

"A beautiful account of an underworld of in-your-face bad boys." — **BILL BUFORD**

BLOOMSBURY



BLOOD, STRUGGLE, AND DREAMS AT THE HEART OF MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

BEAST

DOUG MERLINO

For my brothers, Dave and Nik

In memory of James Merlino

Beast

*Blood, Struggle, and Dreams at the
Heart of Mixed Martial Arts*

Doug Merlino

B L O O M S B U R Y
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As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world—that is the myth of the atomic age—as in being able to remake ourselves.

—*Gandhi*

Beast: When referring to a person, beast status is achieved when the aforementioned person is so good at a certain skill that they have exceeded human comprehension, thus making them non-human.

—*Urban Dictionary*

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American Top Team

(Beowulf Sheeha

Preface

One morning in early 2012, I watched from a set of aluminum bleachers as dozens of fighters advanced in rows across a length of gray mats, punching the air in unison, dipping a knee to the ground, rising, and repeating. We were in a warehouse gym in a South Florida industrial park. Sunlight beamed through tall windows that ran along one side of the space. Ceiling fans circulated cooled air. Championship belts, plaques, and banners hung on the walls above the fighters. Coaches walked among the ranks, encouraging, admonishing, making technical adjustments.

I looked around for Jeff Monson. I didn't think that, at five foot nine and two hundred and forty pounds, covered from head to foot in tattoos, he would be difficult to spot. I'd flown down from New York City to meet him, and we had made plans to talk after the training session. After an hour of watching the fighters struggle through an increasingly grueling practice and still no sign, I texted him. He called a few minutes later and apologized. He was in Seattle.

My preoccupation with mixed martial arts had started a year earlier, springing from a conversation with my neighbor in New York, who was a fan. As he enthused about his favorite fighters, I became interested. *People fighting in cages?*

I barely knew anything of the sport. I was in college in 1993 when the Ultimate Fighting Championship, a pay-per-view spectacle pitting fighters from various martial arts against each other in "no-holds-barred" combat, debuted. It was, at the time, denounced as a new form of barbarism. But in surely the most unlikely story in sports entertainment in the last two decades, the UFC not only stuck around, but became a business with hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenues, a broadcast deal with Fox television, and the ability on a good night to sell a million pay-per-views at fifty dollars each.

Below the UFC were numerous mixed martial arts (MMA) promotions, from the Viacom-owned Bellator Fighting Championships to fights put on by small-time promoters in armories, community college gyms, and bars. Gyms that taught the sport—which combined elements of wrestling, boxing, jiu jitsu, and Muay Thai kickboxing—populated strip malls in every city and town in the country. It seemed like something out of time, a throwback to the bare-knuckle fighting of the 1800s, an anomaly in an era in which kids aren't allowed to ride scooters without helmets.

My neighbor took me to an Irish bar in midtown Manhattan to watch a night of UFC fights. The broadcast began with a shot of a shirtless gladiator, lit by torchlight, standing with his head bowed. A bell rang as an operatic chorus sang in Latin. He pulled his breastplate over his head, secured his leather and metal forearm protectors.

There were voiceovers from the night's opponents:

I'm going to break you till you quit.

I'm going to try to destroy him, take him out as violently as possible.

The gladiator knelt, grabbed a handful of sand, and let it run through his fingers. A door swung open, flooding him with light.

Cue a nu metal riff and a montage of fighters punching opponents in the face, pummeling them to the ground, kicking them in the head.

A shot of the crowd in Las Vegas at the MGM Grand Garden Arena, men holding up beers and

shouting, “Woo!”

“The night is finally upon us,” an announcer said. “Two men who do not dislike each other, the *hate* each other. And you know what? The best thing to do is to solve it, solve it tonight, solve it right now.”

The fighters made their way to the octagonal cage in pairs. There were Englishmen, African Americans, a Mexican American, a Brazilian, a white guy from Jersey. They fought and bled on a mat imprinted with advertisements for motorcycles, beer, and shaving gel. The winners were briefly interviewed after their fights, thanking their teams and sponsors before being shuffled off.

The fight that stayed with me was between two heavyweights, one chiseled, the other with a belly that sagged over his shorts. The muscular fighter dominated the first two rounds, peppering his hapless opponent with punches. In the third and last round, however, the chubby fighter snuck a hook to the chin of his brawny adversary, who collapsed, unconscious. It was shocking, violent, and electrifying.

I left the bar energized. On one level, cage fighting embodied much of what we’re taught is “wrong”: It was aggressive, violent, an unrepentant celebration of what some would call regressive masculinity. It was also completely in tune with these anxious times—fighters were presented as warriors battling their demons, overcoming fear, standing up in a world that was increasingly technologized and impersonal. They embodied virtues such as hard work, discipline, courage, and honor. They were freelancers whose product was their own bodies.

Who are these guys? I wondered. *How does this whole thing work?* I read a few of the dozens of websites dedicated to the sport, which offered minute coverage of its daily dramas—the coming fights and the rivalries—but little in-depth. Of the books written on mixed martial arts, most were quick autobiographies by popular fighters, revealing little of substance. The only way to sufficiently answer my questions about the men who chose to fight in this unforgiving sport, I realized, was to get out and ask the fighters themselves.

I started by visiting a fight team in Philadelphia. They practiced on the second floor of a furniture warehouse, a space so dank with body odor that breathing was a chore. They invited me to a local cafe that included several of their fighters. I sat next to the cage while one fighter had his femur broken in half and another had the orbital bone in his face shattered. None of the fighters from the gym I was with was seriously injured: They went out for beers afterward.

But none of them, I knew, was going any farther than Philadelphia. They trained hard but, with jobs and lives outside the gym, weren’t at the level of athleticism or commitment to make it into the elite levels. I was curious about the fighters at the top of the sport. To find them, I’d have to go to one of the country’s three MMA “super camps,” gyms that were home to dozens of fighters that filled out the events of the world’s top promotions: American Kickboxing Academy in San Jose; Greg Jackson and Mike Winkeljohn’s gym in Albuquerque; or American Top Team (ATT) in Coconut Creek, Florida, a suburb just south of Boca Raton.

I chose ATT because of Jeff Monson, who was exactly the character someone looking to write about cage fighting would seek out. At forty-one years old, he’d been fighting for fifteen years, including a failed shot at the UFC heavyweight championship. He was a former mental health counselor and self-proclaimed anarchist who had no qualms about sharing his opinions.

When I contacted him, he told me he was planning to come to New York City to take part in the Occupy Wall Street protests. When he failed to make it, I decided to fly to Florida, and so we arranged to get together at the gym.

He showed up two days after our scheduled meeting, which I learned was pretty much on time for

his standards. He introduced me to fighters and trainers at the gym, including Kami Barzini, the team's soft-spoken wrestling coach.

Barzini and I talked one night after an evening practice. I told him I knew nothing about fighting but wanted to understand it. He sized me up and seemed to make a judgment on the spot. He pointed to a group of fighters who were sitting together on the mats, chatting after training. *Why not follow some of these guys?* he asked. *Live with them, come backstage, see the weight cuts, the sparring, the training—really experience it from the inside?*

It was exactly what I wanted to do, the immersive project I'd been seeking. Six months earlier, shortly after my interest in mixed martial arts began, my dad had dropped dead of a heart attack. It left me in shock. To make things worse, there was a dispute over his estate, which would lead eventually to litigation. I was in a state of distress, my mind working to come to terms with my dad's sudden absence while also trying to process the scorched-earth tactics of my relatives. It forced me to rethink large parts of my own life and experiences. The gym, with its daily routines and rituals, was a respite.

I rented a studio apartment nearby and showed up every day at practice, sitting, observing, taking notes, getting to know some of the dozens of fighters. I wanted to be such a regular sight that I would eventually just become another part of the surroundings, like the elliptical trainers lined up near the wall. I was referred to as "The Writer."

The gym was owned and heavily subsidized by Dan Lambert, a businessman with interests in time-share condos, hotels, and cruise ships. There were a couple dozen fighters who appeared in the top American promotions. A similar number fought in regional shows a level down but were still broadcast nationally on cable. Others were prospects trying to scratch their way up from the local circuit. Some, such as Monson, fought abroad in Russia, Europe, and Asia.

The gym was also in something of a turnaround, actively looking to add promising fighters to the team. New faces arrived every week—from urban and rural Brazil, from college wrestling programs from prison and refugee camps, from Chechnya and Cuba, from jobs changing tires and sweeping streets.

There aren't many places like American Top Team left in America. It's an open space: Anyone can walk in the door, get on the mats, and try out. Every month or two, someone comes in and shows he really has something. If you last long enough, you might get invited to join the team. It's a place where you are received on your abilities, not your pedigree.

I was treated the same way. Barzini's initial invitation and his introductions to fighters were tremendously important. Otherwise, though, I was left to my own devices.

Over the course of several months, I found a small group of fighters to follow, observing all aspects of the sport: the drudgery of training, the highs of winning and the devastation of loss, the money and contractual woes, relationship struggles, the fear and doubt, the marketing of self.

Their challenges were relatable to most of us, but compressed and heightened. Their fortunes rose and fell with every fight, each a step forward or a step back. Stripped of the lights and showmanship of professional fighting was people struggling to come to terms with themselves, to rise above their pasts, to give shape to messy lives, to scratch out a living in a business and society that rewarded winners and discarded the rest.

Prologue: Kearney

On the afternoon of the fight, Mirsad Bektic walked out of the Best Western hotel in Kearney, Nebraska, to get some air. He was joined by his coach, Kami Barzini, and his friend, roommate, and fellow fighter, Sirwan Kakai. It was sunny and mild, surprisingly pleasant for late November in Nebraska. Even the smell of manure, which only a few hours earlier had wafted through the air, had dissipated.

Bektic, having made his 145-pound weight limit the day before, appeared the most relaxed of the three. As was his habit, he'd taped printouts of motivational sayings throughout his hotel room. On his bathroom mirror:

I AM A WORLD CHAMPION
I'M READY FOR WAR!!
THANK YOU MY GOD,
FOR MY HEALTH AND MY DESIRE TO WIN!!

Bektic was twenty-one. He'd just been the subject of a "Prospect Watch" profile on Sherdog, a popular mixed martial arts website. A film crew had trailed him for several days to produce a series that touched on all of the points that made Bektic stand out in a sport overflowing with young hopefuls: his "war-torn" background; his athleticism; his habit of being the first to arrive and last to leave the gym; his total dedication to training as if dominance in the cage held the key to everything he wanted—respect, dignity, a life that would be better than average.

Tonight, his journey led through Kearney, a farm-country stopover on Interstate 80 between Omaha and Denver. Bektic and Barzini had scouted YouTube videos of Doug Jenkins, the night's opponent. Nothing had raised alarm. Jenkins, a twenty-five-year-old fighter from South Dakota, had been in some scraps, but his technique was lacking. The conclusion: tough kid, but beatable; just another aspirant among the countless with more heart than skill.

Bektic, Kakai, and Barzini followed a path that led away from the hotel parking lot. They walked next to a barren field, toward the freeway that rumbled with the passing of semi-trucks. All three recognized the oddness of lives that had brought them from their foreign birthplaces to a weekend fight card in the American Midwest.

Kami Barzini, the coach, had grown up in Tehran during the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, catastrophes that had devastated his family. Sirwan Kakai, a Kurd, was born in a refugee camp in the Kurdish part of Iraq; he had immigrated to Sweden when he was four. Mirsad Bektic's mother had fled Bosnia with him when he was only a baby, ahead of the killers who would bring mass murder to their home village. He had grown up not far from here, part of a large Bosnian community in Lincoln, Nebraska.

At thirty-four, Kami Barzini was a solid five foot eight, his head shaved close to the scalp with stubble on his chin to match. He was a quiet man with a connoisseur's taste in beer and a spiritual bent, guiding his interests from Gandhi to the Zoroastrian religion to Sufi poetry.

Mirsad Bektic and Sirwan Kakai, dressed in identical gray-and-white sweat suits, jostled one another as they walked side-by-side. They did everything together: They shared a house in Florida a short walk from their gym; since Kakai fought at 135 pounds, just ten pounds under Bektic, they were

often sparring partners; on weekends, they went to the beach together. Both were among the top prospects in their weight classes in the sport: Bektic's professional record was 4-0; Kakai's was 8-1.

They came to a drainage lake next to the freeway. It was as far as they could go. Bektic handed his phone and the three posed for a photograph, the two fighters, in their matching outfits, flanking the coach. Bektic made a fist. All three squinted into the sun as the phone clicked.

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The arena, an aluminum-sided building that looked like a giant shed, was normally the home of a minor-league hockey team. In the locker room, Bektic pulled on his headphones, lay back on the floor, closed his eyes, and listened to Tupac. Kakai had fought two months earlier and won; now Bektic knew the focus was on him. Earlier in the day, while working out at the hotel, his hands had felt a little heavy. Had he fully rehydrated from his weight cut? He'd seen all the people on Facebook writing that he was going to destroy his opponent. What would happen if he lost?

He redirected his mind: *You've trained hard, you're ready, just go out and do what you've prepared to do.*

The undercard fighters warmed up, grappling and hitting mitts on a black mat spread across the center of the room. Only the faintest sounds from the arena penetrated the concrete walls. What transpired in the cage became clear as fighters reentered the locker room, the winners jaunty, slightly crazed, arms around their corner men. Losers came quietly, heads down, lips pursed.

In a sport with thousands of hopefuls, every loss was a potentially fatal roadblock to further advancement. The Resurrection Fighting Alliance, the promotion Bektic was fighting in that night, was mid-tier—far above the fights held in bars, strip clubs, and school gyms, but a step below the UFC or Bellator, the second-place organization in the sport. It was a developmental league for those higher levels.

To move ahead, even the winners needed more than just a victory: They had to impress physically, ideally ending their fights with a knockout or submission before the three five-minute rounds expired. If they possessed that bit of extra charisma or a nice backstory—anything that set them apart on television—so much the better. But for nearly all the fighters on the card, this level was as high as their careers were going to go.

Bektic grappled with Kakai on the mats, Barzini observing from a few feet away. Bektic's hands were wrapped with white athletic tape. Four-ounce fingerless gloves had been pulled over them and sealed with strips of red duct tape around his wrists. His black shorts, which clung to his muscular thighs, bore his website address and an advertisement for an Omaha car dealership.

Bektic tackled Kakai to the mats, stood, shook out his arms, breathed in around his mouth guard. The main card, including his fight, was to be televised nationally on cable. Bektic's teammates and coaches back in Florida would be watching. He wanted them to see his best performance.



(Doug Merlin)

A man with a clipboard appeared. “Bektic!”

Kakai and Barzini led him from the locker room. They entered darkness: One third of the hockey arena had been draped off, black curtains hanging from the ceiling to the floor. Plywood had been spread over the ice, and a chill shot up through the seams. A set of stairs led through an aluminum trellis and down a gangway to the cage.

One hundred feet ahead of Bektic, his opponent, Doug Jenkins, huddled with his corner men. When his name was called, Jenkins climbed the stairs and disappeared.

A few thousand spectators from central Nebraska’s Tri-Cities—Grand Island, Hastings, and Kearney—filled the arena for the Friday night fights. Baseball caps and flannel shirts were abundant. Blue aluminum bottles of Bud Light overflowed the arena’s garbage cans and spilled onto the floor.

One section had filled with several dozen Bosnians, including Bektic’s older brothers, Senad and Suvad, who had made the two-hour drive from Lincoln. Several of the Bosnians waved the blue and yellow flag of their home country.

Most of these men—many of whom had been using the preceding hours to catch up on drinking—Bektic barely knew. Since the early 1990s, when civil war had devastated what was Yugoslavia, several thousand Bosnian refugees had arrived in Lincoln. Some had done well, others had struggled, especially those that had been older. Bektic felt that many had placed their hopes on him as a symbol of Bosnians making good in the United States.

He cringed as his fans greeted Jenkins with a cascade of boos.

It was Bektic’s turn. He emerged onto the gangway through a blast of red-lit dry ice. A cameraman backpedaled a few feet in front of him as his walkout music kicked in:

The Bosnians exploded. *Mirso! Mirso! Mirso!*

Bektic reached the stairs up to the cage and pulled off his shirt, revealing a chiseled torso devoid of fat. BELIEVE was tattooed above his heart. He was handsome, with high cheekbones, black hair, a shaved head closed to the scalp, cauliflower ears that jutted from his head, and forceful eyes.

A man from the state athletic commission, which was responsible for regulating the event, rubbed Vaseline around Bektic's eyes and cheeks to help prevent the punches from Jenkins's leather gloves from lacerating his face.

Bektic climbed the stairs to the cage, jogged around it once, and then paced as Jenkins mirrored him on the other side.

The ref called the fighters to the center and advised them to protect themselves at all times. They touched gloves and returned to their corners.

Jenkins shook out his hands.

Bektic faced him, left leg forward, and rocked back and forth, fists clenched.

At the sound of the bell, he blasted across the cage.

They met in a flurry of punches. Bektic ducked down, grabbed Jenkins around the waist, lifted him, and slammed him to the mat.

Bektic was the heavy favorite, and Jenkins had seemed even less of a threat when they met at the weigh-in the day before: With his long hair falling down around his face, a goatee, and a frame that was emaciated at 145 pounds, he had looked, in Barzini's curt description, like a junkie.

Now, however, his straggly hair was pulled back and tied up, and his body, after rehydration, had filled back out. As he worked to grab Bektic's arms and limit the damage he could inflict, it was clear the South Dakotan was not going to go easily.

After two minutes on the ground, Bektic had planted Jenkins on his back and straddled his hips—the full mount position—ideal to smash down fists and elbows on his face. Jenkins struggled to grab Bektic around the shoulders and pull him close to halt his strikes. At the same time, he maneuvered his feet to the fence of the cage. He gained traction and pushed, throwing Bektic off.

The fighters scrambled to their feet. Jenkins swung looping punches that came from the side at odd angles. Bektic trained six days a week, most often morning and night, working on wrestling, jiu jitsu, and striking. He had several sessions a week with Muay Thai and boxing coaches, who taught him to slip, circle, use head movement, and slip to avoid sloppy punches such as these. Still, they were dangerous—*with the light four-ounce gloves used in cage fighting, a single punch landed in the right spot could put you to sleep.*

"Be patient!" Barzini urged from the corner.

Bektic knew he should wait for his openings, but as the crowd brayed and Jenkins came at him, he wanted to brawl. He pressed forward.

Jenkins threw a right that hit flush on the side of Bektic's face. Suddenly, Bektic's momentum reversed and he was falling back toward the canvas.

In his bedroom back in Florida, Bektic had taped a printout of a title belt of the Ultimate Fighting Championship to his bulletin board. When he woke up, he liked to stay in bed for a few minutes and look at it, visualizing his route to the title, all the hurdles he would overcome, all the sacrifices he would make, how amazing it would feel when he achieved his dream.

In a different time and a different America, Bektic might have tried his luck on the Western frontier, shipped out to sea, or found himself in a boxing ring. Now, in a media-saturated world hung

for stories of personal triumph in the face of long odds, he was stripped down to his shorts, fighting for his future on cable television.

But fighting is a zero-sum game: For one fighter to move ahead, his opponent has to take a step back. Though unheralded, Doug Jenkins did not want to be another stone on Bektic's path to glory.

Bektic fell backward, as if he'd been trying to sit down and somebody had pulled away his chair. With his ass inches from the canvas, he twisted his body, shot his left hand back to the canvas, and bounded back to his feet.

Jenkins charged, pushing Bektic to the cage. He grabbed Bektic behind the neck and pounded a knee into his stomach.

Bektic returned with an uppercut that knocked Jenkins a step back, and then tackled him to the ground.

The two struggled as the last seconds of the five-minute round expired.

Ubijte ga! Ubijte ga! Ubijte ga!—"Kill him!"—Bektic's supporters chanted.

An older man with white hair stood in the front, waving a Bosnian flag and screaming. Two women in the adjacent section rose, pointed their fingers at the Bosnians, and told them to sit down and shut up. The rest of the crowd started its own chant: *USA! USA! USA!*

Mirso! Mirso! Mirso! the Bosnian fans countered. *Ubijte ga! Ubijte ga! Ubijte ga!*

"Jihad!" shouted one Bosnian.

A dozen yellow-shirted security officers and a handful of uniformed cops rushed between the Bosnians from Lincoln and the Kearney locals, forming a line to keep them apart.

Bektic sat on a stool in the cage as Barzini huddled beside him and gave instructions, calm and precise. *Do not brawl with this guy. Wait for your opening, take him to the ground, get in position, and grind him down.*

The second round began. Bektic charged again, landing a right cross that knocked Jenkins back against the cage. He took Jenkins to the canvas, got on top of him, and jammed an elbow into his face, opening a cut at the corner of his left eye.

Bektic stayed in position, grinding Jenkins with fists and elbows. Jenkins absorbed blow after blow.

The bell ended the second round. Jenkins, his face bloody and puffy, stood and waved his arms to rally the crowd.

USA! USA! USA! it roared.

The fans from the opposing cheering sections jostled to get at each other. Fed up, the security men grabbed the Bosnian supporters and, one by one, dragged them out of the arena.

In the cage, Bektic again took top position and pummeled Jenkins, who did his best to blunt the attack. Finally, after fifteen minutes of fighting, the bell ended the third and final round. Bektic pulled Jenkins to his feet, and the two exhausted fighters embraced.

Bektic won the unanimous decision. The crowd, now devoid of his fan base, jeered as his hand was raised.

Bektic hurried out of the arena, trailed by Kakai. Backstage, he crumpled in front of a locker.

It was the first fight in his career that had gone the distance—he had not been able to finish Jenkins. And being perfect meant winning by submission or knockout. A unanimous decision wasn't good enough. On top of that, the Bosnians had embarrassed him. The "USA!" chants hurt, too: Wasn't he also an American?

He draped his sweat-suit top over his head and cried.

Sirwan Kakai hovered near him. He waited a few minutes and then spoke.

"You know what you did wrong, and that's good," he said. "Seriously, you did a great fight. You

fought hard.”

“I’m so much better than that,” Bektic said. “So much.”

“I’ve been in this position,” Kakai said. “People expect you to win; it doesn’t matter who you’re going to fight, they expect you to fucking win. You’re so hyped up now. And this is the thing sometimes we face these tough guys, and we cannot expect to put them away.”

“I’ve got to get back in the gym right away,” Bektic said.

“No. You rest for three weeks,” Kakai told him.

Barzini entered the locker room. “You did a great job,” he said “Everything I told you after the first round, you did it.”

“He got me against the cage for a few seconds,” Bektic said.

“This kid was strong, man, this kid was strong,” Barzini said.

As they spoke, Doug Jenkins slipped into the locker room, his face red, swollen, and cut. Bektic hugged him.

“Nice fight, man,” Jenkins said, his voice a whisper.

“Thanks,” Bektic said. “It’s the toughest fight I had.”

They posed for a photograph, arms around each other, making fists with their free hands.

“Thank you so much,” Bektic said as Jenkins turned to leave. “Keep it up, man.”

Ricardo Liborio, the head coach of American Top Team, called to congratulate Bektic.

Bektic stood with the phone to his ear, apologized, and cried again. He felt he had found a place where people cared and watched out for him, something he had not often felt in his life. He knew that he’d earned that attention through his performance in the cage. He was scared it could go away.

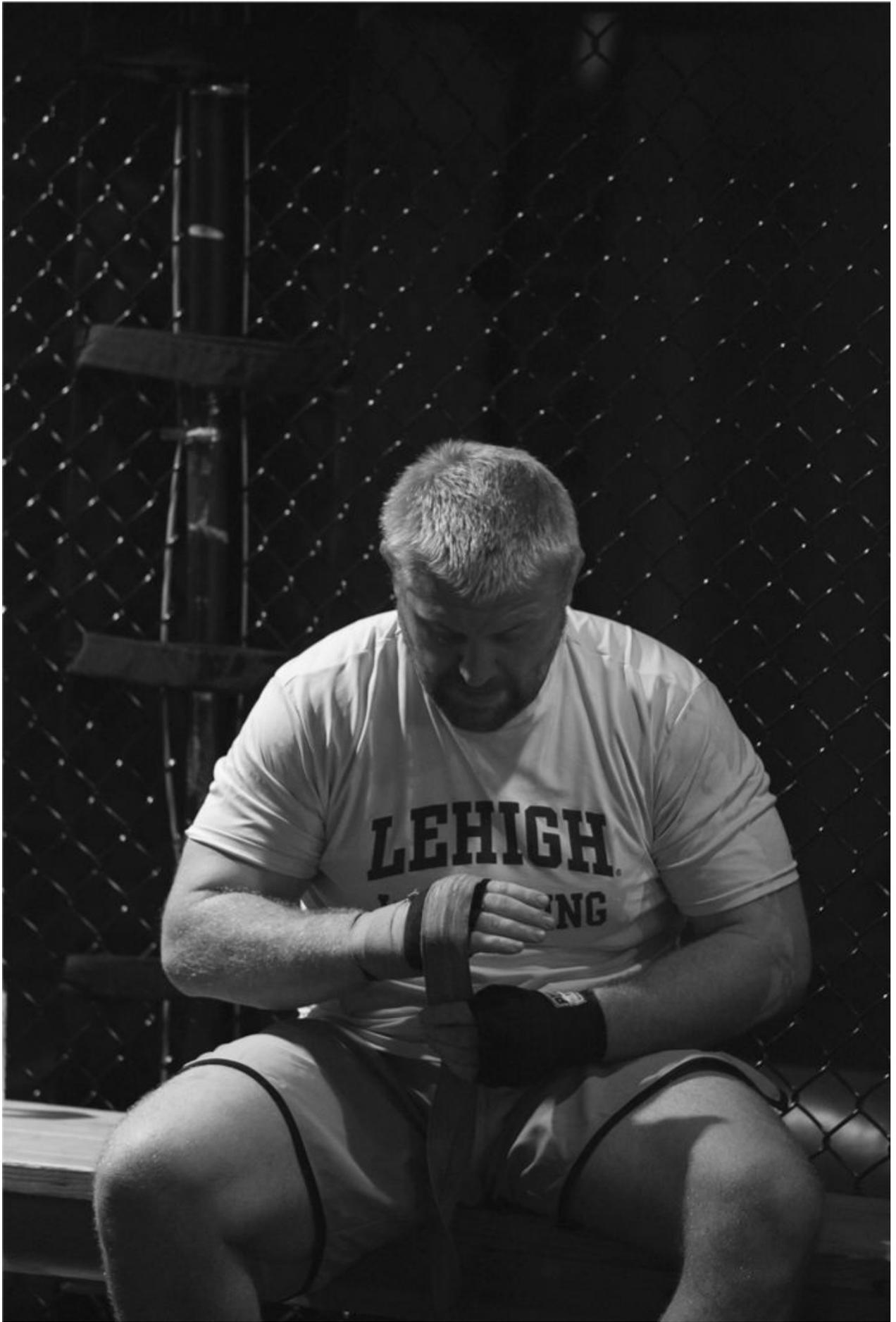
“You did great,” Liborio reassured him.

“I’m sorry,” Bektic said. “I’m sorry.”

New Starts

Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.

—*Mike Tyson*



Steve Mocco

(Beowulf Sheeha

The Anarchist Next Door

Jeff Monson was, as usual, running late. He was trying to get his two-year-old daughter, Willow, to eat.

“Here comes the plane, Willow,” he said in a singsong voice, holding out a spoon to the girl, who was sitting in her high chair. “Are you ready for the plane?”

Willow threw back her head, covered in red curly hair, laughed, and refused.

Monson wore shorts, flip-flops, and a T-shirt that stretched to cover his muscled frame. His head, which rose out of a triangular base of trapezius muscle, was bald. FIGHT was tattooed on the left side of his neck, directly above an exhortation to DESTROY AUTHORITY.

He lived in a home in a gated community in West Palm Beach. The backyard sloped down toward the waters of the canal system that snaked through the housing development, a reminder it had been built on backfilled Everglades. A book sat on the kitchen counter, *23 Things They Don't Tell You about Capitalism*, in which Monson had scrawled notes inside the front and back covers. The living room was strewn with Willow's books and toys. A three-foot-tall teddy bear, an impulse buy Monson had just made at Costco, leaned against a wall.

Monson's wife, Dani, was a flight attendant, and childcare duties fell to him when she was working. Needing to get to the gym, Monson finally grabbed Willow and his duffel bag and carried them out to his battered Dodge SUV in the driveway. He strapped his daughter into a child's seat in the back. Willow rode shotgun as Monson drove us out of the development's palm tree-lined streets, past rows of identical, peach-colored houses with red Spanish tile roofs.

He pulled onto a six-lane road, bordered by a string of giant car dealerships. Willow giggled and shrieked from the backseat, “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!”

“Okay, Willow, Daddy's driving now,” Monson said. “We're going to day care, Willow. Won't that be fun?”

He parked in front of a one-story beige building that adjoined a small playground and carried Willow in, limping as he went, his left leg jutting forward with each step like a peg leg. Willow's head poked above Monson's shoulder, next to the tattoo at the base of his neck, which depicted one stick figure pointing a gun at the head of another. One word was written underneath: CAPITALISM.

On the playground, Monson set Willow down and followed her as she staggered to and fro, occasionally picking her up to swing her around. He loomed next to a worker as they watched the children cavort.

After several minutes, he finally turned, headed into the building, and then emerged into the parking lot.

He sighed as he climbed into the driver's seat. “That's always hard,” he said.

“For Willow?” I asked.

He shook his head. “For both of us.”

...

Monson merged onto the Ronald Reagan Turnpike, heading to American Top Team. Years of fighting had not only debilitated his hip, but reduced to rubble several vertebrae in his back. The mo-

comfortable he could get while driving was to lean the seat as far back as it would go. Van Halen “Beautiful Girls” played on the radio.

Monson steered with his left hand while operating his iPhone with his right. The truck drifted across lanes. Conversation veered similarly, from government policy toward the mentally ill to his sixteen-year-old daughter’s progress in high school softball to the relationship between Christianity and anarchism.

Within a sport that tolerated divergent personalities, Jeff Monson diverged more than most. The most obvious outward manifestation was the tattoos that adorned his body. They included the political—a hammer and sickle on his left calf; across his back, a teenage girl inspired by *Les Misérables* propping her right foot on a prone Uncle Sam lying in a pool of blood; on his stomach, the anarchist slogan NO MASTERS. The personal: the handprint of his daughter Michaela on his left side. And the whimsical: a Hello Kitty tattoo on the top of his right foot.

For years, Monson had been a guaranteed lively interview for MMA websites. When asked which books influenced him, he cited Leo Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, a late work in which the author advocated personal revolution through living a life according to the example of Jesus. Other recommendations included Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian anarchist, and Emma Goldman, the American firebrand. Queried about steroids, he replied that he had used them at times and thought they should be allowed within the sport as long as everyone had access, making the point that athletes were already pumping so many supplements into their systems it was impossible to keep track anyway. When asked if there was something in life he thought everyone should try, he suggested magic mushrooms.

When Monson tweeted his support of the establishment of a Palestinian state, Pat Miletich, legendary UFC fighter known for his conservative views, responded by calling him “pathetic.”

The argument escalated:

MONSON: Supporting the right for the Palestinians to be recognized is in no way supporting terrorist organizations. If you wanna learn about terror organizations read “The people’s history of the United States” by Howard Zinn. Our government is responsible for more oppression, global poverty, and deaths than any other ‘terror’ organization could ever hope to accomplish.

MILETICH: Listen, asshole. If you don’t like your country, take a hike. Simple, bud. You rattle on about USA being evil yet you enjoy the fight money and sponsorship our capitalism provides. Walking contradiction.

MONSON: Don’t you read any more? US corporations and banks, the IMF, and the World Bank run economies, impoverish countries, and dictate government policy. Maybe when Uncle Sam is done fucking the Palestinians at the UN he can come over to your place so you can suck his dick.

MILETICH: You’re dead to me.

While fighting in the UFC in 2006, Monson appeared in a promotional video wearing a T-shirt that read ASSASSINATE BUSH, prompting a visit from the Secret Service. A few years later, *ESPN The Magazine* sent a photographer to his home in Olympia, Washington, where his first wife and their two children lived. During their afternoon together, Monson grabbed a can of spray paint and headed to the state capitol building, which he tagged with an anarchy symbol and the words NO WAR. When the government used the authority he hated to press charges, Monson pled guilty and ended up with three months of work release and a \$21,894 fine.

One image, taken in September 2008, when Monson was in St. Paul, Minnesota, to protest at the Republican National Convention, had done more than anything to seal his image. Monson and a group

of anarchists were on the streets downtown, heading to the convention hall with the hope of blocking the delegates' access, when they were confronted by a group of riot police in full gear.

The photograph was taken from behind Monson, his anticapitalism tattoo in full view. It shows him facing off with six cops, one of whom has his face shield lowered and a hand on his Taser. (A moment later, the cops were told that all the delegates were inside the hall, and the riot squad stood down.)

The photo was the best branding tool Monson could have wished for. It accompanied nearly every story written about him and was posted and reposted in anarchist forums. Monson liked it so much he had it printed on his business card.

...

In 2012, Monson was forty-one and had been fighting for fifteen years. He had long been one of the best submission wrestlers in the world, having twice won the prestigious Abu Dhabi grappling tournament. He had fought for the UFC heavyweight title in 2006, but lost. Other fights had taken him to Japan, Israel, Ireland, Australia, Brazil, Switzerland, France, and the Philippines. His record was 43-13. Nearly everyone from his generation of fighters had retired, but Monson still took whatever fights came his way, a recognized name promoters used to draw fans to the gate.

In November 2011, just as Monson seemed to be in twilight, he got the fight he had craved for years—against Fedor Emelianenko, the Russian heavyweight considered one of the greatest MMA fighters ever.

From April 2001 to June 2010, Fedor, fighting mostly in Japan, won twenty-eight fights in a row. He was a complete fighter, equally strong on the ground and on his feet, with a face that rarely expressed anything more than a Mona Lisa smile. He seemed to be an imperturbable destruction machine.

But time had caught up with Fedor, too. He had lost three in a row starting in 2010. He retreated to Russia and signed with a Russian promotion, looking for a turnaround. The promoters needed a respectable but beatable opponent. Jeff Monson fit the bill.

For years, Monson had been public with his desire to fight Fedor. A win over the Russian, he felt, would be the career-capping achievement that had eluded him. The offer was even more appealing because not only would the pay be good, but he had always wanted to go to Russia, the cradle of Communism and anarchism.

The fight took place in front of a capacity crowd of twenty-two thousand at the Moscow Olympic Arena and was broadcast to millions more on Russian national television. Vladimir Putin sat in the front row. Monson emerged from the locker room first, hobbling to his corner. As Fedor came out, the lights dimmed and smoke gushed onto a platform. A group of men and women in Cossack outfits whirled around as the legend materialized in their midst.

The fight was never close. Fedor stayed outside of Monson's reach, punishing him with punches and leg kicks. Every time Monson tried to get his hands on the Russian to take him to the mat, he grasped at air.

In the second round, Fedor broke Monson's lower right leg with a kick. Monson pressed on, and the punishment continued.

By the third round, Monson was a mess. His lower lip had been cleaved in two and blood ran down his chin. Still, he came forward to receive more beating.

After the bell rang to finish the fight, Monson's corner men rushed in to prop him up. He draped his arms over their shoulders as they dragged him back to the locker room.

Putin climbed into the ring and took the microphone to congratulate Fedor, but the fired-up crowd seemed to take offense at the politician grabbing the spotlight. Boos and hisses rained down. It was reported around the world as the first time the Russian president had been jeered in public.

Monson needed medical care, which he later described in a note he posted to his fans:

Well guys I had a very frustrating fight as you know. ... Ended up breaking my leg in the second round from the one kick I checked in the match. After the fight I had a choice of two hospitals. One for everyday folks and one for visitors and government officials. I picked the local everyday folk hospital as I was told it was closer to the arena.

I'm obviously not a big fan of the medical industrial complex in the US as it is profit driven however the experience at this hospital did make me appreciate the comfort of health care in this country. Upon arrival there were ER staff smoking in the lobby. The hallways were full of wandering patients that looked like they were just out of a civil war battle. I had to fight with one of the doctors to avoid having my skull x-rayed.

Eventually I got an x-ray for my leg which showed it was broken (something I already knew) and had it casted. I got 16 stitches on the inside and outside of my lip with a material that could of passed for chicken wire. It was so sharp it was making my gums bleed so I took them out myself.

In the meantime, a Kremlin spokesman claimed the fans were not actually booing Putin, but Monson for leaving the ring before the decision was announced. This prompted an angry reaction from thousands of Russians, who took to Monson's public Facebook page to express their support:

Jeff, I respect you!

You are strong, hard fighter.

Putin—the coward and the liar who tries to be covered with you. He is—a country shame.

Yours faithfully, Martin.

St. Petersburg, Russia

Mr. Monson, respect from all russian anarchists. Your intentions are honourable, you are admirable. No one can live without defeats, but you are a real man, and this one will make you even stronger. Don't give up!

Jeff, you're a great fighter and a very kind person. You fight with a lot of respect, and Russians will never disrespect a great sportsman who lost. We boo the one who has no respect and fight for our freedom.

Jeff, greetings from Russia.

You are a nice guy, polite and attentive.

Great, brave, strong-willed fighter. I was amazed that you fought the fight with a broken leg, all three rounds! It was painful to you.

Now, I'm your fan! I will watch all the fights, past and future.

I want to tell you important words: the Russian people have always respected their opponents.

Get well soon!

The day after the fight, Monson lay in bed in his Moscow hotel room, his face swollen, leg broken, feeling sick that he had blown the biggest fight of his life. The phone rang but he let it go. A hotel security guard knocked at the door. *Pick it up next time*, he said.

It was Putin. He told Monson it had been a good fight and he should be proud of his performance. Furthermore, he was always welcome in Russia. Repeating the phrase Monson would hear over and over in the country, Putin told him: "You are a real man."

The Bear Goes South

At the start of July 2012, Steve Mocco drove into Florida with Johnny Cash on the stereo, his black lab, Bear Cub, riding shotgun, and all the belongings he could stuff into his Honda CRV behind him.

A threadbare yellow T-shirt, the word FLY written across the chest in blue, hugged his broad torso. His older brother, Joey, had given it to him two decades earlier.

As a kid, Mocco had been terrified of flying. When, as a young wrestling prodigy, he was slated to compete in a tournament in Belarus, he'd chosen to wear the shirt on the flight because of the word on the front. The plane did not crash, and the shirt had been Mocco's good luck charm ever since.

He'd worn it as he'd gone on to become perhaps the most dominant high school heavyweight wrestler in American history, won two NCAA championships, and earned a spot on the 2008 team at the Beijing Olympics, where he'd finished seventh in heavyweight freestyle wrestling.

The shirt was so tattered that Mocco rarely wore it anymore. But now that he was entering into another major change in his life, he'd pulled it on for the trip.

Mocco had been on the traditional path followed by many premier wrestlers. A few years earlier, he had gotten a job as an assistant coach at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where he could expect to put in a few years before working his way up to a head coaching job somewhere, becoming one of the royalty in the small world of elite American wrestling. In the meantime, he continued training with the goal of making the wrestling team for the 2012 London Olympics.

He caught a glimpse of a different path soon after arriving in Bethlehem, when he was approached by Carmelo Marrero, a heavyweight MMA fighter. Marrero had trained in Florida at American Top Team, but as he neared thirty, he had started to think about a future beyond competition. He had moved back to Pennsylvania and opened an American Top Team affiliate gym, training college students and other locals looking to learn jiu jitsu and striking.

Marrero, who still planned to take fights, needed a wrestling partner and offered Mocco boxing lessons in exchange. Mocco liked learning how to punch. He started to train at Marrero's gym.

After more than two decades in the structured world of competitive wrestling, Mocco found fighting to be fun and novel. One night, when he went to meet Marrero at a bar, he found the fight had gotten into words with some local toughs. Instead of taking it outside, they decided to go back to the gym, where Marrero had the guys from the bar sign waivers. They all pulled on boxing gloves and took turns fighting, drinking beers between rounds. The guys from the bar, who couldn't make it more than a minute or two without gasping for breath, got beaten bloody.

The experience exhilarated Mocco. And Marrero was excited about him. A number of former wrestlers—among them many of Mocco's college and Olympic teammates—had gone on to great success as cage fighters: Muhammed "King Mo" Lawal, Ben Askren, Johny Hendricks, Daniel Cormier. Moreover, Mocco—nicknamed "The Bear" for his ferocious demeanor on the mats—was a heavyweight, always a coveted prospect.

Weight classes in MMA run from 125 pounds at flyweight to a maximum of 265 pounds for heavyweights, and there was always a glut of talent in the middle divisions. It was rarer to find an exceptional fighter at either end of the bell curve.

Marrero guessed he had unearthed a nugget of gold. He called Ricardo Liborio, the head coach at American Top Team. "You need to see this guy," he said.

Liborio flew up to Bethlehem under the pretense of visiting Marrero and checking out the gym. He watched Mocco work out and saw the potential for a fighter who could take his opponents to the mat, gain top position, and beat them into submission. The coach immediately offered Mocco a place on the team, but the wrestler was set on returning to the Olympics. Liborio bided his time, checking in by phone every few months.

As the trials to make the 2012 U.S. Olympic wrestling team approached, Mocco's family was in crisis: His mother-in-law, who lived in Illinois, had just been diagnosed with cervical cancer at fifty-nine and given only a few months to live.

Mocco and his wife, Katie, were both close to their families. The two had been together since they were students at the University of Iowa, where Katie had received an athletic scholarship for track. Steve, even as a freshman, had been a campus celebrity. He'd been the country's most-recruited high school wrestler, and wrestling was a major sport at Iowa, where thousands of zealous fans sold out every match.

Steve and Katie had met in an environmental sciences class in the spring semester of his sophomore and her junior year. He had asked her to tutor him. That spring, he won the NCAA title, and they started dating that summer.

Katie enjoyed learning about the sides of Steve others didn't see. He was a curious mix of urban and redneck, having grown up in North Bergen, New Jersey, just over the Hudson River from Manhattan. As a kid, he'd trained weekly at the New York Athletic Club, across the street from Central Park. Wrestling was where he excelled in a high-achieving and athletic family. Joey Mocco, also a wrestler, had graduated from Brown University. Other siblings had gone on to advanced degrees in law, education, medicine, and psychology.

Katie recognized a boy who was thoughtful, sly, and funny. Yet he slipped with ease into the meathead persona for which the Iowa wrestling team was known, and with more intensity than most.

In an ESPN documentary series that followed the Iowa wrestling team for a season during Mocco's time there, he speaks straight to the camera with a crazed gleam in his eye: "They're trying to destroy me, and I got the right to kill 'em," he says, adding: "I think wrestling is a good sport because you can break somebody. You can break their spirit and make them be a different person for the rest of their life."

Katie watched him use this persona strategically—not just in competition, where it petrified his opponents, but in social situations. She suspected that letting people see him as a crude athlete gave him a chance to size them up and decide if they were worth his time. In the end, if he wanted you to know him, you would; if not, you got the facade.

After a coaching change at Iowa, Mocco transferred to Oklahoma State, the school's arch rival, for his last two seasons. Katie graduated from Iowa and followed. They had been together ever since and now had three young children.

For Katie, life had seemed orderly: You went to school, got married, had kids, took one step to the next, everything in its place. But her mother's diagnosis had disrupted all of this. Her condition deteriorated as Steve trained for the Olympic trials, held in April 2012. He placed third in his weight class, failing to make the team.

Ricardo Liborio called from Florida to renew his proposal to join ATT, offering housing and financial assistance. Steve was receptive: At age thirty, he was not ready to be finished with competitive athletics. Katie, with a profound sense of the shortness of life, thought they might as well take the chance.

With a moving pod in place outside their home in Bethlehem, Katie got the phone call that her mo-

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