



For as long as man has been able to put one foot in front of the other, we've been trying to kick seven shades of shit out of each other. Since the dawn of human history, conflict has ruled our lives, whether it's been over food, land, influence or the one cavewoman who regularly shaved her legs.

As we evolved, both physically and mentally, so did our skills in fighting. Our bodies straightened up, our brains developed and strategy and technique became as significant as brute strength in battle. Discipline and training also grew in importance, as one-on-one combat gradually moved from gladiatorial "fight to the death" conflicts to more of a sporting pursuit.

Everyone was at it. The Greeks and Romans developed modern wrestling, the ancient Egyptians invented boxing and in Asia, martial arts involving kicks, throws and grappling became the preferred choice of unarmed warriors. When it came to thinking of ways to kick each other's arses, we humans could be quite inventive.

Most of the world's fighting disciplines developed in regional vacuums but with the advent of trans-continental travel, the world shrank and the exporting of fighting styles soon followed.

Suddenly jiu-jitsu was being taught in Brazil, wrestling exported to the United States and boxing techniques taught to students in the Far East. Eager to give themselves any edge over an opponent, fighters began taking these newly-learned skills and incorporating them into their own style of fighting. Whether they knew it or not, they became the pioneers of mixed martial arts, a.k.a. MMA.

But how were a disparate group of fighters brought together to create the biggest sporting phenomena of the late 20th century? And why has it proved so appealing?

Undoubtedly, MMA's allure is in the brutality of its combat. The blood trickling down the side of a fighter's face;

the pounding fists on an unprotected head; the neck of a barely-conscious opponent being squeezed until a limp hand taps the mat in defeat. It's car crash sport. You know you should turn away, but you can't help but look.

The sport is more than just voyeurism though. The combatants are focused, professional athletes who are dedicated to their craft. The stories of the fighters' lives, the theatre of the build-up and the physical and mental battles played out in the cage all make for compelling human drama.

The history of modern MMA is one of innovative teaching, family dynasties, larger-than-life personalities, bucket loads of cash and, of course, some of the toughest men (and women) to ever step into an arena.

Today MMA is the fastest growing sport in the world, with a global TV audience, massive merchandising franchises and superstar fighters who are as recognisable as any film or rock star. Once treading a fine line on moral and legal issues that threatened its existence, it is now a credible, regulated competition with a solid business plan, world-class fighters and a fiercely loyal fan base.

MMA has become the best combative sport in the world and the story of how it got there is as breathtaking as any championship title-winning rear naked chokehold.