

Marketability of a fighter

How long is the fighting life of a fighter? We all know it's not long, compared to say, a banker or a lawyer.

What are the average earnings of a fighter over this period? Well, we all know that most fighters struggle to pay the bills, so most have an extra job.

Why is his? We work so hard, we sweat, we bleed and we get bruises, breaks and brain damage. The price is high – very high indeed.

But we love this game, or we wouldn't be doing it.

However, there are millions of fighters all over the world who wants to fight in the top leagues. The big organisations get thousands of applications per week – to fight on an availability of about 5 to 12 events per year for each organization.

Not only do these candidates compete against each other, but they also compete against the established fighters who aren't going to give up their spots – you can bet on that.

So, let's put some numbers together. Lets assume you want to fight for one of the top 10 organisations in the world. Lets assume – hypothetically – that you've chosen one and sent an application to fight. The application would typically consist of your record, a photo of yourself and a video of your last fights (or sparring sessions).

Then you would send it in and it would be thrown on a pile in the organisation's office. This pile is growing at a rate of 10 or 20 applications per day. They usually would have two people who, among many other things, would have to sort out this pile.

So, these two would be coming from a tournament which they've held in another city. They've prepared for this tournament non-stop for two weeks (in which time they didn't look at any of the applicants' videos). They'll also be staying in hotels for a day or two after the fight for press conferencing, networking with sponsors, talking to the top trainers (who want to talk about their fighters and other fighters that they want to get into the organisation).

So, by the time they're at the office again, there are about 200 videos and applications. They will quickly (and I mean quickly) scan the applications to see if there is anything special (like you having 5 world titles, being 7-foot tall, or something).

If there is nothing that gets their attention quickly, then they won't fuss. More people want to fight for them than they have fights available.

They won't give everybody an equal chance either. Sure not – this is a business, not an equal opportunity employer!

So why would they let you fight for them?

One word, and one word only – marketability.

It is about their return on their investment. They have to choose you among a thousand others. What have you got to offer the organisation?

Mm, think about it a bit, will you?

Which brings us to the next set of questions. How marketable are you? How many people know about you? Why would any organisation want you to fight for them?

When being asked these questions, most fighters give the wrong answers – usually something to do with the fact that they are good fighters, or even, excellent fighters.

Sorry, but who cares? Do you know how many excellent fighters are out there in the world? Fighting ability alone is not the thing that will get you the TV coverage and big money.

Take for example the boxer Vitali Klitschko. Ranked at number 1 (at the time of writing this) as world heavyweight fighter, with almost all his wins by knockout or technical knockout.

He is an excellent fighter – no doubt. So here is the question: how eager are you to go and watch him fight? How exiting is he? Does he make you exited? Do you expect anything great to happen on his fights? Does he draw big crowds and high television ratings?

Personally, I don't have the least bit of an interest in watching him fight. Why? Well, if I knew him personally, it might have been another story. We all like to watch our friends or relatives fight.

But if I don't know him, then what do I know about him? Well, nothing, except that he is a good fighter – that's it! He wins his fights, but there is no hype, no excitement, and no incentive for me to go and watch his fights. Very boring, actually, isn't it?

Compare him to Mike Tyson. Tyson gets disqualified, loses some fights and is of late, shadow of his former self. He became the youngest ever heavyweight world champion at the age of 20. Since

then he's been in prison, lost fights and like I said – is not so good any more. In fact, lots of fighters would now be willing to fight him – unlike the “old” days.

But, Mike always makes the news. He is hated by many and loved by many. He is in one scandal after the other. He's in and out of prison. Some countries have banned him (such as Japan) and when he visited England for one fight, a protest group picketed in front of the hotel.

But, the fact is, he is in the news. He makes headlines. He is his own publicist.

And when he steps into the ring, I know something's going to happen. He causes a lot of excitement. Even though he is not as good as he used to be, we still want to see him. He has a high probability of getting disqualified. He is a beast. He isn't nicknamed “Iron Mike” for nothing.

He is a menace who instills a lot of fear, but always causes controversy.

In his 1997 fight against Holyfield, almost two million people subscribed to pay-per-view television to see the fight – producing about a hundred million dollars in revenues. This was the famous “ear-biting incident”. To date, six of the ten highest pay-per-view grossing events were Tyson fights.

If you are a fighter, you have something to sell – you. What have you got to sell?

You are a brand and a product. Irrespective of which style or organisation you're fighting in, you've got something to sell.

Who would want to see you fight? What kind of excitement do you bring to the ring? Don't go biting ears or do crazy things, but my question is – what is your angle?

Putting the question in business terms: Who would want to buy your brand?

Who would buy you? Who is the probable customer?

This is a fine balance, but your customer is first the crowd, the fans. When you are popular with the crowds, or at least show the potential, the fight organisations will buy you, to resell you to the fans.

Then, if you deliver (so hopes the fight organisation); you may get high television ratings and increase the earnings of the organisation.

When you get high television ratings, the organisation would want to ensure that their investment stays put (i.e. not getting drafted by another with the lure of more money) and your earning potential will skyrocket.

Fighting ability

If we start talking about short-term earnings, then fighting ability sometimes takes a back seat.

In the K-1, two of the most hyped fighters were Bob Sapp and Akebono. These two fighters are (most would agree) not the best kickboxers around, but pulled the highest television ratings in Japan.

Even outside Japan, people who were not really kickboxing fans, wanted to know about these big men. Their earnings were very high indeed.

However, fighting ability will ensure some staying power. In the K-1, the two top fighters to date, in terms of K-1 championships won, are Dutch fighters Ernesto Hoost and Peter Aerts.

When they were younger, they exited the crowds, but never quite matched Sapp and Akebono when it came to excitement. Now in 2004, Sapp and Akebono's popularity is fading and Aerts and Hoost are still there, as they have been in twelve years in the K-1. The key here is that these two Dutch fighters' fighting ability has prolonged their careers.

What I'm saying is – you can make it to the top of the earnings bracket – riding on the back of some other vehicle, but if you want to stay there for a while, that vehicle that you came in on, better have a good fighting ability on it too.

Association

As fighter, you must find the best management team that you can. Fighting is a business of brands. Association with the top brands is the key.

Getting in as an unknown fighter is very likely a losing battle.

In kickboxing, managers like Steve Kalakoda and gyms like Vos Gym and Mejiro can give you an edge, because they are well known brands in the K-1 community.

Associating with such a brand brings you into the eyes of the fighting world. You will get more opportunities than fighters from lesser-known associations.

Why? Well, these guys are in daily communication with the organisations. They are also trusted, so a recommendation from them is worth a lot.

Another good example is the Gracie family. Some fighters will get fights on bigger shows, just because they fight under the Gracie name.

However, brand in itself can be a problem to some fighters.

If you are not quite a well-known fighter, in a big stable with many top fighters whose earnings are high, your chances of breaking through are not too good.

The reason is that the top fighters bring in more money, so why should the manager look for opportunities on the top shows for you - who don't earn so much?

So, my advice is to find a gym where you'll not be a little fish in a big pond. Find a slightly smaller pond where the manager will work hard on getting you in.

But, if you can't find a right fit, join the big brands – at least you will gain valuable experience, train with the best and feed off them, in terms of meeting fans, being seen with them and being under the eyes of event organisers.

This just makes people curious about you. The managers will evaluate you and as soon as the time is ripe, then they'll recommend you to the organisation, and voila, you're in!

It's all about the show

What do you have to sell? Remember what I said earlier, relying on just your fighting ability isn't good enough.

People want to see something exiting, something that will make them take money out of their wallets.

Have you ever attended a jiu-jitsu tournament? Yes? Well have you ever seen any spectators that were not friends or family and a few fighters?

Probably not. Why, isn't it exiting?

Well it is exciting – but, only to those who know the game.

To other people (who can't make heads or tails of it), it is boring. There is no hype, no incentive to want to see the spectacle.

Think about professional wrestling. Nobody does this better than professional wrestlers.

I don't even like professional wrestling, but I still watch it – even if it's just on TV! And often too! These people know the art of selling the show.

They all have an angle, a persona. They have good guys and bad guys; they have heroes and heroines. They even have a story – it's almost like watching a soap opera. They even have beautiful women to match.

And people from all ages and all walks of life watch it. Not everybody gets equally excited, but they will still watch it.

It is not strange to see movie stars come and watch Mike Tyson or Oscar de la Hoya fight, because of the excitement and the anticipation. Maybe something bad will happen and then the newspapers will write about it.

Something like: “Hey I hope Mike Tyson doesn’t misbehave again. He is on a thin leash – let’s hope he doesn’t make an ape out of himself again!”

And then he does it. Something bad.

And the newspapers go: “We should have known! He shouldn’t be allowed to fight any more!”

And the people talk about it – everywhere - in the bars, in the boardrooms and on the golf courses.

And so the tickets are sold – and the television shows. And so the money is made.

Hahaha. How we humans love to see what we don’t want to see. If this sounds like an oxymoron, well yes, it is – and it fits.

In boxing, even people who don’t know about boxing know about Mohammed Ali.

“I am the greatest!”

Who can ever forget that?

“Fly like a butterfly and sting like a bee.”

What a showman - he had the crowds. Some loved him and some hated him, but this controversy made money – big money.

Another to rival him in the showbiz game is Prince Nazeem Hamed who said that he would be world champion in five or more weight divisions. He never did, but was a showman extraordinaire.

People watched his fights, wondering what will his next entrance be like - every time.

He would be showboating before the fight, during the fight and after the fight. He would talk big to the media and he would challenge everybody to fight.

Some people wanted to see him win, some wanted to see him get beaten, but for whatever reason, people came. He drew sellout crowds.

In the K-1, big-muscled Bob Sapp, who stood at about 2 meters tall and weighed 160 kilograms, had people talking.

They wanted to see this football player fight in the K-1. They even hyped a supposed challenge with Mike Tyson in 2003 - which never took place.

But, he made money. Bob couldn't speak Japanese, but appeared in almost 200 television commercials in Japan.

In 2003, Japan had Sapp mania. He could be seen everywhere, on TV, on T-shirts, he had his own clothing store and appeared in magazines everywhere – even outside Japan.

He appeared in Time magazine in 2003 and was in the news about his high earnings. Yes, he made a lot.

Sumo wrestler Akebono was the same.

This 220-kilogram behemoth had some of the biggest crowds when he fought. He drew on his status as sumo grand champion in Japan (the first westerner to hold this great honour), and brought a big fan base to the K-1.

People wanted to see a sumo fighter in the K-1. His first opponent was Bob Sapp. The pre-fight hype was more exciting than the fight itself.

Japanese fighter Genki Sudo is another example of the perfect showman.

His entrances are always a draw-card. He dances, he has dancers around him and he makes his own entrance a show.

And then he fights. And he showboats sometimes during a fight.

Let's take nothing away from Genki – he's an excellent fighter. So, even his fights are exciting.

And after his fight, he lifts up a banner. His famous banner "We are all one" has been in countless fight magazines.

These fighters earn big, regardless of fighting ability. They earn big because of the worth of their brand.

These fighters understand the customer and the customer's needs. There is one way to fulfill this need: Let the show begin.

What do you have to sell? Can you do it big? If you are not Giant Silva - standing 7 feet tall, or Rampage Jackson, with his chain around his

neck, or Gary “Big Daddy” Goodridge, who pumps up the crowd with his entrances, then you’ve got to find a persona.

Find something or some way to brand yourself and sell it.

Marketing yourself

If you do not market yourself, nobody else will.

If you’ve got a nice budget, you can hire the services of a publicist or some other expert. If not, you have no choice but to do it alone.

So, when you talk to people, how do you talk to them? What do you do when you interact?

Here I want to pull out K-1 fighters Sapp and Gary “Big Daddy” Goodridge again.

These men interact with fans like nobody’s business. When asked to pose with fans for the camera, Gary always has the fan either in a chokehold, or some or other grip, pulling a face and acting up.

He makes a little photo session an experience for them. Fans love it and his popularity is growing – even though he is already a veteran called back from retirement.

Sapp would stop for people in the street and chat with them (actually, he would get swarmed).

Talking to people is a must. You have to build a fan base. Build a relationship with them. Have special fans – give them free T-shirts (branded with your name, of course), autographed photos, etc. Get to know some personally; exchange email with some, but talk to them. Reward your fans. Invite some to your parties, for example.

How do you introduce yourself to other people? Do you have a name card? I've seen some great name cards from fighters – like Jan “The Giant” Nortje’s cartoon self-portrait.

Do you have a website? You should have one. Your website should have an easy address – just your name – not some twenty-word address.

Be seen at events. Not only fight events, but social events and market yourself all the time.

Talk to as many people as you can. Be seen at places where not only your potential fans will be, but also at places where potential sponsors can be.

Try to maximize your media exposure. Send information to the sports pages about yourself, or get journalists to do a profile on you.

Promote, promote, promote. You have to get noticed.

Not only must you promote yourself to the public, the media and the fans, you also have to promote yourself to the fight organizations. When they are constantly aware of you, it is easy for your name to pop up in their minds when they need fighters for a show. When they see how you interact with fans, your following and your persona, then you will sell.

Remember, it is still entertainment.

Entertainment is show business. If you can't entertain, then you have no business in show business. You will disappear unnoticed in history – no matter how good a fighter you are, or have been.