

SPRAWL

A Step Ahead

While it is true that without fighters there would be no sport, you can also say that without sponsors there would be no fighters. One of the biggest is SPRAWL.

While the face of MMA is driven by fighters such as “Rampage” Jackson, Robby Lawler, Randy Couture, Jake Shields, Tony Lopez and other champions from the high-profile shows such as King of the Cage, UFC, EliteXC, K-1 and others, there is an entire industry of clothing, fight gear, supplements, mats and training equipment that provide the sponsorships that allow these athletes to train and fight full-time. This is the first in a series of articles about the industry insiders who drive the sport forward and who are the unsung heroes behind the popularity of MMA. Who better to start with than Steve Marino and Steve Izzi of Sprawl shorts, sponsors of numerous MMA and grappling fighters, who started their company less than 10 years ago and have now reached to every corner of the grappling and MMA world. In this interview, Steve Marino provides an insight into how he and Steve Izzi went from garage warehouse to worldwide consumer powerhouse.

Q: When did you guys get the idea for the first SPRAWL shorts?

A: The idea first came to me around 2000 when I was running a predecessor brand to SPRAWL called Valhalla Fight Wear. It was a label under which we were selling gis, traditional tight fight shorts and rash guards. When I did no-gi training I was not comfortable wearing the tight spandex shorts of the day so I got the idea of wearing board shorts from Rodrigo Gracie, who was one of my instructors at the time. However, my problem with standard board shorts was they kept coming untied and I would always have to stop and fix them while training; so I thought there had to be a better way. Replacing the external draw string with a Velcro and internal tie system eliminated the problem and made for a better grappling short.

Q: What was the design philosophy behind SPRAWL shorts?

A: The philosophy was to create something with the coverage, style and comfort of a board short with a functional difference that would allow for a secure waistband so fighters and grapplers could focus on their game instead of their shorts.

Q: What are your athletic, business and personal backgrounds?

A: I've been training in martial arts for over 20 years and started going to BJJ seminars about a year before the first UFC. That was back when Royce and Rorion Gracie were going around doing the seminar circuit. I continued my training with Craig Kukuk who was the first American to get a black belt in BJJ, then with Renzo Gracie, Rodrigo Gracie and now with Matt Serra. Actually, Serra and I were white belts together under Kukuk. My business partner, Steve Izzi, and I both have extensive backgrounds in management, sales, marketing and distribution from our past careers.

Q: With submission grappling and MMA being such a new sport when you started Sprawl, what has set you apart?

A: That's a good question. Based on the size of the market at that time we never thought SPRAWL would be more than a hobby and now it has grown beyond anything we could have ever imagined. We were driven by a love for the sport and the opportunity to be a part of it and there was never the expectation of significant business success, but it has certainly been an added benefit. We would definitely do it all over again even if the payoff wasn't there.

What has set SPRAWL apart has been our length of time in the sport and our focus on perfecting fight shorts. SPRAWL was launched in the beginning of 2002 when MMA was simply a niche interest and since then we have had over six years of building a reputation for innovation, leading-edge products and excellent customer service. So when people are making a decision of what fight wear to purchase our reputation plays a big part in the decision. Authenticity is another huge factor. SPRAWL created many of the components you now see are standard in MMA fight shorts. Most similar products have incorporated design elements from our shorts. Customers are smart and they realize this and would rather have the original.

Q: What products have you branched into besides shorts, and where do you see the company going in it's future product direction?

A: Most of our products have been ancillary



SPRAWL founders Steve Marino and Steve Izzi

items such as rash guards, tee shirts and hats. We are not focused on being a lifestyle, or more accurately, a fan wear company, but rather we focus on perfecting shorts and gear for the hardcore guys who train and/or compete on any level.

Q: Do you think that the sport still has room to grow?

A: That's hard to predict but we believe there are signs that growth will continue for at least the next few years. We base this in part on the number of MMA schools opening across



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the country, many of whom we hear from on a daily basis. Also, many traditional martial arts schools are instituting MMA programs. The reporting of MMA by mainstream media is another very good sign of growth. Additionally, the interest from traditional mainstream companies seems to indicate there is still growth ahead. So there are positive indicators from both the participant base and the fan base.

From an alternative point of view, there are indicators that can be interpreted that the sport has or is nearing its peak. For example,

there has been no sustained, strong competitor to the UFC. Now this may be due in part to a lack of a viable strategy by the competitive promotions, but if demand was high enough it is logical to assume the market would support other promotions.

Q: Why has Sprawl felt it was so important to sponsor so many fighters and grapplers over the years?

A: It is important because there is so much benefit to both parties. Through sponsorships the fighters are able to increase their income

over and above their purse, which allows them to focus more on training versus paying the bills. For us as an MMA/grappling brand it keeps our name in front of our target audience. It's just nice to be able to support the fighters who are the center of the universe in this sport and it gives us a lot of fulfillment as fans and business owners. 

For more information on SPRAWL or to buy their products, visit your local MMA/grappling/jiu-jitsu retailer or go to www.sprawl.tv