

THE BLOODY TRUTH: Blood in Boxing and MMA

Written by Michael Woods
Thursday, 30 May 2013 10:29



I became a fan of mixed martial arts, or, as it was known then, extreme fighting, back in 1996. I watched about six hours worth of the best of the Ultimate Fighting Championship on New Year's Eve 1996 into 1997.

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The sight of the blood you saw in some of the matches didn't bother me, or affect me enough to keep me from staying a fan. No surprise, I guess, considering I'd been a boxing fan since I saw the first "Rocky" movie, in a theater, in late 1976 or early 1977. The sight of the gore onscreen when Rock implored Mick to use a blade to cut his right eyelid, to let out fluid and reduce swelling, enabling him to see, struck me, made my seven year old self squirm squeamishly..but didn't put me off the sweet science.

The sight of blood in MMA touched me, struck me, more than it had previously, however, when I was watching some UFC PPV pre-lim action on Saturday night. Not even sure what match it was on FX, but I had a hard time taking my eyes off the stains on the floor of the Octagon.

As the fighters were circling, assessing, looking for an open striking or takedown lane, I was focused on the crimson puddles on the floor, which was soaked in. I wasn't sure if it was from the previous fight, or the one before that, but that visual pinballed around in my brain.

It got me thinking, if this sight grabs me, someone who has been a boxing fan since the late 70s, and a fan of MMA for more than 15 years, I wonder how it strikes a newbie?

How often, I pondered, does a sports fan willing to give MMA a chance start to watch a match, and find themselves not attaching to the spectacle because they can't get past the blood?

I recalled, as I watched, and my mind drifted, that a friend of mine, a colleague at ESPN Magazine, who'd been a boxing fan since the mid 60s, told me he gave MMA a try, but wasn't into it. A huge part of that, he said, was that he found it "too brutal." One fight he saw had two men bleeding badly, and they were covered in each others' blood, and were then grappling each other, and he found the whole sight a turnoff. He also couldn't wrap his mind around the sight of one man sitting on the others' chest, and dropping sharp elbows down on the face of the eventual loser.

During the prelims, I also found myself wondering why the heck some removable flooring hasn't been invented yet. Is there a reason or reasons why the top layers of the Octagon floor can't be switched out, lickety split, after a particularly liquid-y event? Would that be too time consuming?

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Or is that an architectural impossibility? I'm guessing that what would be gained in appearance of cleanliness and hygiene and visual flow might be diminished in pure safety terms, because if layers of floor were removed, UFC might not be able to know beyond a shadow of doubt that the newly elevated layers were locked in, solid, and immovable.

I took to social media to process some of these thoughts and ideas and got into a spirited debate with a follower. This person didn't at all accept much of my theorizing. He didn't accept my loose conclusion that it stood to reason that if a seasoned fight fan like me were struck by the blood on the floor then a few or maybe more than a few potential fans were probably struck to the extent that they were lost as faithful consumers of the product.

My friend, admittedly, got off to an iffy start in our back-and-forth when he answered, "None," after I posited that perhaps UFC loses some potential fans when they tune in for the very first time and see the buckets of blood.

"None?" Not a single, solitary one?

We engaged in debate from there. Our man said he thinks that if the sight of blood turns them off, they were "never potential fans. Just sissies who use it as an out."

OK, I admit, the use of the absolutes "none" and "never" push my buttons. I know, social media isn't the place for nuance, but I offer that it need not be a rarity. I reacted to my friend with a measure of "spillage emotion," I think, latching on to him as a symbolic flag-holder for an entire movement, where a definitive declaration--not backed perhaps by anything more than a gut instinct, an inkling-- has come to be viewed as fact, as Gospel.

Like when one of my relatives told me that he views the President through this lens: he told me in 2010 that he thinks that if re-elected, the President would seek to confiscate firearms held by private citizens. He pictured a door-to-door confiscation project, throughout the nation. He didn't offer "proof" beyond his gut, and wouldn't engage in a discussion about the feasibility of the confiscation project. I shook my head then, and now, at the slide towards a decrease in intellectual rigor, and the easy embrace of "shouter" media, opinion presented as fact, angry op eds now substituting as "news."

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Yep, the guy pushed my buttons. He really didn't "deserve" my leap from 0 to 60 on the scorn-o-meter, though, as I reserve that for the ninnies who scream about Benghazi-gate without the self awareness to admit that if the circumstances of Benghazi trouble you, then you should be equally or more touched by the [buildup to the Iraq War](#) , and the fact that perhaps hundreds of thousands of human beings were killed stemming from that course of action.

My debate partner said that if you are turned off by the sight of blood you are not a "real" fight fan. I found that contention to be arrogant and arbitrary. Who is anyone, frankly, to judge what a "real" fight fan is? I applaud someone and embrace their freedom to choose if they tell me they think boxing or MMA is too vicious for them, I don't dismiss them as a "sissy."

My man then said that he thinks boxing "has been much bloodier than MMA." I took issue with that, and drifted back to one UFC fight I watched a few years ago. I think it was on their "The Ultimate Fighter" show, and to my recollection, one fighter was cut, and blood was spilling out from his cut, onto the face of his foe, as he threw hammer fists down on the guy, who tried to turn his eyes so the blood wouldn't go into his eyes. No, I admitted, I haven't seen a study to prove which sport is bloodier.

My debate pal had to be grudgingly respected for his tenacity, if not the quality of his "evidence;" he said that there is "more" blood in boxing, "since the fights are longer." I didn't get into the fact that in championship UFC fights, a cut can open in the first seconds of a round, and flow for five minutes, as opposed to three in boxing, so that would leave me to believe that if we measured milliliters in a bloody boxing versus a blood MMA match, more blood would flow in the MMA bout. He said no study existed on which sport is bloodier, yet wouldn't back off his assertion that boxing is bloodier. Absence of evidence be damned, my gut is all I need to inform me, he seemed to say.

I continued to object to the lack of rigorousness of the sifting of the information used to reach his conclusions, which were presented too much as unimpeachable fact, rather than opinion. I may have stepped over the line--sorry, bro--when I accused Mr X of intellectual arrogance, because time and again, he offered opinion based on nothing more than his perceptions. He didn't widen the scope of inquiry beyond what his eyes and gut told him, in my view. And yes, I realize that I always have to battle this tendency myself, which is why I figured I should reach out to an expert.

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Who, I wondered, is an expert on the subject of blood spilled in the ring AND the Octagon, who could bring some clarity to the debate.

How about "The Bangor Bleeder?"

How about Marcus Davis (*pictured above*), former pro boxer (1993-2000), who is currently a mixed martial artist? He just signed on with Bellator after fighting in UFC from 2006-2011. Davis has left his red blood cell on many a canvas, and is an engaging and willing interview subject.

I reached out to the fighter, who was kind enough to ponder the subject of blood in boxing and MMA. He weighed in on whether or not it is a deal-breaker turnoff to potential fans, and I hoped maybe he could help bring me and Mr. X further from personal theory based on perceptions to a viewpoint formed from life experience from one who has spent time in the arena, and whose words and views should be considered with extra respect, and gravity.

First off, to establish Davis' cred: he told me that last Saturday marked the 101st time he'd needed to be sutured to close a cut from fighting. "I'm guessing I've had somewhere between six and eight hundred sutures done in my face over the course of my career," the 39-year-old Maine native told me.

We got right to it, about which sports' practitioners shed more blood.

"As far as milliliters go, I think there's more in MMA," he said. "I'm going to say for every pint of blood lost in boxing, there's two to three in MMA."

He agreed with me that the use of the elbow as a weapon in MMA probably opens up more cuts, and more deep gashes, than a boxing-gloved fist is typically able to activate. But, Davis said, to this point, the worst damage he's suffered as a fighter came from his participation in a boxing match. "Both my eyes were split open, you could see the bone in my skull, my cheekbone was shattered," he said. "It was against Lyndon Walker (in 1995), he headbutted me like five times in the first round."

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So, does Davis think the blood is a big turnoff to new potential fans who look down and see the swatches of blood on the floor, or see two men covered in fluid grappling each other?

Davis said he thinks the presence of blood in MMA isn't the main impediment to reaching new fans; rather, he said, he thinks that fight fans, many if not most, are pretty specific in their preferences. There certainly is overlap, but many boxing fans are simply not going to take to MMA, and will find elements they don't care for. "They are not going to like it either way, so they will point out little things," he said.

Most fight fans, he has found, seem to be educated and realize that blood is often part of the deal. They realize that there is no recorded evidence of HIV, for example, being contracted from fighter-to-fighter contact, Davis said. Good point: you might recall the fear and speculation that arose when [Tommy Morrison said he wanted to fight even though he was diagnosed HIV positive](#)

The majority of watchers who would even consider getting deeper into MMA, Davis said, wouldn't be likely to be repulsed by blood-strewn spectacles, because they've already parsed it out in their head, that a wide gash doesn't mean one of the fighters will bleed to death. "It takes a person who is able to think outside of moment," he said. Davis had said he doesn't think there is a significant segment of people who might turn into MMA converts being turned off by the occasional gore. He gave a strong hint of his political leanings when he shared that he thinks prevailing "liberal" mentalities, and liberal leanings of the mass media and liberal politicians looking to score points are more likely to drive masses of people away from fighting. Fight fans, when not influenced by a liberal media push, are open to seeing blood, Davis said.

It's not so much that a newbie will see a bloody MMA scrap and run in the other direction, Davis said, but that the potential exists for the press to settle on the sport as a target to eradicate. The press runs in cycles, he said. They hated Dana White, the UFC honcho, and now "everybody loves Dana." The "liberal media," he said, was seduced by the parade of celebs who gravitated to the Octagon, and that took the target off UFC's back. "MMA is not the target right now, owning a gun is a target," he said.

Davis has tried remedies to keep him from cutting, and no, not to keep his visage clear and keep potential fans from taking to MMA, but to keep himself in fights.

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The fighter nicknamed "The Bangor Bleeder" before he switched to "The Irish Hand Grenade" used to lose time in training camps glueing his cuts closed. (I forgot to ask if he ever reached out to Super Glue as a possible sponsor.) So he had surgery, in 2008, to have the bone over his eyebrows filed down, so the skin wouldn't be pulled as tight over that area, making it prone to split open. "That did stop the cutting," he said. "I went for the longest I hadn't been cut, for about two years." But with scar tissue building up on itself, the efficacy of the treatment wore off, he said.

As for the idea of the peel-off canvas, Davis said he hasn't heard of anyone working on that. Cost might be an issue, he said, and inventors would have to insure the stability would be the same as the current version. A stained canvas is a given, he said, when there are upwards of 12 or so fights on an average card. He fought on one card that had 31 fights on it, he said.

My takeaways: my social media debate partner helped me, as is usually the case in situations such as these, because he forced me think longer and harder about a subject matter, and try and track down some facts to help better inform us both. I am hoping he sees this piece, and is able to allow the possibility that he might be able to become a better critical thinker by searching out more facts and evidence and not relying as much on his own opinions, and, possibly, mistaking them for "facts." I salute his effort at conciliation and applaud his invitation to sit down and smoke a stogie with him someday.

Also, I am not sure if because I haven't been watching as much MMA in the last couple of years, for a few reasons, including the need to spend more time to properly cover boxing, in this 24-7 news cycle-world, and the unwillingness to spend pay-per-view monies on two sports during a recession, that my tastes and perceptions didn't change. Did I become more sensitive to the sight of blood because I wasn't seeing those large, dark puddles so often? Is that a case of habituation wearing off, did I regain some sensitivity to what (should be?) a stark image?

I am still a stubborn mutt. I do still maintain that the presence of blood, in a different context than we see in boxing, might dissuade more potential fans from MMA than boxing. Maybe not in the younger generations, Generation Saw, whose taste for gore have increased in the last 10 years or so. But I think in older fans, that sight of those extra pints spilled in the Octagon may indeed be a more-than-occasional deal-breaker to a real relationship with UFC.

Finally, if my removable Octagon floor idea lit a light bulb in an inventor out there, and you get to market with the new floor plan, would you kindly cut me in? Thanks!

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DaveB says:

I will admit to liking boxing and mma. I am more a fan of boxing but I will check out mixed martial arts and I can respect the skills needed to perform in that arena. I have watched mma since its early inception when it was banned because of its brutality. I don't know what percentages there are for fans that are cross-over fans of both arts. You can never really compare the two disciplines because no one will ever be as good as a boxer is with his hands. But on the other side mma guys and women have to be disciplined in striking, wrestling, leg kicks, leg bars, arm bars, chokes, etc. so there is more to worry about in a fight. Boxing has a lot of nuances within its sport too. The reason why I will always pick boxing over mma is because boxing being a game of punches moves faster with more action. I saw the match that you were writing about and I too was thinking about the blood stained mat. It is interesting that I have never (don't mean to offend you) at least in my recollection have seen a fight in mma called off due to bleeding. And having an opponent on the mat and raining down elbows does seem a bit over the top, knowing that the ref usually doesn't stop it unless the beaten competitor doesn't offer resistance. Otherwise it keeps going. I once recall Eddie Mustafa Muhammad saying due to someone being hit while on the mat that person was going to end up being killed. He is a fan of mma, btw. That has never happened. That statement will also bring up the debate of which sport is more dangerous. I think casual fans could be turned off to both sports when they are at their most brutal. So I would agree with you on this but I think it would apply on both sides but mma can be especially brutal if judged solely from the factor of how blood is spilled during one of their matches. I respect a person's decision not to watch. I am not a boxing or mma snob.