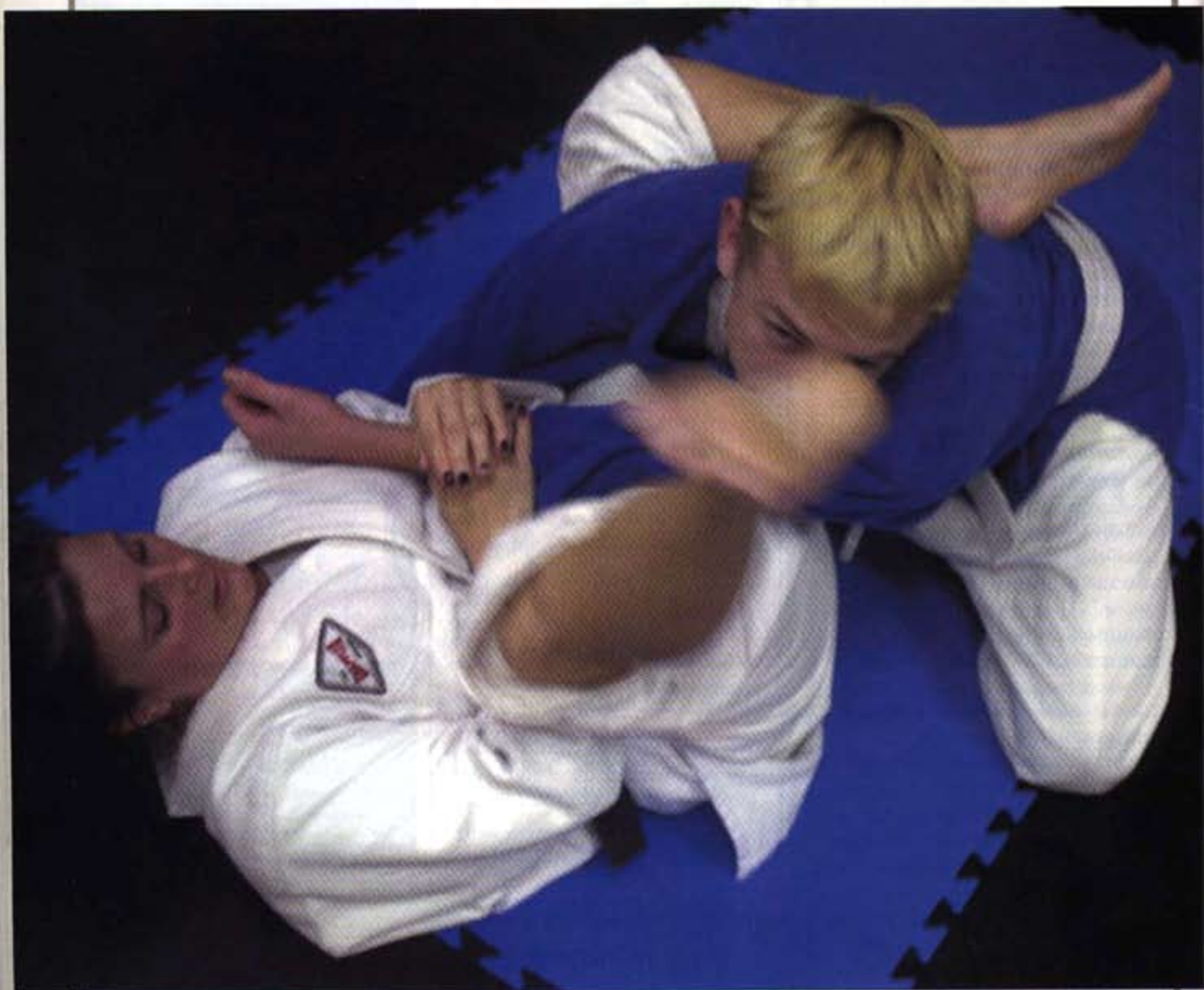


Fight Clubs

"We follow the standard rules—no small-joint locks, no groin strikes or eye gouging, no biting."



THE SECOND ULTIMATE FIGHTING Championship, in 1994, was the event that changed the sport of mixed martial

arts forever. After a grueling struggle, 176-pound Royce Gracie of Rio de Janeiro defeated 260-pound Greco-

Roman wrestler Dan Severn of Coldwater, Michigan, using a then almost unknown Brazilian jujitsu technique

called the Triangle Choke. The Triangle involves wrapping one's legs around an opponent's head and arm, which shuts off the blood to his brain, causing him either to pass out or to "tap the mat" to signal surrender. The video footage of the behemoth Severn trying mightily to extricate his head from the leg grip of the calm little Brazilian in the judo suit was played over and over all around the country in living rooms, boxing gyms, karate dojos, and Army barracks. In other bouts Royce Gracie had faced boxers, kung fu stylists, karate masters, and street brawlers, rushing them, taking them to the mat, and either applying a joint lock or a choke to finish the fight. But now he had proven his technique against a world-class grappler.

Six years later the world of martial arts is a different place. The old argument that any one style or discipline is unbeatable has been laid to rest. Instead the best competitors use a variety of styles—wrestling, jujitsu, Thai boxing, karate, and judo. The Brazilians, who have been training this way for over seventy years, call the hybrid fighting style *Vale Tudo*, or Anything Goes. In the U.S. it is called no-holds-barred or submission fighting or whatever term a promoter can dream up. The simple truth is that the best one-on-one, unarmed fights in history are being fought right now, and some of the most interesting ones are taking place in such unlikely arenas as the Armory in Griffin, Georgia, or the Macon City Auditorium, or any one of a dozen gathering places from Arab, Alabama, to Panama City Beach, Florida.

As a rapidly aging five-year student of Brazilian jujitsu, I have achieved a kind of energetic mediocrity. Since leaving my home state of Alabama over a decade ago, I've lived in Montana, where jujitsu instructors are as scarce as surf bums and where fighting still means boxing or a windmilling, beer-bottle-flying saloon fracas. But despite the legend of the rowdy cowpoke and the ham-fisted logger, the interest in mixed martial arts is dramatically lower in the West than in the South. In my part of the Rocky Mountains, a young man is more likely to pitch himself against a ski slope or a high-altitude ice-climb than

he is to backhand the fellow on the next bar stool who's talking a mite too loud, and the nearest no-holds-barred competition is at least a day's drive away. So whenever I want to see a new level of the fight world, I go home.

WHEN THE PROMOTER MATTHEW Waller first brought tournaments to Griffin, Georgia, he faced the same kind of opposition that promoters of the Ultimate Fighting Championships continue to deal with nationally. "There was an uproar in Griffin," he says, "from the churches, from everybody. Nobody would carry my advertisements. Everybody wanted to talk about how brutal these fights are and how they should be illegal." Waller tried to explain that his competitions actually follow strict rules and are not, by definition, no-holds-barred fights. "In the main fights, we follow the standard rules—no small-joint locks, no groin strikes or eye gouging, no biting. . . . We have other fights where there's open-hand strikes only and no knees or elbows, no kicking on the ground. That lets fighters who aren't yet comfortable with the more extreme rules come into the sport and try it out."

Waller follows the national fight scene closely to see how the rules are evolving as these tournaments become more mainstream. "There is a big debate over which rules make it safer and which ones open up new dangers," he says. "In the Ultimate Fighting Championship they make everybody wear fingerless gloves now, which were supposed to protect the fighters, but what happened is that the gloves allow you to strike a lot harder without breaking your hand, so people are taking a lot bigger hits."

But still, he says, it's safer than boxing. "These fights almost all go to the ground pretty quick. There's not much of that continual head pounding that you take in a boxing match, and they mostly end with a tap-out from either a joint lock or a choke. There's been around five hundred deaths in boxing since it started. I don't know how many people get killed in football, but it's a bunch. Neither of those sports face any kind of opposition at all from the public."

He readily admits that some of the fights get bloody. "We get face cuts all the time. They look bad and bleed bad, but there's not a lot of real damage happening. Since several of my events have come and gone with no serious injuries, the opposition has kind of died down."

Waller is twenty-six years old and manages a restaurant in Macon. He would very much like to promote fights and fighters for a living. "I'm kind of breaking even with this now," he says. "There's not much cash to be had from it. But it's a lot of fun, and I'm promoting a sport that I believe in. I see these great fighters come in with all this mix of skills, and the only way they can move up is to have the kind of fight background that these tournaments provide."

THE LOCAL BOYS WHO FIGHT FOR Matthew Waller pride themselves on keeping a no-frills, close-to-the-bone approach to their sport. Their gym is a converted barn in the woods outside of town. A well-pounded heavy bag hangs in one corner, and a few barbells and dumbbells are scattered around. On a clean towel by the door is an array of bandages, athletic tape, compresses, bottles of Betadine. There's no air conditioning, but a couple of fans sort of stir the heat. Nobody is complaining, though, because heat keeps the muscles supple and makes the joints less prone to injury. On a small sweat-slick wrestling mat, Cam McHargue is putting a choke hold on Waller, who has both hands on McHargue's forearm, trying to pry him loose. McHargue sinks in the choke, the one the Brazilians call the *mataleon*, or lion killer, and Waller slaps the mat three times, the universal signal of surrender.

Waller takes his place in front of the fan, catching his breath. "This is the way we like it," he says to me. "Redneck style, out here with the ringworms and mosquitoes and the ticks."

Like everybody else, Cam McHargue became fascinated by Brazilian jujitsu while watching the Ultimate Fighting Championships. At the time Royce Gracie and his brothers were rising to fame, McHargue was an amateur full-

contact kickboxer living in Valley, Alabama. He ordered a set of Gracie instructional videos and, along with some like-minded friends, began a self-education in ground fighting that continues today. He draws from any source of fighting knowledge that will make him more dangerous in the ring. "You show me a technique that I can't defend against," he says, "and by God I'll learn to use it."

At thirty-one McHargue is the oldest and most active fighter in the group. He's not really a big man, maybe 180 pounds, and he's not packing any extra fat or cosmetic bodybuilder muscles. With his red hair buzzed close to his scalp, he looks like the East Alabama Irish country boy that he is, the kind who likes to drink a few beers and keep the jokes going, and the kind who will happily kick your ass should the occasion call for it. He has a job with a computer graphics firm in LaGrange, Georgia, and operates a small martial arts school there. When Matthew Waller began organizing tournaments in Macon, McHargue was one of the first to sign up. In the opening minute of one of his first bouts, he threw a high kick that sent his opponent to the floor like he'd been clubbed with a sackful of rocks. "I told Matthew I was going to do that," he says. "When people look at me, I think they assume that I'm a grappler first. That's a mistake." McHargue has built a strong local following of fans who will pay to see him go into the ring and channel the exact mixture of skill and fury that has become his trademark. He has fought successfully on the national level and is on his way to a competition in Evansville, Indiana, called the Hook 'n' Shoot, which, if all goes well, should give him a shot at a pro fight. "This has never been about the money," he says. "My biggest purse so far has been five hundred dollars. I just want to take it as far as I can."

He also knows that age is no friend to a fighter. "It takes longer to heal up as you get older. Every time I've fought, I've been hurt in some way—sprained knees, ankles, always something. But one rule I live by is that I'd rather regret something I did than something I didn't." Later he explains it this way:

"At the Nationals, at one point it was just like I was back on the battlefields of old Ireland." He makes the motion of swinging a heavy sword.

THE ATLANTA SUBURB OF BUCK-head is a planet separated by more than just distance from the shade of the woods outside Griffin. On Roswell Road the traffic shimmers in a heat and diesel haze, and the roar of the I-285 loop sounds like some continuous natural disaster occurring just beyond the horizon. The jujitsu studio of Romero "Jacare" Cavalcanti, located on the second floor of a sprawling office and business complex called the Prado, is an oasis of calm. A block of offices across a breezeway walls out the noise of the city. Tinted glass doors seal in the air conditioning, and the room is spacious and cool. When I arrived there at midday the studio was quiet, and an aging and self-assured little pit bull was lounging in the center of a vast expanse of wrestling mat. Cavalcanti was the Brazilian Jujitsu Champion of 1977-78 and now trains fighters in both sport jujitsu (where the participants wear a heavy judo uniform and depend on joint locks and chokes, not strikes, to win) and no-holds-barred, or *Vale Tudo*.

While I was soaking up the air conditioning, Steve Headden, a member of Team Jacare, stopped in. Headden was one of the first fighters to participate in Matthew Waller's tournaments in Griffin and is also working his way up through the ranks as a sport jujitsu competitor. He works nights as a bouncer at local clubs and trains during the afternoons. Like McHargue he's thirty-one years old, weighs in around one-eighty, and has been interested in martial arts all his life. He was a hand-to-hand combat instructor in the U.S. Army Special Forces. "After I got out of the military, I took some fights around Macon just for excitement, just challenge matches, throwing some mats down behind a store or wherever. I was doing judo, ninjitsu, whatever I could pick up."

In 1996, long before he met Matthew Waller, Headden fought a no-holds-barred fight against an opponent who outweighed him by over fifty pounds. "The only rules were no eye gouging,

no biting," he says. "You could stomp, head butt, you name it. We both got carried out of the ring." The new rules (such as no stomping) and better organization of the sport have made it both safer and more interesting, says Headden. "I'm the sole supporter of my family. I just wouldn't do it the old way. With some rules and some weight classes it is a lot better."

Asked if he is afraid before going into a fight, Headden thinks for a few seconds before he answers. "Nervous, for sure. But not scared. Being a combat vet is part of that, and knowing that in the ring you can tap if things get impossible. I'm not afraid of anybody, but that doesn't mean there aren't plenty of fighters out there who are a lot better than I am."

IT WAS MY INTENTION TO SPEND

the night somewhere in Atlanta and train at Cavalcanti's studio the next morning, but I made a wrong turn onto I-285 and found myself sucked into a stream of multilane traffic moving at roughly the speed of sound. I let myself be hurled northward with the rest of the bellowing mechanical herd and then headed west for Alabama, eager to get back among some trees and creeks and cattle. I knew if I hooked up the right back roads I could make it to Cullman to catch the evening class at Triad Martial Arts.

Back when a lot of fighters were still trying to figure out where Brazil was on the map, Triad owner Johnny Lee Smith was in California training with Rickson Gracie, Royce Gracie's older brother (who at forty-one years old is still considered the most technical and dangerous no-holds-barred fighter in the world), and with the Machado brothers, the other powerhouse family of Brazilian jujitsu. Nowadays Smith stays closer to home and family, teaching a variety of martial arts, including Brazilian jujitsu and *Vale Tudo*. Once a year or so, old friends like Rickson or one of the Machado brothers will visit him in Cullman and help him teach. (Over the past three years I've learned more jujitsu just watching Smith and getting beaten by his students than in any other place I've trained.)

One of the Triad students is David Sosebee of Huntsville, Alabama, who has fought seven no-holds-barred matches. He made a very impressive showing in Waller's Gauntlet Trials, winning his matches with a classic jujitsu armlock, and Waller had told me that he would like to see him come back. But Sosebee is not sure when he'll return to the more intense levels of the sport. "I worked so hard to prepare for those early fights," he says. "I swam laps for forty-five minutes a day, lifted weights twice a week, did avoidance drills where I would put my hands behind my back and let a friend put the gloves on and try to punch me out. Most days I would run two miles, then come to the Triads to train jujitsu."

He says that now he knows that that level of fitness is not really necessary for those kinds of fights but that it helped to make him more confident going in. "You need fitness but not super-fitness. What you need most of all is technique, all you can get, and that means spending time on the mat."

Sosebee is twenty-four and has a seven-month-old baby girl. He holds down a job and is a full-time student at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. As any athlete will tell you, a life like that requires a triage that affects more than just training time. "My motivations were different when I was most stoked about taking these fights," he says. "I have an extremist personality, and I wanted to put myself in that place to see what it was like. Also I love jujitsu, and I wanted to test it under those real conditions, and I did that. I'll always train in jujitsu, but no-holds-barred can be so completely dangerous if you're not willing to give it your life, and right now I want to focus on some other things."

Over half of the jujitsu class at Triad is spent in sparring or "rolling," simply pairing up and trying to use the techniques you have been taught to force your partner to tap the mat. Strikes are excluded, and the matches are a contest of grappling skill—relaxed and friendly but quite serious. Sosebee and I are about the same size, around 165 pounds, and we roll a couple of matches. In the first one I feel like I'm doing pret-

ty good, although I fight defensively and am on the bottom most of the time. If this were a striking fight, I would be taking a whipping, but it's not, so I relax and try to wait for an opportunity to reverse him. During the time spent grappling, your mind is involved totally in orchestrating a very physical chess game, guarding your weaknesses, trying to work toward a position of advantage.

The essence of the art, and one of the most difficult things to learn, is to relax totally in the midst of the fight, to breathe deeply and normally. That relaxation while striving to win is a form of meditation, a meditation using the mechanics of violence. It is a rare thing, and it hooks a lot of people into a lifelong involvement with the art. Sosebee, more to the point, captures my left arm, which I have failed to guard, and spins into an armlock. I tap the mat quickly to avoid hyperextending my elbow.

IT SEEMS A GOOD ARGUMENT FOR open-mindedness and flexibility of spirit that this complicated art should have swept the United States and found its way into the dojos, backwoods gyms, and street brawls of the South. Ten years ago no one would have predicted that young men in Cullman or Griffin would be talking with respect and knowledge about Brazilian fighters and about arena fights and championships taking place half a world away. Almost no one then had developed that balance of skills—boxing, kicking, wrestling, and jujitsu—that can be seen in action at any number of amateur fights today.

But the future of legal, arena-style mixed martial arts competitions depends upon a constantly shifting political wind. Like the opposition that Waller faced when he brought his fights to Griffin, there are plenty of people who view the sport as too violent and too dangerous to be allowed. The Mississippi Athletic Commission has recently refused to recognize mixed martial arts competitions in their state.

"If they do it, we'll put somebody in jail," says Billy Lyons, the chairman of the Commission. Lyons says that the

first fights he saw were supervised by a knowledgeable referee, which made them safer. "It went downhill from there," he says. "There was a fight in Corinth where one guy was on top, slamming elbows down on the side of the other guy's head. The referee was just standing there." Another state, Florida, has never sanctioned the sport, but plenty of matches are held there, piggybacked onto more traditional kickboxing competitions.

In most states, trying to eradicate mixed martial arts fights would be like trying to shut a barn door after the horses have run off. People, especially men, will always be drawn to contests with such a dramatic array of challenges and rewards. And there will always be people who will come to see them fight. There will be the ubiquitous yahoos craning their necks to see the blood fly or the shoulder pop. There will be people like myself who know something of the mechanics of the sport and want to see them taken to their logical extreme. And there will be those who cannot imagine themselves in that ring, who watch the fighters as they would watch a man tiptoeing across a high wire without a net. In a time when so much entertainment is tilting toward the virtual, this is real. The stakes, for any fighter, are high.

If the rise of Brazilian jujitsu represents a kind of cultural exchange, it is one that flows both ways. A few times a year, along Highway 36 near Hartselle, Alabama, there are small cardboard signs reading, in block letters, **NHB TONIGHT**. The fights are held at the Sparkman Civic Center and do not always attract the more skilled competitors. Two years ago Johnny Lee Smith and a group of his students, including an old friend of mine, took Carlos Machado, a veteran jujitsu instructor from Brazil, to see the action. The people in the crowd, caught up in the excitement or perhaps making up for the lack of technical ability in the ring, began brawling amongst themselves. Later my friend asked Machado what he thought about the Hartselle fights. "Well," he said, smiling diplomatically, "that was a very interesting experience." ★