

REFEREE'S CALL:

Legitimate Concerns or Paranoia?

by Nelson "DOC" Hamilton

Grappling Magazine / April 2007

Approximately eight years ago a major promoter asked if I would attend one of his events as a consultant. He was not happy with the quality of judging and wanted to know how it could be improved.

Shortly after the show started I saw the first problem; not only were all three judges sitting at the same table, but each had a beer at hand, and one judge had his wife sitting on his lap.

I advised the promoter that the present judging format was totally unacceptable, explaining that for the judges to render independent and unbiased decisions, they had to sit in three different locations, could not drink beer during the event and must avoid all distractions, even by their wives.

The next issue to be addressed was that of understanding how to properly interpret the judges' decisions. Since all non-title fights were of two rounds, many of the fights were scored as draws. However, whenever two judges scored a draw, the remaining judge usually scored a win for the local fighters. The final decision was then announced as a split decision win for the local fighter. The promoter and his staff thought that the two judges scoring a draw canceled out each other, leaving the third judges score as the final score. I informed him that two judges scoring the fight a draw and one scoring a win constituted a 'majority draw'. To his credit, he acknowledged the mistake and had the decision changed.

These are just two examples of how some things were done "back in the day." Promoters were in total control of their events. However, today, for the most part, national and international television exposure has state agencies

looking over their collective shoulder. What was once a "no holds barred" spectacle and derided as "human cockfighting," is now regulated by the athletic commissions of twenty-two states, as well as a number of Canadian provinces.

The "MMA spectacle," which couldn't even buy time on PPV-TV six years ago is now being shown regularly. The UFC is Spike TV's number one draw. PrideFC and the IFL are now mainstays on FSN. That's in addition to the PPV-TV buys of approximately 700,000 for the most recent UFC events.

The rapidly increasing TV viewer ship has caught the eye of Showtime TV, which as of this writing has announced that they will begin promoting MMA in February 2007. In addition, with the UFC's purchase of the WEC, rumor has future WEC events being televised in conjunction with HBO. How long before Mr. King and Mr. Arum decide to jump on the MMA bandwagon?

So, Doc, what's the problem you ask? Isn't this what we've been wishing for? Yes, I guess so, but knowing human nature I can't help but worry that MMA is expanding too rapidly and exposing itself to a multitude of unforeseen problems. I think that we should be careful what we wish for.

First, the lures of making big money have enticed a number of wealthy wanna-bees to form new promotional companies. I'm concerned that these new promotions will be more concerned about their bottom-line than about the sport and the contestants.

I'm concerned that inexperienced promoters will hire inexperienced matchmakers who may or may not recognize a mismatch. I'm concerned that inexperienced fighters with marginal skills will be thrown into the cage to satisfy the increased demand for MMA events.

I'm concerned that there are too few experienced referees to work the increased number of events. As one who teaches MMA officials, I'm both disappointed and concerned by the fact that neither the major promotional organizations nor the state athletic commissions are fulfilling their administrative obligation to formally train additional referees. This is shortsighted and will most likely result in unnecessary injuries as well as undermine the integrity of the sport.

In summary, here's what I worry about; overexposure due to too many shows, the rapid deterioration of our product due to a shallow pool of talent, an increased number of mismatches, poor officiating due to a shallow pool of

experienced referees, and ultimately, I worry about all of these factors coming together at the same time and place resulting in unnecessary critical injuries. I certainly hope my worries never become a reality, however, if they do, MMA will take a hit in the court of public opinion that will set it back for many years to come.

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