“Human Cockfighting.” In 1998 that was the label John McCain applied to the increasingly popular sport known as mixed martial arts (MMA) or "cagefighting." During the 1990's, this fledgling sport was criticized by pundits on both sides of the political aisle as an unnecessarily violent spectacle that appealed to the worst of human nature. In the new millennium however, cage fighting has been repackaged and sold to the American public as the combat sport of the future. Since the appearance of the reality show “The Ultimate Fighter” in 2005 which exposed this activity to an even broader audience, MMA has become one of the fastest growing sports in the United States. Recently, sports writers and journalists have argued that MMA (which is also sometimes called “ultimate fighting”) has supplanted boxing as America's pugilistic pastime. Today, MMA’s top athletes receive celebrity status, appear in movies, TV shows, and commercials. Mainstream media outlets such as ESPN and FOX cover these events and enter into lucrative partnership agreements with promoters.

In the mid 2000’s, just as mixed martial arts was edging its way into the mainstream, my colleague and I were in the midst of conducting a participant observation study of cage fighters in 5 gyms on the east and west coasts of the United States. At this time (surprisingly to some), many of the participants in these gyms were college educated men and women from the middle-class (including doctors, academics, real estate agents, and teachers). These people made numerous sacrifices outside of the gym in order to continue cagefighting. They had to deal with the raised eyebrows of colleagues, the strain 20+ hours a week in the gym placed on romantic and family relationships, the chronic fatigue (which had an effect on their day-jobs), and the injuries that resulted from training and competing. We examined why these individuals, who had access to more traditional pastimes and sources of status, were so hooked by the gym. Certainly, these were not the inner city boxers or street corner men described by past ethnographers. So why did they do it?

Over the course of the next three years, we immersed ourselves in this world. We spent upwards of 20 hours a week in the gym, dealt with injuries of our own (including broken noses, cracked ribs, and torn ligaments), and experienced the interpersonal strains this activity involved. We even competed in cage fights ourselves. Our mothers were not pleased with us. In the process, what we observed was surprising. Contrary to both popular and scholarly accounts that cast “cage fighting” as violence run amok, we found that both the gym and the cage were highly organized and rule bound. The men and women who participated made sense of the activity not in terms of "violence," but community. Excessive aggression (either in talk or behavior) was not tolerated in the gym or after the match. Caring for one’s “training partners” and “gym mates” was not only encouraged, but expected.

In the midst of cagefighters, we found a world where people used seemingly peculiar practices to form a community that reinforced a brand of middle-class American morality. Rather than providing a “fight club” like rejection of American ideals, the gym and cage were typically seen by our subjects as spaces where the individualism, voluntary community, and meritocracy that underpinned their “moral world,” were alive and well.
Our subjects deeply felt that in the cage and gym unlike the larger world outside, how they were perceived by others was the result of who they “really were”. They saw the gym as a special place where like minded individuals could come together to act “authentically” (as they put it) in a way that reflected what they valued. The cage was seen as a place where they could test themselves against others to reveal "who they were" to themselves and others. The subculture held particular sway over its members because the middle-class participants felt that its ideals, status hierarchies, and daily practices more directly embodied the deeply embedded principles of middle-class morality and habitus than other elements of their lives. Ironically, what pundits lambasted (and lambast) as "the worst society has to offer," was in fact a classic American community (with all the inequalities and contradictions which this entails). This photo essay provides a window into this world, and a glimpse of how its peculiar rituals appear in everyday life.

The full academic article can be found here: [http://rd.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11133-010-9175-8](http://rd.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11133-010-9175-8)

Training: The minutes spent in the cage are dwarfed by the long hours at the gym training the body and mind. Top: Two partners train in Brazilian jujitsu. Bottom: "Working the bag"
Status: Sparring is one of many everyday rituals that influences the prestige a gym member holds in the community (right).

Coach: Coaches play a key role in the gym. They not only train the fighters, but serve as organizational caretakers who must settle dispute, articulate values, and maintain order (above).

Community and Camaraderie
For many of the fighters one of the prime appeals of cagefighting was the ability to be part of a tight-knit community that (viscerally) reinforced typical American ideals. Top: Two gym members talk after kickboxing practice. Left: The team poses for a picture after a submission grappling tournament.
Family Affair: Gym members often talk about the gym members as part of an extended family. On holidays and special events, it is not uncommon for children, spouses, and friends to congregate at the gym (left).

Gender: More men participate in MMA than women. However, women were not necessarily excluded. Many assumed prominent roles within the gym as fighters, coaches, and training partners (right).

The Match: Although the lead up is long, the fight itself is often “nasty brutish, and short.” Left: An amateur fighter gets knocked out in the first round by a flying knee.
After the Ritual: Once the fight is over, fighters are expected to let any animosities go. They hug and congratulate one another, return to the gym, and start the cycle anew. Left: Co-author Darren Modzelewski compares notes with an opponent. Bottom: Another day back in the gym.