

Mixed martial arts in the United States was not conceived by the Gracie family and Art Davie in 1993, it actually began life 14 years earlier in a Pennsylvanian diner. FO reveals the untold story of...

# MMA'S FORGOTTEN FOREFATHERS

WORDS / RICHARD CARTEY

**N**ovember 1979. The world's favorite *Stars Wars* film is yet to illuminate a single silver screen, Jimmy Carter was walking the halls of the White House and a gallon of gas cost less than a dollar down the road from the Denny's restaurant in Monroeville, Pennsylvania, where two kickboxing promoters, Bill Viola Sr and Frank Caliguri, would meet once a week.

Bill, a 33-year-old karate school owner and school science teacher, and Frank, the 32-year-old proprietor of the only karate gym in Pennsylvania with a boxing ring, were talking business. However, unlike every previous week's Denny's conversation, this one would lead to holding the United States' first ever mixed martial arts league. And this was nearly 15 years before the 1993 debut of what would become the world's largest MMA organization: the Ultimate Fighting Championship.

Bill and Frank would converse about their efforts promoting their co-promoted karate and kickboxing events. As publicizing primarily entailed hanging posters in gyms and bars, they'd frequently encounter clientele keen to point out a martial artist they knew could pummel any kickboxer on their show. "It would keep coming up," Bill Viola recalls to *Fighters Only*. "Then one night, we were just there like we always were, having a little bite to eat, and we both almost simultaneously came up with this idea: what happens if we get all these guys together and do an event?"

As men fascinated by the question of who would win between jeet kune do creator Bruce Lee, boxer Muhammad Ali and wrestler Bruno Sammartino, they needed no more encouragement. Only days later, Bill began hashing out a rule-set, picking the brains of the judokas, boxers and other martial artists who visited his shotokan karate gym's unique open door Wednesday night, where the practitioners could share techniques. He also visited with his school's wrestling coach on his free periods to hit the mats.

What resulted was a remarkably thorough 11-page rulebook that outlined regulations (fights to end by knockout, submission, referee stoppage or decision), safety gear (head guards, karate gloves, foot and leg protection) and even judging criteria for a 10-point must system. There would also be two physicians, one ringside and one in the dressing room. In 1979, mixed martial arts was already light years ahead of itself.

Soon Viola and Caliguri were brainstorming names. 'Ultimate Fighting Championship' wasn't in their top 10, Bill admits with a laugh. "We may have had a little blunder there," he jokes. Seeking a title that would echo the tough ethos of their Steel City Pittsburgh locale, Bill and Frank would first settle on "Tough Man

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Contest.' Though it seemed perfect, within months, they would get their first hint of why the moniker wasn't as shrewd as they'd hoped.

Unaware, the pair created flyers and posters to spread the word. Seeking fighters for, as the promotional material promised, an "anything goes" event "as they fought in the Orient," but to find "the real-life Rocky" was easier than they anticipated. Bill marvels: "It was unbelievable. We would get 150, maybe 200 (calls), for a tournament or kickboxing show. First week we got 1,500 phone calls. We didn't know what to do. We were totally engulfed. We had to actually hire a real secretary. We knew from that point this was going to be huge."

They immediately scheduled a three-night event, March 20th, 21st and 22nd 1980, at the Holiday Inn in New Kensington, Pennsylvania. However, by now, Bill and Frank (who had formed CV Productions – the 'C' for Caliguri, the 'V' for Viola – to stage the shows) received word of a gritty amateur boxing event in Michigan already using the title 'Tough Man.' Not wanting to be associated with a pure boxing contest, a simple name change to 'Tough Guy' ready for the second round of posters was in order.

As Bill recalls, those booked for the first shows in New Kensington were a local rag-tag crew of wrestlers, boxers, karate fighters, martial artists and, just as the UFC would attract well over a decade later, brawlers. Having selected simply via first come first served, Bill and Frank had gathered a tournament bracket of 32 lightweights (175lb and under) and a separate grand prix of 32 heavyweights (176lb and over), all to compete over three two-minute rounds with the finals »



each being three three-minute fights.

Come fight night, the crowd was abuzz, fueled by the allure of the unknown and the grandeur of the unseen. Local TV news had even rolled in to eye the event. Unbeknownst to them all, they were about to watch the first organized occurrence of the 21st century's fastest growing sport.

"The first fight was unbelievable," enthuses Bill. "The excitement, I'm telling you; you've never seen a crowd like this. New Kensington Hall only held 2,400 people. We had 3,000 people in the first night, 3,000 the second night, 3,000 every night."

Refereeing the action was then-current world heavyweight kickboxing champion, and Muhammad Ali sparring partner, Jacquet Bazemore. Six-foot-four, 230lb, articulate and knowledgeable: he was a 'Big John McCarthy 13 years early. But also observing the action was the Pennsylvania Athletic Commission, which had already confirmed with CV Productions it had no jurisdiction over this new form of combat, but eyed it nonetheless.

As the evenings bouts unfolded, Frank and Bill rapidly concluded no single skill-set

guaranteed victory. "We did have the actual tough brawler," says Bill, "but the guys who actually went on to win the events, they had a combination of a little bit of boxing, a little bit of ground fighting."

By the end of that first trio of thrilling March cards, the promotional team knew they "had a tiger by the tail." Bill recalls: "Some of these fighters had such a great following, and they were good fighters, that they wanted to fight again. I said, 'Oh, wow, this is great.' Because I thought maybe this would be a one-time shot, a novelty. No. People started training, they started cross-training."

Bill and Frank arranged for their top eight lightweight and top eight heavyweight combatants to square off at the near 3,500-capacity Stanley Theater in Pittsburgh on April 18th 1980, while they planned another show at the 6,000-seater Johnstown War Memorial Center for May 2nd-3rd.

Sensing they could take their Tough Guy Contest on the road, Frank quickly attained written permission to do just that from practically every US state with an athletic commissions. Realizing the lofty possibilities,

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they even established plans for a \$100,000 grand prize final in either Las Vegas or Atlantic City.

Such was the excitement around their new attraction, Frank and Bill began sponsorship negotiations with a large beer company and even entered into talks with NBC for broadcast rights to the finals. What was first intended to satisfy their curiosity was quickly becoming a heavyweight operation.

Looking back, Bill, along with son Bill Viola Jr (who was just a toddler at the time of his father and Frank's groundbreaking shows), recognizes the Johnstown show shift from single-event series to organized league. "Anybody can do a one-time event," says Bill Jr, who has worked for the past two years to draw attention to his father and Frank's achievements, "but after you've got two, three, four and you start up a following, and have return fighters and build that reputation, that right then and there, they were on their way to being a UFC entity 30 years ahead of its time."

With their fighters gaining followings and already cross-training in other disciplines to round out their skill-sets, Caliguri and Viola

sought to elevate their product. "They knew from the get-go this could be a sport and needs to be athlete vs athlete, not style vs style," says Bill Jr. Opportunities to shift from amateur to pro fighters, trophies to title belts and establish more weight classes were all being assessed while CV Productions prepared for their grandest event yet: going cross state to Philadelphia's Convention Hall.

After finishing off two more events that summer Frank and Bill realized to begin the leap into professionalism they so desired they had to rebrand. Multiple names such as Tough Guy Contest, Battle of the Brawlers and Battle of the Tough Guys were out and the weightier Battle of the Super Fights took their place. Both men agreed it more appropriate for their June visit to the then boxing capital of the US.

Says Bill Sr: "Here we are, a new event, where they had just filmed *Rocky 2*, the biggest blockbuster motion picture, and we are in Philadelphia. We had to change the name." Just as they had around Pittsburgh, the Philadelphia newspapers devoted pages upon pages to the coming event. And while some Pennsylvania dailies were skeptical of this new

draw, many sportswriters fully embraced it.

"A legitimate sport and not just a passing fad," declared one later that year. A press conference to publicize the Philadelphia show drew 32 reporters, who were treated to hors d'oeuvres, wine and cheese and a meet and greet with some of the forthcoming show's fighters. In line with CV Productions events' growing status, the Philadelphia card drew its highest profile names yet: former Philadelphia Eagles' football player Len Pettigrew, and Sylvester Stallone bodyguard, Sam Allen.

The event was a success, and Frank and Bill began lining up shows for Mississippi, West Virginia and New York – until they received a phone call. It seemed Battle of the Super Fighters' Philadelphia debut had drawn unwanted attention. "The third day home, we get a phone call from the athletic commission," recalls Bill Sr. "They basically said, 'You guys are crazy, the people who fight are crazy, you do another show we'll arrest you and put you in jail.'"

The development placed their next show – in November in Greensburg, PA – in jeopardy. But while high-powered attorneys assured Frank and Bill the commission had no



legal right to follow through on its threat, it did little to quell the fighters' fears of arrest. A cascade of favors had to be called in before the commission would agree not to interfere in CV Productions' Greensburg event.

"That just hyped everybody up more," says Bill Sr. "The show went off in Greensburg as it was planned and we thought we were on a roll again."

Except they weren't. "This is where this whole 'Tough Man' comes back to haunt everyone," states Bill Jr, of a March 1981 incident. "That gentleman that started the Tough Man boxing did a show in Pennsylvania under the name 'Tough Man.'" Reports from the time note 23-year-old entrant Ron Miller, 185lb and five-foot-eight, died in hospital one day after the event where he was knocked out in his first match, then knocked against the ropes in his second.

"Even though they had zero, zero, zero connection to what we were doing, that athletic commission used the public outcry as an excuse to open up an investigation (into this

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BILL VIOLA JR AND SR WITH ROYCE GRACIE

new combat sport, which was still at least two decades away from being branded, MMA)."

Instead of pursuing the Michigan promoter's amateur boxing event, the Pennsylvania government sought a ban on any combination of boxing, wrestling or martial arts, using techniques such as, but not limited to, kicking, punching and choking. Bill consulted their attorney, who thought they could fight the ban and win – if they didn't they could appeal and even go to the Supreme Court. But, with wives and children to support, neither Frank nor Bill had the money. "Once this got out, that the state was going to shut us down, every sponsor ran, took off, disappeared," says Bill Sr. "Unbelievable how big government stomped us, broke us down, cut us off at the legs; unreal. It was just a slap in the face I'll never forget it."

Although CV Productions' home state of Pennsylvania was now closed to them, surely these other states who had confirmed they could take their events to their cities were still open. Weeks of phone calls later, it became apparent the situation had changed. Bill Sr says: "That damn Pennsylvania athletic commission was a good ol' boy system. They got on the damn

phone and they called all their a\*\*hole buddies and that's exactly what happened. We called six, seven, eight, we started going down the list. We had in front of us written confirmation. They all said the same thing, 'Under further investigation, pending.'" It was over.

Only now, over 30 years on, is Frank Caliguri and Bill Viola's story becoming known. Having lightning in a bottle, then it being taken away – they simply didn't want to talk about it. In 2010, one year after Pennsylvania lifted its near 30-year-old ban on mixed martial arts (1981-2010 in PA), Bill Jr encouraged them to come forward. In 2011, the martial arts pioneers' work was permanently recognized with an exhibit in the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum, in the Heinz History Center.

Now the owner of local Pittsburgh-area martial arts promotion Kumite Classic, Bill Viola Jr says he and his father give full credit to UFC president Dana White and his entire staff for what they have managed to achieve with what is now known the world over as mixed martial arts. They have been able to do what Frank and Bill aimed to. But Bill Jr can't help but wonder where the sport might be had

Battle of the Super Fighters never been halted. "Where is MMA going to be 10 or 15 years from now? They could be at that point already had my dad and Frank not been stopped."

For Bill Sr, how does it feel to see a sport he and Frank had created over 30 years ago, erupt in popularity in the modern day? There are mixed emotions he admits. The karate black belt, now 64, who had taken a one-year sabbatical from his science teacher job to make a go of this early MMA venture likens it to "someone inventing the television 30 years ago and the government says you're not allowed to turn it on." Still, he also applauds the accomplishments of the UFC and White, who he and Frank met with backstage at a recent UFC event.

There will probably always be a sense of regret, but, in its own right, the present-day success of MMA is validation of Viola Sr and Caliguri's hard work. He can feel good about that. And Bill Sr adds: "My theory or foresight that you had to be a mixed fighter to have success out there, you had to train in different disciplines; that came true. The vision that me and Frank Caliguri saw out there actually came true." **FO**