

PRO ATHLETES & MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

Story by: Matt Beardmore

"I think any time you step onto whatever court or field or mat, you go out with the mentality that you're going to leave it all out there..."

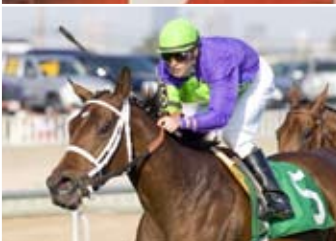


Photo by: Miles Kennedy/Philadelphia Phillies



Photo by: Mark Buckner/St. Louis Blues

Punch after bad-intentioned punch, St. Louis Blues forward Cam Janssen endorses his paychecks with heavy-handed slugs to his opponent's face and body. Protecting his teammates and pumping up an adrenaline-filled crowd is what he signed up for. "When I'm on the ice, people are scared," Janssen says. "That's why I'm in the NHL." Janssen isn't kidding himself. The 6-foot, 210-pound St. Louis native knows he'll never lead the league in scoring, assists or gentlemanly play. To survive in the NHL, No. 55 has to let his fists fly. Since he and his dad first checked out Jesse Finney's gym in St. Louis a few years ago, Janssen, 25, has incorporated MMA workouts into his grueling summer training regimen. "Jesse had no idea who I was, but once he saw I was serious with my shit, we really started hitting it," Janssen says. Less than two months after making four tackles and recording a pair of sacks in the Pittsburgh Steelers' 27-23 victory over the Arizona Cardinals in Super Bowl XLIII, linebacker LaMarr Woodley was already back in Ann Arbor, Michigan, training for another run toward the Lombardi Trophy. "I wanted to do a little (MMA) training in the offseason, and I tell you what, I take my hat off to those guys," says the 6-foot-2, 265-pound former University of Michigan standout. "That training is vicious. I don't know how they do that." "I sparred one time," Woodley recalls. "We only did body shots, but those three-minute rounds killed me. They felt like 20 minutes." Was it more challenging than your most exhausting football practice? "Yes, it was!" Woodley says. "I was working some muscles I never knew I had. I couldn't get in the ring with any of those guys. I couldn't do it." Philadelphia Phillies Gold Glove center fielder Shane Victorino is a diehard UFC supporter – he's friends with Dana White and Lorenzo Fertitta – but don't expect "The Flyin' Hawaiian" to ever make his MMA debut. "There's no way I'm going to try that," Victorino says. "It's a different level of athleticism. These guys train their asses off. I definitely tip my hat to those guys." "So many people on the street think they can get in there, and I'm like, 'No way, it's not like that.'" While Victorino will keep his distance from stepping into the cage, he's always close to the action. "I go to UFC events in Vegas all the time," he says. One fight the Wailuku native eagerly awaited was the UFC 101 light-weight battle at the Wachovia Center between fellow Hawaiian BJ Penn and Kenny Florian. Even with a home game that night against the Florida Marlins, Victorino made it a priority to attend the UFC's debut in the City of Brotherly Love. "I'm walking over right after the game," he says.

When the UFC announced it would make its Second City debut in Oct. 2008, Chicago Bears wide receiver Rashied Davis knew he had to find a seat at the Allstate Arena. "That was a lot of fun to see (Anderson) Silva defeat (Patrick) Cote," Davis says. "I'd definitely like to meet Silva one day." Davis, 30, lost touch with the UFC for a little while following Royce Gracie's wins at UFC 1 and 2, but now, the fifth-year pro rarely misses an MMA event. "I'm always watching on SPIKE and Pay-Per-View," Davis says. Like Victorino, Davis will opt for a comfortable chair in the crowd rather than a spot in the Octagon once his playing days are over. "Me fight? I don't want to end up getting knocked out like (former NFL wide receiver) Johnnie Morton!" Davis says. While jockey Inez Karlsson makes her living these days at Arlington Park Racetrack and Hawthorne Race Course in suburban Chicago, she knows exactly what it feels like to get knocked out. That's exactly what happened to her in her last boxing match in Sweden. "I like to watch MMA, but I don't want to do it," Karlsson says. "I don't want to break my nose again!" Karlsson took third in the 2005 Swedish Boxing Championships, however, her efforts have taken her from the ring to the homestretch. "I train to ride like I'm going to fight," she says. "I train 'til I puke then I train again." "Riding is very physical." Are you or any of your fellow jockeys tough enough to compete in MMA? "Physically, most of the jockeys would be able to," Karlsson says. "A lot of jockeys have been wrestlers and boxers. Riding involves coordination, balance, reaction. That's what helped me with the riding." Two years of Muay Thai training during high school have helped Seattle Sounders goalie Terry Boss on the pitch – even though he's fighting off soccer balls these days, not kicks and punches. "I would say that more people than not say that I missed my calling," Boss says. "I love sitting and watching MMA. I play goalkeeper, it's kind of an aggressive position." "I think any time you step onto whatever court or field or mat, you go out with the mentality that you're going to leave it all out there. All sports are comparable." As tough or as fast or as gutsy as they might be on their respective fields and courts, today's professional athletes share a similar sentiment about the men and women that make their living fighting inside a cage – pure respect. Even Janssen feels that way. And he's never backed down from anyone. "Oh, God no, I'm never going to get in there," Janssen says. "I'm going to be in the NHL for as long as I can and hopefully live off my investments." **A**

SPOTLIGHT