

Is '06 The Year UFC Choked Out Boxing?

Written by Michael Woods

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With the benefit of hindsight, we may look back at 2006 as the year our beloved sport, the Savage Science, got choked out in the scrap for relevance, acceptance and buzz, by mixed martial arts.

In the United States, for all intents and purposes, MMA is synonymous with UFC. This Saturday, two of the UFC's most marketable and capable stars, Chuck "The Iceman" Liddell, a soft-speaking, serial-killer-looking striker with a serious hard-on for kayoes, and Tito "The Huntington Beach Bad Boy" Ortiz, a bleached-blond trash-talking badass whose fan base is split 50-50 between lovers and haters, will step in to the Octagon and get it on.

Why, you ask, does this effect me, I can hear you saying...

I've logged on to a website called "The Sweet Science," haven't I?

And correct me if I'm wrong, but mixed martial arts doesn't have a cool 'nom de nick' like "The Sweet Science."

Again, correct me if I'm wrong, but mixed martial arts couldn't even agree on the name of their sport until 2005. Before that it was called extreme fighting, wasn't it, Woods?

And if I want to watch human cockfighting, which is what I've read in mainstream publications some people call the UFC's product, then I'll go into one of the warehouses where they hold these unsanctioned, ultra-brutal contests, and check it out. OK, Woods?

Duly noted, one and all. Let me tell you why it matters.

On Saturday night, the UFC powers that be are betting that the card pitting Liddell, their light heavyweight champion, against Ortiz, their former poster boy who fell from grace after wanting too many slices of a pie that was smaller than he thought, will do bang-up business. What constitutes bang-up business, you might ask?

Maybe, like, 250,000 people might pony up for this thing?

Is that what you're guessing?

Because while you know this sport is on the upswing, and you're aware that the reality show on Spike has been a success, and that you've heard some people in boxing refer to the fact that boxing is on the decline and MMA is picking up the slack, if you're thinking, a quarter mill, you are off.

Bigtime off, like "weapons off mass destruction are a slam dunk," off.

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Try 1.2 million.

That's the PPV magic number UFC bigs, like president Dana White, are theorizing they could get for the card which pits Liddell against Ortiz for the second time (Ortiz succumbed to Liddell's destructive hands in the second round of their 2004 encounter).

And what's the big deal about 1.2, you say, you query-crazy interrogator, you?

Well, no boxing PPV card in 2006 went over a million buys. Oscar De La Hoya's beatdown of the bullying Nicaraguan Ricardo Mayorga in May did 925,000. That was the highest figure among boxing, MMA and the WWE juggernaut, which is also smarting from the siphoning of their fans and their fans' discretionary PPV fundage. For comparison, know that the record for buys in this arena is 1.99 million—Christ, let's just round up, shall we, the 2 million people who paid to watch Tyson/Holyfield II in 1997. White, who clambered his way up from working as a hotel bellman in Boston in the late 80s to be the public face of the UFC hierarchy, thinks Saturday's card can approach the record for boxing in the non-heavyweight category: 1.4 million buys for De La Hoya/Trinidad in 1999.

I recently called White, and asked him how he views the MMA/UFC vs. Boxing matchup.

"I picture a scene with UFC chasing after Boxing, looking to clamp down on Boxing with a rear naked choke," I said to White, who with the brothers Frank and Lorenzo Fertitta has marshaled a sport on life support into the sports growth story of the decade. "How close are you guys to catching boxing?"

"We've already choked them out," White said, chuckling. "Boxing and the WWE, too. My opinion is, once Oscar is gone, boxing's in a lot of trouble, unless another star breaks soon, which I don't see coming."

White is confident that the 37-year-old Liddell, who he cheerily admits looks like a serial killer (with those prominent ears and that Mohawk) and the former UFC light heavyweight titlist, the 31-year-old Ortiz (with whom he's sparred with verbally in bitter fashion after heated contract talks a few years back) will surpass the 925,00 mark for ODLH/Mayorga.

"We'll be the top dog once Oscar leaves," he said.

White, age 35, is not a standard issue CEO sort who is trained to underpromise and overdeliver.

He's unafraid of combat, be it literal (he and Ortiz were set to glove up and box, but that's been postponed for a spell) or figurative (he'll provide inflammatory, pull-quote-ready fare on a moment's notice to a reporter). And his backstory fits snugly with many of the fighters in his organization—he could have settled into an unexceptional middle-class existence, but he stepped it up, ramped up his desire and ambitions, and now has arrived financially and as a cultural treeshaker. So if you haven't delved into his story, or his sport, you will have more opportunities to do in 2007. Showtime will run their first MMA show on Feb. 10, featuring Renzo Gracie against Frank Shamrock. And HBO is dipping its big toe in the warm waters in 2007, and

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will run four MMA programs.

So, an obvious question is, is boxing backpedaling, on the ropes, sagging, with jellied legs and unfocused eyes? Or is boxing the survivor specialist, rope-a-doping for a spell while it catches its breath and waits (prays?) for a second wind?

I'm not in the camp that cries persistently about the deterioration of boxing.

Yes, the sport is relegated to cable and thus misses penetrating 15% of people who own TVs but don't have cable. And HBO has about 30 million subscribers, and Showtime has about 14 million, so there are a lot of houses that aren't set up to easily tune in to the premium fight fare available day to day. And thus boxing is allowing potential new fans to latch on to other combat sports every day because it is absent from free-TV, a situation which anyone who might want to make a living in this business for a few decades might want to attend to...But do not shed tears for boxing, no way, not when Oscar might be picking up \$25 million to fight Floyd next year.

So yes, let's look at the bottom line here: money, great gobs of it in fact, is still being made by some boxers, and people in the boxing business. But some gobs are going elsewhere now, and that fact must be acknowledged. Any media outlet with their head not in their arse did a piece on UFC in '06, and I predict that next year we'll see a UFC athlete on the cover of both ESPN The Magazine and Sports Illustrated. OK, so I'm not Jon Landau, but here's my version of "I saw rock and roll's future, and its name is Bruce Springsteen."

MMA is here to stay, in a big way, and it's getting bigger, and anyone who doesn't see this fact must acquaint themselves with the product if they want to stay current, or risk looking like a Discman in a world of iPods.