CENTER VALLEY – Recently I had the opportunity to visit the Colosseum. In addition to photographs with a costumed gladiator, tourists there have an opportunity to walk the same pathways as did the Roman emperors. Overwhelmed by the magnificence of this ancient monument, one cannot help but be amazed at the architectural and engineering prowess of the ancients, who managed to construct not only one of the more durable buildings in the world but also one of the more ingenious stadiums for public entertainment. Once inside, the spectacle of the games unleashes the mental image of men engaged in deadly battle against wild beasts or each other. The chants of “jugula” (“cut his throat”) seem still to resound.

Those same sights and sounds, with at least as much fury if not always the same results, appear now in new venues. Taking place in steel caged rings, or even in local garages, today’s battles highlight a growing interest in the mixed martial arts. Whether in professional championships or in amateur clubs, fighting for fame or for fun is becoming quite the rage, literally!

Punching, kicking, elbowing, gouging, even using plastic knives – “Fight Club” aficionados have turned the 1999 movie into managed mayhem. The “sweet science” of boxing and the wide world of wrestling have morphed into back alley brawls that office workers seek out and the viewing public delights in. But what motivates supposedly civilized persons to inflict physical punishment on others, to submit to brutality themselves, and to cheer all the while?

Scholars tout the virtuous character of regulated boxing. Some see it as preparation for life, which is all about hurting and getting hurt. Gordon Marino, a philosophy professor and
boxing trainer, argues that this sport “gives people practice in being afraid ... but if you keep punching, you learn not to be pummeled by your emotions.” He also suggests a global benefit, arguing that “getting and taking punches makes you feel safer in the world, and that people who do not feel easily threatened are generally less threatening.”

But what of those underground battles that excite the untrained and the ordinary. Those who defend the Romanesque recreation of fight clubs argue for its therapeutic value, as an escape from, or channeling of, the frustrations of life through a no rules, no holds barred means of exercise. The founder of the “Gentlemen’s Fight Club” – no slight oxymoron – postulates a somewhat higher value: “This is about self-improvement through a seemingly destructive activity,” says Gints Klimanis, a software engineer in Silicon Valley. He also adds a mythic twist to the madness by acknowledging that in these bloodied brawls, “You get to be a superhero for a night ... and just for a couple of hours we have the freedom to do what we want to do.”

And there’s the rub (or scratch or claw or whatever). In a world more regularly at war, battles become acceptable. In a society governed by litigation, conflicts become commonplace. In a culture where unbridled individualism prevails, social constraints go down for the count.

Yet, ethical concerns abound among professionals. Doctors warn about the long-term physiological effects of being pummeled. Economists worry that the unwary or uneducated become mere pawns in a moneymaking industry. Sociologists question the extent to which pugilistic matches incite more violence among the masses.

But the fundamental issue is ultimately personal. Two men, or increasingly two women, squaring off against each other with the objective of drawing blood, knocking unconscious, or otherwise causing sufficient harm to “win” is brutish, to say the least. Logically, it cannot stand up to the most basic of moral principles, namely that an action intended to inflict injury on an innocent person is incapable of being good.

Professional boxing may not rise to the ranks of “legalized attempted murder,” as an international Jesuit magazine opined last year. But drawing non-athletes into the ring of unregulated violence surely stoops to the level of beasts, however therapeutic it may feel or whatever discipline it may yield. In reflecting a decidedly antagonistic approach to others, where combatants fantasize about inflicting pain on someone, fight clubs risks creating a culture where conflict comes to be resolved with force rather than reason. Of that, our world daily sees too much.

The ancient Romans thought human beings to be part angel and part beast. The Colosseum stands as testimony to both – in the genius that built it and the skill that enabled gladiators to survive there. Fortunately, the latter fight no more. If only we could keep it a thing of the past.