Written by Ronan Keenan
Wednesday, 19 September 2007 19:00

A stock market crash can happen suddenly even when sound economic fundamentals prevail. At UFC 71 last May the surging careers of Chuck Liddell and Keith Jardine came to an abrupt halt when both men suffered shocking first round knockouts by underdog opponents.

But, as any shrewd financial investor will attest, the best time to buy stock is when the price is devalued since another rally could be just round the corner.

While Liddell is expected to reclaim his stardom, not many MMA observers forecast that Jardine's career will reach cosmic heights, and even fewer are predicting a victory over "The Ice Man" at the UFC 76 pay-per-view show in Anaheim, California this Saturday.

Internet message boards have been inundated with angry posts from fans deriding this weekend's bout as a mismatch that is not worthy of their dollars. They cite Jardine's relative inexperience and devastating 48 second loss to Houston Alexander as evidence that the Albuquerque resident is not worthy of sharing the Octagon with the former UFC light heavyweight champion.

"I scratched my head when this fight was first announced - two guys coming off KO losses are matched up in a PPV main event," says the Houston Chronicle's Steve Sievert.

"It's certainly not the most compelling fight, but the UFC had limited options and gave Jardine a huge opportunity in taking on the biggest name in the sport. This was supposed to be the spot for the Liddell-Wanderlei Silva fight, but the UFC couldn't get Silva signed in time."

Even Jardine himself was surprised when offered the bout, but the 31-year-old is under no illusion as to why he has been given the opportunity.

"[When the UFC called about a fight against Liddell] I thought the guy was joking right away," reveals "The Dean of Mean". "Then I found out they were serious and I thought 'Wow this is such an opportunity.' I was really grateful for it.
"I think [the UFC] are making me a warm-up fight for Chuck, but I don't think he's going to look at it like that."

So is the UFC asking fans to pay $40 to watch Liddell shake off some rust against non-threatening opposition?

"If you evaluate this fight based on each fighter's experience and level of previous competition, it's a mismatch," says Sievert. "Liddell is the superior fighter. But that's why they fight the fight. Jardine has an effective stand-up game, which gives him a chance in a fight that will likely never see the action go to the ground."

Although he was brutally dismantled by Alexander, the loss seems to have bolstered Jardine's

determination to transform himself from a straightforward striker into a well-rounded mixed-martial-artist.

Just three days after the fight Jardine, 12-3-1, returned to Greg Jackson's camp to train with the likes of Rashad Evans and Georges St. Pierre.

"I think now with my training and everything, I'm finally coming together into a complete well-rounded MMA fighter," Jardine told HACNews. "I polished my boxing and everything is a lot better including my ground game. I think you're going to see a totally different Keith Jardine."

What's more, since last May it has become apparent that losing to Alexander is no disgrace. At the time of the fight, most observers viewed the unheralded Alexander as a tune-up opponent for the streaking Jardine, who was coming off a sensational high-profile knockout win over Forrest Griffin. Yet a series of flush right uppercuts sent the 5-1 betting favorite tumbling out of the 205-pound title picture.

But Alexander has since gained recognition as one of the most dangerous contenders in the light heavyweight division with another dazzling performance in his most recent outing against Alessio Sakara.

So could it be that many observers are discounting Jardine's ability by fixating on what was his first loss in five years?

"Many chide Keith Jardine because he's coming off a quick knockout loss. Well, so is Liddell," says CBSSports.com contributor Sam Caplan. "Many people are going to be surprised with the quality of the match that [Jardine will] have with Liddell.

Jardine is not the best matchup for Liddell. During Liddell's big run as the UFC's top dog in the light heavyweight division, he was primarily matched up with ground specialists who were not known for their striking abilities. Because of Liddell's sprawl, the fighters were unable to get Liddell off his feet so that they could utilize the strongest aspect of their game.

"This match could turn into a slugfest and there is a chance Liddell could get caught."

While Jardine may have stylistic similarities to Liddell, their personalities are poles apart. Whereas Liddell is notoriously fond of spending late nights in high-profile casinos, Jardine indulges in rather less glamorous pastimes.

"In my spare time I like to visit the coffee shops and also see films, independent films, foreign films, and read books to get me away from the world of fighting," he says. "I'm kind of anti-celebrity. [My ideal day] is going camping somewhere with a lake. Get away from people. Get away from the noise."

But, win or lose, Jardine will be looking to make a loud statement on Saturday.

"I'm not here to get more points than my opponent," he stresses. "I want to out-fight my

opponent.
“I don't see it as a sporting event; I see it as a real fight. I’m not standing around trying to win points, I’m trying to win fights.”

Octagon Odds and Ends:
- It may not be the most mouth-watering matchup that can be made in the packed 205-pound division, but Liddell-Jardine should deliver hard-hitting action between two strikers who don’t like going to the ground. The finer points of mixed martial arts won’t be on display, but look for somebody to get kayoed in decisive fashion.

- Also on the card, highly-touted Pride FC star Mauricio “Shogun” Rua will make his UFC debut against the popular Forrest Griffin. Rua, who holds victories over Quinton “Rampage” Jackson and Antonio Rogerio Nogueira, will have the perfect platform to demonstrate his skills on Forrest’s porous defense, but it should be exciting while it lasts.

- Diego Sanchez will be looking to rebuild his reputation after his surprisingly passive points defeat to Josh Koscheck last April. But he figures to have a difficult time against Jon Fitch, who has won all six of his UFC appearances in impressive fashion.

UFC 76 will be screened live on pay-per-view on Saturday September 22 at 10pm ET /7pm PT