

FOREWORD: BILL VIOLA JR.



Photo courtesy of Bill Viola

Bill Viola III (Jr.) and his father, Bill Viola II ca. 1981

Godfathers of MMA

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I have studied a full spectrum of martial arts, most notably Shotokan Karate, since birth. As the son of a karate master, no memories seem to exist before the *dojo*. I guess you could say it was preordained that I would become a black belt. My father instilled the importance of cross-training from an early age: kickboxing—jujutsu—practical self-defense. It wasn't tagged MMA, but mixed martial arts was his "way." The training shaped my character, instilling me with perseverance, determination, and focus. I followed my father's mantra, "The more you sweat in here, the less you bleed out there." It is the intensity of your training that makes you who you are, and the

“secret” to karate proficiency is simply, “Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday,” perfect practice makes perfect. To me, a bow is a sign of respect and doesn’t hold religious significance, that role is reserved for my own Christian faith. I was taught that while martial arts can sharpen your mind and body, there isn’t anything “magical” about it.

Others hold a more celestial attachment to martial arts. Greek and Roman mythology romanticize the notion of mere mortals who could transform themselves to godlike stature through apotheosis. The supernatural belief has forged an intangible connection with many martial arts over the years; some with a deep spiritual undertone, others even intertwined with sorcery. A large contingency of practitioners share in the metaphysical belief of internal “life” energy (Chinese “chi/qi” Japanese “ki” Indian “prana” or simply “vital energy” to Westerners). In laymen’s terms, followers believe these masters to have mind control; they can “use the force,” a manifestation most can relate to from *Star Wars*. Traces of this ancient dogma have since been enshrined by Hollywood, casting a mystical shadow over the martial arts.

Regardless of your beliefs, by the ‘70s, many martial artists were seen as almost superhuman. It’s an image sensationalized by the entertainment industry and accompanied by theatrics I like to label as “martial marketing:” Smashing rocks, shattering blocks of ice, breaking flaming boards, and even walking on shards of glass all of which were usually accompanied by some type of acrobatics and *kiwis*. These demonstrations seemed to defy physics and incited the “wow factor.” The public was hooked, but not everyone was a believer. The performances no doubt took precision and skill but remember, “Boards don’t hit back.” Skeptics aside, martial arts did evoke a sense of mystery and exaggerations spread like wildfire. My personal favorite cliché, “karate experts must have their hands and feet registered as lethal weapons with the police.” Reality was relative and the debate of which fighting arts were legitimate was

reaching a boiling point.

Outlandish claims drew the ire of critics who questioned the effectiveness of some martial arts. The signs of the times were leading to a crossroads so to speak. Opposing schools of thought (boxing, wrestling, karate, kung fu etc.) scoffed at one another with steadfast loyalty to their craft; pure ego. A good old fashioned argument couldn't sway the cult-like devotion inherent among them; you needed proof. In 1979 MMA was a hypothesis, a challenge of all the ancient superstitions in a "physical" manner. Bill Viola and Frank Caliguri simply said no more talk; it was put up or shut up.

Ultimate fighters ahead of their time...

Godfathers of MMA is really a memoir chronicling the dramatic rollercoaster ride that was CV (Caliguri and Viola) Productions. This account, now legendary, is dedicated to preserving the historical lineage of modern MMA as a sport from its humble beginnings in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, through its tumultuous rise across the United States. Many people and groups have helped pioneer mixed martial arts, creating the worldwide phenomenon we know today. The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) shook up the country with its no-holds-barred approach to televised combat, while the Gracie family inspired a completely new generation of martial arts fans and practitioners. Zuffa, LLC took their marketing strategy to an

entirely new level and has since put MMA on a global scale. All of the hard work and dedication should be, and for the most part has been recognized and commended—almost.

My father was 32 years old when he and his partner took bold steps to bring mixed martial arts to the forefront of American sports culture, decades ahead of their successors. To put the evolution of MMA in perspective, Dana White (current UFC President) was in elementary school when the first wave of MMA fights took Pennsylvania by storm. Coincidentally, as I began this book project, I too was 32 years old sharing an uncanny connection and unique sense of timing to the entire mercurial tale. As a seasoned promoter and martial artist, I followed in my father's footsteps accruing a lifetime of stories growing up around the fight game.

In life, things tend to come full circle; *Godfathers of MMA* brings family, friends, and the legend of CV Productions together. Although I was just a toddler during the “Tough Guy” craze, the memories have impacted my career forever.

I grew up in the midst of what I like to call the “Golden Era of MMA,” hearing firsthand the inspiring and often crazy stories that rattled the status quo of combat sports. It was like the Wild West for contemporary mixed martial arts fans, with an improbable cast of characters ridden with outlaws, rebels and bad asses famous for their brash egos and short tempers. These men stepped into the squared circle for a free-for-all, a real fight where it was legal to punch, kick, knee, and slam your opponent into submission. It was the first of its kind, an emotional rush and sport never seen by the American public before.

While other kids my age fantasized about being studio wrestlers, I idolized the real deal and men (my father and Frank) who transformed reality fighting into a new brand of competition. The charismatic duo had swagger and a certain moxie that made them feel invincible. They weren't afraid to go toe-to-toe with anyone; big government or rival fight promoters. With fistfuls of ambition, the two sparked a

cutting edge movement that pushed the boundaries of the fight game.

I remember an old hand sketched picture that hung in my dad's office that simply read, "He who flies highest, sees furthest." He and Frank were men of vision, progressive thinkers with the experience to launch their *Super Fighters League* nationwide. CV may not have had a crystal ball, but they did seem to have a measure of clairvoyance because it took the UFC years to catch up to the MMA model they introduced in 1979.

Until then mixed-fights were few and far between, mostly publicity stunts. The Ali (boxer) vs. Inoki (wrestler) farce was still fresh in people's minds, and no long-term legitimate outlet existed for budding mixed martial artists; they needed an arena. CV Productions changed the game providing common ground and giving everyday rough-and-tumble fighters a sport to call their own. This wasn't a style vs. style exhibition or a rigged wrestling match; this was "The Real Thing in the Ring (a phrase coined by Fred Adams)." It was an age old idea presented on a revolutionary new platform, one that only the pageantry of sport can create. These men who "left it all in the ring" are forever a part of the first mixed martial arts fraternity in America, a brotherhood unique to Pennsylvania.

CV embraced a warrior spirit that embodied what mixed martial arts could be and would become in the future. They brought the classic tale of American bravado to life, giving bona fide "Tough Guys" an opportunity to prove who the best "Super Fighter" really was. Bragging rights were put to the test and the pride of many self-proclaimed champions was broken. The unknown sport would give ordinary people an extraordinary opportunity. The allure of an underdog gaining overnight fame and fortune immediately struck a chord with the working class; it was the *Rocky* syndrome.

As this book's saga unfolds, we reveal a clandestine plot to subvert the "first" mixed martial arts revolution and fill in the missing parts of the sport's history. CV's billion dollar brainchild sparked a massive power struggle between a host of

jealous boxing promoters, corrupt politicians and seedy underworld players—all who wanted to protect their interests. Mixed Martial Arts quickly made inroads into boxing's "Holy" territory igniting a turf war with some of the most powerful players in Pennsylvania. Tension reached fever pitch by 1983, but the world wasn't ready for MMA. Time marches on and three decades later the journey had all been but forgotten and the facts in jeopardy of being lost forever.

Malcolm Gladwell once said, "Invention has its own algorithm: genius, obsession, serendipity and epiphany in some unknowable combination." CV Productions was blessed with that unique chemistry but sadly seen as a flash in the pan. The truth is they never had the chance to share their handiwork with the world, instead blindsided and buried by political rhetoric. For my father, "It was like inventing the television and the government telling you, you can't turn it on." People often quip "right place, right time" to explain success, but my dad always joked it was "wrong place, wrong time." Unfortunately he was correct.

As we reminisce about the chaotic rise and fall of MMA from 1979-1983, most fight fans don't realize just how close they were to seeing a UFC-type entity thirty five years ago. CV had no interest in promoting a gimmick; it was supposed to be a game changing concept from the outset. In the words of my father,

“ This is a new, entirely different sport. ”

—Bill Viola, On what combined fighting [MMA] was.

**quoted by Tom McMillan, Tribune-Review (November 7, 1980)*

The original fighters and promoters were brave but they were in fact, decades ahead of their time. I felt that it was my responsibility to recognize these trailblazers and give them the respect they earned so many years ago. This is the untold story; the birth of an American sport...