



Gray Maynard puts the pressure on Frankie Edgar on his way to a victory at UFC Fight Night 13

UNDER PRESSURE

What really strikes fear into some of the world's toughest athletes

BY MATT BEARDMORE // PHOTOS BY PAUL THATCHER

At the conclusion of his 2004 welterweight bout with Mexican fighter Jorge "The Naked Man" Ortiz, Jon Fitch wasn't grappling with the racing thoughts of possibly losing a three-round battle. In those awkward few moments before the decision was announced, Fitch wrestled with something any fighter reading this would deem unthinkable.

"I really was more afraid of winning," he says.

Once scraping by on \$800 a month, Fitch should have been concerned about having his arm raised in victory – and nothing else – each time he stepped inside the cage. But as he gazed into the crowd on a December night in Juarez, Mexico, Fitch wasn't sure how the fans at the El Poliforo Juan Gabriel would respond if a former college wrestler from Fort Wayne, Ind., defeated one of their hometown fighters.

"I was thinking, 'Are these guys gonna let me out of the arena?'" Fitch recalls. "I might have to sneak out the back door."

Wait, was this the right Jon Fitch? The same guy who tied Royce Gracie with a then UFC-record eight consecutive wins? The same guy who stood toe-to-toe with Georges St. Pierre for 25 brutal minutes last August? One of the most widely respected, toughest bad-asses in the MMA world?

And this same Jon Fitch was afraid?

Fans often look at Fitch and his peers as indestructible and fearless – understandably so – but these larger-than-life athletes battle the same fears as everyone else.

While Fitch's fear of winning and getting his ass kicked by an out-of-control crowd is about as common as seeing a good set of ears on an Olympic wrestler, the anxiety caused by the thought of a loss can drive

even the most self-motivated fighters.

FEAR OF LOSING

"Losing is a big fear," heavyweight Jay White says. "I had a fear of losing when I

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first started out, but I went to a sports therapist for a few months to help my performance get better."

Instead of the hardcore death metal or rock you'd expect the tatted-up heavyweight to be rocking on his iPod during his walk toward the cage, White lets motivational messages from his earphones soak into his psyche.

"THE ANSWER"

Lightweight Frankie Edgar employs a far less Freudian approach for inspiration. But like White, he can find himself locked in a psychological struggle against losing.

"Absolutely, I think losing is probably one of the biggest things for everybody," Edgar says. "But you don't want to get too hung up on losing. Then you can't perform."

After beginning his MMA career with eight straight victories, Edgar suffered his first defeat last April to Gray Maynard at *UFC Fight Night 13*. They say time heals all wounds, but "they" never lost a perfect fighting record. Nearly a year after this first setback, the disappointment in Edgar's voice is palpable.

"It sucked," he says bluntly. "It was like a

death in the family."

BOBBY SOUTHWORTH

Less than 2 months after losing his Strikeforce Light-Heavyweight championship to

Renato "Babalu" Sobral, Bobby Southworth admits to more than 200 reasons he fears losing.

"All the kids at my gym look up at me," he says. "I don't want to let them down. And my mom comes to most of my fights, and I don't want to let my family down."

STEVE CANTWELL

Neither does former WEC light heavyweight Champion Steve Cantwell. "The Robot" is comforted, though, knowing that friends and family will support him, win or lose.

"No one wants to lose in front of a hometown crowd," he says, "but knowing that friends and family who love me are there is reassuring for me."

BILLY EVANGELISTA

A week prior to his unanimous decision victory over Harris Sarmiento at *PFC 12* in Lemoore, Calif., – a card at which his brother Jorge lost his featherweight championship – Billy Evangelista speaks glowingly of his family's and friends' support. Fighting in front of loved ones doesn't scare the former Airborne Ranger – it provides strength.

"All my friends and family, and everyone

For a guy that now cuddles up to an American pit bull terrier, you'd never imagine that he used to run scared from a dog.



But Kenny Florian was no different than any other kid that's experienced some childhood canine trauma.

"A German shepherd on my street growing up bit me a couple times and I used to be scared of him," Florian laughs. "I got bit once riding my bike and once running to my friend's house."

Chris "Lights Out" Lytle has never been bitten by a snake, but don't ever expect to see the welterweight getting cozy a slithering reptile.

"When I was younger I'd see gardener snakes out and about," he recalls. "The other kids would grab them, but I definitely didn't want anything to do with them."

"They're nasty little creatures."

And if one of his kids says, "Daddy, I really want a snake as a pet?"

"That's great," Lytle says he would tell them. "As soon as you've got your own place, have at it."

Just off a plane in Boston after training in Montreal with Georges St-Pierre's crew at Tristar, Florian also admits he's not a huge fan of heights. Yet as you'd expect from one of the top fighters in the world, Florian is not about to give into his fear.

"Before a couple of fights in Vegas I went to the top of the Stratosphere and did the needle shot," KenFlo says. "Walking up there was pretty scary."

Florian won't be running into fellow lightweight Aaron Riley as he's surveying The Strip. Riley keeps his feet on the ground as often as possible.

"I hate flying," he says, "but I have to do it all the time. I have to do seven flights this month."

Back from a week of gut-busting training with the U.S. Marines at Camp Pendleton in San Diego, Riley is man enough to relate a vomit-inducing experience eight years ago when he encountered a not-so-intimidating roller coaster – or at least that's what his girlfriend thought of the ride.

"She was giving me a hard time, so I went on it," Riley says. "It was a pussy roller coaster, but I still got sick."

Several years ago, he also tried his luck at the coasters at Holiday World near his hometown of Tell City, Ind.

"I think they were the fastest wooden roller coasters in the U.S. when I was there," Riley says.

So did he get sick?

"Oh, definitely."

who knows me, know that I train hard and do my best," Evangelista says. "My biggest fear when I started was training my ass off and going in there and just getting caught in a submission or one punch."

THE AXE MURDERER

Wanderlei Silva has delivered many of those during his Hall of Fame caliber career. But with five losses in his last six fights, is the 32-year-old Brazilian with more than 40 professional bouts ready to call it quits? Not a chance, he says. Taking a break from his hectic Las Vegas schedule, Silva declares he's ready to fight for another 5 to 7 years. No defeat – not even the devastating first-round knockout variety to Quinton "Rampage" Jackson at UFC 92 last December – will unnerve "The Axe Murderer."

"No, I'm not afraid of anything," Silva says. "Every situation you train for."

While he delivers one of the most intimidating prefight stares in all of mixed martial arts, Silva is not immune to dealing with jitters prior to his battles inside the Octagon.

"I'm nervous before all fights," he says. "I have a lot of pressure on me."

JAKE O'BRIEN

The dog-eat-dog world of MMA is no different for those at Silva's world-class level or for the up-and-comers looking to grab their slice of the MMA pie. One defeat can set a career back months or years, while one victory can position a fighter on the fast track to a championship bout. The pressure to succeed is immeasurable, as is the fear some fighters experience knowing that the countless, gut-busting hours prepping for a fight can be erased in a split second by one inexperienced or careless sparring partner.

"Some guys you've got to be careful with – that don't know what they're doing," UFC light heavyweight Jake O'Brien says. "They don't do it on purpose, they just don't know."

FINANCIAL FEARS

Forget the physical pain. The financial hit a fighter endures because of a training injury can hurt even worse. No fight, no paycheck.

"That is something that worries you," Fitch admits. "It's not a huge fear, but if you get hurt, it could mean a lot of money."

And if Fitch suffered a career-ending injury? The thought of dusting off that bachelor's degree in phys ed from Purdue and getting a "real" gig must scare the shit out of him, right?

"I've never been concerned with that," he says. "I enjoyed progressing and setting small goals. It made it very easy regardless where I was financially."

Fitch isn't – and never will be – in the fight game to add zeroes to his bank account. Fans understand this, and they love him for that. Fitch could have used this passionate fan support in Juarez a few years back, but any fears he had then of an angry Mexican mob attacking him were eased as Ortiz graciously hoisted his arm to the crowd when Fitch was pronounced the victor.

"When he did this, they became my fans," he says. 🍷

