

Will California Approve Mixed Martial Arts In 2002?

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Hey fight fans, have you ever felt like an early pioneer as you drive for hours to some remote Indian reservation to see your favorite MMA fighter? Do you remember wondering why the promoter couldn't get a location that didn't have buzzards flying overhead? Well, I'm here to tell you why so listen-up!

As a member of the California State Athletic Commissions' Martial Arts Advisory Committee, I am gratified to know that all of the committees' hard work formulating the MMA rules and regulations was not in vain. The rules, with minor changes, are alive and well and being used in Nevada and New Jersey. Unfortunately, to the dismay of the Athletic Commission and the MMA community in general, the rules won't be used in California in the year 2002. Once again, the politicians in Sacramento have been unresponsive to the public and the Commission.

Here's the 411: For the past two years the Commission has worked diligently for the inclusion of MMA as a legitimate state regulated sport. Unfortunately, it hasn't happened yet. According to Rob Lynch, Chief Executive Officer, California Athletic Commission, "We fully expected that our MMA regulations would be approved and implemented in 2001. Needless to say, we are very disappointed that the Administration refused to approve our funding request, which in turn, caused our regulations to be disapproved. To this date, no explanation has been given and I still don't know why the Administration refused our request when we all know that MMA revenues would far exceed the costs to regulate it."

This year, the Athletic Commission attempted to introduce legislation, which would have provided the proper funding to regulate MMA in 2002. However, the Commission could not find a legislator who was willing to carry the proposed legislation. To compound the problem, the Commission's operating budget was slashed 15 percent for year 2002. Mr. Lynch stated that, "This budget reduction not only impairs our ability to regulate boxing and kickboxing for year 2002, it becomes impossible for us to also regulate

MMA." It appears that the state's depressed economy and energy crisis have acted in concert to derail MMA approval for another year.

I believe it is important that we, the MMA community, understand that the state's failure to regulate the sport should not be blamed on the Athletic Commission. The Commission is well aware of the sport's rapid growth as well as its income potential to the Commission. They are eager to be involved with the sport. However, they are subject to politics and politicians just as we are.

I asked "Cal" Soto, Commission Chairman, what do the members of the Commission think about MMA? He said, "It is my opinion, and that of most, if not all of the Commission members, that MMA deserves to be and should be regulated by the Athletic Commission. This would help to ensure the integrity of the sport, protect the fighters, and promote the growth of the sport. We are only sorry that it hasn't happened yet. Rest assured, we will continue to press for passage of regulatory legislation."

The sentiments of Mr. Soto are echoed by Mr. Lynch, "We will keep trying to get legislation passed. In the meantime, I urge all MMA fans to continue to support the sport. Lastly, I would like to thank the other members of the Commission's Martial Arts Advisory Committee, the Director of the Department of Consumer Affairs and the Secretary of State and Consumer Services Agency for all their support. I guarantee to the MMA community that we will try again."

It is unfortunate for MMA promoters and fans alike that accessible sites such as Staples Arena, Olympic Auditorium, and Arco Arena, to name a few, are not presently available to them. Fortunately, the sport continues to grow despite the inconveniences and expense associated with travel and lodging to attend shows in remote locations. It is a credit to the MMA community that they not only continue to support the sport, but do so in record number. I encourage the MMA community to continue to fight the good fight: it is not a matter of if we get state approval, just when.