

The Doc Is In:

A View From The Inside

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Inside Kung Fu Magazine / November 2006

Over the years, I have frequently been asked what it's like to referee in the cage. While there is no one single answer, I will share with you my thoughts and feelings as I've made the transition into refereeing MMA. However, before we go there, lets start at the beginning.

Having refereed the stand-up combat sports for the better part of 20 years, I am no stranger to the ritualized mayhem that takes place in the ring. And, although I have wrestled, trained in judo and kenpo, when I decided that I wanted to start refereeing MMA, I knew that I had to put in some mat-time to really learn the sport.

I began hitting the California dojos from Huntington Beach up to San Luis Obispo. I rolled some and talked to a lot of fighters to learn what they wanted and expected from a referee. Over the years, it has proven to be the best thing I could have done. I strongly recommend it to anyone thinking of becoming a referee.

As to the cage, according to Webster's II Revised Dictionary, a cage is "a structure for confining birds and animals," and "an enclosure for confining prisoners." Well, I can tell you this, depending upon whether you are the hunter or the hunted, or the man in the middle, both dictionary definitions are applicable to any one fight. Think 'Hard Times'.

After all of my years of training and ring experience, and my year of working with fighters, I felt prepared to deal with almost anything that could occur in the ring. That was, until I stepped into the cage for the first time, on tribal land, and refereed my first MMA fight.

What I didn't anticipate was just how intimidating the combination of fans and cage could be. Fans attending MMA events are fanatic. Fans attending MMA events on tribal land are both fanatic and rabid. If they weren't, they probably wouldn't drive to the end of the earth to support the sport.

MMA crowds on tribal land frequently resemble a Hollywood back lot shooting a 'B-movie'. Not only does the beer flow like it is an Irish wake, but also, I've never seen so many tattoos, so much plastic cleavage, and so many bare bottoms in one place. Throw in a steady stream of very loud expletives from the crowd during the bouts, and I had to rethink my sanity for climbing into the cage.

Despite all of my preparation, my refereeing debut left a lot to be desired. Everything was going as planned until mid-way through the second round. One guy landed a big overhand right, knocking his opponent three feet across the ring and down. Old habits die hard; I immediately step in to give the fallen fighter a chance to get up, at which point I hear "get the f**k out of the way" just before getting bowled over by the attacking fighter. He jumps on his opponent and finishes the fight. The crowd jumps on me like a dog on a bone, at which point I swallow my pride and learn a most unforgettable lesson.

Over the past five years I have long since come to grips with my sanity or lack thereof. As with most things in life, you get used to almost anything if you do it often enough. Working the cage now is now second nature. The screaming of the crowd is no longer intimidating and I stay out of the way of the fighters. Knowing the rules and understanding the sport provide the necessary confidence to treat each fight as one that is unique unto itself.

MMA fighters are a breed unto themselves. Some walk the thin line between reality and illusion. Some are flat out entertainers and will go to almost any extreme to get attention. Those of you who have seen Charles "Krazy Horse" Bennett in action know what I mean. On one occasion, at the very start of the fight, Charles leaped to the top of the cage and while sitting there gestures to his opponent to come and get him. The crowd goes crazy; his opponent is confused and looks to me for an answer. After telling him twice to get down, I had to use the big stick and threaten him with disqualification to finally make it happen. For some things there are no schools, experience is definitely the only teacher.

As a referee, there are three things I never lose sight of. First, regardless of the level of competition, the potential for disaster in any bout is always present and I must be ever vigilant. Second, my primary responsibility is to

protect each and every fighter from excessive and unnecessary injury, regardless of the level of competition. Third, I understand that for each participant his fight is the most important of his life and I owe it to him to treat it as such.

Usually, regardless of the event, referees are not given bout assignments until just before show time. Therefore, when working a high profile event such as the UFC, I start reviewing the bouts the day before the event. I try to determine which fights I might be assigned and then study the style and records of each fighter. Once I know a fighter's strengths and weaknesses, I then review every possible scenario that comes to mind.

One scenario that never came to mind when I refereed the fight between Frank Mir and Wes Sims at UFC-43 was a disqualification. After escaping a near submission rear-naked-choke, and convinced the Frank was gouging his eyes, Wes grabbed the cage and proceeded to stomp on his head until I jumped in. Since Frank was unable to continue as the result of the intentional foul, a disqualification was dictated. Take note all of you trivia buffs; since the "MMA Unified Rules" were instituted on 05/04/01 at UFC-31, this is the only disqualification to occur in a UFC event to date.

Frequently, when working lower profile events, the fighters are unknown to me. Therefore, I make a point of asking the other officials and the promoter what they know about specific fighters. Hopefully I can get some useful information, if not, I do the best that I can.

Time permitting; I will have a one-on-one review of the rules with the fighters that I will be refereeing. I let them know what I expect of them and what they can expect of me. I specifically ask if they have any questions about the rules. I ask if they have anything specific they want me to know about their game, e.g. "I am double jointed, or, I will not tap when choked." I let them know that if they are caught in a submission it is their responsibility to know when to tap, I'll be there to stop it.

After I've talked to the fighters, I go ringside and talk with the timekeeper and doctor. I let the timekeeper know that I want a notice of time at 1:00 minute, 30 seconds, and 10 seconds. With the doctor, I review the procedure for having him come into the cage to check an injury, and, does he want me to revive a choked-out fighter or not.

As each fighter enters the cage, I check the taping on his gloves; I check the gloves for scuffing; I check that his finger and toenails are trimmed and that he has a mouthpiece and is wearing a cup. Does he have any last minute

questions about the rules? I tell him that I expect a clean fight, I expect him to protect himself at all times, and I expect him to listen to my commands at all times. When the gate is closed and each fighter indicates that he is ready, I point to the timekeeper and its show time.

The desire to perform well haunts not only each and every competitor, but every referee as well. Although a certain amount of performance anxiety is natural and present at the start of each bout, it must be controlled. External influences such as very large crowds, TV cameras, and extensive media coverage of highly publicized championship contests, although stress producing, must be kept in check.

Although no two fights are exactly the same, certain absolutes are. First, as the referee, I must focus only on that which I can control and must disregard everything else. Second, through meticulous preparation for the worst-case scenario, I will usually achieve the positive results desired.

In closing, refereeing any sport is a challenge, but none more so than MMA. It is both dynamic and unscripted. The participants are extremely motivated, highly skilled, mentally and physically tough, possessing large egos, and, it is all fueled by the highly combustible mixture of adrenalin and testosterone. Think 'Thunder Dome'.