating the outcome... I'm trying not to intervene too much unless necessary. I'm not trying to spoil the fight at the same time as I don't wanna jeopardise fighters' safety. (Baz)

The importance of avoiding undue involvement in fights that could 'spoil' them – by interrupting action and altering competitive outcomes – was often expressed as existing in some degree of tension with the need to intervene in the name of safety, as Baz notes. However, despite these broad commitments to remain 'hands-off' while keeping fighters safe, referees could also elect to involve themselves in fights in a way which both altered the balance of a match, while instigating the kind of action otherwise recognised as being inherently dangerous. This is via the use of the 'stand-up' mechanism, captured in the following field note:

In the third round the fight falls to the floor, and while the man on top has a dominant position, he is not doing much with it. Neither of the two fighters are particularly active; I can see them both breathing heavily. The man on top seems to be focused mostly on resting and recovering, as he lazily throws weak punches into the other's side while the mounted fighter holds his opponent's head down against his own body, preventing more meaningful offence. It is not particularly exciting, and the crowd starts to boo. Frank issues a warning: 'Move, c'mon, let's work!', but little happens. He warns them again, then leans over and puts his hands on either fighter, calling them to stop and stand up. The crowd cheers Frank's intervention as they return to their feet; the fight begins again with an exchange of jabs and leg kicks. A few seconds later, the man who had held a dominant position on the ground is caught with a heavy shot to the jaw, knocking him down. (MMA event, May 2018)

Much as is the case with early stoppages, early stand-up decisions may come in for critical scrutiny from fans and commentators, particularly over their implication for penalising fighting styles that rely on wrestling (see Cunningham, 2017). Here, the argument goes, a referee's involvement interferes with legitimate martial arts tactics and unjustly alters the outcome of competition in favour of fighters who would otherwise have lost to slow-paced, 'smothering' wrestlers. Yet while an early stoppage interferes with free-flowing competition in the name of 'saving' fighters from harm, a stand-up (whether deemed to be 'early' or not) does so *in order to place them at greater risk*, since standing fighters up is explicitly intended to lead to a direct increase in the pace of a fight. As illustrated in the field note, such exchanges are where dynamic striking and dramatic reversals in fights are more likely to take place, and in such moments, fighters are more likely to be exposed to the kinds of trauma noted earlier than they are while grappling on the ground in a near-stalemate.

Given that the excitement generated by such drama is key to the sport's appeal to fans, and thus its commercial success (Cheever, 2009; Zembura and Żyśko, 2015), referees' stand-up decisions are important for the viability and longevity of MMA as a form of spectator sport. However, it is important to stress that referees themselves do not conceive of their role as being to entertain these spectators or pander to the commercial interests that profit from them. Indeed, as Ali bluntly told me, "you get the promoter going 'oh, but last time we done it like this, makes it exciting for the fans and all that'. And I say, 'I don't give a fuck, that ain't what I'm here for'". Rather, when deciding to stand fighters up, the focus of the referee is on ensuring that the risky action comprising the essence of the sport is maintained. To clarify this, Noel explicitly framed the use of the stand-up as a mechanism that he would avoid using if one fighter was 'threatening' another on the ground<sup>5</sup>:

We have to understand what's a threat, if it's a threat and what sort of threat. If it's not a threat, I can stop the fight, stand you up. If it's a threat I'm gonna give you the opportunity to see it through, if you're threatening with it. (Noel)

This is reminiscent of Brett's (2017: 20) characterisation of the aesthetic judgements made by MMA commentators in differentiating "palatable practices" from "insufficient action". That is, in order to count as proper or valuable MMA, a fight needs to contain a consistent element of 'violence', or 'threat' thereof; without this, a fight fails to meet the minimum thresholds for what an MMA contest ought to be. For referees then, this means "keeping it safe without watering it down" (Ali), making sure that "a fight remains a fight" (Frank) as they work to preserve the presence of just enough risky action necessary for constituting an MMA match-as-such.<sup>6</sup>

Summarising these findings, referees simultaneously act to protect people from harm whilst also working to propagate something that they recognise to be unavoidably harmful. Strange as this logic may seem, it does not constitute a contradiction when risk is approached in the nuanced manner outlined at the start of this paper. Firstly, referees' context-specific definition of risk, vis-à-vis the hazardous action of MMA, involves characterising its dangers as something that, within limits, are highly desirable. The rewards of participation are worth the risks, because the sport whose essence depends upon them is something that they, along with the fighters they work alongside, *love*, and evidently find great significance in practicing.

Meanwhile, the parameters which define referees' construction of desirable risks are bounded by their interpretation of fighters' ability to continue fighting. As such, this tolerance of risk can be seen as a practical manifestation of the supposed 'realness' of MMA fights (Downey, 2014), whose flow should only be broken once one person is clearly defeated. Conversely, where referees' ideal lack of interference in bouts is effectively a means of realising this promise of realness, stand-ups constitute a means of ensuring that such fights do not descend into the unintelligible, boring stalemates that some 'real' fights have the propensity to become. Although there again appears to be a contradiction here – in the simultaneous idealisation of non-intervention alongside a normalised and justified practice of interference – both mechanisms effectively work towards the same end: that is, the continued maintenance of the desirable kind of risk that sits at the heart of this sport. In this way, it is probably appropriate to say that referees are not facilitating 'real fights' *per se*, but rather they are facilitating 'real MMA'.<sup>7</sup>

## Discussion

Throughout this paper I have shown that the objective dangers of MMA, which are framed as a fundamental necessity for the construction of subjectively desirable risk among the sport's communities, are tolerated – even celebrated – within limits that are practically managed by referees. Thus, referees are key individuals whose judgements and actions mediate the relationship between sport and risk, navigating the tension between producing excitement whilst minimising harm. While doing this work, the 'man in the middle' stands between not only two colliding bodies, but also competing priorities to promote dangerous behaviour whilst managing its excesses. Working at the conceptual frontier between legitimate, enjoyable competition and illegitimate, disgusting violence (Brett, 2017; Channon, 2020), MMA referees are truly central to the sport, embodying the tension surrounding just how much tangible danger to allow within the social production of exciting, sporting risk. To finish, I highlight some further concerns that may drive future analyses of referees' (and others') roles in this process.

Firstly, it is worth underscoring the observation that the rules of MMA – specifically concerning when stoppages or stand-ups are warranted – constitute the formal framework around which objective hazards are translated into subjective risks. As Weinberg (2016) argues, the existence of a formal, ‘unified’ ruleset has been a crucial element in MMA’s quest for public legitimacy (see also Sánchez García and Malcolm, 2010). Yet, while ‘unified rules’ of the sport exist, their application in practice is not exactly unified. For instance, different rulesets exist for amateur and professional fights, as well as adult and various junior age groups; different state athletic commissions in the USA adopt slightly different variations on the ‘unified’ professional rules; and fight promotions operating in countries where commissions do not oversee matches are more-or-less free to invent their own rules. This may lead to some confusion over when and how referees ought to enact stoppages, but it also highlights a continuing degree of flexibility in the overarching schema for recognising, defining, and classifying risks in the sport. Given the political importance of rules to MMA’s social legitimacy (Weinberg, 2016), the question of how situational changes to rulesets are achieved in practice – with or without the involvement of referees – is sure to prove interesting ground for further analysis.

Secondly, this observation directs our attention towards the individuals, groups, and larger bodies that organise MMA and similar activities, for whom commercial gain, and/or political recognition and support, is likely to play a key role in shaping such decisions. Indeed, while the referees in this study rationalised their role in producing risk as justifiable regarding adherence to MMA’s sporting and aesthetic principles, it remains important to contextualise their work within the wider political economy of the sport and its development (see McClearen, 2021; Weinberg, 2016). The general preference for a hands-off approach, alongside the existence of the stand-up practice, are institutional mechanisms favoured by the sport’s leading promotions and organisations for sustaining the dramatic entertainment value of the sport in the eyes of a paying audience. Indeed, standing exchanges are historically preferred by (in particular) American MMA audiences for their resonance with idealised conceptions of what fighting ought to look like (Hirose & Pih, 2010), as well as their greater likelihood of producing dynamic, exciting, or fight-ending action (Downey, 2014).

In this way, the tensions that referees must navigate in practice may be rooted in sporting logic or aesthetics, but these are themselves the product of commercial interests responsible for the sport’s emergence and maturation (Sánchez García and Malcolm, 2010), and hold important symbolic meaning in the on-going branding and image management of its promoters (McClearen, 2021). Therefore, further study of how the sport’s leading organisations foresee the trajectory of MMA’s development, and the necessity of either embracing greater risk or curtailing it in the interests of fighters’ welfare, may help us grasp how the production of socially desirable risk is likely to change in the future. What role referees play in these developments is particularly interesting to study, given their oft-stated preference to emphasise fighters’ safety within a structural context that does not always make this easy to prioritise.

Lastly, the data above suggests that refereeing MMA fights can involve particularly intense emotional experiences. Participants described a range of emotions, from their love for the sport and its heated excitement (see Parsons and Bairner, 2015) through to the anxiety and dread of watching athletes willingly absorb damage whilst being unable to help them. In light of recent shifts in public awareness and sports policy regarding understanding and protecting the mental health of athletes, coaches, and other sports personnel, it is worth considering the extent to which referees are expected to carry the emotional burden of this experience, particularly if/when fighters they are working with suffer serious injuries. This raises the question of what might be done (for instance, by sport psychologists, or other

providers of support) to equip them with the skills to manage this burden effectively. Further research may examine this aspect of referees' work in closer detail, and/or explore the possibilities for creating such support structures to facilitate their wellbeing in light of it.

## Concluding Thoughts

As the first empirical study of MMA referees, this project has broken new ground in the rapidly maturing body of research on the sport. Extending the analytical lens of ethnography beyond the embodied experiences of participants, I have highlighted some of the key complexities facing an under-researched but vital group of sports professionals, whose work has profound implications for both the wellbeing of competitors and the development of MMA. While risk has been extensively researched from the point of view of the people taking and experiencing it, or consuming it as spectacle, this study provides new insights by showing how risk is understood, managed, and facilitated by third-party actors balancing (moral) responsibilities and aesthetic judgements within their own logic of practice. Future studies in this field would do well to continue this effort, broadening out the scope of immersive, qualitative research to incorporate other stakeholders, and/or expand on the initial foray I have made into understanding MMA refereeing. Wherever the analysis of risk and its production in MMA leads next, I hope that this paper illustrates the importance of referees to other scholars interested in understanding how risk is produced and managed in this and other athletic contexts.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While there are women working as MMA referees, the majority are men, which explains the circulation of this phrase throughout this and other combat sport communities. While I acknowledge the implicit sexism of its wording, I use it in line with common parlance in the field and given its metaphorical resonance with the conceptual ideas outlined in this paper.
- <sup>2</sup> For example, compare disproportionate fears over the risk to women's health posed by boxing (Hargreaves, 1997) with epidemiological research suggesting the sport is just as dangerous, if not more so, to men (e.g., Bledsoe, Li and Levy, 2005).
- <sup>3</sup> Neil Magny vs. Hector Lombard at *UFC Fight Night 85*; a fight widely recognised as one where the referee's stoppage came too late.
- <sup>4</sup> Except, of course, for when he can: "...unless it's a really damaging one though, if I can see a fighter's rocked and that the second punch is gonna clean him out, I'm within my right. I've done that plenty of times actually!" (Baz)
- <sup>5</sup> Noel is referring to the possibility of either securing a joint lock or chokehold, or advancing to a position where a fighter could land powerful strikes to their opponent.
- <sup>6</sup> An example of a high-level match subsequently held up as an example of when a fight fails to be a fight is Derrick Lewis vs. Francis Ngannou at *UFC 226*.
- <sup>7</sup> For lack of space I cannot properly draw out the problems and tensions residing in the supposed 'realness' of MMA fighting; see Downey (2014) for an excellent discussion of the 'hyperreal' nature of this sport.

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