

SPORTS

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Weighing in on MMA debate

Native Miltonian defends controversial sport

Craig 'Cyclone' Cyr has faced plenty of mixed martial arts (MMA) detractors, and — as one who rarely gets fazed or frazzled — generally takes their remarks in stride.

However, the 36-year-old Milton native — who grew up in town and still has strong ties to the community — couldn't help but abandon (albeit just momentarily) his even-keeled demeanour when asked about one particularly colourful characterization of his sport.

"He called it what? Human cockfighting?!" the stoic fighter blurted out in response to a rather infamous quote by U.S. Presidential hopeful John McCain a few years ago. "Man, that's just crazy. What do you say to something like that?"

The Republican senator's comment may be a bit extreme, but there's no denying MMA — for all its popularity — still has its share of critics, who see the caged combat as nothing more than a blood sport.

Never one to pull punches, either in the ring or out of it, Cyr has a very straight-forward reply to that viewpoint.

"That's just ignorance talking," said the five-foot-nine-inch, 155-pounder, who took up MMA about a year-and-a-half ago following a lengthy hiatus from combat — having enjoyed a highly-decorated kickboxing career throughout the 1990s. "Most people don't know how much discipline goes into this because they can't see the training behind the scenes.

"Contrary to what some believe, there's a lot of strategy involved. It's like a human chess match in there, and most of the guys really do respect each other. Yes there's a lot of hype and adrenaline before a match, but nobody's looking to do serious harm to the other guy."

Of course it goes without saying that MMA has ample supporters as well.

In fact a swift uppercut or flying knee to the head aren't nearly as staggering as that understatement, given the sport's skyrocketing fan base — primarily among males 18 to 34. Just last month CBS began capitalizing on the sport's craze, airing the first in a series



with STEVE LeBLANC

In the stands

of Saturday night EliteXC cards. Its viewership among that aforementioned demographic spiked by a whopping 271 per cent during that previously-dormant time slot.

But one would hardly be going out on a limb to suggest MMA isn't exactly being embraced by a sizable segment of mainstream North America — something Cyr fully appreciates.

And with images like blood pouring down a fighter's face or fists being driven into the back of one's head, the lightweight combatant stresses that it's certainly not appropriate for youngsters.

"No I wouldn't feel comfortable with children being exposed to it. They can't grasp what's going on."

But when it comes to the actual consequences of that violence, MMA opponents aren't on nearly as solid footing as they'd like to believe.

While unfair to draw a direct comparison with other sports — for a variety of reasons — consider this.

The Journal of Combative Sport reports that there have been 686 boxing-related fatalities in U.S. history, while that total jumps to 1002 for football. The number of deaths in sanctioned MMA events since its inception — one, Sammy Vasquez in Texas last October.

Add in the fact that the potential for head injuries is just as prevalent or more so in the ring and on the gridiron than in the cage and it's difficult to see MMA as any more dangerous than its more accepted combat counterparts.

Said Cyr, "Yes it's violent, but there are

much stricter safety measures in place now than when it first started. They stop the fight pretty quick now when a guy's in trouble. I've never been scared for my safety in there."

Recently solicited for their opinion on the controversial sport, long-time local martial arts instructors Scott Hogarth and Bob Kranz — of Fighting Griffin Martial Arts and the Milton School of Jiu-Jitsu respectively — both said they're all for MMA competition.

That is, as long as it's properly sanctioned.

"You've got to have the right matchings in terms of weight and experience," stressed Kranz.

Cyr totally agrees, pointing to a first-hand experience earlier this year at a Rochester-area event that may not have been above board.

"Truth be told, it didn't seem completely legit once I got there," admits 'Cyclone', who due in part to the red tape involved in getting a license and because MMA is banned in many areas like his native Ontario, has only had two bouts (both knockout wins) to date. "I just wanted to get another fight in, but I won't be doing that again."

"I don't see the sport going underground here (Ontario) like it has in places like New York, though — not with the heavy fines involved. There's been rumours of it being sanctioned in Ontario since the UFC had such a great draw in Montreal. I sure hope they make it legal here soon, but there's a lot of politics involved and it seems like a few people are working hard to keep it banned."

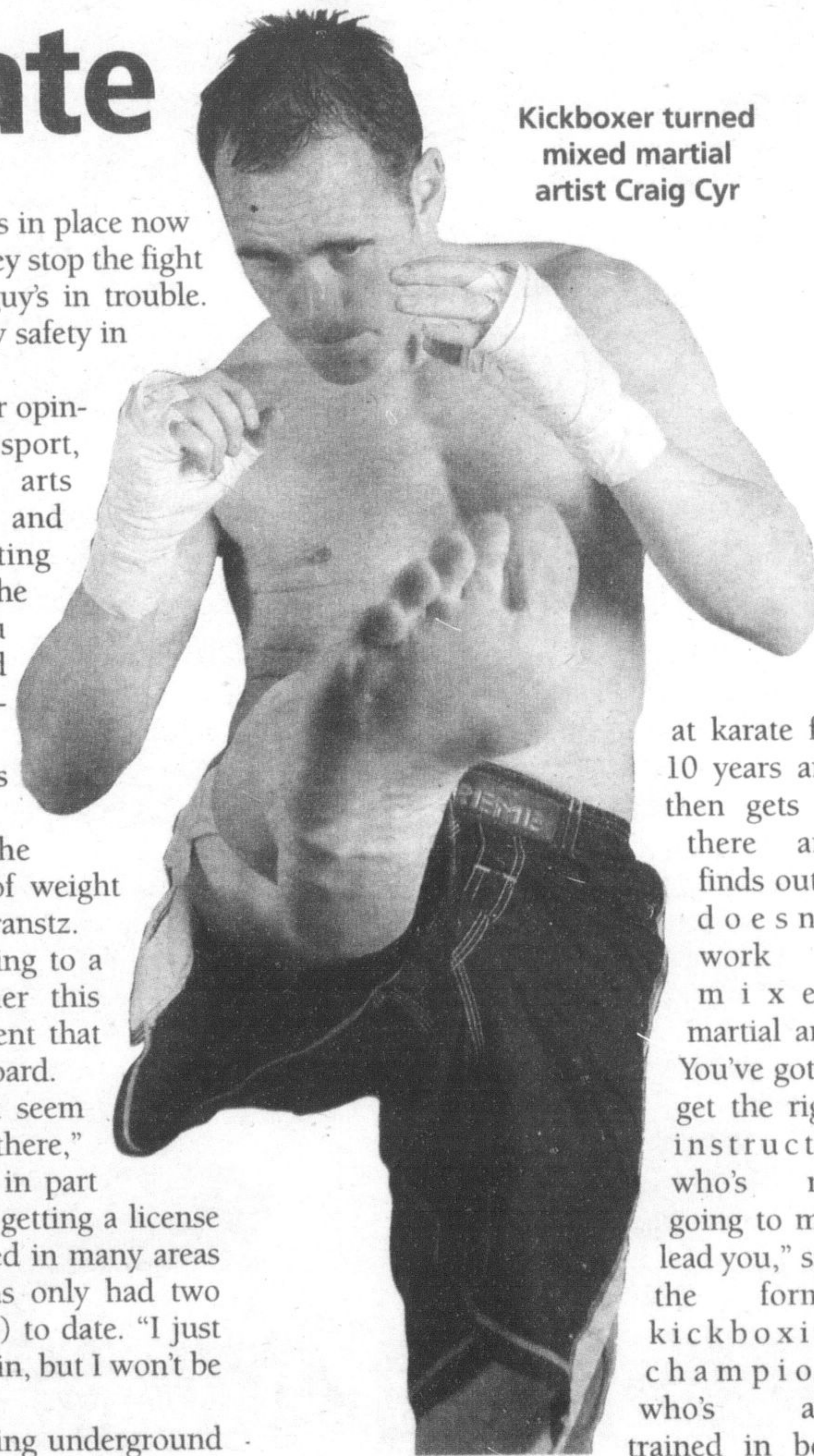
Another concern local martial arts instructors have relates to training — or rather a lack of it.

"My worry is that guys who've been successful in one particular martial art may be getting a false sense of security from their coaches and going in (to MMA) when they're not ready," remarked Hogarth.

Cyr stresses that's not the case with him.

"Yeah you may get someone who's thrived

Kickboxer turned mixed martial artist Craig Cyr



at karate for 10 years and then gets in there and finds out it doesn't work in mixed martial arts. You've got to get the right instructor who's not going to mislead you," said the former kickboxing champion, who's also trained in both

jit-jitsu and kung fu. "I'm a very realistic person and would never get in there if I felt I wasn't prepared. I'm not about to risk getting hurt or looking like an idiot just for curiosity.

"And there really is enough safety measures in place. To add any more, like wearing head gear or not having it in a cage, would be taking away a lot of what the sport is."

At 36, Cyr realizes his MMA career may be over before it really gets a chance to begin — having been turned down by the UFC in favour of younger fighters.

But when it comes to the sport's future, he doesn't see its momentum diminishing anytime soon.

"It's the evolution of martial arts. It's here to stay."

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