GROWTH SPORTS: MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

Decades of debate about which of the martial arts is best have led to the rise of the combined combat sport of Mixed Martial Arts, in which a wide array of techniques is allowed and success depends on using the right one at the right time.



Best of all worlds

Clearly, there's more to sport than television, but among the benefits broadcasters can bring to the bodies that regulate different sporting activities and the equipment and clothing manufacturers supplying athletes at all levels is a stark, scientific indication of popularity. If fans don't want to watch or, increasingly, pay to view events, television companies know right away and usually amend their schedules accordingly. Money talks in that business as in few others.

By the end of 2009, many pay-per-view audiences for bouts under the various commercial banners of mixed martial arts (MMA) in the US were more than one million, which helps explain why broadcasters are keen. Prices are high, but organisers argue that groups of friends are clubbing together to spend an evening in one person's home watching the stars and socialising. Such is the popularity of MMA now that it has even made a breakthrough in the electronic games market. And a Las Vegas-based company, Truesport Alliances & Entertainment, which partners with the MMA industry leaders to market "branded concepts and equipment", is making a name for itself as gyms everywhere look for ways of installing the right set-up to meet the demands of amateur MMA enthusiasts, as well as catering to the professional market. It has put together an entire MMA training centre model, which it calls the TapouT. Opening in dedicated premises, the centres offer the right equipment and tuition for amateurs, including children of all ages, to learn about MMA, and for professionals to train in.

As you would expect, sports clothing brands have been quick to follow up on all this enthusiasm and now have their own exhibition, UFC Fan Expo, which takes place in Las Vegas

MMA fighters use a combination of different techniques from various martial arts.

Truesport Alliances & Entertainment

every year in May. UFC stands for Ultimate Fighting Championship, one of the commercial companies tapping into the sport's popularity.

UFC began in 1993 after its founders saw an early Brazilian version of MMA called 'vale tudo' ('anything goes'). But it's not true that absolutely anything goes and during the 1990s, UFC worked hard to help establish rules that many championships and regulatory bodies in different parts of the world have since followed. Rules include a ban on head-butting, eye-gouging, hair-pulling and rabbit-punching.

What to wear

This form of MMA, however, allows apparel companies less scope than some of its competitors. While participants must wear gloves, designed to protect the hand but not large enough to improve the striking surface or weight of a punch, they can choose between shorts and kickboxing trunks to cover the groin area. UFC does not allow shirts, shoes or gis (traditional eastern-style martial arts suits) because of what it calls "the problems they present for grabbing". Fortunately, other forms of MMA, including the Pride Fighting Championships, which were based in Japan until 2007, are keener on clothing. Athletes there are free to wear gis of many colours.

The full name for a gi is a keikogi, from the Japanese words for practice (keiko) and clothing (gi). Traditionally these garments are made from cotton, but a variety of weaves is available from most manufacturers. In between single and double weaves, which are the lightest and heaviest respectively, manufacturers also make gis with gold weave and platinum weave, which is lighter than gold and ideal for warmer conditions.

Away from the glare of television, enthusiasts in gyms and centres, such as the one Truesport Alliances is setting up, are wearing tight-fitting T-shirts (typically with a narrower cut on the body and arms) with shorts or gi pants to learn, train and compete, and women artists have a range of tank tops and bra-tops available to them, as well as T-shirts, from companies including Jaco Clothing and Revgear (which emphasises the combative side of women's MMA by offering a cotton-polyester-Lycra sports bra in camouflage colours).

Celebrity status

When you have paying audiences of more than a million and a growing band of product manufacturers that want a piece of the action, you get stars and spin-offs. In MMA today one of the undisputed world stars is Quebec athlete Georges St Pierre, so famous that everyone in the sport knows him simply as GSP.

In November 2009, sports apparel brand Under Armour announced that it was signing the Canadian, current UFC welterweight champion, up on a "multi-year endorsement deal". It would have been extra interesting if Under Armour had decided to launch its own mixed martial arts range to mark the occasion, but it's limiting itself to having GSP promote its underwear line. It's still an important deal because underwear is one of the brand's most important categories, and one that will now have Mr St-Pierre as its "face" in a "multi-platform media campaign" that began over Christmas and New Year.



Truesport has put together a model for entire training centres devoted to MMA, for amateurs and professionals.

Truesport Alliances & Entertainment

Deals like this are barely news when they feature a football, tennis or basketball star, but this is the first time an MMA fighter has been so sought after, which is another indication of how far the sport has come since 1993.

"It is quite an honour for me to represent Under Armour," the athlete said at the time of the announcement. "I have always appreciated the quality of their products, and to be partners with them is a dream come true." He will help promote specific Under Armour products, including the BoxerJock, BoxerBrief lines and Recharge suit.

Under Armour's senior vice-president for brand development, Steve Battista, said: "Not only is Georges one of the biggest stars in one of the fastest growing sports in the world, but his dedication to training and making himself the best at what he does aligns perfectly with our brand's mission to make all athletes better. When we found out that he was a fan of ours, we jumped on the opportunity to bring him into the Under Armour family."

And what of the MMA family? There is talk in some circles of the sport's popularity having peaked, and counter-talk in others of its having outstripped wrestling and even boxing already with further growth to come; some commentators even speak of making MMA an Olympic event. If it keeps gaining fans and practitioners, the International Olympic Committee may not be able to ignore the calls.