





UFC BY TKO

The Ultimate Fighting Championship has become the hottest ticket in America – and it has boxing on the ropes. Can the two sports co-exist?

WORDS: MARK KRAM JNR **MAIN PHOTO:** DANIEL BEREHULAK

Nothing quite enlivens the blood as much as the spectacle of a good ass-kicking. Exhibit A for me will always be round one of the 1985 Marvin Hagler-Thomas Hearns bout in Las Vegas, during which I looked from the press row with a spine-tingling blend of awe and revulsion. Seeing it again on video does not do it justice: Both answered the bell firing warheads and did not back up an inch until Hagler, his face covered in crimson from a cut on his forehead, pulverised Hearns with two right hands that left the gallant 'Hit Man' in a quivering heap on the floor. I walked away thinking, 'Well, nothing will ever top that', until I came upon an unsanctioned brawl in the casino lobby. Someone had said something, or pushed someone, and suddenly bodies were airborne. It was a mesmerising yet utterly frightening scene, one that ended with the intervention of security and not the crack of gunfire that had seemed so imminent.

I bring up that long ago evening in Las Vegas because I had expected the Ultimate Fighting Championship to be some fusion of the two aforementioned encounters, which is to say a cross between organised sport and something that would spill into the street from a bar room. Until I attended UFC 101 at the Wachovia Center in Philadelphia in August, I had had only a passing acquaintance with mixed martial arts, under which operates UFC and rival organisation Strikeforce. 'Give it a chance, you may be surprised,' a young friend told me. So I did – and I was. In fact, I could not have been more surprised by the overall scarcity of the action. With the exception of a bloody eye here and there, and what appeared to be a lively exchange in the stands between two local damsels, I have to confess I have seen more fur fly between two squirrels battling it out over an acorn.

Given that I am closer to collecting Social Security (62) than the legal drinking age (21); that I do not have a pierced eyelid; and that I still have a fondness for 'The Sweet Science' (even ►



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if it serves up an intriguing match with the frequency of a solar eclipse), I should point out that I am somewhat removed from the demographic so prized by the UFC. Whatever I happen to think of it, there can be no arguing that the sport has become a worldwide phenomenon under the stewardship of UFC president Dana White, who has succeeded in large part by luring in the testosterone-crazed 18-to-34 male. Revenues in 2008 were up 37%. To appreciate just how captive his fans are, White sold out the Wachovia Center days in advance and did not have to take out a single shred of advertising. Moreover, closed-circuited sales once again did a big number, proof positive to some that UFC has lapped boxing in popularity. Is it any wonder that light-heavyweight champion Roy Jones Jr had been trying that week to wrangle a chance at UFC star Anderson 'The Spider' Silva?

But what White has said and keeps saying is that it is not his intention to slug it out with boxing, that the two sports have unique followings and that there is enough swag out there to be had for both parties to co-exist in a state of harmony. Good try, but not so. Boxing has become increasingly stale in the United States, in part due to the absence of a compelling heavyweight champion and the proliferation of sanctioning bodies that have whipped up not one but four champions in each weight class. Big events along the lines of Hagler-Hearns are too few and far between, which in part is why even boxing loyalists such

as closed-circuit promoter Joe Hand Snr look upon what has happened to the sport with a forlorn eye.

'People ask, "Do you think UFC will kill boxing?"' says Hand Snr. 'It already has. Boxing is dead.'

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No city in America has a richer pedigree when it comes to brawling than Philadelphia, the place that gave us the fictional 'Rocky', as portrayed by Sylvester Stallone in his unending run of sappy sequels, and the genuine article in Joe Frazier, the legendary heavyweight who hooked up with Muhammad Ali in what would become a rivalry for the ages. Thus, it did not surprise me that UFC would do well in Philadelphia, or that the parking lot at the Wachovia Center would be teeming with activity even hours before the doors opened. But I have to say that I was somewhat startled by the composition of the crowd, which reminded me again why I prefer to stay home in the evenings.

Charged up by the arcing decibels of 'Teenage Wasteland' by The Who, the fans that had come out for UFC 101 exuded the outlaw air of a rabble of bikers. Somewhat younger than your average boxing crowd – and by this casual appraisal less racially mixed – the men and woman seemed to favour a style of dress that leaned heavily to leather jackets and stripper heels. Oh yes – and there seemed to be tattoos wherever the eye landed: on shoulders, calves, ankles and lower backs, which on women ►



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are pejoratively characterised as 'tramp stamps'. Somehow, the seedy attire on display seemed to correspond with the promise of mayhem that a UFC card engenders, that someone could end up on a slab by the end of the evening. Says the ex-heavyweight Marvis Frazier, whose dad Joe once said that the bodies entangled on the floor in UFC 'looked like two men having sex': 'When I see it, I think, "This is how it had to be in ancient Rome." People go there thinking that someone will end up with their heart ripped out.'

Until White came along and cleaned it up in 1993, UFC events were no-holds barred affairs that encouraged head-butting, hair-pulling and eye-gouging. It was not uncommon for 150-pound men to step into the Octagon against opponents twice their size or more. United States Senator John McCain, of Arizona, was so

appalled that he called it 'human cockfighting'. But White would change the image of the sport when he purchased UFC out of bankruptcy for \$2 million with a consortium of investors. A former aerobics instructor in Las Vegas who once managed stars Chuck Liddell and Tito Ortiz, White downplayed the barbaric aspects of the sport and accentuated the skills of what he says are 'incredible athletes'. But that is not to say that White has fiddled with the essential brutality of the UFC, which packages itself in highlight snippets of fighters sitting astride the chest of their opponents and pounding them with gloved hands again and again in the face. Unless you knew better, you would have sworn there was a robbery in progress.

But there is more to UFC than just the occasional surge of violence. Undeniably, there is indeed some very fine athleticism on display in a typical encounter, during which there are three phases in the action: STANDUP, which involves any form of boxing, kickboxing or Maui Tai (an Asian extension of kickboxing); CLINCH, which involves up-close sparring; and GROUND, which involves a Brazilian jiu-jitsu, judo and the Russian martial art Sombu. Undercard bouts go three rounds, title fights five. While the rounds are longer in UFC than in boxing (five minutes as opposed to three), that is not to say that there is more action. In fact, there could well be less, given the tentativeness that can set in until a takedown leaves the principles squirming on the floor for the upper hand.

Headlining UFC 101 was a lightweight showdown between the ever-popular Hawaiian, BJ Penn – 'The Prodigy' – and ►

Kenny ‘KenFlo’ Florian, the New England native whose press notes indicate that he has ‘dangerous elbows’. But before that bout went off at 11:58pm that Saturday, there was a full slate of preliminary events, which included a light-heavyweight match between Silva and crowd favorite Forrest Griffin. With the fans behind him, Griffin circled Silva with a certain caution until ‘The Spider’ tapped him on the jaw with a weak right hand. A replay later showed that Silva was backing up as he delivered it. But Griffin went down as if he had been tossed from the saddle of a spooked horse. And he stayed down. While Silva took his bows, Griffin got up slowly, cleared his head and literally ran out of the Octagon under a chorus of boos. He did not show up for the press conference later, and White could not say what had happened to him other than to observe: ‘He could be in Georgia by now. Who knows? The guy is emotional.’

HOWEVER ANAEMIC THE SCENE IS TODAY, BOXING DID GIVE US ALI-FRAZIER, HAGLER-HEARNS AND AN EXTRAORDINARY ARRAY OF OTHER BIG EVENTS

Next up were ‘The Prodigy’ and ‘KenFlo’. Cheered as they walked up the aisle and into the Octagon, the two stood upright and exchanged light jabs through two rounds. Well into round three, the pace had still not picked up. Annoyance began to bubble up in the crowd. But in the fourth, Penn flipped Florian over on his back and drove him into the canvas. As Penn covered him with his body, turning him this way and that, I was reminded of what the comedian Stephen Colbert had said of UFC – that there was ‘an occasional moment of action and 40 minutes of awkward spooning’. In any event, Penn won it by stopping Florian with a ‘rear naked choke’, the conclusion of what White later called ‘an awesome night’.

Someone asked White if he planned to set up something between Silva and Jones.

He demurred. ‘I like Roy,’ he said. ‘And I respect boxing. But what is the point?’

While White is careful to avoid the appearance that he has picked the bones of boxing clean, boxing is not what it once was, either in the quality of action or fan appeal. Contrary to what the always astute Joe Hand Snr said, I do not think boxing is necessarily dead – but I do think a clergyman is in order. To say that UFC has devoured boxing is only true up to a point, given that boxing has done such a fine job of it by itself. Whenever the autopsy on the sport is performed – if that happens in some fashion – you will not have to look far for the cause of death: corrupt promoters, a shrinking talent pool, and the inability to police itself in any unified manner. The good news: There is a pulse.

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History reminds us that boxing has been down for the count before. When Jack Dempsey closed out his career, it created a void in the heavyweight division at the height of The Great Depression that attracted a parade of so-so talents such as Jack Sharkey, Primo Carnera, Max Baer and an ageing James Braddock. The landscape was so bare that *Fortune* magazine carried a poster of the young heavyweight Joe Louis under the

Joe Frazier retained his title with a unanimous decision at the end of the ‘fight of the century’ in 1971, dealing Muhammad Ali his first professional loss



headline: ‘Can this Black Messiah Lead Boxing to the Promised Land?’ So we have been there before.

Walking out of the Wachovia Center that evening, I came away from UFC with a few observations. No 1: I could understand why it is so popular with young people. In a certain way it holds the same appeal of video games, some of the characters in which appear as if they could chew through a lead pipe. Some of the lead players in the UFC appear as if they could do the same. No 2: It seems unlikely that UFC will ever produce the big moments that boxing has. However anaemic the scene is today, boxing did give us Ali-Frazier, Hagler-Hearns and an extraordinary array of other big events. Moreover, the sport produced a body of superlative literature, which helped set in place the foundation of legends we still speak of today. Somehow I cannot picture that the canon of sports writing will ever be enhanced by UFC.

Of course, I could be wrong.

Hey, I probably am, given how I am so generally uncomfortable with whatever happens to be the next new thing. To give you some appreciation of that, an acquaintance once asked me if I ever planned to get a Facebook account. When I told him no, he paused, looked at me oddly and said, ‘How do you feel about colour TV?’ ■

Kram is an award-winning writer for the *Philadelphia Daily News* and the regular contributor of *The American Read*.