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By EARL WATT

- Leader & Times

As Mixed Martial Arts continues to grow across the nation, and the world, Liberal's events have also grown, and March 23 the cage at the National Guard Armory will come alive for what could be a record-setting event.

"You are going to see the largest MMA event in the state of Kansas," promoter Dave Rine said. "We have 23 fights in the adult division and 17 fights in the junior division. Fights start at 3:30 in the afternoon. Adults at 5:30. It is quite a card. It will be the biggest and best anyone has ever seen."

The night will also feature four professional bouts and fighters from North Dakota, Texas, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma and Arkansas.

Maurice Running Elk is coming from a reservation as well as fighting clubs from Salina, Colorado Springs and Amarillo.

"We have guys coming from all over to fight," Rine said.

Liberal has become a destination for MMA fighters to build their resume in an attempt to reach the UFC, and the presentation in Liberal, along with its certified sanctioned status has made it an attractive venue.

“The State of Kansas says we treat people right,” Rine said. “We are not afraid to put on pro fights. You have to pay tax, and we don’t care about that. Our sponsorship is amazing. We keep holding good fights, lots of fights. It is an amazing show.”

The popularity of MMA continues to be recognized as the fastest growing spectator sport in America, and moving up the ranks can occur quickly.

“UFC has promoted the sport well,” Rine said. “There’s the UFC, Bellatore, and then us.”

Rine said that relationships with the upper divisions may help set the stage for local fighters to get their chance to move up.

“Bellatore contacted us,” Rine said. “We have guys around here that have been in that reality series. I talk to Clay Guida every week or two. I talk to Brian Bowles once a month. We try to get the people to go through the program, do what they are supposed to do. In the next year, year-and-a-half, we may have somebody in the Ultimate Fighter reality show.

“These guys can make it, and actually win. I know there is one guy that has all the talent on earth, and he can handle it.”

Rine’s fighters have developed from focusing on one skill set to becoming a threat in multiple disciplines, and that is what the program is all about.

“They have become mixed martial artists,” he said. “These aren’t guys that do just one thing.

We have a few guys — amateurs — who have done one or the other, but the guys who can move up are good wrestlers, Brazilian jiu jiu and kick boxers. They are not superb at any one, but good at all of them.”

That balanced approach to the sport has been the key to success for fighters at the next level.

Rine said that one particular fight he watched indicated the need to become a true mixed martial artist. A strong fighter on his feet was taken down and submitted because he was weak on the ground.

“The stand-up guy had no ground game,” he said. “The ground guy got him to the floor and the fight was over. If you can fight on the floor and stand up you don’t have any issues.”

Those are the types of fights Rine said would be on display at the Armory March 23.

“There are a lot of good fights,” he said. “All the pro fights are good. One fighter has been to Ultimate Fighter.”

Liberal’s Mario Munoz will be one of the marquee fights. Munoz is 1-1 as a pro, but Rine said that this time around will be different.

Munoz has already guaranteed that “someone will be knocked out.”

“In Mario’s last fight, he lost too much weight,” Rine said. “Now he is back to his original weight. He will do an amazing job.”

Rine said a number of other fights will also draw some major attention with Amarillo fighters pitted against Chocktaw, Okla., fighters as well as local fighter Cesar Gomez facing a kickboxer

from Texas.

“All of these guys are gogetters,” Rine said. “I foresee a lot of good fights.”

Tickets are currently available at Rine’s Karate.

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