

# COMMERCIALISM, HYSTERIA, AND HOMICIDE

EDITORIAL BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

VIGOROUS training of mind, body, and soul in manly sport is a first-class thing; to obtain rest and enjoyment by looking at other men practice an interesting sport is entirely proper; excessive indulgence in the latter type of amusement, however, with the consequent distortion of the perspective of life, is of course noxious; and enjoyment in looking on at a sport because it is cruel, or is dangerous to the lives of those taking part in it, is thoroughly vicious and demoralizing. In theory all these statements are axioms; but the fact that New York now permits the existence of a highly commercialized variant of the prize ring, and, above all, the fact that the brutal slaughter attendant upon motor-racing is not merely permitted but extravagantly enjoyed throughout much of the Union, ought to warn us that it is high time to reduce these axiomatic theories to practice.

Boxing is a thoroughly good and manly sport. There are very few sports as good for strong young men who require an outlet for their vigor. It is an admirable thing to have boxing on board our war-ships, for instance. One of the incidents that first attracted my attention to a certain priest who was one of the best chaplains we ever had

on a battle-ship was the fact that he himself brought aboard a number of sets of boxing-gloves and started the men to boxing; I at once made up my mind that that particular chaplain was exactly fitted to be the spiritual adviser of his particular flock. When I was Police Commissioner, Jacob Riis pointed out to me the fact that in many quarters of the city the introduction of boxing clubs, conducted in a proper and healthy spirit, did much to reduce the worst gang evils of the neighborhood and to make the resort to deadly weapons in quarrels far less common.

But commercialism, though sometimes inevitable, is always an unhealthy element in any sport, and when it becomes the chief factor in continuing the sport's existence, it is time for that sport to be brought to an end. The events in Madison Square Garden under the new boxing law of this State are sufficient to show the great unwisdom of the law and its demoralizing effects.

Such a boxing contest is too unpleasantly like the gladiatorial games of later Rome, the objection being, not to the actual encounter between the two men, but to the mixture of commercialism and of hysterical craving for unhealthy excitement which seem to be the

predominant motives among the managers and spectators respectively. It must always be remembered that the mere spectators at any form of sport get little or no benefit from it save what is obtained from any other harmless diversion, and that it is both unhealthy and slightly ridiculous for them to permit their taste for looking on at a sport, especially at a professional sport, to develop into an absorbing passion.

"We none of us know everything, not even the youngest of us;" and America, still young, can well pay heed to the lessons taught by the career of Rome when Rome was very old. Three able men at about the same time happened to treat of this subject. Lovers of the curiously modern letters of Pliny will not need to be reminded of Trajan's contemptuous allusion to "those little Greeks," whom he jeered at because of their "inordinate fondness" for looking on at "athletic diversions." Trajan was a great administrator, a great fighting Emperor when the need for fighting arose, and just because he possessed the traits which made him a good citizen and a wise ruler we can afford to pay heed to his views concerning men who make healthy sports and innocent amusements ridiculous or noxious by exaggerating their importance, or, what is worse, by permitting them to be twisted into a species of pandering to the darker and more evil passions of mankind. Those who heartily believe—as I do—in athletics can well afford to call the attention of the worthy persons who get athletics out of the proper perspective to what Plutarch tells of Philopœmen. This fine soldier, "the last of the Greeks," whose great delight was in managing horses and managing weapons, was naturally fitted to excel in wrestling, and was urged to turn his attention to athletics, but after investigation he came to the conclusion that the decadent Greeks of his day paid altogether too much attention to athletic diversions of the artificial type, so that the athletes whom they admired and strove to emulate really wholly unfitted themselves to be soldiers because of the way in which they pursued their athletics and the absurdly disproportionate regard they paid to them. The gladiators of Rome were athletes trained to slay and be slain; yet, curiously enough, when regiments of gladiators were raised they usually proved unequal in combat to the regular soldiers. Readers of Tacitus will remember his comments on this fact when he

speaks of the defeat of the Emperor Otho's gladiators by the regular soldiers of Vitellius in a fight on an island in the Po. Athletic sports are a means and not an end, and he who puts them out of their proper place and diverts them from their proper and wholesome purpose is their enemy.

But the worst perversions of the love of sport are the desire to look on at sports because they are dangerous, and the desire to make money out of the hysterical and improper craving to witness exhibitions which derive their chief attraction from the imperilment of human life. Automobile-racing has become, from every standpoint, thoroughly unhealthy, thoroughly undesirable. The headlines of the newspapers which devote most attention to the meets emphasize the danger to life which is their inevitable accompaniment, and it is this danger, it is the possibility or probability of seeing some of the contestants killed, that attracts tens of thousands of spectators. No good whatever comes from these automobile races. They serve no useful purpose, and are of no benefit. We would not allow a series of races between champion engines, whether in the interest of two rival systems of railway or in the interests of rival locomotive manufacturers. Just as little should we permit the automobile race—and indeed the kind of aviation contest which is most dangerous to life. In the present stage of development of aviation, risks must be taken, and where flying-machines are to be used in war it may be necessary to train those handling them in a way which implies risk of life, just as the same thing is true in training cavalry; but neither in the case of automobiles nor in the case of flying-machines should we permit the kind of commercialization of sport which means the coining of money out of that shameful and hysterical curiosity which is to be satisfied only by seeing men risk their lives, where the risking of the life is itself what really attracts the onlooker, and not the courage or address shown in a manly sport. There are plenty of ways of testing automobiles by contests which shall be wholly free from the evils attending the automobile-racing meets; and if aviators have to perform feats in which the chief interest is the risk of life, these particular meets should not be public. There are few spectacles less elevating than is that of commercialism engaged in meeting the demands of hysteria by making provision for what amounts to homicide.