Manhood Impossible

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Fighting Back

The Gentlemen’s Fighting Club helps men face physical tests and conquer their fears, engendering a sense of confidence in their ability to protect themselves and their loved ones. The garage is a place of contradictions, though. It is a source of both therapy and ridicule. It is a space where men who were bullied as boys can repair and restore a sense of masculine identity. Yet fighting is not acceptable for adult men, especially those with families and careers, men who are unlikely to need these kinds of skills. To many outsiders, the garage is a symbol of arrested development, of men who need to grow up.

Some GFC members frame their involvement as a rejection of contemporary society, with what they see as its contempt for fighting, risk-taking, and ultimately, visceral masculinity. We have become soft, fearful, feminine, they believe. Fighting is their act of political protest. Their need to embody masculinity, to literally feel and enact it physically, is not unique. Researchers have found men embracing these kinds of corporeal-protest masculinities everywhere from construction worksites to men’s movements.1 Feeling masculine brings physical and psychological pleasure, whether from the rigors and muscled rewards of blue-collar work or from all-men retreats where participants do ritual dances meant to symbolize animalistic spirits. Whether explicitly or implicitly, individually or collectively, many men respond to what they see as a feminized culture by doing visceral masculinity. Fighting makes some GFC participants feel connected to real or imagined men of the past, whether tough guys from American history or the proverbial caveman from which we
evolved. Adult men shouldn’t be ashamed of fighting, they say. They should celebrate it, collectively, via ritual celebrations of primal (fighting) man.

The contradictions of GFC and the garage are reflections of broader cultural incongruities. We send mixed messages about violence to boys and men. Violence, sometimes even the same act in the same context, might be celebrated, rewarded, justified, accepted, tolerated, dismissed, ignored, derided, or punished. Violence is omnipresent. It is the pornography served up nightly by local news, a weapon used by the state, the focal point of much media entertainment, integral to many individual and team sports, and though largely in steep decline in recent decades, still too prevalent in families and communities.

We expect young men to follow Cold War protocols when deciding if and when to use their bodies for violence: Bodies should have the capacity to perform like dangerous weapons but should be used only to deter others’ aggression or, as a last resort, for self-defense. Otherwise, they should exist mostly for show and as a source of pride. Using bodies to initiate violence is unacceptable (excluding sports). But soldiers are trained for war, not simulations or exercises, and certainly not diplomacy. Cold wars heat up. Fight culture produces fighting. Boys and men who fail to fulfill this embodied manhood ideal internalize a sense of failure and/or attempt to repair that failure, restoring their masculine identities. GFC can provide collective repair against perceived threats to fight culture.

**Internalizing: Losing Control**

Most of the GFC fighters I speak with have always enjoyed watching and participating in fight culture, from Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Kung-Fu Theatre as kids to schoolyard fights and contact sports as teens to martial arts training and Gentlemen’s Fighting Club as adults. Some of the GFC participants attribute their interest in fighting to a rather unremarkable continued expression of manhood. Nearly all of them shared stories of getting into conflicts and fights during their youth, in many cases due to being targeted as a racial or ethnic minority at school or in their neighborhood. Several got into fights after entering adulthood. In almost every case, they say they did not initiate the violence but rather were placed in the position of deciding whether to act defensively. In that regard, their experiences mirror most boys’ and men’s.

Several GFC fighters, though, relayed incidents that were poignant and formative, marked by fear, humiliation, and loss of control. They were picked on, bullied, harassed, and beat up. In short, they were dominated and emasculated. Their response was to seek ways to address their inability to fight and try to overcome their perceived shortcomings as well as their fears. Those who did not take action soon after being bullied or controlled were plagued by feelings of low self-confidence and weakness or issues with control. Victims of
bullying exhibit lower levels of self-esteem and poorer academic achievement, as well as higher rates of anxiety, depression, and antisocial behaviors, among other negative consequences. If boys are expected to be able (or at least try) to defend themselves but are unable or unwilling to do so, they are likely to feel emasculated and humiliated. Eventually those suppressed emotions will bubble over, whether as raging violence directed at others or self-directed abuse and dangerous, self-destructive behavior.

Fighting-filled memoirs and rich ethnographies provide a window into boy codes in tough neighborhoods. Boys, even very young ones, have to be prepared to fight other boys, even those who are older and bigger, to prove they aren’t afraid. The consequences of getting beat up aren’t nearly as severe as are crying, showing fear, or backing down from a fight. Failing to fight back marks a boy as passive, making him more likely to be targeted by other boys. These “codes of the street” are more prolific in distressed and disadvantaged pockets within communities populated largely by African American and Latinx residents. Fighting for boys in these contexts provides them with access to respect and dignity in the face of poverty, racism, and racial profiling. Still, the codes precede and reach far beyond poor urban ghettos to communities and boys of all types. GFC fighter Stuart’s “courage of the crowd” is an example of how masculinity and violence norms appear in a suburban setting among adult men.

I argue that boyhood experiences of backing down—of choosing not to fight—become gendered humiliations that compel men to try to repair their wounded masculine selves. They do so by trying to correct the perceived failure directly instead of reasserting themselves elsewhere (such as excelling at work or using violence against intimate partners) to reclaim their masculine identities. When they were younger, they lost control of their bodies to other boys and men. As adults, they place themselves in a similar situation to try to reclaim and restore control.

Other GFC members such as George and Sean redressed their negative experiences by conforming to boyhood norms: they lifted weights, learned how to fight, or simply chose to fight back in the moment, saving face and buoying their sense of self. They behaved gender appropriately, confronting their bullies and fears, and gained confidence and fighting experience. Clearly, that option is not always available, effective, or appropriate for victims of bullying. Some research has found that boys who use reactive aggression in response to being victimized are more likely to be victimized again. Fighting back could be met with escalating and even more dangerous levels of violence.

Also, boys fight to establish themselves in the pecking order, learning how to use violence and suppress emotions when called for, and these behaviors occur “within a nurturing environment of violence: the organization and demands of patriarchal or male dominant societies.” In extreme cases, boys’
violent responses to being victimized may turn lethal. Boys who kill have often suffered from a constellation of abuse and neglect at home, in schools and their communities, and at the hands of law enforcement and the mental health system. Some kids who are victimized—who are subject to shame and ridicule and who feel abandoned and rejected—lash out immediately instead of bottling up these feelings. This doesn’t preclude them from later acts of violence. Toxic shame accumulates: “Hurt little boys become aggressive big boys.” They experience what they rightly feel is an injustice: that they are treated as though they are worth nothing and are nothing. A mortified self and wounded soul can bring forth restorative violence.

I am not suggesting that victims of bullying who don’t fight back are responsible for their continued bullying. Instead, I merely note that boys’ gender conformity (i.e., fighting back) can give them a sense of empowerment, regardless of any potential short- or long-term negative consequences, individually or collectively. GFC members report that family, friends, and older boys or men in the neighborhood often encouraged or facilitated their boyhood fighting, whether through verbal guidance or challenges, training, or enrolling them in martial arts courses. Whatever confidence they gained from childhood fights or martial arts training is far exceeded by what they now get out of GFC.

Asher—mid-30s, married, and a father—has a lucrative career in the technology sector. Like several of the men I meet, he was bullied and beaten up as a boy and considers those experiences formative. When I ask him what led to his interest in martial arts and GFC, he says, “I was kind of picked on in high school, a little bit when I was younger. In college, I was kind of a skinny, not [a] very active or strong or athletic guy, I don’t know—but I mean there was more than that. I think it was kind of something I always wanted to do. I wanted to know how to fight.” After graduating from college, Asher committed himself to martial arts training. A friend recommended he train with a skilled fighter named Lars: “[He] was saying, ‘If you do martial arts stuff, you should get together with Lars. Like that guy really knows his stuff and he’ll just fucking kill you.’ I think I wanted people to say that about me—not that I wanted to be like a bully or that I wanted to fight people at work or be a jerk about it, or like start fights with people—but that was how I wanted to be thought of.” I ask him why he wants that feeling, and he explains, “Because I guess I always—I don’t know, I felt like a weakling most of my life and I don’t know, it’s . . . haven’t you ever been beat up or bullied when you were a kid?” Asher’s father enrolled him in martial arts classes, but he quickly quit and has long regretted not being better at “standing up for myself when I was younger.”

GFC fighter Sammy, married and in his mid-40s, is slight of stature, which, not surprisingly, exposed him to more bullying as a child and teen in the occasionally violent and gang-ridden neighborhoods where he grew up. When
threatened by gang members, he says, all of his options felt emasculating: crying for help (dependence), begging for mercy (submission), or suffering the pain and failure of being beaten (lack of control). He chose submission to avoid the physical pain. “Saying, ‘Sorry, sorry,’ many times definitely hurts your ego,” he tells me, laughing ruefully. Even while finding humor in the memory, he recognizes its importance. The physical peace he secured by apologizing and submitting to the other boys came with a social psychological price. It was “powerful,” he says, “because I was all cocky when I was young and then, ‘Oh, fuck.’ A few guys come [at] you, and then you’re nobody. Definitely, this had something to do with getting me to try to practice [martial arts] and prove my manhood.”

Sammy’s experiences illustrate the need for men to constantly prove themselves; despite feeling as though he won his earliest childhood fights and, as an adult, becoming a skilled martial artist, the times he failed to act continue to bother him years later. Much like Asher, Sammy’s professional and family life is settled, and he does not fear what he sees as his safe surroundings. Still, his childhood experiences influence his adult choices, behaviors, and identity. He spent years training in martial arts, but GFC afforded him an opportunity to test his training, obtain a degree of confidence in his ability to fight, and reclaim the physical aspect of his manhood.

Freddy, one of the longtime GFC regulars, says he got into grappling and wrestling to get the feeling that he could control his own body and others. Once, when he was in elementary school, two older neighbors pinned him down, stripped him of his clothes, and ran away, leaving him to try to sneak back into the house, naked, in front of some older women relatives. “I seem to recall them mocking me and making fun of me,” he says of the older boys. “So that’s kind of a formative situation. Where I would never want to be in a situation where I was out of control of myself again.” Freddy not only lost control of his body but was exposed, literally and figuratively. He also attributes his previous strong homophobia to this humiliating incident.

Freddy’s combustible mix of angst about being dominated and virulent homophobia led to a violent reaction in college when some friends tried to pull a similar stunt, grabbing him and attempting to strip him naked in a dorm hallway:

I was like, I ain’t down with that. And that was during the time that I had that homophobia. . . . I went through the doorway, and they grabbed me, and I knedd the first guy in the balls; I turned around and grabbed the other guy by the throat and threw him down. And I looked over in the closet, and there was a two-by-four, and I grabbed it, and I raced over; he’s yelling, and he was like, “No, no!” and I just dropped it and walked away.
Freddy’s violent reaction stemmed from what happened to him as a young child. However, it must also be understood in cultural context: “To be fully, appropriately masculine, [a man] must exhibit physical control of his space and be able to act on objects and bodies in it.” These expectations exacerbate Freddy’s lost sense of control and desire to reclaim it. It would seem to make sense that GFC would attract some men who’ve been bullied for being gay or getting gay-baited. Sexuality is not used as a filter to participate, but all of the men I interview identify as straight, and none suggest that homophobic taunts led to their fighting.

**Repairing: Fight Therapy**

Social science research reveals that men who are prevented from fulfilling one measure of manhood often find other outlets to compensate for their perceived shortcomings. Young men living in poverty and denied access to good jobs may assert themselves through sports, sexual conquests, or risk-taking activities like crime. Adult men who fail as breadwinners are more likely to abuse their wives or girlfriends. Men with physical disabilities may highlight their decision-making skills and authority to offset their inability to live up to men’s body ideals. In these cases, men’s economic or physical circumstances block them from directly fixing what they and others often view as failed manhood. Their manhood acts are adaptations; they use the resources and skills available to them. GFC offers one group of men—those physically emasculated as boys but otherwise physically capable of fighting—a way to directly repair and bolster their masculine identities. They don’t have to compensate elsewhere. They can fight, as adults, and (at least attempt to) restore their lost manhood. This may help explain why these men don’t reject masculine ideals of physical toughness and control or embrace a different definition of manhood. They aren’t forced to rework it.

Violence often arises from shame and ridicule. Boys and men can use violence to restore and repair their masculine identities and their lost sense of self due to previous experiences of humiliation, whether physical or otherwise. One study found that boys who were victims of bullying, physical violence, and sexual violence attempted to reassert control over their bodies and selves by identifying younger and weaker targets. Their efforts to reestablish a sense of control and power were short-lived, though, when older and bigger peers (or family members) continued to target them. This may help explain why some of these boys engage in severe acts of physical and sexual violence against younger and weaker victims, repeatedly and fruitlessly trying to reclaim control. No GFC members report experiencing severe bullying and physical violence or any sexual violence as boys. They are able to reassert control over their
bodies without preying on others, whether as adults at GFC or as boys getting into fights with peers.

For Asher, Sammy, and Freddy, GFC offers an opportunity to replace the psychological scars of bullying and submission with physical scars they can wear as badges of manhood. Fighting is therapeutic. It brings more than insight. The fighters can confront their feelings of failure directly, as adults. And they restore control over their bodies, paradoxically, by choosing to give it up, placing themselves at risk. Even when they lose a fight, they are reestablishing their masculine identities by demonstrating the ability to withstand violence.

Asher’s long journey toward repairing began the way it does for many young men: by trying to get bigger and stronger. He started lifting weights, eating more, and “[got] to the point where I looked, I guess, intimidating enough that people wouldn’t just assume I was a wuss.” Still, he says, “[What] I found was that even though I looked stronger, you know, certainly felt better and more confident—I still do—I still was never really sure I could do it, you know? I was really never sure I could fight somebody and not just lose my cool during the fight and panic and then end up getting beaten up or . . . It was like some of the martial arts and getting in shape wasn’t enough. I needed to know I could really do it.” It wasn’t until he found some success fighting at GFC that he restored a sense of control over his body. He found it crucial to not just spar but participate in a fight because it’s “a situation where you just don’t know what’s going to happen.” Fighting is not about eliminating fear, he says, “but knowing you’re not a coward.” I ask him if he has gained enough confidence in his fighting abilities to overcome his boyhood experiences. He tells me, “Uh, yeah. I mean that’s not to say—certainly not to say I’m the best fighter there ever was or even particularly good, necessarily—but I know what I can do, and I know that if I’m in a fight, I’m not going to lose my cool. I can, you know, I know I can compose my thoughts and come up with a plan.”

One key source of his renewed confidence is his friendship with sparring partner Lars. Lars is a highly trained, skilled fighter who is passionate about teaching and learning how to fight. Asher’s efforts to repair his broken manhood were initially undermined by a series of what he experienced as dignity-crushing sparring sessions with Lars: “I have spent a lot of time getting my ass kicked by him. I think there came a time, like a couple of years ago, where you know I was sparring or grappling or whatever and I just felt like . . . I just felt like he was like trying to humiliate me or something.” Asher discussed it with his therapist, who encouraged him to talk to Lars, which he did:

So I was like, “You know I kind of felt like the other day, when we were sparring, as I was working really hard trying to get up I kind of got this feeling like you
were trying to humiliate me or something.” And he says, “Oh, no, I was never trying to do that. [Just] always trying this new stuff or stuff I haven’t worked with before and just kind of seeing what it does. But you’re my friend, and I would never try to humiliate you or try to break your spirit or anything.” And he apologized, you know, for what he had been doing.

The conversation and apology left Asher feeling “more free to say what I was feeling, to express myself while we were training,” which made it more fun and the fighting feedback more helpful: “At times when—if I was getting overwhelmed and just getting beaten up—Lars would just stop and [say], ‘Oh, gosh, I’m only attacking you that much because you’re not hitting me back. The real solution here is for you to just attack me more. Like if you attack me enough, I’m not going to be able to respond like that.’” Asher began reinterpreting Lars’s physical domination: “I saw that he wasn’t trying to break me down or humiliate me or make me feel like a wimp. He was actually trying to help me get better. And that he was willing to work with me on my particular issues, psychological issues about all this stuff—I think it made me a better fighter and made us better friends.” Once Asher was able to redefine the situation as a source of training and growth, and with Lars’s help, recognize that Asher could use his offensive fighting skills to impose some of his will on a bigger and better opponent, he no longer felt controlled and humiliated.

Sammy has enjoyed professional successes, but they do not offset his sense of boyhood emasculation. He does not view his work as being particularly important for his masculine identity. Sammy says the ability to fight is “basically your real confidence. Let me put it this way. It’s almost like the test of your manhood, or a test of your superiority in terms of handling things. I think that has something to do with [why I fight]. A sense of power and control, right?” Whereas he avoided being hit as a child as an act of self-preservation, today he happily subjects himself to such violence. “After I got punched enough times [at GFC],” Sammy says, “I understand that I can definitely take a [big] punch, and then I’ll nail you [with one].” He doesn’t expect to be bullied by gang members now that he’s an adult, but if he finds himself in that situation, Sammy now has the confidence to deal with it.

Freddy began reclaiming a sense of control over his body when his parents enrolled him in wrestling. He later trained in martial arts, eventually landing at GFC, which he calls a life-altering experience. Freddy’s extensive GFC experience has translated to an acute self-awareness and sense of control. “Now I think of myself as a hard target. I don’t feel like a mark,” he says. “Only I kill me.” With the skills and confidence he has developed, he believes it’s only his own mistakes that expose him to painful or theoretically dangerous blows.

Other GFC members also share stories of being bullied and picked on as boys but appear to have short-circuited the most negative social psychological
consequences by asserting themselves in the moment or soon after. American culture celebrates and rewards masculine violence (especially when it’s considered justifiable); expects boys and men to be tough, aggressive, and in control; sends kids to schools that are only now beginning to institutionalize antibullying programs and practices; and lacks strong antibullying peer cultures of support to resist or offset the bullying. Thus it is not surprising that the GFC members who tell me they fought back against boyhood bullying enjoyed increased confidence and self-esteem and came away less psychically scarred.

George, one of the bigger fighters at GFC, was skinny and experienced some bullying and got into fights as a young child. After he lost his first fight to a boy at school, George “really wanted to lift weights,” thinking, “I must fortify myself.” He tried doing so, but without the benefit of puberty and no one to instruct him, the weights had little impact on his body. He recalls deciding to fight back in a later incident at school, in fourth grade, when he and his classmates were learning a dance:

It’s a small group of kids, and you see the same kids for over a decade. So there’s this built-in hierarchy. It’s a small class. They gang up. They pick on you. They’re physically bigger . . . They just kept doing all kinds of stuff: tripping me, kick[ing] you in the shins and they laugh, and all that sort of stuff. I didn’t want to take it anymore. [As we’re going around the circle dancing,] I caught [one boy] with a punch to the elbow. Well, he hurt his elbow real bad. And of course it broke my finger. And he stopped. That was it after that.

George had a few minor incidents in the years that followed, but eventually his body filled out. The earlier incidents had little long-term negative impact and probably little influence on his interest in fighting, as he later enrolled in martial arts training mostly by chance.

Sean’s uncle taught him martial arts when he was in middle school. He did so because Sean “used to always get picked on as a kid,” even by an older cousin. Sean was small and skinny and grew up in tough neighborhoods, often as one of the only kids of Asian descent, all of which led to him being targeted by other boys. “A lot of the kids in the neighborhood, yeah, they would outright just see me and beat me up,” he says, laughing as he shares this memory. Sean seems less damaged from getting picked on because he quickly learned to fight back effectively. As a kid, he had little interest in fighting, “Cause like, I’m pretty much a nice guy.” He was mystified to discover that fighting was the best way to prevent others from trying to fight or bully him: “A lot of the older cats in the neighborhood were like, ‘You gotta fight back. You’ve got to defend yourself. You can’t always just run.’ That’s one thing that really confused me as a kid. It’s like, OK, if I hit this guy, he’s going to leave me alone? What the fuck?” Sean reluctantly learned to defend himself. He explains, “Growing up, a lot of
the kids, a lot of the gangs, that stuff, they’ll call you like, ‘You soft. You square.’ Maybe something like that, and if you don’t react to it, they [go after you] relentlessly. They just see you every day, they pick on you. There was a [bigger] guy in high school [messing with me] for three or four months... and I just couldn’t take it no more, and we got in a fight, right in front of the teacher and everything. I hit him with a computer monitor.” Sean fought older and bigger boys to successfully avoid being viewed as someone who could be picked on. He learned “the code of the street,” which says you have to be prepared to use violence to avoid being a target of violence. All boys face the expectation to be physically tough and in control, but boys in distressed and disadvantaged neighborhoods—mostly resource-poor young men of color—are likely to live under its crushing weight anytime they leave their homes. The stakes, too, are amplified.

Boys who fought back and men who later learned to fight and tested their skills at GFC found some peace of mind. Even after proving themselves repeatedly in the GFC garage, though, they were motivated to continue fighting. They cite many reasons and many benefits of doing so, but one likely reason is how manhood is constructed. Boys and men must constantly prove themselves over and over again. This helps explain why men who have exorcised their boyhood demons continue to test themselves, even though our society tells them that they should abandon the youthful activity of fighting. Even after proving their courage, toughness, and ability repeatedly at GFC, some fighters return again and again, for months or even years. The ritual binds them.

**Collective Repair: Fighting Modernity**

“Fuck it, man, if I want to fight, I’m going to fight until I can’t do it anymore,” 42-year-old GFC fighter George says. “I don’t really care if people think I’m violent. Just look at me: no criminal record, career man, family, kids. And you know what? fighting is fun. I want to make a statement: Fighting is fun. This is what we do for fun.” George is responding to what he and many other fighters see as a perverse trend in our society: the domestication of men. Modern society, they believe, fears and frowns upon violent combat. They attribute this mostly to an economy, culture, and lifestyle that rely less and less on physical strength and toughness.

A couple GFC members also blame feminists. They do so because of feminism’s critiques of orthodox masculinity and its challenges to biological explanations of women’s and men’s differences. If sex differences don’t explain gender inequality, sexism does. George is the most vocal critic of feminism and the social changes it has helped produce. He says it is no coincidence that a book and film about a fight club, and GFC itself, appeared and captivated people’s interest when they did; they are pushbacks against the rise
of metrosexuals and men’s increased concern with their appearance. From George’s perspective, modernization and feminism have led American men astray. Interest in fight culture is a natural corrective: “I’m a child of the late ’60s, early ’70s, where we were told we were all the same. No, we’re not. We’re not. I mean, men have these big bodies. I have these physical urges to be active. I can’t just sit there. I don’t know if fighting is exactly it, but it has to be something strong. There’s some physical urge to really just [makes gesture and noise indicating pounding someone].”

He sees other contradictions in American culture. Capitalism requires masculine-marked characteristics, but feminist-inspired curricula discourage these behaviors in boys and men, he says:

It’s a tough, progressive, competitive society, and you have to compete. Competition, aggression—those are traditional male attributes. Not physical violence but social, and not quite the way women do it either. You basically have . . . if you win, you’re honored. And I think modern-day boy culture doesn’t prepare you for that at all. There’s an undervaluation of what men have or a male teaching style in all of our education, K–12. And I’m not sure why that has occurred, but I think there’s a certain social force that innately women believe that they are superior beings because they have these attributes such as cooperation, lack of aggression, able to follow directions more often, and a preference for social versus physical outlets . . . elimination of recess, all these things. And maybe it’ll turn back the other way or even out, but right now it seems like there’s a certain bias. There’s a bias against boys and for girls. Physical fitness tests—they don’t have those anymore. Getting rid of dodgeball. Sports are designed so that both girls and boys can play equally. I heard that even at my school. Touch football and they told us, “Don’t run as fast.” Don’t run as fast? Why? Why would anybody say that? Why not run as fast as you can? . . . Yeah, I feel the physical outlets and the physical expression are indeed suppressed to the point of oppression. Where [there is] zero tolerance for fistfights in school. It’s squelching [for boys].

Who does that select against? If you’re biologically driven, it’s discriminatory to throw one person out for something that they do and not for the other, which is like, for a girl, an example would be complete social alienation, telling everybody not to talk to this person. It’s a little harder to prove damage from one versus the other.

Instead of the Boone and Crockett Club from a century earlier, George might have boys be segregated in junior fighting clubs to stave off what he sees as their feminization. Men fight off fears of feminization everywhere, including schools, churches, on dance floors, at salons, and more.21 A fighting club is seen by a few GFC men as a collective response to threats to men’s essential natures. In this context, GFC is not being used to repair individual men’s loss
of power and control but rather to address their sense that all men have lost something, and that an essential manhood needs to be restored. Their solution of reinstating a more physical, perhaps violent version of manhood is best understood as a collective effort to restore what it used to mean to be a man.

Adult men who fight, much to George’s dismay, are now often labeled criminal, crazy, or if they are lucky, merely juvenile. His and others’ desire would be to restore dying and displaced models of manhood. Threads of these older versions of manhood, which expect and celebrate men’s violence, continue to exist. Yet these are arenas for young men. Today’s hegemonic ideal requires family men to focus mostly on providing and being responsible. Yes, they are still expected to be able to protect themselves and especially their families. And it’s fine to watch boxing, mixed martial arts, or football or to play video games to scratch that violent itch vicariously. What is not acceptable for adult men is to actually get in fights, even relatively safe ones such as those at GFC.

Reactions to GFC

GFC teeters on the edges of legality and deviance. What makes its members feel and what makes the group itself exceptional is the same thing that generates criticism and illustrates their defiance of social norms. Members commonly share their fighting exploits with others and enjoy their appearances in local and national media. Telling people you are a member of a fighting club is quite the conversation starter; curiosity and adulation often follow. When Sammy’s close friends introduce him to others and say he is from Silicon Valley, he says he is met with yawns—until his friends add, “And he fights, too.” Then people’s eyes start lighting up.” Many of the fighters’ spouses, friends, and coworkers enthusiastically solicit blow-by-blow highlights from the latest gathering in the garage.

Over time, though, particularly as the core members have grown older, they have learned that some of the interest is due not to admiration but morbid curiosity, like rubberneackers slowing down near an accident. Participation in GFC also generates a lot of harsh and negative reactions. A sizeable proportion of family, friends, bosses, coworkers, and public critics express disdain for GFC, viewing the violence as repugnant and fighters’ participation as objectionable. Media attention has been a double-edged sword. Sammy acknowledges the downside of being known as the guy from Silicon Valley who fights: “They probably think you’re just weird. They’ll just think you’re immature. The way the media image was projected and the way people perceive it is [that] fighting is immature. It’s only kids’ stuff.”

Asher notices the connections detractors draw between violence and immaturity: “From the outside, it’s easy for a lot of people to look in and say, ‘Oh, this is working out their aggression and working out their anger.’” He
admits that there are times he wants to fight at GFC because he is “frustrated and pissed . . . but it’s not because I want to let out my anger on somebody. It’s because I just want to forget about all that other stuff for a while and concentrate on something that’s immediate.”

Jackson compares it to any other form of stress relief after work: “You know, everyone has their outlet, after their eight-hour day—even if they’re not working, everyone has their outlet where they go take a jog, or they skydive, or bungee jump, cycling. And this is my outlet. This is my physical test. And I’d liken this to almost the same as just going to the gym. Some people get it out at the gym, and I get more of it out at the fight club.” Despite their protests, members recognize that their participation falls outside of social boundaries of acceptable adult behavior. When Jason’s bruises and cuts draw attention, he chooses to obfuscate to deflect attention: “If it’s not a good friend, I’ll usually say it’s martial arts training, that I was sparring with somebody, or something like that without getting into the whole, ‘Yes, it really is a fight club’ sort of thing.” I ask him why and he says, “Because it does sound kind of crazy. It does sound crazy. I think for people who aren’t exposed to it, it sounds like somebody who goes there must be inherently violent, and unstable, aggressive, out to hurt other people, and that sort of thing. Without a long explanation . . . you wouldn’t want to get into it.” When Jason and I discuss women fighting at GFC, he assumes one reason so few participate is gendered social stigma. “Whatever strange looks I get when I tell people about it,” he says, “I’m sure it would be 10 times more for a woman saying that she was in a fight club. That probably would raise a lot of eyebrows.”

It is revealing that fighters consistently conceal their participation from strangers and acquaintances alike. Several, including one who declined to do an interview with me for fear of professional repercussions, expressed concern about their employers’ reactions to GFC. One GFC member was admonished by a boss and avoided by some coworkers after soliciting participants in a posting at work, thinking it was no different than the frequent recruitments for company softball and soccer teams, lunchtime Ultimate Frisbee, or self-defense courses.

Another indicator of the social inappropriateness of an adult fighting club is the overwhelming disinterest among men recruited to fight, even in the martial arts community. George estimates 99 out of 100 men declined his invitation. He blames what he sees as our feminized culture. “I call it domesticated feminist society,” he says, arguing that it “forces masculinity underground. If it weren’t for this, [more men would] be doing this for fun. Why does it have to be underground, in the garage, where nobody hears about it?” George is incredulous that contemporary American culture deems fighting as taboo.
Primal, Fighting Man

George implies that fighting is intrinsic to being male. He thinks we are trapped in a contemporary American culture that socializes boys and men away from their primal natures. Jason doesn’t articulate the same critique, but he nonetheless has discovered that few men share what he experiences as a natural urge to fight. “I was initially inclined to think that it was totally to do with maleness,” he says, but “the majority [of men I told] just had zero interest in it.” This was surprising to Jason because fighting feels so instinctual to him:

It’s just an unconscious, “Of course this is right.” Unquestionably, this is what I love to do. Sometimes I feel like I’m meant to do this. Not in any hocus-pocus sense, but this is what, as a human being, I’m built for. I’ve talked to other people about this when people say, “What the hell are you doing?” Sometimes I describe it like discovering that I had an appendage that I never even knew was there. It just totally felt natural and right.

Fellow longtime GFC member Jackson says fighting is analogous to breathing; both are integral to his state of being. In a follow-up email exchange after having some time to reflect more on our interview, Sammy writes, “The more I think about it, the more I feel it is an innate need to feel in touch with individual (maybe just male) power at the more primal form, without [hiding] behind any societal decorations. In short, I need to feel the ‘gut.’”

Instinctual. Innate. Inborn. Natural. Pop culture, propped up by some evolutionary psychology arguments, deploys a simple, one-size-fits-all model of women’s and men’s behavior: biology is destiny. Leadership styles are attributed to testosterone levels, talent for math or language is due to our being left- or right-brained, job attribute preferences reflect maternal and reproductive instincts, assertive versus affiliative relationship styles date to our hunter-gatherer ancestors, and on and on.

Evolutionary psychologists argue that today’s gender differences are the result of different evolutionary pressures faced by females and males, mostly revolving around reproduction. Humans, like other animals, are driven to reproduce. Our ancestors evolved based on how they were best able to adapt to their physical environments. Males faced paternity uncertainty, and females had to survive during pregnancy and while raising very dependent offspring. Males could impregnate many females. Females enjoyed fewer reproductive opportunities. These different pressures, so it goes, caused females to seek males who were able to provide more resources, while males sought females who would not mate with other males. Yesterday’s hunter becomes today’s breadwinner. Likewise, according to evolutionary psychology, widespread
cross-cultural practices such as valuing women’s virginity or women being “slut-shamed” for their actual or perceived sexual desires can be explained by sexual selection pressures faced by our early *Homo sapien* ancestors tens of thousands of years ago.

Innumerable social characteristics and behaviors presumed to be categorically different between women and men are attributed to our evolutionary past. It matters little that the vast majority of psychological variables reveal no or very small gender differences or that the small differences that do exist, along with the handful of moderate and large ones, are easily and perhaps better explained by cultural factors. Anthropologists and sociologists, bolstered by decades of empirical evidence, would point out that gender differences are not observed universally, as would be true if biology was the sole or primary predictor of women’s and men’s characteristics and behaviors. Instead, we find variation within individuals over their life course, within American culture (and others) over time, among subcultures and groups, and across cultures and societies around the world. The evidence is overwhelming. It demands that our models recognize the subtlety and complexity of social behavior and, at minimum, highlight the interaction between culture and biology, if not argue for the primacy of gender over sex.

Freddy and I discuss at length his views on the nature of men. We meet after dinner outside of a coffee shop in Palo Alto, California, near Stanford University and an array of Silicon Valley companies that give Palo Alto a healthy economy and high profile.

Freddy has had his ups and downs throughout his life, including his longtime struggles with being and fearing being physically dominated by others. GFC has helped him address those fears and establish a life philosophy that, in his mind, is an expression of men’s essential nature. “I used to be fat and unhappy, but that man’s dead, and I’m in his place,” he says. He is evangelical about fighting in general and GFC in particular. Freddy believes he has figured out how men should live: they should fight, compete, and try to excel and win at everything but do so in ways that enable them to bond with each other. They also should be supportive, loving, and engaged partners and fathers. He wants other men to enjoy life as much as he does, and he believes fighting is the key. We have a long conversation about caveman masculinity and contemporary manhood while sipping our coffees on a bench outside of a quiet, upscale strip mall.

“I really think the definition [of manhood] is stronger, more visceral for me,” he says, adding, “When you ask what it means to be a man, I almost want to say, ‘To fight.’ And maybe metaphorically and literally. I think we’re just built for it. I really think we’re built to fight.” Freddy and I discuss an interaction he had at a bar and how it epitomizes his beliefs about the biological basis of men’s behavior.
FREDDY: A guy stands in front of me, blocking my view of the TV screen. I look him up and down, and he turns around and looks at me, and this is a guy that’s pretty big, you know. He looks at me and goes, “Oh, sorry.” And he moves out of the way. And I don’t thank him. I really feel like I moved him by aura. Like, he looked back, and he could just see that, you know . . . and maybe that was because [the next night] I was going to do my first night [SCUBA] dive, and I was already in full courage mode. But also, it’s totally because of fight club.

SM: You’re carrying yourself differently since joining the fight club?
FREDDY: Yeah, right. And in two different ways: Since being in [GFC] I haven’t had to get into any altercations [because he has found happiness and no longer has a chip on his shoulder]. I haven’t been in any street fights. And then, the other branch of that isn’t the happy branch, it’s the yeah, like, “Fuck you, dude, let’s do this!” It’s that kind of comfort. Like, I’ve been hit in the head with all kinds of stuff [at GFC]. You know, I like to say I have a head full of cement.

SM: So that moment, where you felt like you moved that guy, how did that feel?
FREDDY: It felt great. Oh, yeah.

SM: Can you describe the feeling? Was it like a sense of control?
FREDDY: Dominance, yeah. A guy that big. I mean, he was a big dude, he could handle people in that bar, but he looked back, and he looked at me, and . . . that’s the other thing, I lock eyes with guys, now, in public, and I wait for them to look away. I never used to do anything like that. Not this coffee shop, but I had been to another coffee shop [recently], I did that.

SM: Do you do that consciously? Are you kind of testing them?
FREDDY: Totally. I’m testing them, and I’m testing what I’m doing. I will look at somebody until they look away. And when they look away, I win. That’s sort of mandingo.

SM: [joking] I do that with my dog.
FREDDY: [Grunts several times, half-jokingly, both of us laughing.] I’m not a prick at all [laughing]. You know?

SM: Yeah, I’ve known you for 20 minutes, and I’ve heard about you [from other fighters], you kind of seem like a nice, sweet guy—
FREDDY: Totally. Totally.

SM: —I gotta be honest, so, how do you kind of reconcile that?
FREDDY: [laughing] I don’t. You know, it’s all one—it’s a pillowcase full of shit. And you know, here we are, talking on a bench. Yeah, a paradox. It’s part of our nature. But I feel evolved. I feel . . . before, I felt manly; now [after fighting at GFC], I feel man. There’s that kind of projection of aura—you know, masculinity and strength—that I use, and then I have no problem putting my body into something where, you know, I’ll force somebody out of the way. I used to not do that.
SM: An outsider would say, “Oh, it’s like a pissing contest.” You know, like who can make the other person move.

FREDDY: Or, the staring in the eyes, and the . . . one or the other looks away.

SM: Sure.

FREDDY: That’s completely, yeah, at one level, that’s ridiculous, honestly. But on another level, it’s very primal.

SM: I’m looking around, we’re in a pretty nice place, it seems like a fairly safe place.

FREDDY: It’s Palo Alto!

SM: It sounds like you’re highly unlikely to get in these confrontations, right? It’s pretty damn unlikely, but yet, you still kind of live your life in such a way that you’re thinking about this all the time, and you’re preparing for this stuff, and you’re asking, “Why don’t more men do this?” And so maybe you’ve kind of answered the question, because we are in a situation where we mostly don’t have to face those kinds of fears. You’re escalating every confrontation or the possibility of there being a serious confrontation, so if all guys are walking around with this training, and with this kind of caveman attitude—

FREDDY: We would be so polite, and nobody would . . . nobody . . . I would hold the door for another man, because we would really know—I already know that any of us could kill each other—that any of us . . . there’s a bunch of guys over there sitting on a park bench, hey, those guys could kill me. That’s just the way it is. You know, an armed society is a polite society. I used to carry a knife all the time, I don’t anymore, because I feel like, if I would ever pull it out in a situation where I couldn’t prove, in a court of law, that I really needed it, that I would do time. So I’d rather fist and kick and, you know, punch my way out of something, and then run my ass off. I’m going to run. Dear God, make no mistake, courage . . . courage is to jog away from doing an eight-year bid. That’s courage, running away from that.

SM: Your first inclination would be to get the hell out?

FREDDY: Oh, I’m out. I’m out. Hell, we’re sitting here—again, in Palo Alto—but if something happened, or let’s say they get in our face or there’s nowhere to turn, Scott, you and me, we’re fighting out of it because we have to. But then once we’re out of there, I’m like, “Dude, let’s beat feet and call the police.” But yeah, the primal thing, I really believe in it.

. . . I just, I want more men to [try fighting]. I want more men to run, fight, I want them to have great sex, I want them to just . . . all of that. I just wish men were stronger, you know? I talk about that a lot. Are men lost nowadays? If men were strong, I think women wouldn’t be bitchy, you know? And I’m not saying this role or that role—each marriage, figure it out. Every marriage is completely its own. I just wish [men] were stronger. Stronger as fathers, stand-up guys . . . you know, not that they’re not “good guys.”
SM: I get the sense that you are always pushing yourself, at work and at play.
FREDDY: Always.
SM: Is there an ego part to that?
FREDDY: Definitely. You’re pegging me right, man. Scott’s understanding me.

Yeah, I feel like the day is won when I, let’s say if I have a really good fight night—it’s great, right? I mean, you feel . . . I feel alive, I feel happy, I’ve rebounded with the brothers, right? You know, with the tribe. I feel like I’m renewed as a man, as a male Homo sapien, you know what I mean? As a human animal, I’ve . . . because, you know . . . this concrete sidewalk’s bullshit, these manicured trees on this road next to us—it’s all BS. [We sit] under fluorescent lights on soft cushy chairs. I don’t worry about where my next 100 meals are coming from, so there’s sort of that disconnect there.

But you know, after a fight night, I really feel like I’m, you know, back to the original man. [When I’m older,] I’ll be able to look back . . . you know I really lived. I’ve really lived. And that’s why I try to get guys who aren’t fighters to come to the garage once, man. Just come once. Fight just once. We’re not built to live how we live now. It’s definitely comfortable, and I wouldn’t choose to be a caveman, but physically, we’re built to be cavemen, right? And I use the term cavemen in a, you know, not, duh, rock, you know, club guy. Not the Flintstones, but more like the mobile hunter-gatherer. That’s . . . our bodies are built for that. Male bodies are built to last, you know, 30 years, maybe, of hunting and running and spearing. So for me, personally, running and fighting go very well together, I believe. We’re built for three physical things: violence or hunting, running, and making more of us. We are really, really good at those three things. We are excellent at making babies, we are excellent at fighting each other and hunting animals, and we are built to run. Built to run, so I think we’re built to fight.

Despite the cultural resonance of evolutionary psych models of women’s and men’s behaviors, caveman masculinity is not a socially suitable justification for adult men’s participation in a fight club. GFC members’ assertions that fighting is a natural expression of maleness—a biological state of being—challenges the cultures’ elaborate antiviolence social mechanisms. Adult fighting clubs are taboo. To fight in one is to participate in a subculture mainstream society sees as deviant.

Tribal and Fraternal Bonds

Since the late 19th century, American men have created organizations to separate themselves from women. Sports teams, unions, and fraternal organizations (such as the Elks and Moose Lodges) are examples. Men carved out more of these homosocial spaces as women gained greater economic power
and social access. Although not entirely exclusive to men, the Gentlemen’s Fighting Club serves as a fraternal organization for many of its core members. They describe GFC fights and the group itself as a noncompetitive, tribal-like bonding experience. One of their mottos is “You don’t know a guy until you fight him.”

Fighters are not judged, ranked, or humiliated. Camaraderie replaces competition. Winning and losing are irrelevant. No one scores the fights or keeps track of the number of strikes landed. There’s almost a team spirit, despite the one-on-one nature of combat. The fighters have an interest in helping each other build their skills, but they show no interest in ranking each other, playing out anger, or humiliating anyone. They certainly deliver painful blows and occasionally cause injuries to opponents, but there’s no intent to cause serious harm. In one of my fights, my stronger opponent skillfully delivered painful strikes using rattan sticks, but he didn’t bull-rush or grab me, pin me down, or pummel me. Stronger and more skilled fighters use various weapons to expand their own and their opponents’ skills. They gain nothing by overwhelming smaller, less experienced fighters with brute strength. Winning is supplanted by skill development.

New fighters may feel as if they are undergoing a controlled hazing ritual, but the regulars help create the best of a fraternal atmosphere— camaraderie and bonding— without fear of being judged by other men. The bond is evident in the postfight hug, an authentic embrace of appreciation and respect. My afternoon of fighting ended, as they all do, with beer and laughter while watching recordings of the fights. (No copies of the videos are made or distributed.)

GFC may be unique in the way it cultivates the most visceral element of American manhood. Unlike mixed martial arts competitors, these garage fighters don’t attempt to injure each other to win. And unlike middle school bullies, they don’t try to physically humiliate each other. They push and challenge each other, encouraging everyone to grow as a fighter—and as a person. As one veteran explained as I prepared for my first fight, your fellow fighters are “there to bring you up, not beat you down.”

Manhood is elusive and tenuous, always capable of being undermined by a single failure. GFC gives men a venue where they can prove themselves physically, shielding them from the burden of trying to dominate others—and the fear of being dominated. The garage serves as a protective membrane from the outside world. GFC offers therapy to those men seeking to heal their wounded masculinity and often feelings of powerlessness. Not all men participate for that reason, but those who do enjoy an experience similar to the men’s retreats that peaked in the 1980s and continue in smaller numbers today. (The politics of those groups ran from liberal feminist to antifeminist backlash.)
GFC has no explicit masculinity politics or agenda, but its ritual violence and fraternal atmosphere share characteristics of men’s retreats. Outsiders’ negative reactions to GFC reinforce an “us-against-them” collective identity and bond. “For me,” Freddy says, “It’s about the brotherhood. It’s tribal. We’re all warriors, we’re all in the tribe.” Whoever fights earns Freddy’s respect. When new fighters show up, he is quick to integrate them into the group and alleviate their anxieties. Conversely, MMA fighters seek to intimidate each other before fights to increase their chances of controlling and dominating their opponents.28 Freddy explains, “I’m completely inclusive, you know, not quite a ‘Thanks for coming,’ more like a ‘Hey, how are you doing, my name’s Freddy.’ I try to quell any fears a new . . . you know, a young buck has.” Freddy will say to new fighters, “Oh, yeah, man this is going to be great! I can’t wait. Maybe we should do a keyboard fight. You ever fought with a keyboard?’ [My approach is] ha ha, make some jokes.”

Other fighters, including longtime core participants, dismiss the tribal or fraternal aspects of GFC. Jason says the camaraderie part is “not a big deal” for him. He just enjoys fighting. Most fighters show up for fight nights, enjoy the evening’s experience and leave. They may return many times, but it does not produce lifelong friendships or bonding. Fighters with extensive childhood histories of getting into fights seem least likely to experience GFC as a fraternity or fighting as a tribal ritual. A few who come from fighting cultures dismiss as fake other fighters’ claims that GFC offers a tribal atmosphere. One fighter, Barry, felt like the ritual became sadistic over the course of his several experiences. He was pushed too far and hard in his fights, leaving him alienated from the group: “I’m all in favor of sadism, but you’ve got to find somebody who wants to be beaten up. That wasn’t what I was there for.”

George has arrived at the conclusion that one of GFC’s most important functions is its fraternal atmosphere. He supports women training in self-defense and once saw GFC as a potential source of that training. Over the years, he found that almost no women were interested in fighting, and he lost interest in their participation. He folds this information into his negative views of feminism and women:

I believe in a fraternity. I like a fraternity. I like a place where you can go and you can speak as a man would. I mean, we don’t demean women, or we don’t talk about bad things about our wives and girls. In fact, strangely enough, in most fraternities, those conversations are nearly absent. And it would be only fair and equal for men to malign women the same way that women malign men. They get together, and the bulk of their conversations really are about how inadequate their provider is or how he doesn’t measure up against the sum of the next 10 guys. So the conversations are different. But I do like the fraternal aspect of it.
And I do think one woman showing up changes the conversation. I think it’s the same in the workplace as well. It’s the same thing.

The combination of homosociality and what fighters describe as the pure honesty of this kind of physical exchange leaves many feeling deeply connected. Some describe their fights as a form of art, as a tribal ritual, an expression of respect, and the source of some of the strongest bonds they share with other human beings.

Yet there have been some women who have fought at GFC. However, only one, Beth, was a regular. She was respected and viewed as a serious fighter. Beth’s presence did not alter Freddy’s view of GFC as a fraternity and brotherhood: “She’s the only female I’ve ever fought. She’s great with the blade. She carved me up. I give her some back, some knees, elbows, you know, bang it out. I don’t hold back. She’s tough.” Freddy says he has no problem with women and men fighting but knows others do: “Some guys don’t want women to fight at [GFC]. I really don’t care.”

“You treat them just like anybody else,” Darren says, while expressing enthusiasm for women fighting. A few of the much larger and highly trained GFC participants, such as Ronnie, report holding back some when fighting Beth. They did the same with other fighters who were at a size or skill disadvantage, in all cases with the goal of fostering growth and building confidence; bringing your sister up rather than beating her down. Jackson also fought Beth at GFC, and he, too, welcomes women fighters. Recalling his fights with Beth, he says,

That chick fucked me up! That chick kicked my ass. I remember she had me on the ground, and she was taking shots at me and stuff. Or, no, she was trying to submit me. And I just . . . You know, it clicked, like, “Oh, my God, this chick’s going to kick my ass.” And at first I kind of went easy on her, and then I realized, OK, she’s not playing. And I remember I was on my back, and I just reared up, and I decked her in the face, like as hard as I could, and it was like an instinct. And the guys were like, “Hey, no face, no face,” and she just shrugged it off, like, “Really? Is that all you have?” And every time I fought Beth after that, I did not underestimate her. She’s quite versed in stick fighting, and she’s a tough girl.

Jackson’s minimizing terminology (“chick” and “girl”) for Beth contrasts with his view of her as a skilled, tough fighter—one who nearly emasculated him when she was controlling and dominating him.

Fighting is no longer solely men’s terrain. Women have long been practicing the “manly art” of boxing, competing in 2012 for the first time as Olympic athletes. Women’s MMA has gained popularity, drawing huge audiences during Ronda Rousey’s 2012–2015 rise and reign. Rousey’s judo skills, which earlier
won her an Olympic medal, translated to her dominating opponents for several years. She is also girl-next-door pretty, which helped launch a modeling and acting career and landed her on various “most attractive women” lists. She does gender in both the most conventional and the most unconventional ways possible, reflecting in part the rewards women can enjoy for doing masculine-marked things, especially if they conform to heteronormative beauty ideals.

Rousey’s reign as champion was so prolific and respected that many admirers wondered aloud whether she could defeat professional men fighters in her weight class. Rousey’s self-confidence was balanced by her understanding that fighting a man would have broader implications than even Billy Jean King’s 1973 “Battle of the Sexes” tennis match versus Bobby Riggs. In a 2015 interview, Rousey said, “I don’t think it’s a great idea to have a man hitting a woman on television. I’ll never say that I’ll lose, but you could have a girl getting totally beat up on TV by a guy—which is a bad image to put across” given recent high-profile cases of violence against women by professional football players.30

The stakes are much lower when GFC fighter Beth arms herself with a training knife and squares off with a man in the garage. Still, several men say they would not fight a woman at GFC. Barry captures the sentiment of a couple of them when he explains, “The main reason I wouldn't is there’s no way to win that. So if you win the fight, you beat up a girl, and if you lose the fight, you got beat up by a girl. You’re not coming out on top there.” Sean knew Beth fought at GFC and “thought it was real cool,” but he says he would not spar with her because, “I still have that thing—‘You don't put your hands on no woman.’” The reasons for not doing so run from chauvinistic and patronizing to ideological opposition to violence against women. Beth had plenty of takers, but some men were unwilling to treat her equally. Gender politics are messy in a fighting club.

Beth was exceptional and her participation was temporary. Most of GFC’s history is men fighting and bonding with other men. Freddy explains why he has become such close friends with two other fighters. He says,

I’ve hit both of them as hard as I possibly could, I’ve belted [one of them] with a stick, after the buzzer, or whatever, and just kneeling him, kneeling him, kneeling him, and he kind of just calmly afterwards, [says] “So are we done?” You know? And that's that moment of bonding. I’m like, “Sorry, bro.” And he’s like, “Whatever, don’t worry about it, it’s all good.” You know, and that’s a guy you can depend on, that’s a guy who would stand tall with you, that’s, you know, that’s that bond, right? Because, well, I guess in a sense, I have tested all of them myself.

Pushing and testing each other is a sign of respect. Holding back too much does not foster growth and might be perceived as condescending and insulting.
Conversely, demolishing a novice fighter also stunts their growth; that form of humiliation is unwelcome in the tribe. The bond develops as fighters push and get to know each other in ways that starkly contrast with everyday interactions. Rick explains, “At some point, you end up pushing somebody and they push you back. You really know them on a deeper level. And rather than what beer they like or what cheese they eat or where they work or where they were born—I mean, I guess it’s OK. I don’t really care where they were born [laughing]—I mean, that comes afterwards, right?” Jackson’s years of fighting at GFC have fostered deep connections. He says, “I know if I ever got like in some real, real shit, they’re some of the first people I’d want to go to.”

As with many fraternities, sophomoric and other humor helps solidify brothers’ bonds. Fighters often wear flashy or goofy clothing, target each other’s groins and love handles, and choose nonlethal weapons merely for entertainment, including Dustbusters and toilet plungers. (The latter they occasionally use to plunge a bowl before arming unsuspecting participants and quickly launching their fight.)

Fights are recorded, watched, and when something funny happens, cued up and watched over and over again. “Watching videos constitutes 50% of the fun,” Kay says, “because you do this and then you watch yourself. You look more ridiculous than anything. It’s just funny.” There are countless sources of self-mocking, good-natured teasing, and laughter. Excessive screams of pain, unexpected in-fight dialog (“Gotta dig deep!”), clumsy and failed moves, and in one incident during Fight the Professor, two fighters’ simultaneously kneeing each other in the groin, all bring howls of laughter when replayed. Unlike groups of men gathering to watch MMA fights or football games, watching their own fights isn’t a vicarious manhood act. Neither is it parallel to young men’s practices of watching porn together or going out to “hit on” women and bond. From what I observed and heard, the fighters bonded watching their videos—but they did so because of their comedic value rather than as a celebration of violence or men’s physical dominance. (The organizer’s wife is a regular viewer and also finds the videos funny.) Kay jokes that he is a very shallow guy, that he does not practice martial arts for spiritual reasons. Rick laughs and suggests that fighting has “no higher purpose,” that GFC’s original rationale did not extend beyond “My Fist. Your Face.”

When American men have isolated themselves, gathering separately from women, they have mostly done so as a means of escape. The humor GFC fighters sometimes use to poke fun at modern society—jokingly inquiring if their opponent would prefer “cucumber lime” or “revitalizing pomegranate and mango” for the soap bar they will wrap inside a towel and use to pummel each other—has clear implications for gender relations. Take, for example, when fighters use magazines rolled around a heavy, solid object such as a brass rod. When they choose Martha Stewart’s magazine, Living, the threat posed by
the weapon extends from physical to symbolic. Fighters are in danger of not only getting bruised and battered but emasculated. One fighter joked, “Yeah, getting beat down by popular feminine culture. I mean, come on, I don’t wanna get hit with Martha—she’s done time.” A short prison sentence for obstruction of justice isn’t what makes Living magazine’s editor-in-chief such an overtly gendered choice, though. Martha Stewart is a symbol of feminine domesticity: an imaginative and skilled cook, interior decorator, and gardener. Her name conjures images of 1950s housewives—or at least it does to the guys who use her magazine to beat up their friends in a garage. It’s not CEO Martha or multimillionaire Martha and not even “ex-con” Martha that makes her such an appealing weapon. The fighter who gets pounded by a brass rod encased in Martha gets the message loud and clear: you just got your ass kicked by a woman—and not just any woman, but an icon of femininity. What kind of a man are you? Not one at all. Of course, the magazine is used in a joking manner, not unlike men’s countless other homosocial hazing rituals.

Feeling Pain, Feeling Alive

GFC fighters object to the idea that their club is too dangerous, an unnecessary risk to one’s health. Their objections are often unpersuasive; they are left balancing their desire to fight with society’s general disapproval of it. Bruises, scars, and other more visible markers of fighting invite conversations and the possibility of being harshly judged. Why would a father so selfishly put himself before his kids? How could you risk breaking your fingers when you need them for work? What do you have to prove?

Risking and enduring pain and injury are rites of passage in youth sports. Boys and young men are respected and celebrated for suffering without tears or complaint, all the more so if they can persevere and keep playing: “Suck it up!” “Walk it off.” “You gotta take a licking and keep on ticking.” Adult men are eventually told to settle down, listen to their bodies, stop viewing overcoming pain as a competition or manhood act, and prioritize their families and careers over adrenaline-fueled gambles with their physical well-being.

GFC members protest that fighting is no riskier, and usually safer, than many other activities that they and plenty of other adults do, such as snowboarding, mountain biking, and rock climbing, to name just a few. All occasionally produce an array of acute injuries resulting in emergency room visits and short- and long-term disabilities. Weekend warriors who break a leg skiing or trail riding are much more likely than GFC participants to receive sympathy and admiration, perhaps to even have their dangerous pursuits romanticized in such a way that others vicariously enjoy the thrill. Pushing your body to its limits in a test against nature receives a qualitatively different reaction than doing so in a fight.
There are other grounds on which fighters can and do protest the disparagement they receive for participating in a fight club. Beyond what they see as the hypocrisy of stigmatizing one risk-taking activity while accepting another, they point to the cumulative effects of years of participating in otherwise safe sports such as tennis, golf, and running. The wear and tear often lead to surgeries and joint replacements, which are not met with righteous indignation. Tennis elbow, shredded knee cartilage and tendons, and bulging discs are not visible to the naked eye, lessening the moral outrage levied against even much older participants who are injured. I would add that our jobs often pose the greatest risks. Stress, repetitive motion injuries, overuse or underuse of our bodies, and other job-related threats to our health abound. Recent research suggests the more time we spend sitting, whether on couches watching TV all night or at office desks all day, the likelier we are to die sooner.32

Is there really that much difference between wrecking our bodies one way versus another? Is fighting really that different than other risk-taking activities and sports? Yes and no. Fighting, like boxing or football, is a hitting sport. Basketball, by contrast, is a contact sport. Interpersonal contact is part of the game but not an end in itself. Tennis is a noncontact sport, although most tennis players’ knees would beg to differ. Chronic injuries common to all physical activities seem less grotesque than acute injuries, especially those wrought by interpersonal violence. And whereas pain and injuries are unwelcome among most athletes, there are exceptions among fighting club participants.

As part of their fight against modernity, some GFC members embrace physical pain rather than try to eliminate it from their lives. Pain is euphemized as “feedback” from other fighters. Instead of retreating from it, many fighters invite pain as they would a friend to dinner. They ensure its arrival by being as welcoming to it as possible. They fight without pads and even shirts, use weapons that bruise and tear skin, and revel in (minor) damage to their own and others’ bodies. They view injuries as teachable moments. Immediately after the injury, they examine what they did wrong that allowed it to occur. The weeks and months of healing and recovery, culminating with a return to fighting, are seen as a period of growth that reveals their character, determination, and courage. Fighters accept that if they spend enough time in the garage, they will experience broken fingers and toes, cracked ribs, and battered bodies. Injuries and wounds are things to “experience” rather than from which one “suffers.” They are assumed to have been part of daily life for our ancestors. To fight through them is to confirm that one is merely hurt and not injured, that modern man hasn’t fully succumbed to the assimilating forces of modernization.

Several fighters tell me they have experienced and fought through mild concussions. They talk about “getting dizzy,” the “curtains falling” and the
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“lights going out” before their brains regroup and “check back in” so they can continue fighting. At Fight the Professor, Rick and Patrick’s double-stick fight is halted when Patrick has his bell rung. Turning slightly sideways, Patrick exposes an unprotected spot on the back of his protective headgear during the fight. Rick’s stick hits Patrick’s head instead of the padding during that split-second move, and Patrick is visibly shaken. He wants to resume, but Rick stops the fight. In the postfight interview, Rick asks, “Why did you want to keep on going?” Patrick responds, “I feel good. I mean, I’m not tired.” When we watch the video later, Kay says, “That’s one psychopath right there!” Mocking Patrick, Kay continues, “It feels good. I feel I almost passed out. I feel good. I feel I need to be punished. I need to be punished!” We all laugh. Rick adds, “That’s not the usual response [to getting hit in the head].” The labeling and sarcastic imitation Patrick receives are thinly veiled expressions of respect. The group uses humor to acknowledge his demonstration of toughness.

Jackson’s one serious fighting injury initially made him angry, but eventually he became introspective before defiantly returning to the garage. He says,

I remember I was like face down on my floor, just like in so much pain . . . [I was in pain] for like a month or a month and a half. I went through the gamut of emotions. I was like, “Man, [the guy he fought]’s a big guy. He’s like twice my size, why would he hit me like that? He knows I’m smaller.” But at the same time, it’s like, yeah, you know, that’s the risk. The guy’s big, you know. And I started asking myself, “Well, why did you put yourself in that situation? You didn’t have to. Like, come on, think about this, don’t blame him. I came to [GFC to] build myself up. I came to challenge myself, and hey, I got dusted. I might have failed this little test, but there’s a lot to learn from this.” And I became a much better fighter after that incident. It was after that where I got a little bit more cautious, a little bit more serious. You know, it was like a growing point for me . . . When I came back, I was like, “Screw that, I’m no bitch. I can do this.” You know, so there was a lot of ego and bravado in there. Like, “I’ll show them. I’ll come back even better.” Yeah, that was absolutely going through my head at the time.

Dominating other fighters produces less satisfaction, self-esteem, and sense of accomplishment for most fighters than does overcoming adversity. Demonstrating resilience and courage are highly valued manhood acts. Weakness is for “bitches.” It is, in Jackson’s account, symbolically feminine, thereby reinforcing fighting, toughness, and dominance as features of maleness and manhood.

Sammy initially expected to reclaim his manhood by beating up his opponents. Instead he came to believe that the “true power” was being able to
withstand a beating. Getting hit is, in many ways, more important than hitting. “So sometimes losing is winning?” I ask him. “Losing is definitely winning,” he says. He now invites and even embraces fights with men at GFC who are stronger and may subject him to countless strikes. The same confidence has helped him handle nonviolent confrontations at work, he notes. Darren feels more robust after years of being “toughened up” at GFC. With experience, he says, “you figure out how to absorb the blows and how to endure past that. It feels really, really good. It’s like you pick up your endurance level, feel like you’re able to get through life a little better. I mean, let’s face it, it’s kind of like life, right? It’s just a series of blows and getting through them; it’s how you get through them. You know, get through them with a smile on your face and a positive attitude instead of just succumbing to them.” Darren and like-minded GFC fighters believe they should literally be smiling through the pain. They smile not to ridicule opponents’ ineffective blows but to dismiss contemporary society’s frowning upon their fighting. They take pleasure in experiencing pain.

Of course, not all fighters enjoy getting hit or view pain or the scars of violence as badges of honor. On the contrary, some fighters see their bruises and cuts as sources of shame. These marks indicate failed technique. And, fighters note, it sucks to be in pain. Some of this subset of fighters takes pleasure in dominating and controlling fights, but not for sadistic reasons.

Ronnie says he wants to win the fight in the moment, “but in the end, it’s really about the challenge and about the growth in it. So immediately, it’s like ‘Yeah, I don’t want to lose you. I want to make sure I whip your ass as much as I can.’ But in the end, for me, it’s like a period of growth.” He asks himself after every fight night, “How did I grow from the last time? How did I grow from the two times before that? How did I stretch myself into a place where I could become a better fighter, or feel more confident, or more fluid in my motion and actions?” Ronnie fights to improve his technique and to grow as a fighter, not to prove his manhood or as a form of protest against social norms.

Other fighters are less interested in dominating fights via violence than demonstrating their ability to avoid pain and injury. Sean attempts to deliver a blow and avoid preemptive or counterstrikes. He approaches fights as if they are simulations and each weapon as if it could be lethal. “If that was a [real machete] fight, that one good shot could kill you,” Sean says. Barry fantasizes about exerting the least violent form of control over opponents and fights. He says,

I don’t mind getting hit, but I really like, if I could’ve waved a magic wand, I would want to be like a master of aikido. I would like to be able to dodge anything that someone throws at me and always come out on top—but always come
out on top where I’m using two fingers to put them in a hold that, if I went a little farther, I would break their arm, but at this point, I haven’t hurt anything, and then they’re going to say, “You win.” I would have been happy with that. I didn’t want to beat up anybody.

Fantasies aside, even Barry says he “probably took more pleasure in surviving a punch than anything.”

It pays to be a winner, but given how manhood is constructed, it’s more important to avoid being at the bottom than it is to be at the top. Boys and young men, including those who are badly beaten, obtain masculine capital when they attempt to fight; complying, however unsuccessfully, brings some reward. Those perceived as too fearful to even try to defend themselves are the ones who lie at the bottom of the hierarchy; they are the ones who are most subordinated. GFC affords men opportunities to repair their broken manhood or assert a primal version of it, whether individually or collectively, in response to perceived challenges to their status and identity. Individually, some men use GFC to repair and restore what they lost as boys. Collectively, some members view GFC as a way to restore a sense of fighting, primal man.