

By: Brian J. D'Souza

After years of speculation, it was announced last week that the UFC had reached a seven-year broadcast deal with the FOX network to air UFC fights, *The Ultimate Fighter* reality series and related programming on their channels. Network television has dabbled with MMA before—most notably with CBS airing Elite XC, and later, Strikeforce shows. So what's different now, and what exactly does this mean for the fighters and the future of the UFC?

The first question is whether the airing of four live events per year on FOX terrestrial will increase interest in MMA. It's a loaded question, since television ratings will hinge primarily upon seeing big-name fighters in quality match-ups.

"I can tell you that we're going to deliver big fights on broadcast network – fights that mean something and there's a lot hanging on the line," said current UFC president, Dana White.

As talented as UFC champions like Frankie Edgar or Dominic Cruz are, they won't be able to generate much mainstream interest; neither will the typical watered-down undercards that maximize PPV revenue while simultaneously milking the fans. Therefore, the best bait that FOX/UFC could really count upon to move the needle might include the return of Brock Lesnar, a marquee match-up like GSP vs. Anderson Silva, or a more-hyped version of Jon Jones set against an equally compelling foe, like Dan Henderson.

How much will the UFC be given to spend on programming? The Sports Business Daily Journal reported the contract to be worth an average of \$100 million a year. Therein lies the question—what kind of dollars will the stars of the UFC like Rampage Jackson, Lyoto Machida, BJ Penn or Cain Velasquez settle for to appear on television? Would putting their best stars on a regular UFC PPV be more profitable for the UFC? And are there better show concepts than the stale *Ultimate Fighter* that has notched continually disappointing ratings regardless of the coach's star power?

The deal also includes UFC product to air on other FOX channels, including 32 fights to be aired on cable channel FX, and UFC programming to be aired on Fuel TV. Countdown shows

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and older fight archives will be useful to promote future PPV's, just as Spike TV acted as a gigantic infomercial for the UFC brand.

One of many problems with Elite XC's time on CBS was that the promotion was built around an overhyped/under-talented star in Kimbo Slice. When the window of opportunity arrived for Strikeforce to gain exposure through CBS, the proceedings were marred by the Strikeforce: Nashville brawl between Jason 'Mayhem' Miller and the entire Cesar Gracie crew—an out-of-control mess that made CBS executives ice cold on the idea of promoting MMA in the future. Fedor Emelianenko's unavailability (caused by M-1's contract wrangling) for the CBS TV dates was also a headache that was never solved.

What the UFC needs to do in 2012 is get back to the action-packed series of fights that helped the promotion breakout of obscurity. It will take more than scheduling the best talent for blockbuster cards—the fighters can't drop out due to injury, nor can they perform in a risk-free manner that alienates new audiences.

According to a news article by MMAJunkie.com's John Morgan, FOX Sports Media Group chairman David Hill recounted a telling story from Lorenzo Fertitta from ten years ago, "He said, 'What boxing was to your generation, UFC will be and is to the next upcoming generation.'"

The disconnect between boxing and MMA comes through the longer history of boxing that has seen spikes of mainstream interest followed by fallow periods where the sport lacked breakout stars like Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson or Manny Pacquiao.

Truth be told, the television deal is underwritten with the promise of hard results. FOX will have expectations when it comes to ratings, advertising revenue, and public perception. Showtime warmed to MMA when it realized that it required a way to replenish its wilting subscriber base; FOX as a similar angle in nabbing the 18-34 male demographic while airing programming that will be watched live without anyone fast-forwarding through the commercials.

The reality isn't all positive as low ratings would mean the UFC would find itself announced as being cut from FOX's television lineup rather than the typical announcements about the UFC cutting fighters. Marquee fighters are already hard-pressed to fight on tape-delayed PPV's in Europe or Australia that will earn them less money as they get a cut from fewer buys; how will

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they react if FOX doesn't cough up the same resources for payroll that they're used to earning from the PPV model?

Perhaps the future will tell the story, but a successful transition to the big time for MMA may or may not happen. At one point in the millennium, Japan was filling massive stadiums with shows that aired on primetime slots—now that's as distant a memory as the time when the US wasn't plagued by reoccurring financial turmoil. There are many factors at play, but we can all guarantee that the suits at FOX will be watching the results of their new investment with keen interest every step of the way.

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