

Butterbean Wants A Piece Of Dana White

Written by Ron Borges
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The King of the Four Rounders is, at 43, still spoiling for a fight and he knows his target. This time it's the Octagon, or at least the guys who run it.

Eric Esch, known more widely as Butterbean, is just about out of the fighting world but that doesn't mean he's not still in the fighting business. The former self-proclaimed "King of the Four Rounders" may be retired from boxing as well as sumo wrestling, kick boxing and mixed martial arts but that doesn't mean he isn't ready to take on Dana White's UFC stranglehold on MMA from another venue.

"They can't have all the good fighters in the world," Butterbean said this week while in Worcester, Massachusetts to promote along with Moosin, the South Korean-based mixed martial arts outfit, a show featuring former two-time UFC heavyweight champion Tim Sylvia against MMA novice (2-0, 2 KO) and five-time world's strongest man Mariusz Pudzianowski in a pay-per-view show the Bean claims will break international pay-per-view records.

The latter may be Butterbean hyperbole but combat sports have long been the home of hyperbole and no one knows it better than The Bean, who turned an aggressive personality, knockout punch and 415-pounds of heftiness into a money-making phenomenon for nearly 20 years in boxing.

Now he's eyeing White's UFC, the unrivaled king of MMA, believing his show business sense combined with an international roster of mixed martial artists might be ready to give White a run for his considerable money.

"They do have a lot of the top fighters in the United States," Bean conceded. "I can't even pronounce the names of some of the guys on this card but we have top fighters from Poland, Japan, Korea. That's how we're competing. We went global.

"This will be the highest viewed MMA event ever because of the overseas broadcast."

The man formerly known as Eric Esch based that claim on numbers that, like most involving both MMA and boxing, are not really verifiable. Then again, a lot of things in boxing and MMA are not verifiable, which is part of the appeal of it all.

Bean claims this show will do five million buys in Poland, a number based on the fact 15 per cent of Poland's 38 million people watched Pudzianowski's MMA debut in December. If true that would mean 5.7 million Poles tuned in.

To do that will cost them 99.35 zloty's tonight, which is \$29.95 in the US. How this converts for Butterbean, who is a partner in the promotion, nobody knows but it seems a safe bet that he will climb into his mobile home for the drive back to Jasper, Alabama with a grasp on some cash. That, along with an oddly entertaining ability to knock a man cold, has long been the root of his success.

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The Bean is a former assembler of house trailers who one night decided to try his hand at getting paid for what he liked to do best – which was getting in fights. Problem was there are limits, even in a Toughman contest.

In that case the limit was 400 pounds and the Bean was no string bean. So to drop enough tonnage to qualify he went on a chicken and butterbean diet that got him a nickname and to the magic number. The rest is history and so were most of his opponents.

He became a five-time Toughman world champion before turning pro in 1994 as what many felt was a circus act. With promoter Bob Arum behind him and his 416-pounds of muscle and suet stuffed inside a pair of supersized trunks that resembled a satin American flag, The Bean looked like The Michelin Man but fought like an angry man. Most importantly, he sold to a society looking to be entertained.

Most guys can't make a living fighting four round boxing matches. It's a job that nets you \$500 if you're lucky and that's before the tax man shows up. But the Bean made millions despite only fighting beyond four rounds three times, finishing with a 77-8-4 record and, most importantly, 58 knockouts. He made money because he had a good shtick and carried a big stick.

The Bean may have been a joke to boxing purists but it was no joke if he landed a gloved fist in your face, which was his only ambition in life it seemed. Although the well-respected trainer named Murray Sutherland tried everything he could think of to make him some sort of boxer, The Bean would get on his toes for a few seconds once the bell sounded and think, "What's the point?" Then he'd throw down and usually someone would go down.

"I could throw big punches, knock someone out, get paid and not go to jail," Bean said. "I used to get in fights in school and I'm from Alabama. They still paddle you there. So I got paddled to fight and thought it was worth it. Getting paid was a whole lot better.

"I'm a small-town kid from Alabama. My life is a fairy tale story. To experience what I experienced? I fought on some of the biggest pay-per-view cards in boxing. I'm the only four-round fighter to ever headline a pay-per-view show.

"I traveled around the world fighting. The first museum I ever went to in my life was the Louvre in Paris. The first pro football game I ever went to was the Super Bowl and I was in the owner's box. First time I went to a Lakers game was at Madison Square Garden against the Knicks and I sat next to Spike Lee. God blessed me."

He blessed him with the gift of unconsciousness and locked it inside his fists and with the gift of salesmanship, with which he now intends to KO Dana White.

"They know we're there," Bean said of his connection with Moosin's MMA operation. "I've known Dana a long time. I like him but we're probably making him nervous.

"When I first got into boxing people thought it was funny until I knocked out Louis Monaco. I don't think Dana thinks what we're doing is funny. He's too smart for that."

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Bean's boxing days began to wane three years ago but his urge to fight never ebbed. He has fought as a sumo wrestler, had seven fights as a kick boxer and recently moved into mixed martial arts, although at 43 it's primarily with what he claims is a seldom used new weapon this time.

"I find the promoting side is more challenging than the ring fighting," Bean said. "I'm using my brain, which I haven't used in a while."

Actually he used it to create an act that paid him handsomely. He was smart enough to accept the odd life he created as the King of the Four Rounders, beating just enough journeymen like Monaco and Peter McNeeley to make him acceptable but not growing blind to what he was not.

Although he went the distance with Larry Holmes in a 10-round fight and even dropped the Hall of Fame former heavyweight champion in the final round, to be fair Holmes was 53 at the time and simply trying to pick up a few extra bucks. Then again, so was The Bean.

In fact, the one guy he was willing to venture into the ring with for big money was the one who got away. After he knocked out McNeeley in one round four years after McNeeley fought Mike Tyson, The Bean issued repeated challenges in Tyson's direction. Though it would have been considered a freak show it would have sold too, which to guys like White and The Bean is the point.

"I don't think Mike was afraid of me but the people around him were," Butterbean said. "Mike's skills as a boxer surpassed mine but they kept wondering 'What if he hits him on the chin?' They didn't want to take that risk. I was no boxer but I could hit...HARD."

He could also earn hard dollars and unlike Tyson he knew how to keep them. Long-time boxing PR man Bill Caplan, who worked many of Butterbean's shows for Arum, said while he may have only made several million to Tyson's \$600 million, "He's got the first million...and the second million."

"I didn't make the money Mike made but it's not what you make that's important," he said. "It's what you keep. I wouldn't have bought a \$150,000 car, forgot where I parked it and gone and bought another one. He'd spend \$150,000 on a watch! I got a Casio...but it's a nice Casio. And it's paid for."

The Bean is not unwilling to pay the price of putting his considerable body at risk in his new venture either. In fact, he was scheduled to engage in an MMA showdown with former Boston Bruins' hockey hard guy Lyndon Byers, who now works at a Boston radio station, on the Sylvia-Pudzianowski card but the Massachusetts Athletic Commission scratched the scrap. Not because they thought Bean might get hurt but because they were sure Byers would.

That left The Bean in street clothes, counting the house at the DCU Center in Worcester Friday night and hoping Pudzianowski and an international field of MMA fighters will do what he always did.

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"I was the best entertainer boxing ever had besides Ali," Butterbean said. "Ali could fight really well. I could knock people out really well. That's what people want. They want to see great fights."

The Bean has already lost one with White, who scooped former middleweight and super middleweight champion and heavyweight contender James Toney away from him at the last minute. Toney was to have been in the original main event on Bean's show but he and White engaged in some verbal sparring that led Toney to fly to Las Vegas to confront him.

By the time he left, he had signed with the UFC and will come to Boston in August to headline the first UFC card in that city. To the Bean, them's fighting words but not surprising actions.

"Dana's made some genius moves with UFC," Bean conceded. "I had a verbal commitment from James but Dana threw money in his face and he said 'I got to have that money.' I understand it.

"I know all the fighters. I know what they're thinking. But UFC will just abuse him. Houston Alexander was our opponent for James. As a novice in MMA that was a good fight for him and for the fans. Until he learns more of the ground game and the wrestling side of it, James needs more stand up guys as opponents. Not a great ground guy like UFC is doing to him. UFC isn't looking out for him. We seek good fights, not slaughterfests."

What the Bean is really seeking is a chance to get into it with White. Not in the Octagon but in the ticket office and the accounting office. Though that may sound like a joke, it would be wise not to laugh too hard or too long.

"Media is the key to a fighter being popular today," Bean said. "You can't just go fight and say forget the rest of it. It's really a mind game."

As Butterbean said this week, that's what he's going to use to fight Dana White's UFC. He's going to use his mind...although if White wants to use his fists Bean's ready for that, too.

"No problem if he wants to challenge me," Bean said of White, who has had a propensity to throw out such challenges. "Just write the check."