Introduction

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An Introduction to the James Quirk Special Issue and the Economics of Combat Sport

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Abstract

The purpose of this special issue is two-fold. Firstly, it is a celebration of the contributions and life of James (Jim) Patrick Quirk. Jim's contributions to the field of economics and sub-discipline of sports economics span almost half a century, and he can rightly be considered one of the forefathers of the subject. The second is to consider an area that, to date, has received little attention in sports economics and is deserving of greater exploration – combat sport. Appropriately, two of the earliest working papers considering combat sport were co-authored by Jim Quirk, and therefore, it is fitting that this area is explored in the realization of this special issue.

Keywords

James, Quirk, boxing, combat sport

This special issue has twin objectives. The first is to celebrate one of the foremost international sports economists – James (Jim) Patrick Quirk – whose contributions to the field of economics and sub-discipline of sports economics span almost half a century. The second is to shed light on a sport that receives little attention in this area and is deserving of greater exploration – combat sport.

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Correction (November 2024): Article updated; for further details please see the Article Note at the end of the article.

Born in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1926, Jim would commence studying civil engineering at Marquette University in 1944. Serving in the war effort between 1944 and 1946 as a member of the United States Navy, Jim would return to his studies following the end of the conflict. His educational achievements would include a BBA in (economics) in 1948, a MA (economics) 1949 and a PhD (economics) in 1959 all from the University of Minnesota. Concurrent to his educational pursuits, his early career would see him commence work for St. Mary's University in Texas (1949–51), the Bureau of the Census in Washington, D.C. (1951–52), and the Department of Commerce (1952–53). He would work as an economist for both Pillsbury Co. and for Northwestern Bell in Minneapolis before returning to academia in 1958 to join Purdue University. He would teach there for six years before leaving to become professor of economics at the University of Kansas in 1966. In 1971 Jim joined California Institute of Technology (Caltech), where he worked until his retirement in 1987. During his time at Caltech he became an international figure in the field of sports economics and, over a period of nearly four decades became a pioneer in the area. In June 2020 Jim departed this world having been one of the forefathers of sports economics, leaving an indelible mark and enduring legacy in the area.

The marriage between these twin objectives – Jim Quirk and the economics of combat sport – can be found in two working papers by Jim and his co-authors Roger Noll and Joel Balbien. The first working paper, written in 1978, called "Economic Policy Analysis of Boxing, Wrestling, and Karate: A Data Management System for the California State Athletic Commission", is probably the first sole-focused exploration into the economics of combat sport. Using primary data, the authors investigate issues such as market concentration, competition and profitability. Balbien et al. (1978) note that the paucity of data and destruction of records limited the efficacy of the paper. A second working paper in 1981 – "The Economics of Boxing Regulation in California" – would seek to remedy this. The focus was narrowed to boxing, and the paper explored regulation within the sport, and the impact that regulatory rules were having on the welfare of athletes and the competitive performance of the boxing industry. While neither the 1978 nor 1981 papers were accepted in peer-reviewed journals – the subdiscipline of sports economics was in its infancy – both are very important precursors for what has followed. We are delighted that Roger and Joel have contributed two papers to this special issue. The first explains the origins of the 1981 boxing study, while the second is an updated version of the working paper "The Economics of Boxing Regulation in California". It is fitting this should now be published in the *Journal of Sports Economics*, having held the place of a seminal working paper in the area for more than forty years.

Despite an early exploration of boxing, Jim is probably better known for his association with baseball. Jim would examine various sports and competitive structures throughout his career, but baseball appears to have been his natural home. He would go on to produce various academic papers and books on the economics of the bat-and-ball sport, including *Pay Dirt* and *Hard Ball*. Much of this was co-authored with Rodney Fort. Together, Rod and Jim successfully produced peer-reviewed work and popular books in economics and sports economics for almost 30 years. Rod has contributed to this special issue by writing Jim's academic obituary. There is no person better placed than he to write about Jim's legacy and contributions to sports economics.

The remaining part of this special issue is then dedicated to three empirical papers. While Jim was not known for his love of empirical research, these papers are a reminder of how the field of sports economics has changed since Jim, and others, began their early explorations.

The first examines broadcasting demand for cable boxing in the United States. This is a timely question given the evolution of the broadcasting market, and the movement from traditional television and pay-per-view services to streaming services and online platforms. The importance of this issue is further highlighted by the evolution of boxing as a sport, considering the emergence of substitute products in the past two decades, particularly mixed martial arts (MMA). MMA is then the focus of the second empirical paper. The emergence of this sport and the future of boxing are considered. MMA's place in this issue is very important even though it is not listed in the 1978 study alongside boxing, wrestling and karate. Two years prior in 1976, a fight between Muhammad Ali and Antonio Inoki in Tokyo, under 'special rules', would be a precursor for what would follow. However, MMA's mainstream emergence would not start apace until the 1990s. The final paper examines how wages are used to compensate workers for the risk of reinjury, using the boxing ring as the place of work. Given the risks involved, it explores whether boxer price into the fight purse (payment for fighting) the risk associated with the recurrence of a past injury. More than 1,200 fights are considered in this unique empirical investigation.

Finally, this special issue has only been made possible thanks to the support of many people. A special word of thanks to all of those that have contributed to this issue, in particular Rod Fort, Roger Noll and Dennis Coates. All three have been great sources of advice and guidance from the outset and made this special issue a far easier project than it may otherwise have been. The Quirk Family have also been an essential part of this journey. A special mention to Jim's daughter, Jill Powell, and granddaughter, Julie Powell, who made Jim's unpublished work available and were very generous with their time and support for this collection of works. I hope it is a fitting tribute to the enormous contribution that their father and grandfather has made to the field of sports economics.

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Article Note

The paper by Balbien, Noll and Quirk mentioned in the Editor's Introduction has not been included in the issue. Unfortunately, because the combat sports industry has changed so dramatically since the original paper was written, and the role of Professor Quirk in its creation so important, the surviving authors have reluctantly concluded that revision of the original paper without Professor Quirk's participation is impossible.

References

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Author Biography

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