

By Sally Arsenault

Sally: Why MMA?

Turi: When I graduated from UCLA I thought I would pursue a career in film, specifically in visual effects. I interned and worked for Boss Film, at the time the 3rd largest visual effects studio in the country. My boss (Richard Edlund) was an Academy Award winning visual effects producer who had worked on the Star Wars Trilogy, Raiders of the Lost Ark and Poltergeist (to name a few). Unfortunately, I joined the industry at a time when there were a lot of changes and shifts going on and the studio closed.



Shortly afterwards (early 2000) I had an opportunity to be involved with an MMA show out in the San Jacinto desert, which was King of the Cage (KOTC). I started out at the bottom of the totem pole but I learned everything I needed to know and met everyone I needed to meet and fell in love with the sport. I was familiar with the UFC at the time, but only in a casual way, however, I grew up as a big boxing and pro-wrestling fan and MMA had elements of both and I felt was more exciting than either.

I became fascinated with who the best *fighter* in the world was, not just the best boxer or wrestler. It was an exciting time because all of us were learning as we were going and the folks in the community back then all grew up together in our different ways. Fighters like Rampage Jackson were just starting out at KOTC, the founders of Tapout were there selling t-shirts out of a car, journalists who were writing for small websites would later move on to Sports Illustrated and ESPN, etc. I fell in love with the sport, the community and the business of fighting.

Jay: I came out to SoCal in 1998 to attend USC film school. My lifelong dream was to work in film. Once I graduated and got into the business, of course it turned out to be as tough as I'd envisioned. Tougher, in fact, as it clearly was not conducive to a healthy and happy life. I'd followed the sports entertainment business (pro wrestling and MMA) since I was in high school (particularly pro wrestling), and I was always just as passionate about it as I was with film.

One day, Randy Couture and his manager came into the office where I worked, for a meeting with one of our director clients. I knew who he was, and was in awe of him above and beyond any Hollywood stars I'd ever met. I literally knew then that I'd much prefer to get in at the ground floor of MMA rather than be an irrelevant and abused cog in the larger Hollywood machine. I kept in touch with his manager and ended up working for him a year or two later.

As for what I love about the sport itself, obviously it addresses and honors some of our most carnal and innate traits as human beings. It's probably the most liberal combat sport in that it

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allows you to strike (prohibited in most other grappling sports) and it allows you to clinch, choke, and lock joints (prohibited in most other striking sports). In society's pursuit to become more civilized and intellectual, I think we've made a mistake in neglecting our instincts for activity, competition, risk, and self-defense. Under controlled circumstances (because we obviously we don't want to backtrack in our civility either), MMA addresses and honors those instincts.

Sally: Both of you have had a lot of experience in MMA promotions, why did you choose to start your own company?

Turi: After almost three years with King of the Cage, I joined Japan's PRIDE Fighting (5 years) and EliteXC on Showtime (2 years). I know no other way to do things then to pour your heart and soul into a promotion and I was saddened and disappointed at how PRIDE and Elite both ended. I saw many things done right and many things done wrong. I felt I had mentored enough and it was my time to step up and become a leader. At that time I had no interest in being involved in MMA any longer unless it was on my own terms and realizing that that may never happen working for someone, that's how University of MMA was born. Jay and I started this out of a need to want to do things on our own as well as recognizing a need in the fight community, which was the need for a great amateur level show. But not just an event that has fights. Any promoter can do that. Our events are about a community with the fighters, about offering our experience, guidance, and connections and promoting a show that people are proud to be a part of.

Jay: Turi and I have worked together since 2007, and known each other a little bit longer. When I jumped into the sport and had my first MMA job (working for Randy's manager), I didn't feel like I had anybody I could call a friend. They were all business acquaintances with whom I was friendly, but I was venturing into unknown waters by myself. The timing of Turi and I first working together was perfect, because by that point my first job fell through and I desperately needed a place in the sport to work.



Turi needed someone reliable, trustworthy, and fun to work with. He brought me aboard to PRIDE FC in January 2007 and even though the company was already on the downside by then, we instantly developed a great repoire. Since that time, we've continued our partnership at several different companies, growing our skills and experience as a team. Unfortunately, those other companies didn't grow. They died. Finally, in 2010, when amateur MMA

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became legal and regulated in California, Turi pitched the idea of us starting our own fight promotion. We'd always had very similar visions and philosophies on what it took to run a good promotion, so we decided to take the shot.

Sally: How can a fighter get on one of your cards? What do you look for in a fighter?

Turi: While I'm involved in the matchmaking, this is more Jay's arena.

Jay: In that we're regulated by the California Amateur MMA Organization (CAMO), all fighters have to be fully registered and licensed with them. But we're open to using fighters of all weight classes and experience levels. We're open to using independent fighters to guys/girls from smaller fight teams and onto the bigger, more established gyms. If we can find an evenly-matched opponent for them, we'll do it.

As far as what we look for in a fighter, perhaps the most important qualities are heart and maturity. Sure, skill, strength, speed, and fighting spirit are all important elements to being a great fighter, and we do look to showcase those guys, but at the amateur level, not everybody can be Young Anderson Silva, or Baby Jon Jones. We're looking to build ambassadors of the sport, and so the guy who can work well with us (keeps communication and cooperates with the marketing / matchmaking info we need from him), who trains his ass off, and approaches this opportunity seriously - those are the guys we want to support. And whatever skill or experience level they're at, we're willing to give them opportunities to fight.

Beyond that, when it comes to things that a fighter should keep in mind, besides being a great fighter, they have to always keep in mind their marketability and presence as a public figure. When they step in the cage, they're in the spotlight. All eyes are on them and they have to be able to deal with that. We want someone that's going to fight their heart out, and embrace that moment in the spotlight. That includes the willingness to sell tickets, the comfortability of acknowledging the audience and giving interviews, and leaving it all in the cage, physically and emotionally. The fighters that can meet all those marks are going to be the ones that fans get behind, and for whom the promoters always clamor.



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Sally: Many amateur MMA promoters aren't interested in helping fighters become more marketable. Why do you make the extra effort?

Turi: Because we see things from a different perspective. We've been to the top of the mountain in terms of big professional MMA shows. We know what the big promotions look for because we've been there. Fighters need to stand out and sell themselves. Yes, their abilities and performance in the cage are the priority but how you package that is critical.

Jay: No matter what any amateur MMA promoter thinks, none of their fighters are going to stay with them. Most of them will go pro, and the rest of them will just decide fighting isn't for them. We've got a limited window in which we can be a part of their lives and careers, and if we can instill in them a sense that we helped them learn the intangible elements of being a success in the sport, then hopefully they'll speak well of us in the future. There's little better testimony of a fight promotion than kind words from someone who's gone through your system onto bigger and better things.

Sally: What is involved in matchmaking? Which match-ups have turned out to be the most exciting for you?

Jay: For me, the trick to great matchmaking is to pair up fighters as evenly as possible. And that means taking into consideration every little detail, as much as possible. Ultimately, you're often left to rely on the honesty and accurate assessment of the coach who's pitching a fighter to you, because it can be difficult / impossible to find video on some fighters, but the more that you can process information on a fighter and if you feel you're giving that fighter a match that s/he can realistically win, but they still have to work their ass off for it, the better your chances for a great match.

I think the best matches are the ones where the crowd is going crazy and both fighters look at each other with smiles on their faces, knowing that they both left it all in the cage and they pushed each other to their limits. Those are the win-wins; fighters feel good about their performances, the crowd enjoys a great battle, and I've earned the trust of the fight teams and coaches. When I get that trust, or that crowd reaction, I know that I did a good job with that match.



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Small aside story, but I ended up as the matchmaker kind of ironically. Turi and I were hired to do a King of the Cage show in 2009 in Everett, WA. We already were friends with Matt Hume in Seattle, and so he became our local partner for the show. Matt knew all the local gyms and fight teams far better than Turi or I did, and although Turi officially was the matchmaker on the show, he was dealing with all the venue / marketing / etc. logistics of it. Matt and I ended up doing all the footwork on the actual matchmaking. Later that year, I did the matchmaking for several amateur MMA shows that Matt did under his own banner, Genesis Fights. I really learned my fundamentals of matchmaking from Matt Hume and those shows.

Turi: Yeah, that was the time that Jay and I started gravitating more towards different spectrums and why we complement each other well. Jay focuses on the talent and matchmaking and I focus on the business. We do cross over, it's not exclusive. I certainly feel strongly about certain matches and if we disagree we talk it out. One thing that I thought was always cool was I believe Jay and must have the most gogoplatas in our events as a duo!

Back in the PRIDE days, I put together the Nick Diaz vs. Takanori Gomi bout which led to a Diaz gogoplata:

<http://youtu.be/FR9gpJJ2qTQ>

Then Jay and I worked on a King of the Cage together and Brad Imes submitted Bo Cantrell via gogoplata:

<http://youtu.be/hwe70LV5PwI>

Finally at the U of MMA we had another when Eddie Bravo student Ben Sample locked in the gogoplata:

http://youtu.be/kSNHAC_WgM

In a nutshell, if you like gogoplatas then come to one of our shows.

Sally: What are the most challenging tasks behind the scenes? How long does it take to plan an event?

Turi: We like a good two months. It can be done with more time or even less, but this is a time period that works well in terms of matchmaking and promotion. And both of those happen to be the most challenging tasks. We have to put the matches together, make sure they stick and then do everything we can to make sure the fight community knows we have a great event coming up.

The actual logistics of the event aren't too bad once you get a routine down. I saw my sister arranging her wedding and it occurred to me that arranging an MMA event is very much like arranging a wedding except people punch each other at the end.

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Jay: It's a tough balance to plan an event. So much of it starts with the matches. If we start too early, fight teams usually aren't ready to commit so far ahead. But the later we start, a lot of times fighters are committed to other shows already. We start about two months out, and usually have a full 15-match card one month out.

From there, the toughest challenges become the little disasters and dropouts that happen closer to fight day. Whether it's matches falling apart, problems with the cage, or losing one of our production or announce team, the closer it is to showtime, the tougher it is.

Sally: Why should people attend your events? How can people purchase a pay-per-view?

Jay: We don't do PPV yet, which is ironically one of the best reasons to attend a live U of MMA event. In our region, we put on the best-looking, slickest amateur MMA event around. The fights are always fiercely competitive. Club Nokia at LA Live is clean, sexy, comfortable and in a really exciting part of downtown LA (across from STAPLES Center). Our entire announce team - Sal Arellano, Dawna Gonzalez, Rich Slaton, and Andrew Montanez - is the best at what they do, which helps make our fighters look like stars and makes Turi and I look like great promoters and producers.

The bulk of amateur MMA audiences are friends and family of the fighters, which gives any show a casual, homey sense of grass-roots familiarity. That's great, but our shows are designed to give that fighter a night of feeling special, such that they acknowledge within themselves that they can "make it," and that it's worth the effort to see how far they can take this. I think that the more we demonstrate to the fighters that we take them seriously, the more they'll take themselves seriously.

Turi: Exactly true. But another part of our strategy with U of MMA was to create a live show in which fight fans could see exciting fights in a world class venue and have an outlet when the live fight bug hit and the UFC is not in town. The UFC is in LA maybe once a year and some of the better shows are out at the Indian reservations in the boonies. Believe it or not, LA didn't really have its own MMA show and we feel we cover that need.



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Sally: How many people does it take to run an event? What are some of the positions ie: videographer, ring girl etc?

Turi: I think we have a staff of about 20-30 people. We have photographers, videographers, a video production crew and announce team, cage crew, ring announcer, post-fight interviewer, singer for the national anthem, and 2-4 ring girls.

Jay: Every promotion is different with which show elements they place the most value. But the unsung heroes are those behind-the-scenes guys that set the stage (proverbially and literally): the cage crew, and production / weigh-in team. These guys are often there volunteering because they love the show and they want to be a part of it. Their teamwork and dedication to the show makes everything run whoever smoothly it does. Their contributions can't be overstated.

Sally: How do you advertise? Are your events sponsored?

Jay: Flyers and posters around town are the traditional means of promoting live events like this, be it boxing or MMA, pro or amateur. We also do a lot of social media and online stuff, especially through Facebook (/TheUofMMA) and Twitter (@UofMMA). We've also started an instagram account (@UofMMA).

Turi: We also receive a lot of support from AEG/Club Nokia. Our events have been featured on the STAPLES Center marquee off the 10 and 110 freeways, as well as in signage at LA Live. In terms of sponsors, we have some incredibly supportive partners, like Bodybuilding.com, OTM Fight Shops, and WSS shoe stores, all of which help us with their marketing muscle. We're the only amateur MMA promotion in the country that Bodybuilding.com supports.

Sally: Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

Turi: I'd like to thank my family, friends, and everyone at the University of MMA (gyms, fighters, coaches, staff) for helping to make our events a reality. It's very surreal to go from an idea to



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something tangible and real. I'd also like to thank my professors and classmates at Pepperdine. I just graduated with my MBA and I've received so much support, advice and contacts from the program. This is just the beginning for the U of MMA!

Jay: Becca's (the Editor of Breaking Muscle) nickname down here was 'Bubbles,' and I never bothered to spell her last name correctly. I always thought it looked better spelled my way, rather than hers.

Thank you, Bubbles, for bringing Jay, Turi and I together to help spread the word about the University of MMA!