

1 **The role of skill in animal contests: A neglected component of fighting ability**

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14 Short title: Skill in fighting animals

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17 This is a manuscript version of an article published in *Proceedings of the Royal Society:*

18 *Biological Sciences* **284** (1863): 20171596. The version of record can be found at

19 <https://dx.doi.org/10.1098%2Frspb.2017.1596>

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33 **ABSTRACT**

34

35 What attributes make some individuals more likely to win a fight than others? A range of  
36 morphological and physiological traits have been studied intensely but far less focus has been  
37 placed on the actual agonistic behaviours used. Current studies of agonistic behaviour focus  
38 on contest duration and the vigour of fighting. It also seems obvious that individuals that fight  
39 more skilfully should have a greater chance of winning a fight. Here, we discuss the meaning  
40 of skill in animal fights. Since the activities of each opponent can be disrupted by the  
41 behaviour of their rival, we differentiate between ability, technique and skill itself. In addition  
42 to efficient, accurate and sometimes precise movement, skilful fighting also requires rapid  
43 decision making, so that appropriate tactics and strategies are selected. We consider how  
44 these different components of skill could be acquired, through genes, experiences of play-  
45 fighting and of real fights. Skilful fighting can enhance resource holding potential (RHP) by  
46 allowing for sustained vigour, by inflicting greater costs on opponents and by minimising the  
47 chance of damage. Therefore, we argue that skill is a neglected but important component of  
48 RHP that could be readily studied to provide new insights into the evolution of agonistic  
49 behaviour.

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51 **KEY WORDS:** Contest, Fight, Skill, Vigour, RHP, agonistic behaviour

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55 **INTRODUCTION**

56

57 Competing skilfully enhances the ability to win in a variety of situations including courtship  
58 in animals [1] and sports in humans [2]. Here we discuss the role of skill in contests, a central  
59 feature in the lives of most animals where the potential importance of skill has attracted  
60 relatively little attention. Although a few traits that might contribute to fighting ability (e.g.  
61 body size, weapon size) have been heavily studied, these traits are often relatively fixed and  
62 thus do not directly account for the interactive nature of fighting. Furthermore, the  
63 importance of these traits will vary across species and thus it is still not clear whether there  
64 could be general traits that differentiate winners from losers across diverse species of fighting  
65 animals [3]. Here we argue that how skilfully an individual fights is driven by both intrinsic  
66 and extrinsic factors associated with fighting. Skill could therefore provide a more accurate  
67 measure of fighting ability that offers a better explanation for fight outcomes across a diverse  
68 range of animal taxa.

69

70 *What makes a good fighter?*

71 For animals, unequal access to food, shelter, territories and even social status and mates can  
72 constrain survival and reproductive rates [4]. Thus, individuals are likely to come into severe  
73 conflict, particularly with conspecifics that require exactly the same resources. When these  
74 conflicts are concentrated upon the ownership of a single indivisible resource unit the result is  
75 a discrete interaction called a contest [4]. In addition to a resource, contests are characterised  
76 by a set of opponents (usually two individuals), the use of agonistic behaviour and an  
77 outcome that produces winners and losers. The word *contest* is often used synonymously with  
78 *fight*, whereas some authors prefer to reserve the latter term only for the most intense

79 examples of contests where sustained physical contact occurs and there is the possibility of  
80 injury. In less intense contests, outcomes might be decided by the use of signals or by trials of  
81 strength, as in pushing or wrestling matches. In this review we use *fight* to describe all of  
82 these levels of contest behaviour because they all involve the use of *agonistic behaviour*. This  
83 is defined as aggressive or defensive behaviour used when attempting to directly exclude  
84 other individuals from access to a resource that is usually indivisible [5] (although see [6] for  
85 an example where resource units can be shared if opponents are evenly matched).

86 Fights are usually characterised by asymmetries in fighting ability between the  
87 opponents. Fighting ability, often termed Resource Holding Potential (or Resource Holding  
88 Power, RHP [7]), represents the phenotypic variation that differentiates winners from losers.  
89 If both opponents value the resource equally, the individual with greater RHP should prevail  
90 [8]. Therefore, enhanced RHP should offer a selective advantage and it is not surprising that a  
91 central question in the study of contests should thus be centred on understanding which traits  
92 contribute to RHP: In other words, what makes a good fighter? The importance of this  
93 question goes beyond the initial identification of RHP traits. Once these are known they can  
94 be used along with data on contest duration [9,10] and escalation patterns [10,11] to test the  
95 hypothesis that losers reach their decision to give up either by comparing their RHP to that of  
96 the opponent [12] or simply when their own individual threshold of costs is crossed [13,14].  
97 Studies of fighting typically focus either on differences in physical or physiological RHP  
98 traits [15] or on uncorrelated asymmetries between opponents that are determined by the  
99 specific context of the fight, such as resource value [16] or the effect of prior ownership of  
100 the resource [17]. It seems obvious that larger individuals should be likely to defeat smaller  
101 ones [18,19] but differences in size can be further broken down into differences in weapon  
102 size [20,21] and strength [3,22]. Strength is an example of a performance capacity and overall  
103 stamina has also been revealed as an important performance capacity that can increase the

104 chances of victory [23]. Stamina in turn is dependent on energy reserves, aerobic capacity  
105 [24] and metabolic rate [25]. Thus, morphological and physiological traits seem  
106 fundamentally important to the outcome of animal fights.

107

### 108 *The nature of fighting*

109 Are brute force and high stamina always enough to secure victory? A consideration of the  
110 characteristics of fighting across a broad range of examples suggests that the answer is often  
111 no. In some cases where dangerous agonistic behaviour is used to kill or maim, powerful  
112 weapons, strength and overall bulk are of obvious importance. For example, in northern  
113 elephant seals, males use their teeth to maul their opponent's head and neck [26], and  
114 massive size might predispose animals to dangerous fights if weapons grow faster than  
115 defences [27] . However, injurious fighting is not restricted to massive animals. During the  
116 duels of Asian rhinoceros beetles, *Trypoxylus dichotomus*, males try to pinion their opponent  
117 on their head horn, which enables them to puncture the opponent's elytra using the sharp  
118 spikes of the thoracic horn [28]. Although it is not surprising that fighting can lead to injury,  
119 basic game theory [29] shows that this need not be the case and in many examples we see the  
120 frequent use of relatively dove-like tactics. In large and powerful mammals such as red deer,  
121 *Cervus elephas*, and fallow deer, *Dama dama*, most fights are settled without injurious  
122 fighting even though injuries can occur in the most escalated contests [30]. Diametrically  
123 opposed to injurious fights are contests that are settled purely on the basis of agonistic  
124 displays without any physical contact at all. Various species of butterfly, for instance, use  
125 aerial displays to compete for favoured territories where males use flashes of sunlight  
126 reflected off their wing scales to ward off competitors (see [31] for a short review).

127           Each of the above examples, regardless of whether opponents must be physically  
128 overpowered or only given a display, involves the use of challenging agonistic behaviours  
129 that are specific to fighting and distinct from routine activity patterns. In examples where  
130 physical contact is involved, the level of challenge is raised even further, because neither  
131 opponent passively allows its rival to perform agonistic behaviour without interference.  
132 Courtship is another context where animals have to perform challenging and unusual  
133 behaviours and parallels between courtship and agonistic behaviour have recently been  
134 discussed [11,32]. During courtship, individuals that perform their displays well tend to be  
135 more successful than those that perform poorly [1]. This ability to perform a challenging  
136 behaviour well has been described in the context of sexual selection as *skill* [1]. Similarly, we  
137 should expect that individuals that can perform agonistic behaviour skilfully should have a  
138 greater chance of victory than those that perform poorly [33]. In the following sections, we  
139 discuss what ‘performing well’ during a fight might mean, and what might underpin variation  
140 in the capacity to do this. Crucially, a distinction can be drawn between skilful and vigorous  
141 behaviour [1] and in the following sections we show that this distinction can be applied to  
142 agonistic behaviour as well as to courtship. We will then consider the components of skilful  
143 fighting and show that, because opponents might interfere with one another’s agonistic  
144 behaviour, it is necessary (in the context of fighting) to further distinguish between *skill*,  
145 *technique* and *ability*.

146

## 147 **VIGOROUS FIGHTING**

148 When studies of fighting move beyond the measurement of physical traits and outcomes to  
149 include analysis of agonistic behaviour itself, the focus tends to be on vigour [18]. Vigour is  
150 defined as the intensity and rate of performance of an agonistic behaviour [34] and can be

151 most readily quantified for tactics that are performed repeatedly. In hermit crabs, for  
152 example, attackers try to take the gastropod shell of a defender. While defenders remain  
153 withdrawn into their shells, attackers perform bouts of shell rapping by repeatedly striking  
154 their shell against the defender's shell in a series of bouts. The intensity of shell rapping can  
155 vary through the amount of power supplied to each rap [35] and the rate of shell rapping also  
156 varies in several ways. These include the number of raps in each bout, the intervals between  
157 raps within a bout and the duration of pauses between bouts [36,37]. Attacking hermit crabs  
158 are more likely to win the shell fight, evicting the defender from its shell, when they rap  
159 vigorously using powerful raps at a high rate [35]. In addition, these aspects of vigour vary  
160 during the fight, with successful attackers escalating in vigour as the fight progresses while  
161 unsuccessful attackers de-escalate. Understanding escalation patterns during fights such as  
162 those between hermit crabs is key to determining how losers make the decision to give up.  
163 'Escalation' during a fight is actually used in two different senses. First, as described above,  
164 it can refer to the pattern of change in the vigour of a single behaviour as the fight progresses.  
165 Escalating winners and de-escalating losers suggests that the agonistic behaviour is  
166 demanding to perform and that losers become constrained by fatigue, a result supported by  
167 studies of the energetic costs of fighting [15]. However, escalation could also refer to changes  
168 in agonistic tactics as the fight progresses, usually from less costly to more costly activities.  
169 This type of escalation is predicted by the sequential assessment game [12], where giving up  
170 decisions are assumed to be made by each opponent through comparing its own RHP to that  
171 of its rival. As we discuss below both types of escalation are relevant to the question of skill.

172         While it is possible to show that on average winners fight more vigorously, and are  
173 more likely to escalate than losers, there is a difficulty in establishing a given individual's  
174 actual capacity for vigorous fighting. This is because an individual's vigour will vary from  
175 fight to fight, as a consequence of variation in resource value and the RHP (and agonistic

176 behaviour) of different opponents. Thus, individual performance capacities have to be  
177 quantified independently of fighting by measuring traits such as locomotor endurance [23] or  
178 the closing force of appendages [22]. Studies applying these approaches indicate that  
179 agonistic behaviour is energetically challenging and that the ability to fight vigorously is  
180 strongly correlated with endurance capacity.

181

## 182 **SKILFUL FIGHTING**

183 While vigour and the chance of winning can vary with a host of physiological parameters that  
184 drive endurance [15], endurance and hence sustained vigour might also be influenced by how  
185 efficiently the required motor patterns are executed. Efficient movement is one component of  
186 skill, which in the context of sexual selection Byers et al. [1] distinguish from vigour as  
187 follows: If *vigour* represents the rate and intensity of a challenging behaviour, *skill* represents  
188 how well the challenging behaviour is performed. In the context of fighting (and perhaps  
189 courtship as well), how well a behaviour is performed encompasses its efficiency, accuracy,  
190 precision and appropriateness to the situation. While *efficiency* refers to the minimum amount  
191 of movement (and hence energy expenditure) required to perform a behaviour effectively,  
192 *accuracy* refers to the degree of congruence between the motor patterns required (i.e. the  
193 patterns that will influence the behaviour of recipients) and what is actually performed. As  
194 well as signals that are attuned to the psychology of receivers (sensu [38]), accuracy could  
195 encompass the delivery of strikes if the opponent must be struck on a specific body part (e.g.  
196 on the telson in fighting mantis shrimp [39]). In addition to accuracy, *precision* may also be  
197 important if victory depends on the consistency of agonistic behaviour within a fight, for  
198 example repeatedly striking the same area of the opponent within narrow parameters of  
199 variation. *Appropriateness* refers to the choice of agonistic tactics used in cases where there



200 is a range of possible choices and where the optimum tactic can vary between and within  
201 fights, typically showing a pattern of escalation towards more costly tactics as the fight  
202 progresses [12]. This is analogous to the concept of ‘game intelligence’ in human sports [2].  
203 Inefficient agonistic behaviour would lead to reduced endurance while inaccurate or  
204 inappropriate agonistic behaviour will produce ineffectual fighting. Thus, although vigour  
205 and skill may be functionally linked (for example if sustained vigour is dependent on efficient  
206 movement [34]) it is nevertheless possible to distinguish between the two, if vigour describes  
207 temporal parameters of agonistic behaviour (rates) and skill refers to the spatial parameters  
208 [1] of efficiency, accuracy, precision and appropriateness (Table 1).

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210

211

212 *Skill is underpinned by ability and technique*

213 As with observations of vigour, if we can detect differences in motor patterns between  
214 winners and losers, we could infer that variation in skill contributes to fighting success. But  
215 for a given individual the level of skill employed might vary from fight to fight due to  
216 interference from opponents. This constraint on our ability to measure an individual’s skill  
217 highlights a distinction between the potential to fight well and what is actually achieved in a  
218 particular fight.

219 In sports training an analogous distinction is drawn between the potential to perform  
220 movements well and the level of realised skill that is actually displayed in a real competition.  
221 *Technique* is defined as the capacity to perform specific movement patterns whereas skill is  
222 defined as the capacity to use these movements effectively during a competition. In

223 association football for example, dribbling the ball past static obstacles would require a  
224 particular set of techniques. But using these techniques to dribble the ball past a real player,  
225 without being dispossessed, would be an example of skill. Here, the correct ball-dribbling  
226 techniques must be rapidly chosen and adjusted to counter the tackles of the defending  
227 player. Similarly, in combat sports such as judo, the movement patterns required to throw the  
228 opponent can be practised in training on a partner who will not resist. But again using the  
229 same techniques against a real opponent, who will resist being thrown, would be an example  
230 of skill.

231           Thus in interactions between animals that do not involve direct contact and mutual  
232 interference (such as courtship displays and some agonistic displays), technique and skill may  
233 be identical.. But the amount of automatic correspondence between technique and skill is  
234 likely to diminish as physical contact and opportunities for interference increase. Technique  
235 in turn can be acquired through a combination of ability and experience. Here we use the  
236 term *ability* to represent innate capacities for (a) good technique in terms of forming motor  
237 patterns efficiently and accurately, and (b) for choosing the most appropriate technique to use  
238 at different stages of fights. Typically (in sports science) innate capacities are thought of as  
239 being determined by genes but there is also the possibility that developmental experiences  
240 will alter the expression of those genes. Thus we distinguish between two types of  
241 experiences that could influence the techniques used in fights. First, there are general  
242 developmental experiences that can interact with genes to drive variation in basic ability.  
243 Second, any instances where the specific motor patterns involved in fighting are practised  
244 could offer the opportunity to convert ability into technique, and to improve technique. In the  
245 following section we discuss potential sources of variation in ability, technique and skill  
246 (Table 2).

247

248 **VARIATION IN ABILITY, TECHNIQUE AND SKILL**

249 *Variation in ability*

250 In sexually selected displays the ability to perform coordinated movement patterns has been  
251 linked to investment in musculoskeletal, nervous and sensory systems [1]. The general  
252 principle that coordinated movement should be underpinned by the architecture of nervous  
253 and sensory systems, and by how these interface with motor systems, is well established. In  
254 vertebrates, for example, the cerebellum is responsible for the overall integration of sensory  
255 inputs with stored information about the capabilities of individual body parts, and damage to  
256 this brain area severely reduces motor coordination [40]. More specifically, in birds the  
257 quality of song will depend on the ability to coordinate muscles used in ventilation and  
258 phonation; specific nerves, areas of the forebrain and feedback-loops responsible for this  
259 coordination have been elucidated [41]. However, direct links between variation in the  
260 structure of musculoskeletal, nervous and sensory systems and variation in sexual displays  
261 are relatively rare and, although likely to be present, such links with agonistic behaviour have  
262 yet to be established.

263         Variation in the musculoskeletal, nervous and sensory systems that should drive  
264 variation in ability can be separated into genetic and environmental components. The genes  
265 controlling neurogenesis are highly conserved across animals [42] and development of key  
266 structures such as the cerebellum in vertebrates is increasingly well understood [43]. In  
267 contrast, there are few examples where a direct link between genes and specific behaviours  
268 have been demonstrated (see [44] for a review). In a more general sense, the links between  
269 genotype and behaviour, including examples of variation in abilities that underpin technique,  
270 can be demonstrated using quantitative genetics. In the field cricket, *Gryllus integer*, males

271 emit a stridulated call to attract females. The proportion of calls with long bout durations,  
272 which are preferred by females, is highly repeatable across males. Call duration is also  
273 heritable, indicating that much of this variation in calling ability between males is under  
274 genetic control [45]. As well as being influenced by genes the structures that underpin  
275 variation in ability will also be subject to developmental plasticity. Compensatory growth, for  
276 example, allows individuals that are subjected to a poor diet early in life to achieve large  
277 body size, via a prolonged growth phase, if diet improves later on during development.  
278 However, developmental plasticity can come at a cost, for example in the swordtail,  
279 *Xiphophorus hellerii*, prolonged growth results in reduced swimming speed and fighting  
280 ability [46]. Thus, variation in ability is likely to be driven by interactions between genes and  
281 environment.

282

283

#### 284 *Variation in technique – the roles of development and experience*

285 Ability may provide the foundation for skilful fighting but it is unlikely to be enough on its  
286 own. Rather it must be converted into technique, meaning that individuals with similar  
287 potential (based on ability) could still demonstrate different proficiencies in technique. As  
288 noted above, participants in human combat sports may acquire technique by practising in the  
289 absence of an opponent or against an opponent who offers reduced resistance. In many  
290 animals these controlled scenarios are unlikely, making it difficult to observe technique  
291 independently of skill. For some animals, however, there are situations that can offer the  
292 opportunity for practice fighting, for example, during play.

293         There are a number of explanations for play behaviour in animals (reviewed in [47]),  
294 but two hypotheses seem particularly pertinent to the acquisition of fighting technique. First,

295 the *motor training hypothesis* (MTH) posits that play promotes the adaptive development of  
296 neuromuscular systems and (in vertebrates) the cerebellar synapses that allow for specific  
297 motor patterns [48]. Here, play is expected to be concentrated during sensitive periods of  
298 development. This type of play might also optimise the development of standard RHP traits,  
299 such as strength and stamina, but if it promotes changes in synaptic connections it could also  
300 allow for the development of technique. A second explanation for the function of play is the  
301 *training for the unexpected hypothesis* (TUH) [47]. This includes situations where an animal  
302 simply has to recover from losing its footing through to situations where an individual's  
303 options are directly impacted by the unpredictable actions of others. For instance, Spinka et  
304 al. [47] describe situations such as being “knocked over”, “pinned down” or “shaken  
305 vigorously”, all of which might occur during a fight.

306 A prediction of MTH is that play should be focussed on activities similar to those  
307 used in real situations. In contrast, TUH predicts that animals at play should seek more  
308 unusual activities that can even appear to be somewhat contrived so as to offer unlikely  
309 scenarios. Such play could lead to generalised improvement in performance across a range of  
310 contexts, and thus play activities need not mirror real fights closely. Young mammals  
311 frequently indulge in play-fighting but these interactions do not necessarily involve agonistic  
312 tactics or the targeting of body parts that feature in real fights [49]. Rather, examples across a  
313 range of mammals show a diversity of levels of realism in play-fighting. In black bears,  
314 *Ursus americanus*, play-fights are very similar to real fights, but in muroid rodent species  
315 aggressive behaviours are targeted towards different areas of the opponent's body in  
316 comparison with real fights [49]. On balance it seems that play-fighting does provide some  
317 practise of tactics that are at least similar to those used in real fights. On the other hand,  
318 although fights are often ritualised it is unlikely that an individual will be able to predict what  
319 its rival will do next, because fighting animals should conceal their future intentions [5].

320 Indeed, it is not certain that most animals can even perform the (perhaps deceptively) simple  
321 task of assessing their opponent's RHP during escalated fighting [10]. Therefore, the ability  
322 to cope with unexpected contingencies, in terms of agonistic behaviour of the opponent (and  
323 updated assessments of RV; see below), could also enhance the ability to fight skilfully.  
324 Thus, both routes may allow animals to build techniques that are useful during fights.  
325 Overall, differences in technique might arise from variation in the quantity and quality of  
326 play, which can be influenced by a range of intrinsic factors, including consistent variation in  
327 aggressiveness, and extrinsic environmental factors [50].

328

329

### 330 *Variation in skill*

331 While individuals with similar abilities could achieve different levels of technique  
332 (depending on their experiences), it also follows that technique need not necessarily translate  
333 directly into skill. Again experience seems key, and real fights, in addition to play-fights, also  
334 represent experiences that could influence future combat (e.g. see [17, 51]). In jungle fowl,  
335 for example, females that have prior experience of fighting, regardless of winning or losing,  
336 are more likely to achieve dominance when transplanted to a new group [52]. Real fights  
337 should not only allow animals to practise technique but also to practise the application of  
338 these techniques. Individuals are likely to differ in their experience of fighting for a number  
339 of reasons. First, availability of resources will drive the motivation to fight, the likelihood of  
340 engaging in a fight being inversely proportional to the availability of resources and  
341 proportional to the value of the contested resource unit [16]. Second, individuals might vary  
342 in aggressiveness and highly aggressive individuals should experience more fights than those  
343 with lower levels of aggression [53].

344 As well as the opportunity to practise the application of technique, real fights are  
345 characterised by outcomes (winning or losing) that could influence skill in a more direct way.  
346 First, winners will obtain enhanced access to resources such as food. While energetic  
347 constraints on vigour are well established, initial evidence from animal contests [34] and  
348 combat sports [54] indicate that the efficiency and accuracy of agonistic behaviour can also  
349 decline with fatigue. Thus, winners that gain more food might be better placed to sustain  
350 skilful fighting in future combat due to an enhanced energy balance. Second, in injurious  
351 fights losers are more likely to sustain injuries than winners. If these injuries affect the  
352 musculoskeletal, nervous and sensory systems that determine innate ability, this will  
353 ultimately reduce the capacity for fighting skilfully. Finally, in addition to efficient and  
354 accurate motor patterns, skilful fighting requires appropriate tactics to be chosen. Intra-  
355 specific variation in information gathering, assessment and decision making is well  
356 documented [55] and such variation in cognitive ability could also lead to differences in skill  
357 during fights, particularly with respect to the selection of appropriate tactics.

358

359

## 360 **HOW COULD SKILL PROMOTE SUCCESSFUL FIGHTING?**

361 Thus, skilful (efficient, accurate, precise and appropriate) fighting is dependent on three  
362 capacities (ability, technique and realised skill itself) and these are likely to vary between  
363 individuals (Figure 1). But given that RHP is already known to be influenced by several other  
364 traits [3] how important is skill likely to be in influencing the outcome of fights? As noted  
365 above, at present there are very few studies of fighting skill in animals [34,56] and only one  
366 of these [34] looks at the effect of motor patterns on outcomes. Nevertheless, when other

367 RHP traits are similar between opponents, differences in skill could determine the outcome  
368 and below we highlight scenarios where skill could make the difference.

369 *Skill reveals underlying qualities*

370 During courtship, receivers of dynamic and repetitive signals (usually females) might be  
371 interested in the level of skill displayed *per se*, since skilful behaviour may indicate the  
372 underlying quality of the performer. Indeed, studies of sexual displays in birds [57,58] and  
373 humans [59] indicate that the receivers of such signals are sensitive to this type of variation.  
374 Signals that reveal underlying quality might also be pertinent during a fight between males if  
375 the fight is observed by females that use information on skill to subsequently choose a mate  
376 [56]. Similarly, if skilful agonistic behaviour correlates with persistence capacity or strength,  
377 then skill could reveal information about RHP during contests settled through mutual  
378 assessment [12]. On the other hand, contests can also involve costs that accrue to individuals  
379 through the repeated performance of energetically challenging behaviour [13], as well as  
380 costs that opponents inflict directly on one another through injuries [14]. Therefore, the level  
381 of skill used in a fight could be important not only because skill *per se* is directly assessed by  
382 a potential mate or a rival but also because skill level will influence the costs accrued through  
383 performing agonistic behaviour and the costs that can be inflicted on the opponent.

384

385 *Efficiency and endurance*

386 Vigorous fighting involves the repetition of challenging behaviours, so performing these  
387 motor patterns efficiently seems imperative. In the example of shell fighting in hermit crabs,  
388 Briffa & Fortescue [34] quantified the motor patterns involved in individual raps by  
389 measuring the distance through which the attacker's shell was displaced. As well as rapping  
390 more vigorously than attackers that failed to evict the defender, successful attackers displaced



391 their shells through shorter distances and there was a negative correlation between  
392 displacement distance and vigour. Over-displacement of the shell might have reduced the  
393 capacity for vigorous rapping, possibly by wasting energy. Interestingly, sustaining low  
394 displacement distance presented a stronger challenge to certain attackers. Those that evicted  
395 the defender showed a gradual reduction in displacement as the fight progressed whereas  
396 those that failed to evict the defender showed increasing displacement over the fight.  
397 Although analyses of motor patterns during animal fights have rarely been undertaken,  
398 similar approaches have been used to study human combat sports. Ashker [54] analysed the  
399 proportion of punches on target over three-round boxing matches and found that although  
400 winners fought with greater accuracy overall, for both winners and losers the proportion of on  
401 target punches declined from round to round. These examples indicate that the ability to fight  
402 skilfully (in terms of accuracy), as well as vigorously, is constrained by fatigue.

403

#### 404 *Accuracy and damage*

405 Some fights involve inflicting direct blows on the opponent, which have the potential to  
406 cause injury. Recipients of attempted blows would benefit from making rapid decisions on  
407 appropriate defensive moves, such as evasion or blocking, that are executed accurately so as  
408 to match the anticipated site of impact. For individuals attempting to strike the opponent the  
409 accuracy of agonistic behaviour will determine their effectiveness, for instance by targeting  
410 the most vulnerable part of the body. Furthermore, as inflicting damage has recently been  
411 shown to sometimes result in injury to the attacker as well as the recipient [60], the ability to  
412 effectively target attacks for maximum impact may reduce the costs incurred by the attacker.  
413 Particularly in the Pancrustacea, self-inflicted damage costs could be avoided by the accurate  
414 targeting of strikes on weakly armored, rather than strongly armored, regions of the

415 opponent's body (see [27]). Individuals that are better able to land targeted blows may also be  
416 able to secure a victory through a single attack, whereas other less skillful fighters may have  
417 to strike several times before causing the opponent to retreat. By deploying multiple attacks,  
418 individuals not only increase the likelihood of sustaining substantial self-inflicted damage,  
419 but also give their opponent the time and chance to strike back and thus may incur  
420 even higher damage costs. Therefore skillful individuals could be able to win injurious fights  
421 faster, by inflicting single blows with maximal impact and minimum cost.

422

423

#### 424 *Appropriate choice of tactics*

425 Different tactics may be employed during different phases of fights [12] but even within a  
426 given phase a range of tactics may be available and, notwithstanding energetics constraints,  
427 different levels of vigour may be chosen. Selecting the best course of action from among the  
428 options available will require decision-making based on the integration of several sources of  
429 information. In hermit crabs, fighting with high vigour involves powerful as well as rapid  
430 shell rapping. When attackers are prevented from delivering powerful raps (through  
431 experimentally dampening their shells with silicone) they increase the proportion of an  
432 alternative tactic, shell rocking [61]. This indicates that attackers change their technique  
433 based on an assessment of the effectiveness of their own agonistic behaviour.

434

#### 435 *Skill and strategic decisions*

436 Thus far we have considered how skill may promote victory (i.e. act as an RHP trait) for  
437 individuals committed to winning the contest in order to obtain a valuable resource. Under

438 certain circumstances, however, persisting in a contest through to victory may not be the  
439 appropriate strategy, since fighting is costly and RV may not necessarily outbalance the costs  
440 needed to secure victory. Animals that decide to enter into fights should place a high value on  
441 the resource but the perceived balance between RV and costs could change as the fight  
442 progresses. First, perceived RV could be updated during the fight, for instance in situations  
443 where an intruder only comes into close contact with the resource once the fight is under way  
444 as in hermit crabs fighting over shells [62] or guppies fighting over shelters [63]. The ability  
445 to make such assessments can vary with experience [62, 63]. Second, for contests that  
446 involve mutual assessment, the perceived costs of victory could be updated as more  
447 information is revealed about the opponent. In such cases, where it becomes apparent that the  
448 resource is not worth fighting for relative to the anticipated costs of victory, persisting in the  
449 fight should not be the optimal strategy. Thus, as well as making appropriate tactical  
450 decisions, about which agonistic behaviours to use, making appropriate strategic decisions to  
451 ‘cut ones losses’ is also an ability that could increase with experience of real fights [62, 63].

452

## 453 **CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

454 A popular approach to the study of animal fighting is to focus on morphological RHP traits  
455 and performance capacities, coupled with analysis of contest duration and outcome. This  
456 closely follows an established framework [9,10] for determining whether contests are settled  
457 through mutual-or self-assessment. However, we have previously argued [10,11] that there is  
458 much to gain from quantifying actual agonistic behaviours within fights, specifically by  
459 investigating vigour. Here we suggest that in addition to vigour we should also attempt to  
460 analyse skill. Like vigour, initial evidence shows that skill can drive outcomes and varies as  
461 fights progress [34,54] and the pattern of change in skill within fights can differentiate

462 winners from losers [34]. A wide range of approaches could be taken to the study of skill in  
463 animal contests and it is likely that the relevance of any one approach will vary greatly  
464 between study species due to the diversity of fighting behaviour among animals [4]. For  
465 example, complex and diverse song is known to correlate with success in male birds but  
466 without knowledge of this aspect of their natural history variable song patterns could be  
467 misinterpreted as lacking in precision. With this caution in mind, potential approaches to the  
468 study of fighting skill include the following: Kinematic studies could characterise agonistic  
469 behaviour in 3 dimensions [64] such that the spatial components of skill can be quantified.  
470 One might then quantify between-fight variance in the aiming of blows or strikes to estimate  
471 accuracy and within-fight variance to estimate precision. Two approaches could be taken to  
472 disentangle skill from technique. First, measuring overall motor performance capacities in a  
473 context other than fighting could be useful if it is reasonable to assume that these will  
474 correlate with technique. Second, one might observe individuals across multiple fights, to  
475 account for the influence of opponents [64]. Longitudinal studies could also be used to track  
476 (or manipulate) play fighting and real fighting during ontogeny, especially in long lived  
477 species, to test the idea that experience [hsu] allows the conversion of ability to technique.  
478 Finally, studies of skill should ideally incorporate more traditional RHP measures (e.g. body  
479 size) so that the relative contribution of skill can be assessed. An interesting question relates  
480 to the possibility of alternative fighting phenotypes; might skill be more important for some  
481 (e.g. smaller) individuals whilst other (e.g. larger) individuals can rely more on strength and  
482 stamina?

483           Although some initial evidence is available, the contribution of skill to fight outcomes  
484 and decision making during fights remains a largely open question. If fighting animals have  
485 evolved to compete skilfully as well as vigorously then we should see variation in the  
486 efficiency, accuracy, precision and appropriateness of agonistic behaviour between fight

487 outcomes (winners versus losers) and between individuals with different levels of experience  
488 of fighting and different life history trajectories. .

489

#### 490 **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

491 MB conceived of this review and it was written jointly by MB and SML.

492

#### 493 **FUNDING**

494 SML is supported by funding from the BBSRC. We are grateful to Bob Elwood and two  
495 other reviewers for their constructive comments.

496

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662 **Table 1:** Components of skilful agonistic behaviour

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<b>Component</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Efficiency	Performing agonistic behaviours with the minimum amount of movement required for that behaviour to be effective	An attacking hermit crab avoiding excessive displacement of its shell during shell rapping
Accuracy	Performing agonistic behaviour that matches a template needed to elicit capitulation in the rival	A boxer connecting their punches with an opponent; a mantis shrimp striking an opponent's telson
Precision	Performing repeated instances of agonistic behaviour with low variance	Consistently performing a given displacement distance or consistently targeting the same body part of an opponent
Appropriateness	Choosing the optimal tactic from the range of possible tactics available	A male fallow deer choosing to vocalise rather than initiate jump-clashes during the opening phase of a fight; a hermit crab switching from rapping to rocking if rapping is ineffective

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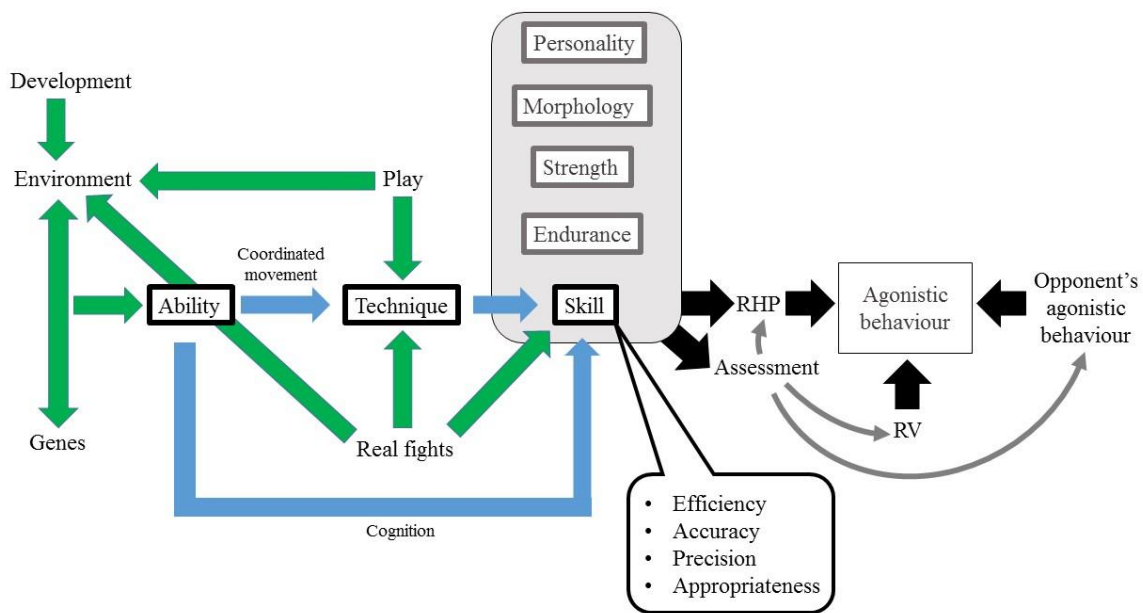
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674 **Table 2:** Sources of variation in ability, technique and skill

<b>Trait</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Driven by</b>	<b>Sources of variation</b>
Ability	Potential to perform efficient and accurate motor patterns needed for agonistic behaviour	Musculoskeletal, nervous and sensory systems	Genes and environment including during development
Technique	Capacity to perform agonistic behaviour in the absence of significant interference or resistance from a rival	Ability (co-ordinated movement) Practice	Experience of play fighting, experience of real fighting (including winning and losing)
Skill	Capacity to fight efficiently, accurately, precisely and appropriately against a real opponent	Technique Ability (cognition) Practice  Agonistic behaviour of the opponent	Experience of real fighting (including winning and losing), opponent's RHP including skill

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**Figure 1:** Schematic representation of relationships between ability, skill and technique, applied to animal contests. In sports opponents try to thwart one another's attempts to win and in sports training it is therefore necessary to distinguish between innate ability, technique in the absence of significant opposition and skill, where techniques are used against real opponents. Fighting is also characterised by opponents that interfere with one another and similar distinctions must be made when considering the role of skill in animal fights. The blue arrows show how fighting skill is underpinned first by ability and then by technique. Green arrows represent hypotheses for the causes of variation in ability, technique and skill. The components of skill are listed in the clear callout box. On the right hand side of the figure skill is grouped with other traits that contribute to resource holding potential (RHP), which along with resource value (RV) and the agonistic behaviour of the opponent, will determine a fighting individual's agonistic behaviour. In addition to influencing the ability to win fights (RHP) skill could also influence the ability to make strategic decisions about whether to initiate or persist in a fight, as more experienced individuals might be better at gathering and utilising (assessing) information on RV, their own RHP and in some cases the opponent's

RHP. Note also that all of these RHP traits may interact with one another (e.g. skill might influence endurance) and drive some of the hypothesised causes of variation in skill (e.g. aggressiveness might influence the number of play fights or real fights experienced, see [50]). While other RHP traits have been investigated at length they do not explain all of the observed variation in contest outcomes [3]. In contrast, the role of skill has been neglected and its contribution to RHP remains an open question.