

‘You Don’t Need to Knock Out Your Competition to Win’: Inside the Professional Fighters League’s Strategy for Success

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Professional Fighters League (PFL) founder Donn Davis has zero experience sparring in an MMA cage. But make no mistake, the man is a fighter. A former AOL exec and prominent venture capitalist who’s backed startups from Zipcar to Draftkings, 61-year-old Davis came out of his corner office swinging earlier this year when he signed Jake Paul, Francis Ngannou, and Amanda Serrano to his premiere Super Fight division, guaranteeing the athletes an unprecedented 50/50 revenue split. Now, with PFL’s World Championship slated for Nov. 24th, some MMA insiders speculate Davis is determined to deliver a haymaker to the decades-old market leader, UFC. But he doesn’t exactly see it that way.

“MMA is not like other markets where it’s about taking shares from the next guy,” Davis insists. “These are two differentiated approaches to the market. Fans can like both.”

Distinguish, Don’t Extinguish

Though PFL has attained about 40% of UFC’s broadcast viewership in just five years, Davis’ fight plan has always been to be a co-leader rather than a category killer. The action in the ring may look the same, but UFC and PFL, at

their core, are different products. UFC operates under the traditional promoter model, where the company sets fights at its discretion and ranks fighters primarily on popularity. To distinguish PFL, Davis has another vision. He describes his league as a meritocracy: If you win, you advance, if you lose, you go home. It's an approach that's been used in professional sports forever, with one exception: Mixed Martial Arts.

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The UFC determines rankings based on anonymous voting rather than a fighter's record. "The biggest stars always get ranked one and two, even if they're not the best fighters," Davis notes. "When it's a big title fight, cool. But the other 500 fights? Ten percent are awesome, but the other 90% mean nothing."

In other words, if you don't love watching two random people beat the crap out of each other, the average UFC fight might not interest you. Compare that to Davis' sports-season model, where athletes compete in the regular season, playoffs, and championships each year. Every match has actual stakes, so fans can track the progression of their favorite fighters. What's more, about 90% of PFL content is available to viewers for free, a strategy designed to reach the broadest possible audience and attract new fans.

Think Global, Fight Local

Despite gaining major market share, Davis acknowledges a misconception that the UFC is to mixed martial arts what the NFL is to football: the sport's only league (or at least the only one that matters). He prefers comparing MMA to that "other" kind of football because of its global fanbase, estimating that 80-to-85% of soccer and MMA fans live outside the U.S. Soccer has a plethora of coexisting leagues worldwide, a future Davis is already working towards by

creating regional international leagues for MMA.

“The idea is to take the fight to the fans where they are,” he says, explaining that each league will put its best local fighters on primetime TV for regional competitions. Seventy-two fighters (12 in each weight class) will compete in tournament-style events for the chance at hometown glory—and \$100,000. From there, the victors go on to represent their region and duke it out with the best martial artists on the planet in PFL’s Global League Season. The season culminates with the PFL World Championship, where the winners take home \$1 million each. Davis likens the PFL Global League to soccer’s UEFA Champions League, and the comparison makes sense. In September, PFL Europe wrapped up a major competition in Paris that was the most viewed MMA event ever in France, and Davis plans to follow up by launching PFL Mid-East in 2024 and PFL Africa in 2025. By 2026, he’s confident that PFL will have six international regional leagues.

“Our format benefits both the athletes, who have an opportunity to advance their careers strictly through their skill, and the fans, who can follow the journey of an emerging fighter from the regional leagues to the global stage,” Davis says.

For the PFL, that just might be a winning one-two punch.

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