



PHOTOS BY ANDREW WITCHEY | FOR THE VALLEY NEWS DISPATCH

Frank Caliguri (left) of Lower Burrell shakes hands with fellow promoter Bill Viola of North Huntingdon while displaying one of the original mixed martial arts promotional posters Wednesday at the Academy of Martial Arts in Lower Burrell.

Caliguri's MMA history honored

Western Pa. Sports Museum to open exhibit today on Lower Burrell resident's contributions to sport

by PAUL KOGUT
VALLEY NEWS DISPATCH

Lower Burrell's Frank Caliguri sometimes wonders what might have been if mixed martial arts hadn't become illegal in Pennsylvania soon after he helped organize what some consider to be the first such event in the United States more than three decades ago.

"Battle of the Tough Guys," promoted by Caliguri and Bill Viola, was held at the Holiday Inn (now the Clarion Hotel) in New Kensington on March 19, 1980. Still, Caliguri is proud of his early association with the sport, which has experienced a huge increase in popularity in the past 10 years and was legalized again in this state in 2002.

At noon today, the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum at Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh will open an exhibit on the roots of mixed martial arts that features memorabilia from Caliguri, Viola and others.

"I feel, if they hadn't made it illegal back then, we would have been



Promotional posters, programs, photographs and awards are displayed at the Academy of Martial Arts.

the main people," said Caliguri, 61, co-owner of the Academy of Martial Arts in Lower Burrell and a ninth-degree black belt. "We had big sponsorships coming in."

The exhibit will include photos, posters, programs, protective gear, tickets and uniforms. It will be displayed temporarily at the entrance to the sports museum before being added to the boxing and wrestling section.

"We're truly honored," Caliguri said. "It's an honor being in this region's sports museum."

Mike Murray, 59, of Colliers, W.Va., was in the first bout of the

inaugural event and lost by technical knockout to Dave Jones. Caliguri, Viola, Murray and Jones plan to attend today's opening.

"Thirty-one years later, you don't expect this kind of honor," Murray said. "It's very humbling to be in there with those others."

Anne Madarasz, co-director of the sports museum, said the new display is a worthy addition.

"This exhibit adds a new chapter," she said, "as we trace the roots of mixed martial arts in the United States back to the Pittsburgh region."

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