

Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts

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Most rule sets for mixed martial arts competitions have evolved since the early days of vale tudo. As the knowledge about fighting techniques spread among fighters and spectators, it became clear that the original minimalist rule systems needed to be amended. As rules evolved and regulations added, different branches of mixed martial arts have emerged, with differences between the different rulesets dictating different strategies. Similarly, shoot wrestling organizations, such as Shooto, expanded their rulesets to integrate elements of vale tudo into their sport. However, for the most part, fighters accustomed to one rule set can easily acclimate to a different ruleset, as the basics of fighting remain largely the same.

The most prevalent rule set in the world being used currently is the Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts, adopted by all state athletic commissions in the United States that regulate mixed martial arts and is used most notably in the Ultimate Fighting Championship. The Unified Rules are the de facto rules for mixed martial arts in the United States, and have been adopted by other promotions and jurisdictions worldwide. Other notable sets include Shooto's, which were the first to mandate padded gloves, and PRIDE rules, after PRIDE Fighting Championships, which were also adopted by other promotions worldwide.

Contents

1 Evolution

2 Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts 2.1 Rounds

2.2 Attire

2.3 Judging criteria

2.4 Fouls

2.5 Medical Requirements

2.6 Prohibited Substances

3 PRIDE Fighting Championships (defunct) 3.1 Rounds

3.2 Attire

3.3 Judging criteria

3.4 Legal techniques

3.5 Fouls

3.6 General conduct

3.7 Bushido rules

4 Other mixed martial arts promotions

4.1 Shooto

4.2 ZST

4.3 K-1 Hero's

5 Cage or ring

6 Government regulation

7 References

Evolution

Some main motivations for these rule changes included:

Protection of the health of the fighters: This goal was partially motivated to clear the stigma of "barbaric, no rules, fighting-to-the-death" matches that MMA obtained because of its vale tudo and no holds barred roots. It also helps athletes avoid injuries which would otherwise hamper the training regimens that improve skill and ability and lead to better fights in the future.

Providing spectacle for spectators.

Weight classes emerged when knowledge about submission holds spread. When more fighters became well-versed in submission techniques and avoiding submissions

Head-butts were prohibited because it was a technique that required little effort and could quickly turn the match into a bloody mess. Head-butting was common among wrestlers because their skill in takedowns allowed them to quickly transfer bouts to the ground where they could assault opponents with head-butts while not being required to alter their position.

Small, open-finger gloves were introduced to protect fists in punches while still allowing for effective grappling. Gloves were first mandatory in Japan's Shooto league, but are now mandatory in matches for nearly every promotion. Although some fighters may have well-conditioned fists, others may not. The small bones in an unprotected and unconditioned fist are prone to break when it hits a torso or forehead with power. Gloves also reduce the occurrence of cuts (and stoppages due to cuts) and encourage fighters to use their hands for striking, both of which enable more captivating matches.

Time limits were established to avoid long fights on the ground with little perceivable action. No time limit matches also complicated the airing of live events. Similar motivations produced the "stand up" rule, where the referee can stand fighters up if it is perceived both are resting on the ground or are not advancing toward a dominant position.

In April 2000, the California State Athletic Commission, voted unanimously in favor of regulations that later became the foundation for the Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts. However when the legislation was sent to California's capital for review, it was determined that the sport fell outside the jurisdiction of the CSAC, rendering the vote superfluous.[1]

In September 2000, the New Jersey State Athletic Control Board began to allow mixed martial arts promoters to conduct events in New Jersey. The intent was to allow the NJSACB to observe actual events and gather information to establish a comprehensive set of rules to effectively regulate the sport.[2]

On April 3, 2001, the NJSACB held a meeting to discuss the regulation of mixed martial arts events. This meeting attempted to unify the myriad of rules and regulations which have been utilized by the different

mixed martial arts organizations. At this meeting, the proposed uniform rules were agreed upon by the NJSACB, several other regulatory bodies, numerous promoters of mixed martial arts events and other interested parties in attendance. At the conclusion of the meeting, all parties in attendance were able to agree upon a uniform set of rules to govern the sport of mixed martial arts.[2]

The rules adopted by the NJSACB have become the de facto standard set of rules for professional mixed martial arts across North America. All state, provincial, & municipal athletic commissions that regulate mixed martial arts have assimilated these rules into their existing unarmed combat competition rules and statutes. For a promotion to hold mixed martial arts events in a sanctioned venue, the promotion must abide by the commission's body of rules.

On July 30, 2009, a motion was made at the annual meeting of the Association of Boxing Commissions to adopt these rules as the "Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts". The motion passed unanimously.[3]

Rounds

Every round is 5 minutes in duration with a one minute rest period in-between rounds. Non-title matches must not exceed three rounds (The governing commission can grant dispensation for non-title five round bouts[4][5]). Title matches can be sanctioned for five rounds.[2]

Attire

All competitors must fight in approved shorts, without shoes or any other sort of foot padding. Shirts, gis or long pants (including gi pants) are not allowed. Fighters must use approved light gloves (4-6 ounces) that allow fingers to grab. A mouthguard and protective cup are also required and is checked by a State Athletic Committee official before being allowed to enter the cage/ring.[2]

Judging criteria

The ten-point must system is in effect for all fights. Three judges score each round and the winner of each receives ten points, the loser nine points or less. If the round is even, both fighters receive ten points. In New Jersey, the fewest points a fighter can receive is 7.[2]

Fouls

As set out by the Association of Boxing Commissions:[6]

- Holding or grabbing the fence
- Holding opponent's shorts or gloves
- Butting with the head
- Eye gouging of any kind
- Biting or spitting at an opponent
- Hair pulling
- Fish hooking
- Groin attacks of any kind
- Intentionally placing a finger into any orifice, or into any cut or laceration of your opponent

Downward pointing of elbow strikes (see Elbow strike)
Small joint manipulation
Strikes to the spine or back of the head (see Rabbit punch)
Heel kicks to the kidney
Throat strikes of any kind, including, without limitation, grabbing the trachea
Clawing, pinching, twisting the flesh or grabbing the clavicle
Kicking the head of a grounded opponent
Kneeing the Head of a grounded opponent
Stomping of a grounded fighter
The use of abusive language in fighting area
Any unsportsmanlike conduct that causes an injury to opponent
Attacking an opponent on or during the break
Attacking an opponent who is under the care of the referee
Timidity (avoiding contact, or consistent dropping of mouthpiece, or faking an injury)
Interference from a mixed martial artist's seconds
Throwing an opponent out of the ring or caged area
Flagrant disregard of the referee's instructions
Spiking an opponent to the canvas on his or her head or neck (see Piledriver)
Attacking an opponent after the bell has sounded the end of the period of unarmed combat

When a foul is charged, the referee in their discretion may deduct one or more points as a penalty. If a foul incapacitates a fighter, then the match may end in a disqualification if the foul was intentional, or a no contest if unintentional. If a foul causes a fighter to be unable to continue later in the bout, it ends with a technical decision win to the injured fighter if the injured fighter is ahead on points, otherwise it is a technical draw.

Medical Requirements

Contestants shall complete all pre-licensure medical examinations and tests required by the jurisdiction licensing the contest.

The jurisdiction licensing the contest shall conduct or supervise all pre-contest weigh-ins and may hold or supervise a rules meeting for all contestants and their cornermen.

Post-Contest medical examination. Immediately following a contest, each contestant shall be given a medical examination by a physician appointed by the commission. The medical examination may include any examinations or tests the commission deems necessary to determine the post-contest physical fitness of a contestant.

Any contestant who refuses to submit to a post-contest medical examination shall be immediately suspended for an indefinite period.[7]

Prohibited Substances

Use of Prohibited Substances The use of any illegal drug, narcotic, stimulant, depressant, or analgesic of any description, or alcohol substance, by a contestant either before or during a match, shall result in the immediate disqualification of the contestant from the match and disciplinary action in accordance with the commission licensing the contest.

Detection of Prohibited Substances In order to detect the presence of any prohibited substance, a contestant shall submit to any pre-contest or post-contest urinalysis or other laboratory procedure that is ordered by the physician appointed by the commission. Refusal to submit to such testing shall result in the immediate disqualification of the contestant from the match and an indefinite suspension from the sport of mixed martial arts.

Urinalysis: All contestants may be ordered to complete a pre-contest urinalysis exam to detect the presence of any drug.

In addition to a pre-contest analysis, the local commission may, at its discretion, decide to test for the presence of performance enhancing drugs and thereby require additional urine specimens to be produced at any time after the completion of the contest.

Collection of specimens for urinalysis testing shall be conducted or supervised by a commission official. Refusal to submit to such testing shall result in the immediate disqualification of the contestant from the match and an indefinite suspension from the sport of mixed martial arts.[7]

PRIDE Fighting Championships (defunct)

Historically, PRIDE's rules differed between main PRIDE events and Bushido events.[8] However, it was announced on November 29, 2006, that Bushido events would be discontinued.[9] When holding events in the US, PRIDE abided by the Unified Rules, but added the prohibition against elbows to the head.

Rounds

The first round is ten minutes in duration and the second and third rounds are five minutes in duration. There is a two minute rest period between each round. Grand Prix matches are two rounds in length if more than one round is scheduled on one night.

Attire

PRIDE allowed fighters latitude in their choice of attire but open finger gloves, a mouthguard and a protective cup are mandatory.

Judging criteria

If the match reaches its time limit then the outcome of the bout is determined by the three judges. The fight is scored in its entirety and not round-by-round. After the conclusion of the bout, each judge must decide a winner. Matches cannot end in a draw. A decision is made according to the following criteria in this order of priority:

- 1.the effort made to finish the fight via KO or submission,
- 2.damage given to the opponent,
- 3.standing combinations and ground control,
- 4.takedowns and takedown defense,
- 5.aggressiveness, and
- 6.weight (in the case that the weight difference is 10 kg/22 lb or more).

If a fight is stopped on advice of the ring doctor after an accidental but illegal action, e.g., a clash of heads, and the contest is in its second or third round, the match will be decided by the judges using the same criteria.

Legal techniques

PRIDE allowed the following techniques:

Stomps to a grounded opponent.

Soccer kicks to the head of a grounded opponent.

Knees to the head of a grounded opponent.

Fouls

In addition to the common fouls, PRIDE Fighting Championships considers elbow strikes to the head and face to be fouls.

In the event that a fighter is injured by illegal actions, then at the discretion of the referee and ring doctor, the round is resumed after enough time has been given for the fighter to recover. If the match cannot be continued due to the severity of the injury then the fighter who perpetrated the action will be disqualified.

General conduct

If both fighters are on the verge of falling out of the ring or become entangled in the ropes, the referee will stop the action. The fighters must immediately stop their movements and will then be repositioned in the center of the ring in the same position. Once they are comfortably repositioned, they resume at the referee's instruction.

If fighters commit the following actions, they shall be given a yellow card by officials: Stalling or failure to initiate any offensive attack, making no attempt to finalize the match or damage the opponent, and holding the opponent's body with the arms and legs to produce a stalemate. A yellow card results in a 10% deduction/fine of the fighter's fight purse.

Bushido rules

PRIDE Bushido events instituted distinct variations to the full PRIDE rules:

Bushido bouts consist of two rounds; the first lasting ten minutes and the second lasting five.

Intermissions between each round remain two minutes in length.

In full PRIDE rules, a total of three yellow cards results in a red card (disqualification). In Bushido, yellow cards can be given out in an unlimited number without disqualification.

PRIDE discontinued Bushido events in late-2006 and their rules were last used for lightweight and welterweight fights at PRIDE Shockwave 2006.[9][10] As the lightweight and welterweight divisions will now be on the main PRIDE shows, the rules for the lighter classes are also changing to reflect standard PRIDE rules.[11]

Other mixed martial arts promotions

Shooto

Uses A, B, and C levels. The C level is considered for amateurs only.

Every level has its own rules and restrictions.

The C level rules require headgear to be worn and prohibit striking on the ground.

In case of a knockdown (when any part of a competitor's body touches the mat solely as the result of a strike) the referee will perform a 10-count. The competitor has until the count of 10 to return to a standing position. Three knock downs in a single round will end the bout. There is also a mandatory standing 8-count.

ZST

Uses two 5-minute rounds.

Does not use judges. The fight is declared a draw if there is no KO, TKO, Submission.

Allows elbow and knee strikes only if they are covered by padding.

Does not allow attacking head with strikes when one fighter is in downed position.

K-1 Hero's (defunct)

Uses two 5-minute rounds, with an extra round option should the judges be unable to determine a clear winner of the fight.

Prohibits elbow strikes to the head, kicking by a fighter in the standing position to the face and head of a fighter in the ground position (When both fighters are in the ground position, kicking to the face and head of the opponent fighter is allowed). Knee kicking to the face and head of a fighter in the state of any ground position including 4-point position etc. is also illegal.

Has moved to a tournament format similar to that seen in K-1, with an eight man tournament. However, the final matches are not decided on the same evening, but at later events.

Cage or ring

MMA is often referred to as "cage fighting" in the US as it is associated with the UFC's octagonal caged fighting area. Most major MMA promotions in the US, Canada and Britain use the "cage" as a result of directly evolving from the first UFC events. There are variations on the cage such as replacing the metal fencing with a net, or using a different shape for the area other than an octagon, as the term "The Octagon" is trademarked by the UFC (though the 8-sided shape itself is not trademarked). In Japan, Brazil and some European countries such as the Netherlands an area similar to a standard boxing ring is used, but with tighter ropes and sometimes a barrier underneath the lowest rope to keep grappling athletes from rolling out of the ring. The usage of the ring in these countries is derived from the history of Vale Tudo, Japanese pro-wrestling and other MMA related sports such as kickboxing.

The choice of cage or ring is more than aesthetic however, as it impacts the type of strategies that a fighter can implement. For example, a popular and effective strategy in a cage is to pin an opponent into the area where the fence meets the mat, and then pummel him with strikes. Randy Couture is well known for this tactic. Defensively, the cage is often used as support to fend off take-down attempts, or as a support to get from underneath and opponent (known as "walking up the cage"). These positions are not possible in a roped ring. On the other hand, the roped ring can result in entangled limbs and fighters falling through the ropes, requiring the referee to sometimes stop the fight and reposition the fighters in the center, as well as carrying the possibility for either fighter to sustain an injury. In either a cage or ring, a fighter is not allowed to grab the fence or ropes. Some critics feel that the appearance of fighting in a cage contributes to a negative image of MMA in popular media.

Government regulation

In the U.S., state athletic and boxing commissions have played a crucial role in the introduction of safety rules because they oversee MMA in similar ways as they do for boxing. Small shows usually use more restrictive rules because they have less experienced fighters who are looking to acquire experience and exposure that could ultimately lead them to getting recruited into one of the larger, better paying promotions. In Japan and Europe, there is no regulating authority over MMA competitions, so these organizations have greater freedom in rules development and event structure. In general, a balanced set of rules with some organization-specific variances has been established and is widely used, and major rule changes are unlikely, allowing for fighters in one organization to transition to others easily.

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