

Affliction could become MMA heavyweight

Contributed by Dave Meltzer
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ANAHEIM, Calif. — The landscape of the mixed martial arts business may have changed Saturday night as the debuting Affliction promotion came out of its debut show with the potential for several of the biggest heavyweight marquee matches in the sport.

The myth of the quiet but unbeatable Russian, Fedor Emelianenko, turned into an undisputed reality as he destroyed former two-time UFC heavyweight champion Tim Sylvia in a scant 36 seconds in the main event at the Honda Center. Emelianenko, 28-1, who was the PRIDE heavyweight champion from 2003 until the company closed in 2007, became the first World Alliance of Mixed Martial arts heavyweight champion with the win.

It was billed as for the first undisputed world heavyweight title, although clearly “undisputed” is the wrong word to describe the first title created by an outside sanctioning body as opposed to a champion declared by a promotional company.

The industry already has two UFC heavyweight champions, in Randy Couture, the last champion who never lost, and Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira, who the company is recognizing as interim champion due to Couture’s resignation from the organization. There will be an Elite XC champion after a match with Antonio Silva vs. Justin Eilers on Saturday night in Stockton, Calif. Strikeforce also has a heavyweight champion in Alistair Overeem and IFL has one in Roy Nelson.

Emelianenko, showing amazing reflexes for a heavyweight, came out throwing punches before Sylvia even realized what hit him. The 6-foot-8 fighter, who weighed 263 at weigh-ins but was probably closer to 280 come fight time, went down from the initial barrage. Emelianenko, 6 feet and 230 pounds, choked him out on the ground before the sellout crowd of 13,988.

“I was very pleased with my performance,” said Emelianenko after the match. “Everything I wanted to do, I was able to do.”

“I was prepared to stand up, but I knew I had a better chance to end it on the ground.”

“I know I’m one of the best heavyweights in the world, and I was amazed at him,” said Sylvia. “I really don’t think that he’s human.”

Emelianenko laughed about the comment.

“I’m human,” he said, noting his thumb came out of its socket during the flurry. “I thought I was the guy to beat him,” said Sylvia. “But I’ve never been hit so hard. I think it was a choke across the windpipe because that hurts. But my pride’s hurt, that’s about it.”

The bigger picture after a night in which UFC and Affliction went head-to-head, is not who had the better show, or were seen by the most fans (UFC on Spike TV undoubtedly drew the larger audience), but what it builds for the future.

The Affliction show, with a packed house, had a major-event atmosphere that was a stark difference from most of the promotional opponents UFC has faced off against over the past few years.

Several fighters, most notably former UFC heavyweight champions Andrei Arlovski and Josh Barnett, came across as potential superstars. The key is how well this first show did on pay-per-view, and if expected major losses in putting together such a loaded debut card affect the company going forward. Promoter Tom Atencio talked about a second show in November, and indicated he would like to match Emelianenko vs. Couture, but negotiating the match is out of his hands right now.

Such a match would only be possible if Couture was able to get out of his UFC contract, which from a time frame expires in October, but UFC is claiming Couture owes them two more fights on the four-fight deal signed in early 2007. Ultimately, the courts will decide if and when this match can take place.

Emelianenko vs. Couture, if promoted by UFC, would undoubtedly be the biggest money MMA match in history. However, there is virtually no chance that will happen in that organization. But whatever potential that fight had Friday was magnified by Emelianenko’s performance Saturday.

“Every fighter has his strengths and weaknesses,” said Emelianenko. “Randy has many strengths,

but I can see weaknesses. It's a matter of taking advantage of the weaknesses. A match between us would depend on who took advantage of the others' weaknesses."

The night couldn't have finished better for the new group after a rocky start to a card that featured just two fights in the first two hours. Not only did Emelianenko answer all critics who questioned whether he had lost a step in the three years since he had faced a legitimate top-ranked opponent, but two potential opponents past Couture were also established.

Arlovski, who left the UFC upon taking a bigger money offer from Affliction, had his best all-around performance in years to establish another potentially lucrative match.

Arlovski, a Belarussian who has been living in Chicago for years, knocked out a game Ben Rothwell in impressive fashion at 1:13 of the third round in the match that stole the show.

Josh Barnett of Seattle avenged a 2001 loss to Pedro Rizzo by scoring a knockout at 0:44 of the second round. Barnett spent the past five years mostly fighting in Japan after being stripped of the title due to a steroid test.

"It was redemption for seven years ago, but seven years is a long time," said Barnett. "I'm really upset that it was Pedro. He's a really special person. I'd have rather knocked out somebody else."

Barnett knows Emelianenko well as they spent years together working on the same shows in Japan.

"He's a good friend and has an incredible character," said Barnett. "We have the traits that we can have a great fight."