

The Problems with Amateur Kickboxing or MMA Tournament (“Tough Man” Style) Elimination Competitions – One Ringside Physician’s Opinion

June 31, 2016

Nicholas Rizzo, M.D., FACP

I was once asked by a committee to talk about amateur kickboxing and MMA tournament-style elimination competitions (TSEC) from a medical standpoint, including addressing what the real question is here. Below is an expanded adaptation of the presentation.

The Medical Standpoint

First let’s look at the how and why TSEC’s are controversial from a medical standpoint. The obvious answer is the number of deaths that have occurred and caused the majority of states to make the format illegal or unsupported. So the first question is “are the number of deaths significant”?

Let’s look at some statistics comparing amateur boxing, TSEC, and pro boxing. If we look at the number of deaths per million bouts, amateur boxing has about 14, TSEC 47, and pro boxing 76. Let’s look at the same statistics as deaths per minute fought. Amateur boxing has 1, TSEC 23, and pro boxing about 42. What this says is that the TSEC format has between four to twenty times as many deaths as amateur boxing, and between 55 and 62% as much as pro boxing. Let’s take a quick look at raw numbers. There have been 12 deaths and five serious brain injuries in TSEC in the USA. There have been 14 deaths in MMA -- but that is an international number including all MMA bouts since the sports inception. Clearly, no matter from what angle you look at the death rates in TSEC, it is very real. And it’s real enough to understand why so many states have made it illegal.

Can TSEC be done safely?

Can we regulate or create a safe TSEC competition? Let me rephrase that: is it even possible to create a safe TSEC competition? And, again, this is specifically coming from a regulatory and medical standpoint.

Let’s consider the medical variables – in other words, how is TSEC different than other contests, and have these differences been responsible for these excessive deaths? These variables are three-fold. I am going to address each of these three pitfalls from a medical and regulatory standpoint, and see if it is possible to have a TSEC event without this excessive risk of deaths.

First, we are dealing with amateurs and their associated pitfalls, detailed below. Second, there has in the past been a significant lack of sanctioning and regulation, with loose structure and laws. Third, there is a definite risk in sequential or consecutive bouts, whether on the same day or the next day, and tournament style competition.

What defines an amateur?

The first issue we face is that we are dealing with amateurs. Now, on the surface, this doesn't sound bad. But, that is not necessarily the case. I can tell you that the word "amateur" does NOT, I repeat, is not equivalent to "easy" or "light" or "in good fun". All too often, it means things are often done amateurishly. Note, though, that these amateurs are not the same as amateurs in USA boxing for example. Those amateurs have well-established training regimens, coaches, regulation, etc. that TSEC competitors do not have. In other words, USA Boxing amateurs are not just amateurs, these are *initiated* amateurs. So there is an important difference between "amateur" and "initiated amateur".

Putting it another way, the problem with working with uninitiated amateurs is that there is a huge variability between each one. Some are highly trained fighters ready to turn pro. Others, on the other hand, and this often includes a majority, have no fighting or martial art experience, no adequate conditioning, and no proper health screening.

I've personally seen beer-bellied bullies enter contests and think they can fight. I've seen smokers wheeze so badly before contests that I had to disqualify them. I've seen kids cut weight so improperly that they've lost consciousness even before they get into the ring. I've seen a fighter lie on his pre-bout physical form about a spinal column defect and become temporarily paralyzed in the cage recovering the use of his limbs only after the pressure on his spinal cord was relieved. Recently, there was a death in an amateur event due to a medical condition the fighter deliberately left off of his medical form.

The main issue here is, again, medical. Amateur MMA bouts are often riddled with amateur strikes and lack of, or varying, fighter technique. That means the injuries are often odd, non-standard, repeated, and sometimes even unrecognized. For example, flash (or transient) knockouts occur and are often missed by novice officials. Basically, there are a lot of concussions that happen and go unrecognized. Undoubtedly some of the deaths associated with TSEC have been due to second impact syndrome, or, the effects of a second concussion before the first one has had time to heal. While there is a lack of large scientific studies here, the sheer numbers of deaths due to brain trauma and second impact syndrome cannot be argued or denied. It has, though, been statistically shown that these fatal injuries occur in the later rounds or bouts of TSEC tournaments.

The bottom line about the first point I'm trying to make here is that combat arts are inherently risky. This is not table tennis. And, when working with amateurs, certain risks including the variability of the health, conditioning, skill level, and weight cutting techniques are not "easier because they are amateurs", but they are really much, much worse because they are often not done correctly. Here I'd like to use what I call the race car analogy. Everyone can drive a car. We even start out as teenagers. But driving in a professional race is inherently dangerous, as are martial arts. Who do you think is more likely to get hurt in either, the amateur driver or the professional driver? Would you want to be racing next to the sixteen-year-old driver with a learner's permit?

The Mismatch

But this variability in skills does not only cause problems from this standpoint, it also allows for a very, very serious problem called the mismatch – a problem that is magnified in TSEC style and amateur elimination tournaments. And anyone in the know with combat sports will tell you that this is when medical personnel get concerned. It's when the ringer steps in the ring for the prize money and knocks out the inexperienced amateur. To illustrate this I'll give an example of the other end of the spectrum – the Pacquaio-Mayweather fight. No ringside physician in the country was very worried about the safety of either of those fighters because first, they were in the finest condition, and second, they were experts in their field. Most, if not all of these amateur fighters, are neither this conditioned or skilled. I don't need to tell you that this is not what we want.

Additionally, mismatches occur for other reasons than skill. There can be a weight mismatch – for example a 140-pound fighter who fights in a 140 to 160-pound weight class. Say for example he does not cut or lose weight for the fight. But a 180-pound fighter dehydrated 20 pounds (which is possible and often done) weighs in at 160. Now you've got a 40-pound swing – a real problem that will without doubt predispose to injury. For all the lawyers out there, a significant mismatch is directly analogous to the “eggshell skull” theory in tort law.

The Ringer

And then there's the “ringer”. These events often attract ringers, people who have extensive training but not yet competed, or have competed to a significant degree and lie on the application, and enter the contest for the rent money or alimony.

To illustrate this, there is a YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LX8894xEPBA> that shows a MMATSEC match. At first, you might not think there was a mismatch. But on closer inspection there is. There a few things to point out here. First, there is approximately 100 pounds difference between the contestants. Second, the lighter fighter was knocked out cold. Third, the winner was Butterbean – a household name in the fight industry. Mr. T once fought in one of these tournaments. How would you feel if your son got into a ring and then Mr. T entered the other corner?

At this point, I would like to point out some things I've seen in professional bouts, again for the purposes of illustration. When working professional bouts, I've seen a fighter who was completely blind in one eye want to fight – and his excuse was that other states had allowed him to fight. I had a fighter nearly die from heat stroke and dehydration – the only reason he is alive is because we got lucky by having the excellent paramedics we had that night. I've seen a fighter who had a bleed in his brain suffered in a previous fight, then with surgery and a steel plate covering a hole in his skull, and then try and fight again. I've seen a fighter forge physical forms to try to get licensed in Illinois. And these are the Pros!

The reason I bring up these experiences with professional fighters is that these guys are highly and tightly regulated. And, they and their promoters and managers know better than to try to pull this stuff and yet they continue to try. My point here is that things like this go unrecognized and often unaddressed with amateurs. In truth, amateurs should be more tightly regulated than the pros, not less. Again, and I cannot emphasize this enough, the word “amateur” does not mean “less dangerous.”

The Purse

I'd like to address the money component. When prize money is given to amateurs, they are no longer fighting only for the sport, but for the money. Which means that some fighters will focus not on the fight, the preparation for the fight, or anything else except the prize money. Just because a statute or rule says that even though there is prize money that they retain their amateur status doesn't really cut it. Actions speak louder than words here. I'll give another example from my personal experience. I know a professional boxer who is a journeyman fighter. His record is something like 1 win and 26 losses. I saw him get in the ring and get pounded. As he was leaving the ring and said to me "I just got the rent money". The argument has been made that if it's called a "stipend" or "honorarium", or if it's given "to the fighter's gym" that it doesn't matter. The truth is that it does. Even if the money is given to the fighter's gym, how that fighter approached that fight changes. Bottom line: Money changes the game and there's no way around that.

Sanctioning and Regulation

Is it possible to eliminate the risks associated with this first of three main issues? The answer is "possibly" at best. The solution would be increased regulation from a state perspective, in addition to having effective sanctioning bodies. And, these regulations would have to be in accord with other state and nationally accepted standards, for example current requirements for amateur MMA sanctioning bodies. More specifically, contestants would have to have some kind of documented experience in a martial art. For example, a few dozen amateur boxing matches, documented training in a respected MMA or kickboxing gym, collegiate competition in a combat sport, or something along those lines. But, the problem here is, of course, that this process is murky and difficult to enforce or execute at best.

There has in the past been a significant lack of sanctioning and regulation, with loose structure and laws. First let's ask why we have sanctioning bodies and commissions. The answer is to protect the fighters. These fighters are our sons, our daughters, and our constituents. The question begs, though, is who are we protecting them from? We are of course protecting them from each other, but more importantly from unethical promoters, unethical managers, uncaring trainers, etc. Most importantly we are protecting them from themselves. The best analogy of what a commission does to protect a fighter from themselves is to say to them "buckle up, it's the law" as they enter the ring. These protections include educated match making, hiring and assigning competent, professional officials and medical teams, enforcing codes on physical plant and equipment, enforcing licensing codes such as screening fighters for hepatitis and HIV, and so on.

Sequential or Consecutive Bouts

One important question is why some martial arts can have sequential bouts and others cannot. The answer lies in the style of the particular art. Specifically, hard style versus soft style, and how much physical damage occurs during a bout. Soft styles are those which have more grappling and rolling, and hard styles have more "hard" strikes and kicks. In martial arts, less physical damage occurs in soft styles like Aikido and wrestling, and more damage occurs in hard styles such as Muay Thai and Tae Kwon Do.

One illustrative analogy uses different sports. If we imagine a spectrum of physical damage per game or bout, and place common professional sports on that spectrum, the idea becomes clear. At the “soft” end would be baseball. At the “hard end” would be professional boxing. Basketball and football would fall in between, with basketball being placed closer to the soft end, and football being placed closer to the boxing end. What you will also notice is that how often these sports can be played is likely a reflection of the recovery time athletes would need in between games or matches. In baseball you can play a double header, even going into extra innings. Football, on the other hand is only played once a week. Boxing has a minimum two-week layoff time, and that is assuming there are no medical suspensions. Now let’s apply the same concept, but now only using martial arts. Going from soft to hard, one could list them in this order: Aikido, wrestling, Jiu Jitsu, Judo, amateur boxing (with protective gear), Kung Fu and Tai Kwan Do (with protective gear), kickboxing, Muay Thai, professional boxing, MMA. Putting it another way, you can wrestle and do Aikido all day long without taking much physical damage and risk. On the other hand, that is not the case for hard styles such as MMA. So, sequential or consecutive bouts for hard styles can have much more serious ramifications. And, it follows, that the more physical damage a sport has associated with it, the less possible and feasible it is to have consecutive or sequential bouts. Putting it in an illustrative way, baseball players can play double headers because they can. Football players don’t play two games in a day because they can’t – and the same goes for hard-style martial arts.

Some may raise the question of why can Glory Kickboxing have a tournament style event? The answers are several fold. First, they are highly-trained professionals, not amateurs – see the Pacquiao-Mayweather analogy above. This means that there is much less likely to have mismatches in skill, conditioning, and other aspects that you would find in amateur events. Second, it’s highly regulated by its own rules and is subject to high-level commission oversight. Third, these athletes are required to have a physician exam and clearance in between each bout. Fourth, these matches have shorter rounds and use full gloves, as opposed to MMA. While it may sound counterintuitive, from these aspects, professional kickboxing could be considered safer towards its individual athletes than amateur kickboxing.

The next question that follow is: if strict commission oversight and regulation make professional kickboxing tournaments safer, couldn’t it do the same for amateur kickboxing or MMA tournaments? It is my opinion that the answer is “no”, and that is specifically because of the first reason above – the nature of amateur events and the high degree of variance of amateurs’ skills and conditioning. It’s highly doubtful that regulation could compensate for the dangers introduced in that context.

Tournament Style Format

I will personally tell you as a former collegiate wrestler that part of tournament style competition is to finish off your opponent as soon as possible in order to save your energy for the next bout. When transposing that thought process to full contact martial arts, it lends to a very, very dangerous scenario, one that ends up losing any regard for the opponent’s safety – even if it’s unintentional. In other words, tournament style approaches to competition are better reserved for sports where advancement in the tournament is not directly tied to injuring the opponent. Putting it yet another way, what makes martial

arts and combat sports different from other tournament style sports is the use of deadly force. And anyone that argues this point is in error, because people do die in this sport, and they die as a direct consequence of getting hit by their opponent – that is deadly force. Putting it bluntly, tournament style or elimination style competition and sports that utilize deadly force is a bad combination. It makes “elimination” a very literal term. Here lies the biggest problem with TSEC tournaments. *There is no possible way to avoid or decrease the medical risks of fatal head injuries associated with sequential or consecutive full-contact amateur kickboxing or MMA bouts, especially in a tournament format.*

Bottom Line

The most important point and most serious problem with TSEC is that it is not possible, and I want to repeat this, it is NOT possible that any amount of regulation or legislation could in any way decrease the very real, demonstrated rates of death associated with repeated amateur bouts especially in a tournament format. It is my opinion as a nationally recognized fight physician that this is the specific reason, in addition to the number of fighter deaths that have already occurred, that nearly 40 states do not allow TSEC or elimination style amateur kickboxing or MMA tournaments.

A Personal Note

When I was an athlete I knew what it was like to be injured and not care about the injury, to want to work through it to the point of not being responsible about it, to not care what the long-term risk would be. I’ve been there. When I was a coach, I knew what it was like to view those kids as your own, to even want to bend the rules for them and then struggle inside to not do so and play fairly, knowing that if your kid took second to someone who cheated, that life lesson would stay with that kid for decades, a much more valuable thing than any gold medal. As a ringside physician, I’ve seen athletes get angry with me for making them follow the rules, and then that same athlete, after they got knocked out or even just scared at something in a bout, look at me and tell me “I’m glad you’re there in my corner, Doc.”

Regarding any economic arguments a promoter may have, well, no one is telling them that they can’t make money off of the fight game. They just have to do it differently. There’s an old saying that says “It’s not enough to do the right thing. You have to do the right thing the right way.” And there’s a corollary to this: if in the public eye, you have done the right thing the right way while also maintaining the appearance of doing the right thing the right way in order to convey that you are doing the right thing.

Summing up this presentation in a few sentences, I’d like to end with the following statement. I love a good fight. I really do. But I also don’t like a bad fight. And, unfortunately, I cannot see any way that amateur kickboxing or MMA tournament style competition can result in a good fight. As a ringside physician, if offered the chance to be part of such an event, I would unhesitatingly say “absolutely not.”