

What's Up Doc?

by Todd Hester

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With an interest in martial arts that began in his native New Jersey, Nelson "Doc" Hamilton's main combative outlet in his younger years was through wrestling, which he practiced throughout high school and college. After moving to Los Angeles to study Chiropractics (still his long-term profession), Hamilton realized he was out of shape and started training in judo before moving to karate and kickboxing with Sensei Bill Ryusaki. While attending a kickboxing tournament, he was surprised to find out that some of the matches were in danger of being cancelled due to a lack of qualified referees.

Immediately seeing a way to combine both his love for martial arts with his competition background "without having to get the hell beat out of me," he pursued his goal of becoming a referee. He was licensed as a California kickboxing referee and judge in 1988, a certification he still holds to this day. Traveling throughout the country, he has officiated some of the most prestigious fighting events around, with many of the sport's top athletes.

Always progressive and open to new methods of combative physical expression, Hamilton was one of the first referees to officiate DRAKA, a sport which combines kickboxing with throws. When mixed martial arts burst upon the scene, Hamilton was one of its earliest supporters who, as a member of the California Martial Arts Advisory Committee, successfully pushed for its acceptance and legalization. Frustrated, however, that the current California administration has not approved funding to allow the accepted MMA rules to be implemented, Hamilton is still convinced that MMA will one day become a major world sport.

With his grappling, wrestling, and judo background, Hamilton acknowledges that most opponents of MMA are misinformed when assuming that boxing or kickboxing is a less dangerous sport. "MMA is the only sport where a fighter can tap-out or give up without a stigma being attached to them," says Hamilton. "In boxing or kickboxing if you just give up you'll have your purse withheld or be booed. In MMA, though, if you get caught in a choke or joint

lock, you don't have to have your arm broken in order to signal defeat. You just tap-out and everyone is fine with it. That's unique to MMA. There is much less potential for injury in MMA than you will ever see in any striking sport."

Hamilton is also convinced that mixed martial arts has the fan base to become a worldwide phenomenon. "Every culture and every race has a form of combative self-expression that they practice. MMA is the only combat sport which has rules broad enough to allow the combatants of two culturally different martial arts to interact physically in a ring in a fair and non-biased manner. Where else can a grappling art go toe-to-toe with a striking art and each man have an equal chance to win. It truly crosses cultural and political boundaries. You might as well try to stop an avalanche with a snow shovel as to try and stop the mixed martial arts movement. What you can do, however, is to make sure that it is properly regulated and protected against abuses by overseeing it. Once the current political leaders see the truth about the sport, it is going to take off like no other sport in the history of the world."

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When did you begin the martial arts?

I would have to say that it began in junior high school. I lived in southern New Jersey, which was a hotbed of wrestling. I wrestled throughout high school and college.

Were you training in any other martial arts at that time?

No. After college I taught high school for a brief time and then relocated to L.A. to begin Chiropractic school in 1963. After graduating and working for a number of years to build my practice, I realized that I was totally out of shape. After searching for a judo school, I started training at Ryu Dojo with Sensei Bill Ryusaki in 1973, and have continued to train with him ever since. I have also studied Hawaiian Kenpo and Aiki-Jitsu.

You are a well-known kickboxing official. How did you get started in that?

In the mid-1970's, full-contact karate was increasing in popularity after the

formation of the Professional Karate Association (PKA). This resulted in a need for trained and knowledgeable judges and referees. After being asked to judge some events, I realized that I enjoyed it and just stayed with it. After logging quite a bit of time in the gym, I started refereeing in 1988 and have been doing it since.

What makes a good referee?

First and foremost, a referee must have a thorough knowledge of the rules and regulations. Knowing that he knows the rules gives him the self-confidence to enforce them. Second, he must have the courage of his convictions and the integrity to stand by his decisions. Third, he must have respect and compassion for the fighters and not allow them to take any unnecessary punishment. Fourth, he should have the necessary physical skills to maintain control of the ring and the fight. Also he should not take himself too seriously and maintain an even temperament. He should realize that the fans come to see the fighters, not the referee. Last but not least, accept the fact that no matter how good of a job he does that he will not please everyone.

Which sports do you like to referee?

To be honest, it's a labor of love for me. I thoroughly enjoy refereeing all of the various ring and cage sports. Being totally involved in the contest and in such close proximity to the action engages all of the senses and is quite a rush. I have always enjoyed being involved in the action more than being a spectator to the action.

What sport is the most difficult to referee?

The last thing I want to do as the referee is to interfere with the flow of the action and give one fighter an advantage over the other. In Muay Thai, it is necessary to make sure that all knee strikes are legal, and that both fighters have pretty much stopped throwing knees before I stop the action. In MMA the biggest difficulty is making sure that the action has subsided enough to warrant getting the fighters back to their feet and that neither fighter has lost an advantage.

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What are the best fights you've refereed?

Two fights come to mind. In December 1993, Peter Cunningham and Ronnie Green fought 12 rounds for the WKA World Lightweight Championship at the Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas. Without a doubt, they were the quickest and best technicians I have ever had the pleasure to referee. For the record, Peter won by decision. The other fight that comes to mind was the DRAKA World Light Heavyweight Championship between Ramazan Ramazanov and Manu Sitsifu Ntoh, held at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles in 1998. Those are two of the toughest fighters I have ever had the pleasure to referee. They punched and kicked each other with some of the hardest blows ever seen, asking no quarter and giving none. They were true warriors. Ramazan retired to his corner after round nine due to leg kicks.

You were a member of the Martial Arts Advisory Committee to the California State Athletic Committee. What was that like?

Actually, I have been appointed to the council three times. My first appointment was in 1989. I was re-appointed in 1991 and served as the committee chairman, and my most recent appointment was in 1999. The purpose of the committee is to evaluate, re-evaluate, and update the rules and regulations governing martial arts in California. The committee then advises the commission as to their findings and makes recommendations. Depending on the individual, serving on the committee can either be total boredom or very interesting. Personally, I enjoyed the experience immensely. I appreciate having had the opportunity to be part of the solution while giving something back to the martial arts community. My only regret and disappointment is that the Governor's Office denied the Commission's funding request to regulate MMA for the year 2001. No one I've spoken to has been able to explain why.

What do you think about mixed martial arts?

I think they're great! I feel quite sure that it is not just a passing fad. It appeals to the martial arts purist because of the numerous and varied techniques employed, while appealing to the layman's basic instinct of fight or flight. Its increased popularity and appeal in such a short time speaks volumes about its future.

Is MMA dangerous?

In my opinion, MMA is not anymore dangerous than any other combat sport,

provided the referee is knowledgeable and experienced. A good referee is well positioned relative to the action and able to evaluate applied submission holds and a fighter's ability to defend himself. In addition, as you well know, tapping out and throwing in the towel are universally accepted MMA fighter safeguards.

Do you see a difference between MMA and Judo?

Yes, there are numerous differences. In point of fact, the only shared similarities are the chokes and joint locks. From an historical perspective, MMA techniques were practiced in Jiu-Jitsu, the prevailing martial art in Japan from the late 17th to mid-19th century. It employed choking, striking, kicking, kneeling, throwing, tying, holding, and also some weapons which, of course, MMA doesn't use. After studying Jiu-Jitsu, a few students devoted their lives to expanding specific techniques. Jigoro Kano formulated Judo, and Morihei Uyeshiba formulated Aikido from Jiu-Jitsu. As you can see, MMA has now closed the circle once again and brought Jiu-Jitsu back to its warrior traditions.

What do you see as the future for MMA?

I think that it has a very bright future. It has already come a long ways in a very short time; however, it will realize its potential only if the integrity of the sport is not compromised by greed and by promoters who do not care about fighter welfare. The sport has more than its share of detractors in high places who would like to see it fail. I believe that MMA's rapid growth and potential revenue sources will influence many state athletic associations to soften their hard-line approach toward the sport. Ultimately, they will enact the legislation necessary to regulate the sport. Recognition by the states conveys legitimacy to potential sponsors, which in turn means more revenue and greater growth for the sport. Nothing will have more of a negative impact on the sport than unnecessary serious injuries. This means that fighters should not be mismatched and all officials must be well-schooled and competent. It's mandatory that the sport remains vigilant in its attempt to avert serious injuries. The safety of the competitors must be kept a top priority. It is important to remember that, " those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."