

GIANT KILLER

The UFC's Keith Hackney is Still a Busy Man

BY MATT BEARDMORE

As he swings open the front door of Hackney's Combat Academy on a late-July evening in Roselle, Illinois, you'd swear Keith Hackney could still ground- and-pound with the best of them inside the Octagon. Noticeably absent from his UFC days of the mid-1990s is the Billy Ray Cyrus mullet. However, he still has the pronounced guns that would make a bodybuilder envious.

If a Fountain of Youth exists, Hackney is tapping it, because at age 50, this mixed martial arts pioneer is, without a doubt, still built to fight.

"When it stops being fun, I won't do it," he says, as a steady flow of young fighters check in and greet him with a playful fist pound. "It keeps you young and keeps your heart pumping. People sit around with the remote control and pretty soon the years go by. Then, all the sudden, they want to get in shape.

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No, you've got to stay on top of it."

Whether it's inside or outside the cage, staying on top is a way of life for this former UFC fighter. Best known for chopping down 600-plus pound sumo wrestler Emmanuel Yarborough at UFC 3 in 1994, "The Giant Killer" continues to attack his business ventures and training with a schedule so vigorous that many of today's best-conditioned MMA fighters would be impressed.

Along with owning 10 rental properties and managing Hackney's Classic Heating & Cooling in Roselle, Hackney trains 5 to 6 days per week and teaches four times per week, including his latest venture as the head of the Combat



Keith Hackney with students at Pinnacle Performance in St. Charles.

Center at the Pinnacle Performance School of Wrestling in St. Charles.

"This is my relaxation, seriously," he says with a smile. "Jumping in the cage is a great way to get rid of all your anxiety. Stress will kill you."

Hackney learned the lessons of the Octagon much earlier than most, but never in his wildest dreams did he envision the UFC's meteoric rise from "controlled street fighting" to multi-billion dollar company.

"It's too bad the UFC didn't start when I was 21 years old," he says with a laugh. "But the thing is, I had an established business and I was trying to put my kids through college when I first fought in the UFC. So what do you do? Quit everything and go into the UFC where they didn't pay much money back then. You had to win three fights in one night to win \$50,000."

Hackney never scored a huge payday in four UFC battles – he earned a paltry \$1,000 for his submission victory against Yarborough – although his academy is feeling the trickle-down effects from MMA's skyrocketing popularity.

"Before, I didn't charge anything," he says. "I had a place for people to come fight, and it was great. But we had so many people wanting to train that I had to expand and run a business."

With 150 members, business is booming. On this Monday night, 16 participants fought through a heart-pumping beginner MMA session, the phone at the front desk got a steady

workout, and the parking lot outside this non-descript, brick-faced building filled up faster than the Allstate Arena will on October 25 when the UFC invades the Land of Lincoln for the first time at UFC 90.

"MMA is the hottest thing going," says Mike Castellano, former Carlson Gracie Academy owner and the Brazilian Jiu Jitsu instructor at Hackney's. "I think it's going to be very popular at least for the next few years."

Hackney dreams of forming a fighting team, although he understands that the geographic limitations of his suburban academy may hinder this from happening.

"I'm not like the Miletich School where I'm right next to Iowa wrestling and you can bring in 30 wrestlers who have competed all their life and are ready to go," he says. "It would be nice to have a stable like that, but in reality, it's not in this area. Here, we've got a lot of beginners who come in. We take them from scratch and build them."

He has no plans of downshifting this wild ride any time soon, so it's safe to say you're never going to find Hackney and his wife Donna playing shuffleboard and spending their golden years at some sleepy retirement community in Florida.

"This is going to be my retirement," Hackney says. "You know, you've got to have a reason to get up in the morning."

By looking at what Hackney's built, he obviously has plenty. 🍷