

# 40 Years Ago This Month: Joe Lewis Professionalized Sport Martial Arts

by **Paul Maslak** - Sep 21, 2014 at 14:00 pm



*(Left to Right) Lightweight Isiais Duenas, MD, middleweight Bill "Superfoot" Wallace, light-heavyweight Jeff "The DC Bomber" Smith and heavyweight Joe "The Golden Boy" Lewis receive their championship trophies at the 1974 PKA world championships.*



When Lewis's own black belt student, former Vietnam Green Beret Lee Faulkner, asked him to participate in Faulkner's light-contact invitational *1<sup>st</sup> Pro Team Karate Championships*, Lewis agreed provided Faulkner also promoted a "full-contact karate" bout inside a boxing ring for the finale. On January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1970, Joe Lewis knocked out Greg Baines for the US heavyweight full-contact title. The competitors wore boxing gloves and sneakers. Faulkner initially called his promotional organization the *Professional Karate Association*, as seen at the bottom of the event poster, but immediately changed the name to the *United States Kickboxing Association*. Although Lewis and Faulkner intended at that time to call the new hybrid sport *full-contact karate* (as opposed to *light-contact*), the event ring announcer referred to it as *kickboxing* and the name stuck.



*Joe Lewis knocks out Greg Baines for the USKA heavyweight kickboxing championship in January 1970. Baines later perishes in an car accident. (Mary Townsley photo courtesy of the STAR System World Kickboxing Ratings.)*

Over the next couple years, largely amateur kickboxing bouts were introduced as part of the finale at light-contact karate tournaments throughout the United States and Canada. The enthusiasm, though, slowly died down and the new sport began to fade.

Meanwhile, Bruce Lee's theatrical films together with the TV series *Kung Fu*, starring David Carradine, created a national fervor in America for martial arts action. By 1974, Joe Lewis and another of his black belt students, Universal Television Vice-President Tom Tannenbaum, co-created the concept of televised world professional karate championships. This time they would call the sport *full-contact karate*. Lewis recommended Mike Anderson, a taekwondo black belt and publisher of *Professional Karate* magazine, to promote the event; Tannenbaum arranged for television coverage of the event and the appearance at ringside of many prominent TV stars then under contract with Universal.

On September 14<sup>th</sup>, the live event drew over 10,000 spectators to the Los Angeles Sports Arena. A team of European tournament champions were flown in by Germany's Georg Bruckner, a Mike Anderson black belt student. Celebrity ringsiders included David Carradine (*Kung-Fu*), Lorne Greene (*Bonanza*), Jim Kelly (*Enter the Dragon*), Ryan O'Neal (*Love Story*), George Peppard (*The A-Team*), Peter Graves (*Mission: Impossible*), Peter Fonda (*Easy Rider*), Richard Roundtree (*Shaft*), Christopher George (*The Rat Patrol*) and special guest Linda Lee, Bruce Lee's widow.



Professional Karate magazine cover featuring the September 1974 PKA world championships

Joe "The Golden Boy" Lewis (heavyweight), Jeff "The DC Bomber" Smith (light-heavyweight), Bill "Superfoot" Wallace (middleweight), and Mexico's Isaias Duenas (lightweight) captured the inaugural world championship titles as recognized after the event by the *Professional Karate Association*, named for Anderson's magazine.

The *World Professional Karate Championships* subsequently aired twice, as a 90-minute national broadcast, on ABC-TV's *Wide World of Entertainment*, first on December 27, 1974, at 11:30 p.m. and, for the first time for a martial arts event, attracts media coverage from major network sports news, *Sports Illustrated* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Even though broadcast opposite Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* and, the show garnered an astounding 52 share of the Nielsen ratings that night.

From this event, the sport of professional kickboxing took off, spread throughout the world and, much later, helped spawn the mixed martial arts movement.

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