

# MMA Receives Mixed Reviews From State Boxing Officials

By MIKE RUBEN

For The State Journal

CHARLESTON — Mixed martial arts is getting a mixed reaction in West Virginia.

Recognized as the fastest-growing spectator sport in America, MMA is illegal in West Virginia and 17 other states.

The full contact sport, which is a combination of boxing, wrestling, jiu-jitsu and variations of kick boxing, is yet to gain approval from the state **Athletic Commission**. **Steve Allred**, chairman of the five-member, governor-appointed commission, said he is not in MMA's corner. A former boxer, Allred maintains the safety of combatants outweighs any positive benefits that cage matches would bring to the Mountain State.

A typical mixed martial arts bout consists of three to five five-minute rounds. The fight may end by knock-out, referee stoppage or "tap-out" submission. Head-butting, eye-gouging and strikes to the back of the head are prohibited.

Specifically, Allred expressed his concerns about two of the ways that fighters may win an MMA match. He said choke holds prevent oxygen from reaching the brain and could lead to permanent disability, and that submission holds may result in a broken arm or leg.

"These matches can be brutal," the Boone County resident noted. "Personally, I just don't believe that it's worth it."

Others in the boxing community agree.

**World Boxing Council** Chairman **Jose Sulaiman** has been quoted as saying MMA events are throwbacks to the caveman era and the Roman circus.

"They (the bouts) are intended crimes accepted by bloody people who love this savage fighting," he said.

Still, MMA events have continued to grow in popularity. Once limited to pay-per-view events, the sport now is reaching mainstream America through national television audiences for programs such as the "Ultimate Fighting Challenge," "Pride," "Tapout" and **World Extreme Cagefighting** (WEC).

One organization, however, recently suffered a self-induced financial knock-out. Elite XC is filing for bankruptcy after reporting losses of \$55 million over the past two years. The CBS program suffered a public relations black eye when its headline athlete, **Kimbo Slice**, was knocked out in just 14 seconds by **Seth Petruzelli**, an unranked opponent, in front of a network prime-time audience.

There was more controversy following the fight when Petruzelli, who was a late replacement for veteran **Ken Shamrock**, commented that Elite XC officials financially encouraged him to fight by using Slice's stand-up style.

## The Promoters

Boxing promoters in West Virginia offer guarded optimism about future of the sport here.

**Jerry Thomas** and his Clarksburg-based **WV Sports Promotions** have been in the boxing and Tough Man business for 30 years. He recently expanded into the MMA arena with **Hard Knocks Cage Fights** in Ohio.

"I have what you would call an old-school boxing background, but it (MMA) is very exciting," said Thomas. "It's all over television now, and it's definitely reaching mainstream America."

Thomas said he has become increasingly more comfortable with MMA as the rules and regulations have been modified to place a greater emphasis on the safety of the participants.

"The rules for amateur events have drastically changed over the last three or four years," he noted. "The rule changes are dramatic."

Thomas said he has initiated informal



discussions with the state commission about bringing the sport to West Virginia venues. He suggested the state should mirror the rules already in place in neighboring Ohio.

"It's a matter of supply and demand," he added. "We can't handle the number of requests we have for people who want to participate."

WV Sports Promotions sponsors Tough Man events at 12 locations from October through April. Thomas recently organized an event at **Wheeling Island Hotel Casino and Racetrack** that included boxing and kickboxing events.

"We had a standing-room-only crowd," he commented. "It was one of our best attended events."

**Stephen Simons** of Westover has a 14-year history in the fight business, promoting about six boxing and kickboxing events per year. Simons Promotions is organizing a Nov. 15 event at **Waterfront Place** in Morgantown.

"I still like the old-style boxing, where two guys go into the ring with boxing gloves, punch it out, and may the best man win," he commented. "I can tolerate it (MMA)."

Simons said MMA events are now taking place in several surrounding states.

"They have it in Virginia and Ohio; now and it's coming to Maryland in January and to Pennsylvania," he added. "I know they're having record-breaking crowds. It seems like it's coming on. I think it's just a matter of time."

Simons said boxing still has a fan base here. He noted that his Morgantown events typically fill a 700-seat venue, and boxing cards at Appalachian Power Park in Charleston usually will attract crowds of 1,200.

**Chris Smith** of Charleston has been promoting his **Rough & Rowdy** events in West Virginia and four other states for more than a dozen years. He also is venturing into MMA with his **Ruckus** in the Cage events in Virginia and North Carolina.

Smith said MMA is approaching market saturation in many areas.

"It started growing in popularity rapidly with all the coverage by the TV networks," he said. "It's very popular with the 18-34 male audience. It's what they want to see."

Smith strongly advised that the sport needs to be regulated.

"There must be 30 promoters with MMA events in Virginia," he explained. "It seems like it's in every school gym and every bar on about any weekend. They can't make cages fast enough."

He said the sport could be successful in the Mountain State if the proper controls were in place.

"It has to be sanctioned properly," Smith added. "You can't have a situation where just anybody can put up a cage and have fights."

Fighter safety is taken into consideration at his amateur **Ruckus** events, according to Smith. Knee and elbow strikes to the head, for instance, are not allowed.

"If it was legal, we would try it in West Virginia," he noted, "but only if it's properly regulated."

While the sport currently has an alphabet soup of organizations, an effort is under way to create one governing body. **The World Alliance of Mixed Martial Arts** is attempting to be recognized as the sanctioning body with promises of bringing "integrity, legitimacy and prosperity" with unified titles, ratings and rules.

The effort gets no support, though, from the biggest brand name in the sport. Citing examples of corruption within the sanctioning bodies of boxing, UFC President **Dana White** is vehemently opposed

to the World Alliance. He described it as merely an attempt for others to cash in on the sport's increasing popularity.

"It is exactly what the sport doesn't need," said White.

## The Fighters

**Josh Barton** is a mild-mannered barber by day. For the last nine months, however, he has spent most of his evenings lifting weights, running and sparring in preparation for his first venture into the cage. Barton (6-0, 155) is scheduled to make his MMA debut on Nov. 8 in Abingdon, Va.

"I saw it on TV and thought it would be fun," said Barton, a 26-year-old from Athens. "It's on my list of things I want to do. I didn't want to be 30 years old and say, 'I should have done that.' It's a chance to see what I've got in me."

Always the little guy in school, **Cheyenne Church** said he constantly had to prove himself. Now a 28-year-old father of four, he is taking the lessons learned in street fighting and put them to use in the ring. The Montcalm resident owns an 11-1 boxing record and is 1-2 in cage matches.

Introduced into the ring as "Hells Bells," Church confesses that his punching skills are well ahead of his wrestling and martial arts maneuvers.

"I should be 2-1 (in MMA)," offered Church, who will depart in December to begin his second tour in Iraq. "I was winning, but he used a jiu-jitsu move and twisted my arm. It didn't hurt that much because of the adrenaline, but I heard something pop and crack, so I had to tap-out."

"I've got four kids (ages 7 years through 8 months), and I don't need to be sitting at home with a broken arm."

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