

## QUESTION: CAN CHUCK BEAT ESPN COVER JINX?

Written by Michael Woods  
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If you walked into your local newsstand early this week, you noticed that MMA is on the cover of the nation's two major league sports mags, ESPN The Magazine and Sports Illustrated.

That's some feat considering the sport was once lumped in and tossed aside in the same waste receptacle with WWF, cock-fighting and dog-fighting. The thought of a mainstream advertiser paying to sponsor a UFC event in 1994 was laughable, in a non-funny way if you were involved in the endeavor and maybe wanted to earn a living off it.

But today, livings are being earned, some of them quite regal. ESPN's coverboy, Chuck Liddell, has been racking up cameos (Entourage, Blade, Punk'd) and has passed Mr. T as the owner of the most well known Mohawk. The man is positively swamped when he goes out in public, as everyone wants to interact with the sweet tempered serial-killer-looking dude, even if they aren't exactly sure where they "know" him from.

We've almost come to the point where writers can dispense with the "Please allow me to introduce you to..." angle, where the author gives the Dummies Guide to UFC, and, without fail, mentions that John McCain likened the sport to cockfighting.

(The falsity of that comparison aside, as a sidenote, I did some research on a periodical database, and it looks to me like that quote has been incorrectly attributed to McCain, who was a staunch opponent of the early, less regulated, version of the sport. An extreme fighting event run by Battlecade was chased from New York City in 1995, and State Senator Roy M. Goodman, a Manhattan Republican, then called the sport "human cockfighting."

"Why should society be permitting this kind of human cockfighting?" Goodman asked at a City Hall news conference on Nov. 9, 1995.

If any reader can find an earlier instance where this spurious comparison (I'm not aware of an "extreme fighters" outside of a Seagal movie were ever outfitted with razor blades on their feet, and were pitted in fights to the death) was made by McCain, before Goodman used the phrase, please let me know, and we'll clear the record once and for all).

Sports Illustrated, presuming that their audience is largely ignorant to the specifics of UFC and MMA, gave a "For Dummies" sort of overview on the sport while ESPN Mag (which I must disclose sometimes uses my work) gave a thorough profile of Liddell, the 37-year-old Las Vegas resident. In a neat juxtapose, they put the fighter on the cover holding his son. SI, meanwhile, curiously, chose to put a relative unknown, "rising star" Roger Huerta, on their cover. For fans of crotch shots, the image, overwhelmed by the black Octagon cage, was a winner. But overall, both mags give the thumbs up to the sport, and that's no small victory; the two covers is a dual stamp of approval from a relatively conservative faction of editorial bigs who wouldn't sign off on anything without having done their homework (read: market research, focus groups).

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On Saturday, the UFC will try and draw PPV eyeballs in a difficult slot, Memorial Day Saturday. They have a solid storyline to draw returning eyes, with Mag/SI influenced newbies curious about the phenomenon potentially revved to see if Liddell (20-3) can avenge his 2003 loss to Quinton "Rampage" Jackson (26-6) at the MGM Grand in Vegas.

The challenger, a 32-year old California resident, holds a ground 'n pound/corner requested stoppage win over Chuck before he was CHUCK, in a Pride event that took place on Nov. 9 in Tokyo.

The second round TKO stop was the third loss for Liddell and since then, his results have grown with his earning power--he's won seven straight bouts since then, with all of the wins coming in definitive fashion, by KO or TKO.

So, can Liddell stave off (or kick off?) the ESPN Magazine cover jinx, and show Jackson how much his skills and confidence have blossomed since 2003?

Or will the absurd and wondrous UFC upset streak (Couture over Sylvia at 68; Serra over Georges St-Pierre at 69; Gonzaga over Cro Cop at 70) continue?

Liddell is favored, but what with the spate of upsets we've seen recently, I thought it prudent to get Jackson on the cell, and delve into his mindset, predictions for the course of the fight, and determine how many of his children hold the middle name "Rampage...."

Stay tuned for Part II of this piece, as Rampage gives TSS an exclusive, legitimately shocking take on the circumstances of his win against Chuck!

Don't ditch work early for the holiday, check back for the second installment!