



The Business of Mixing MMA and Fitness

Interview by Lin Conklin

Ross O'Donnell, along with his wife Joanne and daughter Brittany, have securely planted themselves in an arena many others would not have dared to enter. For years fitness clubs wanted to train their members in fitness techniques that in no way involved any martial arts moves. The fear of injury stood in the way of any possibility of using actual kicks, strikes and blocks on anything but a training bag. Martial arts schools were no different by not understanding the importance good fitness could play in their training programs. Thus, martial arts schools and dojos focused on proper martial arts strikes and blocks but put little to no effort into any kind of fitness training.

President and CEO of Fitness Kickboxing Canada, Ross O'Donnell built a business that allowed two previously independent training regimens to be combined into one: fitness and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) training. Mr. O'Donnell describes the idea of integrating fitness training and martial arts to be like mixing oil and water. The difference here though is that the two did mix and have continued to do so exceptionally well.

O'Donnell's background is as a Certified Personal Trainer (PT), specializing in karate, boxing and kickboxing. His humble beginnings were doing one-on-one, in-home PT sessions that concentrated on using boxing and kickboxing pad work. His work there exposed the need for standardization of boxing, kickboxing and MMA certifications, as well as the need for adequate and

affordable insurance coverage for trainers. What O'Donnell discovered through his own experiences was that certification programs were as varied as the teachers who instructed them. Because of the variations in the certification instruction, insurance companies could not rely on consistent instruction being given to personal trainers, making them reluctant to insure them.

Using his background in karate, boxing, kickboxing, and as a Can-Fit-Pro PRO-Trainer along with his experience as a competitive coach, O'Donnell designed a systematic approach to teaching personal trainers. His method resulted in the creation of 15 training manuals and a book to establish a standardization of the material personal trainers learned. With his system a person could get an Instructors Certification anywhere in Canada to the same standards. Whether you were certified in Vancouver or Newfoundland, you could be assured that your training was identical. With this development, O'Donnell approached one of Canada's largest insurance companies to underwrite insurance that could be tailored to personal trainers. In return the insurance company would be able to insure most, if not all, personal trainers – volume meant it became worth their time and also meant lower costs to the insured. The insurance company could see that all personal trainers were receiving the same FKCI standardized instruction. This made them more comfortable with the idea that the same knowledge was being transferred to all instructors.

But don't think O'Donnell stops at offering personal training for fitness only. He and his team take competition seriously. He owns and acts as chief instructor for the Canadian Amateur Sport Kickboxing (CASK) Association and the Canadian Amateur Boxing Association (CABA) club, which operate out of the O'Donnell's head location in Orangeville, Ontario. Training is focused on being able to compete at the national level. In fact two years in a row he has trained and placed a member on the Canadian National Kickboxing Team and produced two National Champions and three Provincial Champions.

Fitness Kickboxing Canada started with the idea of filling a need to service trainers through education and certification programs. Today the program spans Canada. Mr. O'Donnell accomplished this by franchising the training program and training 40 course conductors to implement the standardized training.

Eventually O'Donnell and his team found themselves in the market to supply training equipment, such as gloves and portable boxing rings, because the people they were training saw and liked the equipment Fitness Kickboxing Canada instructors were using. Eventually they grew into a full product line of combined fitness and MMA products. The latest of their designs are the MMA gloves, which are combination of traditional MMA glove (no palm and a knuckle protector) and a weight lifting glove. This design means no change of gloves is required when transitioning from lifting weights to punching.

Fitness Kickboxing Canada also offers a unique striking bag. This training bag is shaped in the figure of a torso and has a density of about 13 inches so you can jump on it and also perform all MMA techniques. It works well for conducting formatted classes where the instructor calls out a series of strikes (forearm strike, knee strike, etc.), which the student can perform in succession on the training bag.

A complete product line of Fitness Kickboxing Canada Incorporated (FKCI), including gloves (Bag, Boxing and MMA fitness), pads, floor MMA striking bags, and portable boxing rings, is offered on a wholesale basis to the trainers they certify,



at the conferences they attend, as well as through BOES, one of Canada's largest boxing equipment providers.

The idea to mix fitness training and MMA was first presented on a mass scale at the FKCI Conference Continuing Education Credit (CEC) program in conjunction with the MMA Expo held in June 2009 in Toronto. Supported and encouraged by MMA Expo president Gerald Chopik, O'Donnell hired former UFC Lightweight champion Sean Sherk to assist in the training sessions presented at the Expo. With Sherk's observation that the mixed program was a great way to combine fitness and authentic MMA movements with several transitional moves used in actual training, O'Donnell knew he had designed a working program. Even more encouraging were the 24 sessions they conducted at the event because they involved martial arts instructors and school owners as well as fitness instructors and club owners. The combination of fitness and MMA was a success. Discussions are underway for MMA Expo shows in Ottawa, Calgary, Vancouver, Montreal, and maybe even the United States. All are expected to do just as well as the Toronto show.

Coming up in August, O'Donnell and his family, who are all certified instructors, head for Beijing, China, where they will be presenting their training program to the Chinese Sport and Aerobic Association at the 2009 Chinese Sports and Fitness Conference. In addition they will be providing 3 days of certification training to Chinese trainers and instructors to enable them to teach fitness kickboxing across China. It is truly exciting for O'Donnell to have a Chinese organization purchase a 20-year contract for the rights to his program in order to spread it across China.

It is hard to imagine with teaching and conducting CEC workshops to certify over 1,000 people a year with Can-Fit-Pro, the Canadian Professional Training Network (CPTN) and the YMCA that O'Donnell could find the time to write a regular fitness column for his local newspaper, and he expects the release of his second book, *The Ultimate Fitness MMA Workout*, to be released this fall. His first book, released in 2005, was *The Ultimate Fitness Boxing and Kickboxing Workout*.

So what's next for Mr. O'Donnell and his team? Returning from taking part in the UFC 100 Expo in Las Vegas, which was held in July, they are on to China (Beijing), Vancouver BCFit09, Can-Fit-Pro Toronto, and the MMA Expo in Montreal. O'Donnell is excited to have teamed up with Can-Fit-Pro, who hold the largest fitness conference in Canada, for the first ever MMA Zone at the August 21 and 22 Can-Fit-Pro conference in Toronto. With all this, Fitness Kickboxing Canada has without a doubt been successful in their endeavor to merge fitness and MMA.

Fitness Kickboxing Canada is located at 10 Second Street, Orangeville, Ontario, ON L9W 2B5. You can look at their scheduled event in your area on their website, www.fitnesskickboxingcanada.ca. Ross O'Donnell can be reached by emailing info@fitnesskickboxingcanada.ca or by phone at 519-942-1625.