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State News



A Fighting Chance

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Even if you've never seen an Alaska Fighting Championship event, you probably have an idea of what it's about. You may know it's about two men in an octagonal cage, fighting until one of them gets knocked out or calls it quits. But it's what you don't know about mixed martial arts that could determine if you see it as a violent recreation, or give it a fighting chance, as a legitimate sport.

At first glance, it may look like nothing more than a well-organized street fight. Two men, punching, kicking, and choking each other as hundreds of fan scream directions like "Knee!" or "Elbow to the Face!" But Alaska's ultimate fighters resent the idea that it's a brutal blood sport.

"They need to take a closer look. Look behind the scenes. I don't think they know really what's going on," says Kevin Barber, an AFC fighter and trainer.

What is going on is months, even years, of training. At Anchorage Brazilian Jiu Jitsu a group of fighters known as the "Wolfpack" trains six days a week. For two hours each day, they work on things like cardio, boxing, and grappling. It's that kind of training, they say, that draws them to the sport.

Rob Yundt, a fighter with the "Wolfpack" says he got into mixed martial arts, or MMA, after a long career as a wrestler.

"You stay in shape. It's a good hobby. It's the safest sport in the world."

Safest sport in the world? That seems unbelievable considering the amount of blood on the floor of the Octagon after a fight. It's true though, unlike nearly every other professional sport, MMA has never had a serious injury or death. Fighters point to rules like no eye gouging; no kicking, kneeing, or stomping a grounded opponent; and no head butting. They also point to their training.

"If you have two untrained fighters in there they might not know when to stop. They might do a submission too hard, whereas a trained fighter might know just enough pressure to apply," says Sean Hedrick, a Staff Sergeant at Elmendorf Airforce Base, who recently got into the Alaska Fighting Championship.

But what happens when a fighter gets overly excited, and doesn't know when to stop?



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primetime 9.00

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- Alaska Aces
- Gwinnett Gladiators



"For one, you got a referee in there to stop things when things get too serious or a fighter in unable to defend himself," notes Tim Hendricks.

All of the fighters credit refs with making the sport safe. The refs appreciate the recognition, but say it's all in a days work.

"You just stay as close as you can to the action and then if you're gonna make a mistake you err on the side of caution. You want both fighters to be able to walk away," says Mike Huston, and ex-fighter who's been reffing for the AFC for two years.

Organizers also want the fighters to come back, for more fights, and more fans, and that's exactly what they're getting these days. Thanks to shows like the reality series 'The Ultimate Fighter' on the Spike channel, more and more fans are being drawn in. As new fans are being attracted to the sport, so is a new kind of fighter. These days, more and more women are stepping into the Octagon. The women fight just as hard as the men, both in the Octagon, and out - defending more than just the sport.

"I'm pretty much a normal girl. I mean, yeah, I'm a little bit of a tomboy but for the most part, I'm not some masculine chick who wants to fight all the time," says Susan Arnett, one of the best female fighters in Alaska.

Other female fighters agree, and they add the same can be said for the men of mixed martial arts. Whether male or female, these athletes say they are more than brainless brawns who want to beat each other up. In fact, they say, they are supreme athletes.

"It's a better way of life actually. I mean, you have to eat right, exercise, you can't drink or use drugs," adds Barber.

All the fighters agree, if people look past the outward appearance of MMA, they'll see an ultimate sport that emphasizes health, and good sportsmanship, above all else.

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