



The rise of youth cage-fighting

Legal and regulated in some states and banned in others, youth MMA is growing in popularity



(Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

By Roman Stubbs

June 8, 2022



1267

TEMECULA, Calif. — Isaiah Triana woke around 4:30 a.m. and shivered in the dark of his hotel room at a Holiday Inn off Interstate 15. He was cold and hungry. In less than eight hours, he would step into the cage for the most important mixed martial arts fight of his career, but first the 10-year-old needed to cut weight to be eligible. He didn't eat for several hours, and when he stepped on the scale at the U.S. Fight League national championships later that morning, he was relieved to learn he was under 63 pounds, about four less than his normal weight and the necessary mark for his division.

“Cutting weight is the hardest,” he said. After scarfing down a plate of eggs, bacon and hash browns, he finally could turn his attention to his first fight.

He walked by the two cages centered in the middle of a gym owned by a former UFC fighter and into a musty yoga room filled with children warming up. Wearing white spandex emblazoned with his nickname, “The Natural,” he stared at his stalky 4-foot-3 body in a mirror, his light brown hair perfectly jelled, a scab on his left knee leftover from a recent staph infection.

Ten-year-old Isaiah Triana traveled across the country to compete for a national title. The Florida fighter goes by the nickname “The Natural” and is a colorful showman, mimicking his UFC heroes inside and outside the cage. (Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

“He’s like a unicorn,” his trainer, Douglas Vileforte, said as he began to wrap Isaiah’s hands. “We just have to make sure we don’t break him.”

The trainer handed his young fighter a protective cup, a mouthpiece and headgear. An official finally shouted, “Isaiah Triana, it’s about that time!”

Outside the cage, the organizer of the tournament, Jon Frank, was still checking in some of the 182 kids who paid their \$100 entry fees to compete for a national championship in California, the first state to regulate youth MMA and one of the few places in America where young fighters such as Isaiah can compete in legally sanctioned bouts. Youth MMA remains unregulated or illegal in many states, and as the sport has grown in popularity over the past decade, so have questions about how to safely offer it to kids, some of whom dream of being the UFC’s next generation of stars.

Like other physically demanding youth sports, youth MMA is viewed as problematic by some because it exposes kids to potential brain injuries. But unlike youth football, hockey or even karate, youth MMA has been slower to gain public acceptance. Proponents of the sport maintain they are misunderstood even as they try to implement stringent safety protocols and

differentiate themselves from the violent image of professional leagues such as UFC.

Isaiah had come all the way from Florida to live up to his nickname, and as he walked into the cage he emulated one of his heroes, Irish fighter Conor McGregor, by doing the UFC star's "Billionaire Strut" around the ring, waving his arms as he stared at a crowd of a few hundred. Some parents raised their phones to record the moment.

He held up his arms to tap his opponent's gloves as soon as the fight started, then immediately went to work, catching a kick and driving the other fighter into the cage before taking him to the ground. Isaiah grabbed the kid's wrists and began to pull.

In just over a minute, he had his first submission and victory of the tournament. He raised his fists as he walked out of the cage, asking an organizer when he might fight again that afternoon. It would be a while. Isaiah sighed and swigged some water.

"I have to wait for another win," he said.

Official Vanessa Hardy, center, signals a win by Isaiah Triana during the USFL's national championships. The 10-year-old fighter has big dreams in the sport and has already appeared on two pay-per-view events — an MMA match for a Florida combat sports and entertainment company and a broadcast bout in the Pillow Fight Championship league. (Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

‘It looks very violent’

The event in May was the largest youth MMA tournament the USFL had ever assembled, with 199 bouts for kids aged between 8 and 17, all vying for a national championship in a sprawling gym run by former UFC star Dan Henderson. Families wheeled in large coolers full of Gatorade and Capri Sun. Coaches wrapped their fighters’ hands and gave pep talks. Some kids played video games on their phones or with Barbies near the cage, where several participants entered to sing the national anthem before the fights started.



unitedstates.fightleague

1,899 followers

[View profile](#)



[View more on Instagram](#)

39 likes

unitedstates.fightleague

Walk of Champions! Some of the most disciplined, empathetic, mentally strong, intelligent kids you'd ever meet. And they're coming from the most unexpected place!

[view all comments](#)

Add a comment...

“This is the hardest tournament in the world to run,” Frank said as he bounced between two cages, making sure everyone was in the right place. Three doctors in green scrubs sat ringside to check fighters after their bouts, and an ambulance was stationed near the front of the gym doors, with paramedics manning a stretcher inside.

Official Ed Buckley kneels to check on Alexander Moran, 16, during a fight. To stage sanctioned events in California, event organizers must undergo background checks and an ambulance with medical personnel are required at each event.

Rose Gracie, a member of the legendary Brazilian jujitsu Gracie family, doesn't believe athletes should be able to enter the ring until 25 — when their brains are fully developed. "The younger these children are exposed to this type of damage, the earlier they will show signs of something major in the future," she said. (Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

At different moments, Frank, 55, paused to marvel at what he had helped create. After more than three decades as a Marine and an inspector for the U.S. Marshals, locating fugitives and missing and exploited children, he had settled into this world in the early 2000s, promoting the USFL as more and more children became interested in competing in an ancient form of martial arts known as pankration. "My whole focus is to use this sport to build the character of kids," he said.

Nine years ago, that dream seemed far-fetched. After running events in his home base of Southern California for several years, the league caught the attention of lawmakers in 2013 after a video emerged of a young boy landing a hard right cross to the chin of a 9-year-old female fighter. The state halted USFL competition and passed a bill that would authorize the California State Athletic Commission — which already oversaw boxing, kickboxing and mixed martial arts at the professional level — to implement regulations for youth MMA.

Frank said the video that caused such alarm was misleadingly edited and "blown out of proportion" — but he began to work with the commission, going back and forth on safety regulations, namely banning head strikes and dangerous

takedowns, requiring every fighter to wear headgear and discouraging cutting weight. Organizers would have to undergo background checks, and an ambulance with medical personnel would be required at each event. By 2014, the USFL held the first state-sanctioned youth MMA event.

“Our biggest setback became our biggest accomplishment,” Frank said. “At first, [the commission was] very concerned this was going to backfire on them, that they were going to get in trouble. It looks very violent; it looks very dangerous. If it’s not regulated properly, it is very dangerous because these kids are really good ... They trusted me to do the right thing.”

Hannah Wagstaff, 15, from left, Shaniyah Carlson, 19, and Andrea Frisque, 17, cheer on a friend during the USFL tournament.

Teammates of a fighter from Sacramento say a prayer before his fight.

Coach Josh Cordero cheers on Reyna Duran-Cupis, 17, during a bout.

Adrian Lee, 16, left, battles Kris Arrey, 17, in a closely fought match. Adrian comes from a family of fighters and has three siblings who compete professionally overseas. (Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

But while the USFL regulated the sport in California, the organization has struggled to expand to other states. There is no centralized governing body for youth MMA; states instead have their own athletic commissions, which were originally designed to regulate professional boxing and later adopted oversight of kickboxing and mixed martial arts. Some states allow youth MMA to be regulated, while others don't sanction the sport. The USFL has held tournaments in Florida, Tennessee, South Carolina, Wisconsin, Nevada and Texas, but it has had events canceled in other states.

Frank thought Missouri would become a hotbed for his organization, but state legislators shut that down in 2018 when they passed a bill that shifted oversight from amateur organizations to the state commission and banned those under 18 from competing in events. A year later, a tribal commission in Michigan shut

down USFL scheduled bouts after several concerns were raised about the safety of the participants.

“This is different than contact sports. This is combat sports. Everything you’re doing is magnified, and that’s especially true for children,” said Nitin Sethi, the chief medical officer of the New York Athletic Commission, which does not allow MMA events for those under 18.

Sethi, a Cornell University-affiliated neurologist, pointed out there’s a trove of data and research that suggests children are more susceptible to concussions and brain injuries. Headgear might not protect against accidental hits, and hours of training or sparring in the gym can leave lasting damage.

“There’s kind of a false thinking that when you ban head strikes you make the sport safer — I think that would kind of be taking a simplistic view of that entire situation,” Sethi said.

“These are combat sports,” he added. “It’s very hard to make them completely safe.”

Isaiah Triana waits to be called to the cage. The 10-year-old had to lose about four pounds in the days before the tournament to meet the limit for his 63-pound weight class. (Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

‘A good track record’

Isaiah walked out of the cage after his first victory, and after being checked by a doctor, he took off his headgear and shin guards and grabbed his phone. “Finals, baby!” Isaiah said to himself as he dialed his father, Eddie, who stayed back in Miami.

As the day progressed, school-age fighters shuffled in and out of the cages, accompanied by joy and disappointment. At one point, Frank positioned himself near one cage and pulled out his phone to film the championship fight between two of the best 155-pounders in the world, Adrian Lee and Kris “The Arm Collector” Arrey.

The two collided with each other in the cage as soon as their bout started. After each fighter delivered body blows — one of Lee’s punches dislodged Arrey’s headgear, sending it flying to the canvas — Arrey grabbed his opponent’s leg for a submission hold. Lee tried to twist out of it, and Arrey’s coach screamed that they saw him tap out. The official stopped the fight. “I did not see a tap. You have it on video?” he asked Frank, who showed his phone to the judges.

The fight restarted and, after two more rounds, Lee was declared the winner. One of Arrey’s coaches ran over to protest. “That’s bulls---!” he yelled, and after the judge tried to explain, the coach screamed, “I don’t want you around me if you’re going to cheat!”

Carter Pham, 7, front left, along with his older brothers, Aaden, 10, Parker, 8, and mother Choy make their way into Dan Henderson Athletic Fitness Center in Temecula, Calif. The USFL national championships marked the family's first organized MMA event.

Scofield Vang listens to his dad Chinghi Vang, as the 9-year-old gets ready for a fight. Safety headgear is required of all competitors, though experts say fighters still risk head injuries in the cage and in training.

Fans and teammates cheer on fighters during the national championships. Many traveled great distances to attend the tournament in California, one of the few states where youth MMA is permitted.

Shayna Ward, 15, left, Lariah Gill, 14, center, and Jordan DeLeon, 14, right, take the podium. (Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

Even as the sport has continued to grow — the first youth MMA world championships were held in 2019 in Rome, featuring more than 250 fighters — the pandemic disrupted the USFL’s momentum. Frank, who said he does not make any money off the league, had to get part-time jobs and lived in a camper van to keep the organization alive.

There have been controversies. After holding a non-state-sanctioned event in Austin in January, Frank said the state athletic commission notified the promoter of a complaint and youth MMA events would not be allowed in the state. Frank said the complaint came after multiple fighters suffered injuries.

In a statement, a spokesperson for the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation said amateur youth MMA competitions are illegal for anyone under 17 in the state, with the exception of events conducted by an organization of the Olympic Games, Paralympic Games or Pan American Games. “As the USFL is not part of an Olympic-sanctioned sport, there is not an exception that would allow children under 17 to compete in an event,” the statement read.

The USFL is required to report injuries to the California State Athletic Commission. In 3,416 athlete exposures over 1,573 bouts since 2014, there have been 40 cases of athletes who were injured and had their eligibility suspended pending medical clearance, according to the USFL. One fighter lost consciousness because of a submission. Four injuries occurred because of illegal strikes to the face, including one concussion. Two other concussions occurred because of “scrambling for position on the ground,” according to Frank.

“It’s safer than it was when I first saw it,” said Andy Foster, the executive director of the California State Athletic Commission, who admits he is still lukewarm about kids fighting. “The USFL has maintained a good track record on safety.”

Isaiah Triana closes his eyes as trainer Douglas Vileforte adjusts his head gear. “He’s like a unicorn,” Vileforte says of his young pupil. “We just have to make sure we don’t break him.” (Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

The call to the cage

Fighting runs in Isaiah’s blood. His father, Eddie, was an amateur boxer and a fight coach for years. Eddie’s father was a boxer, and so was his uncle, who competed for the Cuban national team. When Eddie put his boy on the mat to train in jujitsu for the first time, Isaiah was 2½ years old.

When Isaiah Triana's mother was in labor, her baby had stopped breathing and doctors feared the worst. "And then you just hear it: Boop ... boop. And everybody froze and looked in this one direction," the boy's father, Eddie Triana, recalled. "It started kicking. He started moving. ... He pops out, and his hands were clenched to his face, like a fighter." (Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

"I had my pacifier and my blanket. I was just a little baby," Isaiah said. "Once I got on the mat, I just felt some kind of feeling that I was going to go in there for a long time and that I was going to stay there forever."

As jujitsu became the foundation of his training — "His ground game is his bread and butter," Eddie said — Isaiah's parents were more apprehensive about him sparring in other combat disciplines because of potential brain injuries. What has put the family at ease, Eddie said, is that in youth MMA head strikes are banned, along with the quality of officiating that enforces the rules and the improvement of headgear.

“That’s probably what allowed my wife and I to be a little bit more forgiving and allow him to do it,” Eddie said. “It makes things easier — it really does. Because he’s a little boy. You don’t want him to get brain damage.”

Families join the USFL for different reasons. The USFL has given rise to young fighters with ambitions of competing professionally — including from the Lee family, which is considered a dynasty in the sport back home in Hawaii. Former USFL fighters Angela and Christian Lee now fight in One, Asia’s largest martial arts promotion, and their youngest sister, Victoria, became the youngest fighter signed by the company at 16.

Lariah Gill, 14, first started competing in jujitsu four years ago because her father wanted her to learn self-defense skills.

“I was more into girlie stuff, like gymnastics and cheer,” Lariah Gill says. But then she started to make friends and grew to love the striking component of the sport — punching and kicking opponents.

Lariah Gill hopes mixed martial arts will one day be added to the Olympics and that she can compete. Her dream, she says, is to eventually become a UFC champion and own her own MMA gym.

Using a blend of strikes and grappling moves, Lariah Gill won her second national championship belt and qualified to compete for the Youth World MMA Championships in Abu Dhabi later this summer. “It’s just a different feeling when you’re fighting and when you’re getting ready to fight,” she says. “I just love the environment of knowing I can go out there and fight and do what I love.” (Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

“Now Adrian starts his journey,” said his mother, Jewelz Lee, a two-time Canadian world taekwondo silver medalist who trains young children in MMA outside Honolulu. “It definitely prepares them for life. The more important thing than the competition and winning the competition is the journey, going through all of the trials and tribulations, the mental discipline, the physical discipline, the emotional discipline.”

There were first-timers at the California event, including 8-year-old Parker Pham and 10-year-old Aaden Pham, brothers from Orange County who spend their time outside of school training in jujitsu and wrestling. Their father, Thanh, entered them in classes after he went to pick up Aaden from day care one day and learned his son had been tied up with a jump rope by two older kids.

Adrian Lee, 16, top, swings back for a strike on Kris Arrey. The Lee family traveled from their Hawaii home to compete in the USFL's national championships. "It definitely prepares them for life," says Jewelz Lee, Adrian's mother and a taekwondo champion herself.

Christian Lee, left, celebrates with brother Adrian after the 16-year-old secured his national title win. Three of his Lee's siblings already compete professionally. "Now Adrian starts his journey," his mother says. (Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

He wanted to teach his boys self-defense, but the sport quickly became a lifestyle. Thanh began training in jujitsu himself and has used the sport to spend more time with his kids every day at the gym owned by Frank's son. Thanh's children pushed him to compete in amateur MMA fights, and once Parker turned 8, the two sons signed up for the national championships.

“My only hesitation is, unless you’re a Conor McGregor, this isn’t going to be your career. You’re not going to grow up and do this and retire from this,” said Thanh, who watched as Parker won the national championship for his age group. “My wife — obviously all mothers — are concerned about their kids getting hurt; there’s always that concern from a parent’s perspective. But in this environment, it’s a controlled environment, it’s a safe environment.”

Allison Keenan, 17, embraces her mom, Jennifer Keenan, after winning her final fight. Families have different reasons for choosing the sport, and many praise the USFL's safety regulations. (Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

‘Congrats, champ’

As adult spectators and tournament officials towered above him, Isaiah walked calmly to the ring for his final fight while Vileforte, his trainer, steadied his

phone's camera behind him, hoping to capture every moment of a national championship. Isaiah is a pint-size showman, drawing from Eddie's time in the fight game and his mother's time as a hip-hop dancer in New York.

His father has bought him more than \$7,000 in outfits and suits to wear to fight events — he's currently trying to get a custom fit for his son from McGregor's suit company, a reward for Isaiah making fifth-grade honor roll — and Eddie often calls Isaiah "Little Conor."

Before entering the cage, the rules were laid out — "You can do ground strikes, okay? But no knees, no leg locks, no anacondas, no guillotines, all right?" the ref leaned down and said. The 10-year-old nodded. Isaiah stepped inside the ring, bowed on the mat and prayed.

“Let’s go!” a referee yelled to signal the start of the fight. Isaiah danced with his opponent and avoided a takedown — then took the fighter’s back and mounted him to the ground. “Stay heavy! Don’t lose position!” Vileforte screamed as Isaiah’s opponent wiggled underneath, desperately trying to get out of a submission. Isaiah eventually elevated his body and saw an opening for an arm-bar. He pulled as hard as he could before his opponent tapped out, tossing his hands up and beginning to cry in frustration.

Isaiah eventually threw his arms up, too, and within the hour he had taken his place atop the podium for his third MMA title. He held up the belt and mimicked an announcer’s voice — “Isaiah ‘The Natural’ Triana!” he roared — before eventually retreating to a day-care room attached to the gym. He FaceTimed his father. Eddie told his boy he was proud of him before starting to cry.

Isaiah Triana and trainer Douglas Vileforte video chat with Isaiah's dad back in Florida, showing off the 10-year-old fighter's newly won championship belt.

The rules and safety regulations give Isaiah Triana's family a sense of comfort when they send him into the cage to fight. "It makes things easier, it really does," his father, Eddie Triana says. "Because he's a little boy. You don't want him to get brain damage." (Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

"Thanks, Dad," Isaiah said. "I love you, too."

Isaiah will fight in the International Sport Karate Association World Martial Arts Championships later this month; he said he will attempt to become a "Triple Crown" winner — competing in boxing, kickboxing and MMA. Two of those competitions allow head shots, but Eddie believes headgear is safe and his son is skilled enough to avoid any substantial blows.

First he was going to celebrate this championship. "I'm going to sleep with the belt under my pillow," he said, joking that he hoped the tooth fairy wouldn't

steal it. “Or the belt fairy.”

Isaiah slung the title belt over his shoulder. “Congrats, champ,” a parent told him as he walked out of the gym. Isaiah looked back and smiled before climbing into Vileforte’s rental car. Isaiah needed to stop and get something to eat with Vileforte’s family at a Japanese steakhouse down the street. He was weeks away from his next weigh-in, and he was starving.

“A lot of people say I inspire them for MMA. If people are getting inspired by me, it just means a lot,” he said. “Because a lot of 10-year-olds, they don’t do this stuff.”

Isaiah Triana has modeled his style inside and outside the cage after former UFC star Conor McGregor. The younger fighter maintains an active social media presence and at just 10 years old is already a national champion. (Alisha Jucevic for The Washington Post)

By Roman Stubbs

Roman Stubbs is a sports reporter for The Washington Post.  Twitter

washingtonpost.com

© 1996-2022 The Washington Post

[About The Post](#)

[Contact the Newsroom](#)

[Contact Customer Care](#)

[Request a Correction](#)

[Send a News Tip](#)

[Report a Vulnerability](#)

[Download the Washington Post App](#)

[Policies & Standards](#)

[Terms of Service](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Cookie Settings](#)

[Print Products Terms of Sale](#)

[Digital Products Terms of Sale](#)

[Submissions & Discussion Policy](#)

[RSS Terms of Service](#)

[Ad Choices](#)