

DEAD MAN

Inside the lines/Around the game

FIGHTING



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IN 2005, COURT MCGEE WAS HEADED FOR THE MORGUE. TODAY, THE MMA PROSPECT IS MORE ALIVE THAN EVER.

By Matt Beardmore

WHO'S THAT HOLLOW MAN? COURT McGee wondered. As he stared in the mirror, getting ready for about his 30th heroin hit of the day, McGee couldn't even recognize the guy staring back at him. Gaunt. Bleary-eyed. Sad.

He was in the bathroom of his cousin's trailer, with only vague estimates of how much heroin, alcohol, cocaine and Xanax he had consumed that day. The only thing McGee knew for sure was that it was after 10 p.m. and he'd squandered another day getting

wasted in his cousin's trailer. He was tired, but when he looked at what he had left, there was plenty for one more hit. It was one hit too many. He says the needle tip pierced his skin that night, Sept. 4, 2005, around 10:40 p.m. "Immediately after that shot, I got really sweaty, and that was it," he says. About 15 minutes later, EMS workers believed Court McGee, 20, was dead.

But, due to a freak series of events, he came alive again.

His cousin, who was always

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO US

The 33 trapped Chilean mine workers got to see their national soccer team play Ukraine. A fiber-optic cable lowered down a bore hole projected a 50-inch-wide image on a subterranean wall while one miner, an ex-pro, provided commentary.

concerned about McGee's drug use, unexpectedly made a pit stop home in the middle of a night out—to put some ice cream in the freezer—and found McGee unconscious, slumped on the bathroom floor between the door and the toilet.

She called 911, then began performing CPR. In this remote area of northern Utah, ambulance response times can be a crapshoot.

On this night, though, a crew just happened to be in the same trailer park. About five minutes after his cousin made that frantic call, the responders arrived and began working on McGee. EMS workers tried repeated heart defibrillations and a naloxone injection to counter the heroin's effects. But they got no response from the comatose body. It was around 10:56 p.m., doctors later told his family, that all evidence indicated that McGee had actually died.

Which is when the real strangeness began. Because five minutes after his breathing stopped, McGee was resuscitated: The ambulance crew, despite no signs of life from McGee, had continued to work on his lifeless body for several more minutes.

Their persistence paid off. But on the way to the hospital, as he drifted in and out of consciousness, McGee was still barely clinging to life. Lucky for him, the young man's Grandpa Bill was at his side for the entire ride.

The two hadn't spoken in years, but being with Grandpa reminded McGee of his days as a standout prep wrestler at nearby Layton High. He'd been an athlete back then, not a junkie, and making his grandfather proud on the mat was a driving force in his life. That grappling experience is a big reason why McGee has become one of mixed martial arts' top prospects.

Of that hazy trip to the hospital, McGee recalls only that his grandfather, a former Air Force lieutenant colonel, was dressed in his standard button-up, red-plaid shirt.

Bill McGee never said a word and didn't have to. His sad face said it all. "He used to be so proud of me," McGee says. "I never wanted to disappoint him—and he looked so disappointed."

Another strange thing: Grandpa Bill had died in 2000.

McGEE SPENT the next few weeks in detox and rehab facilities, relapsing while in treatment. For chronic users like him, getting clean is never easy. It's not

just the drugs in the system, it's the system itself. Sometimes not even a brush with death can erase the need to escape. "All I wanted to do was get loaded and forget," McGee says. "I was full of shame and frustrated with my life."

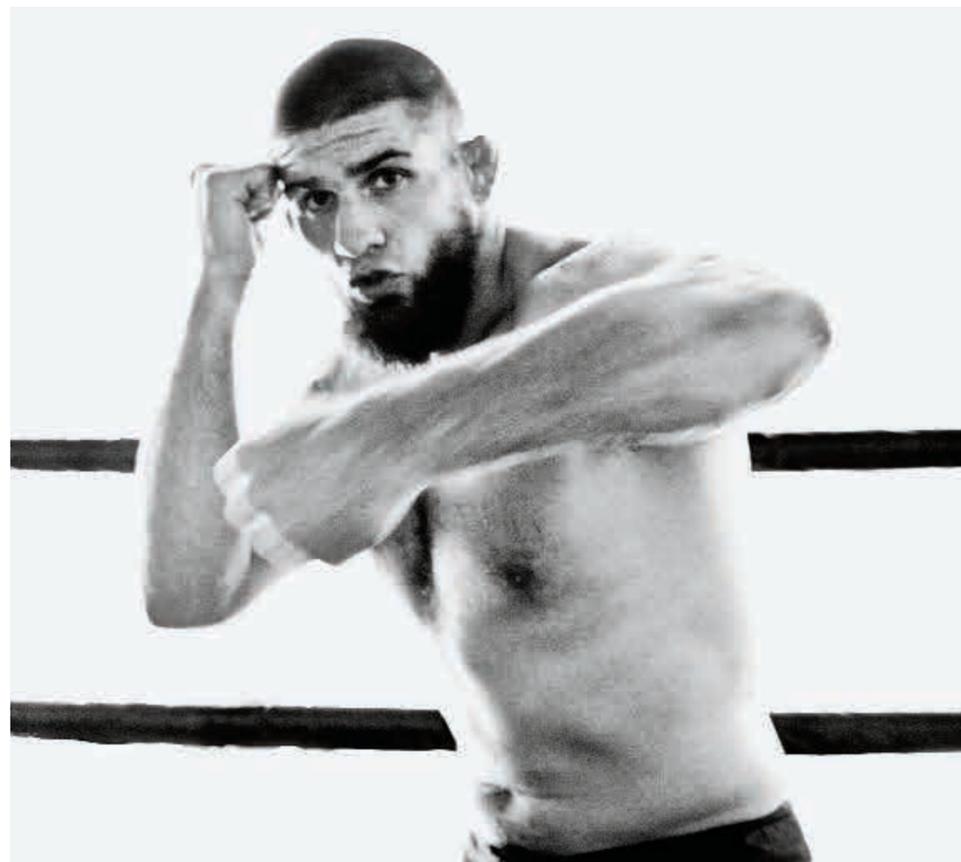
Upon his release, he stayed right in the drug game. One day, he went out and bought \$20 worth of cocaine. Driving home high to his parents' house, McGee hit his low point. The car ran out of gas, and he had to push it the rest of the way. "I just sat there and reflected," McGee says. "It was Easter 2006. I said, 'That's it. I'm done.'"

He made the decision to get clean and stay clean. Eventually, he got a job as a plumber's assistant, earning money

while trying to find his place in the world. Fellow crewmen nicknamed him The Crusher for the way he'd wrench pipes so hard they'd break.

The name stuck when he started working out at a local gym, teaching wrestling to local kids and taking some jujitsu classes. Within six weeks, McGee was tapping out even the gym's most advanced jujitsu practitioners.

In shape, physically and mentally, he wasted no time getting into live competition. By the end of the year, he had grappled in dozens of jujitsu



JIM KEMPERZUFFA/LLC/GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM)

THE NEEDLE TIP PIERCED HIS SKIN AROUND 10:40 P.M. ABOUT 15 MINUTES LATER, EMS WORKERS THOUGHT COURT MCGEE WAS DEAD.

matches and started competing in amateur boxing bouts.

In Utah, though, MMA is king of the combat-sports world. Thanks to former UFC star Jeremy Horn, born in Nebraska but a longtime Salt Lake City resident, cage fighting has exploded in popularity in the Beehive State. Horn still competes (career record: 86-19-5) and his Elite Performance team has produced tough MMA veterans like Joe Riggs and Travis Wiuff. Gyms are popping up everywhere in Utah, so when McGee went looking for fights, he found a bunch. In his first five months of pro fighting, McGee racked up six straight wins, most in Utah's Ultimate Combat Experience.

Then came the biggest test: a Dec. 1, 2007, bout against a guy who's considered a pioneer in the sport and who'd fought Chuck Liddell two years earlier for the UFC's light heavyweight title. The pro's name? Jeremy Horn.

Alas, McGee wasn't ready for the man they call Gumby, who outclassed McGee with his striking skills and kept him planted on his back for most of the bout. Horn won easily on all three judges' scorecards.

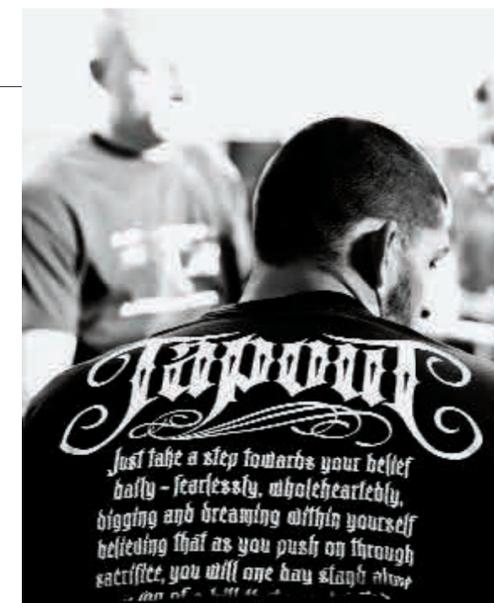
But with more than a year clean, a new wife (high school girlfriend Chelsea) and a newborn son, McGee lost a bout but didn't feel lost anymore. "I was just over a year sober," he says. "I don't think I was ready."

He went back to the gym, focused on his recovery and staying in shape. He kept winning local bouts and eventually got onto the UFC's reality show, *The Ultimate Fighter*.

As tough as the 27 other UFC wannabes looked, the house itself was just as daunting. Alcohol is allowed, and some of the Spike TV show's greatest and/or worst highlights have come during drunken moments.

As an addict trying to stay clean, that was just one more fight for McGee. But it was one he was ready for. "I grew up and became a man, a dad and a husband," he says. "I had some clean time under my belt—I was ready to conquer the world."

And that he did, despite one big bump in the road. He actually lost a controversial split decision to fellow competitor Nick Ring. But when another contestant got injured, UFC president Dana White picked McGee to return to the show. That's happened many times



In the throes of addiction, McGee had dwindled to 170 pounds; now the *TUF* champ cuts to 185 as one of MMA's biggest, strongest middle-weight prospects.



in the 11-season history of *TUF*, but McGee became the first alternate ever to return and win the whole thing. After victories in the quarter- and semifinals, McGee advanced to the June 19 finale and beat fellow finalist Kris McCray with a rear-naked choke. His first post-*TUF* bout comes Oct. 23 against rugged vet Ryan Jensen on the undercard of the Brock Lesnar-Cain Velasquez heavyweight title fight. Competing on such a big card will put a lot of pressure on McGee. He says he's looking forward to it.

He credits his fourth bout on *TUF* as proof that he can now handle adversity. Facing Seth Baczynski in an early elimination bout, McGee was dropped

with a right hook to the jaw. For the guys back at the Academy gym in Utah, it was the first time they'd seen McGee hurt. "He can take a punch," says his training partner, Brock Jardine. "A lot of fighters get in trouble and they freak out."

McGee didn't. He scrambled to grab Baczynski's leg. At that moment, the goal wasn't to win the fight, or even the round. It was to hang on, to survive, to get back on his feet. "Something kicked me in the ass to get up," McGee says. "I don't know why I was able to pull through. I think God was taking care of me. And now I know that I've been dropped and I can still come back."

He just as easily might have been talking about his life as that fight. ■