



## Mixed martial arts a bloody barometer

The Globe and Mail's front page recently featured a photo of an NHL player knocked out on the ice. The accompanying story focused on concussions in professional sports, and a tragic succession of brain-injured players. This wasn't the only story on male-on-male violence on the Globe's front page that day: Vancouver city council has voted to allow mixed-martial arts competitions in the city, under a two-year trial. Also known as "extreme fighting," the Thunderdome-like sport is considered by some to be a bloody barometer of our times.

BY VANCOUVER COURIER JANUARY 8, 2010

The Globe and Mail's front page recently featured a photo of an NHL player knocked out on the ice. The accompanying story focused on concussions in professional sports, and a tragic succession of brain-injured players. This wasn't the only story on male-on-male violence on the Globe's front page that day: Vancouver city council has voted to allow mixed-martial arts competitions in the city, under a two-year trial. Also known as "extreme fighting," the Thunderdome-like sport is considered by some to be a bloody barometer of our times.

Over coffee, I asked David Hatfield, a Vancouver leadership consultant and facilitator who specializes in masculinity work, what he thought of this ironic juxtaposition of news items.

Extreme fighting is a "symptom" of a wider social malady, Hatfield observes, though he prefers to deconstruct it than dismiss it. "It's a very different kind of sport, but it is still a sport," he insists. After a moment's thought, Hatfield draws on theologian Matthew Fox's observation about why so many middle-aged and older men watch sports on TV. "Fox said it's because it reminds them of a times when they felt that alive themselves. All you cared about was the next play, or scoring. The great satisfaction of making a pass, or being one step ahead of everybody and you didn't even know how you did it. Being physically fit, unencumbered, feeling fast."

The articulate, quietly intense educator has conducted seminars and workshops throughout the world, from Latin America to New Zealand, on gender role explorations, conflict transformation, improvisational singing and youth leadership. With his ongoing men's studies course called "Manology" at Vancouver's Roundhouse Community Centre, he has turned his attention to the city's local circle of men, inviting them to gather and build community as they question and redefine the two-dimension male role scripts provided by society.

"I appreciate the training of extreme fighting, the stakes are very high. You could easily end your career

in a fight. But these days I'm trying to pay attention to things at a mythological level, by watching the stories that the culture tells itself, through Hollywood films, through sports events, through TV shows.

"We still have this misunderstanding of the warrior archetype, in that we confuse the soldier with the warrior. While both are skilled, the soldier obeys orders from officers and is a passive part of large military machine. The warrior obeys the heart, is introspective, community minded, nobility-driven and thus, not for hire."

So what would he call these extreme fighters--soldiers or warriors? What are they fighting for? "It's just personal glory," he says. "They don't fight for a cause, they don't fight for a culture. They fight for personal opportunity and financial reward. And that's a huge part of what we're drunk on as a culture: individualistic power."

If you're a fighter in a ring, throwing everything you have against a powerful opponent, the moment matters, he observes. "Everything about your performance matters. And for every mistake you make you're going to endure pain, or shame. That is a 100 per cent real, and I think that's the biggest draw of all. But it only matters for a very short period of time, and then it's over, and because it never fully satisfied the core need, you have to go back and do it again. That's the hallmark of an initiation that's not being done properly--you have to go back and do the same ritual over and over again."

The male struggle for status, money, sex, or other forms of conquest, is "an immensely powerful and attractive success descriptor" for western men, the consultant adds. But it's a vicious circle: that very competition reinforces the endemic isolation that, for Hatfield, is the hallmark of current masculinity. "My efforts are aligned with the warrior archetype; a heart centered and self-aware masculinity, unafraid of what's on the inside or outside."

Mixed martial arts don't seem to fit in well with Vision Vancouver's espoused socially conscious philosophy, Hatfield notes. But if the sport comes to one of Vancouver's sports complexes, it could make an "interesting field trip" during the Roundhouse course on manology, he says with a puckish smile.

More on Hatfield's work next week. To check out his course at the Roundhouse, go to:  
<http://masculinity21st.wordpress.com>

[www.geoffolson.com](http://www.geoffolson.com)

© (c) CanWest MediaWorks Publications Inc.