

## **WHY IS THIS CALLED A SPORT? BLOOD GORE ULTIMATE FIGHTING CHOKE PUNCH KICK PUMMEL FIGHTING CHOKE PUNCH KICK PUMMEL**

**UFC capitalizes on the primal urge to watch men beat each other senseless, and is now worth \$1.5-billion after being bought for \$2-million eight years ago.**

**James Christie explores the world inside and outside the octagon. From Saturday's Globe and Mail Last updated on Monday, Jul. 20, 2009 04:09AM EDT**

**The Ultimate Fighting Championship is the sports world's version of a traffic accident. It's a bloody, brutal, violent spectacle, and people can't help but look.**

**Learned social behaviour tells us it's uncivilized to watch as men pound each other into *pâté* inside an octagonal cage, let alone cheer madly as a losing combatant turns into a hematoma. Yet for the broadcast of UFC 100 from Las Vegas last weekend, young men lined up five deep in upscale downtown watering holes - not low-end beer joints - to scream and howl as combatants were pummelled and choked into unconsciousness.**

**During one match, fighter Dan Henderson knocked opponent Michael Bisping unconscious and then - "Just to shut him up a little," Henderson said later - raised himself on his toes before dropping down to lay another blow on Bisping's still body.**

**"It's a phenomenon that allows people to take part vicariously in the type of behaviour that, on the street, would get you a jail sentence," says Geoff Smith, a cultural historian and retired Queen's University professor.**

**Whatever the draw, "like crack, it's growing exponentially," says Joel Gerson, five-time Canadian jujitsu champion and owner of Revolution MMA, a mixed martial arts club in Toronto. "Combat is probably the most human aspect of sport, physical combat between two people. The Fertitta brothers [UFC main shareholders Frank and Lorenzo] are giving us what we want as humans, feeding that primal urge."**

**At the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino, UFC 100 drew gate revenues of \$5.1-million (all currency U.S.) on sellout ticket sales of 11,000, and another 4,000 watching on closed-circuit outside in hot temperatures. UFC sold 1.3 million pay-per-view subscriptions in the United States alone for \$50 each. Canadian numbers were unavailable, but Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver consistently rank among the top-10 pay-per-view markets for UFC events.**

**Company president Dana White last week called Canada a "mecca" for the sport.**

**The strongest brand name within the mixed martial arts sphere, UFC was bought for a reported \$2-million eight years ago and is currently valued in excess of \$1.5-**

billion. It attracts men between 18 and 35 who have the discretionary income to purchase the pay-per-views.

In Canada, a recent Ipsos-Reid poll found MMA to be the fastest growing of 30 sports in terms of popularity, with 22 per cent of Canadians claiming "avid" or "casual" interest. The NBA has 26-per-cent interest and Major League Baseball 38 per cent. The rate of growth of interest is higher for the UFC than for either hockey or the Olympics. Among Canadian men, 33 per cent of the 2,000 surveyed said they had some interest in UFC events.

UFC vice-president Marc Ratner told *The Globe and Mail* this week that a live event at the Rogers Centre in Toronto would deliver a record gate for the company. However, MMA fighting is not formally regulated in either Ontario or B.C., and is banned as prize fighting under Sec. 83 of the federal Criminal Code. Exemption is made for amateur boxing and pro boxing events licensed under an athletics commission. Undeterred, UFC is lobbying for regulatory change, and planning to stage cards in Toronto and Vancouver next year.

"No question, we've seen the front-page stories and we're aware of the growing popularity of the UFC and there seems to be increased interest in MMA, but our concern is the health of participants and spectators," says Mark Skaff, spokesman for Ken Hayashi, chairman of the Ontario Athletic Commission.

The UFC is, without a doubt, the miracle of sport marketing in the early 21st century. As messy as things get in the ring, officials seek to present it as a groomed product in all other aspects. There are rules, they say, to differentiate UFC fights from anything-goes 19th-century-style fighting where eye gouging, finger stomping and groin attacks were permitted. Information on UFC fighters extols the credentials of heavyweight Brock Lesnar as a former U.S. college wrestling champ and the middleweight, Henderson, as one of at least 14 ex-Olympic wrestlers in the mix. Supporters point out that the head is not always the primary target, as in conventional boxing.

But the body is trying to shake the image of its fights as bloodbaths or "human cockfighting," as once described by U.S. Senator John McCain.

And it is diligent about distancing itself from professional wrestling, a task complicated by the fact that some of its competitors emerged from those circuits and brought the baggage with them. Last weekend after Lesnar pummelled Frank Mir, he played the part of the showboat WWE wrestler, thrusting his middle fingers to the crowd to generate more jeering. World Extreme Cagefighting featherweight champion Mike Brown criticized the move afterward, saying: "I've never been a pro wrestling fan, but I could imagine, I know there's a lot of them, how they got really into that. They love the heel, the bad guy, the jerk who talks a lot of smack. So maybe it'll attract some hillbilly fans."

**White, the UFC president, immediately pulled Lesnar into a side room for a verbal beatdown.**

**"Lesnar was being the perfect heel," Gerson says, "something that's part of the show in WWE. But the UFC doesn't want to go all that far toward WWE. He [White] cursed him out in the change room. ... Lesnar spent the press conference apologizing. Dana is the alpha male, he's the boss and everybody recognizes that."**

**Henderson, too, apologized in a way for his unnecessary blow to the unconscious Bisping, saying that usually he "tends to stop" after rendering an opponent unconscious.**

**The punch, however, contributed to Henderson's \$100,000 bonus for "knockout of the night."**

**Call it blood money.**

**The crowd roared.**

**What does this say about us? Smith, the former professor, suggests UFC symbolizes the violent, churning times in which we live:**

**"You don't like it? Flip the channel and there's a war in Afghanistan or Iraq," he says.**