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# It's Ladies' Fight

Ultimate fighting is crude, vicious and bloody—no wonder it's outdrawing boxing. Now a group of women athletes are looking for a good brawl and a better payday

BY SEAN GREGORY/COMPTON

**Y**OU DON'T KICK A GIRL WHEN she's down, right? Not if you can pound her face instead. At the Fatal Femmes Fighting Championship, an all-female mixed-martial arts (MMA) event, almost anything goes in the cage. Sofie Bagherdai, otherwise a sweet, petite teenager from Southern California, has her opponent, Stephanie Palmer, pinned to the floor. Now she's ready to work—whack, a shot to the noggin. Bam! Pow! Boom! Half a dozen more. Palmer cowers in the fetal position, and the ref stops the fight. The medics cart Palmer out on a stretcher. (She escapes with a fractured foot, suffered earlier in the bout—which seems minor, considering the beating she took.) “I like to be friendly to my opponents, but from the start, she's been mad-dogging me, looking me up and down,” said Bagherdai after the bout. “I wanted to make her pay.”

And see a payday. Over the past few years the popularity of mixed martial arts, the full-combat sport that combines elements of boxing, kickboxing, wrestling, jujitsu and other disciplines, has exploded. One card in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), the most prominent men's MMA organization, whose fights are shown on Spike TV and pay-per-view, drew more television viewers than the baseball playoffs in the all-important 18-to-34-year-old-male demographic. The UFC surpassed HBO's 2006 pay-per-view boxing take and is probably worth more than \$1 billion. So although the sight of two women pummeling each other in a 24-ft.-wide (7.3 m) cage makes some people queasy, the girls are now trying to cash in on the MMA wave. “We're not hitting tennis balls. We're hitting people,” says Gina Carano, a fighter in the upstart, male-dominated

EliteXC circuit who draws more traffic to the tour's website than any male fighter does. “Isn't that more exciting?”

The women fighters are feral. “To be able to potentially break somebody's arm is pretty cool for me,” says Jessica Pene, an Orange County, Calif., makeup artist by day who won her recent Fatal Femmes bout. The raucous Femmes crowd, an eclectic, testosterone-heavy mix of bachelor-party drunks, white-collar MMA fans and even a few young girls, ooohed every choke hold and kick to the face. Says James Jackson, an aerospace worker and MMA fan: “They're almost more brutal, more barbaric, than the guys.”

That brutality is sometimes hard to watch. The women will also have to KO several other daunting challenges to catch the men. Women's boxing, for one, had a nice late-'90s run, but there weren't enough talented fighters to challenge big names like Laila Ali. “There are very skilled women in MMA, but there's going to be a smaller pool [than the men],” notes Ken Herschman, the sports programming GM at Showtime. And at the end of the day, the women must realize that, for the most part, they will still be sold as entertainment for men. It's the ultimate cat fight: as the Fatal Femmes ring announcer put it, “Let's get ready to ... meow!”

The most serious challenge for female

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fighters is to find the right organization to promote them. Fatal Femmes is a promising yet fringe production: its second event, in mid-July, was at a small casino in Compton, Calif.; the first, in June, made just \$10,000. Most female fighters

to support themselves. Plus the UFC, which Fatal Femmes star Lisa Ward has to as “dreamland,” has no plans to add a women's division. “I don't want to see two women beatin' on each other,” says UFC president Dana White. “I don't like it.”

White admits he sounds like a chauvinist, which fires up the women's fight even more. “That is so ridiculous, especially in this day and age,” says fighter Lisa King. “I'm not a women's lib person or anything, but we're doing everything why not this?”



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fighters is to find the right organization to promote them. Fatal Femmes is a promising yet fringe production: its second event, in mid-July, was at a small casino in Compton, Calif.; the fighters, on average, made just \$1,000. Most female fighters need day jobs to support themselves. Plus the UFC, which Fatal Femmes star Lisa Ward refers to as "dreamland," has no plans to add a women's division. "I don't want to see two women beatin' on each other," says UFC president Dana White. "I don't like it."

White admits he sounds like a chauvinist, which fires up the women's fighters even more. "That is so ridiculous, especially in this day and age," says fighter Lisa King. "I'm not a women's lib person or anything, but we're doing everything else, so why not this?" ■



#### Do you like my gloves?

Sofie Bagherdai, top, gets ready to smack down Stephanie Palmer at an all-women ultimate fighting event, the Fatal Femmes Fighting Championship, in Compton, Calif. Left, a ringside view of the cage, just 24 ft. (7.3 m) in diameter

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To see more photos from the Fatal Femmes Fighting Championship, visit [time.com/fatalefemmes](http://time.com/fatalefemmes)