

THE CURRENT



A Challenging Evening

THE PARKING AREA of Key West's East Martello Museum was stuffed full and young people were streaming through the cars, talking over one another in loud anticipation. A roar erupted behind the towers museum, and then another. Then came absolute confirmation: the two ambulances.

Yes, it was the North American Combat Challenge 2, which, the promoters wanted everyone to know, was a fully licensed and insured Florida State Boxing Commission event. Indeed, the emphasis seemed to be on giving the event precisely the mix of semi-legitimacy and sleazy swagger that attaches to a big-time boxing match. The

prices were steep – \$50 for ringside, \$35 to be seated, \$25 general admission – and an announcer with one of those “and *now*, in the *red* corner” voices was in the raised ring. A curvaceous girl walked around the ring before rounds, holding a card and flouncing for the digital videographers who were recording the event for DVD.

Still, a dusty yard behind a small Key West museum isn't Vegas, and the Combat Challenge isn't boxing. It's what once was called ultimate fighting and now has adopted the more genteel name of “Mixed Martial Arts (MMA).” As currently practiced, MMA includes elements of boxing, jiu-jitsu, Brazilian kick-

boxing and various forms of wrestling or grappling. Though it can seem like nothing more than no-holds-barred street-fighting, it has strategic aspects, with fighters playing to their strengths.

Punchers, for instance, try to keep their distance and go for the knockout and wrestlers constantly try to take their opponents down to the mat.

In the name of decency and death-reduction, the official Florida MMA rules do prohibit certain activities, calling them “fouls.”

These include:

- Eye gouging, biting, hair-pulling, and “fishhooking” (use your imagination);
- Groin attacks;
- Placing a finger in an opponent's cut, orifice or laceration;
- Kicking to the kidney with the heel of the foot; and

■ Spiking opponent to canvas on crown of head or neck.

But it is clear that mixed martial arts bouts will never be actually genteel, because the following are perfectly acceptable:

- Arcing elbows and forearms;
- Kicks (if not to the head of a grounded opponent);
- Stomps (if opponent isn't grounded);
- Knees (if not to the head of a grounded opponent); and
- Submission techniques (but no small joint manipulation).

I MAKE IT to the standing-room area just in time for Billy "Mad Dog" Mayhew of Horsehead, New York to force Jeremy May of Ocala, Florida to submit, or tap out by slapping the mat via what certainly seems to be a choke hold. The standing room area is, actually, just the dusty yard behind the towers museum, marked off from the more expensive seats by waist-high street barricades. And the seats are just folding chairs. And, really, the sight lines are better if you're standing rather than sitting down and looking up at the raised ring. But there's a reason to pay the extra \$10 to get a seat (or \$25, to be ring-side).

The reason would be a date.

Yes, the North American Combat Challenge 2 has attracted hundreds of people, most of whom appear to be coupled up. And they seem to view the event as a glitzy affair, to which women wear their bling, bring their carefully coiffed hair and parade their expensive blouses and décolletage. The men in the seats are, oddly, also extremely well-dressed and -groomed, I note, as the country and western music stops and the second pairing of the night - Jeremy "Baby Face" Marcum from Rensselaer, Indiana versus Mitch McElroy of Miami - is announced. Mitch runs across the ring, smashes Baby Face in the mouth and then pummels him on the ground until the referee stops the fight.

Which takes eight seconds, total.

Stunned by the ferocity of the bout, I find myself wishing for an instant replay just as a handsome woman sidles by,

squeezing herself and her occupied baby stroller into the seating area. The amplified music turns to a funky rap-soul mix as the announcer calls, with an ironic smirk, for a "ring technician" to clean "bodily fluids" from the ring. Soon Steven "No Sweat" Connley and Triso Valls are announced in the 173 pound division.

Twenty-seven violent seconds later, "Machine Gun" Valls has fired so many thinly padded fists at a prone Mr. Connley that the fight is ended in Valls

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favor because of "too many unanswered punches."

It is now intermission, and I wander as close as I can to two large sun tents that are cordoned off from the general audience to watch the fighters warm up. There I notice Maria Protopsaltis of Key Haven, who is chatting with her boyfriend, killing time till the next fight. And why does a nice Greek girl like her want to watch men attack one another?

"It's human nature," she says with a broad smile. "Everyone wants to see a fight. Even when it breaks out at a bar, everyone runs to go see."

THE NEXT FIGHT pits Noco Parella of Pembroke Pines, Florida, against Patrick Mikesz of somewhere in the Czech Republic, and it's a good one. They dance around one another, occasionally punching but really looking for an opening to go to the mat. There are reverses, then reverses of reverses on the ground, and suddenly Mikesz uses some kind of leverage magic to put Parella into submission at 3:55 of the first round, which draws wild hooting from the crowd.

Before the fifth fight can begin, the announcer must thank some of the sponsors of the evening's festivities, including

a bail bond firm and the Police Athletic League. So I talk to Ginger Weller, a Key West hairdresser who looks like she can't take another second of mixed martial arts. "It's stressful. I always go. But I'm always like," she says, contorting her face into a grimace that conveys maximum anxiety. "I don't know why I come."

Then she looks at two guys she's with and adds: "They love it."

The next fight starts with what looks to be a motion of sportsmanship - the extension of a fist to touch the opponent's similarly extended hand - but both fighters cheat, trying simultaneously to sweep one another to the ground with their legs. The fight begins to take on a truly frightening character - almost as if it's a horror movie - as the guy in blue, who's clearly stronger and interested in punching, hunts the guy in red who's clearly weaker but clever on the ground. The blue guy punches the red guy a couple of good

What's on my iPod



Charlie Bauer,
general manager,
Hog's Breath Saloon

■ **"WICKED TWISTED ROAD"** Wicked Twisted Road album, Reckless Kelly.

■ **"LAST PORK CHOP"** Almeria Club album, Hank Williams Jr.

■ **"BOONDOCKS"** The Road to Here album, Little Big Town.

■ **"WAKE ME UP WHEN SEPTEMBER ENDS"** American Idiot album, Green Day.

■ **"GOOD IS GOOD"** Wildflower album, Sheryl Crow.

■ **"FOUNTAIN OF SORROW"** Solo Acoustic Vol. 1 album, Jackson Browne.

■ **"INTENTIONAL HEARTACHE"** Blame the Vain album, Dwight Yoakam.

■ **"JULY, YOU'RE A WOMAN"** Ain't in it for the Money, Mickey & The Motor Cars.

■ **"HOLLYWOOD,"** Bop Till Ya Drop, Ry Cooder.

ones, but then the red guy takes him down, and they grapple strenuously for what seems like a very long time, the red guy on his back but actually controlling the stronger blue guy with his legs, never letting him get his hands free to start a good pummeling.

Eventually, the blue guy staggers to his feet. But the red guy won't get up; he stays on his back, crablike, trying to tempt the blue guy back into grappling on the ground. Instead, the standing blue guy starts kicking the prone red guy, in the side, the legs, the shoulders, and he's kicking hard. So the red guy wails away with both of his legs from the ground, nailing the blue guy right in the face with a staggering kick that causes the crowd to inhale.

Suddenly, it's back to grappling, and their eyes bulge as they twist, writhe and roll on the ground. Then the blue guy strips the red guy's hands from him and stands, and they're both on their feet, with the blue guy hunting again.

Before the second can begin, the fight is suspended. There is an emergency in the back, by the sun tents.

THERE'S AN AGONIZINGLY long, bureaucratic wait as the event promoters and the EMTs try to figure out what they're going to do. A real hush falls over the crowd as medical personnel examine a fighter who's sitting on a folding chair, staring in a daze at the ground.

Eventually, after a good 20 minutes, they put the fighter on a stretcher, strap on an oxygen mask, hang a saline bag and roll him out to the ambulance. The fight begins again, and the blue guy hunts the red guy for the full five minutes of a second round, winning by unanimous decision of the judges. The sixth fight ends in a submission hold that forces a tap out at 4:14 of the first round. The guy who nearly passed out seems oddly buoyant afterward, laughing and smiling and hugging his opponent.

The ring technician is called in again to clean up more bodily fluids, and, while he does, the announcer promises more heavyweight action to come. But another medical technician is called to the back,

another oxygen mask is strapped to another dazed fighter, and I decide to leave. Because, as it turns out, not everyone does want to see a fight.

It's Official — Keys are World's Safest Year-round Resort Isle

CLIMATE HAS ALWAYS been high on the list of reasons that people give for visiting Key West. Now, in light of recent *Wall Street Journal* findings, climate

Island Index risk score of 36 out of a possible 100.)

And it isn't just that Key West and its surroundings are environmentally safer than 87.5 percent of the islands the *Journal* scored. Two out of the three water-bound locations that are supposedly safer than ours – Prince Edward Island and Easter Island – cannot be described, even by diehard supporters, as top-rank destinations. (Yes, we know about the long-nosed Moai statues of Rapa Nui; we also know about Easter Island's active volcano. And, as the *Journal* helpfully notes, the average



Sri Lanka was rated the most environmentally dangerous island, for obvious and tragic reasons.

change should join that list.

In an undertaking that seems to have gained little notice here, the *Journal* gathered information from a host of agencies to compile an index that gives environmental risk scores to 40 islands scattered around the globe. Based on a host of environmental factors, including, specifically, climate change, the Dow Jones Island Index announced late in October that the Florida Keys are – drum roll, please – the fifth-safest isles in the world in terms of climate change and environmental risk. (Actually, we're tied for fourth with Curaçao – both locations earning, for what it's worth, a Dow Jones

December temperature on Prince Edward Island is 24 degrees Fahrenheit.) The third island supposedly besting the Keys is Martha's Vineyard, a beautiful and historic Massachusetts resort with wonderful ferry service. And February.

(For the morbidly curious, Sri Lanka – with its plague of floods and drought, combined with last year's devastating tsunami – garnered the perfect "100" score that earned it most environmentally threatened honors in the *Journal's* index. It beat out Cuba with its 272 threatened species, Sulawesi and its bleached coral and Sicily, home to Mt. Etna.)

Plotting Burglary



Though it has ironic undertones, the Dow Jones Island Index was a thorough undertaking. To compile it, the paper gathered authoritative data on 12 different types of environmental risk that islands, their residents and their tourists face. These “metrics” included hurricanes making landfall over 20 years, the number of natural disasters since 1985 (with some qualifications), the presence of active volcanoes and malaria, change in ocean temperature since 1975 and even the number of shark attacks in 2004.

Beyond the high environmental-safety listing, the *Journal* provided us another tourism-promoting favor: an Island Index listing of the Florida Keys as residing in the Caribbean Sea, rather than the less tropically evocative Gulf of Mexico or Atlantic Ocean.

So, we hereby name Key West as the safest year-round resort island in the world, leave Curaçao to argue its own case and set off for Smathers Beach and a dip in the Caribbean.

Mr. Burglar's Neighborhood

KEY WEST is generally thought of as a low-crime locale, and the common wisdom is not completely off base: We're no

Dodge City. According to reports made to the FBI, the city had just one murder or “non-negligent manslaughter” in 2004 and two the year before. An analysis of 2003 crime statistics by the CityRating.com Web site showed Key West per capita violent crime rates to be, overall, slightly below the national average. The FBI's 2004 figures (apparently the latest available for cities of Key West's size) show only slightly more reported violent crime than in the previous year. And the *Key West Citizen* recently reported crime was generally trending down in the first half of 2005.

But property crime seems to be another matter. Using FBI statistics, CityRating.com calculated Key West burglary and theft/larceny rates at 75 percent above the national averages for 2003, and the bureau's 2004 figures for Key West show even more property crime than in the previous year. (For those who are obsessed with specifics: the FBI listed 1,897 property crimes “known to law enforcement” in 2003 and 1,940 in 2004.)

Of course, crime in general is different than crime on your block, so we asked the Key West Police Department (KWPD) for a list of burglaries and thefts reported during the last six months of 2005, and the locations at which those offenses reportedly occurred.

When the list arrived, it came with an explanation that “a few incidents may be missing, but not enough to significantly affect the printout's statistical integrity.” The list also included a lengthy caveat that seemed reasonable enough to quote in full: “Please keep in mind that these are reported burglaries, i.e., whoever called in the incident called it a burglary or theft, or thought it was a burglary or theft at the time it was discovered. Further investigation sometimes results in re-classification of the incident, but the initial call remains in the computer as it was called in. Therefore, some of these may have turned out not to have been burglaries after all. Most often the reason for this, where burglaries and thefts are concerned, was something misplaced, or borrowed by a friend. Unfortunately, this sort of thing can skew our statistics to make the crime rate look worse than it really is.”

The KWPD list includes reports of 20 shopliftings, 24 thefts from motor vehicles, 11 thefts of bicycles and 136 “other” larcenies. It also summarizes 45 reports of burglary or breaking-and-entering, and we decided to plot those incidents – as qualified as the police tell us they are – on the map above, just to see where some of our burglars prefer to ply their trade. — *John Mecklin*