

## Fighting with a sense of style

Local men battle to make mixed-martial-arts clothing line a hit

By COURTNEY McCANN, Staff Writer, 609-272-7219 | Posted: Wednesday, July 29, 2009 |

An alcove in the living room of Mike DiCarlo's Brigantine condo has been turned into an office... if you can call a room draped in skulls, crossbones and devil horns an office.

It's the home base for Bone Yard Industries, the fledgling mixed-martial-arts clothing line run by DiCarlo and Galloway Township native Scott Shelingoski.

On one wall hangs their inspiration, the fight shirt for Atlantic County native Rob Lawless, Bone Yard's first sponsored fighter. The gothic red lettering and mixture of stars and skulls represent the moment seven months ago when DiCarlo realized his homemade shirts had business potential.

"We made (a shirt) for Robbie and the thing sold like hotcakes," DiCarlo said. "We ended up making another 30 or 40 shirts."

The two men hope shirts such as that will translate to dollar signs thanks to the growing popularity of a sport once thought of as being little more than "human cockfighting." But they have their work cut out for them, as the soaring popularity of MMA has caused the once struggling market to be oversaturated with vendors.

"Everyone has a banner, everyone has shorts, everyone has a T-shirt," Shelingoski said. "There are sponsors everywhere."

### Growing up

In the early 1990s mixed-martial arts was taboo, and even illegal in some states.

"There was a kind of a niche popularity," said Kevin Iole, a mixed-martial-arts writer for Yahoo! Sports. "In those days it was almost like back-room-type stuff. We wanted to watch this because it was a devilish delight."

Today, thanks to new regulations and the promotional work of leagues such as the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), mixed-martial arts is on the verge of becoming a mainstream sport. And predictably, the sponsors followed.

The blood is barely wiped off the victor at the end of a televised match before his corner has draped him in towels, T-shirts, hats and energy drinks, all in time for the arm-raising money shot.

While attending the UFC fan convention in Las Vegas earlier this month, Iole encountered a slew of vendors packed into a convention center selling everything from action figures to training books.

"I think they had between 30,000 and 50,000 people going through there buying stuff like you wouldn't believe," Iole said. "There was a lot of fighting equipment, a lot of clothing, videos, books."

### The clothes

With mainstream acceptance comes style, and mixed-martial arts has developed one that's all its own thanks to designers such as TapouT and Affliction. Fighters wear a mix of knee-length and thigh-grazing fight shorts, and T-shirts that sell for upwards of \$70 and can be worn to the gym or the club.

TapouT, a marketing success story, started with the three founders dressed in crazy costumes selling T-shirts out of a van in the parking lot of fight venues, and getting arrested for attending underground fights. In 1999, the company's revenue was about \$30,000. Today, the line pulls in \$100 million annually and the crew has branched out to sponsor fighters and film documentaries and reality shows.

DiCarlo and Shelingoski aren't running around Atlantic County wearing wigs and makeup. They look more like the fighters they hope to represent, probably because they are both amateur fighters themselves.

DiCarlo talks about his plans for Bone Yard in a soft, gravely voice that's disconcerting coming from a man with a shaved head and bulging biceps laced with tattoos. So far Bone Yard is just offering T-shirts, hats and women's shorts and tank tops. DiCarlo dreams of expanding the line and starting a management branch to sponsor local fighters. Working in Las Vegas with the UFC isn't part of the current game plan, but it's not out of the question.

"I'm content with what we're doing right now, because I never expected (Bone Yard) to be what it is now," DiCarlo said. "If it takes off and becomes more than that, we'd welcome it with open arms."

### A little too much

Al Buck, of Bridgeton, began fighting professionally in 1995. There was no UFC. No crazy guys from TapouT searching for a fighter to sponsor. Buck couldn't even find a fight in his home state, sometimes traveling as much as 15 hours for a match.

"(MMA) was illegal in New Jersey when I started," Buck said. "It almost cost you as much money to travel to fights as you actually made."

Sponsorships and gear companies were hard to come by. Existing companies were shying away from a sport they considered barbaric.

Buck retired in 1998 after too much struggle and not enough payoff. He returned in 2005.

Things had definitely changed.

"(The UFC) made mixed-martial arts a little more civilized, a little more desirable for the regular person to watch," Buck said. "People now are trying to push into the MMA industry and they're popping up everywhere."

Buck, who has been sponsored by Intense Fight Gear and Full Contact Fighter Gear, said high profile

sponsorships are still difficult for amateur fighters to find.

"If you're not going to be televised, they really don't want to spend the money to put their product on you," Buck said. "They want a fight show or something where they're going to get exposure."

Standing out

Shelingoski and DiCarlo's experiences at local gyms combined with their day jobs as bartenders in Atlantic City, where MMA fights are becoming a regular occurrence, have given them a look at what they are up against. They can either try to top the established companies, or get lumped in with startups just trying to make a quick buck.

"You say you're starting a clothing line to someone and they're like 'Ok, so what. Everyone's starting a clothing line,'" Shelingoski said.

So far things have been going well at Bone Yard. The line's Web site is up and running. The company has contracts to sell gear at Center City Sports in Mays Landing and at several local surf shops.

Standing out requires a delicate mix of creativity and playing to one's strengths. For DiCarlo and Shelingoski, that means fighting.

"First we go in and train with the fighters," Shelingoski said. "It's not just 'Hey, here's our stuff.'"

It's all about respect, DiCarlo added. "We'll get in there and bang with you."

Having spent years on the beach with his two sons, DiCarlo was inspired to broaden the Bone Yard audience to include surfers, and possibly other alternative sports such as snowboarding.

It's difficult to follow the dotted line, connecting a tranquil afternoon catching waves with a roundhouse kick to the head, but DiCarlo believes it's possible.

"You have a 10- to 15-foot wave coming at you and you're next in the lineup, there is no backing out," DiCarlo said. "(MMA) is like catching a big wave. You get the butterflies in your stomach. You don't know the other guy you'll be fighting. You just have to get into the ring and do it."

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Things you might not know about starting a mixed-martial-arts

clothing line

Having a cool name is key.

See TapouT or Affliction. You need a name that's as tough as the sport. Mike DiCarlo came up with the name for Bone Yard Industries several years ago while planning a surfing vacation in Hawaii.

"Back in the day there was this beach they called 'The Bone Yard,' because of so many people getting busted on it," DiCarlo said.

A recession can be helpful when starting a business.

DiCarlo and Scott Shelingoski are working with designers and printers in Mullica Hill, California and even South Africa for less than they expected to pay. The costs have come down slightly, since many artists are struggling to find work.

"We picked the best time ever for us to start a business," DiCarlo said. "We're making all our mistakes now, when we're not paying as much for them."

Paperwork can be a killer.

Forget the octagon. The paperwork that goes into setting up a business nearly killed Bone Yard before it got off the ground. The founders had to make countless trips to the Atlantic County courthouse in Mays Landing to fill out and file forms for their company.

"At one point we looked at each other and were like, 'Are you serious? Should we really be doing this?'" Shelingoski said.

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