

Will Hobbled Economy Hurt UFC Numbers?

Written by Ronan Keenan
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“Vegas is all about skill, guts and standing proud,” touts the mayor of Las Vegas, Oscar Goodman.

The city is America’s party capital all year round, and when a big fight comes to town Vegas turns into a dazzling district of unbridled hedonism.

The University of Nevada estimates that a globally-televised mega fight can attract an additional 150,000 visitors to the city, with each one ready to fall prey to the assortment of slot machines, hookers and hustlers.

This weekend, Vegas is set to stage the most hyped event in mixed martial arts history as Randy Couture defends his Ultimate Fighting Championship heavyweight title against Brock Lesnar at the MGM Grand Garden Arena.

The young sport has yet to match the gigantic figures generated by marquee boxing matches, but the pairing of a legendary come-backing fighter against a monstrous former professional wrestler is expected to generate at least \$45 million from pay-per-view sales alone.

Yet for such a highly-publicized matchup, ticket sales for the UFC 91 event have failed to live up to initial expectations. Typically, tickets for the major boxing and UFC events sell out within days of going on sale, but after four weeks just 8,000 of the 14,000 available seats were sold. Many insiders now predict that this Saturday’s turnout will fall short of the \$5.39 million record gate attained two years ago when Chuck Liddell and Tito Ortiz headlined UFC 66.

“The [UFC 91 event] should have been a first weekend sellout,” said Dave Meltzer of the Wrestling Observer. “[The arena] was scaled to break the all-time UFC gate record and right now it looks like they are going to have to cut deals or paper to sell out the 14,000 plus seats at the MGM Grand Garden Arena.”

Some observers have criticized the main event, labeling the matchup a circus spectacle between a 45-year-old who hasn’t fought in 15 months and a neophyte challenger with a 2-1 MMA slate.

Moreover, the remaining bouts on the nine-fight card lack the big name fighters that usually compose a significant UFC event. The chief support bout between Kenny Florian and Joe Stevenson is certainly an intriguing clash, but the other fights generally comprise untested prospects against relatively obscure opponents.

One theory suggest that some hardcore MMA fans, who regularly travel to Las Vegas for the events, are refusing to support this card, believing Couture-Lesnar will do little to help the sport gain mainstream credibility.

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Yet even though the showdown may not be one for the purists, it is undoubtedly a captivating clash featuring a host of intangibles that make it a handicapper's nightmare.

Despite Couture's experience and expected technical superiority, can his aging body withstand the pressure of a 275-pound brute? Or will the rugged champion utilize his ground skills and force the raw 31-year-old Lesnar to succumb to a submission at some point in the five round bout?

"I can understand why people might feel that Brock hasn't earned this fight," says Shane Thomas, founder of the Kokoro Mixed Martial Arts Gym.

"However, title aside, as a matchup it's going to be interesting. Two guys with very similar backgrounds as wrestlers, who've developed a boxing game in addition to their grappling skills. Where Lesnar has power and bulk on his side, Randy has experience on his side. It's a matchup I'm looking forward to seeing. It's neither a freakshow nor great - just interesting."

"Couture versus Lesnar is a huge main event," adds Denny Burkholder of CBSSports.com. "The undercard could be better, but the undercard's affect on ticket sales or pay-per-view buys is relatively small. People are enthralled by Brock Lesnar and they still love Randy Couture."

Perhaps the event will fail to become the biggest gate in MMA history, but that's won't necessarily prevent it from becoming the sport's highest grossing event. Fans may be unable to travel to Sin City given the hobbled US economy, but it's still possible that they will purchase the pay-per-view in record numbers.

"Americans are hanging on tightly to their wallets, and that trickles down to luxury expenses such as tickets to a UFC event," reckons Burkholder. "The UFC charges a lot of money -- \$750 to \$1,000 each -- for the best seats. That significantly narrows the number of fans who are willing or able to pay for a good view of the Octagon.

"And if you can only afford the \$75 bargain tickets in the nosebleeds, you might seriously consider staying home and ordering the fight on PPV instead."

UFC President Dana White believes the weak economy may negatively impact ticket sales, but will actually boost television revenue.

"I'm predicting that despite the economic crunch, UFC 91 will be the biggest pay-per-view in UFC history," said White on Thursday. "The reality is that a fan doesn't watch the UFC by himself. You get eight or nine buddies over and you all chip in. So it's a pretty cheap night out."

White is forecasting 1.2 million buys, surpassing the current record of just over one million for UFC 66.

While ticket sales for UFC events in the US may be diminishing, demand in Europe remains robust, with the forthcoming UFC 93 event in Dublin, Ireland selling all the 10,000 seats at the O2 Arena in just two weeks.

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The sport, and the UFC in particular, has come along way in the last five years. When the UFC was purchased by casino owners Lorenzo and Frank Fertitta in 2001 it was hemorrhaging money and struggling to gain acceptability in major states. The organization, operating under the banner of Zuffa LLC, lost \$36 million during the first three years of the Fertittas' control. But the brothers' ability to attain sanctioning of events in Nevada and a hit reality TV series turned the UFC into a highly lucrative company.

The additional mainstream exposure in recent years has witnessed a dramatic increase in participants, as was evidenced by the 900 fighters that auditioned for places on the forthcoming The Ultimate Fighter series. The top MMA practitioners are evolving into complete athletes with adept skills in all ranges, increasing the technical aspect of the sport and helping to overshadow the old stereotype of a fight being a random no holds barred brawl.

"Things have changed," notes Shane Thomas. "There was a time when boxing meant two guys knocking each other to the ground with bare-knuckle punches and up to 50 rounds. Now, we have the refined sport of boxing. Same applies to MMA.

"Maybe its roots are a little jaded but today we have a stringent rule set, safe competitive environments and referees whose sole role is to ensure safety of the competitors through adherence to those rules. It's not cage fighting anymore. It's mixed martial arts, a sport."

In a further sign of progression, this Saturday's card will be available for pay-per-view purchase on the Internet through Yahoo! Sports.

Boxing still makes the bigger headlines in terms of revenue, as demonstrated by December's Oscar De La Hoya-Manny Pacquiao fight selling out in minutes, engendering almost \$17 million. But just 500 of the 15,000 seats at the MGM Grand went on sale to the general public, with the rest allotted to the various sponsors.

From a monetary standpoint, the UFC doesn't have the benefit of intense corporate interest. Yet regardless of how many people attend Saturday's Couture-Lesnar event, the vast majority will be true fans intent on producing a sparking atmosphere.