

UP FRONT



WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA SPORTS MUSEUM

By Anne Madarasz,

Director of the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum

Tough Guys

It started with barroom boasting and has grown into a sport followed by millions on cable TV and in arenas nationwide. Frank Caliguri of Arnold, Pa.—a black belt in karate and owner of the Academy of Martial Arts—was motivated by the ribbing he got while promoting karate, and so he decided to stage a “Battle of the Tough Guys” competition with fellow black belt Bill Viola. As Caliguri described it in 1980, “I’ve staged martial arts shows and tournaments for years, and every time I’ve gone into a local bar or diner to tack up a poster for a tournament, the local guys would hoot and holler that they could take on anybody and didn’t need karate. Now they’ll have their chance.”

Caliguri and Viola carefully planned the event, and promoted it through their company, C.V. Productions. They developed detailed rules and regulations to guide their “Tough Guy Contest,” described as, “The martial arts way of fighting as it’s done in the Orient.” All contestants were required to wear protective equipment including head gear, mouth guards, padded gloves, and boots, the same equipment used in the sanctioned karate and kick boxing tournaments the pair had promoted. They booked the ballroom of the New Kensington Holiday Inn for March 20 through 22, and raised \$6,000 in prize money. Then they began advertising for amateur fighters.

Frank Caliguri (left) and Bill Viola, 1980. The three-round bout fought by Jones and Murray has been identified as the first of its kind in the nation. Though billed as a “Battle of the Tough Guys,” the event featured the mix of boxing, wrestling, and martial arts fighting that is today considered mixed martial arts. Caliguri and Viola’s vision for the sport is now a reality.

HHC Museum Collection, gift of Bill Viola.



Mike Murray and Dave Jones answered the call. Murray, a car salesman from Arnold, took the ring against Jones, a laborer from Irwin, in the first match of the lightweight division on Thursday evening, March 20. Murray struggled, battling against the bigger Jones, who pinned him for a 10-count in the first round, then knocked him down twice in the second and third before the match was stopped. Battered and bruised after his technical knockout, Murray remained unfazed, declaring afterwards, “He got in some punches, but I’d do it again. I’m bad! I’m tough!”

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and martial arts fighting that is today considered mixed martial arts. Caliguri and Viola staged their multi-day event, intending it to serve as the first of a series of regional bouts leading up to a national championship. They held their finals, the “Battle of the Brawlers,” in Pittsburgh at the Stanley Theater in mid-April and crowned a champion, Frank Tigano. Interest soared and the events in New Kensington and downtown both drew standing room-only crowds.

But the sport ended almost as quickly as it had begun. Pressure from the boxing commission and wrestling federation (though they had no jurisdiction over the sport), combined with a death in a similarly titled but unrelated “Tough Man” boxing event in Johnstown, led to the banning of all tough



Dave Jones (left) and Mike Murray compete in the "Battle of the Tough Guys," March 20, 1980. Jones, a laborer from Irwin, and Murray, a car salesman from Arnold, Pa. competed in the first bout of the lightweight division. The bigger fighter, Jones, a kickboxing student of Bill Viola's, battered Murray and the fight ended in the third round.

HHC Museum Collection, gift of Mike Murray.

guy and brawlers contests. In 1983, the state legislature outlawed the sport in Pennsylvania and Caliguri and Viola found themselves unable to proceed with their events. It was almost two decades before the sport returned as mixed martial arts, now one of the nation's most popular and fastest growing sports.

The story of that first Tough Guy event held in a New Kensington ballroom lives on in the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum. Mike Murray, Bill Viola, and Frank Caliguri worked with curators to assemble objects such as uniforms and protective gear, and archival materials such as programs, posters, photographs, and tickets—a collection that traces the roots of mixed martial arts in the United States back to the Pittsburgh region. 🌀

CV PRODUCTIONS, INC. PRESENTS THE
TOUGH MAN CONTEST
ARE YOU the toughest man?
Then We Want You!

OPEN COMPETITION — NO PROFESSIONAL FIGHTERS — PIT YOUR NOVICE SKILLS IN THIS EVENT
 ANYONE CAN ENTER — HAVE YOUR OCCUPATION REPRESENTED
 ALSO A WOMEN'S DIVISION

 MIKE MURRY Car Salesman	 DALE SAYLOR Glass Maker	 DONNA SAMUELS Cash Miner	 KEITH PARSON Mechanic	 FRANK NOGA Lumberjack	 TONY YELTRI Police Officer
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BECOME THE NEW ROCKY
\$6,000 TOTAL PRIZES

ELIMINATIONS:
 March 19th, 20th & 21st, 1980
 6:00 - 10:00 P.M.
 New Kensington Holiday Inn
 Grand Ballroom
 18 Miles East of Pittsburgh, Pa.
 Possible TV Coverage

FINAL EVENTS:
 Location Pittsburgh, PA
 —Anybody can enter except Professional Fighters or experienced amateurs.
 —No previous fighting experience necessary.
 —This is your big opportunity!
 —Register today.
 —Mens lightweight and heavy-weight divisions.
 —Also a woman's division.

C. V. PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS

BATTLE OF THE TOUGH GUYS



Sec. _____ Row _____ Seat _____ Sec. _____ Row _____ Seat _____

CV PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS
TOUGH GUY CONTEST
ANYTHING GOES
 SATURDAY, MARCH 22, 1980
 HOLIDAY INN OF NEW KENSINGTON
 TARENTUM BRIDGE ROAD — NEW KENSINGTON, PA.

Ringside — \$10.00

1980
 ania
 1.00

Poster, program, and ringside ticket for the first Tough Man contest, 1980.
 HHC Museum Collection, gift of Bill Viola.