

K-1: Past & Future

- **Japan and the Big Boys**

In the 1990's, my Japanese friends from the dojo would pester me with queries about "Iron" Mike Tyson and his various comebacks from the penal system. Could Tyson have beaten a prime Ali? No, I'd say... ever seen Roy Jones fight? Floyd Mayweather? Their eyes would invariably search the premises as if looking for lost keys, or a punch line. Can *they* beat Tyson?

Come the new millennium, and my Japanese acquaintances had shifted their attention to Bob Sapp and his freakish foray into K-1 and Pride fighting. Can anyone beat Sapp, they wondered? Will he eventually crush perfect Ernesto Hoost, the greatest K-1 fighter of all time? Yes, I scoffed at the former, and hell no regarding the latter, befuddled and bemused by the oriental obsession with occidental big boys. I figured that it was a phenomenon not unlike my boxing fan friend who is unduly impressed by the flashy high kick, or the karate fighters who marvel at the arm bar. Wow. Look at that guy do what I can't. Look at that guy being bigger than everybody in my race. Wow.

Kazuyoshi Ishii had been a karateka in the (then) fearsome Kyokushin system, before breaking off and forming the Seidokaikan fighting system. When Mr. Ishii created the K-1 fighting format in 1993, he was essentially taking the Kyokushin open weight tournament format in which he was raised, and modifying it with reality based kickboxing techniques. In Kyokushin, face punches were fouls that led to disqualification. Relatively smaller Japanese fighters had been able to maintain a tenuous superiority over larger foreigners through spirited training, rules that favored smaller fighters in close decision fights, and questionable judging. Strong, skilled, relatively small Japanese men like Kenji Midori and Shokei Matsui were able to win world tournament championships. In K-1, however, we found out that weight discrepancies carry more, uh, weight, when punches are aimed at the noggin, and that judges' decisions carry less weight when one fighter is more unconscious than the other.

Realities: There is a fundamental difference between a chin and a chest. Dutch men are considerably larger than Japanese men. It's far more exciting to see two half-naked men (be they Dutch or Japanese) aiming to knock each other out with head punches, than two gi-wearing guys socking each other on the chest in a kiai fest.

K-1 was a hit in Japan, and towering Europeans named Branco, Ernesto, and Aerts became fan favorites. Most popular of all was Andy Hug, an exciting Swede who had been raised in the Kyokushinkaikan (before wisely complimenting his extraordinary kicking skills with a healthy dose of Muay Thai kickboxing); and he spoke Japanese to boot. Other large Kyokushin karateka, such as Fihlo, Feitosa, and Pettas, tried their hand at the punching in the face party, as did a few Japanese Don Quixotes, like Sataake and Musashi. K-1 spread throughout the globe, with fighters and tournaments appearing in Australia, Africa, various European outposts, and finally in America. These were "the salad days".

- **Trouble in Paradise**

Boxing pundits like Teddy Atlas and Emanuel Steward bemoan the present state of the heavyweight division, noting that the current dearth of big men is largely due to

marketing. Big kids (who frequently grow up to be big men) are raised on television, and television is more likely to show big men— big, *rich* men— dribbling basketballs or catching footballs than punching (and being punched by) other men. The same applies to the current state of other fighting arts: big boys prefer balls over brutality.

Though K-1 tournaments had become global events, the same fighters always seemed to make their way to the final Grand Prix tournaments that take place in Japan toward the end of each year. There were the champions (Hoost, Aerts, Hug), the almost champions (Le Banner, Bernardo, Sefo, Fihlo), and they were always fighting each other. Then in 2001, some fat slob from Australia named Mark Hunt up and won the world tournament, and either K-1 was evolving (new blood), or entirely random (fat guy won it all). And along came Bob Sapp. Random appeared to take the upper hand.

Any sport looking to market their product needs a superstar, and Ernesto Hoost was K-1's man. A tall, sleek Dutchman of Surinamese descent, his terrible shins and consistent technique had earned him the moniker of "Mr. Perfect." He came off as rather aloof, and his style could be overly cautious at times, but he was undeniably the best fighter in K-1, the toughest guy in the 'hood, the man who could stand behind Mr. Ishii as he told other martial art big wigs: "This is *my* bodyguard." And along came Bob Sapp.

With a melon head bigger than most men's torsos, sitting atop a torso more muscled than a comic book hero's, carried by legs that looked too heavy to lift (much less kick), Sapp was an oddly fearsome character. But he possessed no fighting pedigree. A failed football player, Sapp had only recently brought his 350+ pounds into the kickboxing gym to train. Though he appeared rather foolish when fighting, smaller men frequently neglected to step aside when Sapp charged, so he won some trivial bouts. The Japanese fans loved his cartoon character looks and personality. But putting Sapp in with Hoost was folly; it was Primo Carnera versus Joe Louis.

For the first few minutes of the fight, Hoost put a perfect beating on the amateur. Who would have think that Mr. Perfect would fail to move his head or feet when a hurt, scared, enraged Sapp ran him into a corner? That Sapp would knock out the greatest K-1 fighter? Twice! Don't kickboxers know how to move their feet and head? It was as if Michael Jordan had become a professional baseball player AND tore Randy Johnson a new asshole. Tonya Harding had laced up the boxing gloves AND knocked out Lucia Rijker (twice!). No, this was even goofier. The greatest kickboxer in the world had been knocked out—twice!—by a *mediocre football player*. How tough was Mr. Ishii's neighborhood, when the toughest guy couldn't beat an amateur? The implications were bigger than Sapp's melon head: How seriously can you take a sport built on such a precarious foundation?

- **Paradise Reinvented**

Here's an odd contradiction in American sports' culture: In practice, martial arts tend to attract middle and upper class practitioners, while boxing draws combatants primarily from the ghetto, *yet* the decidedly upper-middle class mass media that reluctantly covers boxing has entirely shunned competitive martial arts (UFC, K-1, Pride) on grounds of excessive brutality. Most boxing fans and mass media are drawn to blood & guts boxers who sacrifice their well being through aggressive, incautious brawling (think of the recent Gatti-Ward trilogy). But somehow K-1 with its concussive head kicks, and MMA with its relatively foreign ground game, strikes many of these same Americans as being

brutal in a *bad* way (“human cockfighting”). In order to appeal to a broader (i.e.: American) audience, K-1 needs to market a product that is not only action packed, but also artful in a manner that is not too subtle for an inexperienced audience. Graceful carnage.

Perhaps it’s time for K-1 to turn to the smaller men, instead of depending so much on the smaller talent pool of the big boys. There are plenty of men in Japan and elsewhere who are not 6 ‘5’, yet possess the athletic ability and heart to compete in a sport that does not require freakish size. These men are not only more abundant in quantity, but often more pleasing in quality. After all, the most popular boxer of the last decade has been Oscar De La Hoya, fighting at weights ranging from 130-160 pounds. K-1 could do worse than to increase exposure to their World Max (70kg and below) tournaments, with a few special heavyweight bouts tacked onto the card to satisfy our fascination with big boys. Perhaps diminutive Norifumi “Kid” Yamamoto could be a sort of dwarfish Golden Boy. Does “Kid” speak English? Does he sing ballads and talk about his dead mother? Is she dead? Think about the possibilities! “Kid” Yamamoto on the Grammy’s, singing Japanese love ballads...

This takes us to the second phase of K-1’s evolution: MMA rules fighting. Though it would be nice to expand the K-1 fan base, there are many diehard fans of full contact martial arts, and we need to be attended to and titillated now and again. K-1 has recently made inroads into the world of MMA with the addition of *Hero’s* to their shows. Following the recent example of Pride and UFC, K-1 Hero’s features MMA competition in several weight classes. They are cultivating a crop of exciting, smaller Japanese fighters (Yamamoto, Tokoro, and Sudo), recruiting old MMA stalwarts (the Gracies and – what a coup!— Sakaraba), and providing a training ground for stand-up fighters wetting their feet in the full contact pool (Aerts, Le Banner, and Sefo). This ladder group indicates the pull of full contact MMA on the martial arts world. K-1 fighters, be it due to boredom with the same old opponents or a desire to prove themselves in a more challenging format, are branching out. One can only hope that K-1’s incursion into MMA is enduring, encourages competition and cooperation between the three major organizations (UFC, Pride, K-1), further develops fighters of variegating stature, and eventually helps to translate the excitement of MMA into the lexicon of the American fight fan. Or maybe we should just throw Yamamoto in with Sapp and let them punch each other silly in the chest.