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# Raising a Warrior-wrestler: Ukrainian Belt Wrestling [*borotba na poiasakh*] (an Attempt at Cultural and Educational Analysis)

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### Abstract

The article examines the topical issue of raising a warrior as a holistic educational process that has a deep philosophical background and a broad cultural basis. That is, an attempt has been made to analyse the fundamentals that constitute a coherent basis for the development of a cultural concept of the Ukrainian warrior-wrestler. Ukrainian belt wrestling is preserved and revived as tradition of physical culture. Its cultural and educational analysis is carried out in the direction of inclusion and inseparability of the Ukrainian cultural and European civilisational contexts.

**KEYWORDS:** *upbringing, warrior-wrestler, Ukrainian belt wrestling, Ukrainian culture, physical culture*

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** *wychowanie, wojownik-zapaśnik, ukraińskie zapasy, kultura fizyczna, kultura ukraińska*

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6, 14–17).

The ongoing war in Ukraine, unexpectedly for everyone, actualised Plato's thoughts about the stratification layers of an ideal state, which are so far from us. Philosophers, as wise rulers, possessing the knowledge of the good – warriors, whose dominant trait is the emotional component of the spirit, and craftsmen, whose key feature is determined by the ability of self-control and prudence. All these strata, regardless of gender and age, must be educated accordingly in order to fully complete their mission to create a state. This is the subject of our academic interest.

Therefore, neither philosophers, nor warriors, nor craftsmen are born, so special attention should be paid to their upbringing. The human soul, according to Plato, also contains three principles: The first element, we say, is the one which allows a man to learn, the second the part which allows him to act in a spirited way. To the third, on account of its diversity, we found it impossible to give its own unique name, so we gave it the name of its largest and strongest element. We called it desiring – because of the strength of its desires for food, drink, sex and everything that goes with these – and money-loving, because money is the principal means of satisfying these desires



(Plato, IX 580d–581a). The dominance of one of the principles, according to Plato, also determines the type of a person: the lover of wisdom, the lover of victory and the lover of profit (Plato, IX 589b).<sup>1</sup> Education of a warrior: philosophical and pedagogical aspect

The problem of educating a warrior cannot be solved in the same way as educating a sage or a craftsman, because a sage is educated by a sage, although Seneca's pedagogical experience to some extent refutes this thesis: his pupil Nero, in order to forever forget about the teacher's instructions, to silence his voice as the voice of conscience, kills the teacher. Long after those tragic events, the Ukrainian pedagogical psychologist Konstantin Ushinskyi explains the reasons for this, in particular, with Seneca's faulty pedagogical approach, which taught the student truths without delving into their content or taking into account the nature of his ward: As for Seneca, if he could not restrain his talkativeness and read Nero ... moral maxims ... then we can directly say that Seneca himself was one of the main reasons for the terrible moral corruption of his terrible pet. Such maxims can kill in a child, especially if his nature is alive, any possibility of developing a moral sense, and such a mistake can be made by an educator who is not familiar with the physical and mental properties of human nature (УШИНСЬКИЙ n.d.). The problem of raising a craftsman, according to Plato, can be solved: if the child grows up with a craftsman father, he will pay close attention to the intricacies of work and skill. It is undeniable that such a pedagogical method is categorically not suitable for teaching military affairs, because then children find themselves in dangerous circumstances. The philosopher thinks that it should start early and include two components of influence: "For the body – gymnastics, for the soul – music" (Plato, II 376e). Like Plato, let's start with the latter, because music was also the word, which exists in two varieties: real and deceptive. Deceptiveness should not be understood as a lie, because it is a form of narrative that corresponds to the age of the child, therefore it has signs of fairy tales and mythology. By the way, Plato warns about lying and its destructive consequences for a person, society, and the state.

Thus, the upbringing of a warrior begins with a myth, a fairy tale. The analysis of the available sources makes it possible to trace the semiotics of the belt as a completely material object accessible to sensory perception, which, at the same time, represents other abstract concepts in thinking, in particular, power and courage as undeniable characteristics of a guard-protector. Let's start with the myth about the exploits of Hercules, in particular the ninth, which is called the "Hippolyte's Belt." The first thing that we consider



appropriate to pay attention to is the geographical proximity of the territories where the events are unfolding (Southern Black Sea region) to modern Ukraine and close cultural and political ties (Greek policies on the territory belonging to Ukrainian territories – Northern Black Sea coast). In the myth of the brave and fair ruler of the Amazons, we meet their characteristics as strong, hardy and courageous in battle. To the best among them, Hippolyta, the god of war Ares gave his belt as a sign of royal power, in recognition of her military skill, dexterity and valour. The same myth, albeit less vividly, also depicts the second type – the antipode to the noble army, which combined the capriciousness of Admetus and the treachery of Eurystheus. Thus, the belt in the myth received the semantic weight of a symbol of power, and folklore, in particular Ukrainian, is an archetype of deserved fame and respect and undeserved. For example, we find it in the fairy tale “Grandfather’s Daughter and Grandmother’s Daughter,” which, however, does not relate to the topic under study. Instead, the Ukrainian folk tale “The Magic Belt” (*Чарівний пояс. Українська народна казка. Народна творчість* n.d.) already has the motif of creating the semiotics of the belt as a source of incredible power, which they try to steal with cunning and treachery, sending the main character – the owner of the belt – on dangerous tasks (like Heracles). In the end, the main character gains power, becomes the head of the army and regains the belt. As we can see, the belt is identified with power, strength and bravery in Ukrainian folklore. This also traces the archetypal consistency of the European and Ukrainian cultural and civilisational fields. Concluding the brief analysis of the epic heritage of the Ukrainian people, let us emphasise that the folklore image of a warrior can be characterised as a just force – that is, what Plato spoke about when he thought about justice as the defence of one’s own against the attack of others. Later, in European philosophy, this was reflected in the “self vs foreigner” dichotomy, and it is also reflected in attempts to connect it with the course of various social processes, in particular, ethnic stereotyping (Семашко 2014). Ukrainian folklore knows many such characters. Among them are historical characters transformed into legends (“Duma [song] about Baida,” “Song about Morozko”), and fairy-tale characters with corresponding apparent or immanent abilities (“Kotyhoroshko,” “Kyrylo Kozhummyaka,” “Bukh Kopytovych,” “Ivan-Pobyvan”), and, as should be especially emphasised, their faithful brothers.

However, not only verbal sources of Ukrainian culture bear witness to the semiotics of the belt, but also ethnographic facts. A belt was an important element of men’s clothing, which could indicate both the social status of its owner and belonging to a certain stratum (Долеско n.d.). Sviatoslav



Karavanskyi's dictionary of synonyms of the Ukrainian language notes 10 words for "belt": *pas*, *pasok*, *pidperizok*, *pidper*, *popruha*, *reminyk*, *cheres*, *ochkur*, *corsage*, and *corset* (the last two refer to women's clothing, and girth refers to horse harness) (Караванський 2000, 322). The online dictionary also adds: *poyasok*, *poyasyna*, *opasok*, *remin'* (SLOVARonline n.d.). A study of the Hutsul Region as a historical and ethnographic region covering the highest part of the Ukrainian Carpathians within the borders of Halychyna, Bukovyna and Transcarpathia reveals the material component of the belt-wearing culture. Something similar existed in other regions, but it has not survived. First, the initial wearing of a *cheres* signified the initiation of a young man as an adult, capable of labor and defence on an equal footing with others (the *cheres* was given by his father). Secondly, the leather belt had a protective value, redistributing the load on the spine, strengthening the core muscles in physically difficult work and protecting vital organs from injuries inflicted by contemporary weapons (arrow, hatchet, etc.). Thirdly, the *cheres* served as a talisman, that is, it performed a magical protective function, therefore it was passed down from generation to generation (a *cheres* is a Hutsul amulet belt). The initiation of a young man, in addition to putting on a *cheres*, and the right to wear an axe (*bartka*) also included the performance of a ritual – a rope dance. According to tradition, men, going to a high mountain plateau (*poloninu*), slowly converged, grouped, and when everyone they were waiting for gathered, joined in a frantic dance. In particular, it involves fast movement in a circle with clasped hands. The circle could not be broken, because then the energy that should have been given to the sun (the movement imitates the solar symbol) would be lost. The circle broke only when the energy that was to be released was concentrated. This was decided precisely by that single body mind that arose in the solar circle. Note that *arkan*, like their steppe counterpart, the *hopak*, are martial dances. By the way, despite the fact that these motor rites are predominantly male, they were also performed by women, albeit in slightly different versions.

Therefore, the emergence of such a form of martial art as belt wrestling is also a cultural artefact, on par with others (verbal and material), since it is quite possible to understand the consistency of the tradition.

## Education of a warrior: physical culture

Next, after the spiritual, according to Plato, comes physical education. The launch of the Olympic Games with their code of culture, laid in their foundation



by the idea of equality, justice, unity and, at the same time, competitiveness, the selection of primacy, runs in the direction of the same Platonic justice, when power should not oppress, but should strive for wisdom – to act for the good. Then it also contains an additional, aesthetic, component, which is revealed in the combination of the intention to realise justice, to win, to learn victory not on the battlefield, but, according to the idea of educating a warrior, is safe for young people.

Many peoples, including Ukrainians, have in their ethnic heritage, in addition to folklore, their own type of belt wrestling. Researchers have long studied and unanimously answered the question of why this is so: clothes were never cheap. If, with a certain note of humor, we remember the ancient heroes, then they also took off their clothes before a duel without weapons, and Heracles saved the skin of the Nemean lion, which he wore constantly. In any case, on an amphora dated to the IV century BC, ancient heroes are depicted without clothes. Therefore, due to the high cost of clothing, they fought wearing leather belts, which were strong, did not tear or deteriorate. It was the belt that was an integral national attribute of men's clothing among the Ukrainian people. The opponent's belt was convenient to use in the fight – you could make a strong grip and hold your opponent; it was convenient to perform throws and other techniques, and the belt also performed the stiffening function of the spine and vital functions of the human body when lifting and moving loads. For Ukrainians and many people around the world, belt wrestling was a national form of martial art. Warriors trained strength and dexterity; thanks to the belt they could knock the enemy off their horse in battle, and save their lives. Ancient statuettes, drawings on rocks, and other artefacts were found as evidence of material culture that recorded the ancient history of this sport. Facts suggest that belt wrestling has more than two thousand years of history. Since the beginning of the existence of mankind, man has always had to defend his interests: to protect his territory, cultural, spiritual, national values, his people and his race. Therefore, depending on the natural-climatic conditions, morphological features of the human body, cultural-spiritual, national and historical conditions, national types of struggle arose among different peoples of the world in order to defend, fight and win. The peace-loving Ukrainian people were no exception, with their own kind of national belt wrestling, which at the initial stage of its formation served as a type of entertainment whereby men would prove their strength, dexterity, speed, while implementing the principle of Olympics, and preparing for the defense of everything that is important to them.



Belt wrestling was widespread in Kyiv Rus. Only in the last hundred years have we not heard anything about it, because the traditions were lost after the revolution of 1917. But the famous Ukrainian wrestler Ivan Piddubny was an invincible belt wrestling champion. Going back to ancient times, we find references to belt wrestling in the territory of Slavic tribes, dated to the VII–VIII centuries, carvings on the stone walls of monasteries of later times. There are paintings and passages about belt wrestling in the works of famous writers.

Such types of fighting form a long list. In addition to Ukrainian, there are leather belt competitions held in Switzerland, *trynta drapte* in Moldova, and Kyrgyz wrestling with *Alysh* belts. The Karachay people call their wrestling *Tutush*. The Yakuts name it *Khapsagai*. For the Kazakhs and Karakalpaks it is *Kures*, while the Uzbeks refer to it as *Kuryash* etc. Despite the common features inherent in different types of wrestling, the different names are not just name variants but there are also differences in the rules. In the vast majority of national types of belt wrestling, it is not allowed to let go of your opponent's belt. In Ukrainian wrestling, the hand can be swapped, and in the freestyle grabbing different parts of the body is allowed. So, Ukrainian belt wrestling is democratic in spirit, which encourages participation by representatives of other types of martial arts such as: freestyle wrestling, Greco-Roman wrestling, *Alysh* belt wrestling, judo, sambo, etc. An interesting personal observation of the co-authors of this article – Bogdan Semeniv (the first Ukraine Coach for Ukrainian Belt Wrestling) and Kostiantyn Koptev (President of the All-Ukrainian Federation of Ukrainian Belt Wrestling, Master of Ukrainian Sports) – is that athletes representing classical (freestyle wrestling, Greco-Roman, judo, sambo) types of martial arts are keen to learn Ukrainian belt wrestling. The growth in the popularity of Ukrainian belt wrestling in Ukraine and the world can be explained by the peculiarities of the grip on the belt and the range of techniques in culturally different areas of the country.

Since the purpose of the article is to examine cultural approaches to the problem of raising a warrior, the folk wrestling in belts should also be characterised in the same context. Since we chose the ancient setting, we shall continue in this vein. The previously mentioned Olympic Games, founded by Heracles according to legend, included a number of competitions designed to glorify Zeus as their founding hero did, overcoming difficulties and thereby bringing glory to his divine father. Therefore, culturology should also look for specific artefacts in the cult of power. The myth of the twelfth labor of Heracles “Apples of the Hesperides” contains a description of the main



character's struggle with Antaeus. We should immediately note that the ethical component of the struggle between good and evil is also reflected in this myth. As mentioned above, in the context of justice, a warrior does not feel aggression towards his opponent, but acts within the framework of the motivation to protect and preserve those he considers his own; otherwise he is doomed to defeat. In the training of wrestlers, regardless of the type of martial arts, the moral and psychological component of fighting also prevails (Колос and Яременко 2012; Єрѡменко 2014), and a number of conducted studies testify to scientific concern about manifestations of aggression among athletes (Хорошуха 2009; Хорошуха and Приймаков 2010; Несен et al. 2022). Returning to the analysis of the archetype, we shall describe the behaviour of Antaeus, which manifests aggression – he forced all the travelers to fight with him, and everyone he defeated, he mercilessly killed. The plot of the fight between Hercules and Antaeus is a side story of the myth, because this duel was not the purpose of the Heracles campaign. But the fighting strategy described in the myth corresponds to the strategy of destroying the wrestler's stance, when the separation of the opponent from the ground provides an advantage, because the lower the stance, the lower the main center of gravity to the area of support, the greater the stability, steadfastness, and the higher the chances of victory.

However, pedagogy, like cultural studies, seeks to single out such characteristics that can be formed and improved. And this requires specificity. So, what features, in addition to the absence of aggression, should be observed in the training process? The traits of a warrior may be witnessed from sports duels and military competitions. In the Eastern tradition, there is the code of a samurai – a collection of rules, advice, standards of behaviour to be observed by a real warrior in society, in battle or alone, a kind of warrior philosophy, his 'good vs evil' coordinate system (Мусасі and Цунемото 2020). As for Ukrainian, we should turn to folklore sources again, as V. Plavyuk did in the book "Fables or Ukrainian Folk Philosophy" (Плав'юк 1946), adding some explanation to the meaning of the proverbs. We offer a list of wrestling qualities, with a direct translation, without searching for counterparts in the target language. In this case, the subject of research (the quality of a fighter) disappears from the field of Ukrainian semantics. Instead, we offer an explanation of the meaning.





**Table:** Qualities of a fighter/warrior in Ukrainian folk proverbs (Плав'юк 1946)

Qualities of a fighter/warrior	Folk proverbs	Definition
<i>Courage</i>	Without courage you will be despised	He who does not defend himself is despised
	Brave Artym, goes boldly into the water and fire	Characteristics of a brave person
	Where there is courage, there is happiness	The brave and determined get everything
	Courage requires leisure	Rest and transition are always needed
	It's not an art to be brave if you don't feel fear	A coward's excuse
	He who is brave wins, and he who is a coward loses	Taken literally
	A coward dies a thousand times, and a brave man only once	A coward perceives every danger as inevitable death
<i>Ability to lead</i>	To be ataman is not to hold a glass in one's hand, but one must turn many thoughts	To lead a community is to take responsibility
	Without wire, the army perishes	A difficult task requires responsible executors
<i>Qualities of will</i>	Great souls have will power, and weak souls perish in captivity	People with big goals will find a way to achieve them
<i>A conscious competition</i>	Learn intelligence from the enemy	The enemy forces us to be careful and cunning
	The enemy knows more about you than you know about yourself	Enemies try to learn about the worst aspects of their opponent
	Your enemy has sharp eyes and sensitive ears	The enemy follows the opponent, so you have to be careful
	It is better to have an enemy in front than behind	It is better not to let the enemy out of sight
	A wise enemy is better than a foolish friend	You can come to an agreement with a wise enemy, and a stupid friend will cause trouble, because he knows the weak points
<i>Ability to assess the tactical situation</i>	The fugitive is not famous, but useful	The one who ran away is called a coward, but he is alive
	You can't run away, but you can run	It is not known whether it will be possible to escape, but it is necessary to try



Qualities of a fighter/warrior	Folk proverbs	Definition
<i>The ability to suppress aggression</i>	Anger spoils the blood	Excessive emotionality is harmful to health
	Anger is a blind counselor	A person is not capable of thoughtful actions when he is angry
	Do not close the barn on anger	The angry person should be left alone to calm down
<i>Strength and prudence</i>	Where there is state, there is power	There are physical signs of a strong person
	Power without reason goes wild, and reason without power slows down	Power without intelligent guidance leads to trouble, and reason without power leads to a dull and monotonous life
	Strength breaks strength	A greater force overcomes a lesser one
	If there is no strength, then the mind gives way	The mind allows you to conserve strength

Table compiled by the authors

Of course, these qualities are not limited to the entire range of personal characteristics characteristic of both fighters and warriors. A cursory analysis of the available literature shows the perspective of these studies, although we will add diligence, self-criticism, attentiveness, the ability to foresee danger, tenacity, a desire for rivalry, balance, and self-control.

## Education of a fighter/warrior

Actually, the pedagogical aspects of training a fighter/warrior should not be limited to general and special training, because in this case we omit a multitude of factors of an internal, psychological, nature. Another aspect of the research topic here is that, in circumstances of full-scale military operations, there was a need to spread the educational experience of the fighters to broad sections of the population, who, although against their will, are forced to face the extremely unfavourable factors of the military nature. Victory in battle or war is also denoted by the word “win.” So, any confrontation is competitive by nature. If in sports the rivalry is between prepared, motivated, technically equipped parties, then in the Russian–Ukrainian war such parity does not exist. Let us add a small aside: throughout Ukraine’s history, it is often evi-



dent that it wasn't trained military formations taking action, but rather the people rising up in revolt. Another remark is that this does not refer to the history of riots and uprisings, but actually to the history of Ukrainian wars. However, this is not our research topic.

Therefore, the problem of how to produce wrestling qualities on a mass scale arises. In this regard, Ukrainian belt wrestling opens up great opportunities, because its own folk origin – the simplicity of the rules, the ability to achieve certain levels of skill without long preliminary training, the possibility of involving both girls and young men – is a good arguments for the mass development of this discipline among young people or students, in particular.

Own experience from teaching practice at Stepan Gzhitskyi Lviv National University of Veterinary Medicine and Biotechnology and the State University of Trade and Economics suggest that it is possible to attract a significant number of wrestlers to Ukrainian belt wrestling. In connection with this, it is necessary to involve high-quality professional and physical training of specialists. In contemporary socio-economic circumstances, the national-patriotic training of students at universities has tremendous relevance. Preserving and strengthening the health of students, instilling national-patriotic and cultural-spiritual values, satisfying the need for physical improvement and a healthy lifestyle are the main goals of physical education.

Physical education in higher education should be based on new teaching technologies, which will ensure the physical and psychophysiological preparation of students to fulfil their professional duties. Therefore, ways to increase the effectiveness of physical training classes for university students are sought.

At the same time, given the scientific and practical interest in the physical training of students, this aspect of the physical education system requires further study and improvement.

A literature analysis regarding this issue reveals that the physical training of students is usually aimed at mastering a certain amount of theoretical knowledge, practical skills and abilities, to support the necessary state of health. However, not enough attention is paid to the purposeful formation of students' need for national-patriotic, cultural-spiritual education associated with the sufficient development of psycho-physiological qualities. It was this problem that was vividly highlighted by the war, albeit with the amendment that Ukrainians proved to be capable of both strong patriotism and spiritual superiority. So, in view of the terrible "approbation," our approaches were correct. They argue that the use of Ukrainian national belt wrestling for the



development of physical qualities (strength, dexterity, speed) and national-patriotic, cultural-spiritual education of students during physical education classes is effective (Семенів and Пацевко 2015). In addition, it can be safely asserted that Ukrainian national belt wrestling represents a historical and cultural value for the Ukrainian nation, is a factor in the revival and popularisation of Ukrainian national traditions, gives young people a positive direction and promotes a positive image of the Ukrainian state in the world sports and political arena. And we really hope that a positive image of Ukraine will be created once again on sports grounds, in exhibition and concert halls, on the shelves of bookstores, and not in trenches, tanks or planes under fire.

## Conclusions

Raising a warrior is a multifaceted and complex process that has its own philosophical, cultural and pedagogical prerequisites, and therefore limitations. The Ukrainian struggle on the battlefield did not arise out of nothing; it had been preceded by a thousand-year history and culture recorded in cultural artefacts, from which we, following Plato chose to simultaneously shape the mind and body towards the idea of *kalokagatia*. In addition, Ukrainian belt wrestling, like other national types of martial arts, needs scientific and practical understanding and implementation.

Our cultural and educational analysis leads us to state that the heritage of Ukrainian culture, in particular the physical one, is closely intertwined with the European civilisational context, so new information about the Ukrainian cultural context of Europe will undoubtedly enrich it. Because is a diamond well-cut if one of its facets is forgotten?

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