

The Army Needs to Get a Grip On the New Generation

By Kelly Crigger

MIXED MARTIAL ARTS ARE MISSING

Generational differences are germane to human evolution, but the current gap between the Army's leadership and America's youth has never been wider. Despite a clear need for a higher end strength and the Obama administration planning on adding 30,000 more troops, the Army, and the entire DOD for that matter, are passing up a golden opportunity to recruit new soldiers because the leadership simply doesn't understand what attracts young men and women today. One outlet is eluding the upper echelons that could prove to be a recruiting and retention boon that would ease the Adjutant General's woes – mixed martial arts (MMA).

Those unfamiliar with the sport of MMA call it "cage fighting," "ultimate fighting," or "the UFC" (Ultimate Fighting Championship—one of the leading sanctioning bodies). In essence it's a stripped down contest of combat skills to determine the best fighting style based on mixing techniques from across the martial arts spectrum. Bits and pieces of ju

jitsu, judo, muay Thai kickboxing, and wrestling are blended together into hybrid fighting styles to see what works and what does not. It has become the fastest growing sport in America and recently surpassed hockey as the fourth-most popular sport among 18–34 year-olds—the target demographic for new Army recruits.


LIVING DOWN THE STIGMA OF BRUTALITY

In its early days, MMA shot itself in the foot and created a stigma of brutality based on "no holds barred" fights; there were no rules, and the contestants fought bare-knuckled. Even in its sanitized and sanctioned form today, it may not appeal to everyone, but it's wildly popular among Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines. Across Iraq and Afghanistan, military personnel flock in droves to their local TVs to watch the free broadcast of UFC

fights on Armed Forces Network. But there's a clear rift between the younger troops who watch the shows and the older officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) who turn their noses up at it, which is both unfortunate and confusing, considering how similar the two professions are.

ARMY'S MACP

First, a little history on military combatives. In 2004, General Peter Schoomaker, then the Chief of Staff of the Army, decreed that hand-to-hand combatives would henceforth be mandatory training for all sol-



Matt Larsen raises the hand of a victorious fighter at the 2007 Army Combatives tournament. Photo provided by Kelly Crigger.

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diers. That year, the Modern Army Combatives Program was stood up at Fort Benning and a system was put in place to ensure everyone in uniform was trained in order to rid the force of paper lions. An annual combatives tournament was held to identify the best fighters in the Army, which has steadily grown year by year and has been covered by multiple national Internet and TV outlets. Army commanders have gotten behind the MACP program because they all want to boast that they have the best fighters in the Army. Staff Sergeant Tim Kennedy not only won the first three tournaments at 205 pounds, but fought in professional MMA matches where he racked up a basket of wins while representing the Army in a professional manner.

MARINES' MACE

The Marine Corps matched the Army's commitment to individual combatives when it established the Martial Arts Center of Excellence (MACE) School at Quantico in 2004. But the Corps found a golden nugget in MMA that the Army has yet to discover. Beyond the training and competition aspect, the Corps is now discovering a therapeutic side to MMA that helps rehabilitate Marines with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

"Marines are more interested in physical challenges like MMA and traditional martial arts," says Andrea Lucie, an instructor at Camp Lejeune's Semper Fit gym. "They'd rather hit something than talk about how they feel." Marine Lieutenant Lee Stuckey, who suffers from PTSD and has trouble sleeping without a cocktail of medications, agrees. "If I have a hard MMA workout, I don't have to take my meds," he says. "But if I miss a workout then I still have to take them. MMA humbles Marines. It shows them they don't have to be aggressive, that it's okay to admit when you're suffering."

FIGHTING IS PRIMAL

Between these two service-wide programs, it would be easy to get the impression that the Army and Marine Corps have finally embraced a truth that MMA fans have known since 1993 – fighting is a primal part



Spc. Kristin Eden from Bath, Maine (top), uses the mounted position to dominate Staff Sgt. Janelle L. Jackson from Alexandria, Va., during the Army combatives event of the 3rd Sustainment Command (Expeditionary) Sustainer Challenge at Joint Base Balad, Iraq. Eden, who is a member of the 2nd Battalion, 142nd Infantry Regiment, and Jackson, a member of the 398th Combat Service and Support Battalion, competed against each other in the last of seven events where Soldiers test their Army combatives abilities. Photo by Spc. Brian Barbour, 3rd Sustainment Command (Expeditionary)

of all of us. Even the most ardent pacifist has had a physical confrontation at some point in his or her life, and the youth of today are full of fire and brimstone to swing fisticuffs. But the fact of the matter is that probably no two organizations in the world have an interchangeable, yet inharmonious relationship as the military and MMA. When it comes to the sport aspect of fighting, both services quickly balk at the opportunity to use the symbiotic warrior spirit of MMA to further their own interests.

As Staff Sergeant Tim Kennedy's expiration term of service (ETS) approached in August of this year, he was faced with a decision—stay a soldier or compete in MMA full time. There was no way he could do both. Or could he? Kennedy tried desperately to strike a deal with the Army to be a professional fighter while staying on active duty and representing the service, but to no avail. He then approached the National Guard Bureau and made an offer—I'll reenlist as a Guardsman and represent you in MMA venues everywhere. The offer was rejected. Forget the fact that Kennedy sought to be a professional fighter and just think of the individual combatives capability the Guard could have enjoyed with him in its ranks. One has to wonder what the possible draw-

back could be. The National Guard Bureau declined to comment.

IS IT THE COST OR SAFETY FEARS?

Is it the cost? The potential expense of an all-military MMA team blitzing across the country proving the world's best fighters are in uniform would be insignificant compared to the advertising dollars the Army spends on NASCAR alone. In 2007, the Army spent \$17 million to splash black and gold emblems across several racing teams to reach the white, southern, young male adult. Half of that amount could comfortably fund a sport fighting team for five years.

Is it the safety issue? If so, let me dispel any misperceptions about the safety of MMA versus boxing. Boxing is a socially acceptable sport, but through November 2007 had experienced 1,465 deaths in the ring, according to the *Journal of Combative Sport*. In contrast, sanctioned MMA has only had one death in the cage. The length of the matches, the weights of the gloves, the standing eight count, and the inability of the boxer to voluntarily quit when he's hurt (MMA fighters are allowed to "tap out" when they cannot continue) all place boxing's risk at five times greater than MMA's. But the

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objective of boxing (to bludgeon the adversary in the head and body until he can no longer stand) is what really makes it dangerous. The cumulative effect of sustained blows to the head is debilitating, whereas in an MMA fight, not a single punch has to be thrown, since the opponents have the option of taking the fight to the ground and choking their opponent or administering a painful jointlock.

"Boxing is the most dangerous thing we do here," says Modern Army Combatives Director Mat Larsen. "Because of the blunt force trauma applied to the head of an opponent during boxing sparring, we have to be extra cautious."

Larsen's trepidation about boxing is based on firsthand knowledge. The only fatality experienced at Fort Benning's MACP was during a boxing match when Chief Warrant Officer 3 Shawn Benjamin was killed after receiving a knockout punch. "It was a freak accident," says Larsen. "He was just sparring and took a shot to the head at the right angle



Two opponents square off in the second round of the 2007 Army Combatives tournament. Photo provided by Kelly Crigger.

that killed him." Yet despite this warning and the well-documented risks of pure pugilism, the Army sponsors an All-Army boxing team and demands that all cadets at West Point participate in it.


Is there a moral imperative for our military's leadership to object to sport fighting because of its stigma of brutality? That would be monumentally hypocritical, considering the military's mission is to close with and destroy the enemies of the United States. No matter how you look at it, our mission is to fight. Some might find that distasteful, but trying to ignore the fact that there are people who enjoy watching sport fighting would be like suggesting aggression has been bred out of the human race.

Where the military refuses to tread, a veteran-owned apparel company is taking action. Ranger Up, which makes patriotic- and military-themed apparel, has been slowly but surely sponsoring members of the military who harbor octagon dreams by providing them with gear and cash to fight while representing the armed services. But why does it have to be this way? Why is a civilian company doing a job that the military should be doing?


RANGER UP TAKES UP THE SLACK

For Nick Palmisciano, Ranger Up's president, the answer comes


easily and passionately. "We started this company to celebrate the military – to show people just how amazing our troops and veterans are," says Palmisciano. "There is no sport that better shows the world our warrior spirit than MMA, so if our brothers in arms want to compete, we are there to back them up. Watch Tim Kennedy get in the cage. He's not sport fighting like the other competitors. He isn't looking to eke out a decision. He is closing with and destroying the enemy. Then at the end of the bout, he is a perfect gentleman. No smack talk. That's the standard that veterans represent. That's what we want to showcase."

Like our Commander in Chief espouses, we must embrace change when it stares us in the face. Adaptation is one aspect that makes our nation's military the most powerful on the planet, otherwise we'd still be wearing bluecoats and firing muskets. Mixed martial arts might not appeal to everyone in uniform, but it's been proven effective and the youth of America savor it. Let's not do them the disservice of waiting through a generational change before the leadership accepts it. In this day of uncertainty and troop strength increases, the Army leadership should take advantage of anything that sparks their interest in donning a uniform. 

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