
AN 'EXPONENTIAL' LOVE OF FITNESS

BY HEATHER HOLTSCHLAG

BILL AND JENN VIOLA'S ANNUAL PITTSBURGH FITNESS EXPO BRINGS FITNESS OPPORTUNITY AND AWARENESS TO THE MONROEVILLE CONVENTION CENTER.

Norwin resident Bill Viola, Jr. found it surprising that there were no substantial fitness or health events in the greater Pittsburgh area geared toward a young, active generation.

Having previously competed as an athlete at the annual Arnold Classic in Columbus, Ohio, from 1996 to 1999, an event hosted by weightlifting legend Arnold Schwarzenegger, Viola had the opportunity to meet Schwarzenegger, who not only recognized Viola's karate school, Allegheny Shotokan, as the top team in the nation in 1998, but also encouraged him to follow his dream of creating a health and fitness event in Pittsburgh.

It was then that the annual Pittsburgh Fitness Expo, the most established multi-sport expo in Pittsburgh, was born. The signature event, the "Kumite Classic," is the competition component. The expo takes place each year over Memorial Day weekend at the Monroeville Convention Center—the place it has called home since 2004.

This type of event was not only new to Pittsburgh; it was something different for Viola, too. But he had a wealth of previous life experiences upon which to rely, in addition to the knowledge instilled in him by his father.

"I founded my company, Kumite Classic, in 1999. I was a recent graduate of the



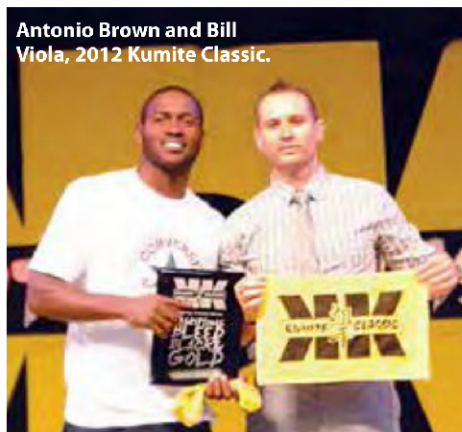
Kurt Angle, Bill Viola and Franco Harris.

University of Pittsburgh and had moved to Los Angeles to gain experience in the entertainment industry," Viola explains. "My father, Bill Viola, Sr., who is the co-creator of the sport of mixed martial arts, was a prominent sports promoter in the 1970s and 1980s, and I wanted to follow in his footsteps. I was accepted into the Screen Actors Guild and worked with some of the

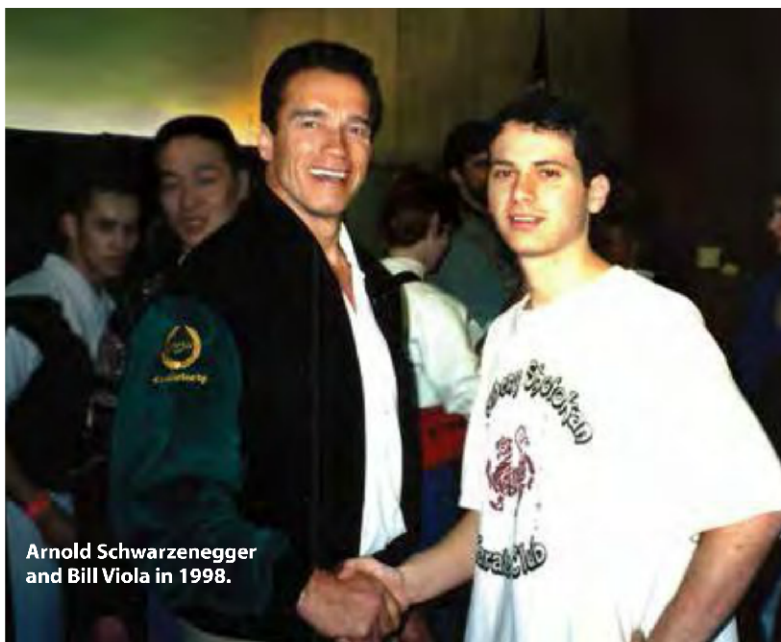
biggest producers, directors and actors in Hollywood. Armed with all of that, I was able to establish the Pittsburgh Fitness Expo."

Viola notes that although most major expos have a full-time, year-round staff, he had just a vision and a few friends. "I was a quintessential workaholic. That first year of the expo was built on passion. I am fortunate that I grew up in the game, so to speak, learning all that I did from my father, but I was still young, at only age 22. I knew my reputation would be on the line, and if the first event wasn't successful, it would be hard to rebound. I went 'all in' to make sure people took me seriously. It worked."

To make the expo happen each year, Viola and his wife, Jenn, organize and complete everything. They have been together since the first expo took place and have now been in business for 17 years. Today, she serves as the director of registration, a job he acknowledged as the most difficult and stressful. Viola considers himself the producer, just like in the movies, a job



Antonio Brown and Bill Viola, 2012 Kumite Classic.



Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bill Viola in 1998.



PITTSBURGH FITNESS EXPO

in which he takes ideas and makes them happen.

"Each day, I wear a different hat," he says. "I do sales, marketing, PR, logistics, social media and web development. I build the brand and put out fires. I operate at every level of the business. Over the years, however, Jenn and I have learned how to delegate better and trust our instincts. She has a business degree from Pitt and a master's from IUP, so she is savvy. We work well together."

Viola admits, though, that if they both didn't have a true love for fitness, the expo wouldn't work. He also acknowledges their friends and family members, all of whom are the main reason the pair's annual expo has been a success.

Although the first expo was well-attended, Viola says that was just scratching the surface, as it did not include the expansive amount of events that are in place today: "After the inaugural year, we kept adding new events, then another, then another. It's been a momentum thing. So what I thought was successful years ago isn't quite the same as it is today. We keep setting the bar a little higher."

The expo has grown in both size and prestige each year, and has even attracted the

likes of actor Ice-T and several Pittsburgh Steelers including Lynn Swann, Franco Harris and Antonio Brown. A "who's who" of martial artists have attended including UFC legend Royce Gracie and Olympic gold medalist Kurt Angle. Viola said that the organizers constantly push the envelope of what the fitness community wants to experience and expects about 12,000 visitors this year.

The expo encompasses more than 100,000 square feet of health, wellness, sports, fitness and nutrition exhibits and vendors, surrounded by nearly 20 different competitions that include strongman, martial arts, body building, CrossFit, karate, grappling, jiu-jitsu, MMA, modeling, figure, teen strength, obstacle course and skill competitions.

"It is a very high-energy atmosphere," Viola says. "We have interactive challenges, classes and workouts, so people can even break a sweat while they visit. And of course we have free samples from the industry's leading brands. It is important that we stay connected with the community, so we work with local companies to sample new healthy supplements and nutritional options."

In addition, the event is an avenue to showcase the latest fitness products, exercise equipment and leading cosmetic products. Health and wellness consultations are often available with physicians, physical therapists and natural health experts.

The exposure that the Pittsburgh Fitness Expo receives extends far greater than just the surrounding communities, mainly due to the nature of the world-class competitions that take place at the event. Viola said he remembers athletes attending from Hungary, China, Mexico, Canada and England last year.

"It has been a fun ride, but I believe we still have so much more potential," Viola says. "I'm certainly proud of our success, but I'm never satisfied. My goal is to get more Pittsburgh-based corporations to partner with the expo so we can reach a broader audience. Our well-being is our most valuable commodity. Preventive health should always be a hot-button topic, and we aim to educate."

The Violas hope that the Pittsburgh Fitness Expo will continue to provide a family-friendly atmosphere where the younger generation can learn more about physical fitness and nutrition. Though a lot of people thought the event would fail in its early stages, he is proud to say that it is still very much a part of western PA's culture.

"We are proud because we are making a difference," he beams.

For more information about the Pittsburgh Fitness Expo, visit PittsburghFitnessExpo.com, email Kumite at Bill@PittsburghFitnessExpo.com, "like" the Facebook page at [FitnessExpo](https://www.facebook.com/FitnessExpo) or follow on Twitter @KumiteClassic and Instagram at [KumiteClassic](https://www.instagram.com/KumiteClassic). ■