**6/21/24; How UFC explains USA**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

NOEL: Donald Trump’s first public appearance after his conviction on 34 felony counts in New York last month?

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.google.com/search?q=donald+trump+UFC&sca_esv=c2560a63331f1db9&tbm=vid&source=lnms&fbs=AEQNm0Aa4sjWe7Rqy32pFwRj0UkWd8nbOJfsBGGB5IQQO6L3J5MIFhvnvU242yFxzEEp3BfblMs7eBu5zPnhtGsrETMyhOqzWtfgc_pCzrf4BYocXHSvZCSOzSIXK6--CxTb7sHfEdD7ktXMSxbqGHiNsvqDz5qLsK8yGVlnCemzlkq1aYCcEKv6vjQAnTO92iP3cJuAKzYxoUQgCowsQMIAf9abppfxDQ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwj5_viw6OyGAxUMElkFHes_AawQ0pQJegQIBhAI&biw=1549&bih=806&dpr=2#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:67b584ef,vid:zu1U4ANFIpQ,st:0)*> UFC 302*

*Announcer: Also with us tonight. 45! Donald Trump is in the building getting a standing ovation (FADE)*

NOEL: He went to a U-F-C fight.

*SCORING IN <KPM\_KPM\_2223\_05201\_Unexpected\_\_a\_60\_\_APM>*

NOEL: He used that night to launch @realdonaldtrump…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.tiktok.com/@realdonaldtrump/video/7375744699140721963)*> Tiktok, @realdonaldtrump  
Dana White: “The President is now on Tik Tok.”*

*Trump. “It’s my honor.”*

NOEL: take photos with fighter and Men’s Rights weasel Sean Strickland / and revel in cheers of “We Want Trump”.

NOEL: If you’re not an Ultimate Fighting Championship fan you may be unaware of the long-running relationship between candidate Trump and the league. But it’s real and, in 2024, it’s meaningful / if you want to understand Trump and his base. And also John Wick. And football. Coming up on Today, Explained: Hady Mawajdeh presents how UFC explains USA.

**[THEME]**

NOEL: Luke go ahead give me your full name and tell me what you do.

LUKE: My name is Luke Thomas. I'm a combat sports analyst, currently for CBS sports. But I have my own YouTube channel. I have a podcast as well where I cover both mixed martial arts and boxing. In terms of the big events, the day to day news and everything in between.

NOEL: All right, so I've never been to a UFC fight. So tell me how this goes. I step into the stadium and tell me everything that I will see and hear and feel.

*<CLIP> Paddy The Baddy Pimblett Walkout UFC London (continues under)*

*CROWD: OH PADDY THE BADDY!*

*Announcer: Buck it up boys.*

LUKE: It's going to be loud.

<CLIP BUMP>

LUKE: It's going to be dark, and it's going to be bright and shiny at the same time.  
  
NOEL: <chuckles>  
  
LUKE: It's going to have, you know, like a strobe light kind of effect at times. But here's what I would say. You're walking into a place with predominantly young males, although certainly not exclusively somewhere between the 18 years old to, let's say, 49 year old demographic.

*<CLIP> MICHAEL 'VENOM' PAGE WALKED OUT TO THE UNDERTAKER THEME (begins playing under LUKE)*

LUKE: and you're going to see a series of combatants. Both take turns walking out to the Octagon and they're going to compete in this bout. Now, these bouts are happening in different ways for different reasons. Some guys are at the beginning of their career. The main event will obviously feature much more established talent…

*<CLIP> MICHAEL 'VENOM' PAGE WALKED OUT TO THE UNDERTAKER THEME*

Announcer: there is a new showman in the UFC. Enter the credentialed Michael “Venom” Page. 21 and 2… (fades under again)

LUKE: …but there is going to be a broader show. It's going to be. It's the way I would explain it…

*<CLIP> MICHAEL 'VENOM' PAGE WALKED OUT TO THE UNDERTAKER THEME (FADE OUT)*

LUKE: is to maybe a softer version of the MOS Eisley cantina…

*<CLIP> Star Wars A New Hope*

*Cantina Scene music plays under.*

LUKE: where Han Solo and Obi-Wan Kenobi walk into this bar, and it's all of these sort of strange, different kinds of creatures from around the universe. That's an exaggerated example, but you're definitely going to see extremely loud, extremely in your face kind of production and sound design. But the UFC fans absolutely love it, and obviously the product is doing quite well.

*<CLIP> Star Wars A New Hope*

*FADES OUT*

NOEL: Yeah. How well is it doing?

LUKE: it depends on how you want to evaluate it. The UFC was sold in 2016 to basically Endeavor…

*<CLIP> Jimmy Kimmel Live*

*Jimmy Kimmel: is this the happiest birthday yet? After making $4 billion?*

*Dana White: It doesn’t suck.*

LUKE: There are current estimates ~~t~~hat puts it in the in the, $10 billion range as well. I mean, again, some of this is speculative, so it's not nearly as big as that.

LUKE: It is growing in parts of Southeast Asia. It's already been big to an extent in Japan. It's growing throughout Europe and sort of, Middle East, North Africa as well..

NOEL: Tell me how the UFC has evolved over the years up to the present day.

LUKE: The story basically begins in Denver of 1993,

*<CLIP> The First UFC Fight Ever | UFC 1 Free Fight*

*Announcer: Eight of the deadliest fighters in the world will meet in an no holds bar combat to determine who is the ultimate fighting champion*

LUKE: and at this time you have every different kind of guy you can imagine, this giant sumo guy, this kickboxer guy from various parts of Europe. No one really knew who they were, but it was all designedto be an infomercial for Gracie Jiu Jitsu.

*SCORING IN <MYMA\_JUST\_0156\_06301\_Street\_Fighter\_APM>*

*<CLIP> Joe Rogen Experience*

*Joe Rogen: The Gracie family is the most important family in the history of martial arts.*

LUKE: There was a Gracie family that had adapted a style of judo from, obviously, Japan

*<CLIP> Joe Rogen Experience*

*Joe Rogen: Brazilian JuJitsu is largely a part of this one dynamic incredible family. If you look at that family, all the fucking champions – Royce, Jorian, Hickson…*

LUKE: and they had kind of adapted it to make it use for anybody of any different kind of size.

*<CLIP> Joe Rogen Experience*

*Joe Rogen: the had to develop the concept of cooking your opponent. You know, all of that wasn’t in japanese jujitsu, it wasn’t in judo.*

LUKE: And so they sent out one of their family members, Royce Gracie, who was not the biggest guy in that family, who was not the best grappler in that family. And what they thought they could do was if we put him in all of these other matches against all these other guys, what people are going to see is that Gracie Jitsu is the dominant style of of fighting, period. And of course, Royce Gracie really dominated.

*<CLIP> UFC 2 Classic Championship*

*Announcer 1: Royce is the ruler. He is the greatest champion on the planet. Unbelievable.*

*Announcer 2: those blows were devastating.*

SCORING OUT

LUKE:And that's really the genesis of how it all kind of got started. ~~W~~hat it ultimately did is it sent forward and again, again, it was in a really rough state with very minimal, and rules, if at all. for example, today, hair pulling,

SCORING IN <AK Boxing Beat>

*<CLIP> Hady Mawajdeh Injury Sounds*

*Hady Mawajdeh: My hair!*

LUKE:banned. eye gouging,

*<CLIP> Hady Mawajdeh Injury Sounds*

*Hady Mawajdeh: OW! MY EYES!*

LUKE:banned. Fishhooking,

*<CLIP> Hady Mawajdeh Injury Sounds*

*Hady Mawajdeh: Get your fingers out of my mouth (garbled)*

LUKE:obviously banned. Attacking the clavicle

*<CLIP> Hady Mawajdeh Injury Sounds*

*Hady Mawajdeh: OOO–UHH!*

LUKE:banned. You could do basically all of that stuff, or at least the, the, big majority of it back in 1993.

SCORING OUT

LUKE:And so over time, this begins to beget this really appealing form of combat where guys who used to be Division one or Olympic alternate wrestlers, they wanted to get on the action and they had some success. So you had this sort of really interesting amalgamation of different people wanting to try this, and it gained popularity, but it also had notoriety as well, because it was unsanctioned, because the rules really weren't established. But you might recall in 1996, this is when Senator John McCain called it human cockfighting,

*<CLIP> Stadium, John McCain*

*John McCain: I mean, I’ve seen people repeatedly getting smashed in the face with a guy sitting on top of them. That’s not sport!*

LUKE:and that really sent it to a pretty terrible place. It got kicked off of Pay-Per-View in many cases. Eventually, a lot of states didn't even want anything to do with it. They would shut it down last minute. And in January of 2001, the guys who originally founded the UFC, they threw in the towel. They couldn't take it anymore. So they sold it for $2 million to Dana White, Lorenzo and Frank Fertitta. Those were two casino magnates from a pretty important family in Las Vegas. And those guys didn't have success either.   
  
NOEL: Hmm!

SAM: They were constantly having problems, constantly having issues with their shows. In fact, when they first got off the ground, those initial shows were a disaster. But in 2005, The Ultimate Fighter hits

*UFC, The Ultimate Fighter origin*

*DANA WHITE: What we knew we had to do was get on television. And reality shows were big. So we're gonna put fights on TV, but we're gonna put it on through reality*

LUKE: The world got to see really unique people doing a really crazy thing at the height of the reality TV show boom! And it worked. For the casual audience who had maybe heard of UFC this put a brand new face on it. This was something that they could see the individual human stories. They got to watch them fight in this house and this sort of like in-house tournament. And it eventually culminated with a live fight on spike TV

*<CLIP> The Ultimate Fighter 1 Finale*

*Announcer: Tonight, it’s Stefan Bonnar and Forrest Griffin for a UFC contract.*

LUKE: it was what would be we would call now a viral sensation, a slobber knocker if ever there was one…

*<CLIP> The Ultimate Fighter 1 Finale*

*Joe Rogen: What is keeping these guys going?!*

*Announcer 1: Bloodied, battered, but neither could be beaten!*

LUKE: that led to a second season on spike TV. In came more money, which came more shows, which came more notoriety. They signed deals with ESPN. They get billion dollar valuation. It really was a seminal moment in the history of that organization.

NOEL: And it sounds like Dana White is the guy who ushered it into the modern age. Who is this man? Tell us about him.

LUKE: Yeah. Dana White is a guy who grew up in the Boston, Massachusetts area. He, I think, initially wanted to try his hand at boxing. I think found that it wasn't necessarily going to be something he could do professionally, but I think wanted to be involved in the sport, had done some managing. He was managing UFC fighters, by the way, at the time of the acquisition He was a ferocious competitor with other MMA organizations. He was a dyed in the wool fight fan and always has been. And when you can make any number of different praises or criticisms of Dana White. But the one thing you must always get right is he is very, very much a real fight fan. And he had this moment in time where he knew MMA could be popular. It could be interesting. and he would go state by state, editorial board, by editorial board, TV station by TV station, proselytizing about the UFC product as best they could, and again, amid these rising fortunes, would make these claims about what it could be, some of which were a little. A bit silly, but a lot of them proved quite correct, and they convinced a new generation of people basically to be fight fans again. It's his controversial stances on things, or the way in which he presents himself, that was seen as an in a world where Roger Goodell is very buttoned up and doesn't tell you anything, Dana White will give you the finger   
  
NOEL: hmm

LUKE: and tell you exactly what he's thinking at that time. That was a huge differentiator for him amid a surging, different kind of brash brand. He was at that time a sort of perfect avatar for what they were doing.

*<CLIP> The Man Who Created The UFC*

*Dana White: some people can't deal with chaos some people can't handle the pressure I love that shit.*

LUKE: At the same time, I think somebody who is that driven and that successful in that determined to see a product or a vision brought to life, they can also be mean. They can be cruel. They can be vindictive. At the turn of the previous year, he got into trouble because he was seen exchanging blows with his wife for a New Year's Eve party. Slaps but blows just the same, and had had previous issues with the that same brash attitude that endeared him to so many. What sometimes crossed the line into some other, less savory forms of expression, and that has made him polarizing and controversial, but certainly popular and important.

NOEL: Popular and important. And here's why I want to try to put a finger on important in what way? In what way is the UFC culturally significant in America?

LUKE: This has changed over time, but I would say you can just see the success of MMA and UFC everywhere. So there have been UFC superstars, for example, like Conor McGregor, he's in the recent *Roadhouse* movie with Jake Gyllenhaal.

*RoadHouse (2024)*

*Knox: i thought you might miss having an audience.I was trying to be thoughtful*

LUKE: Not a very good movie, but that's not a nobody in Hollywood. Amazon is not a nothing studio. These are well-capitalized sort of A-list celebrities that now one of the major fighters is involved with. I would also argue, for example, if you watch movies like John Wick,

*<CLIP> John Wick 3*

*<fighting SFX>*

LUKE: the quality of the fight scenes themselves have dramatically improved, in part   
  
NOEL: <gasp>

LUKE: because people really didn't know what fighting looked like in 1993. You knew what boxing looked like, you knew what kickboxing looked like, you didn't know what was going to happen when the rules were just basically widened to allow for a broad base of them. And now you do. I would also argue the audience skews in a way that it did not necessarily used too much more towards the male high school age, and so you just see a big influence among what athletes they cite and who is attending these shows. I mean, here's a perfect example. Who is the coach for the Boston Celtics? I think it's Joe Missoula. He's only 35 years of age to get his players hyped for games in the finals. He was showing them footage of UFC fighters escaping chokes.

SCORING <KPM\_KPM\_2222\_01201\_Calibos\_\_b\_\_APM>

LUKE: This is the kind of thing that it has. It represents what apex human battle is supposed to be. It has created larger than life figures, and it's created a certain base understanding of what these struggles look like. And it has been majorly influential.

NOEL: Luke Thomas, sports analyst, C-B-S. Coming up: how Dana fell for Donald.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

NOEL: I’m Noel King. Sam Eagan is a reporter and documentary producer who’s written about Trump’s relationship with the UFC.

SAM: Yeah, so their relationship starts in 2001.

SCORING IN <CEZ\_CEZ\_4566\_04101\_A\_Sparkling\_Idea\_Alternate\_1\_APM>

SAM: UFC had just been acquired by Dana White and the Fertitta brothers, and the UFC was in a sort of a pretty sad state. It was being sort of like regulated out of existence.

*<CLIP> The Pivot Podcast Clips, Dana White: So we had a hard time finding venues. And Trump literally called us.*

SAM: Trump stepped up and offered to host two events UFC 30 and 31 at Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City in 2001.

*<CLIP> The Pivot Podcast Clips, Dana White: We get their greatest set up for us. He did this whole thing for us, showed up to the first fight and was there till the last fight.*

SAM: And then Trump actually steps away and starts his own MMA promotion in 2008 called Affliction MMA. It only lasts for a few events, but he kind of tries to step into into the main game himself, which, you know, I think speaks to the fact that he is earnestly a combat sports fan. And then it kind of falls under the radar, I think really until 2016, when Dana White is one of the first people to publicly endorse Trump.

*<CLIP> 2016 RNC, Dana White: Donald has great business instincts.*

SAM: And he even, you know, gives a speech at the Republican National Convention that year.

*<CLIP> 2016 RNC, Dana White:He supports businesses of all sizes. He'll make it possible for them to grow and succeed, which is the backbone of a strong economy.*

SAM: And in that speech, he's very careful, as he still is largely, you know, sort of very delicately tiptoe around the nuts and bolts of the politics stuff and to speak to Trump the person.

*<CLIP> 2016 RNC, Dana White: For over 15 years, Donald Trump has been a loyal and supportive friend. And I know that if I needed Donald, he would be there for me, just like he Was when I first met him*

SAM:, and talks about Trump bringing the UFC out of sort of out of the ashes and helping it rise to be like this massive sports business.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: That's incredible. So really early on, in 2016, when there is a lot of skepticism about Donald Trump, the candidate, Dana White, is fully behind him as as a friend and talking about him in the way that Trump does love to be talked about, which is he's a businessman. He did the business thing.

SAM: Exactly. Yeah.

NOEL: So Donald Trump, close listeners of the show may recall, was in fact elected president.

SAM: <chuckles>

NOEL: And then what happens with the relationship?

SAM: There's a few appearances here and there. And I think it really, really picks up in 2019. The the event that sticks out in my mind was UFC 244. That was in November of 2019. And just a few weeks before that, Trump had been booed at the World Series. I don't know if you remember that   
  
NOEL: I do.

SAM: he was booed at the World Series

NOEL: I do

*<CLIP> CNN, President Trump at World Series*

*Anchor: Booed in his own backyard. That was the reception at Nats Park when President Trump showed up on the jumbotron in game five of the World Series–*

*<BOOS!>*

SAM: And he makes an appearance at a UFC event shortly after. And, you know, it gets the whole the full treatment, the the cameras panned to him and fighters are cheering his name and talking about him in their post-fight interviews.

*<CLIP> mmaworld.com, Jorge Masvidal: I think, real recognize real. No matter what your views are on Trump as a president, the guy’s are bad motherfucker, man.*

SAM: And that starts a bit of a trend. And he he continues to appear at events periodically for the next few years. But then in 2023, it really takes off. And by my count, he appeared at three separate events in that year alone. As I was watching these events, I would notice, like, this feels like a like a captive campaign stop for Trump.

*<CLIP> UFC, Announcer: Making his way into the president, one of the bigger mixed martial arts fans I know. President Donald Trump.*

SAM: And that sort of pace and that relationship has continued into this year. He's already appeared at at least one event, and I'm sure they'll be they'll be many more in the lead up to the election.

NOEL: I understand why the UFC appeals to Donald Trump, and I understand why Trump appeals to Dana White. But the UFC is more than Dana White. It is an entire mainstream sports league. What is it about Donald Trump that appeals to the UFC beyond Dana White as a sports league?

SAM: I think that the UFC has largely achieved regulatory capture around the sport of MMA. At least $0.90 of every dollar spent on the sport of mixed martial arts globally is spent with the UFC. And a relationship with Donald Trump helps them to preserve that vice grip that they have on the sport. To have a president who is deeply pro-business and in no way antitrust is would be deeply beneficial to to the interests of the UFC.

NOEL: I wonder also about the UFC's politics, like the NBA, the NFL, they have been, they've been initially divided by these incidents, like Colin Kaepernick taking a knee or players during– players after George Floyd was murdered, going on Instagram and making statements. Has the UFC ever, like, has it ever kind of done that thing where it sort of seems like it's moving, moving left, or is it unabashedly right wing?

SAM:I think that in general, it's sort of, it sort of steers, right? I mean, I would say fighting is in no way, uh, inherently a conservative sport, but it presents as being about the individual. It's one person competing against one person in a very violent, dominant fashion. I don't know if you're familiar with, active clubs where there's like a growing, a growing neo-Nazi movement that uses MMA to, like, recruit young people sort of into their ranks, using MMA as a, as a sort of backdoor into that. So there's these themes of, in the case of the really, really far right, there's these themes of domination and violence that are like really, really important to to those, political agendas. They're very easily paralleled in MMA. Right, in terms of a more sort of mainstream Reaganomics conservatism. I think that the individual nature of combat sports, I think that this idea of it being sort of sexy and countercultural, right. Like it's not the it's not the normal thing to be into. And I think that conservatives really want to appeal to the counterculture, especially at this. Like, you think about like people like Gavin McInnes. Right, who I wouldn't call a traditional conservative, of course, but there's this deep desire, like, like, like to say that like, conservatism is like the new punk, right? There's this deep desire to appeal to the counterculture. I think MMA is a really, really easy, backdoor for that.

NOEL: Tell me about the fighters. What is it about the fighters in MMA in UFC that appeals to conservatives? Do you think?

SAM: They almost take the professional wrestling approach and some fighters sort of end up having like a, a personas, if you will? One of the people that comes to mind when you ask, this is a guy like Colby Covington, who who is a former title contender in the UFC [and] fought for the title multiple times,

*<CLIP> UFC 296*

*Colby Covington: I wanna shoutout all our first responders, our military those are our real heroes and celebrities of our country. Also wanna shoutout Donald Trump. You can delay us, but you can’t deny us. He’s gonna make America great again.*

SAM: and has sort of made his career by presenting as this, as this super hyper MAGA dude in all of his fight promotions. Whenever he's on mic, he's wearing a red MAGA hat

*<CLIP> ESPN MMA*

*President Trump: You are a great fighter, man. I’ll tell you, you make it so easy. I don’t know how you do it. Congratulations. I wanted to watch that fight tonight.*

*Colby Covington: Thank you so much mr. president, you gave me the dragon energy when you shook my hand on sunday at your rally…*

SAM: He had a title fight against, Kamaru Usman and kept referring to him over and over again as fake news, man, like just doing things sort of sort of like, like this being very, very open about his politics in a way. Like, I don't even think you see people doing in the NFL or the NBA. There's fighters like, Jorge Masvidal who, as a Cuban American fighter from Florida and in 2020, led this, led this bus, campaign around Florida called Fighters Against Socialism, which was just a series of pro-Trump rallies.

*<CLIP> Fighters Against Socialism Rally*

*Jorge Masvidal: We either re-elect President Trump and keep America great. <cheers> amen. Or we let Joe Biden destroy the greatest country the world has ever seen.*

SAM: There was also Sean Strickland who famously and a few months ago got on mic and went on this really, really intense anti LGBT tirade

*<CLIP> MMAWeekly.com*

*Sean Strickland: You are the definition of weakness. Everything that’s wrong with the world is because of fucking you…*

SAM: So you're getting these fighters who are saying these really openly conservative, sometimes downright bigoted things. And Dana White, who likes to sort of fashion himself as like a free speech absolutist, tolerates it, and then in tolerating it is ending up sort of endorsing it.

NOEL: Are we going to see headlines after the election that the UFC and UFC fans got Donald Trump elected? I mean, how how how useful to Trump the candidate is this voting bloc?

SAM: I do not think that the UFC will sway the election.

SCORING IN <Damn Yea, Shebeasts!-02 BMC>

SAM: it's still significant. Like he's shown sort of a roadmap for how to appeal to young men that are typically a maybe vaguely conservative but generally sort of apolitical and particularly young Latino and black men. So I think that this is more of a, of a roadmap for for how conservatives can continue to make gains and continue to galvanize young male voters in a way that previous Republican candidates have not.And I do think that the UFC is playing a big role in that activation.

NOEL: Sam Eagan, reporter and producer. Today’s episode was produced by Hady Mawajdeh, a maximalist. It was edited by Lissa Soep. It was engineered by Andrea Kristinsdottir and Patrick Boyd and fact-checked by Laura Bullard. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**