Blood and Bylaws: A Thematic Analysis of State Athletic Commissions’ Responses to Fighter Deaths in Mixed Martial Arts

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Introduction and Research Question:
In the United States, professional combat sports such as boxing and mixed martial arts (MMA) are regulated by state authorities, with regulative authority and control resting with what is usually known as athletic/boxing/combative sport commissions. These commissions determine the rules, officiating, medical procedures, and licensing of the combative sport within their region. Therefore, combative sport organizations such as Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) have no control over the rules or regulations of their sport. Those powers are solely in the hands of athletic commissions.

The sport of MMA, founded in 1993, began to fall under state authorities’ sanctioning and regulatory regime by 2001, with most state governments placing regulatory control over the sport into the hands of the already existing boxing commissions. These boxing and athletic commissions thus became the regulatory source of power in the sport of MMA.

Since 2001, several deaths in regulated and sanctioned MMA events have occurred in the United States: Sam Vasquez died in a Texas fight, Michael Kirkham in South Carolina, and Donshay White in Kentucky. As issues of fighter health and safety are the sole responsibility of the athletic commission, it is timely to explore the responses by the state athletic commissions of Texas, South Carolina, and Kentucky, to the death of a fighter under their jurisdiction. Specifically, I will investigate these organizations’ official responses, and the potential policy and administrative changes that resulted from these incidents.

Literature Review:
Scholarly research in the area of combative sport regulation and policy development lacks depth, being often limited to simply describing the structure and role of athletic commissions (Hoye, Nicholson, & Houlihan 2010). This research as a result, lacks any form of critical analysis of the structure or role of these organizations. Most of the relevant research related to athletic commissions was conducted during the period of time when MMA was gaining regulatory acceptance through the United States. The research that explored MMA’s regulation through the 2000s, focused on the rationale for states to accept regulation and the media’s coverage of the process. The rationale for regulation was attributed to the economic benefit of allowing and sanctioning MMA event for the state. Additionally, the strong lobbying efforts of MMA organizations such as the UFC were pivotal in this process (Berg & Chalip 2013). Furthermore, analysis of the media’s coverage of the regulation process of MMA, found that the media played a strong role in framing the positive affect of the sport’s legalization (Masucci & Butryn 2013). The point most emphasized by the media was economic benefit towards the state or province that would come with the legalization of MMA (Naraine & Dixon 2014). However, what is most apparent in a review of literature around the regulation and governing of combative sports is the sheer lack of research on the topic. This is troubling as these athletic commissions hold significant power and are charged with the safety of thousands of athletic but with limited oversight. It is this gap in research and knowledge that this study will begin to address.

Method:
The data for this study will be collected from press releases/statements, incident reports and meeting minutes from the three state athletic commissions that relate to the death of the three fighters. A thematic analysis will be conducted to determine how the commissions responded to the incidents, focusing on points identified as relevant in the commissions’ narratives, while also unpacking themes that in the narratives remained unaddressed.

Preliminary results:
Preliminary results suggest state athletic commissions reacted in a defensive manner following the death of these
fighters. The focus of press releases and commission reports detail and emphasize ostensibly proper and correct actions by the commissions, rather than addressing potential shortfalls in the administrative or regulatory processes. Furthermore, initial findings suggest that no changes to the competition rules or regulatory procedures for MMA were carried out in response to the fighters’ deaths. Likewise, analysis of commission documents found that blame for the death of the fighters were not placed upon any individual or group.

MMA is a young, controversial, and economically valuable sport. As a result, the commissions acted in a manner to protect themselves, the viability of the sport, and the economic interests of specific ownership groups, to the possible detriment of athlete safety.

This research adds sport management research in the area of combative and extreme sports. The governance of combative sport is an area that needs more research, and this project adds empirical data and an analytical voice to the research. State athletic commissions wield significant power as both the governing body of the sport and as part of state governments. However, critical reflection on their role, and their response to tragedies occurring within their jurisdiction is absent.