

Convergent Sport Culture: Mediating the Game

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Reaching an Untapped Audience: Reality TV and the Ultimate Fighting Championship

Mixed martial arts (MMA) fights were once considered inappropriate for television due to unnecessary violence and unregulated fighting. After adopting stricter rules and following state athletic commission guidelines the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), a MMA promotion company, looked for ways in which to change the perception of the sport and find a larger audience. This was achieved in 2005 through the use of *The Ultimate Fighter*, a reality sports competition series shown on Spike TV, a US cable channel directed towards male audiences. Since MMA fights, and more specifically UFC fights, were only available via pay-per-view or by attending live events, the UFC needed another avenue in which to reach an untapped audience. The solution, *The Ultimate Fighter*, brought together a group of 16 MMA fighters in two weight classes to be divided into two teams and forced to live in one house while fighting for two professional contracts into the UFC. By creating a reality series the UFC produced a promotional tool for itself, its fighters, and the sport in general.

The Ultimate Fighter exploited *The Real World*-type group living situation to showcase the personalities and personal stories of the men participating in the show and combined it with training regimens, team challenges, and individual fights from the professional side of the sport. By blending these two elements the show was able to highlight a sport that had previously been given little positive mass media coverage prior to the inception of the show. Now in its eleventh season, *The Ultimate Fighter* continues to feature established and popular fighters as mentors and coaches, include commentary and reactions from UFC president Dana White (who plays the role of both businessman and MMA fan), and cover the fighters' personal and professional lives. There have been major changes within the show reflecting the growing popularity of the sport and the increasing coverage of MMA fights on cable and broadcast television. The changes include the elimination of team challenges and the inclusion of preliminary fights to secure a place on the show, allowing more time devoted to fights both in the octagon and in the house.

Within the first season the UFC and Spike TV were able to not only air a reality series about a sport deemed too brutal for television, but was able to air a full fight card as the season finale featuring many of the fighters from the first season as well as two popular UFC fighters. With the success of the first season of *The Ultimate Fighter* and the finale featuring a spectacular fight between two contestants for the heavy weight contract Spike TV and the UFC opened the door for another season of *The Ultimate Fighter* and other MMA-related shows. Now there are TV specials focusing on upcoming pay-per-view fights and clip shows featuring the best knockouts and fights from previous years as well as free fight cards produced for Spike TV. The relationship between Spike TV and the UFC has taken away the financial and geographical burdens of previous MMA events by providing the fights on cable as opposed to pay-per-view or attending live. The UFC is not the only MMA promotional company to branch out into television as other MMA-related shows have aired on CBS and NBC, none of which have had the same kind of impact as the UFC and Spike TV relationship.

As I have focused solely on MMA and the UFC's use of a reality series to promote a sport shunned from mass media, there are other sports that have used reality television to promote itself and its participants, some successful, some not so much. Boxing, football, and golf have all used some form of reality television to give amateur athletes the opportunity to become

a professional athlete, or at the very least an opportunity to vie for a professional contract. What makes each of the other sports' reality series (boxing's *The Contender*, football's *4th and Long*, and golf's *The Big Break*) different from *The Ultimate Fighter* is that they are mainstream sports prior to the reality series. The UFC, part of a marginally recognized sport, successfully used a reality series to showcase MMA fights and contracted UFC fighters to significantly boost interest, profits, and legitimacy of the sport. The use of reality television as an avenue for self-promotion may not be new, but the application in the form of *The Ultimate Fighter* is a great example of various forms of media being used to promote a sport traditionally viewed through restricted forms of pay-per-view and live events.