

## Mixed Martial Arts: Too Violent for W.Va.?

By WALT WILLIAMS

wwilliams@statejournal.com

Professional mixed martial arts fighter **Billy Ayash** can compete in nearly every state, but not the one where he grew up. The West Virginia native — who goes by the nickname “The Punisher” — got his start as a kickboxer. He excelled at the sport, wracking up wins and a world title, but when he was about 20 he realized there would be little money in it. So he turned to MMA.

“The reason I love MMA is because I believe it is the purest sport on the planet,” Ayash said. “It has the least amount of rules to allow who is better to win.”

MMA is a full-contact sport combining elements of boxing, kickboxing and wrestling. West Virginia is one of the few states that don't allow MMA matches, and some members of the **West Virginia Athletic Commission** say it should stay that way. State lawmakers spent a good part of last year studying whether to legalize the sport, and they might introduce a bill doing just that when the **Legislature** convenes Jan. 13. But opponents say it is unsporting and dangerous, with rules allowing for such moves as chokeholds and body slamming, and where the goal is to beat the opponent into submission.

“Cutting off someone's oxygen supply until they pass out. ... It's no way a sport,” said **Steve Allred**, chairman of the athletic commission. “It is assault and battery.”

### A New Sport

MMA started to take off in the U.S. in the early 1990s. Two opponents face off in a ring and try to knock out each other or force the other to tap out.

Fighters can come from a wide variety of combat disciplines. The only protection they wear are four- to six-ounce gloves that leave their fingers free. They can kick, punch and grapple using their fists, feet and knees. They can punch downed opponents, but not kick them. They can't use head butts or downward elbow strikes. They also can't hit the throat, groin, spine or back of the head.

West Virginia is only one of



Photo courtesy of Ultimate Fighting Championship

six states with athletic commissions that haven't approved MMA. It currently is allowed in every state bordering the Mountain State.

Last year, state Delegate **Jeff Eldridge**, D-Lincoln, introduced one of two bills that would have legalized MMA. Both died from a lack of support, but lawmakers passed a resolution calling on a legislative committee to study the issue between sessions.

Eldridge, himself a former fighter, pointed to the surrounding states and the money MMA matches bring in to local communities — revenue he said West Virginia is leaving on the table.

“Mixed-martial arts, as far as competition, is the fastest growing sport,” he said. “For me, I think it would be crazy not to look at it.”

But the no-holds-barred reputation of MMA has made some state lawmakers skittish to endorse it. Delegate **Jim Morgan**, D-Cabell, who is the co-chairman of the committee reviewing the legislation, noted Eldridge sponsored a bill that would have banned Barbie dolls because of alleged harmful image they project on girls. He thinks the same principle applies.

“It is my feeling is if that is bad for girls, then this mixed type of fighting would be bad for boys,” Morgan said.

### Blow to Boxing?

Another concern for those against legalizing MMA is the

dent it could make in ticket sales of other combat sports, particularly boxing.

Boxing promoter **Jerry Thomas**, whose company promotes the Toughman contests in West Virginia, said a typical Toughman match might bring in around 2,000 spectators. A large boxing match, such as one at the **Big Sandy Arena** in Huntington, might bring in 10,000 people who will spend an average of \$50 per person on tickets, hotel reservations, food and other items. That is a big injection of money into the community, he said.

Thomas has visited MMA matches in Ohio and even promoted a few. They don't bring in the crowds boxing matches bring in, he said.

“It seems to me that when people come to MMA matches, they come out once or twice, and then they realize the real world of MMA is not what you see on television,” he said.

Still, opponents of MMA worry interest for traditional combat sports such as boxing will wane as MMA becomes more popular. They said that has already happened in other states. It's not just a simple matter of one sport replacing another, according to Allred.

“What you will have is the much more violent sport of MMA take over boxing,” he said.

Dr. **Allen Saoud** of Bridgeport, who has served as ringside doctor for many boxing matches, said at least four things in MMA

matches worry him. Fighters are allowed to hold down opponents and strike with repeated blows, piledrive opponents headfirst into the mat, perform chokeholds and wear thin gloves that when backed with tape can be harder than a bare fist.

“I'm just concerned with the amount of injuries I have already seen in MMA,” he said.

### Safe Fights

MMA proponents say the sport's danger has been wildly exaggerated. They note MMA has resulted in fewer injuries and fewer fatalities than boxing. And, that unlike boxing, a fighter can end the match by tapping out.

“Anytime you are in a combat sport, there is always a chance for injury,” said **Marc Ratner**, head of government and regulatory affairs for **Ultimate Fighting Championship** and **World Extreme Cagefighting**, two of the most popular MMA events.

Ratner pointed to a 2006 **John Hopkins University** study that found professional MMA matches had no higher rates of injuries than other combat sports. The authors also concluded that the fewer knockouts in MMA could translate to fewer brain injuries as opposed to boxing.

A separate medical study reviewing five years of MMA matches reached similar conclusions.

Opponents acknowledge there have been few serious injuries from MMA as compared to boxing, but they said one has to keep in mind MMA is not as widespread as boxing and has not been around as long. They also said they are more worried about what would happen at the amateur level, which isn't as tightly regulated.

Ratner said he sees that is an argument for allowing MMA, because if a state permits it, a state can regulate it. It can require fighters to carry insurance and mandate that doctors be on site, as opposed to the back alley fights that fans of the sport could go ahead and organize if they wanted.

“They are just thrown together which is exactly what we don't want,” he said.