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Tuesday, August 24, 2010

Marcus Davis gets to fight on his turf

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Special to ESPNBoston.com

SOMERVILLE, Mass. -- The mecca of mixed martial arts in New England is on an unassuming corner in a section of Somerville (just outside of Boston) that's not yet picked up on the fact that this is supposed to be a trendy place.

The Brazilian churrascaria in a modest storefront on the opposite corner does attract its share of adventurous foodies, but the neighborhood is better defined by the weathered Rent-A-Center across Broadway and the bodega down the block where you can pay your utility bills.

Sityodtong USA is working class enough to fit right in here.

You don't enter through the building's front door; that's a law office. You go around back and down a few steps, and you're inside a narrow, low-ceilinged gym that wastes not a square foot. There's a small boxing ring tucked next to a stretch of chain link caging like you'd find in an MMA fight.

At the back of the room, a class of Muay Thai trainees has staked out an area of the blue mat to pair off for half-speed sparring. On the other side of the room, near the door to the tiny office, an instructor is showing a wispy young woman how to torque her slim hips in order to put power into her knee strikes.

When [Marcus Davis](#) ambles in a few minutes later, he's as unimposing as the scene he's entering. But you still can't miss him. The guy is busting out of an old white T-shirt with a Rolling Stone magazine cover displayed across his broad chest. Davis, who is from Bangor, Maine, has been in here pretty much every day for a month, crashing at the home of his manager. He's one of three New Englanders who will step into the Octagon when the Ultimate Fighting Championship makes its long-awaited Boston debut on Saturday night at TD Garden.

In November, Massachusetts became the 42nd state to sanction MMA, and UFC president Dana White, a native New Englander who lived and boxed in Boston for several years, promised to "blow people away" with his promotion's first Garden event. So UFC 118 is headlined by a lightweight title rematch between [Frankie Edgar](#) and the legendary [B.J. Penn](#) and the spotlight-stealing MMA debut of former world champion boxer James Toney against UFC Hall of Famer [Randy Couture](#).

There also will be some top homegrown talent in the cage: [Kenny Florian](#), a Dover, Mass., native and Boston College graduate who trains in Coolidge Corner, Brookline, as well as fellow lightweight (155 pounds) [Joe Lauzon](#), who's originally from Rocky Marciano's hometown of Brockton, Mass., and now fights out of nearby Bridgewater. Then there's Davis, a 170-pounder known as "The Irish Hand Grenade" who lives by the words made famous by the guys pictured on the faded magazine cover stretched across his chest. It was the Beastie Boys, after all, who loudly proclaimed, "You gotta fight ... for your right ..."

A gentle man? Yes, and no

I spot Davis from across the gym while I'm watching video of one of his UFC fights on a TV mounted on the wall. Now, I go 6-foot-1, 235 pounds, and in the past when I've met MMA fighters in the lighter weight

classes, the question that's always come to mind is this: When you're socializing out in public, are you ever confronted by guys my size or bigger who have had maybe one too many and are feeling brave? I don't even consider asking this of Davis. He is as solid as a rock, one tough-looking dude.

I've just been watching him beat up a guy on TV, so I tread lightly as I head over to meet him. But what are the first words out of this strong-armed brute's mouth? "I'm so sorry for keeping you waiting," he says, making eye contact that verifies for me that he means every word. The thing is, he was all of five minutes late, certainly nothing warranting an apology.

And then, when he reaches out and shakes my hand, it's not with the death grip you often get from guys intent on making sure you know how tough they are. Davis is a gentleman *and* a gentle man.

Then again, he's not so gentle, man, when he steps into the ring to work the mitts with his boxing trainer, Joe Lake. They go at it hard for several five-minute rounds, with head trainer Mark DellaGrotte watching from outside the ropes. DellaGrotte, a former pro kickboxer who trained and fought in Thailand, operates this gym he named for his mentor, Kru Yodtong Senanan (the "Sit" part means "student of").

Located in the basement of DellaGrotte's father's law practice, Sityodtong is not a haven merely for local fighters. The framed pictures covering practically every inch of one wall depict just a partial roster of the world-class fighters who have thrown leather here with DellaGrotte: [Stephan Bonnar](#), Patrick Côté, former UFC heavyweight champ [Frank Mir](#) and, of course, Florian, who until recently was part of Team Sityodtong. The UFC even brought in DellaGrotte one year as a Muay Thai adviser for a season of the Spike reality show "The Ultimate Fighter."



Marcus Davis is a polite father of four who takes his kids to school every day, unless he's in training to beat someone senseless.

In the training ring, Davis is getting a constant stream of instructions from DellaGrotte, who keeps pushing for more intense action. And pretty soon Lake is letting out grunts as the pads protecting his midsection get pummeled. Davis looks crisp, his punches straight and hard, way more polished than the sloppy roundhouse strikes thrown by many MMA guys.

And why not? Before launching his mixed martial arts career seven years ago, he was a pro boxer, compiling a 17-1-2 record, mostly at super welterweight, always with Lake in his corner. One of those bouts was part of the final boxing event at the old Boston Garden, in December 1994, on the undercard below a main event featuring another Lake protege, future middleweight world titlist Dana Rosenblatt.

"The fight at the Boston Garden stands out in my mind because of the crowd," Davis says. Being from Maine, home to few pro boxing cards, he always was fighting in opponents' backyards and had become adept at blocking out noise from ringside. But that night at the Garden was different.

Davis' opponent, Joe LaRoux, was from New Hampshire, not a hometown guy. And since Davis had been training for two years with Lake at the old World Gym near the Assembly Square Mall, he was announced as "fighting out of Somerville." That, along with his "Irish" nickname, got the Boston fans behind him, "and I fed off of the crowd," he said. Davis knocked out LaRoux in the second round.

Davis comes from fighting stock, both grandfathers having been boxers. "It's in my blood," he says. "My mom tells me I was punching before I was walking." His family worked in the Maine potato industry in Houlton, along the Canadian border, and his ancestry goes back not only to Ireland but to other locales in the British Isles as well. "But," he says, smiling, "a nickname like 'The Irish-Scottish-Welsh Hand Grenade' just wouldn't

have the same ring to it."

At age 4, Davis moved to Bangor with his mother, who was fleeing an abusive relationship. By the time he was 8, Davis was training in martial arts "because no one would teach me boxing at that age." He eventually took up the sweet science and had his first amateur bout at 14. He turned pro at 19 and soon afterward relocated to Boston. He'd never been to the city before.

He barely experienced Boston even after moving to town. Davis spent day and night in the boxing gym, six days a week, and when he wasn't training, he was working a barback job at the Boylston Street nightclub Esme, which later became the Mercury Lounge.

Not even once did he relax in the Garden balcony, beer in hand, cheering on the Bruins. The first time he set foot in the smelly old building was when he fought there. "I was a young kid with no money and I was already a father," he says. "My life revolved around the boxing gym. I saw boxing as my opportunity to support my family, and I jumped on it."

'I've got to win some fights'

Davis is 37 now and still views his fighting job much the same way. It's MMA instead of boxing these days, but it's still all about being a provider. He has a fiancée and four kids, the oldest 20 years old and the youngest 4. "That's a lot of college to pay for," Davis says. "I've got to win some fights."

He's done just that on 17 of the 23 occasions when he's stepped into an MMA cage or ring. Two years ago, he was on an 11-fight win streak until his march toward a possible title shot was derailed by [Mike Swick](#) at UFC 85 in London.

After getting back on track with a pair of wins, Davis stumbled again, losing two straight, including a razor-thin split decision defeat to [Dan Hardy](#) a year ago amid some ugly trash talking with the brash Brit.

But in May he connected with a devastating one-two to knock out Jonathan Goulet, and there's little doubt that's what he has in mind for Saturday night. Davis actually has more submission wins (eight) on his MMA record than KOs (six), but his fast, powerful hands are his bread and butter. And his opponent, [Nate Diaz](#), is a jiu-jitsu brown belt under the renowned Brazilian trainer Cesar Gracie. Diaz is gifted with a tall, long-limbed frame, and if you venture too close and he gets his hands on you, he's capable of choking you out or twisting a limb into a painfully unnatural position.

Watching video of some recent Diaz bouts on Davis' laptop alongside him, DellaGrotte, Lake and manager Joe Cavallaro provides some insight about Diaz -- he is susceptible to being lulled into a standup battle and can be a bit lazy as a striker -- and speaks volumes about what makes DellaGrotte such a sought-after trainer. He's forever looking for ways to build his fighter's confidence ("Look at that, Marcus; if *this* guy can strike with Nate ...") and his running commentary is consistently about 30 seconds ahead of the TV analysts'. He breaks down his scouting observations and step-by-step strategy in simple terms.

Later, when Davis talks about his preparations for Saturday night, the fighter breaks things down even more



Marcus Davis, who boxed -- and won -- on the last card in the old Boston Garden, can't wait to try to recapture that magic.

simply. "People keep asking if I feel more pressure fighting in Boston," he says. "Not at all. I'm actually more comfortable than usual. I get to train in my gym, where everybody cares for me. I know where to go to get the kind of food I can eat before a fight. I don't have to fly anywhere and adjust -- some of my fights overseas have meant nine or 10 hours of travel. This time I don't have to worry about any of that. My opponent does."

That's not to say this fight camp is without its challenges. Davis respects Diaz as a talented and dangerous opponent. To prepare for and remain focused on the lanky Californian, he's had to make one of the most significant sacrifices he can think of: being away from his fiancée and kids for a month, other than when they drove down from Bangor for a short visit. "That's the toughest," Davis says. "I'm an active parent. When I'm at home, I take my kids to school every day."

But it will all be worth it, he says, if the referee raises his hand Saturday night while ring announcer Bruce Buffer is bellowing, "And the winner is" It's right there for the taking in front of his fellow New Englanders, Davis knows, and the thought of it reminds him of something that puts a smile on his face.

Not only will he be the only competitor on the UFC 118 card -- Toney included -- who already has fought at the Garden (albeit in a different building), but Davis already has the honor of being the only fighter who's been introduced by both Buffer brothers. Bruce has announced his name at many a UFC event, and Michael of "Let's get ready to rumble!" boxing fame was at the mic for that Boston Garden card back in '94. "I love that kind of stuff," Davis says. "It may not mean anything, but little things like that are cool."

As cool as fighting at the Garden ... again? "Being from New England and having the chance to fight in the Boston Garden even once, that was amazing," Davis says, his eyes glazing over as if venturing off to dreamland.

"Growing up, I didn't dream of being an astronaut. I had two dreams: One was to be a professional fighter, and I've done that. And the other was to fight in Ireland, and I've done that. Now this ... my career coming full circle ... fighting in the Garden first as a boxer and now in MMA. So cool."

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