



# Step into the Ring

## Sparring, Wrestling, and Other Physical Contests

By Teos Abadia

*Illustration by Sam Wood*

Bloodied boxers pacing the ring seeking an advantage, heroes battling foes in the tight confines of a gladiatorial arena, and two wrestlers straining to throw one another can make for compelling dramatic scenes. Whether the stakes are gold, freedom, honor, or glory, such contests hearken back to earlier times and reflect our feral beginnings. Hearts beat faster and sweat drips more freely when a physical contest comes to a head. The roar of the crowd and the consequences of victory or defeat heighten the tension, bringing the players and the DM to the edge of their seats.

This article examines how you, as the DM, can build such scenes into adventures. It provides three design frameworks for you to expand on, and it offers rules for using Fortune Cards to add a strategic element.

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## DESIGNING A CONTEST

A physical competition has three components, which you determine in the order given below.

### 1. Premise

Any campaign can feature physical contests. Arenas and gladiatorial combat are commonplace in the DARK SUN® campaign setting. Start your design process by considering why the contest is taking place, who has created the challenge, and who will participate. The following possibilities will help you get started.

**Advertised Challenge or Grand Tournament:** Boxing and wrestling matches with little bloodshed are common in many societies. They provide a way for heroes to earn coin and gain information. A king, a queen, or some other noble might hold a tournament as part of a festival. A coronation, the anniversary of a famous battle, and a holy day for a deity representing strength or war are all suitable reasons for a grand tournament. The rewards for victory are enticing when they align with player character needs and goals. For example, adventurers who want to restore the name of a family that has fallen can accept a sparring contest in the family's name. In the Dark Sun setting, each city-state and most large villages hold periodic contests.

**Ways of the Wild:** Barbarians and other primitive communities often require blood sport before accepting a request from outsiders. This might be an important test for heroes traversing the wilderness, in need of supplies, or seeking directions to a foe's lair.

**Underground Fighting Den:** The first rule of an underground fighting club is not to talk about it, except when you need new combatants. This type of contest works well when the campaign involves criminal elements, such as a city's thieves' guild. It is also an excellent way for characters to infiltrate such an organization, gain information, or sneak into an enemy city.

**Personal or Judicial Challenge:** A powerful rival could challenge the characters to a contest. Or a transgression against the law might be forgiven if the adventurers can prove their worth and win their freedom. In Dark Sun, the whim of a sorcerer-king's templar or the machinations of a merchant house can easily lead to a physical contest to avoid slavery.

**Alternate Combat Resolution:** Two kingdoms at war decide on a contest between champions to end the bloodshed. An archenemy near defeat requests a contest and offers information the adventurers need in exchange. If the characters are losing, a foe with a sense of honor might accept the challenge of a duel. This sort of impromptu contest is a great way for a Dungeon Master to turn a total party kill into a second chance.

### 2. Location

In many cases, the premise of a contest effectively dictates where the contest is held, or at least narrows down the possibilities. A grand tournament, for instance, is typically staged on a parade ground within sight of a castle, with banners proclaiming the names of each noble contestant. An echoing underground chamber illuminated by flickering torchlight and accessed through sewers is perfect for an illicit challenge run by a cult.

Some kinds of contests, such as a match against a longtime rival, could be held in any kind of location. It's possible for the location to be part of the conditions that must be agreed to before the fight. The characters' longtime rival might agree to a contest only if it's in a place of his or her choosing.

### 3. Rules

Every physical contest is governed by rules that might be an offshoot of the premise or the location. A grand tournament is likely to have more rules than a match in the wilderness against a barbarian champion, where the only rule might be "Don't lose."

The nature of the physical activity you want to feature influences the rules of the contest. An unarmed competition might be a wrestling match, a boxing competition, or a martial arts display. A contest hosted by barbarians might focus on feats of strength, agility, tenacity, and even natural knowledge. A gladiatorial match might require particular weapons and armor or involve specialized combat maneuvers.

Sometimes you can decide the rules of a contest by envisioning how you see the match playing out. Are participants trading blows? Is the contest a combination of hand-to-hand combat and tactical skill? Does the contest resemble an obstacle course?

Of particular importance is how or whether all the characters will participate. If this is a solo contest, can the other characters influence the outcome? They might use skills to convince the crowd to cheer for their ally, use skills to aid their champion between rounds in a boxing match, or wager on the fight to increase the benefit of a victory.



## SELECTING A FRAMEWORK

The combination of premise, location, and rules determines the framework that best fits a physical contest—either a combat encounter, a skill challenge, or a hybrid approach.

### Combat

A combat encounter makes for a thrilling physical contest. Excellent resources for gladiatorial matches can be found in the *DARK SUN Campaign Setting* (pages 200-202) and in the article [“Fight! Battles in the Gladiatorial Arena”](#) (*Dragon* 368). Follow the normal rules for designing a combat encounter, making note of the following points.

**Participants:** Traditional combat design works well for a party of four to six characters. A solo combat or one that matches combatants in small groups requires greater care. A melee combat is unlikely to be fair or fun for the player of a character who specializes in ranged attacks. An elite foe that has high defenses and hit points or powers that apply excessive control can all result in too difficult a challenge.

**Design Elements:** Select terrain and design a map that makes the experience exciting. In the city-state of Urik in Athas, for example, the walls and pillars dotting the arena are covered in jagged and blisteringly hot obsidian. In Raam, one side of the arena is a natural crevasse of tremendous depth. Bring the arena setting to life and consider elements such as ramps and bridges, elevation changes, pits, pools, and difficult, hazardous, or fantastic terrain. Hidden traps, resources such as consumable magic items, and terrain powers (see the article [Tutorial: Terrain Powers](#)) can add to the fun, especially when neither side is aware beforehand that they exist. A match in which combatants start unarmed and must

claim weapons that are lying in the middle of a patch of challenging terrain creates excitement even before the match begins.

**Events:** Combat contests are more dynamic if minor events take place, adding to the action but not supplanting it. An arena master or a noble might suddenly offer a healing potion to the first contestant to reach a certain location. Perhaps a spectator is thrown from the stands and begs for the characters to provide protection, or a foe on the brink of defeat pleads for mercy.

**Victory Conditions:** Simply defeating foes in combat can be underwhelming for the players—after all, the characters do this sort of thing all the time. Consider interesting alternatives such as a capture-the-flag scenario (some object must be reached and perhaps brought back to a location) or king of the hill (a position must be reached and held for some specified duration). For an individual match, you could stage a melee scenario in which victory can be achieved by bloodying an enemy, grabbing an opponent for a specific number of rounds, or bull rushing a rival out of the ring.

### Skill Challenge

A skill challenge works well for a physical contest when victory depends on several aspects of physical prowess instead of just on combat. An obstacle course, a test of strength and agility, and a competition to make it through the desert alive are all excellent themes for a skill challenge. An Olympic-style wrestling match can use Acrobatics, Athletics, and Endurance to determine pins and throws, while skills such as Insight and Perception can reflect defensive awareness.

**Participants and Skills:** Any number of participants can be used. Usually, the likelihood of one side having a necessary skill increases with the number of participants on that side. Select enough skills to

provide options for the characters and a reasonable chance of success.

**Design Elements:** Because monsters tend to have fewer trained skills than player characters, static DCs might be a better option than opposed checks. Doing this also speeds up play and focuses the action on the player characters. If you do use monsters, adjust their trained skills and skill modifiers to expected values for adventurers of the appropriate level.

Consider how certain skills can have varying usefulness throughout the contest, represented by stages of the skill challenge. A martial arts competition might start with a stage to learn about the opponent's style through History or Streetwise, progress to skills used to gain a tactical advantage such as Insight and Perception, feature several rounds of Acrobatics or Athletics as they engage in the physical contest, require an Endurance check to stave off fatigue, and then conclude with a final Acrobatics or Athletics check.

**Advantages:** Advantages (see *Rules Compendium*, page 160) should be used in physical contests where the skill challenge has a high complexity. Consider granting advantages with every other success or designing custom advantages based on the situation.

**Events:** Other events that can unfold during a contest add depth, particularly to obstacle courses and racing contests. A swimming race across a river becomes a thrilling affair when crocodiles are encountered and must be fought or evaded. A character's attempt to prove his or her worth to a barbaric tribe by surviving a week in the forest becomes more challenging when snow falls on the fifth day. See [“Cross-City Race”](#) in *Dungeon* 176 for more examples of events and complications.

**Victory Conditions:** Victory is typically determined by a certain number of successes before failures. You could instead compare successes across participants or consider other methods of determining success. For example, a character who pauses

during a race to help someone in need might later be granted two successes by the match organizer for that display of compassion.

## Hybrid Approach

A combination of skill challenge and combat elements can capture both the furious blows in a sparring match and the strategic decisions made to gain defensive or offensive advantages. A gladiatorial match might require participants to battle as they climb a cliff face. In the style of Robin Hood's Merry Men, bandits in the forest might challenge a player character to duel with staffs while balancing on a log over a river.

**Participants:** The hybrid approach to designing a physical contest has the same considerations in this regard as a straight combat encounter or skill challenge. If players can choose between skills and combat or can boost their combat prowess with skills, they gain greater flexibility. For this reason, the hybrid approach allows a wider variety of character builds to compete in a challenge.

**Design Elements:** The most important consideration on a hybrid contest is how to blend the use of skills with the activity of combat. The best way to do this depends on whether you want the contest to be combat-driven or skill-driven (see the sidebar).

**Advantages:** Advantages can be especially useful in the hybrid approach. Consider providing

a minor advantage for each successful use of a skill. In hand-to-hand combat a participant might select from a menu of skills, gaining a different advantage from each.

**Events:** The hybrid approach lends itself well to the use of events. Events can be either combat episodes or skill challenges based on what will introduce a fun change.

**Victory Conditions:** Victory conditions are driven by the kind of contest you devise. In a skill-driven contest, besting a foe in combat might contribute a success toward the skill challenge. In a combat-driven contest, the successful use of skills helps the combatants land their blows or defend against attacks, making success in the overall battle more likely.

### COMBAT-DRIVEN CONTESTS

In a combat-driven hybrid contest, each participant can engage in combat normally. In addition, combatants can use skills to gain advantages.

If a successful skill check is made as a standard action, its benefit should be as significant as the successful use of a power. This sort of contest can work well if participants are not able to use class powers or similar attack powers. A contest might allow only bull rush actions, grab actions, or the use of Acrobatics, Athletics, or Intimidate.

Allowing the use of a skill as part of a move action can be an integral part of a contest focused on traversing terrain, such as a chase. Minor actions are best for skills that provide small benefits. In a duel, a successful Perception check might enable a character to spot a weak spot in the target's defenses.

### SKILL-DRIVEN CONTESTS

For a skill-driven hybrid contest, you can follow the design of a typical skill challenge, breaking the challenge into various scenes or stages. In between each, allow for one or more combat actions or combat rounds. Consider the many adventures of Indiana Jones where he intermittently traverses dangerous terrain and dispatches foes (usually minions).

Combat scenes within a skill-driven contest work best when they are fast and furious. Consider a scene in which three minions block the path that the characters must take. A minion might be prepared to cut a rope bridge, giving the characters just one chance to strike first. Or, they might need to find a key that is in one of several baskets. The correct basket also holds a dangerous viper, leading to a bit of combat before they can gain the key.

## USING FORTUNE CARDS

Fortune Cards are an excellent addition to a physical contest. They can represent tactics that the characters use during the match. Consider using these optional rules.

### Team Deck

Players create a single deck together, choosing options based on their assessment of the challenge. At the beginning of a round, each player draws a card from the team deck. Players can trade cards if desired. The deck should have twenty or more cards so that lasts for the entire contest. You can create a second deck for the opposing team.

### Match Deck

Each participant—including the characters' opponents—selects a deck of ten cards. At the beginning of combat, each individual draws the top three cards and places them on the table face up, discarding the rest of the deck. In each round thereafter, the participant can play a card, turning it over after it has been used.

### Scenario Deck

The DM selects two to four cards of each category (attack, defense, and tactics) that are especially useful in the match. The cards are placed face up where each participant can view them. Each round on his or her turn, a participant selects one of the cards, turning it over after it has been used.

## SAMPLE HYBRID APPROACH: WRESTLING MATCH

**Premise:** Each year the king grants an audience and a boon to an individual who can best his champion in a wrestling match. The player characters wish an audience to free an ally imprisoned in the king's dungeons.

**Location:** The match is held in a small ring in the castle's large courtyard. Nobles watch from stands and wager their coin while villagers jostle for position and fervently cheer for the king's champion.

**Rules:** This is an unarmed wrestling match between two contestants. Either one can win by bloodying the opponent, grabbing the opponent for 3 rounds, or forcing him or her out of the ring.

**Participants:** One player character and one foe. For a foe we select a brute or a soldier within two levels of the adventurer's level, possessing defenses, skills, and unarmed attacks appropriate for the challenge. Other player characters do not participate directly, but they can influence the outcome (see below).

**Design Elements:** Using the combat-driven hybrid approach, here's how the contest unfolds.

Before combat, each PC can use History or Streetwise to learn one fact about the king's champion (granting a +1 to initiative for a success).

Opponents face each other in the center of a 20-foot-diameter ring. The crowd's cheering grants the king's champion a +2 power bonus to attack rolls.

Combatants roll initiative. Each round, the participants can use an unarmed attack, a grab, or a bull rush action. While a creature is grabbed, it can be moved only 1 square per round. Additionally, as a minor action, a combatant can make a Bluff, Insight, Intimidate, or Perception check against a moderate DC to gain an advantage. You might

provide a +1 bonus to the skill check if the player provides a vivid description of the tactics his or her character is using. As a move action, a combatant can shift only a single square or use the escape action. You might allow some racial powers or class powers to be used.

At the end of a round, each of the other characters can try to influence the crowd with Diplomacy, Intimidate, or Streetwise checks. Each successful check shifts the power bonus to attack rolls granted by the crowd one step in favor of their ally, and each failed check shifts the bonus farther in favor of the king's champion, to a maximum of +4 in either direction. A character who's not participating might agree on a wager with a noble, using Diplomacy, History, or Insight. Each successful check translates into a greater reward if the king's champion is defeated.

**Advantages:** Fortune Cards are used with the Scenario Deck option. The first time each round a combatant succeeds on a skill check, he or she chooses one of the Fortune Cards, gaining sole use of the card. A participant can control more than one active Fortune Card, but can use no more than one in a round.

**Victory Conditions:** Victory is achieved when one combatant is bloodied, is grabbed for three continuous rounds, or is pushed or otherwise forced out of the ring by physical means. If the characters win, they gain an audience with the king, any gold they wagered with the nobles, and a boon. If they fail, the king grants them an audience but demands a service in return.

## REWARDS

Victory or defeat should have a story impact on the adventure or the campaign, furthering or setting back the player characters' goals. In addition, a victory should provide a tangible reward. Gold, experience points, a magic item from the organizer, or a boon, such as the glory boons in the *DARK SUN Campaign Setting*, are ideal rewards. The following alternative rewards provide a benefit based on the use of Fortune Cards.

### Cunning Victor Level 3+ Uncommon

*The crowd idealizes you as a crafty warrior, who knows how to exploit the whims of fate.*

Lvl 3 680 gp Lvl 23 425,000 gp  
Lvl 13 17,000 gp

**Alternative Reward:** Glory Boon

**Property:** You gain a +1 item bonus to Bluff checks.

Level 13: +3 item bonus.

Level 23: +5 item bonus.

**Power (Encounter):** No Action. **Trigger:** You draw a Fortune Card that you dislike. **Effect:** Discard that card, and draw a new one.

### Defensive Training Level 4+ Uncommon

*You won't last long if you don't learn to keep your guard up and dodge blows.*

Lvl 4 840 gp Lvl 24 525,000 gp  
Lvl 14 21,000 gp

**Alternative Reward:** Glory Boon

**Property:** You gain a +1 item bonus to Acrobatics checks.

Level 14: +3 item bonus.

Level 24: +5 item bonus.

**Property:** Rather than drawing a Fortune Card at the start of an encounter, you can choose one defense card from your deck and start the encounter with that card in your hand. After removing the card, reshuffle your deck.

**Power (Daily):** No Action. **Trigger:** You draw a Fortune Card from the attack or tactics category. **Effect:** You discard the card and draw cards until you get a defense card, discarding all non-defense cards.

### Aggressive Training Level 4+ Uncommon

*Your tactics are legendary for their devastating nature.*

Lvl 4 840 gp Lvl 24 525,000 gp  
Lvl 14 21,000 gp

**Alternative Reward:** Glory Boon

**Property:** You gain a +1 item bonus to Intimidate checks.

Level 14: +3 item bonus.

Level 24: +5 item bonus.

**Property:** Rather than drawing a Fortune Card at the start of an encounter, you can choose one attack card from your deck and start the encounter with that card in your hand. After removing the card, reshuffle your deck.

**Power (Daily):** No Action. **Trigger:** You draw a Fortune Card from the defense or tactics category. **Effect:** You discard the card and draw cards until you get an attack card, discarding all non-attack cards.

### Tactical Training Level 4+ Uncommon

*Young gladiators seek you out, begging for you to share your insights on the art of combat.*

Lvl 4 840 gp Lvl 24 525,000 gp  
Lvl 14 21,000 gp

**Alternative Reward:** Glory Boon

**Property:** You gain a +1 item bonus to Insight checks.

Level 14: +3 item bonus.

Level 24: +5 item bonus.

**Property:** Rather than drawing a Fortune Card at the start of an encounter, you can choose one tactics card from your Fortune Card deck and start the encounter with that card in your hand. Then reshuffle your deck.

**Power (Daily):** No Action. **Trigger:** You draw a Fortune Card from the attack or defense category. **Effect:** You discard the card and draw cards until you get a tactics card, discarding all non-tactics cards.

### About the Author

Teos Abadia is an administrator, developer, and author for the [Ashes of Athas](#) organized play campaign, set in the world of the *DARK SUN*® campaign setting. A frequent contributor to a variety of organized play campaigns, and more devoted to Athas than most druids, you can follow Teos's musings on his [community blog](#) and on Twitter ([@Alphastream](#)). This is his first *Dragon* magazine article.