

Kazak "Gladiators" Fight for High Stakes

Author: [Arkady
Inin](#)

Impoverished young sportsmen play deadly game with rich rewards.

In secret venues across Almaty, fit young men are beating each other to a bloody pulp in front of a baying crowd. While it can earn them vast sums of cash, what they are doing is completely illegal. This is Ultimate Fighting - and some are paying the ultimate price.

There are no rules in this extreme sport, popularised in the United States but rapidly gaining fans in Russia and Central Asia. Serious injuries are commonplace even in the licensed, adjudicated bouts televised in the US.

The illegal tournaments - a number of which have been held in Kazakstan - are another matter entirely. One kickboxing trainer told IWPR that the existence of such events is an open secret among Kazak sportsmen, saying, "I've been told what goes on - it's like a gladiator fight in ancient Rome.

"People drink, yell, get excited and pay money to watch the show, without caring about the healthy young men who are dying for their amusement."

People are known to have died in the Kazak bouts. They attract some of the finest martial arts experts in the country, but the savagery of the fighting means that even the strongest and most skilful can fall victim to a deadly punch.

The latest casualty of the clandestine fighting tournaments was a former world kickboxing competitor from Almaty, named only as Alexei, who died in the ring last month. "He received a serious head injury during the fight, and died almost immediately without regaining consciousness," the 24-year-old's brother Viktor told IWPR.

Viktor explained that while he often accompanied his brother to tournaments, they both shared an unspoken dread that each fight could be Alexei's last. "Quite honestly, my brother and I were scared that he could be killed, because we saw fighters die right before our eyes on several occasions," he said.

Alexei was drawn to the murky world of illegal fighting contests by the lure of prize money. "He was young and very strong, and he simply wanted to earn some decent cash," Viktor recalled sadly.

The rewards are impressive, especially by the standards of poverty-stricken Kazakstan. Alexei was paid as much as 3,000 dollars for a win, and routinely picked up around a sixth of that if he lost. In addition, the cost of treatment for any injuries he suffered in the ring would be paid for.

The audience goes wild with excitement during the fights, and can place bets as high as 20,000 dollars on a highly-rated contestant.

"They do it for fun, and they have plenty of money to throw around," said Viktor. "For them it's like betting on a horse. It's the excitement of victory that drives and attracts them, not the potential winnings."

IWPR spoke to one fighter who gladly gave up his job as a Tae Kwon Do instructor to take his chances in the ring. "I used to earn around 200 dollars a month depending on how many pupils I had, so I gave it up and went into Ultimate Fighting," he said.

"Of course it's brutal and dangerous, but I can earn more money from one fight than a martial arts instructor can make in a year. I'd be a fool if I didn't take that opportunity."

The fighter, who preferred not to be named, told IWPR that unlawful tournaments are held in almost every major city in the former Soviet republic, and alleged that the authorities won't intervene to stop them because the fight organisers have powerful connections.

"The person who runs the Almaty tournaments has very powerful protection - I'm not prepared to say what kind - so he's got nothing to be afraid of. Also, the audience comprises some very rich and influential people," he said.

While such tournaments are undoubtedly being held on a regular basis, the authorities claim not to know about them.

The Almaty internal affairs department's press spokesman told IWPR, "It's the first I've heard of it. I knew this sort of thing happened some time ago, but I don't know where."

The state does allow the promotion of licensed Ultimate Fighting supervised by a referee, with strictly enforced rules to minimise the risk of serious injury.

But at the moment, there is only one nightclub in Almaty which stages such tournaments. "We don't have any fatalities because we enforce the rules," a spokesperson for the club told IWPR. "For example, punches or kicks to the groin are completely forbidden, as is grabbing an opponent by the hair. What we do is perfectly legal."

Arkady Inin is the pseudonym for a journalist in Almaty

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