

Getting Punchy Fist-Fighting, Wrestling and Fight-Books

by Jeffrey Hull

Often and somewhat understandably, one may find this kind of question at various forums for Medieval and Renaissance German *Kunst des Fechtens* (art of fighting / martial arts):

Why are the knights in the fight-books never fist-fighting but instead wrestling?

There are some unarmed strikes amid the wrestling and dueling of *Kunst des Fechtens* in the *fechtbücher* (fight-books / fencing manuals) of the 14th to 16th Century. Indeed, the single ubiquitous term for a variety of strikes was *stöss*. This was and is a highly dynamic, quite contextual and often-mistranslated word; which was used in both unarmoured & armoured, unarmed & armed combatives; and which could mean “punch, kick, pummel, strike” or alternately “push, shove” – thus any sort of violent “jolt” – and only rarely “thrust / stab [with blade-point]”.

So we find in the fight-books a variety of weaponless strikes: jabs to body as per *Codex Wallerstein* (1380-90 & 1450s) and Hugues Wittenwiller (late 15th Century); kicks to groin, belly, knees & shins, as per Sigmund Ringeck (1438-40), Hans Talhoffer (1459 & 1467) Peter von Danzig (1452) and Paulus Kal (1460-70); head-butts as per Ringeck; punches to face as per Von Danzig; various “death-strikes” or “murder-jolts” (*mort stöss*) done to heart, groin, skull, throat/clavicles & belly of Ringeck; all congruous with the “forbidden wrestling” (*vorboten ringen*) of Döbringer & Von Danzig, the “murder-techniques” (*mortstück*) of *Codex Wallerstein* and “secret techniques” (*verporgen stück*) of Albrecht Dürer (1512), thus arm-breaks, leg-breaks, knee-kicks, bollix-kicks, finger-wrenches, eye-gouges, ear-grabs, nose-crunches, strangles and throat-presses; plus *unterhalten* (holding down / ground-work) as dealt with by Martein Hundtfeltz (1452), MS KK5013 (1425-30), *Gladiatoria* (1435-40), Ringeck, Von Danzig & Talhoffer; plus ubiquitous covers & blocks versus strikes. Yet none of them used unarmed striking as the primary and fundamental system for their martial arts – instead they used *Ringen* (wrestling). They do not seem to advocate a full and dedicated system of fist-fighting or boxing with requisite stances; focused only upon jabs, upper-cuts, hooks, crosses, knife- or spear-hands, palms, paws / claws & hammer-fists; or incorporating kicks like thrusts, sides, angles & rounds; and requisite tactics for such unarmed striking like interceptive-counterattack, panoramic-viewing, bursting etc. However, many of those very unarmed strikes & tactics are portrayed and/or described in the *fechtbücher*, or may be reasonably interpreted. Yet for the most part, unarmed striking is in supportive role to grappling in the methods of attack & counter of German wrestling. Indeed, there were full systems of wrestling during that time by *ringenmeister* like Jud Ott (early 15th Century), Hans Wurm (1507), and Fabian von Auerswald (1539). Plus there were substantial presentations by *fechtmeister* like Talhoffer (1450, 1459, 1467) and even by likely *fechter* such as the great graphic artist Dürer (1512). Even later civilian manuals continuing into the 17th Century, like those of Nicolaes Petter and Johann Georg Paschen, were still basically grappling arrays with some punches, kicks & knife-hands mixed in – thus hardly comparable to either boxing or *wing chun* as far as battering some thug with fists, although just as effective for hurting some thug nonetheless. Yet German fighters certainly understood “vital targets” – thus one may equate Ringeck’s *mort stöss an hertz* to the *shinzo zuki* of *buhei*, thus the *commotio cordis* defined by modern medicine.

At times one is tempted to make reasonable interpolation of any number of those strikes in a given fight-book interpretation – even if such are not explicitly stated, one should be applauded for filling the blanks with punches or kicks when such work. Yet the primary and fundamental unarmed system for the German knight – the one whereupon his entire *Kunst des Fechtens* was grounded, both unarmoured & armoured, unarmed & armed – was *ringen* (wrestling), a grappling system similar in its execution, techniques and mindset to traditional Japanese *jujitsu*. *Ringen* favours staying on one’s feet and in balance (*waage / gewicht*), with some groundwork, using any vicious chance one may have to get rid of the foe, which involved mostly grappling, locking, breaking, throwing and strangling but could have included punching and kicking. *Ringen* compares favourably with the combatives taught to any modern military, and indeed, is finding its way into such combatives nowadays.

So it seems that the Germans then were grapplers and not fist-fighters. Thus I would conjecture these seven interrelated reasons for why the fight-books teach wrestling and not boxing:

Getting Punchy

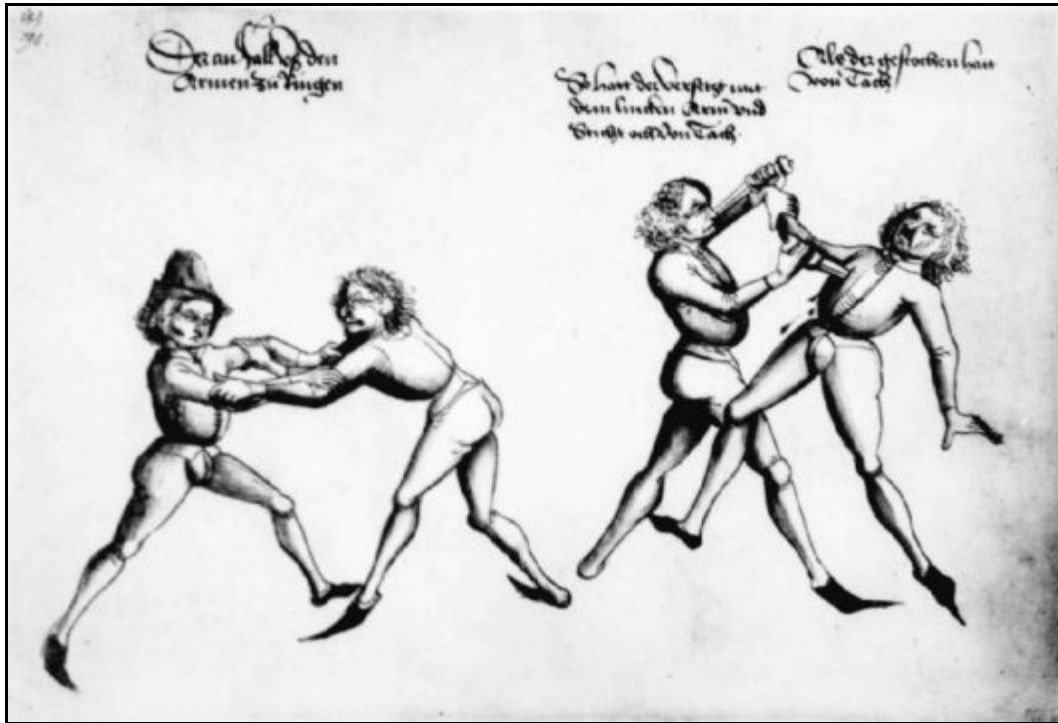


Wurm shows how to counter ye olde grab & punch (cross) (circa 1507)

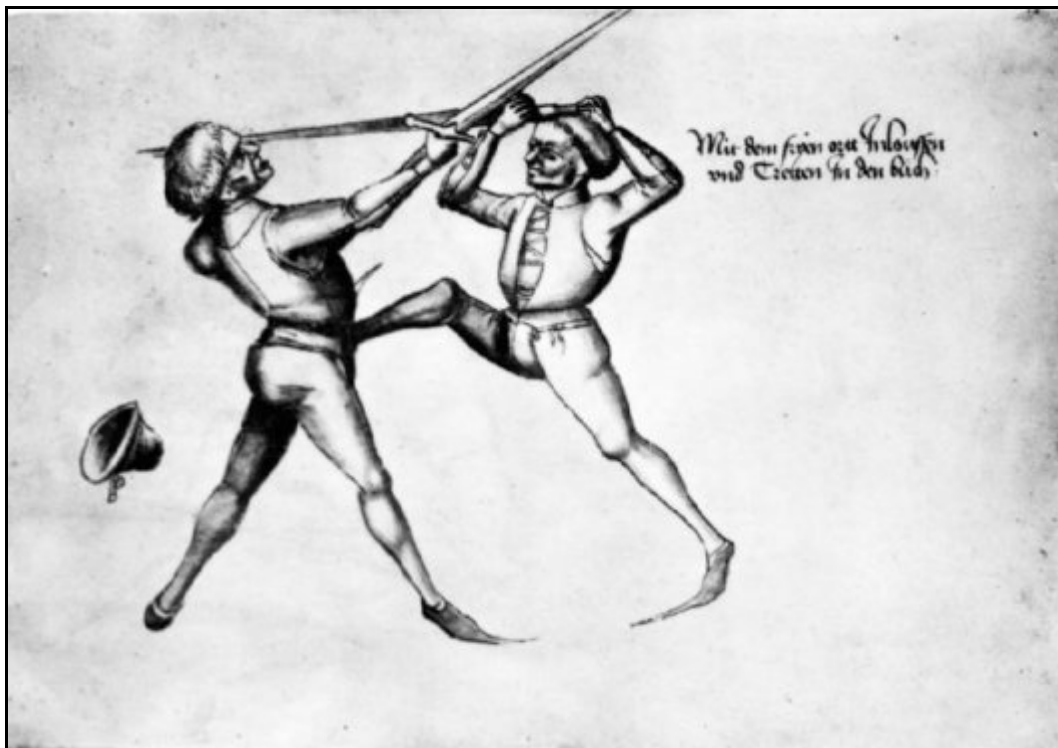


Talhoffer shows how to negate foe's dagger-stab (with winding grab/cover)
and fist-punch (hammer or hook) his mandibles (1450-pl.45)

Wrestling and dagger-fighting were identical in their moves & interrelated in *Kunst des Fechtens*



Starting clinch of wrestling ~ Block, step & stab versus stab from on high
We see the close relationship of wrestling and dagger-fighting portrayed here – Talhoffer (1467-pl.190)



From his *Fechtbuch* (1467-pl.12), Talhoffer shows how to interlope during unarmoured sword-fighting, with your sword-point free / open as you “tread” into the belly of foe, all to counter his attack. The kick hurts the foe in clothing and pushes the foe in armour. Whether you call it belly-kick, push-kick, *tretten in den buch*, *gastrizein*, *chassé median*, *mae-geri-kekomi* or front thrust kick, we all know it when we see it, do it or feel it.

Legal banning. The German knights of the 14th to 16th Centuries may have been banned by law from beating each other with their fists. This probably applied to anywhere but perhaps dueling barriers and battlefield – although such would prove pointless in armour anyway (dealt with later), and if illegal even to practice, then they may not have bothered with it period. Specifically and concretely we may read of royal, indeed imperial, banning and berating of fist-fighting by Kaiser Ludwig IV, who decreed to Friedburg an *ordnung* (17 July 1337, Frankfurt) that burghers not strike each other with specific assault of *faustslag* (fist-strike), lest they shall serve one month in jail; much less wound each other that way, lest they serve one-half year in jail; much less beat his foe to death that way, *daz got verbiede* (as God forbids), or else they get a whole year in jail. It is reasonable to think that similar banning went for the German knights and nobles as well, presumably to keep the men from maiming each other by thuggish blood-sport when they ought to train to fight wars against foreign enemies of the so-called Holy Roman Empire – thus not unlike Silver’s rationale for rejecting the rapier and advocating the sword in order to focus on defence of his beloved England. This may have to do with how wrestling allows the man defending himself, dependent of course upon his skill and the given situation, to exert a range of violence – from controlling & neutralising his foe to maiming & killing his foe – while yet the wrestling remains useful for protection of his person over that range of possibility. However, fist-fighting by its nature is an all-or-nothing defence – either you strike the foe violently or you do not – its violence cannot be varied suitably and still be useful. Even when it does suit your purposes, if you only make harassing jabs and buffeting kicks, then your foe shall just stand there and laugh at you. Whereas if you can and will, you may put your foe into a painful grapple or solid lock, then laugh at him while he suffers immobility and humility – yet you have not knocked him out or maimed him (just yet), as may suit your purposes. For such reasons it seems in Renaissance Germany that *faustschlagen* was simply not the thing to do, at least compared to *ringen*. ~

Differing tradition. Related to the foregoing, there is the legendary precedent set long before that time by a *de facto* “Roman Emperor” – Theodoric the Great (454-526), who was more precisely king of Ostrogoths, regent of Visigoths and ruler of Italy. This Germanic high king was said to have forbidden boxing and/or *pankraton* in the year 500 for its unchristian brutality, its last-vestige of gladiatorial obscenity, something loathsome to the Gothic regard for weaponry and duels as holy. However – this story proves impossible to confirm, despite its rabid proliferation amid the InterWeb, and must be treated as apocryphal (yet perhaps archetypal). For indeed, most all Europe shunned boxing for many centuries thereafter, from circa 500 to 1600, for whatever reason. The possible exceptions during that time were, unsurprisingly, some cities and regions of Greece and Italy. Boxing (maybe Dan. *basken*) finally had its public and widespread reemergence in Europe as “pugilism” in post-Renaissance England and Scotland circa 1650 to 1750. Howsoever, it does seem that the *pugilatorius* of Classical Greco-Roman Europe was undone and supplanted, one way or another, by the *ringen* of Medieval & Renaissance Germanic Europe.

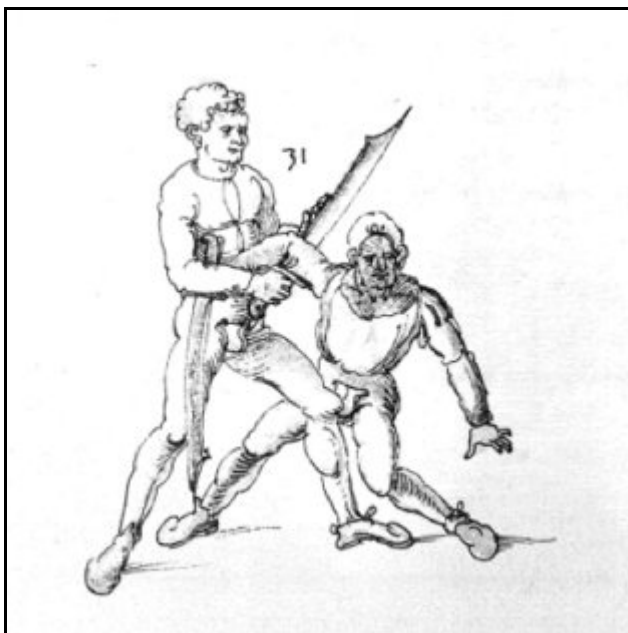
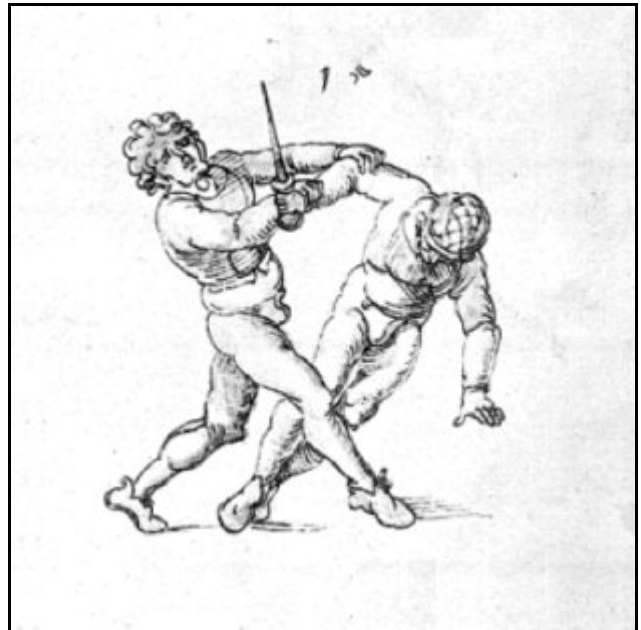
Interestingly, no less a Renaissance German personage than Kaiser Maximilian (1459-1519) partook quite openly of wrestling and encouraged its praxis. All told, we have evidence for both legal and ethnic disapproval for boxing yet legal and ethnic approval for wrestling among the Germans, which was both pre- and coeval to the period of the major *fechtbücher*, demonstrating not just differing tradition yet differing preference (as dealt with next). I confess that this difference surprised me, but then again, we do read of specialised *ringenmeister* in the *fechtbücher* for the period concerned – like Jud Ott, Wurm, Von Auerswald – but not of any sort of *faustmeister* or *boxenmeister* in any *fechtbücher* during that period. Modern German boxing champions like Max Schmeling (1905-2005) and others are progeny of that pugilism-boxing revival and not inheritors of its unbroken survival. Even early Teutonic literature confirms this grappling tradition, for the unarmed struggles in sagas like *Beowulf* (8th-10th Centuries) are wrestling and not fist-fighting (e.g. Beowulf versus Grendel & versus Grendel-Mother). Incidentally, it is funny that even in the middle 19th Century, during the undisputed “black-out” period when misunderstanding of past martially valid fencing was rampant, that apparently wrestling was recognised without argument to have been among the accomplishments of chivalric heroes – as Donald Walker tells us in his *Defensive Exercises* of 1840 – a recognition which still fails to be made even now by too many modern fencers and their so-called maestros.

The first martial art that any Teutonic youth learnt was likely wrestling. That is no surprise, if only because it is something which comes more naturally to youth and may be taught them more easily and safely relative to boxing; with no special gear needed other than a nice grassy field and one’s own body to practice it; and no need of the expensive support-system required to safely practice boxing. Likewise, a pugilist requires more time at training to achieve competency compared to the time needed for a grappler to achieve competency. A youth of any class or religion in Germany could take part in wrestling – thus why personages as diverse as Maximilian and Ott undertook its praxis. In context of all that, grappling had a place among the fighting arts of Medieval & Renaissance Germany, whereas boxing did not. ~



Paumgartner Altar
(left panel & right panel)
Albrecht Dürer (circa 1503)

Even half-armor made fist-fighting difficult, while full-armor made such absurd. Notice the special hairstyling which indicates that these knights would have been wearing some sort of helms. So if not for the sake of portraiture, it is implied that they would be wearing even more armour. And of course, these knights carry weaponry. The context all added up to making wrestling the sensible system of combatives for the German fighting man of the past.



Various armed plays showing wrestling used as needed during fights with weaponry – from the *Fechtbuch* by Dürer (1512). *Ringen* (wrestling) was designed to meld with the *fechten* (fencing) of the German tradition, whether in full battle harness or in street clothing. Notice (3) *ringen am schwert* (wrestling at the sword) leading to *schwertnehmen* (sword-taking); (15) grapple & break or throw versus dagger-stab; (31) grapple, trap & throw in the messer-fight; and (34) catch & wrench and step, arm-bar & throw in the messer-fight. The need for integrating unarmed combat and armed combat was very real to the German knight, so his *Kunst des Fechtens* addressed that. It is the same need addressed by modern military combatives like MACP, MCMAP, *krav maga* and others around the globe.

Wrestling superior. The knight, whether fighting unarmoured or armoured, found it more assured, effective and efficient to grapple & throw a foe to the ground, break one of foe's joints, and/or strangle him; than trying to punch him multiple times to knock out or hurt him. Certainly, the properly trained pugilist can indeed break bones in another man's body without injury to self, and if skilled, can knock out grappler with one strike. In unarmoured fight, hand-strikes of all sorts can be quite helpful – while in armoured fight the exoskeleton simply nullifies them, but for limited & rare shots or as set-ups for throws. The knight would find both striking and grappling useful in street-clothed fight – yet in the plate-harnessed fight, any punches and even murder-jolts avail him not, while many throws, locks & breaks still avail him. Plus a concern commented by harness-fencer Casper Bradak: There would have been the hindrance of frequent catching of one's own armour-plates upon those of the foe's harness as one tries to punch what limited targets may (or may not) occur.

Consider also possible body-mass disparity of combatants; and the likelihood of dagger-fighting as the endgame; and again as CB points out, how those plates can be used just as well intentionally as morbid weapons with certain wrestling moves. Unless of course a knight liked to unhelm himself for dramatic effect while proclaiming doom, allowing the other knight to punch his bare face & head – rather unlikely. One may argue that wrestling is an equaliser, in that the smaller fighter often can find chances to use the strength of the bigger fighter against him to devastating effect, instead of trying desperately to prevail in some slug-fest. However, one may also argue the opposite, that a small quick fighter may prevail, with skilled pugilism, against the big slow fighter. So we can find giant-killers in most any martial art, or at least, fearsome fighters who were capable of beating larger adversaries – Dan Gable, Rocky Marciano, Jack Dempsey and so forth.

Yet ultimately, in armoured context, wrestling is advantageous, and fist-fighting practically useless. Try unarmed strikes versus the foe in full harness and he laughs – but do limb-locks, joint-breaks and body-throws versus the same foe and he is laid low. It was a matter of what best fit the context of all fights that the German knight found himself fighting, usable for both unarmoured and armoured combat, as the fight-books well attest. This same rationale which helps explain why the primary unarmed combat of the German knight was wrestling and not boxing also helps explain why the primary unarmed combat of the Japanese samurai was *jujitsu* and not *karate*. Pretty simple really: Why use a 1000 pounds-force punch or 1500 pounds-force kick to foe's head when instead you may use a 3500 pounds-force throw of foe upon his head? Why beat the foe down when you can throw him into the ground? Lastly, as Meyer-researcher, fencer & pankratonist Mike Cartier commented, a skilled grappler is more likely to nullify threats of a skilled striker than the other way around. So it is a safe guess that the German knight found wrestling superior to fist-fighting for his variety of purpose and situation. ~

Priority of training. Proceeding from that, the German knights already spent enough time training in other martial arts – wrestling (of course), unarmoured & armoured longsword, spear, dagger, horsemanship, etcetera – than to try and find the time required to get really proficient as per the time a boxer, karateka or pankatonist requires. In any case, the wrestling of the German knight worked hand-in-hand with his main weaponry – spear, longsword, pollaxe, halberd, staff, messer and dagger. Indeed, it supported the method of fencing he utilised for all such weaponry quite nicely, especially the dagger, the techniques for which have a fluency that find their source in practically identical wrestling moves, as easily discerned in sources like Talhoffer (1450, 1459, 1467) and other masters. Thus praxis of wrestling was not any waste of time, as it supported the other goals of the German knight's martial training.

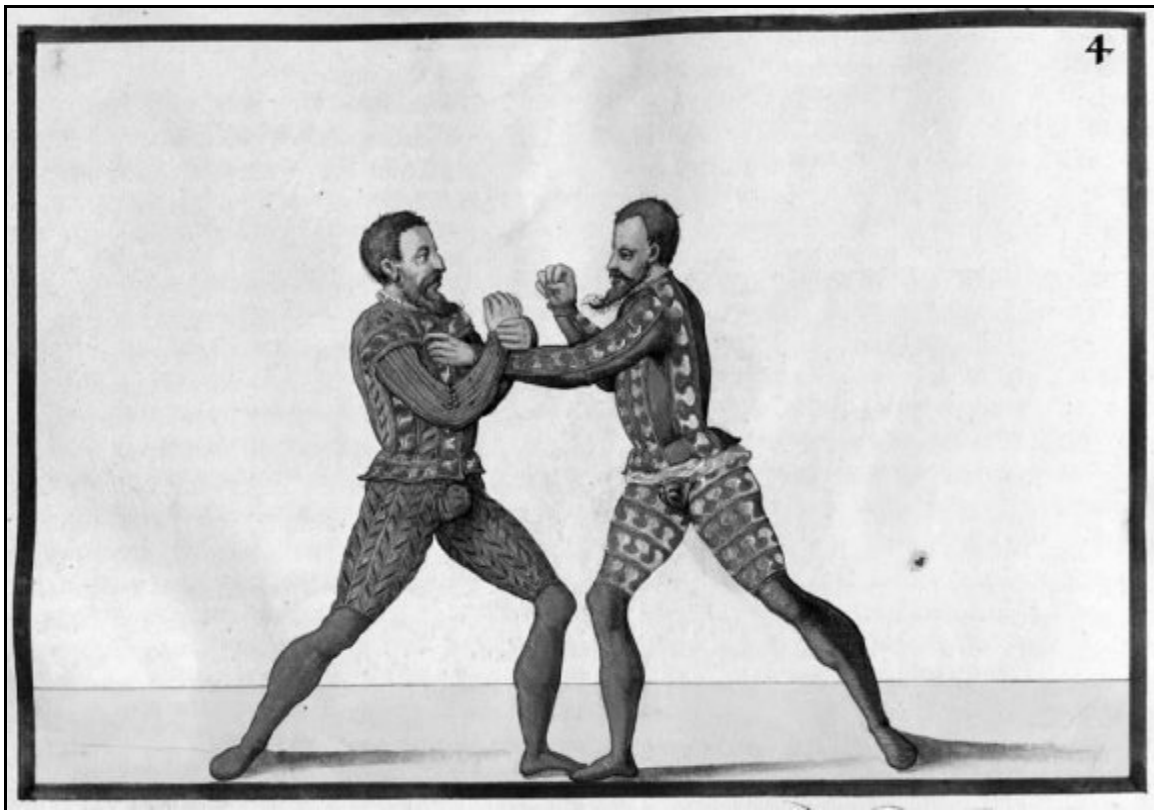
This simple paradigm also depends upon how much time is in each day; how much energy is in one's body; how many arts are desired to be learned; how much time is needed for the other daily duties of one's lands and belongings; how much time is needed for activities like hunting (itself a form of war-training, as Machiavelli asserted); how much time is needed to deal with other nobles; how much time one needs to eat, clean himself and sleep – you can do the math.

The German noble or knight had many tasks as well as many distractions, and so he had to choose not to do certain things and choose to do others, like anybody with lots of responsibilities, based upon what was most worthwhile to him. It was simply a matter of priority. Some martial arts, like wrestling, availed the knight more than others (as dealt with above), plus his obligations were always waiting, plus he needed time for recovery. The knight simply had a lot to do. ~

Getting Punchy



Goliath shows how to counter grab & punch (1510-20)



Mair shows how to counter grab & punch – from his *De Arte Athletica I* (1542)

Getting Punchy



Von Auerswald shows how to counter grab & punch (cross or hook) (1539)



One way Petter shows how to counter grab & punch (hammer or hook) (1674)

Risk of needless injury. Proceeding from that, even if the knight did take the time required to train at fist-fighting without cheating all the aforesaid concerns, none of that could change the inherently injurious nature of it. Admittedly, we are told in passing by some fight-masters to use punching as needed – Talhoffer in 1450 (Plate A) advises to have strong fists (*starck feüst hab*), and indeed, he shows a defense against dagger attack by negating with one hand and punching with the other (plate 45). But that is not the same as telling a knight to risk getting his hands and wrists banged-up or even broken while fist-fighting a sparring-partner, or punching an oak-tree 1000 times a day with bare-hands, or breaking boards & bricks that (as Bruce Lee pointed out) do not hit back – all so that he could not then properly grab the reins of his horse, or hold & swing his longsword, or draw his bow or wield a spear to hunt, or play his lute, or scribe with a quill, etcetera. Although he could have protected himself in sparring with some sort of padded gloves, leather helmet, body-vest & codpiece, he still would have lacked such in any unarmed & unarmoured fight outside of the training-hall, where things would have been done bareknuckled or lightly gloved at best. Plus fight-books simply do not show such suiting for any fist-fighting practice but clearly portray wambeson & trows worn to practice wrestling. Consider also the risk of hand-injury – whether cuts, jams, dislocations or fractures – is especially prominent if one uses exclusively straight punching akin to that of modern boxing at the expense of options like hammer-fists, palm-heels and elbow-strikes. Incidentally, one may notice that no animal fist-punches with its paws to hurt foe or quarry as does the human. Naturally this is due to different biomechanical factors, like how practically no animal has a paw evolved like the hand of the human; and to advantages like claws and often greater strength & flexibility; but also because such an unarmed method of striking as punching does not work with the natural flexion of the knuckles and joints, but instead unnaturally & violently compresses and even crushes them. Fist-fighting intentionally impacts the foe with parts of the body comprised of multiple small bones, the hands & wrists; whereas grappling hurts the foe by using much more of, or all of, the body to do locks, breaks, strangling and throws, which often impact the foe using the largest thing any of us can touch, the Earth itself. Add to this something that must have been apparent in the past as it is now – that the brain gets jostled and eventually permanently injured from multiple hits to the head over time. It is no secret that boxing-caused brain-damage can destroy a man's wits and personality. Not to mention other bad injuries like a broken jaw or nose. So although a skilled puncher can bone-break his foe without injury to self; and wrestling definitely has its potential for many minor and major injuries; relatively speaking, effective practice & execution of wrestling has less risk of concentrated & severe injury compared to effective practice & execution of boxing. Any such injury had its unfortunate social dimension as well (dealt with below). Surely the honest boxer, karateka or pankrationist may attest to his own injuries suffered in pursuit of toughening his hands, wrists and arms, and the troubles it caused him at other activities in his world. Injuring oneself in this manner would have hindered not only what the German knight liked to do yet also what he needed to do in his world – and thus such risk must have seemed quite needless to him and his fellows, and arguably to their fight-masters. ~

Cultural desiderata. Proceeding from that, if indeed the hypothetical boxing-knight dealt with all that in some unlikely way which proved workable, then there was still the culturally desired aesthetic to consider, a social expectation of how one presented himself to his peers. Simply put, knights in Germany – and for that matter in England, France, Hungary, Italy, Spain – liked to look handsome. And their ladies liked them to look handsome. Said ladies probably liked said knights to have faces that did not look battered and maimed, and hands that did not feel like mutilated leathery mitts. Indeed, one of the few junctures of *romanze* and *fechtbuch* is that each tends to portray the same sort of Medieval & Renaissance masculine aesthetic, whether in words of pictures, of the man both athletic and resplendent. The former quality is definitely found among top boxers, but not really the latter quality. Both gloved and bareknuckled brawling, for all the useful skills and methods, can make for some ugly guys. Add to that how it was ideal to be well-spoken and able to carry on some reasonable and intelligent discourse with others.

Throughout Medieval and Renaissance Europe, period literature – the Welsh *Mabinogion*, the German *Parzival*, the English *Le Morte d'Arthur* – and period artists – the German Dürer, the French Bourdichon, the Italian Raphael – all portrayed many handsome fighting men. Those works extolled the ideal manly aesthetic of the dignified, well-groomed, nicely dressed and athletic knight and noble. Arguably the rare portraiture of some *fechtmeister* (Talhoffer, Kal and Thibault) confirm that, while notable exceptions do not (Liechtenauer).

Indeed, if a knight could not carry and compose himself well among his peers, especially in dealing with his foes, because his face was mangled and his mind was addled from getting beaten-up in training, then he became a contemptible fool, not to mention that he defeated his own purpose of training to prevent injury to his person. A similar contempt nowadays would be that which self-defensive historical fencers have for injury-seeking mensur-fencers.

Getting Punchy



Having “strong fists” yet hands able to write and do other tasks were all desirable to noblemen – Talhoffer (1459)



A fight-master was never “too busy lookin’ good” to wrangle some ruffians – Talhoffer (1459)

Getting Punchy



Handsomness is next to godliness: Knights looking right-fine as expected by their peers and leaders, and thus wrestling befit them rather than the fist-fighting that “God forbids” – Kal (1462)



Louis XII of France Kneeling in Prayer, Accompanied by Saints
Jean Bourdichon (1498-99) – portrayal of ideally resplendent men

A further social dimension is arguably that fist-fighting was considered and disdained as a peasant's game. It is not by mere chance that during the 14th to 16th Centuries there were royally appointed wrestling masters but none for boxing, and in turn, when boxing did reemerge later in the 17th Century, it was the peasantry that took to it and thrived as its best pugilists, encouraged by an onlooking upper class. Howsoever effective, this method was unseemly to the nobility, it was beneath their dignity to take part – although spectating was just fine.

Although modern academia makes frequent mention and strident analysis of feminine beauty during the Medieval and Renaissance, relatively little thought is given to masculine beauty of that same time, even though historical literary and artistic evidence for both feminine and masculine aesthetics is prolific. Vanity knows no “gender-bias”, either then or now. Although this is arguable, it seems that such desiderata must have influenced choice of training. Why go out of one's way to punch it up with the foe when you can throw him down and be done with it? You could retain your face and your place with one smooth decisive move (a continuous lock, break & throw) rather than several risky cumulative moves (a series of feints, kicks & punches).

Doubtlessly German knights were athletic enough to do whatever they liked, or were at least willing to make themselves as athletic as needed to achieve their goals. This had not only to do with looking good, but being able to fight well. Indeed, fight-masters encouraged fine fitness in their fighters. For example, Talhoffer (1450) tells the fighter training for duel to work out for as much as four hours daily, two in morning & two in afternoon (*so sol er altag... sich arbayten zwo stünde...und nach mittag aber zwo stünde*), at a variety of fencing and sporting / fitness activities. Also, the fitness that these masters and fighters achieved can be ascertained from the portrayals of many well-thewed, gymnastically-shaped men in the fight-books. So if Germans knights were not practicing boxing, or for that matter, something akin to *karate* or *shaolin kung fu* or *wu shu*, then it hardly had to do with lack of athletic ability. Indeed, the training requirements of *Kunst des Fechtens* and resultant demands of the *fechtmeister* combined with social pressure to look good made knights desire to be athletic, beyond mere vanity, for sake of ability. (Thus, that differs from what was meant in the film *Enter the Dragon* when Williams boasts to Mr. Han about a seeming combination of vanity and style-over-substance by saying: *I'll be too busy lookin' good.*) Likewise, chivalric paragon Geoffroi de Charny considered athleticism and prowess as indivisible when he berated those knights who failed to maintain fitness (circa 1350).

Ultimately, this specific reason is not martial but social, which does not necessarily diminish its validity. When the German knight put all those societal factors together, it must have made fist-fighting as practiced and primary method of self-defence far less desirable socially and personally than wrestling – indeed, if not utterly undesirable. ~

Common knowledge. One last reason, perhaps impossible to prove yet plausible, is conjectured by harness-fencer & pugilist David Lindholm in his book *Sigmund Ringeck's Knightly Arts of Combat*, is that there may have been a conscious absence from the German fight-books of a developed system of punching and kicking because it was considered common knowledge. Moreover, dagger-fighter Jason Vail pointed out to me that *Codex Wallerstein* features several plays (thirteen from my count) that defend or offend with hand-strikes, not to mention a few foot/leg-strikes. So if everybody already frequently punched it up, but such was illegal or at least uncouth, then maybe a master only put such into his fight-books when he thought it was really needed. He hardly needed to tell a knight to punch or kick a foe who is upon ground after a throw so much as he needed to tell him to do a specific lock or break of neck, arm or leg.

Likewise, the wrestling of the fight-books hardly needed an alternative system of hand- and foot-strikes to make it deadly, to somehow fulfill it, since the wrestling already integrated strikes where appropriate. For example, the wrestling of Talhoffer, Ringeck and Von Danzig contains moves in their respective versions of Liechtenauer's *harnischfechten* / *kampffechten* termed and advocated as *verborgnen ringen* (secret wrestling) or *verpotten ringen* (forbidden wrestling) – down and dirty moves meant to cripple and maim, which were a mix of grappling and striking. Indeed, as early as 1443, Talhoffer shows & tells how an unarmed man uses one hand to ward off a dagger-stab then fist-punches his foe in the mandibles (*Der hat Im den stich entwert und will Im mit der fawst In das mawl stossen*) (plate 45). Also, one could assume many strikes and stances with *degen* as translating readily into construction of unarmed equivalents with empty hands – not unlike the integrated methodology of *escrima*, *arnis*, *kali*, *silat*, etc. Surely striking moves had been around for a while. The striking was mixed into the larger body of grappling that we usually and correctly call the *ringen* of the Germans, thus giving their wrestling adaptable diversity – a quality akin to that of modern military combative manuals, like any of the various editions of *FM 21-150*. So perhaps the common knowledge of basic striking was there all along. ~

Before I offer my conclusion, I should like to present analysis of the *ringen* of the *Dürer Fechtbuch* (1512) and comparison thereof to other *Kunst des Fechtens* sources.

Analysis of unarmed striking in the *ringen* of the *Dürer Fechtbuch* (1512) and comparison to *ringen* in some other *Kunst des Fechtens* sources. Here I make an analysis of *ringen* (wrestling) in the *Fechtbuch* by Albrecht Dürer (1512) for purpose of discerning *schlagen*, *stossen*, *streichen* or *verborgen stuck* with *haupt / kopf*, *ellenbogen*, *faust / hand*, *knie* or *fuss*. The listing provides only those phrases from the larger descriptions of techniques in plays 1-120 (in plates 1-40) of wrestling in that *Fechtbuch* by Dürer which indicate use of unarmed striking (*schlagen*, *stössen*, *streichen*) with various body-parts like head, fist / hand, foot, knee, elbow (*haupt*, *faust / hand*, *fuss*, *knie*, *elenbogen*) meant to cause damage in their own right by the offender to the defender via violent shock of impact-force. Thus the listing is meant neither as a complete transcript of each complete play, nor as a complete transcript of all 120 of the richly useful *stücke* (plays) of the Dürer wrestling. It is meant to serve as a concise yet meaningful basis for analysis due to the large number of *ringen* plays, one of the most extensive to be found in any single *fechtbuch*. It is of interest that the great graphic artist and fencer Dürer probably began this unfinished yet substantial manual at the behest of his martially artistic friend and lord, Kaiser Maximilian, basing a great deal of it upon the earlier work of the anonymous *Codex Wallerstein* (1380-90 & 1450s). I think the following study / foray shall prove beneficial.

The listing does not include use of *stössen* or *schieben* when meaning “pushing / shoving” with some part of body, often to set up a lock or help cause a throw, and thus not meant as a damaging strike in its own right. Any *fachen* (catching / intercepting; blocking) or *fahren auf* (moving up) are mentioned only incidentally as such defensive technique versus various *schlagen*, thus not really considered damaging or decisive in their own right. Most of the time, the words & pictures of interest are obvious as to the case of striking one way or another; however, arguable cases are presented, sort of dependent upon a given fighter’s interpretation, and are thusly indicated by use of (?). Instances of *abstossen* (shed / unload); *einstossen* (fracture / injure); and *einschlagen* or *umschlagen* (wrap / encircle / trap), are not included, as they are different grappling techniques unto themselves, not really of concern to this analysis. Notice that one could sort of consider the final *stossen...gegen* (smash...against) of §120 a “strike”, but sort of in reverse, for the entire *erd* (earth) does the “striking”, for it is really a very violent throw of foe into the ground, and so counts here as grappling.

Notice that discernable equivalents to these Dürer plays in *Codex Wallerstein* are thusly indicated (CW folio#), as per concordance by Friedrich Dörnhöffer (1910). Notice that Dürer says *verporgen stuck* (secret techniques) while *Codex Wallerstein* says *mordstück* (murder-techniques), which are included as such may be strikes with/to various body-parts depending upon the circumstances and juxtaposition of offender & defender. My thanks to Dörnhöffer, Cartier, Lindholm, Vail, Walczak and Zabinski for various ideas and research that helped me determine and estimate some of the things in my interpretation of this *Dürer Fechtbuch*. (See *Bibliography* for various works by them.)

First the plays that utilise *stossen* and *schieben* to mean “push / shove”, thus indicative of grappling

§5 von dir stossen (CW 18r & 19v)

§7 So er dich dan also von im stest (CW 34r)

§10 stos in nieder zu der erden (CW 35v)

§41 und stoß in auf den rucken (CW none)

§45 so schüpf im (CW none)

§59 So er dich dan also von im stost (CW 34r)

§61 So dich einer stost von im (CW 35r)

§63 und scheub in ein weill von dir (CW 56r)

§64 und scheubt dich fast von im (CW 56v)

§88 so stos in mit deiner rechten hant in sein lincke seiten flux von dir (CW none)

[Note Dörnhöffer remarks that from §91 to §120 the handwriting is not that of Dürer, yet doubtless it is his artwork.]

§94 und stoß in mit deiner lincken hant unten an sein uchßen...und stoß in hindersich (CW 68v)

§104 das er dich nit zuruck stoß (CW 18v & 19v)

§107 und stoß im auf sein rechte mauß (CW none)

§108 und stoß in mit deiner lincken hant unten an den ars (CW none)

§113 und schlag im mit den paiden fussen an seinen ledigen fuß (CW 47r)

§116 und stoß in von dir (CW 48v)

§120 und dich gegen der erd wil stossen (CW 50v)

Now the plays where *schlagen*, *stossen*, *streichen* mean “punch, kick, strike, jolt”, thus indicative of striking

§2 und stos in mit der hand andaz haubt (CW 16v)

§3 Auch magstu ein verporgen stück treiben thut es nott (CW 17r)

§15 so prich im aus mit einem verporgenen stück...Die selben verporgenen stück magstu in allen ringen treiben (CW 38r)

§19 oder stos in mit eim fus in die knie püg (CW 40r)

§22 (?) so stoss in mit deinem knie aussen an sein knie (?) (CW 41v)

§23 und stoß in mit dem kopf foren an die prust oder pauch (CW 42r)

§24 so stos im noch seinem lingen knie mit deinem rechten fus und mit deiner rechten hand schlach im noch seinen lingen arm...so schlag in mit deinem lincken fus an sein rechten (CW 42v)

§25 und stost dich mit seinem knie aussen an dein knie (CW 43r)

§32 (?) und mit dem rechten arm stos in sein linge prust (?) (CW none)

§33 (?) und will dich in die prust stossen mit seiner rechten hand oder mit dem elpogen (CW none)

§43 (?) und stoß in mit deinen elpogen in sein prust [Out of sequence with §42 in MS.] (CW none)

§46 und stos in mit deiner rechten hand in seinen lingen elpogen (CW 63v)

§47 Item schlecht dir einer mit der feust zu dem gesicht (CW 64r)

§48 Item so dich einer in daz maull will schlahen...und magst ein verporgen stück treiben (CW 64v)

§49 Item so dich einer mit der faust schlachen will so schlach im auch noch seiner faust mit deiner lingen hant von aussen (CW 65r)

§50 Item schlecht dir einer mit der faust noch dem gesicht, so foch den schlag in dein rechte hant und stos in auff den elpogen mit deiner lingen hant (CW 65v)

- §51 Item schlecht einer mit der feust nocht...Du magst auch ein verporgen stück treiben (CW 66r)
- §52 Item wenn dir einer zu schlecht so far im mit deiner lingen feust gegen seinen hals...oder noch einem verporgen stück (CW 66v)
- §53 er woll schlagen...so stoß in mit einem knie in die hoden (CW 66a)
- §54 Item schlecht dir einer nach den kopff oder angesicht so far mit den henden nach dem schlag und stoß in mit einem fuß in den pauch so erwerstu im den schlag (CW 66av)
- §55 Item schlecht dir einer nach dem maul so fach den schlag auff dein lincke hand in das glenck (CW 67r)
- §56 Item schlecht dir einer nach dem maül so fach den streich auff dein rechte hant (CW 67v)
- §57 Item schlecht dir einer zu dem angesicht so fach den schlag auf deyn rechte hant...und stoß in fast zu rucken auf in die hoch (CW 68r)
- §64 (?) und stos im von unden das glid entzwei (?) (CW 56v)
- §68 so stos in mit peden henden stark uff seinen rucken (CW 58v)
- §72 ob du willt magstu in mit einem fuss in den ruck stossen (CW 60v)
- §74 so stos in den mit einem knie an die hoden (CW 61v)
- §75 so stos im mit dem kopf in daz angesicht (CW 62r)
- §77 (?) und stoß im mit dem kopff in den pauch (?) (CW 63r)
- §79 (?) und schlach in mit deinem lincken fus an seinen rechten fus py dem enckell (?) (CW none)
- [Note Dörnhöffer remarks that from §91 to §120 the handwriting is not that of Dürer, yet doubtless it is his artwork.]
- §94 Item schlacht dir einer zu dem maul so vach den schlag auf dein rechte hant (CW 68v)
- §95 als wolstu in mit der rechten hant an das or schlagen...so schlag im mit deinem lincken fuß an seinen rechten fuß so schlechstu in auf den rucken (CW 69r)
- §96 und mit dem lincken stoß in in die zenn (CW 69v) [The words do not fully agree with the picture – probably the result of mistake on part of the other unknown scribe whose handwriting appears in last quarter of the draft, as noted above.]
- §98 und schlag in dan mit der lincken hant auf seinen hals (CW 70v)
- §102 (?) so stoß mit deiner lincken hant an sein rechte und mit der rechten an sein lincke (?) (CW none)

Because the sample listed above does come from such a large & contiguous body of 120 effective wrestling moves total, it may serve as a significant example to present a percentage of how much emphasis was given to such unarmed striking in German *ringen*. So not including the (?) arguable plays, that amounts to 27 of 120 plays, thus almost 23%; and including the arguable, then 35 of 120 plays, thus about 29%. Thus depending how you reckon it, either 93 or 85 of 120 plays (about 77% or 71%) have only grappling techniques as the means of punishing the foe, with no use of striking. So it seems that Dürer's *ringen* was meant to provide various defense against striking from thuggish foes; but also provide offense of striking for the knight or burgher; yet it meant to provide striking that was supportive and not primary, for ultimately grappling and not some sort of boxing served the unarmed fighting needs of the knight or burgher. Unarmed striking could be expected often enough, especially in Dürer's sort of military-

civilian wrestling Thus Dürer's wrestling retained the heritage meant for the reality of armoured battlefield conflicts (hence concern for holds, locks, breaks, trips & throws common to dueling & warfare), yet included protective maneuvers for the reality of unarmoured civilian conflicts (hence concern for punching and kicking more common to street-fights). There is basically no such thing as a successful strike-initiated play to found in this manual; and consequently, many successful plays are described for nullifying such first-strike threats. There seem to be no meaningful boxing-like stances, whether compared to ancient, revival or modern boxing stances. However, for example, some interpretation of stances & strikes similar to *pankraton* may be guessed with some trepidation or reservation. (See *The Pankration Fighting Stance Part I* and *The Pankration Striking Style Part I – Punching* in the *Bibliography* for ideas about that.) If anything, these stances make most sense for a primarily grappling art. As far as the portrayals of the unarmed strikes, their actual nature may be interpreted as a variety of things, either obvious or extrapolated – jabs, hammer-fists, crosses, hooks, palms, elbows, knife- or spear-hands, knee- & foot-kicks and so forth, depending upon the words, pictures, context and interpretation.

Yet let us take some earlier examples from the larger body of *ringen* found in Medieval and Renaissance German *Kunst des Fechtens* and compare their methods with that of Dürer's *ringen* for purpose of discerning respective emphasis upon unarmed striking:

Firstly, we consider the *ringen* of plates 190-221 of Hans Talhoffer's *Fechtbuch* (1467-Gothaer) that portrays 63 plays. Thereof, only 2 plays (plates 198 & 213) or about 3% definitely have any unarmed striking; and if we count the arguable plays (192, 204, 220), it does then amount to 5 plays, which still only amounts to about 8%. So thus, depending how you reckon it, either 61 or 58 of 63 plays, thus about 97% or 92%, deal with locking, breaking and throwing as the determiner of the struggle. Thus again, unarmed striking plays a supportive role to grappling and not the primary role in the German combatives of *ringen*. This is hardly surprising considering the very armour-based / duel-based wrestling of Talhoffer. Despite the wrestlers being illustrated unarmoured in *wamß & hosen*, Talhoffer's plays are doubtlessly meant to serve double-duty for the knight – thus the plays / techniques retain almost total validity from street to battlefield, and vice-versa. (Refer to my *Talhoffer Longsword: Armoured and Unarmoured* in the *Bibliography* for more about portrayal of combative vesture and the actuality of the combat.) Curiously, all 5 of those Talhoffer plays present unarmed striking as defensive counters to offensive grappling and not as defensive counters versus offensive unarmed striking – unlike Dürer's plays that present strikes as counter-attacks to both grapples and strikes. Although 3 of those 5 Talhoffer plays with strikes are typically supportive of locks & throws to finish (192, 213, 220), and the other 2 of those 5 plays mean for their respective strikes to finish struggles in their own right (198 & 204) – Dürer's plays exhibit such mix of method as well.

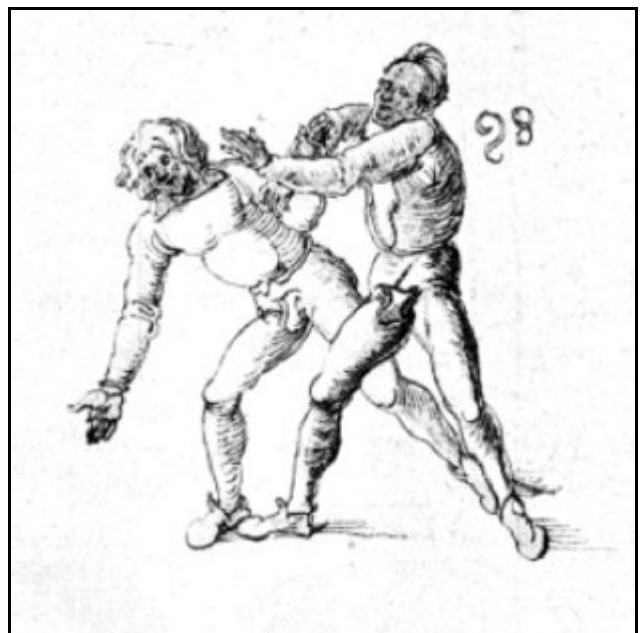
Secondly, we consider the *ringen* for armoured dueling afoot of folios 56r-57r & 58v-61r of the *Von Danzig Fechtbuch* (1452) that more or less contains 16 plays, including *unterhalten* (holding down / ground-work), plus general advice about tactics and explanation of the dreaded & notorious *verpoten ringen* (forbidden wrestling). Well, it seems that only 1 of 16 plays (about 6%) includes any striking (60r-60v), a devastating kick to knee or bollix, while the other 15 of 16 plays (about 94%) deal mostly with locking, breaking and throwing to put away the foe. Again, hardly surprising considering the context of the fighting, the armoured duel.

Lastly, let us consider the *unterhalten* (holding down / ground-work) of Martein Hundtfeitz for armoured dueling afoot of folios 90v-93r of the *Von Danzig Fechtbuch* (1452) that more or less contains 20 plays, with several of those utilising dagger, so not really an unarmed fight, but of interest nonetheless. Of those plays, it seems that the only unarmed strike is done with a free hand to trap or leverage one of foe's hands in order to allow a knight to get afoot again, and thus not to damage foe in and of itself. So really that is 20 of 20 plays (thus 100%) that are totally dedicated to the usual means of grappling. Again, the armoured context makes for the nature of the fight.

It seems that German *ringen*, especially when it got most punchy, made for a very dynamic wrestling that could counter or encourage unarmed striking with various parts of the body. Yet even via most liberal examples of that, such as the wrestling of Dürer, said striking was not other than supportive to the main body of grappling (holds, locks, breaks, trips and throws) advocated by that very wrestling. If I were to dare characterise in very plain general terms, German *ringen* has no commonality with boxing or *karate*; has some commonality with *pankraton*; some commonality with free-style wrestling; some commonality with *judo*; and has great commonality with *jujitsu*. German *ringen* was primarily a battlefield wrestling martial art that could be utilised as a civilian martial art. ~

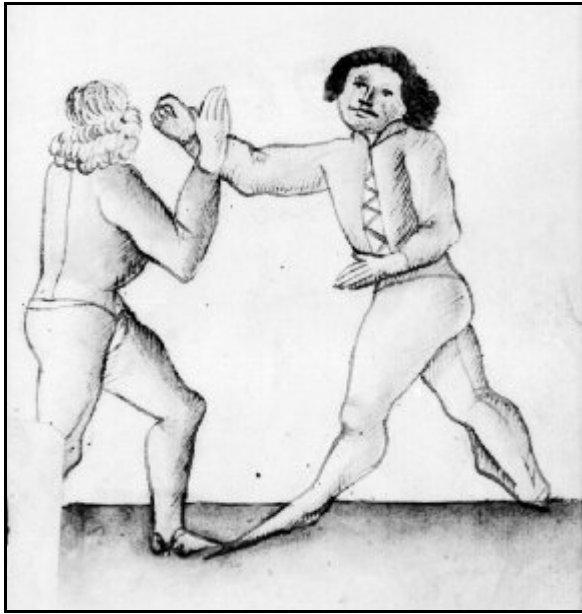


Various unarmed plays from the wrestling of Dürer (1512) portraying use of unarmed strikes amid the grappling



Various unarmed plays from the wrestling of Dürer (1512) portraying use of unarmed strikes amid the grappling

Getting Punchy



Codex Wallerstein shows how to block fist-punch (cross or hammer) (1380-90 & 1450s)



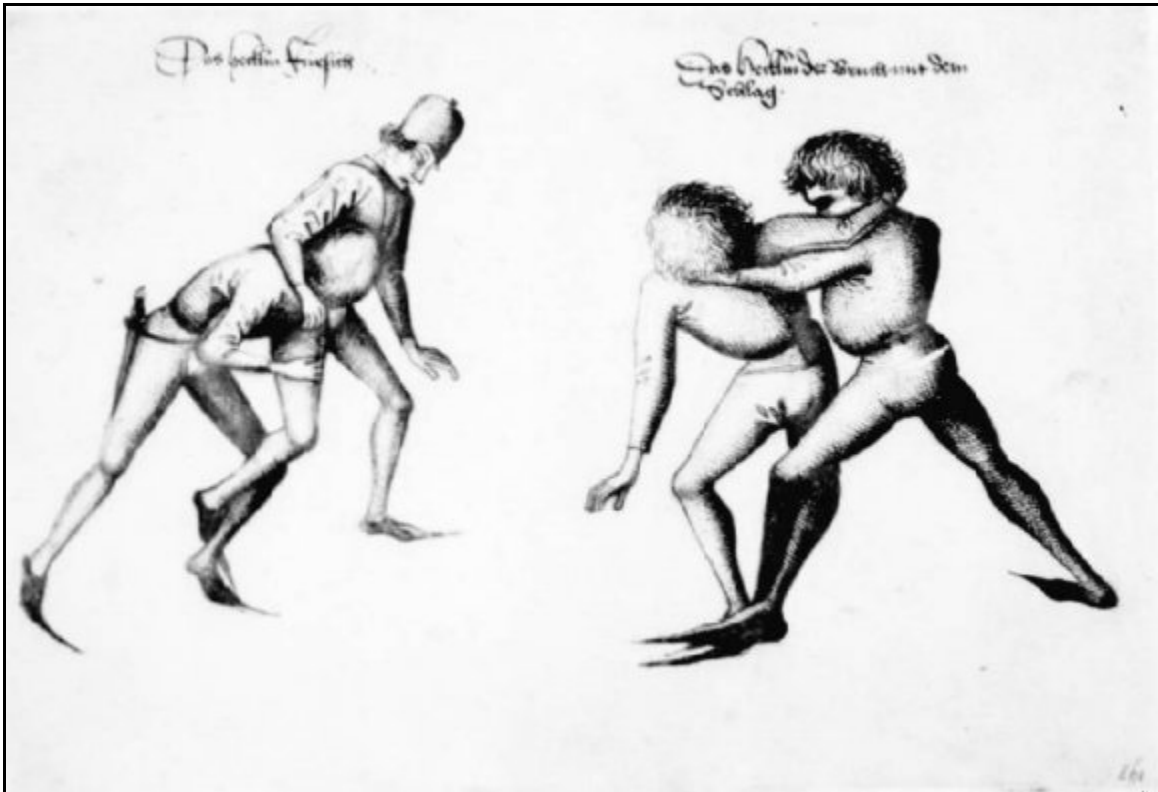
Codex Wallerstein shows how to intercept, tread behind & throw versus punch (jab, cross or hook) to mouth (1380-90 & 1450s)



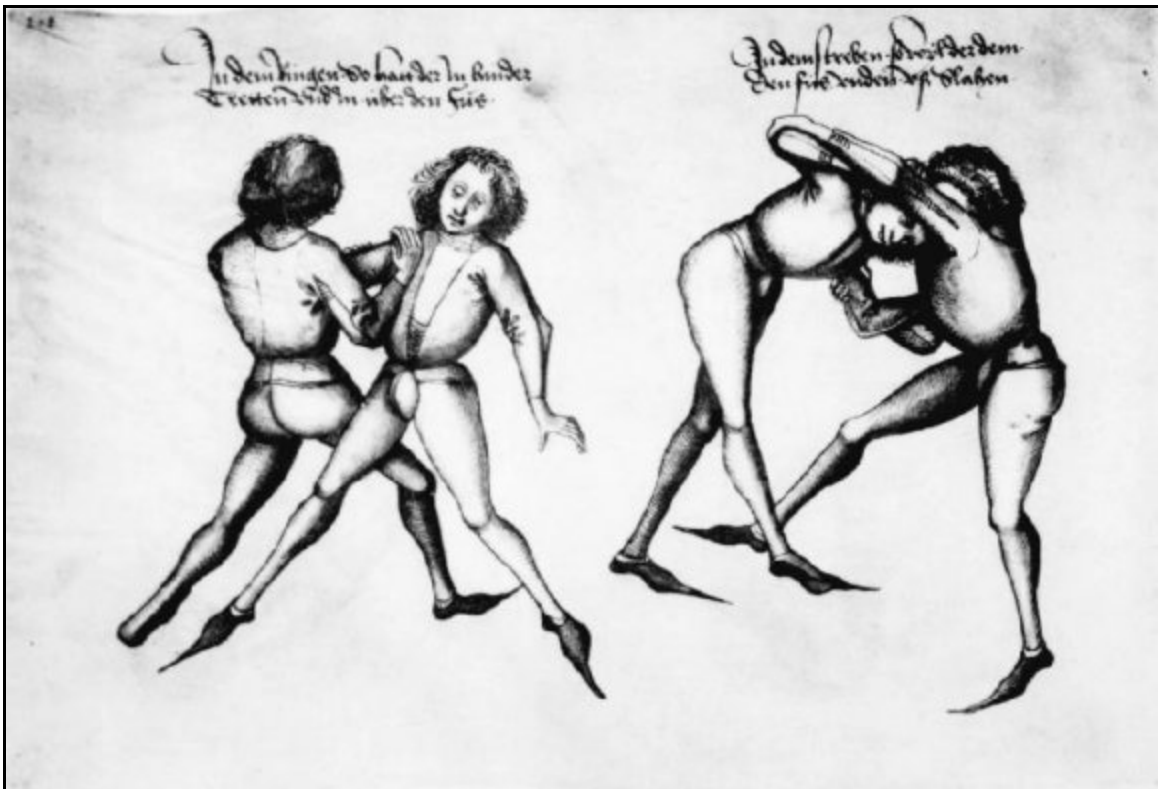
Codex Wallerstein shows how to cover & to kick to crotch if foe punches (hammer or uppercut) to face (1380-90 & 1450s)



Codex Wallerstein shows how to block & grapple versus hand-strike (knife-hand) (1380-90 & 1450s)



The leg-hook counters head-lock ~ Counter the leg-hook with hammer-fist or hook-fist (Talhoffer-1467-pl.198)



While wrestling, arm-lock & tread behind to throw ~ While struggling, foot-sweep beneath (Talhoffer-1467-pl.204)

Conclusion. The following seem to be the reasons for the lack of fist-fighting in the Renaissance German *fechtbücher*: legal banning; differing tradition; wrestling superior; priority of training; risk of needless injury; cultural desiderata; and common knowledge. Said reasons make sense in the context of the time and place concerned, and are largely interrelated, indeed even overlapping. Some are self-evident while some are arguable – consequently some may eventually be proven true or false. It is good for a fighter to be skilled at both striking and grappling – and perhaps the *fechtmeister* of yore would agree. Indeed, if we consider many of the *fechtbücher* (Ringeck, Von Danzig, Talhoffer, *Codex Wallerstein*, Kal, Wurm, Dürer, *Goliath*, Von Auerswald, Mair, Meyer and Petter) then we do find significant strikes with hands, elbows, knees and feet to a variety of opportune targets – eyes / face, throat / neck / clavicles, heart, belly, crotch, knees. These were probably often done to set up finishing techniques of grappling, for example, a clinch leading to a throw. Likewise, we find a number of defences against offences of hand-strikes in those manuals as well, thus indicating that it could get punchy then as now, especially in the mundane unarmoured fight, for example between a knight and some ruffian on city street or country highway. The concern was what was most workable and effective in context of that time and place. Thus for good reasons, the *fechtmeister* wittingly advocated wrestling and not fist-fighting in their martial arts as the primary method of self-defence, as the main unarmed combatives that was nonetheless compatible with armed combatives. The European knight of yore needed to win the fight decisively amid the mortally hostile and often armoured environment of his dueling and warfare – and that meant wrestling. Just as the Hellenic *hoplite* needed his *pankraton* to support his fighting; and the Japanese *samurai* needed his *jujitsu* to support his fighting; thus so the German *ritter* needed his *ringen* to support his fighting. Indeed, his *ringen* was the kind of wrestling that was martial, and thus it resembles modern military combatives rather than modern sporting contests. So, we must understand that, interpolate as is reasonable, and make it work as we pursue the revived *Kunst des Fechtens*. ~



Armoured wrestling from folio 49r of MS KK5013 (1425-30)
Wrap & trap, press & step, and break or throw versus dagger-thrust to axilla
Precisely why wrestling and not fist-fighting was the way of *Kunst des Fechtens*

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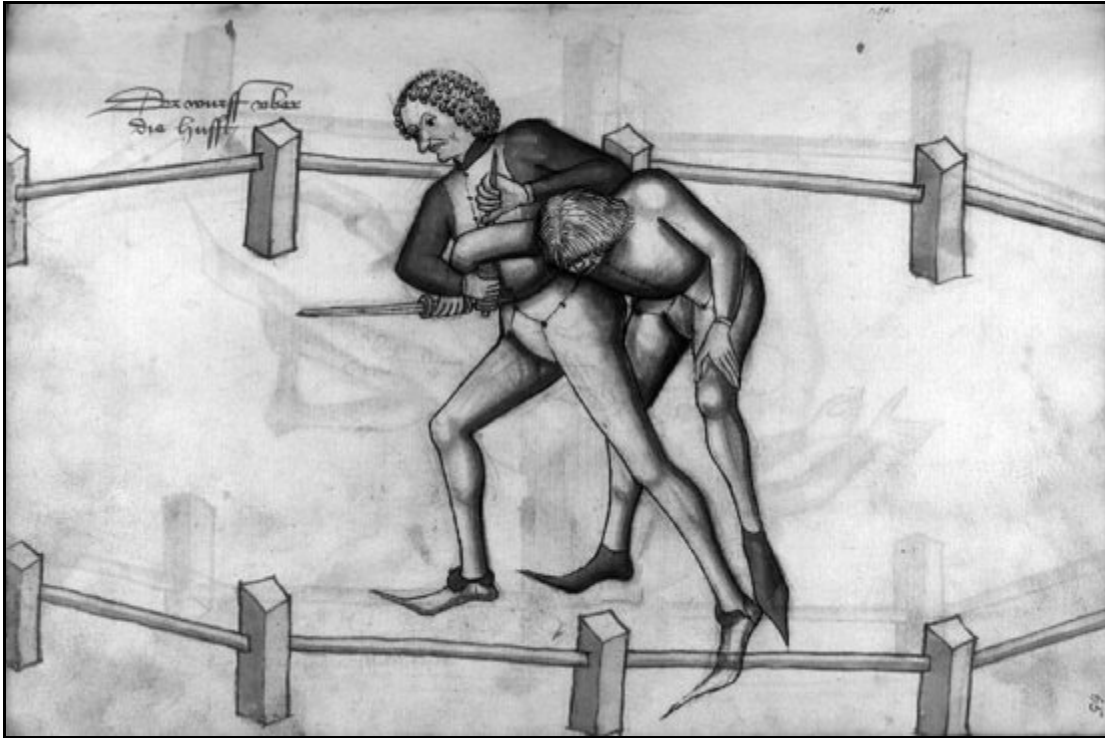
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- Talhoffer Longsword: Armoured and Unarmoured*; Jeffrey Hull (auth); ARMA website; 2005
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- Talhoffers Fechtbuch (Gothaer Codex) aus dem Jahre 1467*; Gustav Hergsell (edit); facsimile of the Cod. icon. 394a, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München; Prague; self-published; 1887
- Über die Fechtkunst und den Ringkampf*; Hans Czynnner (auth); 1538; MS 963; Universität Bibliothek Graz
- Using the “F” Word – The Role of Fitness in Historical Fencing*; John Clements (auth); ARMA website; 2004
- Vollständiges Ring Buch*; Johann Georg Paschen (auth); Germany; 1659
- The World of Dürer: 1471-1528*; Francis Russell (auth); Time-Life Books; New York; 1975



One more wrestling play, for good measure: Talhoffer shows wrestling a foe by arm-lock & hip-throw during dagger-fighting – something effective which, like most of his *ringen*, did not rely upon punching to be effective. From his *Fechtbuch* (1459-f.65r)

Warning: The combative moves of the fight-books are hazardous, maiming and/or deadly. Any martial arts practice thereof must be done wisely and carefully. Such is always at one's own risk. Be warned !

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