The consensus prevails that a blemish on a fight record greatly reduces a boxer's stock. Conversely, MMA advocates maintain that a loss in their sport is merely a reflection of the competitive nature of the game, and should not hinder a fighter's marketability.

Former UFC middleweight champion Rich Franklin is ready to put that theory to the test as he attempts to force his way back onto the big stage when he faces Yushin Okami in Belfast, Northern Ireland this Saturday.

Franklin was considered among the finest MMA practitioners heading into his October 2006 title defense with Anderson Silva. But less than one round and twenty unanswered knee strikes later, Franklin was relieved of his championship and left with a severe nasal fracture that required two bouts of surgery.

The Cincinnati, Ohio native may have entered the octagon that night at less than full fitness after breaking his hand defeating David Loiseau seven months earlier, and some observers claim the champion should have taken on an easier opponent than Silva after such an injury-induced layoff.

But if anyone is making excuses, it's not Franklin.

"From a completely medical point of view, the bone in my hand was strong," said Franklin. "I definitely wouldn't hide behind that as an excuse for the loss in my last fight - not to say the injury didn't play into it, and perhaps the training that led up to it.

"Maybe I didn't come into the fight a hundred percent. Maybe I went back to the gym too soon and didn't have enough of a layoff even though I was injured. Who knows what kind of factors came into play there? What it boils down to is that I had a bad night and he had a good night and that makes for a bad combination when you have two elite fighters in the ring."

Franklin may have been second best on the night, but in his nine-fight UFC career his opposition has been first-class. Since stopping former champion Evan Tanner in his debut four years ago, Franklin has convincingly defeated some of the sport's premier fighters. Ken Shamrock, Nate Quarry, Jorge Rivera and Jason McDonald have all failed to last more than two rounds with Franklin, who has a thirst for competition.

"I don't want to fight easy opponents," Franklin, 32, told writer Thomas Gerbasi. "I'll fight whoever they put in front of me."

And the former schoolteacher knows that a diligent training routine is the best way to master the art of fighting.

"I think that the training partners that I have are what have gotten me to a championship level in

the first place," said Franklin. "People just don't realize that you put that kind of preparation into a fight."

"When I decided that I wanted to do [my first] MMA fight, I spent four months training. It was an amateur fight," he continued. "My buddy and I were training in a shed that was designed for lawnmower equipment in the back yard. It was a little 12-by-15 [foot] shed with no air-conditioning in the summer and no heat in the winter, just a little space heater. We just trained and trained and trained.

"Over the years, our training has gotten better and we've taken ourselves from those beginnings to the top of the food chain in this sport. At the time, we were watching the UFC and we'd say to ourselves that one day one of us would fight in the UFC. Now I am fighting in the UFC. I'm actually accomplishing what I set out to do."

A win over Okami on June 16 will guarantee Franklin a shot at his old title and would certainly rank as one of his finest achievements. The Japanese fighter is unbeaten in his five UFC appearances and recently scored an attention-grabbing win over the highly regarded Mike Swick.

The signs are that this will be a classic clash of styles. Okami is one of the sport's better takedown artists and will seek to use his skills to exploit weakness in Franklin's grappling technique. While Okami will be looking take the fight to the ground, Franklin will likely aim to utilize his sharp striking ability against his smaller opponent.

The bout represents a true crossroads meeting; one fighter is looking to regain his lofty status, while the other has been diligently working his way up the ladder in the background.

But even though he has received the lion's share of the spotlight, Franklin doesn't crave a celebrity lifestyle and is a firm believer in respecting his fans.

"I don't ever want to [create] misconceptions or anything because I love the fans out there and any fan that has met me could probably vouch for me and say that," he admitted. "However, I don't thrive on the fame or anything like that.

"Fame isn't something I personally thrive off, but I can understand it from other people's point of view and for that I'll do anything for the fans."

A great fight on Saturday should do just nicely.

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Also on the UFC 72 card, the popular Forrest Griffin will look to rebound from his December loss to Keith Jardine when he takes on the durable Hector Ramirez.

Two fighters who were defeated by the main event participants clash as Franklin victim Jason McDonald meets The Ultimate Fighter 3 star Rory Singer who was defeated by Okami last time

out.

The exciting Tyson Griffin will be hoping to get back to winning ways against Clay Guida, while Ed Herman of The Ultimate Fighter 4 fame should have his hands full with the power-punching Scott Smith.

I will be covering the card and filing on deadline for TSS.