

REFEREE'S CALL:

MMA-101: Expansion

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This is the fourth and last installment of MMA-101.

Nothing more exemplifies the old adage that, "nothing succeeds like success" better than the phenomenal growth of MMA over the past two years. And, since you can't tell the players without a scorecard, here we go.

The International Fight League (IFL) came on the scene on 01/07/06. Founders, Kurt Otto and Gareb Shamus, developed the MMA team concept and promoted their first event on 04/29.06 at the Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The 2006 season proved to be quite successful and in March 2007, the IFL Battleground show became a reality on My Network TV, and Fox Sports Net. Team realignments and expansion are scheduled for the 2008 season.

On 11/13/06, Showtime Networks, Inc. announced that it would team with ProElite, Inc. and air its first MMA event on 02/10/07. Having successfully done so, they have since promoted multiple events throughout the USA. Deciding not to rest on their laurels, they decided to expand their operation. They acquired Hawaii's Rumble World Entertainment in Oct. 2006; the UK promotion Cage Rage on 09/06/07; King of the Cage and Icon Sport were acquired on 09/14/07.

ProElite stressed that each of the various promotions will maintain its own branding. Although some ProElite/EliteXC seasoning will be added, each is expected to operate under its own identity and key personnel are expected to remain. The acquisition of Icon Sport by ProElite reinforced public statements by Douglas Deluca, CEO of ProElite, Inc., "we continue to move forward with our global growth strategy."

In December 2006, press releases advised us that the UFC acquired select assets (read Quinton Jackson) of the defunct WFA, as well as purchasing rival promotional organization WEC. WEC founders, Reed Harris and Scott Adams, continue at the helm while promoting their events at the Hard Rock Hotel Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada. Beginning with their first Nevada event in 01/20/07, to date, the WEC has televised all of its promotions on Versus television.

Rumors, conjecture, and disbelief were all laid to rest on 03/27/07 with the blockbuster announcement that the UFC had purchased the Pride Fighting Championship. Once the largest and most prestigious MMA promotional organization, tax problems and the loss of their television contract set the stage for their demise. Despite the UFC's initial announcement that they would continue to promote events in Japan, they have not done so to date. However, the acquisition did provide the UFC with a wealth of talent including: Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira, Mirko (Cro Cop) Filipovic, Dan Henderson, Wanderlei Silva, and Mauricio (Shogun) Rua, to name a few. Only time will tell whether the UFC will expand into Asia.

Never one to overlook a potentially profitable business, Mark Cuban, billionaire owner of the Dallas Mavericks basketball team, announced on 09/12/07 that he intends to become a player in MMA promotions. According to Cuban, "we have shown MMA on HDNet on Friday nights for a while now. We've worked with the WEC before they got bought, we've worked with Art of War, the IFL, you name it. I wasn't really a fan until we put it on and I started watching it more and more and got more and more into it."

True to his word, Cuban's promotional debut on 10/13/07 at the American Airlines Center in Dallas, Texas, drew between 6,000 and 7000 fans. Additionally, Cuban is also investing in an MMA show on HDNet featuring Bas Rutten as the primary host. Cuban stated, "Inside MMA is going to kind of be like "Inside the NFL", where we'll cover all aspects of MMA, not just what we show on HDNet."

There's no doubt that Cuban is to be taken seriously. Mistakes and money are not issues concerning Cuban. He stated, "Remember when you're talking about losing a lot of money, at worst case, this is great content for HDNet. But unlike other organizations where they said 'if I can get a TV deal,' well I have my own TV deal, I have my own DVD output, I own my own arena. I can put it on in American Airlines Center. We have our own production company, so I don't have to pay a third party to come in a truck and produce video so I can put out a DVD. These are all elements that we already control."

After months of speculation, M-1 Global, LLC, a new MMA promotion owned by Sibling Sports, LLC announced on Oct. 22, 2007 that it has signed Fedor Emelianenko. Also, it announced the signing of MMA industry veteran Monte Cox, as its President and CEO. "We are excited to announce the formation of Sibling Sports, LLC and our new mixed martial arts organization M-1 Global," said Mitchell Maxwell, President and CEO of Sibling Holdings. "Mixed martial arts is the fastest growing sport in America. It is the boxing of the 21st century."

With the signing of Emelianenko to a letter of intent before handing him a \$1.5 million signing bonus, and Monte Cox as President, it would appear that M-1 Global has bought itself instant name recognition and a measure of credibility. Cox stated, "we're going to do shows in Europe, Asia, and the U.S. We're truly going to be global. We're looking for a television partner that we hope to get soon, that's going to dictate where we're going to go and when. The goal is to open the United States in February and we should have a date and opponent soon."

Only time will tell the extent to which any of these organizations will change the face of MMA. Personally, I hope that they all succeed! Hopefully the competition will propel the sport globally and into the international sport psyche.