

## **MMA: Florida group trying to raise combat sports to artform; local card set for Saturday night**

By SCOTT CLAIR

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NAPLES — Jabz, a gym in North Naples, is alive on this day with the sound of violence.

Heavy metal blares from the stereo system. The concussive becomes percussive as feet and padded fists beat a drum roll against leather striking pads.

A heavy bag does a weird sort of dance, inspired by blows from a guy with a buzz cut and bad intentions. Each time the bag hops then drops, the chain that connects it to the ceiling jingles.

Close your eyes. Picture Mike Tyson playing a tambourine.

To brothers Nathan and Nick Smith, the promoters of Saturday night's Art of Fighting 8: Fury at Germain Arena, this is all sweet music.

They stand against an eight-sided fence — the octagon — in the back of the gym. Nathan is tapping his foot.

They watch as mixed martial arts fighter Crafton "Blaze" Wallace holds class, offering the finer points of unconsciousness to a few goateed and tattooed young men.

Wallace, of Naples, is the main attraction of Saturday's card. He will fight Waachiim Spirit Wolf out of California.

With a reputation as a lethal striker, when Wallace isn't knocking people out, he's teaching people how to knock people out. This is his purpose at Jabz on this day.

The Smith brothers' purpose here is to check and double check that the big and small details of promoting an evening of combat are on point.

Their promotional organization, Art of Fighting, is based out of St. Petersburg, a stone's throw from where they grew up in Seminole. They got into the game only last year after they said their friend, fighter Dave "Pay Me" Yost, was having problems with another MMA promoter. Yost will also fight on AOF 8.

"I didn't think I could do it better. I knew I could do it better," said Nathan, the owner of AOF. "When you have promoters not interested in the sport but only interested in making money, you're not going to have a good product. I love the sport.

"I just didn't think they were treating the fighters very well and the fights were not competitive. They would pull people off the streets. We pull people out of gyms."

Smith has been doing a lot of pulling lately.

Art of Fighting held its first card in January 2009. By the end of 2010, Smith said AOF 12 will be a done deal.

"It's amazing. No one has done six shows in one year in different cities in Florida," Smith said "We pump out a lot of shows."

AOF fight cards have been held in the Tampa area and Sarasota. Saturday will mark the second time AOF has come to Germain, the first was in December.

On that card, AOF 6, Wallace (19-4-1) was also the main attraction. He lost a decision to California's Reggie Orr. Perhaps the crowd might have been a little disappointed about their hometown hero's loss, but it backed up Smith's assertion that every fight on an AOF card will be competitive. No cupcakes.

"All fights will be good, from start to finish," Smith said. "We actually think about reasons why two guys should fight. Do their styles match up? Most cards aren't very good until you get to the main event. Not with us.

"Matching fighters up is an art form. Styles make fights. You put a good striker up against a good striker. You don't put a good striker who's still developing his ground game against someone with a significant ground game."

It is this strategy of competitive fights that Smith feels will help AOF grow into a nationally recognized organization. There is a lot of competition from rival MMA promoters and fight leagues. MMA is on the verge of surpassing boxing as the favored combat sport.

In Florida alone, there are 23 fight cards scheduled from Saturday to the end of the year. Eleven are boxing. Eleven are MMA and one is a combination of both. For the 11 MMA events scheduled, there are eight different promoters, according to the Florida State Boxing Commission, which regulates both sports.

For AOF to emerge as a viable organization, Smith feels cultivating a strong TV presence is essential. The company films, produces and distributes each of its fight cards for television, which are shown on delay on Fox Sports South.

"We have the best show on the east coast," said Smith, who estimates production costs to televise each card at \$60,000. "The first couple of shows didn't look so good. But they got better. We've kept tweaking to the point where it's making us money, doing good things for us and giving us exposure.

"We're trying to reach a much larger audience than is sitting in the seats. We want to go national. We've had national TV offers, but they weren't the right deal. It'll come eventually.

Saturday will mark the second time Wallace is fighting on an AOF card. He's hoping it

won't be his last.

"I've dealt with a lot of promoters, so I can figure out which guys to deal with," said Wallace.

"I like the way (Smith) conducts business," he added. "Straight up. Does what he says he's going to do. He connects with the fighters the right way. That got my attention."



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