Written by Michael Woods
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Dana White had seen this storyline play out before, with Art Jimmerson playing the James Toney role at UFC 1 on Nov. 12, 1993. Things didnt so so smoothly for the boxer Jimmerson when he tried his hand at combat in the MMA sphere, as he was submitted by Royce Gracie after two minutes had elapsed.

White didnt see a need to craft a sequel.

But James Toney stubbornly pursued the UFC boss, called him out, stalked him within an inch of a stalking charge, and finally got a sitdown with the man who has primarily responsible for growing MMA from a sport-on-life-support to a flourishing one that will be seen in about one billion homes next year.

White had gone on the record as saying that he wouldnt put on what he called a freak show, a boxer vs. mixed martial artist clash, which would of course draw scads of curious souls, but wouldnt in the long run serve the best interest of growing MMA.

But Toney sat down with White, and swore that he wanted this, that hed take it seriously, that he wasnt simply looking at an MMA foray as a get-fast-payday scheme.

Toney chased me, its not like I went out looking for this, White told me on Tuesday afternoon. Toney picked a fight for himself. We obliged him.

Toney will make his MMA debut on Saturday night, in Boston, at UFC 118.

White has a knack for making even fights. Hes built the brand in crafty, fan friendly fashion, using a method more boxing fans would like boxing promoters to employ--he stacks his pay per view cards with pick em bouts, instead of one tossup, and a bunch of resume padders. Some fight fans have dismissed the Toney-to-MMA deal, proclaiming themselves uninterested primarily because they see Toney (72-6 as a pro boxer) as a past-his-prime hitter, too far removed from his glory days to be regarded as anything other than a dabbler in search of a end-of-career cashout. White doesnt share this appraisal of Toney. Toneys a real guy, White said. Couture can get clipped. Couture could get kayoed on Saturday. I hope its not gonna happen. It could go either way--Toney knocks out Couture, who isnt known for having the greatest chin, or Couture does a double leg, drives him into the cage, stops him.

White says that Couture called him when he heard the UFC signed Toney to a deal. (White says the deal is a longterm pact, only for MMA, not boxing, and that he will evaluate Toneys contract status on a fight by fight basis.) Therefore, White didnt really even consider any other foes to meet the ex middleweight, light heavyweight and fringe cruiserweight and heavyweight champion. He couldve tried to put Toney in with a young gun, a twentysomething eager to make his bones with the scalp of a future Hall of Famer. But instead, hell pit Toney, who turns 42 tomorrow, against a man who turned 47 in June. Yes, Toney will be the junior partner in the

tussle, which is actually not the feature bout at UFC 118, that being the BJ Penn-Frankie Edgar rematch.

White admits he didnt know truly how seriously Toney would take training, but he feels the pugilist has tried his best to learn the skills of the sport. When we talked, James said to me, Dana, I would never do anything to embarrass myself or my family. I know a lot more than you think I know. You better, I told him. But then, Toney was enormous. And now hes in the best shape Ive see in years. Listen, we might have saved his life, White says, chuckling. He wont have a heart attack for the next 365 days.

White knows how a lot of us see this playing out on paper, but he counsels us to let the action play out. Couture has more tools, good submissions, good dirty boxing, which Toney hasnt seen. But Toney is a crazy m-------r, probably the only guy who would take this challenge, and hes got power in both hands, and he can roll his shoulders, and can take a lot of punishment, and hes got fast hands for a fat dude.

The UFC chief said his people would be putting up a video blog shortly which will show Toney in training.

Toney has, of course, performed in stellar fashion in the leadup to the event, in the trashtalking department. He has promised to shut up White, and knock his a-- out after the bout. Is White going to be shivering in his suit, or does he think Toney is just yapping his gums for effect?

I hope hes just talking s---. But who knows? You never know with him.

White suspects that this new challenge might bring out the best in Toney, and guesses that as a boxer, he mightve gotten bored with the routine, but could well be catalyzed into a rebirth because he relishes a meaty mountain to climb.

White lived in Boston for years, before he yanked up his tent and moved to Las Vegas, so he said hell be extra pumped that his organization, freshly sanctioned in the Commonwealth, will represent in the Boston Gordon. So, will you be leaving a ticket for Whitey Bulger at will call, White is asked?

Thats funny, he said. Eff yeah, Im excited to go back. Ill be at Bristol, at ESPN tomorrow, then Im going to Boston. There will be plenty of old friends and family, Mickey Rourke, Shaquille ONeal (who just signed with the Celtics). I think the Couture-Toney fight is gonna be a fun fight, and just in case,I stacked the rest of the card with really good fights. If youre a fight fan, I think youre gonna love the UFC. If youre a boxing fan, and youve never given us a shot, I think Saturday nights the night.

NOTE: David Avila have much more for TSS U on Toney in the next few days.