



You are here:: [MEDIA / NEWS](#) » Zuffa needs to step up and stomp out cheats

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This needs to be clear off the top: Zuffa is not responsible for mixed martial artists who dope up.

Athletes make, and will continue to make, decisions to use banned substances regardless of the deterrents and penalties. There will always be someone seeking an edge. Someone who realizes they can't rise to the top without the aid of modern science. Someone willing to play a risky game in order to train harder than his or her body would normally allow.

That's the reality in the money-rich, winning-is-everything sports world mixed martial arts has joined over the past decade.

This also needs to be clear: Zuffa can, with one move, catalyze a sea change in MMA's widespread performance-enhancing drug culture. The purveyors of Strikeforce and the Ultimate Fighting Championship, the uncontested pinnacle of the sport, could decide that banned substance users aren't welcome at their events. That they won't do business with fighters who dope. They won't make money with 'em. That the risk for using must, for the first time, outweigh the reward -- because it most certainly does not now.

Many will ask: Should it be on Zuffa to do this when the sport it promotes is regulated by state governments, and when it is but one of many promoters?

I'd argue the answer is yes, and for the same reason UFC recently and rightly awarded Duane Ludwig the distinction of owning the 19-year-old organization's fastest knockout, even though the Nevada Athletic Commission refused to correct an error that "officially" said it wasn't. Zuffa is more important than any regulator, and has a vested interest in making sure the sport continues forward, which also means that among young fighters it's considered the place to be. Why do they see it that way now? The spoils. Money, prestige and fame of it all.

There isn't an organization in MMA that offers end-of-the-rainbow possibilities like Zuffa. Of course, there are a few groups with which fighters can sign and make a decent buck. UFC president Dana White is correct when he says his organization isn't a monopoly. There isn't a barrier to entry in the market for competitors. Viacom just purchased Bellator. Fighters can make money in Japan, though they might not get paid so fast. Asia in general is a burgeoning market for the sport, and other areas of the world are soon to follow. So, eviction from the UFC doesn't necessarily equal a death sentence for a fighter's career. But the fact remains, the allure of fighting in MMA's top organization can be a significant incentive to use PEDs. That's why fighters, including several so-called champions, have taken whatever steps they could, including doping, to get to the top. They have done this knowing the potential price.

Fighters must instead face a real choice. Is this thing I'm putting into my body worth the possibility of never fighting in the UFC? That should be a consideration for fighters these days, and it's really not. But more importantly, especially as it pertains to changing the culture that exists in MMA, kids walking into gyms for the first time shouldn't have to consider the possibility of drugs to get ahead.

Until the consensus among competitors shifts to the point it's no longer worth doing, it will be worth doing.

Still, some suggest the cost to the UFC for such a move would be too dramatic.

1. Potential competitors, like Viacom-funded Bellator, could swoop in and take promotable talent.

I guess. But that presupposes many of the fighters driving pay-per-view sales are using, and that they'll be caught. If that's the case, something drastic has to happen regardless. As it is, I think the idea that UFC would lose all its draws is way overblown. Ousted fighters, well, they'd head to a promoter who can live with an immediate reputation for signing steroid users. Don't you think the benefit of fighting in UFC and Strikeforce will actually grow? Most fans already presume a high percentage of fighters are mixed up with this stuff. Whether or not they truly care -- if responses to my Twitter account are an indication, most do, some don't -- that perception will change were Zuffa to draw a line in the sand.

We know fighters will get second chances somewhere else, and maybe some fans will be interested in how they do. But we've seen enough proof that when a fighter leaves the UFC, his stock takes a serious hit. Plus, if promoters go into the business of signing Zuffa's roid-tainted castoffs, that's great PR for the Las Vegas crew, which will only come out looking like a progressive, forward-thinking company.

I don't think it would take more than a year or two for fighters to get a clear sense that this thing was bad news for them. UFC could replenish lost names with new kids coming up, and they could do it fast.

2. Why should this happen in the UFC when the NFL, MLB and NBA don't cast aside talent when they test positive?

Sorry for answering a question with a question, but why should the UFC be like any other league?

It doesn't have a labor union to contend with. Other than being bound to work under various state athletic commission standards, and sometimes acting as its own regulator, Zuffa can operate with as much flexibility as it pleases. Simply relying on each state to get a hold of the problem isn't cutting it.

3. Stop pretending they're not all using something and let them.

The technology of kinesiology has never been more advanced. Some would say this truth represents another way in which athletes maximize their physical ability to compete at a higher level. And in the grand scheme of things, what's the difference between an innovative training technique, creatine, oxygenated water, or a consortium of nutritional supplement manufacturers pumping out new stuff every day, and anabolic steroids? It's just another piece of the puzzle for some.

There's no question competitive fields spur innovation and require determination -- nowhere is that more true than sport. But is an exercise revolution that produces faster, more powerful movements relative to fitness routines of yesteryear equivalent, in results and fair play, to its pharmaceutical equivalent?

How can anyone say "yes" to that? Not all fighters will want to use. The idea that they should be forced into a competitive disadvantage because of this is insane.

But there's a larger point here. Allowing fighters to use if they wanted would mark an even place from which to start. That's at least something.

Regulators and some MMA promoters, especially Zuffa, have made strides in working to end the use of banned substances. Problem is, the battle between drug users and drug enforcement bodies is as competitive as it gets. Lots of innovation and determination happening. No matter how much Nevada or California improve their tests, fighters will find a way around them. And it's clear in a situation as haphazard as MMA's -- standards vary greatly from state to state -- the one thing that can deliver an impact is a universal stance at the top.

A decree by Zuffa is as universal as it gets.

4. Zuffa will lose out on big paydays.

Maybe some. I mean, what happens in Chael Sonnen's case? That's a tough one. He's lined up to participate in one of the biggest fights of 2012 if he gets past Mark Munoz on Jan. 28. It's a lot to risk for the UFC; true moneymakers aren't so easy to come by.

But it's obvious Zuffa has already lost fights. While Cris Santos, the final inspiration for this column, sits out a year, she can't headline Strikeforce cards for Showtime. Champions lost their belts. Divisions were altered. It's dishonest to act like steroids haven't caused major disruptions already.

If the UFC went down this path, there could be some initial pain. But those bad actors, quickly forgotten, will give way to a new crop. Two years from now, how exactly will the UFC suffer because it can claim the strongest substance abuse policy in sports? One that will absolutely trickle down through the lower levels of MMA. One that will force rival, potentially competitive promoters to comply or be stigmatized. One that will grow more meaningful and expansive as cutting-edge testing procedures are put in place -- because that has to happen too for this thing to work over the long term.

On Monday, Zuffa could announce it will refrain from promoting anabolic steroid users, HGH users, EPO users, whatever-the-next-thing-is-called users, and the sport would be better off.

Go ahead, tell me otherwise.