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UFC Feels That the Future Is Good

By Ryan Mink
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Chuck Liddell was in front of a camera so much that he dozed off while being interviewed on "Good Morning Texas" in March. Laughing about the ordeal during a teleconference last week, Liddell said he was glad he came down with pneumonia, allowing him to take a break from his public relations blitz.

The merry-go-round of press appearances for one of Ultimate Fighting Championship's most vocal spokesmen was starting to wear on him. But recently, Liddell has been back on the public stage, appearing in an episode of HBO's "Entourage," on the cover of ESPN the Magazine and on numerous television shows.

"If anybody knows a name in UFC or mixed martial arts in general, it's Chuck," said David Cater, principal of The Sports Business Group in Los Angeles. "He is that one brand name people associate with."

"Chuck Liddell right now is the king of MMA," said UFC President Dana White.

Tonight in UFC 71 at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, Liddell will defend his light heavyweight title against Quinton "Rampage" Jackson, the last man to beat him and the only loss in Liddell's 20-3 career that he has not avenged. So what happens if UFC's poster-boy loses as the sport begins to cement its place on the national sports scene?

"It will hurt," Cater said. "But this has become a very well-marketed, well-positioned sport. You're seeing UFC work its way into the lexicon of sports. Because it is moving so tactically and so well now, the loss of any fighter, in the ring or to retirement, I don't think will materially harm the growth of UFC."

Jackson beat Liddell in 2003 when the two fought in a Pride bout. Liddell, who will defend his title for a fifth time tonight, has been shooting for a rematch ever since.

"Stylistically, it's a dangerous fight for Chuck," White said. "If Chuck loses, then maybe there's a third fight between them. There's always going to be new stars. There are always new challenges."

There have been a few significant upsets in the last two UFC events. Georges St. Pierre, who was called the future of UFC by White, was stunned in a technical knockout by Matt Serra. White was so shocked, he said he had to be jostled to get up and hand out the new welterweight belt.

Also in UFC 69, an up-and-coming star with a previously undefeated record, Diego Sanchez, was beaten by Josh Koscheck in an uneventful decision. In UFC 70, Mirko "Cro Cop" Filipovic entered as one of the sport's most fearsome

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fighters. He was stunningly knocked out with a kick to the head in the first period.

"The only way any sports league or property emerges is if it creates personalities as it goes," Carter said. "Whether he wins or loses, it will be critical for the UFC to manufacture and promote other emerging stars."

Where UFC needs to be careful, Carter said, is if there were to be a major injury to a prominent fighter during a fight. That could only give UFC's opponents more fodder to tear down a sport they deem too dangerous.


World Wrestling Federation owner Vince McMahon has already said the UFC will burn out from all the attention and boxing figures, including Floyd Mayweather Jr., have taken their jabs.

White, meanwhile, isn't looking anywhere but forward. And he said he certainly isn't concerned about today's bout.

"Chuck's a big superstar," White said. "What Chuck has right now is that aura Mike Tyson had around him. He seems invincible. But I don't think the UFC is going to collapse if Chuck loses."

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