



By Kelly Crigger

THE FLASH POINT

Fighters speak about the most dangerous two seconds in MMA.



*McCullough vs. Alfonso
WEC 19
March 17, 2006*

It should have gone down as one of the most spectacular standing KOs in MMA. But with the ref on his heels, McCullough inebriated on his own killer instinct, and Alfonso just one degree too conscious for his own good, it ended instead in a shocking one-sided punch-fest.

It's the moment many MMA fans clamor for: when high-velocity leather meets its target, and in a split second a trained fighter goes from adrenalized determination to stone-cold unconsciousness. But that's not always the end of it. Sometimes an unlucky fighter, splayed out on the ground, will take two or three more unprotected shots from his raging opponent. In the best cases, the ref or even the victor will quickly halt the action. The worst scenarios make the Rodney King video look like an episode of "Teletubbies."

Modern MMA boasts an astonishing safety record, and state-sanctioned events do an admirable job at enforcing every conceivable measure to protect the athletes. But when the inevitable happens—the guy on top experiences tunnel vision and the third man in the ring is a beat behind the action—it becomes a perfect storm. It is the most dangerous two seconds in MMA, when the righteousness of the sport's opponents swell and the fans' worst fears can be realized.

IS THERE A WAY TO AVOID THIS DEVIL'S TRIANGLE OF DANGER?



It's a race between referee Big John McCarthy (far left) and B.J. Penn's fist: Which will be the first to reach Gaol Uno's face? [Spoiler alert: Penn's fist.]

"You never know what's going to happen," says lightweight Damacio Page, who delivered a series of brutal elbows to an unconscious Rod Montoya at Extreme Challenge 74, a bout that was captured on Versus Channel's "Tapout" reality show. "I couldn't really tell until the second elbow," says Page. "Once the ref jumps in, you know it's time to stop."

In his IFL debut, Mike Dolce came out swinging for the fences and found a home run just 19 seconds into his fight with Jim Arbrille. Dolce pounced on the dazed Arbrille as he lay on the canvas, and delivered two jackhammers that bounced the Atlanta native's head like a schoolyard tetherball. "I'm a caveman," Dolce admits. "I do what I'm told and keep going hard until the ref pulls me off. I mean, we're paid to fight, not walk away when we think it's over."

This is the way of the fighter. It's a subconscious behavior ingrained into his psyche from the day he steps into the gym to train. Until the bell sounds or the referee physically pulls him off the other man in the ring, he keeps going.

Some fighters are in a mental place that doesn't leave much room for the ability to make rational

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decisions when his adrenaline is flowing like cheap champagne. Witness UFC Light Heavyweight Champion Quinton "Rampage" Jackson at Pride Critical Countdown 2004, when he slammed Ricardo Arona into dreamland and then followed it up with two hammering headshots. "I'm not the same person when I fight. When I'm fighting I'm in a different mode," Rampage says. "Sometimes you hit a guy and knock him out, but then you hit him again and wake him up ... just keep going until it's done."

Icon Middleweight Champion Robbie Lawler takes this a step further and erases guilt completely from his mind. Lawler was the prime suspect of two recent muggings in the Icon Sport and EliteXC rings, where

he felled his opponents and proceeded to deliver bombs while they slept. Against Frank Trigg, Lawler connected with a crunching uppercut to his unconscious yet still-standing opponent, which temporarily erased all of Trigg's memories of the sixth grade. Instead of remorse, Lawler puts the responsibility for his drubbings squarely on the referee. "I go until the ref says stop," is the oft-repeated mantra he recites when discussing the subject.

Not all fighters are mindless automatons, as bad blood also can play a part. Such was the case when Tom Speer pummeled Sidney Silva at WEC 27. Speer admits he had some extra motivation to finish Silva decisively. "I kind of did want to hurt him, because at the time I was from a small area with no big names to work out with and he was talking bad about me, saying I had no real skill." But like so many other fighters, Speer sends the ball back to the referee's

**Speer vs. Silva
WEC 27**

May 12, 2007

"Just because I get up at 4:00 a.m. to milk cows before I train doesn't mean he can disrespect me like that," says Tom Speer, explaining his ill will toward opponent Sidney Silva.

court. "I'm not sure who was reffing my fight and if he could have jumped in sooner. The round was coming to an end, so [the ref] probably thought nothing was going to happen," he says.

"Razor" Rob McCullough's Viking-like pillage of Olaf Alfonso at WEC 19 is one of the most severe examples of a fight going a few punches too long. McCullough delivered a right hand that knocked Alfonso's mouthpiece into the cheap seats and sent him crashing to the mat unconscious. McCullough then rained down three more pinpoint-



SUSUMU NAGAO / PREVIOUS PAGE DAISY ROSAS/PEK ROSAS PHOTOGRAPHY (5)

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accurate shots to his lights-out opponent before the match was stopped.

On this occasion, MMA was lucky. The beating looked much worse than it was, and there was no malice involved. “Honestly, I never saw the mouth-piece fall out. I saw him hit the ground, and it was [a] split-second reaction,” McCullough says.

Despite this lingering image of brutality, the blows were not as destructive as the casual observer might think. While studies have shown that most professional

boxers (even those without symptoms) have some degree of brain damage, it is a mistake to extrapolate that data to MMA.

The difference between boxing and MMA is the cumulative effects of repeated blows to the head. According to CompuBox and CompuStrike, a professional boxer can absorb as many as 500 punches to the head and body during a fight, which is two and a half times as many strikes landed by both Chuck Liddell and Keith Jardine during their three-round slugfest at UFC 76. Extensive studies have shown how these cumulative effects lead to a progressive loss of brain function among professional boxers. The MMA world took a significant step in preventing this type of injury by deciding not to use the standing eight count, which can allow time for a concussed fighter to recover and continue fighting.

George Lundberg, MD, the editor in chief of *Medscape General Medicine* and a man who once called for a ban on boxing because of the ensuing brain trauma, sees some difference in MMA injuries versus boxing. “The blows, with lighter-weight gloves and sometimes the floor behind the stable head, can cause more facial and hand damage [than boxing], but seem (so far) to cause less brain damage.” His assertion is supported by the *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine*, which conducted a study of 171 professional MMA fights between 2001 and 2004 in Nevada. The study showed the most common injury was facial lacerations, followed by hand and nose injuries. Nowhere in the results was there a case of brain injury, and it even stated that, “extended periods of grappling could serve to lessen the risk of traumatic brain injury.”

Fighters voluntarily enter the arena knowing that injury is possible, and in the case that it happens, is by their own accord. But a contract goes two ways, and responsibility certainly lies with the promoter to take every measure necessary to ensure the athletes walk out as unharmed as possible. A trained referee is the only man who can truly put an end to the suffering and ensure the safety of a downed man.

“I shouldn’t have to go in there worrying about whether or not he’s going to do his job,” says B.J. Penn, who once gave a vicious drubbing to Caol Uno’s propped-up corpse. “He’s the third man in the ring responsible for our safety.”

Fortunately, most MMA referees are now seasoned professionals with honed instincts on when to step in and declare an end to the match. Safety is the cornerstone of any contact sport, and MMA is no exception—especially when it’s scrutinized by opponents who wait like vultures to harp on the perceived brutality of the potentially danger-filled flash point.



Koscheck vs. Sanford
“TUF 1” Finale
April 9, 2005
The well-rounded kickboxing and jiu-jitsu skills of thirtysomething Cesar Gracie disciple Chris Sanford were no match for the relentless world-class wrestling of future superstar Josh Koscheck.



Weekend at Beatdowns

If lifeless bodies impersonating real walking and talking (and fighting) people is your idea of sheer hilarity, check out our picks for the worst single-participant maulings in MMA since the development of Rohypnol.

Gary Goodridge vs. Paul Herrera

UFC 8
February 16, 1996

During an early UFC tournament entitled “David vs. Goliath,” a concept that seems almost grotesque in hindsight, middleweight wrestler Paul Herrera shot in for a takedown on heavyweight Gary Goodridge. Herrera quickly found himself in an unorthodox crucifix hold, having an intimate if one-sided conversation with Goodridge’s elbow. Herrera was out after the second blow, but the audience counting along reached the number eight before the fight was stopped.

Tito Ortiz vs. Evan Tanner

UFC 30
February 23, 2001

The force generated by the collision of two heads is equally as damaging as any punch. After a massive body slam and inadvertent head butt that knocked out Evan Tanner at UFC 30, Tito Ortiz rained down extra blows to serve notice to the light-heavyweight division that he intended to retain his title as UFC champion.

Kevin Randleman vs. Mirko “Cro-Cop” Filipovic

Pride Total Elimination 2004
April 25, 2004

Elite kickboxer Mirko “Cro-Cop” Filipovic felt like he had nothing to fear from the stand-up of wrestler Kevin Randleman—until Randleman uncorked a left hook that dropped the Croatian; a second short left finished it. What followed was Randleman’s impression of a Def Leppard drum solo on Cro-Cop’s face.

Josh Koscheck vs. Chris Sanford

“The Ultimate Fighter, Season 1” Finale
April 9, 2005

After losing to Diego Sanchez and being labeled a one-trick pony during the premiere season of “The Ultimate Fighter,” Josh Koscheck needed to make a statement. Four minutes into the first round, while in Chris Sanford’s half-guard, Koscheck put the cap on with a stiff right hand, and then twisted it tight with four more shots.

Rob McCullough vs. Olaf Alfonso

WEC 19
March 17, 2006

After meeting abruptly with Rob McCullough’s right hand, Olaf Alfonso’s head spun around so violently that he could have been confused with the possessed girl from “The Exorcist.” But it was the three extra shots he absorbed while lying motionless on the canvas—nearly as motionless as the referee—that made this fight feel like a horror movie.