

FRENCH ENTHUSIASTS DEFY BAN ON MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

PARIS: Mixed Martial Arts is trying to shrug off its image as an ultra-violent, inhuman and even degrading sport in France, where it is banned for pros but loved by amateurs. "MMA isn't a hooligan's sport," insists Bertrand Amoussou, a trainer at an upscale gym in a quiet Paris neighborhood in Montmartre. Combining elements from boxing, judo, karate and wrestling, MMA is allowed across Europe except in France and Norway.

It is played barefoot and without a helmet, while hands are protected only with fingerless gloves. Despite the ban, the discipline has proved irresistible to tens of thousands of amateurs in France. "MMA suffers from its past image when it was pretty savage, with bloody fights resembling street brawls," said Taylor Lapilus, a former jujitsu champion. At age 24, he became one of the only French professionals to compete in the premier Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) in the United States, having trained in his home country but able only to compete abroad.

"Most people misunderstand the sport," Lapilus said. "It's not unusual for people to ask me if it's allowed to hit below the belt, or to bite, or to poke your opponent in the eye. MMA has strict rules!" The rules, which are internationally standardized, do allow contestants to be hit, even in the head, when they are on the mat. A player can win

through a knockout blow, submission-locking the opponent in one of many types of holds-or a referee's decision. The octagonal "cage" in which the fighting is held is designed to protect contestants-and spectators-when they are thrown.

'Chess for legs and feet'

"Once you get a taste of it you can't let it go," said Lisa Amghar, who swears MMA is the first sport she has played. "MMA is very complete. You leave the session feeling serene and calm," the 35-year-old said after sparring with Adams Soulaïmana, a hunk of a guy standing 1.93 metres (six foot three inches) tall and weighing 120 kilos (265 pounds), a professional dancer by profession. "MMA is great because there's no repetition," said Arnaud Colom, a 50-year-old orthopaedic surgeon who has long practised martial arts. "It's a mix of all the combat sports that uses techniques for both the feet and the hands."

Matthieu Quidu, a sports professor at Lyon's Ecole Normale Supérieure, a prestigious university, has begun attracting more and more enthusiasts to his MMA class. "For my students, it's a chess game for the legs and feet. It requires strategy (and) adaptability, which are important qualities in professional life," said Quidu, a researcher in sports sociology. As with



PARIS: People take part in a MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) training session in Paris. — AFP

any combat sport, MMA can be very dangerous. "When fighting is down on the mat, it uses submission techniques that are potentially fatal," Quidu said. "The art of it is to apply the right amount of force to make your opponent quit without hurting him," he added. "Statistically in terms of injuries it's behind gym-

nastics," says James Elliott, who represents the UFC in Europe, citing American studies.

'Humans are voyeurs'

The discipline is a sport, and as such the goal is not to hurt your opponent, he said. It is also a show that attracts millions of view-

ers on television, generating huge profits for broadcasters. "You never know what's gonna happen at an MMA event," Elliott adds. The fights can also be bloody. "Blood is always spectacular, but it's not that serious in medical terms," said psychiatrist Jerome Palazzolo, noting that "the eyebrow is one of the places that bleeds the most." "If you get hit hard in the head or are knocked out it can be much worse, but this doesn't happen with MMA," he said.

People have always been drawn to violent spectacles, he said, likening MMA bouts to "circus games." "Humans are voyeurs, and these spectacles perform a sort of exorcism. They reach certain emotions that are deeply rooted in us, like compassion and hatred." "But the ones who win at MMA are not the guys who hit hard but the ones with great technique," he added. And the true connoisseurs among the fans are fascinated by technique more than by staging because "MMA blends the best of all these sports," Amoussou said. Because of what Palazzolo called a "habitué phenomenon", the uninitiated may fail to understand and appreciate the violence of MMA. The danger is that young people "thirsting for violence" with no appreciation for combat sports may replicate the moves and the holds without containing their strength, he said. — AFP



LAS VEGAS: Brazilian Lyoto Machida (right) fighting with Sam "The Alaskan Assassin" Hoger of the US during their UFC 67. In the space of 15 years, two brothers from Las Vegas have transformed UFC from a little known, somewhat frowned upon brand into the dominant company in mixed martial arts. — AFP

UFC, THE BRAND TO BEAT IN MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

NEW YORK: In the space of 15 years, two brothers from Las Vegas have transformed UFC from a little known, somewhat frowned upon brand into the dominant company in mixed martial arts. So much so that it is even competing with more traditional sports. April 14 will go down as a historic date in the young life of the Ultimate Fighting Championship. That was the day New York became the last US state to legalize professional MMA fights.

Lorenzo Fertitta, a stocky, well-dressed man of 48 who is the co-owner of UFC, says this is perhaps the last big piece of the puzzle he has been assembling. "I think it means a lot, because historically, anybody who was a detractor, who was against the sport, first thing they were putting up was, 'well, you're not even legal in New York,'" he said. "So obviously, it takes that argument away." Coming from the casino world, Fertitta and his brother Frank paid a measly two million dollars in 2001 for a contest that was known for little more than how violent it was. Around the same time, the mixed martial arts world developed unified rules that got rid of dangerous fighting moves and set the stage for a new, more respectable image.

But it would be another four years before things really changed with the reality show "The Ultimate Fighter", in which UFC hopefuls took each other on. "The Ultimate Fighter drove casual viewers to watch MMA and the UFC that were never really interested before," said Joe Favorito, a sports marketing specialist. "They became very quickly educated so they then had a product on free television in the US and in Canada that drove towards their pay per view," he added. UFC president Dana White said UFC 196, an event held in March in Las Vegas and featuring Irish superstar Conor McGregor, broke all revenue records for the firm and was watched on TV by 1.5 million paying viewers. Fertitta said in late December that the company would post revenue of 600 million dollars in 2015.

70,000 people at a fight

Parent company Zuffa was reported earlier this month to be in advanced talks to sell the company-valued at between \$3.5 and \$4 billion to a Chinese conglomerate. But White denied the reports as "overblown," adding: "The UFC is not for sale." The more than 500 fighters the UFC has under contract are independent contractors. That gives it a big advantage: in traditional major US sports leagues, players belong to unions that are often quite powerful. UFC does not seem intimidated by its competitors-Bellator MMA, Cage Warriors or M-1 — even though media giant Viacom acquired Bellator MMA in 2011. UFC markets its product very well, managing to lure sponsors and strike a deal in 2014 with sports apparel manufacturer Reebok.

The fame of some UFC stars, led by American Ronda Rousey, has spread outside the octagon, the name given to the area where UFC fighters battle it out. Big name stars come to watch, such as actor Leonardo DiCaprio and singer Bruno Mars. And besides the fights themselves, the company now has UFC Gym, a network of workout spots open to the public. "I think at first females were a little timid to come in because of the name UFC," Rich Van Houten, who owns a UFC Gym outlet in Jersey City.

But the brand has done a good job of showing it's all about learning a new way to work out and that "you're not gonna get punched in the face," he added. UFC says that after TV, sponsorships and sports merchandising and gyms, the sky is the limit. It has fights planned for November 12 at Madison Square Garden, one of New York's holiest sports arenas. Lorenzo Fertitta is talking about staging fights at Yankee Stadium in 2017 with 70,000 spectators, which would be a record there. Then there is the contract for the right to broadcast UFC fights. It expires in 2018. UFC told AFP it is the only major championship whose broadcast rights are coming up for grabs before 2021. So interest will be keen. —AP

COOK EYES 'BIG MILESTONE'

LEEDS: England captain Alastair Cook said yesterday he was well aware that his looming membership of the 10,000 Test-run club would be a significant landmark in an already successful career. The 31-year-old left-handed opener needs just 36 more runs to become the first Englishman-and only 12th player overall-to score 10,000 runs in Tests and he will hope to get there during this week's first Test against Sri Lanka at Headingley, which starts today. "It would mean a lot and hopefully I can get there sooner rather than later so we can talk about something else," said Cook, speaking at Headingley, Yorkshire's headquarters in Leeds, northern England yesterday. "It's a big milestone in terms of the people who have done it previously so it would be great to try and score these 36 runs."

"I've just got to put that to bed after this press conference and try and do what I've done in the previous 10 years, which is just try and concentrate on that ball coming down and nothing else." The last time England played Sri Lanka in a Test at Headingley, two years ago, was one of the

low points of Cook's career. Sri Lanka, inspired by a brilliant hundred from captain Angelo Mathews-still their skipper-won a thrilling match by 100 runs off the penultimate ball of the game to secure their first Test series win in England. Cook's tactics were widely criticized and he pondered resigning the England captaincy.

Tough moment

But the Essex batsman decided to carry on and has since been rewarded with last year's Ashes success and a series win in South Africa during England's most recent Test series. "It was a game of fine margins and Sri Lanka came out on top and thoroughly deserved it," he said as he recalled the 2014 Test at Headingley. "It was a real tough moment for me as a captain, there's no doubt about that, but I'm glad I hung in there for what's happened since." "It's probably taken me three years to feel comfortable in the job and hopefully I can carry on for a bit, and while I'm still enjoying it and while the guys are still responding I'm staying there." —AFP

AMERICAN WOMEN EMBRACE MIXED MARTIAL ARTS, CRUSH STEREOTYPES

LOS ANGELES: Sweat glistens on Brooke Carlucci's brow as she drives home kicks and jabs. She and a dozen fellow Mixed Martial Arts students can crush anyone's notion that extreme combat sports are a man's thing. Focused and with her body in combat position, the 20-year-old journalism student pounds the bag hanging in front of her: she's here to learn how to defend herself, but also to keep fit, blow off steam and have fun. "People think it's just for boys, and it's not. Girls can do it too," she said at a gym in La Mirada, south of Los Angeles. "We can be strong, we can have fun and grow." "There is definitely the stereotype that it's violent, bloody and gross. On TV it's seen as bad, but girls can do it. And it doesn't have to be violent," she told AFP, exhausted but happy after a tough workout, rubbing the bandages that protect her hands.

Men ran the show for many years in the MMA world: a form of combat sport where anything goes-meaning a dizzying flurry of techniques and moves from judo, wrestling, boxing, kickboxing, karate and other martial arts. The point is to maximize physical contact. Its popularity started growing in the United States in 1993 when the firm Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) turned it into a multi-million dollar moneymaker. It shows the fights on a pay cable channel that is seen by 800 million people around the world.

Enter Ronda

The beginning of the end of MMA as a boys' club came eight years ago when Ronda Rousey, at the time an Olympic judo star who took a bronze medal in Beijing, found a new direction in the combat sport. Now 29, she is the world's most famous woman fighter. She is also the world's eighth most highly paid sportsperson, with an annual income of around \$6.5 million including \$3.5 from advertising. Rousey's powerful presence in the ring, her intelligent handling of her fame, her shrewd businesswoman's instincts, her wide appeal and her beauty all have helped turn her into one of the most influential figures in sports worldwide.

Strong, and proud of it

The "Ronda Rousey effect" has gone a long way in recent years toward sparking the surge in



CALIFORNIA: Students train in a Mixed Martial Arts class at the UFC Gym in La Mirada, California. — AFP

women around the country stopping into gyms to give MMA a go. "She has unquestionably brought an influx of young girls and women into MMA," said Josh Gross who has been covering the sport for years. "I don't think there's any question Rousey's influence has made women look at MMA and see it as not so much a thing of violence or reckless behavior or brutality." Rousey is adamant about encouraging women not to shy away from MMA. "They've never had the idea that it was possible to be there before. She's almost a superhero to them," Gross added.

Genevieve Soszynski can back that up. She has been teaching MMA at different Los Angeles area gyms for a decade. And every day, she has more women students keen to hone combat skills and feel stronger.

"It's great to see more women get comfortable with it and want to learn a new skill and be confident doing that," she said. "Some of them

are a little intimidated by the contact. (But) that initial intimidation quickly melts away once they get in." Abrey Martin, one of her students, is dead serious about her own training and progress.

Each blow to the bag, each lightning kick highlights her determination. She is clearly rushing on adrenaline as she pounds away looking for perfect hits. "I really wanted to do something that made me feel strong and not embarrassed to be strong. It can be passionate and fun, and something that gives you strength and growth and you can learn a lot from it. It's not violent," she said without catching a breath. Just like Martin, Carlucci is fine with her body showing her progress, and fine with her trim lines taking on fearsome new curves. "I think it's cool that girls can have muscles and be really strong and not have that stereotype of 'stick thin.' It looks awesome," she said. "You feel sexy." — AFP

DOG INVASION SPARKS CHAOS AT IPL MATCH BAILEY UNHURT AFTER 'TRUCK-LIKE' BOUNCER

NEW DELHI: A pitch invasion by a dog caused chaos at an Indian Premier League game between Pune and Delhi, sending bemused players scurrying around the pitch to try to shoo it away. Spectators cheered as the lively mutt led a series of fielders and groundstaff on a chase around the stadium in the western city of Visakhapatnam on Tuesday. Delhi Daredevils fielder Rishabh Pant initially tried to shoo away the invader after it settled down beside him five balls into the second inning.

But the dog, tail wagging, was enjoying its time in the limelight far too much to be ushered off the pitch. Delhi's South African import Chris Morris tried to lure it off the field as Australia pacer Nathan Coulter-Nile waved a blue towel at it. The brief interlude did little to disturb the concentration of Rising Pune Supergiants' opener Ajinkya Rahane, who drove the team home with his unbeaten 42 against a hapless Delhi in a rain-shortened game. India has thousands of stray dogs and it is not the first time a sporting event has been interrupted by a canine. In 2011, India was forced to halt its first Formula 1 practice session when a stray dog ran onto the Buddh International Circuit.

'Truck-like' bouncer

In another development, Australia's George Bailey was struck by a bouncer in the Indian Premier League that sent his helmet flying, an experience he said was like "getting hit in the face by a truck". Bailey, playing for the Rising Pune Supergiants on Tuesday night, was not injured by the bouncer that he top-edged onto his helmet, shattering parts and knocking it off his head. "Those watching on TV got a better picture than I did, because all I sort of remember was it was like getting hit in the face by a truck," Bailey said of the delivery from countryman Nathan Coulter-Nile. "It was pretty quick. I was quite glad to have one of the new helmets on," said Bailey. Helmets have been strengthened to meet stringent safety standards in the wake of the Phillip Hughes tragedy in 2014. The Australian batsman, who played 26 Tests, died



VISAKHAPATNAM: Delhi Daredevils player Chris Morris plays with a stray dog during the 2016 Indian Premier League (IPL) Twenty20 cricket match between Rising Pune Supergiants and Delhi Daredevils. — AFP

from bleeding on the brain after being hit on the base of the skull by a rising ball at the Sydney Cricket Ground during a domestic match. Bailey stayed on to see Pune outplay the Delhi Daredevils by 19 runs in the rain-hit game in the

eastern city of Visakhapatnam. "A couple (of players) were disappointed that the helmet did not roll on to the stumps but most people were checking how he was, said Bailey who remained unbeaten on eight runs.— Agencies