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LEMOORE, Calif. -- The California State Athletic Commission granted Sherdog.com an all-access pass to observe its operations at Bellator Fighting Championships 35 on March 5 at the Tachi Palace Hotel and Casino, providing a behind-the-scenes look at all that goes into regulating an MMA event.

Although the event was broadcast live through Bellator's new partner, MTV2, CSAC regulators treated the eight-bout event the same as the 84 mixed martial arts shows, both televised and untelevised, it oversaw in 2010. Those who do not make their living in the fight game may be surprised to learn just how much goes into the regulation of a single MMA event.

According to CSAC Executive Officer George Dodd, the commission's number one priority in regulating MMA is the safety of the fighters. From the start of the event until the finish, it was clear that Dodd's philosophy was shared by all 18 of the CSAC representatives on site.

As a starting point, the term "athletic commission" is somewhat of a misnomer. Although the term suggests the commission regulates all types of athletics, athletic and boxing commissions are state-run agencies that regulate various forms of combat sports. Like its counterparts in other states, the CSAC regulates professional MMA by licensing all participants -- promoters, fighters, chief seconds, referees, judges, etc. -- and overseeing all professional events.

Weeks in the Making

The on-site regulation of Bellator 35 began on Friday afternoon, when the CSAC's first inspector arrived on site at the Tachi Palace Casino. Separate and apart from the on-site regulation, the CSAC's oversight of the event actually began about six weeks earlier, when the commission received the bout cards from Bellator. Before sanctioning the event, the CSAC first reviewed the initial tournament matchups divined by Bellator matchmaker Sam Caplan to ensure the proposed fights appeared reasonable based, in part, on fighters' experience and professional records.

Once bouts are approved, the commission ensures that fighters, their seconds and managers are

licensed in the state of California. The commission also requires the fighter to submit up-to-date medical exam records. All of this initial paperwork, plus additional licensing forms, drug test kits, examination forms for the ringside physician, bout agreements, scorecards and post-fight evaluation forms, finds its way into that first inspector's immense rolling briefcase that follows her around the Tachi Palace.

The CSAC's lead inspector for this MMA event, Sarah Waklee, arrived at the venue the day before the fights for weigh-ins and a host of other activities. The following day, she would be joined by 17 other CSAC representatives from throughout the state. Waklee, an outgoing and matter-of-fact supervisor who has been with the CSAC for seven years, effectively had the final word on what was permissible and impermissible at the event.

The minute Waklee finishes the three-hour drive from Sacramento, Calif., to Lemoore, she is on duty. With only an hour and a half before the fighters report for weigh-ins, there are a slew of issues to work through before beginning the evening's nonstop, four- to five-hour run of pre- and post-weigh-in activity. Waklee meets with Bellator representatives to discuss missing medical records, fight night report times, order of weigh-ins and drug testing.

With this being the CSAC's first live event involving MTV2, Waklee also meets with the production team to discuss the logistics of the live broadcast and ensure everyone was on the same page. Athletes and trainers find her in between meetings to ask last-minute questions about the weigh-ins, rules or fight night, but they only catch her on the move, as she whisks from one activity to the next.

Before weigh-ins begin, fighters not only undergo a steroid test but also a pre-fight physical exam. Pre-fight physicals are a crucial part of regulation because previously submitted medical records can permissibly be up to a year old and therefore might not capture recent injuries, trauma or sickness. A physician could call off a fight for any number of reasons during a pre-fight exam -- all of which contemplate whether the fighter could incur a life- or career-threatening injury if allowed to go through with the bout.

Waklee recalls a handful of occasions when fighters did not pass the pre-fight physical examination. One example was an exam that revealed a fighter had developed a heart murmur; as a matter of fighter safety, the CSAC called off the bout. However, the pre-fight exam is crucial even when athletes are fit to fight. For example, the examining physician needs to be sensitive to how much weight the fighter has cut prior to his or her exam. At times, according to Waklee, the doctor will tell the CSAC that, from a medical standpoint, a fighter cannot safely cut any more weight. As a result, if that fighter does not make weight, the fight is either called off or the fighter can forfeit 10 percent of his or her purse to the CSAC and 10 percent to the opponent, as long as the opponent is willing to fight the overweight fighter. She explains that fighters who do not make weight but are cleared to cut more, if necessary, have two hours to cut up to two pounds; anything more can be dangerous.

The night before Bellator 35, the weigh-ins go off without a hitch, with all athletes medically-cleared and only one needing two attempts to make weight. While fighters slowly rehydrate and begin eating after weigh-ins, Waklee takes the opportunity to conduct her rules meeting. She stresses the consequences of not following CSAC rules during fight night and fields questions from the fighters and their cornermen.

At the conclusion of her long day, Waklee eats dinner at 10:30 p.m. and decides to review the bout contracts in the morning with a fresh set of eyes.

Fight Day Arrives

On fight day, Waklee starts working again at about 8:30 a.m., beginning with a thorough review of the bout agreements between Bellator and the fighters. She also verifies that the promoter has all the requisite insurance coverage in place. Having verified the fighter purse and bonus amounts, she sends a list back to Bellator's chief financial officer so he can cut and hand all the fighter purse and bonus checks over to the CSAC.

Waklee does not, however, leave her hotel room until she is certain she has all of her ducks in a row to begin the fights; there is never any time to return to her hotel room once things get rolling. Her pre-fight ritual includes what is best described as either a very late lunch or extremely early dinner. As our waitress rushes to get us food quickly, Waklee explains that once the 3 p.m. show time rolls around, there would be no time to grab food for at least six and a half hours. As if on cue, when her salad arrives, welterweight Rick Hawn comes up to ask whether he can tape his ankles. In fact, throughout the day, she is repeatedly stopped for rule clarifications while walking through the casino.

At 3 p.m. -- two hours before the first fight -- the CSAC team of 18 begins reporting for duty. Note that this ratio means the CSAC has more than one official on hand for every fighter competing that night. This team is comprised of the lead inspector, seven other inspectors -- all dressed in red

neckties and black suits, which is reportedly helpful in camouflaging blood -- three referees, three judges, two timekeepers and two physicians. Waklee explains that the fights cannot start without at least one of the physicians on hand. In addition to the physicians, two sets of paramedics and their ambulances are also stationed on site as a precautionary measure. In response to various questions about the purpose behind many of the rules and rituals, members of this team, such as inspector Mike Bray, repeatedly stress that their chief concern is the fighters' safety and the fairness of the bouts.

The inspectors assemble to receive their assignments. Waklee charges three inspectors with responsibility for the eight fighters assigned to the red corner. The other three oversee the blue corner fighters, with the seventh inspector assigned to suspension and payout duties.

Next is a quick talk with the paramedics. Waklee is not thrilled to learn from them that the closest emergency room is approximately 30 minutes away. Regardless, she confirms that at least one of the ambulances is solely dedicated to Bellator to the exclusion of any other emergency calls at the casino.

Waklee next turns to Bellator Executive Director of Operations Joe Kelly, also CEO of Titan Fighting Championship, who is also present for the briefing. She informs him that the CSAC's physicians usually charge $300 to stitch a laceration. Without hesitation, Kelly responds that Bellator will cover the costs associated with any stitches. At the end of the night, Bellator made good on that promise. Fighter Jaime Jara requires several sets of stitches to his face following a heated split-decision battle against Waachiim Spiritwolf in the last -- and clearly the crowd's favorite -- fight of the night. Although not televised that night, Bellator decided to air the fight the following week, reportedly in response to fan requests.

At 3:15 p.m., the fighters begin checking in. From that moment until completion of the physician's post-fight evaluation, they are under the watchful jurisdiction of the CSAC and its inspectors. Although the promotion continues responsibility for production and the time between bouts, it has no real oversight of the fighters from this point forward.

The first order of business is providing another urine sample. This second sample is to screen for drugs of abuse; the commission tested for steroid use the day before. Each fighter provides a specimen in an integrated drug testing cup. Once the sample is in the CSAC's custody, an inspector turns a plastic key on the outside of the cup that causes the sample to activate the drug test. The results of the test are visible on a label, similar in concept to a litmus test or those roadside drug tests seen on "Cops."

With one exception, all the samples come back negative, clearing the fighters for their bouts. The sole exception is a defective testing cup. When the key is turned, the test cup fails to properly activate. Because the test is inconclusive, the sample is retained by Waklee, to be taken back for lab testing. CSAC representatives explain that when drug tests do come back positive, the fighter still gets to compete, although the sample is preserved for additional, more conclusive lab testing.

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Bidget and Marty Lesetal

Preparing for Battle

All 16 athletes and their cornermen pack into a large room with six partitions set up -- blue fighters on one side and red on the other. A lit-up sign adorns the wall with the word "Bingo," a subtle nod to the room's less extraordinary purpose before Bellator rolled out its carpet for the weekend. The room is filled with the buzz and excitement of fighters and cornermen in all stages of their mental and physical preparation to go to battle.

The air, laced with an iPod mix featuring Johnny Cash's "God's Gonna Cut You Down" several times over, becomes more and more humid as the evening wears on and the athletes begin warming up, practicing submission escapes and working the pads. Those fighting later in the evening would have a long wait ahead of them. Some take refuge in their headphones, while at least one fighter finds room to escape and focus under a table.

There is certainly no mistaking the inspectors for anyone else in the room, as they are the only people wearing suits. Inspectors in Nevada are easily identified, as well; fans routinely see them on UFC broadcasts escorting fighters into and out of the Octagon sporting those fashionable maroon blazers. The CSAC inspectors divide themselves among the fighters and spend time with each of them and their cornermen -- up to 4 -- to cover the commission's expectations related to locker room conduct: no supplements, alcohol, drugs or oxygen canisters allowed. The corners are also advised about what will happen in the one-minute, three-second rest period between rounds; three seconds were added for this televised event. Only two corners are permitted to enter the cage between rounds, but if a cutman goes in for damage control, only one corner is permitted in the cage. Once the inspector tells them it is time to get out, they have just 10 seconds to vacate the cage. The corners are also instructed that if a fighter goes down, they will need to remain outside the cage to allow the ringside physician to tend to the fighter. Corners are also told to remain in their chairs outside the cage. Throughout the night, several Inspectors gave corners a mindful tap and even a tug on their belts to remind them to remain in their seats.

While instructing the fighter is fine, corners are cautioned against excessive cheering and clapping. For some, like renowned trainer Mark DellaGrotte, remaining seated is no obstacle to being heard; as many in the auditorium could testify, his voice and instructions are clearly audible as he coaches pupils Hawn and [illegible] to victory.

Although the inspectors' lectures appear routine for some fighters and consistent with the expectations of other commissions, they hold more significance for the fighters and cornermen that had never before fought in California.

Next, the hand-wrapping process begins for many of the fighters. While some of the cornermen take responsibility for wrapping their own fighters' hands, all fighters have the option to use either of the promotion's cutmen to do the wrapping. From start to finish, the hand wrapping takes place under the watchful eyes of the inspectors to ensure that the hand wraps only included methods, tape and gauze authorized under section 323 of California's Business and Professions Code.

As he observes professional newcomer Paul Kurz's hands being wrapped, Bray explains that he has seen hands wrapped in all sorts of authorized techniques, effective and not-so-effective, but acknowledges his role is not to judge the effectiveness. Instead, he is there to ensure compliance with the regulations. He also half-jokingly notes that inspectors pay very close attention to hand wrapping in the wake of CSAC's allegation that it found a plaster-like substance in the hand wraps of boxer Antonio Margarito in January 2009.

Even as Bray explains what he is looking for, he never once takes his eyes off the fighter's hands. Once both hands are wrapped, he marks them and prints his name across all the layers of tape. Bellator provides each fighter with a brand new pair of MMA gloves. The gloves are also put on under an inspector's supervision and sealed with either red or blue tape around the wrists.

Tying Up Loose Ends

The three referees brief the fighters and corners on how they intend to officiate the fight, including discussion of a rule applicable only to half the fighters on the card. The eight fighters participating in Bellator's welterweight tournament were prohibited from delivering elbows to the head in hopes of reducing the risk of lacerations that could potentially jeopardize a prevailing fighter's ability to fight in the next round of the draw just weeks later. Fighters are also reminded that the tournament-style format calls for a fourth five-minute round in the event that the bout was judged a draw at the conclusion of the third round.

While all this is happening in the locker room, Waklee is cageside, attending to last-minute issues, including where her timekeepers would be seated and whether they would signal the end of a round with a bell or air horn. She also collects insurance forms, determines the amount the CSAC was due from the promoter, as set by a pre-determined formula, and secures checks to pay the fighters. The CSAC's policy is to pay fighters immediately after their bouts, as opposed to after the post-fight press conference. Bellator's CFO hands over two checks for each fighter -- one of which was a win bonus if he or she prevailed.

Minutes before 5 p.m., the first fighters and their cornermen assemble in preparation to make their entrance to the cage. However, timing the fighters' progression from the back room to the pre-fight inspection area is an inexact science throughout the night. The first of the two fighters in each bout and his or her cornermen inevitably have to wait for some time backstage while the previous fight comes to an end. Before walking out, each cornerman's bucket is inspected to protect against any unauthorized items making their way to the cage. To reduce the possibility of any claims of foul play, the fighters are each escorted to the cage by an inspector, who remains with the fighter's cornermen for the duration of the fight.

Before entering the cage, fighters are all given one last inspection by one of the referees, who also oversees the application of Vaseline by one of Bellator's cutmen. Dean Lassiter, who has been in the business for more than 20 years, does his job with paternal seriousness, giving his assigned fighter encouragement as he carefully applies the grease to his face, assuring him that he will take care of him if anything happens during the fight.

Referee Josh Rosenthal explains that, in addition to ensuring the fighter remembers his or her mouth guard and cup, he is checking to ensure finger nails are properly trimmed and that there is no improper "grease" on the body. Rosenthal laughingly recounts how he had once come across a fighter who was already slippery and explained to Rosenthal that he was just helping the process along by "pre-Vaselining." Rosenthal thus checks all fighters' limbs and behind their ears for "pre-Vaselining." Although he inspects with his black surgical gloves on, other refs, such as Jason Herzog, prefer to do the inspection

without them.

The cage-side area continues to bustle with activity until the referee finally yells "fight" and all eyes move to the cage. The three judges are stationed around the cage with three completely different vantage points. Throughout the night, the judges can be seen viewing the fights, either through the cage or, when their view becomes obscured, through the TV camera feeds streaming to enormous screens. Each of them has his or her own set of colored scorecards: pink, white or blue.

The physicians are seated immediately next to one of the cage doors, ready to come in if called upon by the referee, while Waklee sits at a table inches from the cage to vigilantly observe as events unfolded during and between rounds, along with her inspector in charge of suspensions and payouts, Tim Huff. At the conclusion of each round, one of the referees collects the scorecards, which are folded in half, and provides them to Waklee. She in turn records and tallies the scores on a master score sheet that she flips over to preserve the integrity of the scores.

For those fights that went all three rounds, Waklee tallies the final scores and delivers them to announcer Michael C. Williams to be read aloud.

An Exhausting Night

Each fighter is escorted back to the locker room after his or her fight. Some are exhausted. Others are quietly disappointed, like Anthony Lapsley, who was on the losing end of a very controversial referee stoppage against Jay Hieron.

Huff quickly makes his way back to the room on their tails, along with the ringside physician. He waits patiently while the physician goes through his routine post-fight exam, checking jaw alignment, vision and for any lacerations that might need stitching. He fills out his post-fight evaluation form, which dictates how long the fighter's medical suspension, if any, will last. Huff moves in to give the fighter his or her purse check and, if applicable, win bonus; he voids the bonus check made out to the fighter who lost. Each signs off for his or her check, but some express concern at the length of their respective medical suspensions.

Lapsley, lucid and visibly uninjured, joined in the dialogue about the classification of his controversial loss because it could cause him to be issued a suspension. The doctor inquires about the exact classification of the stoppage, and Huff assures Lapsley that he will obtain clarification and report back to the physician with the necessary information. Huff did so, and Lapsley was not issued a suspension. After the last fight of the evening, Spiritwolf is shocked by his suspension.

"Sixty days?" he asks.

He smiles coyly as the laceration above his eye buckles and shakes it off.

"Man," he says, "they can't keep me down for even 60 seconds, you know?"

At the end of the night, while the crowd disperses and Bellator's team begins dismantling its elaborate production set, Waklee secludes to a small, windowless room with the entire team -- with the exception of one physician who is mending Jara -- for the post-fight briefing. She gives all the opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns, but the overwhelming consensus is that the night ran incredibly smoothly from a regulatory perspective.

Indeed, it was exhausting keeping up with the CSAC staff and its frenetic pace. Every aspect of the event was accounted for. All in all, the commission's performance seemed to safely dispel any notion that MMA is anything other than a highly regulated sport in California.

This article was co-authored by Riddell and Tracey Lesetar. Riddell and Lesetar are attorneys at the global law firm Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, and are experienced in various matters related to the business of MMA. More background regarding Riddell's experience can be found at his lawyer profile found here. Lesetar's can be found here. This article does not provide legal advice, and any opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the views of their law firm. Riddell can be reached at jriddell@sherdog.com and Lesetar can be reached at tlesetar@sherdog.com.

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