

The Not-So-Amateur System of Kickboxing

Written by Steven Wright

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I will never forget it. There was a ton of buzz on all the fight forums in preparation for the World Muay Thai Council and the International Federation of MuayThai Amateur, putting together a major event in Thailand. It was, and I believe still is, the largest collection of organized amateur muay thai fights in the world. I remember how many people were talking about the event, and how it was so big, people started to imagine the idea of Muay Thai being an Olympic sport in the near future. After all, red and blue head gear, body and shin guards, it really did look the part. Then, while exploring the forums one day I came across popular muay thai forum contributor Hellfighter, who posted an interesting picture. It was a picture of him and Artur Kyshenko. I thought it was pretty cool, until I read the comment that accompanied the post. It said that the picture was taken right after Artur Kyshenko won his fight. So naturally, the first thing that ran through me head was. What on Earth is the 2007 K-1 World Grand Prix Semi-finalist doing in an Amateur kickboxing event?

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In a way, I almost thought of it as a bully move...until I realized it was the norm. All of a sudden, well known MuayThai fighters started posting pictures from their fights and uploading video from the event. It turns out, that the professional fighters were not the exception, they were the norm. Outside of the female fighters. The majority of the men had fought professional before, and a decent amount of the women had too. After reading that now 27-1 boxer, but then K-1 veteran Alexander Ustinov had won the heavyweight amateur title in 2006, that Shane Campbell, Andrei Kulebin, Dmitry Valent, Emil Zoraj, and many others all competed at the amateur games throughout the years, I heightened my stance. I saw them as taking spots a true amateur could have. Its not just that these men are pro's fighting amateur, but also that these men are World Champions fighting amateur. And here is the strangest thing about it. Despite having my disagreements, in muay thai and kickboxing there is nothing wrong with it.

Now I am not saying there isn't any cons. For example: here in the states more and more MMA promotions are starting to show amateur fights, because they can sell people on the MMA product, without having to pay the talent. If its not the UFC or any televised version of the brand, than people don't know the difference. In that way moving from promoters that pay to promoters that don't isn't healthy for the sport of kickboxing, because high level guys not getting they're worth lowers the pay for all. How can you argue for more money when last month you fought for free?

Another con, it kills the credibility of the amateur status. There are only two combat sports in the olympics, boxing and tae kwon do (wrestling please don't hate me for not including you.) Boxing alone has formatted its sport in a way that fight fans could follow its competitors. Whether through golden gloves or regional champions, internationally, there is a way to hear about and follow the stars of tomorrow. Seeing as how Muay Thai isn't in the olympics, the promotion that attempts to give it amateur credibility must restrict it to participants of amateur status. If there is a desired day when the muay thai pro ranks is excited to receive an olympic competitor, than the sport has accomplished the highest relationship with the amateur system. If amateur champion has the same status of the World Champion, than the credibility of both takes a hit as there is no line to determine the value of either. I'll explain this further with an example. If a World Champion fights in an amateur tournament and loses, is the winner now the level of a world champion? He didn't have to climb the ladder for the shot, he just jumped to the front simply by the champion going down the ladder. This can not be. It must always lead up. The Champion must be this mythical goal that is to be attained through trial. If not, the title has no value. (I will write about the value of Muay Thai and kickboxing titles another day)

Final con, we are getting great match ups that are meant to sell the sport, hidden under shin guards and head gear. The first time Artem Levin met Yodsenklai Fairtex, he was stopped in the

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2nd round with a right hook at K-1 Scandinavia. No shame there, Yod was and is a beast. However, these two would meet again. This time, Levin was becoming one of the best super middleweight fighters in the world and poised to perform better this attempt. He won the fight. Only problem is, he was wearing head gear and shin guards. The fight took place in the finals of the 2010 Asia Combat Games and even as you read the youtube comments, you see people asking why are they wearing head gear and shin guards. This can not be. Yodsenklai is one of the biggest international muay thai stars in the world. If he fights, people need to see it and who its against. We cannot have elite fighters like top five light heavyweights like Simon Marcus and Artem Vakhitov competing where no body can see them, which is exactly what happens in the amateur system.

So, I am certain at this point readers are wondering why I said that it isn't wrong that professionals are fighting in the amateurs, after going into great detail about the cons of doing so. Well, it has to do with the culture of the sport. In muay thai and kickboxing, there is an understanding going in that one is doing it because they love it, not because they can live off it. The fighters prize things like number of fights and experiences far more than what goes into their pocket. You will commonly hear fighters celebrate their one hundredth fight. I'd argue that muay thai kickboxing alone will be able to produce such an athlete in the coming years, as the knowledge of the long term effects of concussions leads boxer to stop sooner. Capitalizing off the value of Facebook, and the fact that I train high level fighters for a living, I have friends that are boxers, MMA fighters and muay thai kickboxers. No one goes into great detail about their experiences like kickboxers, who can't wait to upload pics from the various events of the world. It is part of the culture that one would choose fight activity over pay for performance.

Another reason the pros fighting in amateurs is good for the sport is because it creates match ups that other wise wouldn't happen. I spoke earlier about how a lot of the amateur events are filled with pros, who then meet in the finals of those events (Levin/Yodsenklai.) However, as much as I want to see the best fight the best and be seen doing it, a lot of these fights wouldn't happen without it. I am sure that Levin and Yodsenklai would have done it for pay if they could. The amateur system provided that opportunity. Even as I wrote that, it came off as a dry answer, so here is another way of looking at it. The reason why Kyshenko and others went to the WMC-IFMA in 2007 is because it was a huge event talked about all over the world. Fighters desired to be apart of it. The chances a Russian promoter has the money to bring in fighters from the US is very low, so it would be difficult to make an international fight between elite athletes. Yet fighters desire experiences and opportunities for international recognition, so fighters will come out of pocket to meet in a neutral place to compete with several of the worlds best. The amateur system opened up the opportunity for fights that wouldn't happen otherwise.

Nothing helps inactivity like amateur fights. Many of the stand out east European kickboxers are able to stay active until the opportunity to fight pro arises. I filmed Artur Kyshenko for my

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documentary and he spoke of how the Ukraine had lots of opportunities for amateur's, but not many for pro. Fighters are able to stay active until opportunities arise, thus building fight experience that would otherwise not be there. This helps out the women's sport in particular as it is even harder for elite women to find pro fights, let alone international ones. Due to this, Miriam Nakamoto, Valentina and Antonia Shevchenko, Lindsey Haycraft and many others can stay active until a promoter is able to offer fights. I would even argue that the amateur system has provided the only consistent opportunities for the elite female fighters to compete with one another. As of right now, Enfusion alone is invested in women's muay thai kickboxing, but isn't yet of a platform to create a Gina Carano/Ronda Rousey type athlete to garner attention for the sport. However, with the combination of rising pro opportunities combined with amateur activity, young women like Iman Barlow, Marianna Kalerigi, Tiffany van Soest and Denise Kielholtz could have the opportunity to attain a portion of the recognition down the road.

Finally, the most important contribution of pros fighting in amateur Muay Thai kickboxing is it further points to the reliance on a major kickboxing promotion. The value of Glory or K-1 goes up significantly if separation between the elite isn't established without them. Returning to the example I used earlier. What value is there in a world champion if he/she loses to an amateur? Neither the world title, nor the amateur title have value enough to separate skill level. By default, it can only be established when a high level promotion provides opportunities for the elites to confirm their supremacy against one another. The kickboxing amateur design, which has World Anti Doping Agency connections, but no amateur status regulations, is flawed. Yet in its failed form, it speaks to the importance of having an organization take responsibility for the best, as amateurs, like World Title belts, can not. The best it can do is add to the resume, which is important. I mentioned above, it gives fights to fighters who are looking to be active until the big break comes. Yet the fact that it can produce a Glory level fight without a Glory level paycheck, leads to the reliance on the super promotion being the life line of the future of kickboxing. So as I said above, I disagree for the most part with pros fighting in the amateurs. But it is clear to me that whether directly or indirectly, there is value in the current system, so I am ok with it.

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