

Cousins from Different Cultures

Written by Eddie Goldman
Wednesday, 03 May 2006 19:00

In recent years I have covered several fights in the Mark G. Etess Arena in the Taj Majal Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City, NJ. There was the card headlined by Wladimir Klitschko's sixth-round TKO over Ray Mercer on June 29, 2002. There was the one featuring David Tua's 30-second knockout of Michael Moorer on Aug. 17, 2002, as well as Tua's second-round knockout of Russell Chasteen along with Cedric Kushner's "Fistful of Dollars" tournament of three-rounders won by Maurice Harris, all on Nov. 30, 2002.

This past Saturday, April 29, I returned to that same building, but this time to cover a fight card in a different combat sport. This was the debut show of the International Fight League (IFL), one of the newest and biggest entrants into the exploding sport of mixed martial arts. This group's particular concept centers around establishing teams of fighters in the various weight classes in that sport to compete in individual fights as part of a dual meet between teams, similar to college wrestling. (Reports on that show, which was quite good, especially for a debut effort, are on my No Holds Barred blog at <http://nhbnews.blogspot.com> / and podcast at <http://nhbnews.podomatic.com/>.)

This building holds a special place in the history of mixed martial arts, since on Nov. 17, 2000, the first Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) event in New Jersey took place there. It was preceded by the first state commission-sanctioned mixed martial arts event in New Jersey, a show by a rival group, the International Fighting Championships (IFC), on September 30, 2000, at the nearby Tropicana. (Disclosure note: I used to be a TV analyst for the IFC's pay-per-view shows and was a judge at UFC 18 on Jan. 8, 1999.)

Looking around at last Saturday's IFL show, and the UFC and IFC shows in Atlantic City, and comparing them to the many boxing cards I have also covered in that town, what stood out is the lack of crossover at these events, both among fans and media. It was just about like going to concerts of Toby Keith and Busta Rhymes: different crowds, y'all.

I did see one person who has covered both mixed martial arts and boxing besides myself, as well as some media people I brought to the event. But there were few others who were at both types of shows, with one notable exception: Larry Hazzard Sr., commissioner of the New Jersey State Athletic Control Board, that state's athletic commission.

Now having served in that post for 21 years, straight through seven state administrations including both Democrats and Republicans, Commissioner Hazzard is not only well-known and respected in boxing for being one of the toughest in that business. He is also well-known and respected in the mixed martial arts for being one of the most instrumental figures in that sport eventually gaining legalization and sanctioning in numerous other major boxing states, including Nevada and, finally just this year, California.

After that first series of mixed martial arts shows which began in the fall of 2000, he held a

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meeting in the state capital of Trenton on April 3, 2001, with several mixed martial arts promoters and others involved in that sport to hammer out a set of uniform rules. These rules were in large part based on rules which had already been adopted and implemented in 1998 in the Province of Quebec under their equivalent of an athletic commission, and even approved but not implemented by the California State Athletic Commission in 2000. Later that year, on July 23, 2001, these rules were basically adopted by the Nevada State Athletic Commission, and the era of the attempted destruction and prohibition of this sport in the U.S. was in the main over.

Nonetheless, there are still many boxing people who even today either don't understand, still fear, or even want to ban mixed martial arts. Much of the disconnect has to do with the unfamiliarity of many boxing people with the fighting techniques used in the mixed martial arts which come from grappling disciplines such as Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, wrestling, and judo.

Speaking right before the IFL event got underway, Commissioner Hazzard said, "What happens most of the time with boxing people is that they understand, they can identify with this as long as the fighters are up. Up position. It's what happens when they go to the ground is where they get lost. And this is where they lose interest. They don't understand the grappling aspect of the mixed martial arts. And until they become a little bit more sophisticated with what goes on on the ground, then I think that the sport will begin to garner even more fans."

Others are just concerned that the growing popularity of these events – the last two UFC pay-per-views each reportedly got at least 400,000 buys – will come at the expense of boxing.

"Boxing people don't have to worry because this particular sport has cultivated its own fans," he stated. "But, it's not that this sport is trying to take boxing fans away. Boxing fans I think will always be boxing fans. Mixed martial arts fans – they've cultivated their own fan base. And when you really look at it objectively, the fan base that is being cultivated I think is one that will have a longer lifespan because they are cultivating a young fan base."

Hazzard also pointed out that the rise of mixed martial arts comes at a time when boxing is in decline.

"As you know, the sport of professional boxing is losing its fan base, because of a lack of competitive bouts, talented fighters," he stated. "When boxing fans associate or try to differentiate between today's boxers and compare them with the fighters of yesteryear, there's no comparison. There's no comparisons to the Muhammad Alis, Joe Louises, Sugar Ray Robinsons. Even when you come closer to the 1970's, your Sugar Ray Leonards, and your Spinks brothers. These fighters today don't compare to them. So boxing is losing its fan base. This particular sport is cultivating an entirely new group of fans, including females. And it's a young fan base. So I think that this sport is going to be around for many, many more years to come – not that boxing won't be around."

And, as he put it, "There are two different cultures."

Like in most distinct, self-protective, narrowly-defined, and parochial cultures, few can exist

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comfortably in both boxing and mixed martial arts. The key to understanding how to do so is to realize that they are both actually cousins, just different branches of the combative sports.

“The one thing that I do know is combative sports,” stated Commissioner Hazzard.

“What we did here – mixed martial arts could not find a home anywhere in the country, including Nevada,” he recalled. In him, UFC, he said, “had a friend, because I have a background in the sport. I’m a black belt in jiu-jitsu. Studied the sport many, many years, with some of the OLD masters.” And even though the style of jiu-jitsu in which he earned his black belt was more traditional than the Brazilian version most popular in today’s mixed martial arts events, that education and training prepared Commissioner Hazzard to understand this sport, where the techniques of numerous disciplines were combined.

“I knew that if you developed a set of rules and regulations that emphasized safety, that this sport would then gain acceptability among the major boxing commissions, because that is our major mission, that’s our goal, to protect the health and safety of the contestants who compete,” he said. “That’s what we did. And the results speak for themselves.” They certainly do, as deaths and severe brain injuries continue to plague boxing, while regulated mixed martial arts events have proved to be safer for the athletes involved, with the only two reported deaths taking place in unregulated events outside the U.S.

The continued relative safety record of mixed martial arts and its growth in popularity in the U.S. may even start to open the eyes of some of the narrowest of boxing people. Asked if he thought that might happen, Commissioner Hazzard concurred.

“I think that they will,” he replied. Then he added, “But you have to understand that historically, boxing fans are diehard fans. I’m a boxing fan. Boxing’s my first love. But it’s because of my background in the martial arts, I look at myself as being a combative sportsman, period. Any form of combative sports, I gravitate to it. And that’s been my life. And I will do everything that I can to keep the sport safe and to promote its popularity.”

Elaborating on his own background, Hazzard said, “I learned jiu-jitsu from a gentleman who was highly recognized, Master Moses Powell,” who he said passed away last year. “I also studied under the great Master Ronald Duncan.” And here, fellow anthropologists, is where that cultural divide is so pronounced.

“These were men whose life was spent promoting and teaching the various forms of the martial arts. This is what they lived by,” he stated. “The martial arts actually is a way of life. So that’s why you have a different type of dedication to this sport that you don’t find in the sport of boxing.”

He added, “But if you know about the history of combative sports, boxing is martial arts also.” I agreed, noting that, in essence, despite the differing rules, histories, techniques, and cultures, they were all really the same.

“It’s all the same,” he agreed. “It’s all the same.”

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Then he concluded, "Boxing fans just happen to be a little bit more diehard to that particular form of martial arts. But those who allow themselves to be a little bit more open-minded, I think will begin to understand and like this also."