

Friday, December 15, 2006

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I know, I know: you haven't even finished buying presents for your barely tolerated loved ones yet. But since nearly every mixed martial arts outlet — major and minor — will invariably spin their own variation on the theme, I figured I'd at least beat them to the finish line.

Here's a nicely-packaged list of things I'd like to see in 2007; the places, people, and events that would make my year just a little brighter, even if said jolliness comes at the expense of deep-tissue lacerations to other human beings.

More MMA on the east coast, please

Las Vegas is a great city, and I hold no grudge with the UFC preferring to make the fight capital of the world its home base. But a good chunk of the millions of fans who tune into *The Ultimate Fighter* are on the left end of the world — myself

included. I haven't seen any blood splatters in a major arena here since the IFL's inaugural trek to Atlantic City in April.

With 30-plus UFC shows slotted for 2007, and dozens more courtesy of the upstart promotions, I sincerely hope the Boardwalk becomes a regular detour. Better yet, I wish Marc Ratner could work his charms on the ineffable New York Commission, whose sensibilities remain in the Dark Ages.

Remember: pasty, snowbound fans need love, too.

[Cung Le \(Pictures\)](#)'s world tour

It's not blasphemous to say that most fans of MMA enjoy an exciting stand-up display over a plodding, deliberate ground battle. For every mat tussle as exciting as Sanchez-Diaz, there are 10 that feature athletes so comfortable in the guard they might as well start paying rent.

Of the current striking specialists in the sport, [Cung Le \(Pictures\)](#) is quickly emerging as the most kinetic of them all. Granted, he's been facing some powder puffs, but an early test against the durable [Jason Von Flue \(Pictures\)](#) over the weekend ended in Le splitting skin with minutes to spare.

Matched correctly and brought up carefully, Le's acumen on the feet could boost any promotion's profile. Rumors are swirling that he'll appear on February's PRIDE card, which means some pay-per-view exposure. His tenure with the blacked-out Strikeforce would end even better with a pick-up by the UFC, who could create fireworks with Le against [Mike Swick \(Pictures\)](#), [Shonie Carter \(Pictures\)](#), or [David Loiseau \(Pictures\)](#).

Whatever the case, Le's skills belong on a national stage. I hope 2007 gets him there.

Quality, not quantity

Long gone are the days when ardent fans would have to wait three months between anemic UFC pay-per-view offerings. Now you're lucky to let two weeks go by without feeling coerced into feeding cable company coffers.

The problem is, with the crop of me-too promoters springing up, the talent pool is becoming increasingly diluted. Take any random weight class, and it's likely that the three or four most formidable contenders are scattered throughout the world. [Fedor Emelianenko \(Pictures\)](#) could separate himself from PRIDE, which also appears to be losing [Mirko Filipovic \(Pictures\)](#). Meanwhile, [Tim Sylvia \(Pictures\)](#) lurks in the UFC.

[Chuck Liddell \(Pictures\)](#) and [Wanderlei Silva \(Pictures\)](#) are distanced from one another. And [Quinton Jackson \(Pictures\)](#)'s skirmish with the WFA had prevented the one rematch (Liddell-Jackson) that's screaming to happen, though that's been fixed in recent days.

And don't even get me started on [Matt Lindland \(Pictures\)](#).

You can have too much of a good thing. As demonic as it sounds, I'd like to see many of the burgeoning events pushing up daisies by mid-year, if only to facilitate the fights that can currently only be worked out on paper. And for the promotions that remain, fewer cards would be preferred. The "event" feel of many shows is lost when they're on a biweekly schedule. I'd rather see one stacked card in a month than two dilapidated offerings.

The "mainstream" press grows a brain

The latest outlet to regurgitate Zuffa's inexplicable propaganda was *USA Today*, which implied MMA was little more than Thunderdome before the exalted Dana White demanded rules and regulations.

It makes for a good story, but the problem is, it's nowhere close to being true.

New Jersey, with the help of Paul Smith and SEG, laid down the ground rules for modern MMA in 2000. White's repeated claim that the previous owners "ran" from regulation is patently false — and Lorenzo Fertitta should be the first to correct him, as he sat on the Nevada Commission when Bob Meyrowitz was courting their approval in 1999. The flub was even repeated on *60 Minutes*, where White was again saluted for "instituting" a rules sheet.

New Jersey's Nick Lembo has mailed repeated requests for alterations to editors, but most stories have gone uncorrected. What's most disturbing about the company line is that the truth is just as impressive as the illusion: White took a sinking ship, plugged the leaks, and turned it into a sensation. Why that's not good enough is beyond me.

I take that back: the *most* disturbing element of this theme is that respected newspapers apparently have primates for fact checkers. If they're getting this wrong, imagine what else they're feeding you.

The Fight Network, stateside

I've poked gentle fun at Canada in this space. (We kid because we love, eh?) But there's one component of their chilly slice of the Earth that practically makes me seethe with envy: a 24-hour channel devoted to concussions, hematomas, and all manner of wonderful joint injuries.

It's the Fight Network, and they broadcast some ultra-obscure shows that would otherwise leave you at the mercy of some demented bootlegger who promised you "Jungle Fight 2" and wound up mailing you a Beta tape of three *Facts of Life* episodes.

Why isn't it in the States yet? I'm not privy to the cable company wrangling, or how much it costs to port over a brand-new offering: I do know my local Time-Warner outlet has channels devoted to fishing, grainy football games from the late 1800s, and one preoccupied exclusively with a blue screen and a faint buzzing noise. I think there's room.

Here's hoping '07 brings the stream over here.

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