

The Toronto Star

December 6, 2011 Tuesday

## **UFC fighters lack 'credibility' on bullying;**

**Critics pan Doug Ford's promotion of scrappers as anti-violence messengers**

**SECTION:** NEWS; Pg. A1

**LENGTH:** 631 words

Asking mixed martial arts fighters to give anti-bullying advice to students is "no different" from tobacco industry insiders "trying to talk about fresh air and clean lungs."

It is, says Peter Jaffe, a "credibility" issue.

The Ultimate Fighting Championship fighters who will speak on bullying to GTA and London students at the Rogers Centre on Tuesday may be well intentioned, but they are the "wrong messengers," argues Jaffe, an education professor at the University of Western Ontario and Thames Valley District School Board trustee.

The issue came to the forefront on the weekend when the Star revealed that Toronto Councillor Doug Ford has suggested local schools consider a community service program backed by the violent UFC.

In an email obtained by the Star, Ford's constituency assistant, Anna Vescio, asked a Toronto District School Board trustee to circulate a brochure to schools in favour of the UFC's Community Works initiative. The brochure claims the program promotes "development of discipline, respect, teamwork, honesty ... and physical fitness" through MMA training and meeting UFC fighters.

Putting this sort of positive spin on UFC fighters - known for their brutal, bloody spectacles - causes some difficulty for people like Jaffe when assessing their value as anti-bullying messengers.

"I'd also have difficulty with hockey players who are goons on hockey teams coming to talk to kids about bullying," he says. "Ultimately, it's about hypocrisy."

He feels it's a "misnomer" to call UFC fighting "mixed martial arts."

"It's trying to dress up graphic violence. It's a gruesome sport," says Jaffe.

But Tom Wright, UFC's director of Canadian operations, believes the fighters can provide valuable life lessons to youth at risk. The Rogers Centre event is an opportunity for students to spend some time with mixed martial arts "athletes" who can talk about bullying, says Wright.

He adds that the UFC has no intention of going into schools. "I have no idea where that notion came about."

As to violence, Wright contends that there are "violent aspects in hockey, football, all sorts of different sports."

One of the fighters who will speak Tuesday, American Matt Mitrione, was bullied as a child. He and Canadians Sean Pierson, Sam Stout and Mark Hominick will be available to speak to students at the event, which is free but closed to the general public.

Toronto Police Services Sgt. Kevin Hooper will also be there speaking about anti-bullying initiatives, said police spokesman Const. Tony Vella.

TDSB chair Chris Bolton says he only heard Saturday about the Rogers Centre event and doesn't know much about the UFC. "It's not something on my radar ... it's a sport of some sort."

He says he's busy focusing on the TDSB's own initiative on "saying no to bullying," an event Dec. 14 at Ricoh Coliseum.

Wright says that the Rogers Centre gathering is the second in a UFC Community Works ongoing initiative to help communities with at-risk youth.

Last April, Toronto's Cabbagetown Youth Centre (CYC) got \$10,000 from UFC Community Works to buy mixed martial arts equipment for its inner-city clientele. The CYC's executive director, Spiro Papathanasakis, said there's no doubt that martial arts programs help youth "channel aggression. If done properly and with good supervision, it's amazing.

"You get the opposite of bullying. It really helps kids respect each other and gain confidence."

Also, he says, "nobody gets hurt."

Therein lies the difference between mixed martial arts at the Cabbagetown Youth Centre and mixed martial arts at the UFC level.

It's important when delivering messages about bullying that those who are "delivering the messages are not models of violence" says Debra Pepler, Distinguished Research Professor at York University.