

REFEREE'S CALL:

Stop The Hypocrisy!

by Nelson "DOC" Hamilton

Grappling Magazine/ May 2005

In the March issue of Grappling, my column, "A New Day?" discussed what I perceived to be subtle changes in the California State Athletic Commission's (CSAC) approach to the business aspect of being a regulatory agency.

At the Nov. 9, 2004 meeting, the commission stated that they had a mandate from "The Terminator," Gov. Schwarzenegger, to increase the fight business in the state. To do so, they pledged to become industry and promoter friendly. Unfortunately, at least to date, the commission, much the same as the proverbial leopard, can't seem to change its spots.

At the Nov. 9 meeting, after checking their collective calendars for scheduling conflicts, the seven commissioners decided to schedule the next meeting for Jan. 27, 2005. The primary business to be decided would be exactly which rules would govern mixed martial arts (MMA) in California.

Unfortunately, on Jan. 25, the meeting was postponed, once again delaying the timetable for MMA promotions in the state. The reason given for the postponement was that four of the commissioners could not attend the meeting due to conflicts in scheduling. Are you kidding me...two days before the meeting date?

After three more months had ticked off the MMA calendar, the postponed meeting was finally held on Feb. 22. The meeting was scheduled for a maximum of five hours. Unfortunately, comprising the agenda was enough business to fill eight hours. This resulted in approximately 30 minutes devoted to discussing the proposed MMA rules and regulations. And, true to its nature, the commission took the path of least resistance. They voted four to one in favor of adopting the rules that were never implemented but

previously adopted in 2003. Sorry, but somehow that just doesn't register with me as being "promoter friendly."

The Bright Side

Looking on the bright side, after a four-year struggle, MMA will finally become a reality in California, probably by mid-2005. The next step in this marathon will be the training of referees and judges, which likely raises another set of bureaucratic hurdles.

When I created Ring Experienced Fight Specialists (REFS), for the expressed purpose of training ring/cage officials, I didn't realize the lack of business sophistication possessed by those state athletic commissions with which I've dealt.

Can you imagine any decent sized corporation saying, "We don't have a budget for training our employees?" No, you can't! And yet, despite their voiced concerns about the rules, and giving lip-service to protecting the fighters, every commission I've dealt with to date has echoed that mantra, "We don't have a budget for training ring officials."

How sad for the fighters putting life and limb on the line while the referees get on-the-job training. How sad for the sport, as it puts its reputation and future on the line.

Multi-Million Dollar Lawsuit

REFS believes that the number of skilled competitors, as well as the quality and number of events promoted, have far outpaced the available pool of experienced and competent ring officials. It is unacceptable that referees and judges are expected to hone their skills on the job, absent any formal training. All promoters must understand -- absent competent officials -- that they are walking in a minefield. One critically injured fighter, followed by a multi-million dollar lawsuit, and they are out of business.

Since MMA's introduction to the USA in 1993, thankfully, the sport has experienced only one death. However, MMA's good fortune will not continue indefinitely based solely on good luck. Promoters, as well as State Athletic Commissions, must make the training of ring officials a priority item. We must never forget that MMA is held to an entirely different standard than other forms of athletic competition. We are still in the forefront for targeted aggression from special interest groups. If we lose sight of the big picture

and fail to act in the best interest of the sport, our detractors will prevail and we will have only ourselves to blame.

A Real Fight

A combat sport without rules is not a sport, it's a fight. A combat sport with rules and no competent officials is a potential riot. A combat sport with rules and competent officials is a successful event, which translates into a successful sport.

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