

REFEREE'S CALL:

MMA-101: Transition

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This is the third installment of a four-part series exploring both the circumstances that have contributed to the evolution of the MMA "Unified Rules", and the sports phenomenal growth.

On 01/09/2001, Zuffa, LLC purchased the UFC from Bob Meyrowitz and the Semaphore Entertainment Group. Ever cognizant of the sports trials and tribulations during the preceding eight years, Zuffa's management team immediately prioritized an affiliation with, and an official recognition from, a state athletic commission.

On 04/03/01, several promoters, including Zuffa, met with Larry Hazzard, the executive director of the New Jersey State Athletic Control Board. Using the MMA rules developed by the California Martial Arts Advisory Committee as a template, the promoters and Mr. Hazzard developed what we now know as the Unified Rules. With the adoption of the Unified Rules, the UFC entered a new era of MMA promotion and cooperation with a state athletic commission.

The "Unified Rules" were first employed at UFC-31, on 05/04/01. In addition to nine separate weight classes, the new rules stipulated that all non-title bouts would be three five-minute rounds, all championship bouts five rounds of five minutes. Held at the Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City, New Jersey, the first championships under the new rules saw Randy Couture win a unanimous decision over Pedro Rizzo to retain his Heavyweight Championship. Also, Carlos Newton tapped-out Pat Miletich to win the Welterweight Championship.

UFC-32: Showdown In the Meadowlands, on 06/29/01, saw the second

installment of the Unified Rules. Tito Ortiz defeated Elvis Sinosic at 3:32 of round one to retain his Light Heavyweight championship. And, despite an unexpected and very disappointing loss of his title just six weeks earlier, Pat Miletich came roaring back into the welterweight division with a devastating knockout of Shonie Carter.

With the two successful shows in New Jersey under its belt, the UFC looked to the Nevada State Athletic Commission (NSAC) for sanctioning and promotional licensure. On 07/27/01, the NSAC voted unanimously to sanction MMA. With the crown jewel of State Athletic commissions now on board, it was felt that the sport had finally come of age.

Just seventeen days after the devastating attack of the Twin Towers on 09/11/01, the NSAC sanctioned its first MMA event, UFC-33. Despite a very subdued atmosphere, "Victory in Las Vegas" took center stage at the Mandalay Bay Events Center on 09/28/01. It featured three title bouts. Dave Menne retained his Middleweight title with a unanimous decision over Gil Castillo. Jens Pulver retained his Lightweight Championship with a unanimous decision over Dennis Hallman. And, Tito Ortiz scored a unanimous decision over Vladimir Matyushenko to retain the Light Heavyweight Championship.

An addition to the Unified Rules followed the 06/06/03 controversial win of Duane Ludwig over Genki Sudo at UFC-43, in Miami, Florida. By all accounts, Sudo had top position, was in control, and winning the bout when "Big" John called an injury time-out. Ludwig had sustained an injury to his nose and John felt that he was swallowing an excessive amount of blood and having trouble breathing. After the doctor determined that the fight could continue, the fight resumed in a stand-up restart and Sudo losing the advantaged top position. With time running out, Ludwig pulled out all stops and dominated the remaining couple of minutes with his Muay Thai. After the bout, Ludwig said that "getting out of bottom position was like being released from jail." The UFC rightly determined that an inequity occurred and required a rules change. Starting with UFC-44, following a medical time-out, all restarts have the fighters assume the same position as the one prior to the time-out. In my opinion, this has proven to be an excellent rule.

As I stated in the first installment of this article, the only rules etched in stone are the Ten Commandments. One of the hallmarks of a dynamic sport is its willingness to make the changes necessary for the safety and equity of its participants.

