



BBC North

29 March 2021

Julian Knight MP
Chair, DCMS Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Dear Mr Knight

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the DCMS Committee inquiry on 'Concussion in Sport'. The Director-General, Tim Davie, has asked me to respond on behalf of the BBC.

We welcome the work of the Committee in looking into the prevalence of head trauma in professional sport and beyond, what actions should be taken to mitigate the potential risks and the sharing of best practice.

Your letter to the BBC dated 12 March 2021 makes observations on the BBC's forthcoming live digital coverage of the Mixed Martial Arts ("MMA") promotion, Bellator. It also references the views of Peter McCabe, Chief Executive of Headway, on the brain injury risks posed by MMA, boxing and other sports. I'll endeavour to respond to the points you have raised and provide some context to the BBC's decision-making.

It is evident that there are safety risks to participants in all physical contact sports. The debates over the health implications of such sports (particularly those with an elevated risk of head trauma) have been aired extensively across the BBC's digital and linear platforms¹. Ultimately, it is for the relevant sporting body to run their sporting events and ensure that appropriate licenses, controls and procedures are in place to manage the safety of participants. That applies to combat sports as it does to all sports.

We respect the right of Mr McCabe and the charity that he leads to express an opinion on the safety of combat sports. It is important that debates such as these are had to ensure that the potential risks are fully understood and mitigated wherever practical. However, it is for the competent authority – not a public service broadcaster such as the BBC – to help set and test the safety measures that are implemented for participants.

The choices made by the BBC on which sporting events to cover are based on the demands of our audiences. Our aim is to provide value to all audiences and that's done by acquiring the rights to a wide range of sports – coverage of Bellator this year will be a small part of our overall offer for sports fans. Our audience research suggests that there are around 2 million² adults in the UK with an interest in MMA. We know from past coverage that MMA also has a strong resonance with those audiences that are often underserved by the BBC, such as 16-24 year olds³ and those from less privileged backgrounds⁴.

We've been reporting on the sport for many years with significant interest shown by audiences in reports and news updates⁵. The BBC may cover up to 50 different sports each year and we apply the same set of editorial principles throughout; we do not 'cheerlead' for any of them.

As I'm sure you are aware, media coverage of MMA in the UK is long-established. The majority, if not all, national newspapers cover MMA on their digital platforms⁶ and occasionally in print. Online-only

sport sites like SPORTbible and SPORF also cover MMA in great depth, to cater for the needs of their target audience. The BBC's live digital streaming of Bellator in 2021 will be a continuation of the coverage previously offered by Channel Five since 2016 and Sky Sports. BT Sport has provided a significant volume of live and surround-sound programming of another high-profile MMA promotion, UFC, since 2013.

MMA, via these commercial promotions, has developed into a multi-billion-dollar sports industry. For example, Bellator (which is owned by the ViacomCBS Group) has multiple commercial sponsorships as well as distribution deals in more than one hundred territories, including partnerships with the likes of Disney-owned, ESPN and Google-owned, YouTube. The BBC's expenditure on MMA is a tiny fraction of those worldwide industry revenues.

We recognise that the BBC's live digital coverage of Bellator may not be deemed suitable for children or of interest to some BBC audiences. MMA is a fast paced, aggressive and physically combative sport. The coverage, which will take place in the evening or overnight, will therefore be preceded with appropriate guidance and BBC iPlayer has the functionality for parents to set a password-encrypted 'Parental Lock'. The live feeds will be monitored and subject to a time delay in the unlikely event of, amongst other things, a serious injury to one of the participants. We take our duty of care to audiences very seriously.

We hope you have found the BBC's submission of help to the Committee's ongoing inquiry. We look forward to its consideration of the issues and reporting on its findings.

Yours sincerely



Barbara Slater
BBC, Director of Sport

¹ For example, see the documentaries, "Alan Shearer: Dementia, Football and Me (2017)" and "Shane Williams: Concussion, Rugby and Me" (2020).

² GfK research for BBC Sport, October 2020.

³ As the Chief Executive of Ofcom noted in its Annual Report on the BBC in 2019, "*the BBC must set out bolder plans to connect with younger viewers and listeners.*"

⁴ A separate piece of research from 2019 by IPSOS Mori for BBC Sport suggested there may be greater interest amongst 16-24 year olds in MMA than in sports such as athletics, tennis and basketball.

⁵ In 2020 the British public voted UFC lightweight champion, Khabib Nurmagomedov to be their World Sport Star of the Year (part of the BBC Sports Personality of the Year programme), beating the likes of Dustin Johnson and LeBron James for the coveted award.

⁶ For example, see www.telegraph.co.uk/mma, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/mma/index.html>