

# THE NEW RULES OF FIGHT CLUB



ROBERT GALLAGHER FOR TIME 121

## S P O R T

Kinder but not gentler, ultimate fighting is back and lunging for the mainstream. Are you ready?

By **HOWARD CHUA-EOAN**

**N**EITHER MAN WOULD GIVE IN, SO THE crowd roared for the fighters to smash each other again: more kicks, punches, stomps, knees and elbows. They obliged. When they got too tired to fight, they would grab each other and crash to the mat of the octagonal ring, grappling, twisting like strange action figures, pressing against the cage's netting. Then they would be back on their feet, catching a breath, calculating advantage, their faces streaked with sweat and gore. Both were bleeders. Weeks before, in a qualifying bout, Forrest Griffin, 26, had suffered a gash above an eye that required so many stitches that few expected him to advance in the contest. He healed in time for this evening's punishment, and as Stephan Bonnar, 28, punched him in the head, Griffin cheekily offered a come-hither smile, turned the other cheek and slammed back.

The Griffin-Bonnar bout, televised live on basic cable earlier this year, offered three

5-min. rounds of compelling intensity. Fight aficionados have buzzed about it online and off ever since. It is also a symbol of a sport's resurrection: what is popularly called ultimate fighting was chased off TV in 1997 and banned by almost every state because of its no-holds-barred, pound-to-pulp violence. Relegated to outlaw arenas, it appeared doomed to languish forever as "human cockfighting," in the words of its critics.

But at a time when boxing has few stars and pro wrestling verges on cartoonish, ultimate fighting has a new appeal and is heading for mainstream entertainment. In June the big showbiz dealmakers at Creative Artists Agency signed up the Ultimate Fighting Champion-

ship (UFC) as a client. A movie project based on the life of a wannabe ultimate-fighting warrior is circulating in Hollywood. On Oct. 3, Spike TV, which is owned by MTV and Viacom and is targeted at men who don't want to grow up, will pit several hours of live ultimate fighting against the choreography of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) on the USA Network. This is in addition to Spike's airing a second season of the reality series *The Ultimate*

*Fighter*. The first season was a strategic move in the canny revival of the sport.

Sport? When it began in 1993, the first UFC was meant to be a gimmicky showcase for Brazilian-style jujitsu (and its superiority to other fighting styles), but it quickly devolved into a circus. Wild audiences screamed for matchups of pugilists

against wrestlers against kickboxers, a *Final Fantasy*-video-game array of combatants, except for the very real blood that spattered on the mat of the octagon.

The cage surrounding the ring was in-



**WWE BEWARE!** Scenes from Spike's first live fight of the season, top and above

**In 1997 ultimate fighting was chased off TV and banned in almost every state**

tended to keep the audiences from jumping in as much as to keep the fighters from falling out. "Violence for the sake of violence," says Phil Mushnick, a sports columnist for the *New York Post*. "I understand that not everything necessarily has to have a redeeming social value. It can have no value. But this kind of stuff has negative value."

After attacks by Senator John McCain and others, this brand of combat was chased into the hinterlands and banned by court after court. Then, in 2001, Frank Fertitta III and his brother Lorenzo, entrepreneurs in the Las Vegas casino business, bought the tarnished name Ultimate Fighting Championship and rehabilitated the sport. Or, rather, remade it. Technically called mixed martial arts, ultimate fighting was given a set of rules (no more head butting) and a streamlined synthesis of fighting styles (so long, one-glove boxing!) rather than the old chop suey of contending martial-arts schools. A doctor was stationed at ringside to discourage death, and a referee joined the fighters within to break up dangerous holds, penalize illegal blows and stop the action if necessary.

As they imposed some order on this mayhem, the Fertittas and Dana White, an ex-amateur boxer who joined as president and minority partner, repeatedly voiced their concern about safety and the need for regulation. It was a smart political move that helped them win the approbation of the athletic commissions in Nevada and New Jersey, where the gambling havens of Vegas and Atlantic City have long made boxing a big-event fixture. "It's a totally new sport," says an approving Nick Lembo, counsel for the New Jersey State Athletic Control Board.

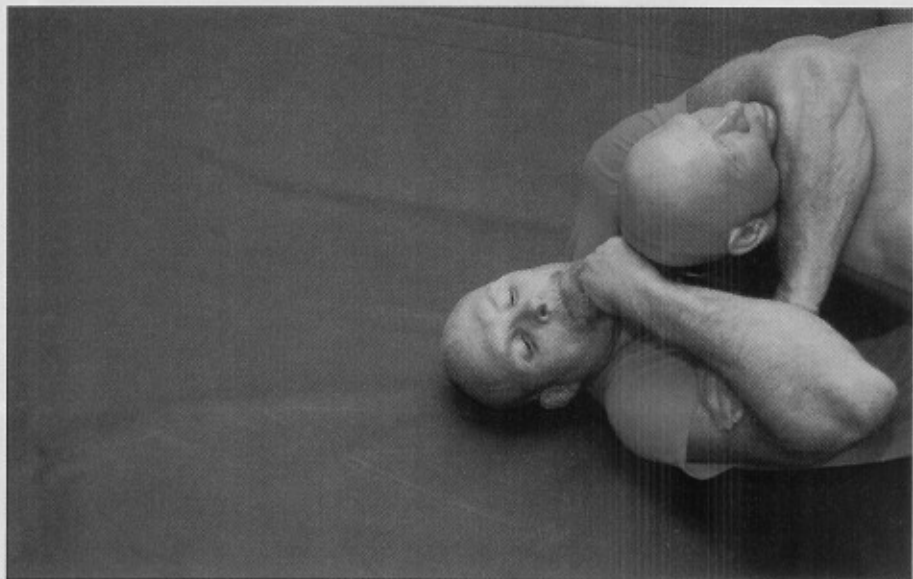
Although the gambling meccas provide ultimate fighting the glitter of legitimacy, reality TV has given the sport its huge momentum. The first season of *The Ultimate Fighter* on Spike was a combination of *The Real World* and *Survivor*, with two rival teams living under the same roof and vying for contracts with the UFC. So much testosterone proved to be a combustible package, with infighting, drunken frolics, doors bashed in and one competitor urinating on another's bed. The payoff? Most episodes ended with a vicious fight to eliminate a contestant. The ratings spiked for Spike, and the Griffin-Bonnar light-heavyweight showdown, the live finale of the series, saw 2.6 million late-night viewers tune in, handily beating the peak rating of HBO's boxing events that season. Griffin won the fight—and the contract—in a disputed decision but, spurred by the excitement, White and the Fertittas gave Bonnar a contract as well.

"*The Ultimate Fighter* was our Trojan

horse," says White. Like WWE's comic-book rivalries, the reality show created competitors whose aspirations and heartbreaks have hooked fight fans. When the first live fight on Spike this season matched a bunch of contenders from the first series in combat, the show outdrew ESPN's NFL preseason and X Games telecasts in the target demographic of men ages 18 to 49. The premiere of this season's reality show drew more than 2 million late-night viewers. The next three episodes logged increases in the number of men watching. "It's the right show for the right network," says Kevin Kay, executive vice president for programming and production

people participate in the sport, we will find more documented cases of damage and we will find, ultimately, deaths." The safeguards, he says, are not transparent enough. The UFC makes no bones about the pain of its regimen but insists that medical oversight is more than adequate.

Other states, including New York, with its large venues, are wary not just of safety but also of encouraging fly-by-night operators who illegally use the ultimate-fighting trademark but not its rules. Says Loretta Hunt, an editor at *Full Contact Fighter*: "We're seeing an influx of promoters coming in, some that don't know what they're doing."



**DON'T CHOKE:** Reality-show contestant Keith Jardin in ultimate training

at Spike TV. Says Kay, who helped develop *SpongeBob SquarePants* for Nickelodeon: "I was skeptical at first, but I just love it."

Winning the demographic was easy. In late July the Fertittas and White—and their company Zuffa LLC—were courting a more difficult group: a convention of state and tribal athletic commissioners. They appear to have made some headway. "We're definitely monitoring it," says Greg Sirb of the Pennsylvania State Athletic Commission. "I was impressed by what I saw at the convention." "It's probably safer than boxing in terms of the chances of injury," says David Holland of Virginia's Professional Boxing and Wrestling Program, reflecting the UFC's argument that the sport's blows are more evenly distributed, whereas boxing focuses on debilitating punches to the head. But Dr. Peter Carmel, a trustee of the American Medical Association, however, is incredulous: "As more and more

In the meantime, through TV, ultimate fighting is visible in places where it is banned. Fighters are now recognized as celebrities, even if they aren't quite paid like stars. Griffin remembers that in the lower circuits, he sometimes got only \$100 to fight and says he often discovered that those \$100 checks bounced. He now has a couple of small endorsement deals and is a 12-and-12 fighter: he gets \$12,000 a fight and a bonus of \$12,000 if he wins. It's a pathetically small sum compared with the millions that top boxers earn—though the potential of the UFC, which controls the sport's merchandising, promises more. Still, Griffin loves the lack of pretense in ultimate fighting. "I watch ESPN, and they will talk about a hockey game, but then they'll show the guys fighting. Why not just cut to the chase and fight?" He adds, philosophically, "Fighting strips away everything. Two guys on a mat going at each other. There is a purity to it." A purity both terrifying and mesmerizing. —**Reported by Clayton Neuman/New York, Gary Andrew Poole/Las Vegas and Sean Scully/Philadelphia**