AUC Kinanthropologica, Vol. 61, No. 1, pp. 17–31

Self-awareness through suffering: A virtue based perspective of combat sports

Whitney Bragagnolo

Faculty of Physical Education and Sport, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic
whitneybragagnolo@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the significance of combat sports through the lens of virtue ethics, arguing that these practices, often criticized as inherently violent, offer a distinct and uniquely powerful path to personal growth and moral development. It argues that the specific kind of suffering, discipline, and hardships intrinsic to combat sports do not merely build character but offer one of the most direct and embodied means of pursuing *eudaimonia*, i.e., human flourishing. The paper compares combat sports with other dangerous sports, such as dangerous team sports (e.g., American football) and some individual sports, especially ultra-sports in nature settings. It situates combat sports within a broader ethical narrative that cultivates resilience, courage, self-awareness, and humility. Ultimately, the paper defends combat sports as not just a valid, but an especially potent, practice for realizing human flourishing under conditions of hardship and adversity.

KEYWORDS

virtue ethics; combat sports; martial arts; eudaimonia; moral development

DOI

10.14712/23366052.2025.6

INTRODUCTION

Hockey, rugby, combat sports[1], climbing, and ultra-running are examples of sports that require athletes to willingly confront injury, harm[2], and even the risk of death. The question arises as to why people would deliberately seek out such extreme challenges;

[1] When combined, combat sports are also referred to as Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), but individually they include striking-based martial arts such as Muay Thai, boxing, and kickboxing, as well as grappling-based disciplines focused on positional control and submissions, such as wrestling, judo, and jiu-jitsu.

[2] By "harm", I refer to injury that significantly impacts a person's health, cognitive function, or ability to move freely.

and whether embracing physical danger and suffering might lead to good consequences. This paper discusses combat sports from the perspective of virtue ethics and discusses issues of human flourishing, arguing that the unique challenges of combat sports can offer a transformative path toward personal growth and self-mastery. It explores how, through disciplined practice and voluntary exposure to suffering and adversity, individuals can cultivate resilience, courage, self-awareness, and humility – virtues central to living a flourishing life. Both elite competitors and recreational practitioners are considered here, as I will argue that the focus on training, rather than competition alone, makes the cultivation of virtues central to human flourishing relevant across both contexts.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that combat sports, particularly mixed martial arts (MMA), carry a substantial risk of injury, including concussions and other forms of traumatic brain injury, as documented in a growing body of research and media reporting (Lockwood et al., 2018; Gross, 2020; Mańka-Malara & Mierzwińska-Nastalska, 2022; Karpman et al., 2016; Rainey, 2009). This reality must be addressed by any philosophical analysis of their ethical legitimacy.

The risk of serious injury is not unique to combat sports. Many sports involve potential for harm. Activities such as climbing carry risks for broken bones, twisted ankles, concussions, or even death. For example, a 2005 New Zealand study highlighted that climbing is associated with serious risk of serious injury and mortality with 4.3 per 100 persons dying as a result of their injuries or accidents (Monasterio, 2005). Similarly, American football tackles have resulted in hundreds of fatalities from brain and spinal injuries. Brain injury-related fatalities account for 69% of all football fatalities from 1945 through 1999 with 497 deaths as a result of players either tackling or being tackled in a game (Cantu, 2003). We might group these as 'dangerous sports' (Russell, 2005), especially when compared to low-contact activities such as table tennis, golf, and curling.

However, sports can also be distinguished by the *nature* of the risks of harm they involve. Combat sports, American football, and ice hockey present team-sports, with contact-based risks, where harm may result from direct collisions or confrontation. In contrast, climbing and ultra-running involve self-directed or environmental risks, without the unpredictable factor of another person actively opposing the athlete.

As Ebert, Durbach and Field (2024) observe, participants in adventure sports are frequently portrayed as "daredevils" or thrill-seekers, an image rejected by the athletes themselves, who view their pursuits as disciplined and meaningful. A similar dynamic surrounds combat sports, which, though also practiced with purpose, discipline, and personal meaning, are often mischaracterized as merely violent or reckless. This moral suspicion echoes a broader public tendency to misunderstand high-risk physical pursuits. Indeed, combat sports often attract some of the harshest criticism, frequently seen as 'violent' rather than recognized for their potential to foster personal growth.

Despite comparable dangers inherent in other sports, combat sports are often dismissed as morally legitimate means of cultivating virtue and promoting human flourishing, largely due to their association with intentional bodily confrontation. For example, Dixon (2001, 2015) argues that boxing and MMA are intrinsically immoral due to their inherently violent nature, suggesting that the deliberate infliction of harm as a central aim place such sports beyond moral justification. With awareness around

the risk of harm, and recognition that all these sports carry some potential for danger, the question arises: why are some of these sports widely accepted by the public, while others remain morally suspect?

The ethical justification becomes more complex when a sport is *perceived* as inherently violent. Dangerous sports will always exist, and the risk of harm will always be present even in sports seen as non-dangerous (e.g., golf). However, sports that involve 'violence' are often more morally problematic for the public to understand and rationalize. Such violence leads to a deep ethical dilemma, especially when comparing combat sports with contact sports like American football. While American football may involve instances of extreme bodily confrontation, the central focus of the game is not the intentional infliction of bodily harm, but advancing the ball and scoring, making it more morally acceptable in the public eye – its primary aim, advancing the ball and scoring, differs from the overt interpersonal contest in combat sports. This fundamental difference may help explain why some sports like football are often perceived as more morally acceptable in public discourse, a distinction that Parry (1998) illuminates in his discussion of aggression versus violence in sport.

In contrast, combat sports are structured around a central objective: temporary immobilization of an opponent. This involves direct bodily engagement until the opponent fails to adequately protect themselves, concedes, or is forced to concede; or until their opponent accumulates more points within a set time limit through dominant performance. Given that the risk of serious injury is inherent in most combat sports, we must ask why athletes choose to participate in such practices?

While many struggle to justify the value of combat sports due to their seemingly violent nature, this paper argues that they possess unique ethical significance, offering a transformative path toward self-awareness and human flourishing. I defend combat sports as a powerful tool for personal development within a virtue ethics framework. As Russell (2005) observes, dangerous sports at their best offer an opportunity to confront and push beyond the perceived limits of the whole self, physically, emotionally, and existentially, in ways rarely encountered in everyday life. This article will focus mainly on virtues that combat sports offer as a result of structuring space for practicing and strengthening resilience, perseverance, courage, humility, and self-awareness, allowing athletes to develop virtues through repeated challenges and reflection.

This paper focuses on a significant yet often overlooked reason: the pursuit of self-transformation and personal growth through disciplined practice, suffering, and structured hardship. By presenting combat sports as a channel for refining one's values and developing virtue, the paper defends their ethical legitimacy and argues these practices provide a means for individuals to expand beyond their preconceived limitations and cultivate the virtues essential for human flourishing.

The discussion begins by clarifying key distinctions between martial arts and combat sports, before outlining the theoretical connection between virtue ethics and personal development in combat sport contexts. It then examines suffering and hardship across various sports as a means to cultivate resilience, courage, self-awareness, and a deeper sense of purpose. Last, but not least, it turns to the specific experiences of the combat athlete, exploring how training fosters the self-awareness necessary for living a flourishing, meaningful, and virtuous life.

Conceptual clarification: Martial arts or combat sports?

The terms 'martial arts' and 'combat sports' are often used interchangeably in both popular and academic discourse, but scholars in the philosophy of sport have emphasized their conceptual divergence, particularly in terms of purpose, pedagogy, and ethical orientation. Martínková and Parry (2016) offer a *purpose-based* classification system, distinguishing martial arts as educational practices aimed at self-development and moral cultivation, and martial sports or combat sports as 'achievement sports', primarily motivated by winning, scoring, and measurable achievement (pp. 151–155). Though both may involve discipline, rigorous training, and mastery, their *telos* – or ultimate purpose, differs: martial arts are directed toward the holistic development of the practitioner, while combat sports focus on external results within competitive frameworks. Expanding on this distinction, they classify traditional martial arts or even more spiritual martial paths as 'ways of life' (*dō*), oriented toward personal transformation and moral cultivation. In contrast, combat sports are described as "achievement sports", motivated by competition and observable success. As Martínková, Parry and Vágner elsewhere explain (2019, p. 3), the aim of martial arts "is not to defend oneself, to subdue or even kill the opponent, but to improve oneself and to develop into a better human being".

In this paper, the term 'combat sports' refers to structured and institutionalized physical practices involving direct bodily engagement: such as boxing, mixed martial arts (MMA), wrestling, and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ). These sports are often associated with competitive formats, yet many are also practiced recreationally or non-competitively, in training environments where the focus is on personal development rather than victory. This distinguishes them from certain traditional martial arts, such as Tai Chi, Aikido, or Karate, which are typically framed as lifelong pursuits and emphasize philosophical or spiritual dimensions (*dō*) (Martínková & Parry, 2017).

However, this division is not clear-cut. Certain contemporary practices like BJJ occupy a unique position: while central to modern combat sports like MMA, they are also often pursued as lifelong disciplines that emphasize personal development and ethical engagement. Though not always framed as spiritual disciplines, such practices often involve long-term commitment and transformation – demonstrating qualities resonant within the ethos of *dō*. This is reflected in BJJ's rank structure: according to the International Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Federation (IBJJF), attaining a 9th-degree red belt requires a minimum of 48 years of active practice *after* earning a black belt. Since black belts are not awarded before age 19, this means the red belt cannot typically be achieved before the age of 67 (IBJJF, 2016). Such a timeline marks not only technical mastery but also reflects an orientation toward lifelong cultivation, aligning BJJ, in some cases, with values traditionally associated with *dō*, such as patience, humility, and self-mastery.

Theoretical framework: Virtue ethics, eudaimonia & combat sports

Virtue ethics takes an agent-centered approach to morality, emphasizing the cultivation of moral character and practical wisdom as the foundation of ethical action. Unlike deontological frameworks, which mandate adherence to universal moral rules, or consequentialist theories, which assess right action by outcomes, virtue ethics focuses on the holistic development of moral character through habituation and lived experience.

Eudaimonistic virtue ethics defines moral actions as those that lead an individual toward eudaimonia – a concept often best translated as "flourishing" or "true, genuine happiness", which is "the kind of happiness worth pursuing" (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2023). By cultivating virtues, positive character traits and dispositions, alongside practical wisdom, an individual gains the essential qualities necessary for flourishing and living a fulfilled life.

Virtue ethics offers a compelling theoretical framework for examining the transformative potential of combat sports, particularly the role of suffering in fostering practical wisdom and the virtues necessary for flourishing. Through their journey, athletes cultivate self-affirmation, develop wisdom of both the self and the external world, and refine virtuous traits. As Russell (2005) argues, while many sports challenge the whole person, dangerous sports stand apart in that they engage all of our basic human capacities under real conditions of threat. This total engagement offers a distinctive and powerful path to moral growth and self-awareness.

Hackney (2009) suggests that the fighter's journey towards becoming an effective fighter, experiencing joy, forming deep friendships, growing spiritually, and developing moral character, illustrates how combative practice and moral development are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing. This relationship between discipline and ethical transformation aligns closely with the Aristotelian model of habituation, in which virtues are cultivated through repeated practice and intentional action over time (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II).

Hackney (2009) references André Comte-Sponville's explanation that "virtue is a quality of excellence for humans, and the more virtuous one becomes, the more human one becomes" (p. 27). The rest of this article will argue that combat sports provide a path towards the development of virtuous human beings, thus contributing to their human excellence.

Suffering in combat sports *versus* other dangerous sports

Combat sports offer athletes a unique opportunity to confront significant risk of harm, pushing them to their limits. Yet, it is important to recognize that while these pursuits test athletes through extreme hardships, this challenge is structured with evolving safety regulations aiming to minimize irreversible harm. Differing from activities involving uncontrolled violence, modern combat sports are governed by rules that aim to protect long-term well-being while preserving the integrity of the challenge (Martínková & Parry, 2016, pp. 154–155). Unlike conventional competitive sports, combat athletes undergo a test that extends beyond mere victory or defeat. While combat sports involve potential to inflict harm, the test lies in the cultivation of perseverance, the mastery of one's limits, and the ability to confront adversity with resilience.

From a virtue ethics perspective, the value of combat sports may lie less in domination and more in the habituation especially of virtues such as perseverance, resilience, and humility, developed through repeated trials (Russel, 2015; Sailors, 2025). This mirrors Martínková and Parry's (2017) view that the educational value of dangerous sports (and apparent-danger-seeking sports) lies not in danger itself, but in the development of self-reliance, confidence, and especially risk education, which together support long-term personal growth. By voluntarily exposing themselves to the uncertainties of their practice, through both competition and training, fighters endure immense suffering

and discomfort, forcing them to confront their own being, and revealing their limits. Such thresholds are rarely reached in other sports or everyday life, as I will examine later. It is here that the distinct value of combat sports begins to unfold.

Through this suffering and the confrontation with fear, individuals gain profound insight, as their enduring reveals newfound efficiency and agency. Overcoming such trials reinforces the value of sacrifice, deepening the athlete's sense of purpose. As Atkinson and Young (2008) suggest, endurance through physical adversity affirms bodily efficiency and agency, reflecting a powerful realization of having used oneself to the fullest. When athletes persevere, these experiences cultivate a deep sense of integration with their own flourishing, bringing both fulfilment and meaning. The wisdom gained through suffering and survival in combat sports is not fleeting – it is lifelong, inspiring, and deeply transformative.

Combat sports can be compared to other sports that share some of these traits. One key distinction, however, lies in whether the sport is performed individually or as part of a team. Rugby, football, and ice hockey players also endure rigorous training, injuries, and hardship. However, when success or failure is dependent on collective efforts, we can question whether it truly allows the individual to push themselves to their limits. It could be argued that these athletes are not tested to their complete breaking points. Athletes in team sports can walk off the field, sit on the bench, or be substituted when injured. In contrast, an ultra-runner facing hardships in her race has no teammate to share the burden – she must endure and persist. Similarly, a fighter mid-round who realizes it is 'not his day' cannot be replaced. When he chooses to stop, he must face the full consequences alone.

When a runner quits or a football player experiences loss, they can often deflect accountability, attributing failure to team performance or external factors. In combat sports, however, failure is direct and inescapably personal. The opponent is not a passive backdrop but an active agent – imposing their will and demanding that the athlete confront escalating adversity. This exposure to one's limits, without substitution, diffusion of blame, or escape, creates a uniquely raw environment for suffering and personal transformation. There is little room for self-deception, since every failure is the athlete's alone. As Samuels (2015) writes in his *Grantland* feature on the Gracie Jiu-Jitsu lineage, "the price of clinging to one's illusions is relentlessly exposed". In combat sports, failure cannot be externalized, it demands a confrontation with the self, forcing athletes to accept reality and evolve through it.

But even among individual disciplines that emphasize suffering, key differences emerge. Though renowned for the hardships they entail, ultra-sports differ from combat sports in meaningful ways. Those who compete in ultra-sports (especially those in nature) deliberately expose themselves to the harsh unpredictability of nature, risking their lives, not from a desire to come to harm, but in seeking personal growth. Krein (2019) argues that it is precisely through the interaction with powerful, uncontrollable natural forces that athletes gain unique opportunities to test and transform themselves. Thus, for many athletes, risk and suffering are not obstacles to be avoided, but integral components to their athletic and personal development. Similarly, cyclist Lance Armstrong, for example, described suffering as a necessity for both his athletic and personal development, stating:

> The experience of suffering is like the experience of exploring, of finding something unexpected and revelatory. When you find the outermost thresholds of pain, of fear or uncertainty, what you experience afterward is an expansive feeling, a widening of your capacities. (Armstrong & Jenkins, 2003, pp. 222–223)

This willingness to embrace suffering reflects a broader pattern among athletes: the deliberate pursuit of challenges that threaten the collapse of the self as a whole (bodily, emotionally, and cognitively). In willingly exposing themselves to real danger, athletes foster resilience through direct confrontation with pain, limitation, and the possibility of being broken in every dimension of their being under unrelenting pressure. This perspective is echoed among ultra-runners. For example, ultra-marathon[3] athlete David Horton, who, reflecting on his first attempt to complete the 3,540-kilometer (2,220-mile) Appalachian Trail, recounted that by his 10th day of 45 miles per day, he was urinating blood and running with tendonitis and shin splints for the next 1,000 miles (Sheridan, 2010, p. 171). In the documentary The Runner, which chronicles Horton's career in ultra-running, he states, "I suffered a lot. But it was worth it. Through suffering we can have a better impression of who we really are and what we can do ..." (Benna, 2006). Renowned ultra-runner Nick Hollon has also spoke candidly about the physical and existential challenges of the sport. In 2012, he nearly died during training – an experience he later described as profoundly shaping his outlook on suffering, the limits of human experience and the transformative potential of pushing through. Echoing Horton's perspective, the multiple world record holder stated in a news article:

> There was a point in the fifth loop of the Barkley where I entered a state of nirvana and euphoria. The pain in my legs disappeared. It was one of the most focused, happy, and present moments of my life. Running these far distances and pushing my body to those limits unlocks that state and other runners have similar experiences. It's what keeps people coming back – that state of clarity keeps people coming back. (Gander, 2017)

The accounts of these athletes illustrate their willingness to disregard the inherent dangers of their sport and endure extreme hardship as a means of achieving self-awareness and the associated benefits. This suggests that, for them, the rewards of such experiences significantly outweigh the potential risks, including close encounters with death. Self-awareness and personal fulfilment arise through the execution of the athlete's autonomous decisions and the wisdom gained from these trials. While it is reasonable to argue that all athletes experience suffering and discomforts in training and competition, Russell (2005) argues that non-dangerous sports, while challenging, do not test an individual's basic human capacities in the way that dangerous sports do, where athletes must face threats to their very being or to fundamental aspects of it.

This resonates with Martínková's (2024) account of ultra-sports in nature, where athletes deliberately subject themselves to natural hardship as a way of encountering their own limits and achieving a form of self-realization rooted in physical vulner-

[3] An ultramarathon (also called ultra marathon running or ultra-running) is any footrace longer than the traditional marathon length of 42.195 kilometers (26.219 miles).

ability and existential clarity. She writes that such athletes, through "a heightened self-awareness together with an awareness of and attunement to the surrounding nature", experience "a deepening of self-knowledge ... while testing one's limits and possibilities; and determining what is bearable and what is unbearable, with respect to natural, often extreme, conditions" (Martínková, 2024, p. 8). These values, she continues, "enable a more mature type of agonism than in traditional sports since, within the hardships, athletes are better able to realize their vulnerabilities and their place in the world" (Ibid., p. 8). Similarly, Krein (2019) argues that the value of nature sports lies not merely in their risk of harm, but in the reflective and transformative experiences that can emerge through encounters with nature, challenge, and uncertainty.

Ultra-running in nature and combat sport do share important similarities. In both, athletes battle their own internal thoughts: doubt, exhaustion, and the temptation to quit, while facing an external force that threatens to break them. However, the nature and immediacy of that force differ. In ultra-sports in nature, athletes contend with natural elements (and sometimes wild animals) (Martínková, 2024, p. 7). In combat sports, the resistance is embodied in another person, an opponent who actively seeks to disrupt, challenge, and overcome them in real time. In this way, combat sports offer a uniquely embodied trial of resilience, where athletes must continuously respond with full intensity to both the opponent's pressure and their own limitations. revealing and refining the whole self in the process. This element of imposed adversity absent in self-paced sports, makes combat sports a rare domain where one's will is exercised under relentless, escalating pressure.

So, while ultra-runners can control the pace and adjust to conditions, a fighter's resilience is tested by an active opponent whose presence is immediate and unrelenting. It cannot be ignored or deferred. In ultra-running, the athlete may pause, slow down, or stop (and in some cases exhaustion or injury may intervene), and while this suffering may be extreme, the experience remains largely self-modulated. In contrast, for combat athletes, stopping is never a neutral decision. They must endure until stopped by a referee, forced into submission, or compelled to tap out (ending the contest), all under immediate continuous, escalating pressure from the opponent.

This dynamic extends beyond competition into the training environment itself. While many ultra-runners may pursue personal growth over competition, combat sports even in training offers a different kind of challenge: one defined by unpredictable resistance from an active opponent threatening their autonomy. Even in practice, failure carries immediate consequences. In combat sports, failure is not just a dropped pace, or a personal shortcoming, it is an immediate reckoning that tests the whole person: bodily, emotionally, and existentially, through direct confrontation with an adversary actively seeking to impose their will.

Unlike the ultra-runner, whose suffering is largely self-regulated, the martial artist cannot simply choose to 'slow down' without consequence. Every lapse of effort has immediate external consequences. They must persist, adapt, or be defeated. This unavoidable confrontation is central to why combat sports serve as such powerful tools for self-awareness. Combat athletes are not granted the luxury of evading adversity or controlling the intensity of their trials the same way; they must confront these challenges under constant pressure or risk defeat. In doing so, they adapt, and grow through the experience.

Beyond hardships, combat sports present a direct challenge to one's integrity, expressed through embodied action. Failure does not just mean succumbing to external pressure; it means being overcome by an opponent of a similar level asserting their dominance. This unavoidable confrontation with suffering and external challenge makes combat sports an unrivalled space for self-affirmation. Russell (2005, p. 15) supports this view, emphasizing that self-affirmation arises from tests that engage every aspect of the self. Russell (2005, p. 14) supports this view and refers to Aristotle, who identifies rational thought as the defining characteristic of human beings and a fundamental component of true virtue and *eudaimonia*. Russell extends this idea by arguing that judgment and decision-making under conditions of stress and danger are uniquely cultivated through dangerous sports:

> Dangerous sport, in its best exemplars – in, say, mountain climbing or boxing or bicycle stage racing – provides one avenue for such self-affirmation by challenging one's whole self at the limits of one's being. It is a particularly rich avenue of realization because it forces us to confront and overcome fear of danger and to face physical threats to those things that we cannot put a value on. (Russell 2005, p. 15)

Given this, it follows that combat sports provide a structured environment for developing rational thinking in high-pressure situations. The ability to make morally sound or 'virtuous' decisions is not innate but requires continuous social practice, something combat sports rigorously instill through repeated exposure to hardship and adversity. Russell (2005) argues that dangerous sports, like those pursued by combat athletes, provide a unique and intrinsic value of self-affirmation, one that must be recognized in discussions of well-being, as they push individuals to fully confront their perceived limits in ways other sports do not. Building on Russell's (2005) account of self-affirmation through dangerous sport, Sailors (2025) emphasizes that the significance of such practices (like combat sports) lies not simply in enduring hardship, but in how athletes must continually draw on multiple virtues, such as striving and resilience, and exercise sound judgment while doing so. This process unfolds most clearly in the demanding context of training, where struggle and reflection foster moral insight over time.

In contrast, athletes in sports such as rugby or football face the risk of injury and endure pain, but injury is often an unintended *byproduct*, not the central challenge. In combat sports, however, athletes knowingly engage in contests where absorbing strikes, chokes, and throws are not only expected but a fundamental component of the sport. This distinction may help explain why combat sports offer a unique path to self-affirmation: athletes face external challenges in the form of an opponent while simultaneously confronting their internal limits, in an environment where enduring hardship is integral to the contest.

Yet this does not mean the athletes in combat sports seek violence for its own sake. As Parry (1998) explains, there is an important ethical distinction between vigorous or forceful play (aggression) and acts of intentional harm (violence). In combat sports, *controlled* aggression is foundational to the discipline and does not necessarily aim to injure. While the risk of harm is real, these sports are structured by rules, norms, and safety protocols designed to mitigate unnecessary violence and protect athletes' long-term well-being (Martínková & Parry, 2016, p. 155).

Even when the athlete's purpose is not to harm but to push personal limits, refine discipline, and cultivate self-growth, a moral tension remains. Parry (1998) acknowledges that combat sports like boxing present a sharp paradox: "hurting or harming someone so badly that he cannot continue the contest is a sufficient condition of victory" – a fact that perhaps makes boxing harder to justify, ethically speaking, especially for children and youth (Torres & Parry, 2017). Despite this, combat sports operate within a framework of mutual consent and regulation, which differentiates them from illegitimate or uncontrolled violence. It is this balance between intent, structure, and the managed risk of harm that challenges the usual lines between violence and ethical sport and invites us to think more deeply about what it means to compete with integrity in combat sports.

Yet such value may not be readily visible to outsiders. As Ebert et al. (2024) explain, individuals who have never engaged in high-risk sports often face an epistemic barrier that prevents them from fully grasping the personal significance these activities hold. This helps explain why combat sports are so often morally misjudged by those who view them from the outside as violent, senseless, or even criminal, rather than as sites of personal growth and ethical striving.

Building on Russell (2005), Lopez-Frias and McNamee (2017) emphasize that individuals have the right to pursue lives they have reason to value, even when such pursuits involve risk of harm. This perspective reinforces that combat athletes, like other athletes in dangerous sport, knowingly engage in their sport as a meaningful path to self-growth. If suffering and even the risk of injury are widely accepted as necessary paths to excellence in other extreme sports, why are combat sports still so often reduced to mere violence, while athletes in other high-risk disciplines are celebrated for embracing peril, risk, and resilience? In combat sports, the risk of harm and hardship are not incidental; they are essential to self-improvement and the realization of personal potential. The process of growth occurs not only through personal effort but also in direct engagement with an opponent who challenges and sharpens one's limits. It is this dynamic that makes combat sports distinct and worthy of recognition as a meaningful, transformative practice – not merely an act of violence.

Training as the catalyst for self-awareness in combat sports

This section explores how the rigorous demands of combat sport training can foster deep personal insight, supporting long-term growth and the development of core virtues.

Fighters spend only a limited amount of time in competition each year.[4] The most significant part of their journey lies not in those fleeting moments of competition, but in the rigorous hours of training that precede and follow. While some individuals *do* engage in combat sports for the competition, for other athletes, the most meaningful aspect of their participation is the self-developmental value embedded in training, which points to a close relationship between combat sports, martial arts and martial training, as noted by Martínková and Parry (2017).

This is echoed by athletes themselves. Georges St-Pierre, former UFC Welterweight and Middleweight Champion and UFC Hall of Famer, who is widely regarded

[4] The average MMA athlete has 3 fights a year.

as one of the greatest mixed martial artists of all time reflected: "There is a difference between a fighter and a martial artist. A fighter is training for a purpose: He has a fight. I'm a martial artist. I don't train for a fight. I train for myself. I'm training all the time. My goal is perfection. But I will never reach perfection" (St-Pierre, n.d.). His words reflect a profound vision of his martial practice as a lifelong path of self-mastery and development, a stance aligned more closely with the philosophical ethos of dō than with narrow competitive ambition. This makes his perspective all the more compelling given a career marked by 26 (out of 28) professional wins, 8 by knockout and 6 by submission. St-Pierre's immense success in one of the most demanding arenas of combat sport gives this perspective exceptional weight: his 'philosophy' is grounded in lived experience, not distant ideals. It emerges from years of training, struggle, and transformation, offering a powerful example of how combat sports can serve as a path not only to competitive excellence, but to self-mastery and deeper personal growth.

This is not only evident anecdotally, but also reflected in empirical research. Chinkov and Holt's (2015) found that BJJ practitioners often report increased self-awareness, humility, perseverance, and emotional control, traits that echo those emphasized in philosophical accounts of moral development. These findings suggest that combat sports like BJJ can function as transformative practices. In both competition and training, fighters endure intense challenges that test their whole being – bodily, emotionally, and existentially, as they work through their limitations. It is through this repeated, embodied hardship and adversity, where struggle and failure are routine, that both technical skill and moral character are refined.

The structure of training itself reflects this transformative potential. While developing technique is essential, training in dangerous sports is recognized as a vehicle for cultivating virtues critical to human flourishing, resilience, courage, perseverance, humility, and empathy (Russel, 2005; Sailors, 2025; Turp, 2023, Chinkov & Holt, 2015). These virtues are cultivated via the repeated, constant exposure to adversity where athletes must adapt, regulate, and act with discipline and self-control.

Training scenarios in combat sports, such as in BJJ and boxing illustrate this. When being hit, choked, or trapped beneath an opponent, maintaining composure, and resisting panic demonstrates key virtues like resilience (withstanding pressure), courage (enduring without fear), humility (accepting defeat and learning from mistakes), and self-awareness (recognizing your limits). As Chinkov and Holt (2015) found, repeated exposure to these kind of training scenarios enables BJJ athletes to manage emotions like fear, frustration, and anxiety – particularly when confronting difficult opponents or these physically demanding positions. Participants reported feeling "mentally tougher" and learning to "stay calm under pressure", even in situations of acute vulnerability both in and out of sport (Chinkov & Holt, 2015, p. 8). The increased capacity to stay composed under pressure reflects more than athletic growth, it expresses moral development. As Russell argues, "resilience is a virtue expressed in the ability to adapt positively to significant adversity" (2015, p. 164).

Therefore, cultivating these virtues in training, through sustained, embodied adversity indeed can guide athletes toward disciplined, resilient, and ethically grounded conduct both within and beyond competition. Repeated exposure to adversity raises their threshold for challenge and endurance. Confronting their deepest fears, combat

athletes are pushed to self-awareness, and a deeper understanding of themselves. The reward lies not in external validation, but in the intrinsic fulfillment that arises from the pursuit of human flourishing.

On receiving his black belt, Jiu-Jitsu athlete Joe Rogan says, colloquially:

> Martial arts are a vehicle for developing your human potential, and nothing in my life has ever put me in face with reality better than Jiu-Jitsu. In life, we can distort our perception of things in order to make ourselves more comfortable, in order to make ourselves accept where we are. There's a lot of people out there that are running around full of shit. You can't be full of shit when you do Jiu-Jitsu. It's impossible to be full of shit because reality comes at you in the purest form possible: A life or death struggle, using your determination, your focus, your techniques, your mind, and your training, over and over, and over again. (Rogan, as cited in Bravo, 2012)

But more than just resilience, combat sports forge an almost paradoxical relationship with suffering itself. Unlike athletes in other sports who push through or past pain as a temporary obstacle, fighters must learn to exist within it: to function, think, and adapt under relentless pressure. As depicted in *Choke* (Goodman, 1999), this process forces athletes to find clarity within the chaos, to train the mind and body together, and to redefine the very meaning of struggle itself. The film's central voice is Rickson Gracie, a red belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, one of the most revered practitioners in the history of the discipline and a figure widely respected for both his technical mastery and his embodied understanding of the demands and meanings of combat. His lifelong commitment to the art gives his reflections a distinct authority, drawn from decades of navigating the full complexity of fighting as a lived practice:

> In these tough positions, you're in a little piece of hell. But through daily suffering, you learn to survive in these situations. You have to find comfort in the uncomfortable. You have to be able to live your worst nightmare. Jiu-Jitsu puts you completely where you must have complete focus on finding solutions to the problem. This trains the mind to build that focus. To increase your awareness. Your capacity to solve problems. Sometimes, you don't have to win. You cannot win. But that has nothing to do with losing. (Goodman, 1999)

Gracie (as cited in Goodman, 1999) suggests that even in defeat, combat athletes do not lose. Rather, they cultivate resilience, self-awareness, and moral fortitude. Indeed, as Skillen (1998) also observes, there is often more to be gained in loss than in victory. Growth in combat sports emerges not from the outcome of a match, but from the character transformation forged through persistent challenge and adaptation. While external success may fluctuate, the enduring achievement lies in developing the capacity to face adversity with clarity and strength. Russell (2015) illuminates, resilience is a virtue that teaches us not only to endure adversity, but to actively thrive in its midst, cultivating creativity, moral resolve, and the imaginative capacity to reframe our limitations. Through this process, athletes do more than recover from hardship, they learn to transcend who they were, reshaping themselves in response to setbacks and reversals.

In this light, success in combat sports is not solely defined by victory over others, but by the ongoing contest with oneself. Each bout, especially in training, becomes an opportunity for growth, not a pursuit of dominance, but a deliberate path towards self-mastery. Individuals are presented an opportunity to overcome personal limitations and refine virtues such as courage, humility, perseverance and resilience, in the pursuit of personal excellence. This process redefines 'winning' as a disciplined path of moral self-cultivation.

Building on this moral growth, the unique demands of combat sports also foster a profound sense of empathy. Through the relentless cycle of training, struggle and setbacks, athletes develop a deep understanding of what it means to suffer and to endure. Having confronted their own vulnerabilities, they become attuned to the struggles of others, cultivating compassion that extends beyond the *dōjo* or competition arena. This reinforces humility and a recognition of shared human hardship. Self-awareness, shaped by repeated struggle and reflection, becomes the compass guiding athletes toward personal flourishing – not as a final destination, but as a continual practice of becoming. Continuous growth through the disciplined practice of virtue.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article is not to suggest that combat sports guarantee a virtuous life, or that suffering should be pursued as a path to wisdom. Rather, I argue that combat sports offer a meaningful and specific avenue for cultivating virtue. Combat sports present a compelling context for the development of moral virtues. The challenges that athletes face, especially hardships inflicted by an opponent, the resultant suffering, and the ever-present risk of harm can cultivate courage. Resilience develops through relentless training, especially in moments where failure is inevitable and regular. Perseverance emerges not as an ideal but as a necessary trait, honed under pressure and in the face of challenges that would tempt many to quit.

Ultimately, the value of combat sports lies not in momentary triumphs, but in the ongoing pursuit of self-mastery. Individuals gradually unlock their potential and nurture the virtues that shape their highest selves. For these athletes, the *real* fight is the one within. A personal struggle to become more self-aware, and more aligned with their fullest human potential. The true value of combat sports is found in the journey, with insights emerging through continuous effort and the transformative power of enduring struggle. As Sheridan (2010, p. 6) aptly puts it:

> Fighting is much greater than a sum of its parts; it is more than a sport, more than any other form of competition in modern society. It is about truth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was written with institutional support from Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic (Cooperatio – Social Sport Sciences).

REFERENCES

Aristotle (1999). *Nicomachean ethics* (T. Irwin, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published ca. 350 B.C.E.)

Armstrong, L., & Jenkins, S. (2003). *Every second counts*. Broadway Books.

Atkinson, M., & Young, K. (2008). *Deviance and social control in sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Benna, J. B. (Director) (2006). *The runner* [Motion picture]. Journey Films.

Bledsoe, G. H., Hsu, E. B., Grabowski, J. G., Brill, J. D., & Li, G. (2006). Incidence of injury in professional mixed martial arts competitions. *Journal of Sports Science & Medicine*, *5*(CSSI), 136–142.

Bravo, E. (2012). *Joe Rogan black belt speech* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTIb16BiGc4

Cantu, R. C., & Frederick, O. (2003). Brain injury-related fatalities in American football, 1945–1999. *Neurosurgery*, *52*(4), 846–853. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12657180/.

Casson, I. R., Viano, D. C., Powell, J. W., & Pellman, E. J. (2010). Twelve years of national football league concussion data. *Sports Health*, *2*(6), 471–483. https://doi.org/10.1177/1941738110383963.

Chinkov, A. E., & Holt, N. L. (2015). *Implicit transfer of life skills through participation in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, *28*(2), 139–153. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2015.1086447.

Dixon, N. (2001). Boxing, paternalism, and legal moralism. *Social Theory and Practice*, *27*(2), 323–344. http://10.5840/soctheorpract200127215.

Dixon, N. (2015). A moral critique of mixed martial arts. *Public Affairs Quarterly*, *29*(4), 365–384.

Ebert, P. A., Durbach, I., & Field, C. (2024). Gratuitous risk: danger and recklessness perception of adventure sports participants. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, *51*(2), 267–284. https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2024.2335350.

Gander, K. (2017, January 7). Blood, sweat and hallucinations: The gruelling experiences of an ultramarathon runner. *The Independent*. http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/ultra-marathon-runner-45-races-nick-hollon-extreme-sport-runnning-blood-sweat-hallucinate-desert-a7510601.html.

Goodman, R. (Director) (1999). *Choke* [Motion picture]. Polygram Filmed Entertainment.

Gross, J. (2020, July 2). For many MMA fighters, CTE fears are already a reality. *The Athletic*. https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/1854544/2020/06/04/mma-fighters-brain-health-cte-is-reality/.

Hackney, C. (2009). *Martial virtues: Lessons in wisdom, courage, and compassion from the world's greatest warriors*. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing.

Hursthouse, R., & Pettigrove, G. (2023). Virtue ethics. In: E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition). Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/ethics-virtue/.

Hutchison, M., Lawrence, D., Cusimano, M., & Schweizer, T. (2014). Head trauma in MMA. *The American Journal of Sports Medicine*, *42*(6), 1352–1358. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24658345/.

International Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Federation (2016). *Graduation system poster*. https://ibjjf.com/graduation-system.

Karpman, S., Reid, P., Phillips, L., & Qin, Z. (2016). Combative sports injuries: An Edmonton retrospective. *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine*, *26*(4), 332–334. https://doi.org/10.1097/JSM.0000000000000235.

Krein, K. (2019). *Philosophy and Nature Sports*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315454177.

Lockwood, J., Frape, L., Lin, S., & Ackery, A. (2018). Traumatic brain injuries in mixed martial arts: A systematic review. *Trauma*, *20*(4), 245–254. https://doi.org/10.1177/1460408617740.

Lopez Frias, F. J., & McNamee, M. (2017). Ethics, brain injuries, and sports: Prohibition, reform, and prudence. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, *11*(3), 264–280. https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2017.1342688.

Mańka-Malara, K., & Mierzwińska-Nastalska, E. (2022). Head trauma exposure in mixed martial arts. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(20), 13050. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192013050.

Martínková, I. (2024). Ultra sports as nature sports (proper). *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, *51*(2), 285–301. https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2024.2315493.

Martínková, I., & Parry, J. (2016). Martial Categories: Clarification and Classification. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, *43*(1), 143–162. https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2015.1038829.

Martínková, I., & Parry, J. (2017). Safe Danger – On the Experience of Challenge, Adventure and Risk in Education. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, *11*(1), 75–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2017.1292308.

Martínková, I., & Parry, J. & Vágner, M. (2019). The Contribution of Martial Arts to Moral Development. IDO MOVEMENT FOR CULTURE. *Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology*, *19*(1), pp. 1–8.

Mez, J., Daneshvar, D. H., Kiernan, P. T., et al. (2017). Clinicopathological evaluation of chronic traumatic encephalopathy in players of American football. *JAMA*, *318*(4), 360–370. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2017.8334.

Monasterio, E. (2005). Accident and fatality characteristics in a population of mountain climbers in New Zealand. *The New Zealand Medical Journal*, *118*(1208). https://journal.nzma.org.nz/journal-articles/accident-and-fatality-characteristics-in-a-population-of-mountain-climbers-in-new-zealand.

National Football League (2017). *2016 injury data report*. https://www.playsmartplaysafe.com/newsroom/reports/2016-injury-data/.

Parry, J. (1998). Violence and aggression in contemporary sport. In: M. J. McNamee & S. J. Parry (Eds.), *Ethics and sport* (pp. 204–217). New York: Routledge.

Rainey, C. E. (2009). Determining the prevalence and assessing the severity of injuries in mixed martial arts athletes. *North American Journal of Sports Physical Therapy*, *4*(4), 190–199. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2953351/.

Russell, J. S. (2005). The Value of Dangerous Sport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, *32*(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2005.9714667.

Russell, J. S. (2015). Resilience: Warren P. Fraleigh Distinguished Scholar Lecture. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, *42*(2), 159–183. https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2015.1009838.

Sailors, P. R. (2025). *Virtuous connections along Russell's route. Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2025.2502085

Samuels, D. (2015, April 14). *One hundred years of arm bars: Gracie Jiu-Jitsu and the making of modern MMA*. Grantland. https://grantland.com/one-hundred-years-arm-bars-gracie-jiu-jitsu-mma/.

Sheridan, S. (2010). *The Fighter's Mind*. New York: Grove Press.

Skillen, A. (1998). Sport is for losers. In: M. J. McNameee and S. J. Parry (Eds.), *Ethics and sport*, pp. 169–181. London: Routledge.

St-Pierre, G. (n.d.). *Official website*. GSP Official. https://www.gspofficial.com/.

Torres, C., & Parry, J. (2017). Boxing and the Youth Olympic Games. *Diagoras: International Academic Journal on Olympic Studies*, *1*, 169–190.

Turp, M. (2024). Meaning and morality in boxing. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, 18(5), 468–482. https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2023.2250925.