

THE SPORT, THE MAN, THE MONEY

FORMER STREET TOUGH DANA WHITE RESCUED THE ULTIMATE FIGHTING CHAMPIONSHIP AND TRANSFORMED THE MIXED MARTIAL ARTS ORGANIZATION INTO THE HOTTEST SPORT IN AMERICA. GET OUT OF HIS WAY BECAUSE HE'S NOT STOPPING NOW. AND BESIDES, YOU JUST MIGHT GET HURT.

BY SEAN HYSON PHOTOGRAPHY BY ART STREIBER

From left to right: Lightweight Tyson Griffin, lightweight Sam Stout, light heavyweight Forrest Griffin, UFC president Dana White, host of UFC All Access Rachelle Leah, light heavyweight Wanderlei Silva





White gives the UFC the same star power as boxing and pro-wrestling. White and Paris Hilton at a 2006 fight (top), and with comedian Joe Rogan at the 2006 Video Game Awards.

Most corporate titans don't look like this. It's hard to picture Donald Trump rolling into a shareholder meeting sporting a fresh shiner from one of his employees. And you definitely won't see Warren Buffett tossing up 300 pounds on the bench press. Thirty-eight-year-old Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) president Dana White may now have the boardroom cred of other business bigwigs, but with his round-shouldered build and two faint but permanent red lines along the edges of his nose (courtesy of a sparring partner), he mostly resembles just another fighter. And that's perfectly fine with him.

Indeed, White's tenure as the guiding force behind the rise of the UFC as the newest "fastest-growing sport in America" is best described as a knock-down, drag-out brawl in which he's now the undisputed champion. Nearly worthless and tainted by controversy less than a decade ago (the sport was not sanctioned by most states), White has helped elevate mixed martial arts (MMA) into the mainstream and transformed the UFC, the first MMA organization, into the biggest—and most surprising—success story in sports. Acquired in 2001 for \$2 million by White and other investors, the UFC now fills arenas in North America and Europe, produces a hit cable series (Spike TV's *The Ultimate Fighter*) and has smashed the all-time pay-per-view record. In 2006, the

UFC generated more than \$200 million in pay-per-view revenue, outperforming boxing and pro wrestling. Last year, *Time* magazine estimated the UFC's value to be over \$1 billion.

What was once a fringe, dark-alley sport—infamously described as “human cockfighting” by Sen. John McCain, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee—is now as Middle American as it gets. In February, the UFC secured a multi-million-dollar sponsorship deal with beer giant Anheuser-Busch that in May placed the Bud Light logo on the floor of the sport's unique Octagon fighting ring. And don't be surprised if White lands a major-network television deal soon, perhaps even before you read this article.

A former working-class tough in South Boston who bolted town to elude extortion from the Mob, White may not yet be among the pantheon of sports' most powerful commissioners and executives. But he's right outside their door and he's got a couple of badasses with him. In fact, Dana White just may be the *next* most powerful guy in sports.

It's been an unlikely journey for the unlikely sports mogul. At 18, after living in numerous cities, White, an amateur boxer and lifelong martial arts aficionado, settled in “Southie,” where he didn't mind proving himself regularly in bar and street fights. He worked as a bouncer and later as a bellman at the Boston Harbor Hotel. While the hotel job paid the bills, it also stood in the way of White's true passion: boxing. “He's always been very tough,” says Joe Cavallaro, a former boxer and friend of White's from the hotel, and now the owner of MMA promotion World Championship Fighting. “I think Dana could have fought

pro. He was thin back then, but with big, big arms and big shoulders. He's got a real nice jab, and there's nothing you're gonna do to out-gut him.”

In time, White ran an inner-city boxing gym and started a box-aerobics enterprise akin to what Tae Bo would become in the late 1990s. This caught the attention of the Irish mob, which pressured him to offer them a cut of the action. White chose instead to return to Las Vegas, where he had spent several of his high school years. There, he opened boxing gyms and began managing fighters. He also became reacquainted with former classmate and multimillionaire Lorenzo Fertitta, a casino owner who was serving on the Nevada state boxing commission. The two, along with Fertitta's brother, Frank, discussed starting their own boxing promotion company. However, a chance meeting at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino changed their course. Long interested in learning submission fighting—precision chokes and joint locks that force an opponent to give in—the trio ran into then-UFC fighter John Lewis, who agreed to teach them Brazilian jiu-jitsu, the style that had been the dominant force in the league's early events. Finding the training addictive and the fledgling sport of mixed-martial arts fascinating, the three began brainstorming ways to promote it. Soon, White signed on to manage relatively unknown UFC fighters Tito Ortiz and Chuck Liddell, both of whom had approached him after seeing his success managing boxers.

While White was mesmerized by the

UFC BY THE NUMBERS

Most-watched pay-per-view event: **UFC 66: Liddell vs. Ortiz 2**
(1, 050,000 estimated buys)

Most-watched Spike TV fight:
UFC 75: Champion vs. Champion
(4.7 million viewers)

Highest fight attendance:
UFC 83: Serra vs. St. Pierre (22,000)

The Ultimate Fighter season 7 premiere: (1.3 million viewers)

athleticism and conditioning of the UFC's athletes, his passion for the sport wasn't shared by government officials and television executives, who deemed it too fringe, too controversial, too free-for-all, and no-holds-barred. Unlike boxing, there had been no fatalities in UFC events (a stat that

remains today), but all major state athletic commissions refused to sanction it, forcing events overseas or to remote sports locales like Mississippi and South Dakota. By 2000, the sport had been banned from pay-per-view by most cable companies. “I thought the UFC had the potential to be big,” White says. “But at that point, it was completely dead. We went to fights and there would be maybe 1,500 people there.”

With the UFC facing extinction, the organization's original owners, Semaphore Entertainment Group, put it up for sale. White persuaded the Fertitta brothers to buy the UFC, with White serving as the new president and having a 10% stake. A turnaround was born.

White's first priority was to get his events approved nationwide. To do that, he knew he had to clean up the UFC's image. The previous owners had banned groin shots, head butts, and other dirty techniques, but it wasn't enough. In an attempt to get sanctioned in Nevada and New Jersey, White and the state athletic commissions made additional rule changes that emphasized fighter safety and encouraged more action. Kicking a downed opponent in the head was disallowed, along with strikes to the spine and back of the head. Strict medical exams for the fighters were also mandated.

Restructuring the sport was meaningless, however, if no one could watch it, so White set up meetings with cable companies where he negotiated getting the UFC back on pay-per-view. He even brought a posse of fighters along to meetings to trumpet the UFC's appeal. “There are all these misconceptions not only about the sport, but about the people who compete in it,” says White. “And the best way to squash that is to walk in the door with the fight-

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ers and introduce them to people so they can see how intelligent and well-spoken they are. Eighty-five percent of these guys graduated college. The fighters themselves have been some of our best salespeople.”

White also changed the way the sport was marketed. The early UFC boasted: “There Are No Rules!” and pushed the fights as modern-day Thunderdome brawls. White abandoned that approach, playing up the fighters’ athleticism and personalities. He changed the slogan to “As Real As It Gets,” implying that the nature of the fights was as close to a real-life beatdown as the law would allow. In interviews, White decried boxing as “your father’s combat sport,” offering MMA as the more exciting alternative. “Dana had a vision to make this sport respectable to the average Joe,” says MMA trainer Mark DellaGrotte. “You went from seeing T-shirts that had bloodstains and words like ‘kill em’ to lines like Affliction [a popular clothing line now closely associated with MMA] that are sold in Nordstrom.”

Recognizing the sport’s appeal to young males, White bought ads in *Maxim* and *Sports Illustrated* and arranged for fighters to appear on TV programs like Fox’s *The Best Damn Sports Show Period*. But it was the 2004 deal with Spike TV that vaulted the UFC into the mainstream. During an all-night brainstorming session, White anted up \$10 million to produce an entire season of *The Ultimate Fighter*. Now in its seventh season, the show about aspiring UFC fighters living and training together is the network’s most successful program. “That was a landmark moment for the sport,” say Scott Wapner, a CNBC business reporter. “It introduced the personalities of the fighters to the public and showed that they were legitimate athletes with a real skill.” The series now gets two million viewers per week.

Finally, White worked to revamp the at-the-fight experience for fans, keeping a tight grip on all aspects of the **(cont. on page 176)**

Before he knew mixed martial arts, White used to think any boxer could knock an MMA fighter out. That opinion changed very quickly.



**“EVERYBODY KNOWS
THAT UFC FIGHTERS
ARE THE BEST”**

Train like an MMA fighter with the UFC Workout II, on page 121.

DANA WHITE'S WORKOUT

HOW THE UFC PRESIDENT KEEPS HIS EDGE

Before preparing for our cover shoot, White weighed 217 pounds. By cycling his carb intake and intensifying his workouts, he dropped over 20 pounds in four weeks, weighing in at 196 on the day of the shoot.

“I’m glad *Men’s Fitness* came along,” he



says. "I need a reason to work out. I've been boxing my whole life, so I get bored with it sometimes. When I get bored of boxing, I'll get more into lifting weights. We're trying to get my bench to 315 now." **RING CIRCLES:** Skips laterally around a

boxing ring for a few minutes to warm up.

SHADOWBOXING: Three rounds.

PAD WORK: Throws punch combinations on focus mitts for four to six rounds.

MILE RUN: White runs on the treadmill.

JUMP ROPE: Nine minutes.

WEIGHT TRAINING: White focuses on chest, shoulders, and triceps one day, then back, legs, and biceps another, alternating heavy and light days. "Chest day takes a long time," he says. "We're big into fuckin' benching." [Laughs].

For more about Dana White's training and diet, go to mensfitness.com/danawhite