

Theodore Roosevelt, Media and the Martial Arts in the Progressive era

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Abstract

As president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt famously endorsed physical culture and athletic pursuits. When the Japanese martial arts jiu-jitsu and judo arrived in America at the turn of the 20th century, Roosevelt expanded his view of sport and sought out instruction in these arts. News reports from 1900-1906 documented Roosevelt's training: His public fascination with jiu-jitsu contributed to martial arts growing from arcane practices to front-page news in papers across the United States. A comprehensive review of Roosevelt's letters and more than 2,000 news reports between 1900 and 1906 reveals how the president's embrace of the jiu-jitsu fad affected American life, from sport to public safety to even foreign policy, in lasting and significant ways. Media depictions of Roosevelt's martial arts training reveal how the arts and their practitioners interacted with the economics, politics, racial and gender norms of the United States during the Progressive era. Within a century, the martial arts would bring sweeping change to America's cultural, sportive and entertainment landscape. Though Roosevelt is one of America's most influential presidents, the role of the martial arts in his life and presidency has gone largely unexamined. This paper argues that not only did Roosevelt's practice of martial arts influence a generation, but created the preconditions for the billion-dollar modern mixed martial arts industry and its transformation of American popular entertainment.

Keywords: history; jiu-jitsu; martial arts; sports; Theodore Roosevelt