“THE UFC IS SELLING WOLF TICKETS”

Sport and Fiction in the Ultimate Fighting Championship

Bart Beaty

You told the fans that I deserve to get beat down, that I chased you around. I got the fight, right? I’m working towards something, everybody knows that. Sorry I had to [say you were scared] to get the fight. They’re selling you all wolf tickets people, you’re eating them right up. Georges here is selling wolf tickets. Dana here is selling wolf tickets. The UFC is selling wolf tickets. You guys are eating them right up.

Nick Diaz, 14 March 2013

Speaking to reporters at the press conference to promote UFC 158 in Montréal, welterweight title contender Nick Diaz claimed that Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) promoter Dana White and welterweight champion Georges St-Pierre had engaged in a conspiracy to deceive the public into purchasing a pay-per-view fight card on the basis of a lie.1 Diaz, using a slang expression that refers to the practice of threatening someone in a boastful manner, accused UFC management of marketing a fake feud between the two welterweights. Specifically, Diaz objected to the fact that the UFC had used an ominous and darkly lit photo of him on the fight posters to make him look more thuggish; that St-Pierre had repeatedly claimed that it was his intention to “retire” Diaz during the fight; and that Diaz had been consistently portrayed as a villain in the promotion of his fight because he had...
skipped previous press conferences and public workouts and had failed a drug test following his loss to Carlos Condit at UFC 143 (4 February 2012). Diaz’s claims were unusual in the realm of fight promotion for a number of reasons, but two are particularly notable.

First, given that Diaz received a pay-per-view percentage bonus for his title fight with St-Pierre, his efforts to discourage fans from purchasing the fight would financially hurt both him and his employer. Indeed, his effort to minimize interest in the main event of a combat sport during the final days of hype may well be unprecedented. Second, Diaz was arguably only in the position of fighting for the title because he himself had engaged in the kind of “wolfing” that he was now decrying. Diaz had been originally scheduled to fight St-Pierre at UFC 137 (29 October 2011), but that fight fell apart when he failed to make a number of media appearances and when St-Pierre was forced to undergo arthroscopic knee surgery. Following his victory over former lightweight title holder B. J. Penn at UFC 137, Diaz claimed in a post-fight interview, “I don’t think Georges is hurt, I think he’s scared,” a comment that caused the fans to boo him, which positioned him as the villain in the inevitable clash between the two fighters.

Diaz’s commentary leading to UFC 158 was at times confusing and contradictory, but more importantly, it points to the central tension that has surrounded the emergence of the UFC as a dominant sports brand. With its origins in boxing, amateur and professional wrestling, Brazilian jiu jitsu, and toughman competitions, the history of mixed martial arts is checkered and convoluted. Nonetheless, mixed martial arts—a sport that relies heavily, nearly exclusively, on the ability to promote fights that the public will buy on pay-per-view television—has come to be understood as a hybrid of sport and entertainment. In the simplest terms, the UFC, as the largest and most visible brand in mixed martial arts, is torn between a “pure sports” logic and the desire to put on entertaining fights.

A pure sports logic is one in which the central integrity of a sport or sporting event remains completely untainted by commercial concerns. It is exemplified by the rhetoric of amateurism that surrounded the Olympic Games through the first half of the twentieth century. At its ideal, a pure sports logic would insist that a combat sport has a champion in a particular weight class and contenders who are ranked according to who defeated whom, with the ultimate goal being the matching up of a champion and an undisputed number one contender (who is classified as such by the fact that he has defeated some combination of the fighters ranked lower than himself). Fundamentally, this is how the major professional sports in North America seek to operate: title games such as the NFL’s Super Bowl.
are contested by the teams that have “earned” the right to contend for the championship by defeating other teams. In the case of football, although a single game elimination format can be criticized for not producing the “best” result (as when a team with a superior record during the regular season is upset by a lower-ranked team), there is no suggestion that the NFL has worked to orchestrate particular results or favoured more popular teams.

The logic of sports entertainment, however, is one in which schedules are shaped or bouts promoted on the basis of objectives other than determining the best team or athlete. Certainly, the logic of entertainment factors into the major professional sports: the use of divisions in professional sports is intended to enhance regional rivalries even though it can unbalance the schedule (in cases where certain divisions are clearly more competitive than are others). Major League Baseball was particularly embroiled in the logic of sports entertainment when it would schedule interleague games to showcase rivals like the New York Yankees and Mets or the Toronto Blue Jays and Montreal Expos without regard to notions of scheduling equity.

In the UFC, an entertainment logic particularly predominates in two types of cases: first, when winners of “boring” fights are not promoted to title fights or are even released from their contracts in favour of less talented but more exciting fighters, and, second, when fighters are given title shots or allowed to headline major shows even though they have not earned that right according to the logic of pure sports. In the case of Nick Diaz’s title shot, both factors seemed to be in play. Diaz is an unusual personality whose boxing style favours exciting knockouts, but he “earned” his title shot at St-Pierre only after losing to the former number one contender, Carlos Condit.

BETWEEN SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT: THE ORIGINS OF THE ULTIMATE FIGHTING CHAMPIONSHIP

While mixed martial arts has a number of important forerunners and influences in terms of its development as a sport, the most important of these is, ironically, not a sport at all: professional wrestling. Amateur and Olympic-style wrestling trace their histories back to ancient Greece and Rome, while professional wrestling—which features travelling performers in staged matches—began as a form of circus entertainment in the United States in the decades immediately following the conclusion of the Civil War. Professional wrestling has had a substantial fan following since at least the 1880s. In the early days of live television broadcasting, professional wrestling was a leading attraction because it ran weekly and the action could be filmed
easily by a single camera. Television’s influence augmented the already outlandish characterizations that were common in professional wrestling, with promoters establishing clear heroes and villains and then engaging them in convoluted feuds involving battles for honour and respect that took on an increasingly melodramatic tone, especially as they could be serialized to build televisual suspense. By the mid-1980s, when much of the American professional wrestling industry had been consolidated under the control of Vince McMahon’s World Wrestling Federation, the business model included the promotion of grudges between tough-talking bodybuilders who were engaged in long-running soap-operatic narratives. Significantly, in professional wrestling, actual fighting skills are almost irrelevant since the matches are predetermined (or “worked”) and the intention is not to injure one’s opponent but to perform a show that can be repeated nightly in different cities. The key drawing cards for professional wrestling, therefore, are clearly the charisma of a performer and his ability to talk a crowd into a buying a ticket or a pay-per-view. The history of professional wrestling in the United States is filled with headliners like Hulk Hogan, Ric Flair, “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, and the Rock, who made millions through a combination of televisial charisma and the ability to sell tickets by cutting promos where they would trash-talk about their opponents (often good friends of theirs) and suggest personal feuds where none actually existed. The WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment, as McMahon’s company has been known since 2002) is the pinnacle of sports entertainment and has, for the better part of the past decade, referred to its performers on air not as wrestlers but as “sports entertainers” and “superstars.”

For much of the twentieth century, the primary rival to professional wrestling, and by far the dominant combat sport in the world, was professional boxing. While boxing differs from professional wrestling in that its outcomes are not predetermined (at least not explicitly, although the history of boxing is rife with stories of fights fixed by promoters and gamblers), it is extremely similar insofar as its greatest successes have been tied to charisma and the ability to sell fights to fans through interviews. Certainly, the strongest example of this tendency is Muhammad Ali, whose combination of boxing skill, personal charisma, and a way with words helped turn his self-declared status as the “greatest of all time” into a truism. Ali, who largely cribbed his interview style from Los Angeles-area professional wrestlers like “Classy” Freddie Blassie, is perhaps the best exemplar of the maxim that personalities sell fights.

Indeed, the relative decline of professional boxing over the course of the past two decades can be blamed in part on the decline of the pure sports element of
ranking and competition, with the various promoting organizations sometimes thwarting a “true” ranking across weight classes, and on the decreasing number of boxers with outsized personalities whom the public will pay to see fight (today, limited essentially to Floyd Mayweather, Oscar De La Hoya, Manny Pacquiao, and a very few others). For the most part, boxing has thrived when its champions and challengers have been larger-than-life personalities like Mike Tyson, and it has suffered when those fighters have been less charismatic and telegenic, like Vladimir Klitschko. Indeed, Klitschko, who has been a dominant champion with fourteen successful title defences (the third-most in heavyweight boxing history) and has had fifty career wins by knock-out, has been something of a warning to the UFC: better to promote a less talented fighter with a bigger personality than to go with the outstanding athlete whom the public finds uninteresting.

Both professional wrestling and professional boxing provided important business models for the UFC, particularly given their reliance on pay-per-view revenues as their dominant economic drivers. Yet although it originated initially as a one-night-only pay-per-view event, stylistically and formally, the UFC had a greater reliance on Brazilian jiu jitsu (BJJ) than it did on boxing or wrestling. A derivative of judo, BJJ has its origins in 1910s Brazil. Extensively developed by Carlos and Helio Gracie (and later by their sons), BJJ is a combat and self-defence system emphasizing ground fighting rather than striking. In particular, BJJ masters taught that a smaller man could defeat a larger man in combat through the use of joint locks, grappling, and chokeholds achieved through superior balance and leverage. Helio Gracie made his reputation in Brazil as a professional fighter in the 1930s, defeating a professional boxer in thirty seconds and fighting and defeating many trained judo fighters who were significantly larger than he was. Gracie’s fame allowed him to earn a living training students in the practice of BJJ, a skill that he also passed on to his seven sons, including Royce Gracie, the winner of the first UFC event.

The first UFC show, held in Denver on 12 November 1993 and broadcast on pay-per-view, was promoted by Art Davie, filmmaker John Milius (a Gracie student), and Rorion Gracie (one of Helio Gracie’s sons). The intention was not to create a new sport but to demonstrate the superiority of Gracie jiu jitsu to other combat disciplines. The question of the superiority of various fighting forms—judo, tae kwon do, jiu jitsu, boxing—had been a source of debate and speculation in gyms and dojos for some time. The Gracies felt that by having Royce Gracie win an eight-man single-elimination one-night fighting tournament as the smallest entrant, the question would be settled once and for all, leading to a growth in their training.
system in the United States. UFC 1 featured fighters from varying disciplines: two kickboxers and one representative each of savate, karate, sumo, boxing, shootfighting, and Brazilian jiu jitsu. As predicted by the promoters, Royce Gracie was victorious, defeating boxer Art Jimmerson, shootfighter Ken Shamrock, and savate fighter Gerard Gordeau. The success of the first event led the promoter, Semaphore Entertainment Group, to run additional events with the same format. The organization lacked weight classes and featured weight mismatches of up to three hundred pounds when sumo wrestling was introduced as a discipline. Royce Gracie won three of the first five events and fought Ken Shamrock to a draw in the championship bout on another. After five pay-per-views and the draw with Shamrock, the Gracie family withdrew their support from UFC, arguing that the introduction of rules, including time limits, mitigated against their vision of the sport (although cynics note that the family withdrew at exactly the same time that the rest of the fighters began to understand and counter jiu jitsu techniques).

The evolution of the UFC from a one-night spectacle toward a legitimate sporting event happened gradually and involved the adoption of unified mixed martial arts rules and sanctioning from state and provincial athletic commissions. While the advertising slogan for the first UFC event was “There Are No Rules!” the organization did in fact ban biting and eye-gouging from the start. In UFC 5, time limits were introduced; these were gradually revised to the current system of five-minute rounds and a ten-point scoring system borrowed from boxing. UFC 12 introduced weight classes (heavyweight and lightweight) for the first time, and UFC 15 placed limits on head butts, groin strikes, kicks to downed opponents, and elbows to the back of the head. UFC 28 was the first event sanctioned by an athletic commission (New Jersey) and run under what are now known as the Unified Rules of Mixed Martial Arts. In the events that followed, several new weight classes were introduced. (The UFC currently has championship titles in eight weight classes, from flyweight to heavyweight.) Each of these changes moved the organization more closely to the pure sport ideal. In particular, the use of third-party government-sanctioned athletic commissions to authorize bouts, conduct tests for performance-enhancing drugs, and impose penalties and sanctions has helped to bring credibility to a sport that was once termed “human cockfighting” by Arizona senator John McCain.

Public condemnation from McCain and others exerted enormous pressure on the UFC, which has evolved to be the dominant company in the sport of mixed martial arts. After McCain wrote to governors asking them to ban the sport in 1999, thirty-six states did so. The UFC was dropped by most cable systems and lost
its home video distribution network. Reduced to running small venues in mostly southern states and without significant pay-per-view or video revenue, Semaphore SEG agreed to sell UFC to Station Casinos owners Frank and Lorenzo Fertitta and promoter Dana White in 2001 for $2 million. Lorenzo Fertitta, a former member of the Nevada State Athletic Commission, secured sanctioning for the organization in that state, and UFC returned to pay-per-view with UFC 33. UFC struck a television deal with Fox Sports Net, which aired the first mixed martial arts match on American cable television in 2002 and later aired footage of some of UFC’s previous bouts. With sanctioning from the state of Nevada, an increasing number of states undid their previous bans on mixed martial arts. With the support of Fox Sports Net the UFC began the push toward mainstream sports credibility. On the verge of becoming a legitimate sport, its breakthrough stemmed from its ability to channel older boxing and professional wrestling tropes by promoting grudge matches between fighters whom the public believed legitimately had interpersonal issues. The breakthrough offered by UFC promoter Dana White, a former boxing manager, was the realization that the “pure sports” logic of boxing had been undermined by the proliferation of organizations and that the “sports entertainment” model of Vince McMahon’s WWE was inherently limited by its lowbrow associations and its status as a “fake” soap opera for working-class males. By presenting UFC as something of a hybrid of the two models, UFC would have the best of both worlds if it could find a way to bring its product to an audience.

**Good Guys Versus Bad Guys: Celebrity in the UFC**

UFC 5 introduced its first non-tournament “superfight” (Gracie vs. Shamrock) to crown a champion, and singles fights would eventually replace the tournament format altogether. With the establishment of champions in various weight classes, the UFC moved closer toward a logic of pure sports, but ironically, it also heightened its focus on the entertainment aspect of the promotion by gearing its fighters toward potential “grudge matches.” Arguably, the most important of these in the post-SEG period was the main event of UFC 40 (22 November 2002), which featured a light heavyweight title fight between Ken Shamrock (the UFC’s first champion, returning to the promotion for the first time since leaving to pursue professional wrestling with the WWF) and champion Tito Ortiz, who had a bad boy reputation and who had shown disrespect toward and had feuded with a number of Shamrock’s training partners since 1999. The ensuing bout drew 150,000 pay-per-view buys, more than triple the company’s average at the time, and helped turn
the company around, since the event was given mainstream sports media coverage in venues including USA Today and ESPN. Significantly, the success of Shamrock vs. Ortiz demonstrated to the UFC that the avenue to success lay in the ability to convince the public not only that the fights were significant in terms of winners and losers moving up or down the card toward a title fight but also that they involved competitors with deep emotional investment in the outcome. Shamrock used the talking skills that he had developed in professional wrestling to convince the public that he truly hated Ortiz. In short, the main event of UFC 40 was a professional wrestling match in which the outcome was not predetermined by the promoter.

Despite the success of Shamrock vs. Ortiz and several other well-promoted fights, the UFC continued to struggle. The turning point for the company was in 2005 with the development of a reality TV series, The Ultimate Fighter, which it produced itself and then sold to Spike TV, a cable channel whose audience was heavily skewed toward young men. Airing after WWE Monday Night Raw, the world’s flagship professional wrestling program, The Ultimate Fighter brought sixteen fighters in two weight classes to a communal house in Las Vegas. The fighters were divided into two teams, coached by light heavyweight champion Randy Couture and the challenger for his title at UFC 52, Chuck Liddell. The goal of The Ultimate Fighter was to introduce the public to the sport of mixed martial arts by combining it with the popular reality TV show competition format in which contestants are “voted off” the show. The twist, however, was that the competitors would not be voted off but would be eliminated by losing a fight to an opponent from the other team. In this way, The Ultimate Fighter revived the single-elimination tournament format of the UFC’s earliest events (although spaced over a period of weeks rather than taking place on a single night). A secondary goal of the program was to promote UFC 52 by highlighting the rivalry between coaches Couture and Liddell, as well as the charismatic leadership of Dana White, who served as host. Finally, the third goal was to find and develop potential new fighters, based as much on their personalities as on their skills.

Keeping a large percentage of the professional wrestling audience that led into it, The Ultimate Fighter was successful from the start but became a sensation with the fifth episode (14 February 2005). This episode followed the repercussions of a decision by White, the host of the show, to allow the fighters to have a night off at the Hard Rock Cafe in Las Vegas. Returning to the house drunk, the fighters began to provoke each other. When a fighter named Chris Leben opted to sleep on the lawn rather than share the house with the other contestants, two members of the opposing team (Josh Koscheck and Bobby Southworth) turned a garden
hose on him while he slept. When the deeply inebriated Leben awoke, he went on
a rampage looking for the perpetrators, which included smashing several doors.
Determining that all parties were to blame for the situation, White ruled that Leben
and Koscheck would fight and that the loser would leave the house. The episode
ended with the cliffhanger of the fight being announced.

The episode, with its melodramatic moments of clear villainy and drunken
heroism, sparked word-of-mouth interest in the show, with repeat airings achieving
increasing ratings. A classic professional wrestling storyline created by happen-
stance and advantageous editing, the episode created the ultimate mixed martial
arts grudge match. The fight between Koscheck and Leben was the high point of
the regular season run, despite the fact that it was a weak and uninspired match
in which the villainous Koscheck held his opponent down for three rounds, doing
little actual damage. Nonetheless, the fight did help lay a foundation for two other
events: UFC 52, featuring the coaches fighting for the light heavyweight title, and
The Ultimate Fighter finale on Spike TV the week before, which featured the finals
of the tournament.

The Ultimate Fighter finale (9 April 2005) centred on two tournament finals. In
the first, Diego Sanchez, a technically advanced but charisma-challenged middle-
weight, defeated fan favourite Kenny Florian by technical knockout in the first
round to win a UFC contract guaranteed at $100,000. It was the main event, how-
ever, that changed the sport forever. In that light heavyweight match, Forrest Griffin
defeated Stephan Bonnar by unanimous decision, with all three judges scoring the
extremely close bout 29:28. What was remarkable about the fight was not only the
obvious camaraderie and respect the two fighters had for each other based on their
experiences training alongside each other but also the punishment inflicted by
each fighter on the other as the two adopted an unreserved brawling style that in
the later rounds largely amounted to each trying to land a knock-out punch while
doing little to defend himself. Significantly, the ratings for the fight rose during
every minute of the match, indicative of the fact that word of the spectacle was
spreading quickly across the Internet and social networks. Widely considered the
most important fight in UFC history, Griffin vs. Bonnar was the most watched
mixed martial arts match to that time and, because of the stakes of the contest,
arguably the most exciting. Thanks to a near-perfect combination of athleticism
and melodrama, the match turned both Griffin and Bonnar into folk heroes in the
sport, gained them tremendous fan followings, and sold the sport to the public as a
thrilling spectacle in a way that no other fight ever had. Based on the success of this
event, and because of their own star power, UFC 52, the week following, became
the highest-grossing event in the history of the UFC, drawing more than 300,000 pay-per-view buys, doubling the previous record. The rematch between coaches Couture and Liddell at UFC 57 raised the number to 410,000.

Having found the formula for success, the UFC began an exponential growth period between 2006 and 2010. The return of Royce Gracie and a rematch between Shamrock and Ortiz drew 620,000 and 775,000 buys, respectively. Ortiz vs. light heavyweight champion Liddell at UFC 66 was the first event to break one million buys. At this time, the UFC began to buy out a number of its rival organizations, consolidating itself as the industry leader in mixed martial arts, and Sports Illustrated ran its first cover feature on the sport in May 2007. By 2009, the company would do 1.7 million pay-per-view buys for UFC 100 (11 July 2009), a supercard featuring a title fight between Brock Lesnar, a former WWE professional wrestler and then-current heavyweight champion, and Frank Mir, a former UFC heavyweight champion; a welterweight title fight pitting champion Georges St-Pierre against Thiago Alves; and a match between Michael Bisping and Dan Henderson, the coaches for the ninth season of The Ultimate Fighter. To date, this has been the UFC’s most successful show, and it is the top-selling non-boxing pay-per-view in history, trailing only two Mike Tyson fights and the 2012 bout between Floyd Mayweather and Oscar De La Hoya.

The Ultimate Fighter led the UFC into mainstream credibility, and the series subsequently became a launching pad that was used to cement the celebrity of some of the sport’s most significant fighters. Georges St-Pierre was one such figure. Born in Saint Isidore, Québec, St-Pierre debuted in mixed martial arts in 2002, winning five fights in local leagues before appearing at UFC 46 with a victory over Karo Parisyan on 31 January 2004. He was given his first welterweight title shot against champion Matt Hughes in only his third UFC bout (22 October 2004), losing via armbar at the end of the first round. After running off a series of four impressive victories in 2005, St-Pierre earned a rematch with Hughes by defeating former lightweight champion B. J. Penn at UFC 58 (4 March 2006). St-Pierre was forced to withdraw from that fight because of an injury, and during his rehabilitation period, both he and Hughes appeared as trainers on the fourth season of The Ultimate Fighter, during which time Hughes was portrayed as bullying St-Pierre psychologically, particularly by repeatedly emphasizing his prior defeat at the hands of the champion. At UFC 63, Hughes defeated B. J. Penn (who had received the title shot that St-Pierre had forfeited due to injury), and St-Pierre entered the octagon following the fight to give an interview.
St-Pierre’s interview comment “I am not impressed by your performance” was not the typical trash-talk of a professional wrestler, but coming from the soft-spoken Canadian, it was seen as inflammatory, and it set up an enormous hunger for a rematch. St-Pierre’s victory over Hughes at UFC 65 (18 November 2006) established him as the welterweight champion and one of the biggest stars in the sport. With St-Pierre, the UFC introduced a new level of fan devotion—that of national and regional pride. Canadians had long been fans of both professional wrestling and mixed martial arts, but the sport remained marginalized on Canadian television and most provinces banned live events. St-Pierre’s gentle demeanour and heavy Québécois accent made him an instant icon in Canada, turning the country into a priority market for the UFC. Shockingly, he showed up to his first defence woefully unprepared and lost his title to an underdog fighter, Matt Serra (7 April 2007). That could have been enough to kill his career, but St-Pierre rehabilitated himself from his second loss by dominating four-time NCAA wrestling champion and Ultimate Fighter first-season villain, Josh Koscheck, and then decisively winning a rubber match against Matt Hughes, who interestingly had gone from hero to villain after his stint on The Ultimate Fighter. On 19 April 2008, St-Pierre reclaimed his title from Matt Serra at the UFC’s first-ever Canadian event, with a stunning performance in Montréal’s Bell Centre that left no doubt about his dominance in the sport. In regaining the title in his hometown, St-Pierre became a national hero in Canada. He has held the welterweight title since that time, running off seven successful title defences before facing Nick Diaz in Montréal. During that period, he lost only two rounds on judges’ score cards and was so dominant in the sport that Rogers Sportsnet named him Canadian Athlete of the Year three years in a row (2008 to 2010). In late 2013, after winning his eighth title defence, St-Pierre vacated the welterweight title and announced his desire to take time away from the sport. The combination of superior athletics and a soft-spoken demeanour had positioned St-Pierre as the ideal Canadian fighting champion, making him a superstar attractive to advertisers (including Gatorade and Under Armour), marketers (he released his own series of exercise videos), and even filmmakers (he appeared in Captain America: The Winter Soldier in 2014).

Creating UFC 158

The dynamics that went into the creation of the UFC as the most significant new addition to the recent history of sports were well on display in the promotion of the main event of UFC 158 in Montréal. Indeed, in many ways, the tensions that are
so central to successful promotion in the present-day period—a pure sports logic married to a sports entertainment logic—were virtually embodied in the media and fan discourses surrounding the two combatants. Coming off his long winning streak and domination of a series of number one contenders, Georges St-Pierre was both the hometown hero and the embodiment of professionalism and the pure sports sensibility. Since regaining the title from Matt Hughes, conversations about St-Pierre had tended to focus not on whether he would win or lose his next fight but where he ranked in the theoretical pound-for-pound rankings and whether one could make a legitimate claim that he was the greatest fighter in the history of the sport. With St-Pierre having soundly defeated the only fighters to whom he had ever lost and having consistently out-struck and out-wrestled his opponents in almost all of his bouts, the UFC now had the ironic problem of finding media-friendly hooks to sell his matches to the public. In combat sports, when the audience does not believe that the contender has a legitimate shot at winning the title, it is difficult to build an audience for a fight. St-Pierre’s loss to Serra, which was the result of a single well-placed punch to the jaw, was frequently used as a reminder that in mixed martial arts “anything can happen,” but this is relatively thin material for fans and for the press. Moreover, St-Pierre seldom participated in the type of trash-talk in which other fighters engaged. (In fact, he seemed to genuinely regret having insulted Matt Hughes’s performance against B. J. Penn.) His well-crafted media persona was that of the squeaky-clean, all-Canadian boy whose success is based on a superior work ethic. This was an image that was carefully cultivated by his sponsors, which had helped to make him the most visible face of the sport in the world. Indeed, by the time of UFC 158, St-Pierre was the most widely promoted active Canadian athlete in the world, and he was known for his seriousness in defence of his title and his reluctance to use the media-marketing machine. Having faced a backlash for his “impolite” remarks to Matt Hughes, St-Pierre had resorted to talking up his opponents rather than running them down.

Nick Diaz, in contrast, came into UFC 158 with an extremely different media and fan profile. Diaz entered the championship fight with a 26-8 (1) record. While he had previously held welterweight titles in Strikeforce and World Extreme Cagefighting (both smaller mixed martial arts organizations that had been subsequently purchased by the UFC), his record as a fighter in the UFC was only 7-5. Having debuted in mixed martial arts shortly after his eighteenth birthday, Diaz had fought for a larger number of promotions with varying success. He joined the UFC in September 2003, generating mixed results before he was released from his contract in April 2006 after losing three fights in a row. He had a reputation for
taunting both inside and outside the ring, including an altercation in the hospital with Joe Riggs following their fight at UFC 57. Fighting for the Japanese mixed martial arts promotion, Pride, in 2007, Diaz failed a drug test for marijuana. His results were so elevated that he was accused by the Nevada State Athletic Commission of fighting under the influence of the drug and his victory over Takanori Gomi was changed to a no contest.

After serving a six-month suspension, Diaz fought for Elite XC and Strikeforce, where he became champion. When the UFC purchased Strikeforce, he was brought back for a potential champion-versus-champion match with St-Pierre at UFC 137, but he was removed from that fight after failing to appear at a media event. He was demoted on that card and defeated B. J. Penn in the semi-main event, while the entire card was shuffled because of St-Pierre’s knee surgery. Following his defeat of Penn, Diaz fought Carlos Condit for the interim welterweight title, with the winner to challenge St-Pierre on his return. Diaz lost that fight by unanimous decision and then failed a drug test for marijuana a second time. Suspended for one year, he returned at UFC 158, facing, surprisingly, St-Pierre. Thus, the road to the title fight for Diaz consisted of losing a number one contender’s match, failing a drug test, and sitting out for one year. By almost any “pure sports” logic, Diaz had absolutely no claim to a title match. However, in terms of sports entertainment logic, pairing him with St-Pierre made perfect sense: Diaz was the consummate bad guy whom the hometown hero would definitively put in his place in Montréal.

The promotion of the fight in the press reads in large measure as if it were scripted by the UFC itself. The fight was announced by Canadian Press in an article on 16 December 2012, in which a remark by St-Pierre laid the foundation for the entire drama: “There’s been a lot of talk about who I should fight next but this was really the only choice for me. He’s made it personal and I personally can’t wait.”

Articles published about the media conference where Diaz initially failed to appear highlighted the challenger’s lack of reliability and the champion’s calm professionalism. In the days immediately leading up to the fight, Diaz skipped a public workout for the press, and the narrative, already familiar to fight fans who haunt Internet message boards, broke into the public. A Canadian Press journalist wrote: “Georges St-Pierre played with children and threw signed merchandise into the crowd. His opponent, Nick Diaz, didn’t bother to show up. Short of escorting a senior citizen across the street or donating an organ to a relative in need, St-Pierre couldn’t have done much more for his good guy image.”

The same article noted that Diaz had skipped the filming of a preview show for the fight and had complained about having to fly economy to Montréal from
his home in Stockton, California. The piece repeated many of the core sound bites surrounding the fight: St-Pierre’s contention that Diaz is “the most disrespectful human being I’ve ever met” and Diaz’s claim that St-Pierre is “pampered.” At the weigh-in on the day before the fight, Diaz heightened the theatrics by throwing an elbow in the direction of St-Pierre during the traditional fighter’s pose. All of this, of course, filled the papers and sports newscasts in the days leading up to the fight. Reported as straight news, the events (press conferences, workouts, weigh-ins) are all carefully orchestrated public displays designed to build interest in the pay-per-view (the live event having sold out 20,145 tickets at the Bell Centre, with a total gate of more than $3.7 million). The hype worked. While the live ticket sales placed this event only fourth on the list of top-grossing UFC events at the Bell Centre (the St-Pierre–Serra rematch for the title occupies the top spot, at more than $5.1 million in ticket sales), the event did particularly well on pay-per-view. While live tickets are purchased months in advance (and priced by the UFC before the true level of demand can be ascertained), pay-per-view purchases are largely a last-minute decision. In the case of UFC 158, the strong media promotion of the good guy/bad guy dynamic seemed to have worked magic—the event was reported as having garnered slightly under 1.1 million pay-per-view buys, almost two hundred thousand more purchases than the next highest show headlined by St-Pierre (UFC 94, with B. J. Penn) and nearly triple the best performance of any other show headlined by Diaz (UFC 143, with Carlos Condit). The pay-per-view success placed the event third on the UFC’s all-time list, trailing only two fights featuring professional wrestler-turned-UFC champion Brock Lesnar (one of which, UFC 100, featured St-Pierre in the co-main event).

The actual fight itself was somewhat anti-climactic, although it was thoroughly enjoyed by fans in attendance. As many had predicted, Diaz was unable to use his boxing skills to damage St-Pierre, and St-Pierre used his world-class wrestling skills to take Diaz to the mat repeatedly, where Diaz’s boxing was neutralized. St-Pierre won a lopsided unanimous decision (all three judges scoring the fight 50-45), to the delight of the Québécois fans. In his post-fight interview, St-Pierre essentially affirmed the charges made by Diaz, in the days leading up to the bout, that the UFC and St-Pierre had been selling “wolf tickets.” St-Pierre told the crowd that “Nick Diaz is a good guy,” a gesture of sportsmanship that recalls the tradition of shaking hands at the end of a hockey playoff series but a declaration that is suggestive of just how much of the pre-fight hype was simply manufactured for marketing purposes. For St-Pierre, UFC 158 was another dominant victory on the champion’s road to becoming recognized as the greatest competitor his sport has ever known.
For the UFC, it was a box-office bonanza that generated more than $60 million in revenues in a single evening. For the Canadian fans, it was a night of entertainment in which the virtuous and hard-working Québécois fighter soundly dispatched the brash-talking and disrespectful American upstart. Through it all was a demonstration that sports entertainment is every bit as important to the sports experience as pure athleticism, and possibly more so. As Georges St-Pierre proved at UFC 158 in Montréal, sometimes it is necessary to cry wolf.

NOTES


