

# Violence: America's Love/Hate Relationship



By Bill Hart

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Joseph Benavidez loves his job.

"I love winning and seeing my hard work and everything pay off," said Benavidez, a professional cage-fighter. "It's just crazy because in the midst of doing that, yes, I'm hurting somebody. You can say I enjoy hurting the person, but it's because I've put so much into that, and that's my [livelihood]."

Violence, in other words, can be fun. This may sound alien – if not grotesque – to some. But most Americans clearly enjoy and reward some types of violence as enthusiastically as they condemn others.

Recent high-profile events have prompted renewed discussions about violence, in both individuals and society as whole. While Americans would likely agree that the country has a violence problem, disagreement remains about what it is, why it is, and what to do about it.

In other words, it seems that there is good violence and bad violence.

But what's the difference?

This brief seeks to contribute to the ongoing public discussion of this crucial issue. Its approach is an unusual one: It reflects the views of four individuals who could be called "violence professionals." These are people who deal or have dealt routinely with violence – witnessing it up close, enduring it, and inflicting it.

The four – a former NFL player, a combat veteran of Iraq, a UFC mixed martial-arts fighter and a police sergeant – generally agreed on several points that emerged from their conversation about living with violence. They spoke of violence as a natural part of life that many people relish much more than they admit. They also acknowledged that employing violence can be an exciting and enticing experience, even when or especially when it involves hurting an opponent.

However, they insisted that a bright line exists between "good" violence and "bad" – between warriors and thugs. The former are professionals who are willing and able to operate within well-defined rules based on shared values of right and wrong, and to "switch off" their aggressive impulses when they leave the ring or the battlefield. The latter are individuals who violate the rules, and who seek personal gain by controlling others, but who ultimately cannot control themselves.

Violence, in other words, is best left to the professionals.

What follows are some of the themes that won general agreement from the four participants.

*"Violence is seen in two different categories, good and bad. We cheer on our NFL team when they smash into the other side, and that's good. On the other hand, when a child is beaten due to domestic violence in their home, that's bad violence. Whether we want to admit it or not, we've created these social constructs about good versus bad."*

– Sara Presler, CEO, Arizona Foundation for Women

This brief is based on a public panel discussion that was held January 29, 2015 in Phoenix. It was sponsored by Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University, the Arizona Foundation for Women, and the Arizona Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence. The moderators were Morrison Institute Senior Policy Analyst Bill Hart and Sara Presler, CEO of the Arizona Foundation for Women. The text has been edited for length and clarity.



***Most people enjoy violence more than they like to admit, as long as they are not themselves in danger.***

“Everyone loves violence,” Benavidez said. “Everyone loves seeing it, but it’s nice to just watch it and then go on to your own life and eat some popcorn....”



***Inflicting violence can be fun.***

Grey Ruegamer played 11 seasons in the NFL, winning two Super Bowl rings. “There’s no better feeling when you press someone in competition and you force them to pick themselves back up and question if they want to do it again,” he said. “That’s when you push. That’s when you win.”

Phoenix Police Sgt. Richard Cosenza, who’s spent most of his 28-year career patrolling the streets, remembered how as a young officer he couldn’t wait to get to work. “We just had so much fun just chasing bad guys and putting people in jail.”

R.J. Mitchell, an Iraq combat veteran who was awarded the Navy Cross for bravery, said, “Our job as infantry Marines was to go to combat and fight and win. [Combat] is fun because you’ve trained so hard for it. Then to actually get to do the job that you’re training for, there is some fun in that.”



***Professional violence is not for everyone.***

“There’s that one percent of people that have that mentality [to] deal with violence responsibly,” said Benavidez, who fights for the UFC organization, “because you can’t just go around hitting people.”

Mitchell concurred: “I would say emphatically yes, we are different [from most people]. I’m not going to come out here and have a conversation with you about how I just blew this guy’s guts out and expect you to relate — is there anybody in here that’s done it? Is there anybody in here that’s watched somebody explode, like literally just turn into bits and pieces?”



***The primary driver for violence professionals is the urge to compete and win, rather than the desire to hurt others.***

“It was always competition to me,” Ruegamer said. “It wasn’t like I’m just going to run around and hit someone. It was like, ‘Oh, we’re playing [a sport] right now. We’re getting physical.’ It was always very contextual....”

Benavidez said, “I would never enjoy inflicting harm on someone outside of competition. But when you’re doing it and you see you knocked the guy out, you see that your preparation and your will and your strength is just that much better than this guy, it is a great feeling.”

Cosenza agreed. “In sporting events, to me, it’s more about competition. When you’re out on the football field or you’re getting in the ring, I think it’s more about being more competitive than the person you’re going up against.”



***Part of the lure of violent professions is the opportunity to prove yourself, to yourself as well as others.***

“I was drawn towards the combat sports because it’s just you in [the ring],” Benavidez said. “It’s just you and you’re the only one to blame whether you win or lose.” Mitchell said the lure was “knowing that you have the intestinal fortitude to step up to a guy that’s bigger, stronger, faster than you, get knocked down, and then stand up and then knock him down.”



***They don’t like bullies.***

“I don’t consider myself a tough guy or anything,” Cosenza said, “but one thing I couldn’t stand growing up was bullies. I stood up for people that were getting bullied, stood up against the bullies. I just took a career path that way.”

Ruegamer, who played at six feet five and 300 pounds, had a similar comment. “I used to love beating up on bullies,” he said. “It was one of those things. I never quite understood it. I was never the biggest kid until probably college, but it always really ticked me off that someone would take advantage of someone else for a very insignificant reason.”

Mitchell recalled when a bully started picking on his younger brother, “which upset me quite a bit. As the

older brother, I felt that I was my job to protect my younger sibling.” So he did. “I laid into [the bully] and ended up winning that fight,” he said. “That was my first experience with violence.”



***Success in using violence requires a mind free of anger or hatred.***

“I respected the enemy that we were fighting,” said Mitchell, who was wounded three times. “They had prepared as much as we had to do the things that they were going to do. [But] when it came down to that finite moment in time, it’s about my life or my buddy’s life, and that’s it. There was no aggression at that point in time,” he said. “It’s either I’m going to die or they’re going to die.”



***It also means dealing with fear***

“If I said in 28 years I haven’t come across an encounter that scared me, I’d be lying,” Cosenza said. “The difference is, I signed up for this job, and I can’t turn the other way. I go up to a house and I have a guy screaming, waving a gun around, that he’s going to shoot the first person who comes through the door. Yeah, it’s scary. [But] I can’t walk away from it.”

There are other fears as well, Benavidez said, such as “just the heartbreak, the embarrassment, all that kind of stuff that goes with [losing]. You’re not scared like, ‘Oh man, I’m going to get hit,’ because I’m comfortable with getting hit in the face. But just the letdown and the heartbreak you’re going to suffer. It’s not a fun place.”



***In order to survive, those who use violence must learn to “switch off” such impulses when they leave the ring or the field.***

“What we encourage younger officers to do is, they have to have a life outside of police work,” Cosenza said. “If you make police work your life, it’s going to destroy your life. When you go home, you leave work at work.”

When he was in the NFL, Ruegamer said, he’d go out and drink beer with other players, “but I wanted to punch them in the face when they were on the other team.” After a game, he said, “We’d shake hands, tell jokes, ask how the family’s doing, talk a little smack to each other. We were still friends, but we knew that you turn it on, you turn it off. That was also a learned behavior.”

Benavidez said: “[Violence] is for the gym. This isn’t something you go try on the street or anything. I think [the training] actually really helps. It gives a guy a certain humbling confidence to know, ‘I could do that, but I’m not going to.’”



***“Good” violence is practiced by warriors operating with self-discipline and within accepted standards.***

Violating those standards isn’t tolerated for long, Ruegamer said. “The guys on any team that I played with who took it off the field, took it into the locker room, they either one, got their asses kicked, or they were removed from the team. It was never tolerated because we — there was a general understanding of this is how it is.”

Cosenza said problem officers don’t last long in the department. “There are officers out there that I might not agree how they do police work, but I think, just like on the football field, those people get weeded out,” he said. “They don’t retire. They don’t usually finish their career.”



***Self-discipline derives from basic values, and a firm sense of right and wrong, usually instilled by parents, coaches or other mentors.***

Cosenza said he remembers his first exposure to severe violence — “when I realized that it’s a cruel world out there. There’s some evil people out there that have to be dealt with.” Early in his career, he responded to a domestic violence call and found a man who “thought it was appropriate to rub his girlfriend’s face in broken glass on the ground because she had broken the glass in anger. He thought he would teach her a lesson.”

Ruegamer said, “I was fortunate enough to have my mom raise me. My dad wasn’t in the picture. I worked from a young age. I respected work, hard work, those types of things. I was brought up with a moral framework... of right and wrong, very distinct right and wrong.”

Mitchell said that values and a sense of honor need to be learned early. “Why didn’t I become a thug

when there was absolutely every opportunity to do so? I believe it's definitely the values that were instilled in me," he said. "Having either a mentor or a reason, at a young age, to say, 'Hey, I want to be like that guy.' "

His mentors, he said, were military veterans in his family. "For me, it was my cousins, my grandfather, my dad [who] instilled in me the values of patriotism and honor. Why did I stay the path? Because to disrespect the family legacy, I would never do that."

 **“Bad” violence – on the street or on the field – is done by people who lack self-control and a regard for the rules.**

The contrast between thugs and warriors could not be greater, Cosenza said, adding that he doesn't even consider “good” violence to be violence. “I really think that what we [four participants] do is not violent. I have a job to do. The military has a job to do. The difference between us and the people we're dealing with is that we have rules. We have rules we have to follow in our job, whether you're over in Iraq or I'm dealing with an armed robbery here in the streets. The bad guys don't have rules. That's [why I say] they're violent and we're not.”

*These excerpts are meant to open a small window into the complex and controversial world of professional violence, and don't presume to represent a comprehensive examination of this critical issue. It is hoped that they will add to a continuing public discussion of how we understand and deal with violence on both the individual and social level. How, in other words, society addresses its ambivalent attitude towards violence, how it defines “good” violence and “bad,” and how it can instill values in young people that prepare them to distinguish one from the other.*



**Grey Ruegamer** is a former NFL player. He played college football at Arizona State and was drafted by the Miami Dolphins in 1999. He played 11 seasons and earned two Super Bowl rings – with the Patriots in Super Bowl XXXVI and with the Giants in Super Bowl XLII.



**R.J. Mitchell** is an Iraq war veteran who was deployed twice during his four-year enlistment. He was awarded the second-highest military decoration for valor, the Navy Cross, for his heroic actions during the Second Battle of Fallujah. Employed by APS, he attends ASU's Ira A. Fulton School of Engineering on his way to earning a degree in mechanical engineering.



**Joseph Benavidez** is an American mixed martial artist from Las Cruces, New Mexico, where he played varsity football, winning two State Championships, and became the State Wrestling Champion of New Mexico in 2000. He is currently ranked #2 in official UFC flyweight rankings with a fight record of 21 wins and 4 losses.



**Richard Cosenza** is a patrol sergeant in the Black Mountain Precinct and a 28-year veteran of the Phoenix Police Department. While with the department's Employee Assistance Unit, he helped coordinate counseling services for other officers, including post use-of-force counseling for officers involved in an incident resulting in serious injury or death.



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