

Setbacks, Strides and Strategies:

REVISITING MMA OFFICIATING

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If a fighter is only as good as his last fight, a mixed martial arts judge must only be as good as his last controversial decision or stoppage. It's in these situations where split-second reactions or educated rulings have to be made. But rooted in human judgment, mistakes are made and observers are quick to point them out.

At the recent UFC 48, fans erupted when Brazilian dynamo Renato "Charuto" Verissimo lost his first round to opponent Matt Hughes on two judges' cards after nearly choking the wrestler out. On that same night, spectators hissed and groaned when referee Hurb Dean stepped in to release heavyweight Frank Mir's armbar on Tim Sylvia less than a minute into their fight before realizing that the top fighter's forearm had snapped in half. In honesty, it can be said that fans were probably watching MMA officiating at its worst and at its best that night. So, where has the system, put in place to protect fighters and deliver their fates, come or gone in the last year?

In the passing of twelve months, there have been differing views as to if officiating in the sport has actually progressed. Responsible for the hiring of officials in America's most high profile mecca for MMA action, Nevada State Athletic Commission Executive Director Marc Ratner has been optimistic, for the most part, of the progress his staff has made, including the estimated two new referees and three new judges he's introduced in the last year. "I don't see any setbacks," Ratner says. "I think it's getting a little more consistent. You gotta remember in this mixed martial arts, very few fights go to a decision, as compared to boxing, and the judging of certain rounds I haven't been happy with, but overall, I believe that for the most part, the person that won the fight in the cage or the fenced-in area, got the win."

Internationally-recognized judge and referee Nelson "Doc" Hamilton believes the quality and consistency of officiating has remained the same

over the course of a year, while "Big" John McCarthy, the UFC's head referee and the model to which all other American referees are held to, has his own tempered view. "Overall, it's progressed," remarks McCarthy. "There are setbacks and you know what? There's going to be setbacks in the future."

What all three of these men, so influential to the advancement of MMA officiating, firmly believe is that education still remains their primary weapon of change. Education. But from where?

ENTER REFS

Just a few years ago, Doc Hamilton was invited to serve as a judge for a prominent mid-level event. When he got to the venue, he was surprised to see an "old school" mentality towards ringside officiating. Seated alongside the other two judges, Hamilton requested the three be separated and placed strategically around the cage. To the promoters' credit, he complied, and just in the nick of the time. On the card that night, a two-round match went to a decision, and discovering that he and another judge had scored the bout a draw, Hamilton was perplexed when the hometown favorite's hand was raised.

Upon further investigation, it was revealed that promotion reps had thought the two draws cancelled each other out, leaving the sole judge that had voted for the hometown boy to determine the victor. "We had so many people coming up and asking us 'What the hell is a majority draw?' Hamilton recalls. "They didn't know what a majority draw was. They'd never seen one before."

As a licensed kickboxing official for the last eighteen years in California, as well as both a judge and referee for various mixed martial arts events around the world for the last four, Hamilton has seen it all. Beer chugging judges kicking back to survey the action, judges clumped together trading their tallies while the bouts went on, questionable actions by the referee, and just plain bad decisions...the more Hamilton worked from show to show, the more discrepancies he saw in officiating. Which is why he decided something had to be done.

"I truly believe that the officiating hasn't kept pace with everything else that has happened in this sport," comments Hamilton. "There's no comparison between the fighters of today and the fighters of then. There's no comparison between the level of promotion now as opposed to what it was then. The venues are the best in the world, and I'm not just talking UFC. I'm talking Pride. I'm talking everything. So, everything has continued to be elevated and improved so that it's become world-class, but nobody's done anything about the officiating." That is until now.

What started as a light bulb over Hamilton's head in 2000, has grown today into REFS, or Ring Experienced Fight Specialists, the first program of its kind in America developed to train both referees and judges on the finer points of MMA.

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are needed to see this picture.

"Big" John McCarthy and Nelson "Doc" Hamilton

A 30-page syllabus Hamilton had committed to paper quickly developed into a 30-minute plus Power Point presentation he unveiled last year to a select group of mixed martial arts media. Also in attendance was "Big" John McCarthy, head referee for the UFC since its second show and probably the most recognized MMA official of them all world-wide. From his observations at various MMA events, like Hamilton, McCarthy was convinced of the need for some kind of educational program. "They'd have shows going on with refereeing that we would watch, or judging that was not to the level of what it should have been for the show," says McCarthy. "Our whole thing

was, let's put a program together that we can teach, that we can instruct, that people will come to and they will get some basic knowledge of what mixed martial arts is."

With McCarthy onboard, REFS sprung into action last May with its first seminar for the Nevada State Athletic Commission and its officials. As part of REFS' six-hour classroom day, both judging and refereeing candidates are exposed to a range of information -- from the Unified Rules currently adopted by Nevada and New Jersey to scoring criteria and the Ten-Point Must system to the Power Point demonstration which illustrates body positioning and ring mechanics for referees. "We tell people, don't bother asking questions, just watch, just enjoy it," Hamilton says of the video presentation. "After that, they watch video stop action and slow motion on the intricate parts needing focus." Currently, approximately 23 fights (the majority of them UFC) are used as examples along, while Hamilton says he is always looking at recent bouts to update the tapes. "We take close fights, and maybe take a round out of the fight, maybe take the whole fight."

Judging prospects are later asked to grade their own fights and share their scores with the room. "Why did you score it the way you scored it? What did you see? What didn't you see?" But most of all, Hamilton and McCarthy try to give their students the tools to make these career-important decisions correctly on their own. "Anybody can go ahead and say, 'Okay, the guy just about choked the other guy out.' But, how did he get to that position? How did he set him up for it? What was going on prior to that that let him do that? I don't expect people to be fighters. Fighters understand it better than anybody because that's their game. But, they {officials} should have a working knowledge so if you sit down afterwards, you can say, 'Well, the reason he got it was...' and you run down A, B, C and D."

For referees, day two of the seminar throws them on the mats, where submission holds are demonstrated, sometimes on them, so they can get a feel for what they are like. Proper positioning in the ring and cage are also taught, as well as review and demonstration of the objective signs that warrant a restart. Judges are welcome to attend the section as well. Although a majority of attendees will have some kind of combat arts background whether it be boxing or kickboxing or even martial arts, is it realistic to think that a judge or referee can learn the ropes of the multi-disciplined sport in one or two days? "That's why we devised the test," answers Hamilton, "because we realized people could sit there, they could be informed, and they could be amused, and they could be entertained, but that doesn't really mean they learned anything. So, we put together a test, and admittedly, it's not an easy test." The test, one tailor-made for judges and the other for referees, consists of 25 questions aimed to determine if the information is indeed sinking in. And, as added incentive, candidates have to score 90% or higher to get listed in the REFS database for athletic commissions and

boards, Native American reservations, and promoters to reference. There are hopes this database will grow into a viable way to recognize and monitor competent MMA officials in the future. Once certified, REFS would also like to establish a mandatory refresher test so officials have to keep up their active status.

Although there have been numerous inquiries from around the country, the NSAC has been the first to take advantage of REFS seminars. In Illinois, however, the REFS program was taken in front of their commission to show that a program such as this now exists. In Denver, Colorado, where MMA has been temporarily clustered with kickboxing and Toughman, Hamilton acted as the sanctioning ISKA representative and saved the show's doors from closing. Although probably not what he anticipated, the wheels are indeed in motion for change.

TACKLING IGNORANCE

If the experts agree that proper education still remains the key, what are the hot topics REFS and others will look to tackle head on in the year to come?

"I think the biggest thing is that the judges have to have a better understanding of what's happening on the ground. I don't think they understand it," starts Hamilton. "One of the gray areas is that the man on the bottom is not necessarily in a disadvantaged position. BJJ {Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu} people understand that. But, judges that don't come from BJJ and don't take the time to understand the sport automatically assume that the guy on top is winning the fight."

NSAC director Ratner has reiterated Hamilton's concerns as well. "It's a work in progress learning about the sport, especially from my Las Vegas guys who have not done it before, who are coming from boxing and haven't had the experience, but they've been working the last three years on it and they're getting better. "I need the judges to get tapes and watch some of these fights and even score them on TV. They've gotta just keep practicing and, unlike boxing, where we have 2, 3, or 4 a month, we may only have 3 or 4 mixed martial arts contests a year."

For referees, McCarthy concedes the same. "They have to have an idea of where that fight is going. You've got to understand what the fighters have got to do. You've got to understand what Verissimo is trying to do from the bottom. You've got to see he's getting him in a triangle. Okay, he's got it locked up and you know what Matt Hughes should be doing to try and get out of that. Those are the keys as a mixed martial arts referee that you've got to be going off of -- is the person doing what you know is the right thing to do? Because you're not going to have the time to look at something."

In addition, McCarthy admits that some universal strides must still be made to ensure more dependable reffing. "It's hard because of the inconsistency of the events. You have the UFC, which goes by the Unified Rules. You have King Of The Cage, which will go by the Unified Rules in one show and won't go by the Unified Rules in another. You'll have all these different shows that really vary in the rules, so the consistency in the refereeing is never going to be quite what it should be because of that, because of what people conceive as the rules and what truly are the rules. Consistency would help a lot."

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Hurb Dean stopped the fight between heavyweight Frank Mir and Tim Sylvia in what turned out to be a great call.

Hamilton, too, sees hurdles to be jumped in ensuring equally handed judging across the country. "I'd like to see that the states that are going to regulate this sport have their officials as learned as possible regarding the sport, because most of the time what happens is when you go into a state, they automatically dip into the well as far as what they've already got, which are boxing referees. We know boxing referees do not make the best judges for this sport because they come in with preconceived ideas as to what's happening. I'd like to see in the states that are regulating it or want to regulate it, that they bring in people from the sport and train them because they're already coming in with a background."

Still, with numerous wrinkles still to be ironed out, Hamilton and McCarthy are both resolute in their goals for the sake of the fighters.

"These guys are world-class athletes," says Hamilton. "They bust their asses for next to nothing when you consider what people get paid for boxing and the rest of it. I respect them. I think the least that they should be entitled to is competent officials."

KEEPING FOCUSED

In July, Zuffa Sports Entertainment, the owners of the UFC, sent McCarthy to the Association of Boxing Commissions meeting in South Carolina. His capacity, as it has been for the last few years at this gathering, was to talk about mixed martial arts in front of one of the most influential audiences of all, a room full of athletic commission representatives from across this country. In the past, McCarthy has related his experience to a fawn entering the lion's den. But this year, something had undeniably changed. "It was unbelievable," an enthused McCarthy relays. "This year when we went to talk, we had more people on their athletic commissions saying, 'Mixed martial arts had been the greatest thing to happen for us. We have more mixed martial arts shows than boxing shows now in our state. We have guys that are putting on shows every week. They're doing a great job. The fights are good. People are happy. We want the UFC to come.' It was amazing the difference. The UFC and mixed martial arts is absolutely accepted by these people now."

A few years ago the interest simply wasn't there. Now it is, as well as the necessity for programs like REFS, who can impart their expertise to every state that wants to welcome MMA into its midst.

Persistence and time have proven powerful allies for the sport as of late. Making mistakes along the way, MMA officials will inevitably become better at what they do because too many people care about the future of this sport. While people like Doc Hamilton, John McCarthy, and others do their part to improve on all aspects of the game, persistence and time could be joined by a little patience.