



Story and photos by Todd Hester

Art Davie and Frederico Lapenda

The Men Who Created MMA

THE BEGINNING of *vale tudo* (anything goes) fighting can undoubtedly be credited to Helio and Carlos Gracie in Rio de Janeiro, where Helio took on all comers regardless of time limit, weight or style. While various members of the Gracie family, most notably Rolls Gracie and then Helio's eldest son Rorion, did come to the U.S. to train and teach, it was the business acumen and creative vision of UFC co-founder Art Davie who took the concept of "anything goes" fighting, transformed it into no-holds-barred (NHB), and then laid the foundation of the modern sport of mixed martial arts (MMA) as we know it today.

In the beginning, NHB, as envisioned by Art Davie, was style vs. style with no rules and no time limit. When the difficulty of maintaining that vision in the face of politicians, government regulations, and television demands became impossible he, as UFC Commissioner, was faced with the monumental task of keeping the spirit of NHB alive while molding it into

something politically correct and commercially sustainable. This process, played out over the course of a half decade, would lead to the adoption by all major athletic commissions of 90 percent of Davie's MMA rules.

The Creation of the Ultimate Fighting Championship

Davie's concept for the UFC, as original ideas often do, came from a very unlikely source.

"My company had a client in the beer importing business we did the advertising for," says Davie. "They asked me to develop alternative sponsorship ideas that didn't involve boxing but yet could attract 18-34 males. When I was in the Marine Corps we used to sit around and talk about which martial arts would win if they would actually get into a ring and fight. Could a boxer beat a karate master, could a judo fighter take on a kung-fu expert? So when Tecate asked me for sponsorship ideas that concept immediately popped into my head. My research produced a list of everyone promoting martial arts in America. That is how Gracie jiu-

jitsu came to my attention when I read the Playboy article on them that came out in September of 1989.

So I had a meeting with Rorion Gracie and proposed to him in 1992 that we put on an event called War of the Worlds that would pit martial arts fighters of different styles against each other in a single elimination tournament. I created a business plan and Rorion provided two fighters, Royce and Zane Frazier. Then I went out and got all the other fighters from other styles, including Ken Shamrock, to compete against him. After a lot of brainstorming we eventually called it The Ultimate Fighting Championship but kept the name War of the Worlds, or WOW, for the name of the production company.

I then approached Jay Larkin and Jock McLean of Showtime and also Lou DiBella of HBO about showing it and they both passed. Then SEG caught the vision and became the television partner that produced the first show in Denver in November 1993. It was an immediate hit with more than 86,000 buys and it just stunned the pay-per-view world. Those were incredible numbers in those days and a total surprise to everyone except me. But I just knew it was going to be a hit. I told people that you could turn off the sound and just watch the television and you could tell what the show was about. You could be blind in one eye and deaf in both ears and you would still love the UFC."

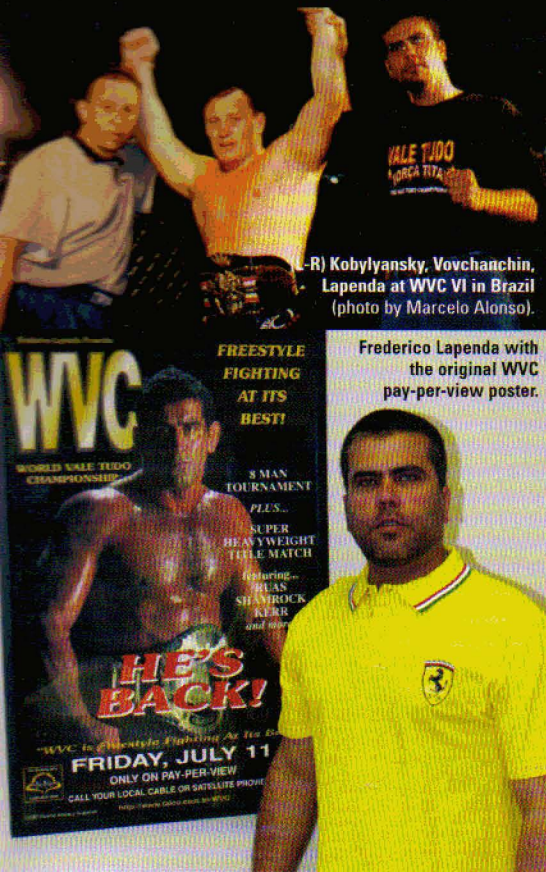
The Birth of the Mixed Martial Arts Style

But while the sport was being created there was another revolution going on: the evolution from style vs. style to the idea of fighter vs. fighter with both men trained in all aspects of combat including grappling, striking, kicking, and submissions. That part of the evolution of the sport would happen in 1995 when Brazilian promoter Frederico Lapenda, transplanted to Los Angeles, was looking to take MMA outside of the U.S. and



Art Davie with Royce Gracie at the UFC II press conference.

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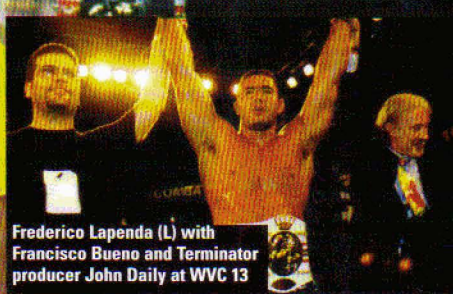


(L-R) Kobylyansky, Vovchanchin, Lapenda at WVC VI in Brazil (photo by Marcelo Alonso).

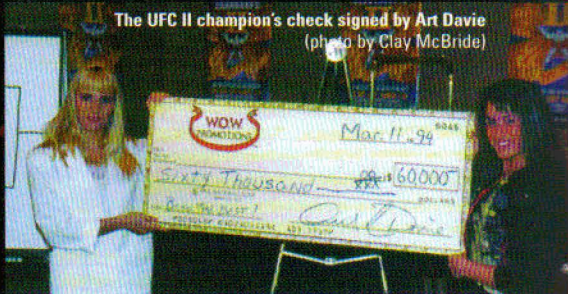
Frederico Lapenda with the original WVC pay-per-view poster.



Frederico Lapenda between Oleg Taktarov and Marco Ruas at WVC Japan (photo by Susumu Nagao)



Frederico Lapenda (L) with Francisco Bueno and Terminator producer John Daily at WVC 13



The UFC II champion's check signed by Art Davie (photo by Clay McBride)

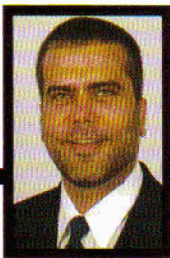
“I decided to create my own event and take it around the world. It had a universal appeal that I knew would transcend all political borders and cross all continents. That first event had an eight men tournament plus a super fight. Among the fighters were three of the six UFC champions including Steve Jenum, Oleg Taktarov and Marco Ruas.” — Frederico Lapenda

to build a star that would attract the followers of all styles. He brought Rio de Janeiro fighter Marco Ruas to the U.S. in UFC VI to be introduced to the crowd and then to fight and win UFC VII. During this time he helped create Ruas Vale Tudo, the prototype MMA cross-training style that is still emulated to this day.

“When I first had the idea of a mixed style, nobody thought it would work,” recalls Lapenda, now the Combat Channel Corporation Chairman and a movie producer at Paradigm Pictures.

(www.paradigmeg.com). “What I saw at the end of UFC V, when Royce and Ken Shamrock drew, was all the other fighters run to Shamrock to celebrate the draw as if they had trained together. That was when I realized that fighters were crossing over into each other’s worlds and would eventually start to cross-train.

So I had the idea of creating the Brazilian Dream Team, which would be all the Brazilian fighters training together in luta livre, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, wrestling, and muay Thai under Carlson Gracie and I actually opened an academy in Los Angeles for Carlson to teach in. Many of the traditional fighters did not agree because they didn’t want to mix their pure art of jiu-jitsu with any other style. But Marco Ruas did agree, even though at the time he didn’t have a formal style that incorporated all the arts. He had done



his own cross-training in luta livre, wrestling, boxing, capoeira, and jiu-jitsu on his own. So we created Ruas Vale Tudo because I was convinced that only fighters who trained this way would be successful in the future. The Brazilian Dream Team eventually became the Brazilian Top Team and was composed of those same people I brought together under Carlson to cross-train. That was the beginning of the modern MMA cross-training style.”

NHB Becomes MMA

One of the biggest complaints about the early UFC, however, was the fact that the no

times limits rule kept pay-per-view unable to schedule the event into predictable time slots. Plus, because there were no weight classes, very talented lighter fighters were unable to compete in the event, limiting its appeal. There were also concerns from athletic commissions about fighter safety. This led Davie to begin to incorporate various rules that would eventually transform no-holds-barred into mixed martial arts.

“The demands of television, pressure from critics and my own hard-won experience in promoting the shows propelled me to adjust and add rules to the contest,” says Davie. “Here’s the key point to remember: I was inventing this sport from the ground up as I went along. This had never been done before and I was experimenting to see what worked. By UFC 5 the process that converted vale tudo to NHB and then to MMA had begun. I added time limits, judges, disqualifications for illegal techniques, weight classes, and gloves. I eliminated head butts, strikes to the head and back of the neck, kicks to a downed opponent, small joint manipulation, pressure-point strikes, and hair pulling.

By UFC 15 the bulk of the changes, 90 percent, were in place to change NHB to MMA. It all came together on October 17, 1997 at UFC 15 when Commissioner Billy Lyons of the Mississippi Boxing Commission officially sanctioned MMA. That was almost two years before the New Jersey State Athletic Control Board sanctioned MMA in Atlantic City and 25 months before SEG took the UFC into their first state sanctioned show in Atlantic City.”

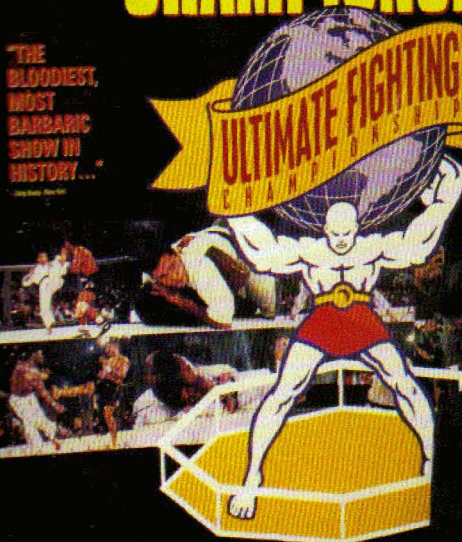
MMA Goes Global

But while Davie was changing NHB in the

THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL EVENT OF THE DECADE!

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UFC creator Art Davie with the original poster from UFC II in 1994.

U.S. and morphing it into MMA, Frederico Lapenda had decided to take the sport global. In 1996, at the age of just 26, Lapenda created his own fighting event, the World Vale Tudo Championship (WVC), which debuted at NK Hall Bay auditorium in Japan to a packed house.

"I decided to create my own event and take it around the world," says Lapenda. "It had a universal appeal that I knew would transcend all political borders and cross all continents. That first event had an eight men tournament plus a super fight. Among the fighters were three of the six UFC champions including Steve Jennum, Oleg Taktarov and Marco Ruas. This was the first time a foreigner would promote a martial arts fight in Japan and also the first time a UFC champion fought in Japan."

But Lapenda soon followed up WVC Japan with even bigger shows. The WVC during the second half of the '90s was the leading international event and created such huge stars as Pedro Rizzo, Mark Kerr, Heath Hearing, Igor Vovchanchin, and others. All of these WVC fighters would go on to fight in either the UFC or for Pride in Japan, which would attract the largest audiences in the world through the foundation laid by Lapenda's WVC Japan.

Not satisfied with running events in Japan and Brazil, Lapenda took MMA to Israel, Russia,

Brazil, Holland, Japan, Aruba, Jamaica, and Ukraine. He also became the first producer to air MMA fighting on cable television in the U.S. in 1999 through his show *Combate Mortale*. Lapenda also broke new ground by co-producing two of the first MMA documentaries, *The Smashing Machine* (HBO) and *Rites of Passage* (PPV), which are still considered the industry gold standard. He introduced pay-per-view to Brazilian television and his WVC Japan was just the fourth MMA show to ever air on US PPV.

Ever the innovator, in 2002 Lapenda became part of Mandalay Entertainment Group as a filmmaker/producer and now hangs his hat at Paradigm Pictures. He has produced four highly-rated programs for TV's Fox Files, including *Russian Night Life* and *Amsterdam: The Red Light District*. In addition he produced *Ultimate Fighting Around the World* and *Underground Fighting in California*. His feature film credits as producer include *Blonde and Blonder*, *Fathers of the Sport*, *Bad Guys*, *Shut Up & Shoot*, and *Nightmare Man*. But MMA is



still not out of Lapenda's blood and he says that his future plans include a theatrical movie on the mixed martial arts world, which is currently in development.

MMA Popularity Will Explode

According to Art Davie, who has seen it all and who started it all, the sport has not yet scratched the surface of its potential popularity. "This isn't the end of the growth of the sport, it's the beginning. An MMA fighter will be on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and the sport will make it to network television in America, as it already does in other countries. We will see the emergence of a real number two brand, a Pepsi to the UFC's Coke. If you look at the PPV numbers, in terms of percentage of households who can get UFC, they are now doing one percent, which is what the old UFC did. So the sport just now has gotten to the point, pay-per-view percentage-wise, where it was 12 years ago. The market penetration will only increase from here. MMA already outdraws boxing on pay-per-view."

For his part, Lapenda agrees with Davie wholeheartedly. "The sport is just getting started and the opportunities right now to get in on

"Those were incredible numbers in those days and a total surprise to everyone except me. But I just knew it was going to be a hit. I told people that you could turn off the sound and just watch the television and you could tell what the show was about. You could be blind in one eye and deaf in both ears and you would still love the UFC." — Art Davie

the ground floor are unlimited. You're going to see some big players get involved and they will make serious money. What other sport in America can an investor build an entire sports franchise for less than 100 million dollars? At this point that's all it would take to enter the MMA world and play. As in all other sports, there will be tremendous new developments in niche markets, fueled by the Internet, that will invigorate the sport and raise it to new heights."

"I'm proud to have started the UFC and created a worldwide phenomenon," adds Davie, "and I look forward to seeing my baby not only walk, but run to the top of the mountain and take its rightful place among the world's top sporting events." □