





# BIG T W W N

As mixed martial arts becomes a phenomenon in the U.S.,  
Las Vegas is poised to become its capital BY JOSHUA LONGOBARDY

SINCE THE EARLY '70s, when Bruce Lee incorporated various disciplines of unarmed combat into his karate style, the sport of mixed martial arts has been BIG. Like Tyson-Holyfield II BIG. Like NCAA Final Four Championships BIG. Like Super Bowl BIG. (Think 90,000 insatiable fans at Tokyo National Stadium for Pride Fighting Championship's Shockwave/Dynamite event, cheering and anguishing as if the world depended on the outcome of each fight.)

But just not in America, where mixed martial arts—otherwise known as MMA—is just starting to grow. It used to be that fighters like Heath Herring and Kevin Randleman, two Las Vegas guys who do combat with more than just their hands, and without anything to assist them but four- to six-ounce gloves on their knuckles, had to go east, to the other side of the world, where mixed martial arts was BIG enough to make them more than a daily wage: It made them into celebrities.

But then, in 2001, the Ultimate Fighting Championship organization was reborn in the States, and, spearheaded by owners the Fertitta family, of Station Casinos fame, just last year it made MMA big business in America. Not yet BIG, but large enough that two new major players in Las Vegas, attorneys Louis Palazzo and Ross Goodman, would start a new MMA organization right here in Las Vegas, and pour tons of money into signing fighters like Herring. And large enough that a BIG organization like Pride FC in Japan, for which Randleman fights, would bring its first show to America this Saturday, October 21, at the Thomas & Mack Center. Not yet BIG, but just about there.



Chuck Liddell gives his warmest regards to Babalu Sobral.

## Saturday Night Raw with the Lean, Mean, Ultimate Fighting Machine

August 26, 2006:

Before a loud and lively crowd at the Mandalay Bay Events Center, UFC superstars Chuck Liddell and Forrest Griffin put on stellar shows in their respective fights. And like all big-time fighters before them, they got the Saturday night party on the Las Vegas Strip off to a dynamic start.

The main event, Liddell's bout against Renato "Babalu" Sobral, was a title fight, for the light heavyweight championship belt, and so it was scheduled for five rounds instead of three, like most UFC fights. But few anticipated it to last that long, evinced by the general antsiness in the crowd, which was rumbling when the

first match of the night's card commenced three hours earlier and then erupted by the time the champion Liddell emerged from the locker room, with Sobral already out and ready for him. And that's because most of "The Iceman" Chuck Liddell's fights end by way of first-round knockout.

Sobral had been waiting to fight Liddell since 2002, his last loss, which came to the hands of Liddell. At 6 feet, 3 inches and 205 pounds, with a Mohawk, a slight beer gut and very heavy hands, Liddell was waiting for him too, with the raucous support of the crowd behind him.

Nobody in the UFC is adored by the masses the way Liddell is. There were 9,000 in attendance, and they formed a crowd typical of UFC events: bad dudes in Tapout T-shirts and their bad-ass chicks,

bearing maximal cleavage; and of course the celebrities, like Carey Hart and Jenna Jameson. Most of whom had shown up for the actual fights, and not just the social event UFC's shows have become.

"The last boxing match I worked as part of the Nevada State Athletic Commission was the Oscar De La Hoya-Ricardo Mayorga fight (which, you know, was a major event), and at the first match of the undercard there was no more than 500 people scattered across the arena," said Marc Ratner, who attended thousands of fights as executive director of the NSAC. "But at the Liddell-Sobral fight, there was a good 5,000 watching the first fight."

And they stayed to watch the main event, with volcanic enthusiasm—the type of noise and energy typical of big American spectacles and consistent with the atmosphere of the Strip—cheering on Liddell as he waged battle with the challenger inside UFC's trademark Octagon ring, 38 feet in diameter and enclosed by a cage fence four feet high and locked shut.

They cheered even louder when Liddell won, knocking Sobral out with a dozen strikes and one concussive blow. Sobral, a crafty Brazilian well-versed in many of the sport's disciplines, such as jiu-jitsu and kickboxing, blew his load early and ran straight into his demise just one minute and 35 seconds into the first round.

As it oftentimes happens in the UFC, the fight was so quick, wild and dictated by primal instincts that even this championship bout featuring two of the most well-prepared fighters in the world turned into a brawl lacking art or science. But this, in essence, strikes a primordial chord in the audience, and they left the arena on Saturday night absolutely invigorated.

"Ah man, I'm so fucking pumped,"

said David Knight, a 29-year-old fan from California. "That was an incredible fight, and now I have Vegas in front of me, baby."

"Whoooooooooooooo!"

On the contrary, Griffin's fight against Stephan Bonnar demonstrated that professional mixed martial arts is not just two pit bulls unleashed within a locked cage. In three rounds of sustained action and calculated strikes, Griffin and Bonnar showed that there is thought, tactic and above all timidity in the cage. That is, two human beings vying to win a competition.

Both young fighters got their start in the organization on UFC's reality series, *The Ultimate Fighter*, on Spike TV. The show, now in its fourth season, has been the medium of UFC's prodigious growth throughout America, says UFC's president and micromanager of all its operations, Dana White. For not only did it expose the fledgling sport to the masses, it also acquainted the fans with individual athletes like Bonnar, 29, and Griffin, 27. So that on Saturday night, when they fought the rematch of their legendary battle at the conclusion of the show's first season, it was as if the fans in the crowd were cheering for friends or even family.

The fight went all three rounds, and in the end of a close and bloody match, the judges declared Griffin the winner. After the fight, as is customary at MMA events, a microphone was handed to Griffin in the middle of the Octagon, so that he would seduce the crowd into loving him, because just as the gladiators in ancient Rome knew, winning over the coliseum is critical.

Griffin did.

And they cheered him, like a hero.

Yet, he would later say that he does not yet feel like a celebrity; and that's because the UFC in specific, and MMA in general, is not yet BIG in America.

Not BIG like Oscar De La Hoya, who sold more than 1 million pay-per-view subscriptions for his fight last May, and made over \$20 million for himself when it was all said and done. Not yet BIG like Mike Tyson, whose selling power has been so strong during the past two decades—not only bringing in hundreds of millions of dollars in merchandise, advertisements, ticket sales and pay-per-view buys, but also sparking a substantial increase in the Las Vegas economy during the weekend of any of his fights—that even now, old, washed-up and disgraced, he has been recruited by UFC's competition in Japan, the MMA organization Pride Fighting Championship.

But the UFC, a pay-per-view business that now holds five or six events a year and is set to begin holding events in Mexico and other countries, is getting there, the numbers indicate. On this night tickets sold for between \$100 and \$750, and more than \$3 million poured in through Mandalay Bay Event Center's gates. These days UFC events, above all those featuring Liddell or Griffin, surpass 400,000 in pay-per-view buys (at \$39.95 each) around the nation, and pack as many as 17,000 fans into the arenas, for the most part in Las Vegas. (To put things in perspective: the World Wrestling Entertainment, a BIG entertainer in America, routinely does 550,000 pay-per-view buys for its major shows.) Which is a significant spike from just a year and a



Forrest Griffin strikes the pose.

half ago, when pay-per-view sales hovered around a respectable 280,000 (at \$34.95 each), and four years before that, when the new UFC had been raised from the grave by its risk-taking owners, Dana White and the Station Casinos moguls, Frank and Lorenzo Fertitta.

The UFC has been around since 1993, but for good reason it suffered the bad reputation of being little more than human cockfighting. Even Marc Ratner, then the venerable head of the Nevada State Athletic Commission, went on TV and said the UFC would never take place in Nevada. But then White and the Fertittas took over, and got the sport regulated—gave it rules, weight classes, fight doctors, judges—and then got Ratner not only to endorse the sport, but also to do so, starting in May of this year, as part of his new job: the vice president of government and regulatory affairs for the UFC.

"No sane businessman would have gotten into mixed martial arts in America when we did," said White, who owns 10 percent of the UFC but receives 90 percent of the credit for its hard-earned success. "The turnaround came with a lot of hard work over the last six years. It feels like it's been 60 years."

Now MMA has been approved by athletic commissions in 20 states, and by all indications, MMA insiders say, the other 30 are soon to follow. For, now, on account of the bountiful field the UFC has plowed, there is good money to be harvested off MMA in America, MMA observers have stated on sports Internet sites and in feature articles in major American newspapers. The West is becoming fertile ground for MMA events.

And now UFC fighters are almost famous. "I do get some fan mail, and a lot of hellos and hand shakes at the super-market," said Griffin. "But I don't feel like a celebrity yet."

At the press conference following the fight, at which the BIG media was absent—the ESPNs and the *USA Today*s and the *Sports Illustrated*s—Dana White introduced Liddell as the light heavy-weight champion of the world. This, by and large, was not accurate, because there is competition Liddell must first conquer before earning that status. Even Liddell understood this, and so he, who will fight fellow UFC superstar Tito Ortiz on December 30, pointed out on several occasions that he wants nothing more than to fight the best: Wanderlei Silva, a Brazilian warrior from the Pride organization, and Rampage Jackson, the formidable bulldog from MMA's newest sensation in America, the World Fighting Alliance.

## A Few Bare-Knuckled Questions About the Upstart WFA

**Why did you sign with the newest organization, the World Fighting Alliance [WFA]?**

Quinton "Rampage" Jackson, former Pride superstar and the last man to beat the UFC's Chuck Liddell, after participating in the WFA's first event, in July 2006: To be real. I've fought for a number of different organizations—it's true: There are several grassroots organizations around the world

which host small events just about every week of the year, and an MMA fighter must surmount these before he can reach UFC, Pride or, now, the WFA—and the WFA is by far the coolest, the most open-minded, and they are serious about this.

Heath Herring, veteran Pride and K-1 fighter out of Las Vegas who just made big news in the MMA world by signing with the WFA on October 3, and will thus be returning to home soil for the first time in seven years (as told to *mmaweekly.com*): I actually called Quinton up and asked him about these guys. He said they were good guys. I know Jeremy Lappen, who is CEO of the company, and I think there are some intelligent people behind this company that know what they're doing.

**If you had a good deal of money to start an MMA organization, as it appears the WFA does, would you focus your operations in Las Vegas?**

Brandon Adamson, an MMA fighter from the esteemed Miletich wrestling camp in Iowa: Definitely. Vegas is the fight capital of the world. The majority of the fighters here are elite.

UFC President Dana White: For us, Las Vegas was the natural decision.

Scott Ence, part owner of Fight Club, near Valley View Boulevard and Tropicana Avenue: Las Vegas is the best now. There's gyms popping up all the time, and you can train in them side by side with top-class athletes. It all goes back to the UFC and the success they've had. We have a lot of UFC fighters who train at our own gym.

Jeremy Lappen, who revived the dormant WFA early this year with the monetary backing of Las Vegas attorneys Louis Palazzo and Ross Goodman (as told to *Whaledog.com*): Everyone saw how successful the UFC was; everyone sees there's now money in it. We wanted to resurrect the WFA brand. We have money and the political power to compete with Zuffa [the UFC's parent company]. The UFC needs competition. Without it, they cannot go as far as they want to.

Urijah Faber, one of the world's best 145-pound fighters, on why, in mid-September, he chose to sign with the WFA: They offered me really good money compared to what the UFC does.

**Dana, whenever we speak to MMA fans, they without fail bring up fighters' salaries in the UFC, and—**

UFC President Dana White: How do they know what my fighters make? We're not boxing, we're not the NBA, and we don't operate under the guidelines of those sports. Problems arise when everyone knows how much you make. Does everyone know how much you make? Listen, my guys are smart—Chuck Liddell got a degree in accounting from Cal Poly; Rich

## WHAT IS MMA?

**JIU-JITSU:** In short, submission wrestling. A sly and graceful form of grappling on the ground in which smaller men can make bigger men say uncle by manipulating leverage. **MUAY THAI:** The art of eight limbs. This discipline emphasizes eight points of striking, the hands and shins and elbows and knees, and makes one think he's engaged in underwater battle with an octopus. **KARATE:** Ever seen *The Karate Kid*? **BOXING:** The sweet science. A discipline of fighting in which combat is limited to the hands. Ali proved it to be an art as well. **KICKBOXING:** Just as the name implies: Boxing, but with the permission to strike with the lower legs. **WRESTLING:** Like they do in the Olympics, not the WWE.

Franklin was a math teacher—don't you think they'd be aware if they were being cheated? When one of them leaves me or even complains, that will be news.

Quinton Jackson, as told to Las Vegas Weekly in July: The WFA's paycheck blew everyone out the water.

Lappen (to Whaledog.com): We're trying to build a fighter-first organization. My experience is that the UFC tries to build their brand, not their fighters. Even now, with the UFC's success, it's still: Who's Chuck Liddell? Where's he from?

Jackson, on the different approach the WFA has taken to promoting: We went to the nightclubs. They were drunk in there—they didn't know who I was. But if that's how you gotta do it now ...

Lappen: We're trying to get the news out to the masses. Make our fighters known.

And the WFA, which, like most sports that aren't yet BIG in America (such as bodybuilding, drift racing), relies on Internet sites first and foremost, in a statement issued through Sherdog.com on October 3: The World Fighting Alliance will return with its second event, at the Aladdin Resort and Casino, in Las Vegas, Nevada, on December 9. Newcomers to the WFA Urijah Faber and Heath Herring will be featured in respective matches, as will Quinton "Rampage" Jackson.

## The Ballad of Pride Fighter Kevin Randleman

A congenital fighter, Kevin Randleman just wants to get in the ring again and to fight at home, in the United States of America. Rest and resolve have permitted him to do the first, and his employer, the renowned Pride Fighting Championship organization in Japan, has granted him a chance to do the second, on October 21, at the Thomas & Mack Center here in Las Vegas.

Which, of course, is great news to Randleman, a Las Vegas resident 5-foot 10-inches tall and 205 fatless pounds, with two NCAA national championships in wrestling to his name. Because after taking his first year off from professional mixed martial arts in more than a decade, to recover from a string of nine surgeries in 11 months, and after searching the world for game competition and viable paychecks, he feels like a Corvette right out of the mechanic's shop: revived, and better than ever. He is antsy as hell from the time he wakes up (early in the morning, to do cardio) to the time he goes to bed (where he'll continue to soak the sheets with anxious sweat). And you don't have to be around him for more than a couple of minutes for it to show: He lets out spontaneous and intermittent yelps. He oscillates about the gym like a Latin dancer and bounces around his house like an incurable boxer. And he is happy, total and true, now able to do what he does best. To fight.

And to train to fight. It's what fills his days, what he looks forward to in the sparse hours he isn't working out, what keeps him in shape and out of trouble. And this is what it looks like:

—6:30 a.m., Mon. - Sat.: One hour of weight training and 40-60 minutes of cardio, typically atop of Mt. Charleston



Kevin Randleman spars with Brandon Adamson.

—11:00 a.m., Mon. - Sat.: Boxing and Muay Thai practice (sparring on t/w/th)

—6:30 p.m., Mon. - Sat.: Wrestling and Jiu-Jitsu practice

He works out with the best competition possible. Sometimes with guys from the UFC, like Forrest Griffin and Joe Stevenson. Sometimes with guys from Pride, like Hammer House teammate Mark Coleman. Or, other times, with any of the myriad top-notch fighters who have come to train in what Randleman calls the new mecca of MMA, Las Vegas. And he works out at a variety of gyms, like the Fight Club, Cobra Kai and Combat Club. Randleman knows what he's doing. No doubt. He's been training like a professional for the past 10 years, and fighting for much longer than that.

Randleman was born one of 12 children in the state of Ohio. As a kid he was short and round. He endured derision because of it, you can be sure. Had to wear corrective braces for bowleggedness, too. Absorbed, of course, a good deal of playground jokes for that one. But then the braces came off, and he got to running. Anywhere; everywhere. And fueled by the built-up aggression of so many years being teased. That's how the fat came off.

Then a teacher raped him. He was still a little boy then, 10 years old, Kevin was. You can imagine the lifelong implications.

Rage was one of them. Randleman grew up mad at the world. He destroyed people in street fights. Older dudes who hit his sisters. Drug dealers who messed with his family. Even guys who probably didn't deserve it. Then he took it out on the wrestling mat at Ohio State University, where he was a three-time All-American. Felt good, to be the best in America. A steaming bull.

Then, in 1999, he charged through the UFC, where he didn't care he was fighting guys who outweighed him by 50 pounds. Hell, no. He was just doing what he does best: fighting. They started calling him the monster—and the name stuck. Won the UFC heavyweight championship belt in 2000. The monster.

But it wasn't enough. The cage didn't exhaust all the monster's rage. He got into some shit. Like selling drugs.

2004, this was.

Went overseas. To Pride, in Japan, where fighting is BIG. Has been BIG since the turn of the 21st century, in fact. Pride wanted him there. Wanted his charm, his charisma, his gesticulate speech. His fast hands, his supernatural athleticism, his doctorate in wrestling. They paid him better there. The competition was superior there—for these weren't just the baddest dudes from America, they were the baddest dudes from Brazil and Russia and the eastern hemisphere, as well. The crowds were bigger there, more invested. He became a celebrity there. The black incredible hulk with blond hair and a 40-inch vertical. It was wild, man. But he missed home. America.

Then he got hurt. Well, better put: He realized he *had* been hurt. Torn right bicep. Fucked-up right shoulder. Fungi the size of a 10-year-old's hand in his lungs. And the list goes on. Doctors told him to have surgery. So he did. It was painful—both the surgery and the not fighting.

And the not going out, too. For an extrovert—gregarious, ineluctable—it was torture to stay in. He dropped to 185 pounds. Walked around his Las Vegas house in a stupor for two months, and if it weren't for the unwavering loyalty of his girlfriend, Elizabeth, a tall and indomitable Italian woman, Kevin's not sure he would have made it. He also enjoyed the fidelity of his employers—the Dream Stage people who own and operate Pride—who are so rich that they own islands in Hawaii yet found time and compassion to visit him in Las Vegas while he was sick. "For me, people come first," Randleman says. "I like people, and I like people who put people first. That's why Pride has earned my respect."

It was then, during his convalescence, that his change came to completion. Then that he found the peace that had been in his back pocket the whole time. That he realized his people and his fighting made him a happy man, and there was no reason to vaunt his rage and aggression anywhere but inside the ring.

(Now, it's no longer personal with other fighters. Except, of course, if you're talking about Tito Ortiz, the motor-

mouth superstar from UFC. Whom Kevin says he would fight for free. Any place, any time. Or, if it were a known pedophile, whom Kevin might continue pounding long after the bell rung.)

The ring. The thought made him antsy. So antsy he cut short his prescribed rest time. Just wanted to get back to training, to fighting. His girlfriend sighs, says he's hardheaded, but what are you gonna do? She chose to cook for him, get his body weight back up to a solid, shredded, spectacular 215 pounds. To take care of his website, his affairs. Even his phone calls sometimes. Whatever it takes to spare her man the time and concentration needed to train. Now, for Mauricio Shogun Rua. Or just Show-Gun. His opponent this Saturday, October 21. No doubt impressive and dangerous.

Pride, with its BIG following back east, the old world, and its preeminent spot in the universe of mixed martial arts, has decided to hold its first card in America. Without hesitation, Pride chose Las Vegas, what UFC president Dana White, and boxing patriarch Don King before him, calls the fight capital of the world. Or just, as Associated Press sports reporter Tim Dahlberg puts it: "Fight Town."

Pride officials saw that the market for MMA had been cultivated in America by the UFC, their competitors; and their presence in Southern Nevada this autumn speaks volumes in regard to how fertile that field has become, say MMA insiders. So fertile, in fact, that Pride is even willing to conform its rules to the Nevada State Athletic Commission's standards in order to host their show here.

And thus, no karate uniforms will be worn, no knees or kicks will be inflicted while one's opponent is on the ground, no stomping will be permitted, and the first round will be condensed from 10 minutes to five.

The event has been tagged "The Real Deal," and now Randleman can fight again, at home.

"I don't always see eye to eye with Dana, especially about money," says Randleman, "but I have a ton of respect for what he's done. We can fight in America, now."

Now, Randleman is ready. He's restless. He's been punched in the face by the world biggest bad-asses; it doesn't matter much. He's fought the best MMA fighter in the world—Emelianenko Fador (who will be in Las Vegas to fight on October 21)—and almost won. He's been knocked out by UFC's Chuck Liddell. He's encountered the best of WFA star Rampage Jackson, a fight after which he ended up unconscious on his back. Moreover, he's known pain all his life. Been in car accidents. Seen his friends shot. Had his father die on him. Pain ain't unknown to him. And so he ain't scared of it. Just wants to get in there and fight. A homecoming of sorts, with his fellow expatriates Mark Coleman and Josh Barnett (also a former UFC heavyweight champion). He just wants to bring the adrenaline to Las Vegas, to show them what a BIG event an MMA show can be, and what an unstoppable fighter he is.

"Man," he says, bouncing up and down in his Las Vegas home, like a kid days before Christmas. "I just want to be a winner again. The king of my own town." **LWV**