There is a common occurrence in boxing whereby a new champion's first title defence takes place in his hometown against a soft challenger. And even though the sport has been criticised for showcasing uncompetitive matchups, boxing's newest stars still partake in the hallowed practice.

After bursting onto the world scene with a stoppage of Kostya Tszyu, Ricky Hatton was subsequently fed the little-known Carlos Maussa in his native England. Similarly, Welshman Joe Calzaghe wasted time against Sakio Bika in Cardiff following his thrilling win over Jeff Lacy.

But in the Ultimate Fighting Championship, things seem a little different.

By knocking out Chuck Liddell for the UFC light heavyweight title in a shocking upset last May, Quinton 'Rampage' Jackson became an overnight sensation. With an exciting fighting style and marketable personality, Jackson is the type of commodity that any promoter would try and protect.

Yet the UFC are doing no such thing by making the California resident travel eight time zones to London, England for a showdown with current two-weight Pride FC champion Dan Henderson in the first ever mixed martial arts unification bout on September 8 at the O2 Arena.

The historic matchup puts together the two dominant MMA organizations' 205-pound titlists to produce an undisputed champion in arguably the sport's most significant event to-date.

"I really can't recall a fight with so much on the line," says CBSSports.com contributor Sam Caplan.

"I almost feel like the media has understated the significance of this bout. The winner will become the most decorated champion in MMA history since they'll be walking away with both belts."

While the titles make the occasion noteworthy, a showdown between these two fighters would be a momentous event regardless. With Jackson having defeated the seemingly unbeatable Liddell, and Henderson coming off an impressive knockout over the legendary Wanderlei Silva, Saturday's confrontation couldn't be happening at a better time.

Path to stardom

With his trademark 'Rumble Chain' and gregarious nature the 29-year-old 'Rampage' Jackson has become one of the most identifiable faces in MMA, but his route to the UFC championship wasn't a smooth charge.

After initially aspiring to be a professional wrestler, Jackson was introduced to MMA through a friend and despite a limited background in martial arts, the Memphis native immediately fell in love with the sport's concept.

"Most fighters have a real strong background," he told writer Thomas Gerbasi in 2003. "I didn't have that in anything.

"I grew up fighting on the street all my life. I just knew how to fight, but I always got in trouble for it. I was thinking, 'damn, [in MMA] I can fight without getting in trouble.'"

After some minor success in smaller American MMA shows, Jackson was invited to Japan to compete in the Pride FC in 2001, but he would struggle to adapt to the lifestyle of a full-time fighter.

"I was living in an RV when I first started fighting in Pride," he recalled. "I was kinda homeless. I moved from my family in Memphis to California and started training. And some things didn't work out. But I didn't want to give up, so I had to live where I had to live. I lived in worse places before, so I did that and God pulled me through."

And although Jackson lost two of his first three outings there, his rugged style enabled him to score notable victories over respected names such as Kevin Randleman and Murilo Bustamante. But a night in 2003 would result in an exponential boost to his popularity.

At the Pride Final Conflict tournament he was pitted against Liddell in a bout that was supposed to be a warm-up for a highly anticipated Liddell-Wanderlei Silva showdown. But 'Rampage' isn't one to show deference for reputations and he bullied Liddell with his superior strength and striking en route to a second round stoppage win.

Jackson's reward was a fight with the in-form Silva just a few hours later in a bout that is widely regarded as a true classic. Yet despite enjoying early success against the Brazilian, Jackson would ultimately be stopped by a series of ferocious knees.

Turbulence

Even though he performed admirably, Jackson's life would begin to descend into chaos the following year.

"I think I was heading for self-destruction the way I was," he told Sherdog.com. "I think I was turning into an alcoholic and I'm just thankful that things happened the way they happened."

A loss to Silva in a 2004 rematch would be followed by a hotly disputed win over Murilo Rua before a convincing loss to the dangerous Mauricio 'Shogun' Rua.

But when it seemed like Jackson's reputation as a top-level fighter was eroding, he showed a return to form by digging deep to grind out a win over the respected Matt Lindland before his 2007 assault on the UFC. In his Octagon debut Jackson would avenge an early career loss to Marvin Eastman before shaking the MMA world with a devastating right hook that sent the

favored Liddell crashing to the canvas in the opening round.

A seemingly more mature 'Rampage' has emerged since his turbulent 2004, and he has credited his new setup in Big Bear, California with his transition into a more complete fighter.

"I think I've grown more in the last year than I've grown in the other years," said Jackson, 27-6. "I hooked up with [trainer] Juanito Ibarra, I got a nice solid team, and we're happy with what we've got going."

Then again, if any fighter could be described as having a maturity about his profession, it's Dan Henderson. The two-time Olympic Greco-Roman wrestler doesn't have the same animated personality as Jackson, but his accomplished record speaks volumes.

After taking up MMA in an effort to finance his wrestling training, Henderson enjoyed success in the early days of the UFC in 1998 and subsequently ventured to the bigger Japanese MMA scene.

"I didn't expect to win [in Japan]," he said in an interview with Total-MMA.com. "I was just looking to bring back some appearance money for my wrestling training. I did almost no MMA training."

Low-key

Nonetheless, he scored victories over some of the sport's most respected names including Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira, Renato Sobral, Murilo Bustamante and, most recently, Vitor Belfort and Wanderlei Silva. Still, he remains an unfamiliar name among many UFC fans and will enter the Octagon on Saturday as a decided underdog.

"People may think I'm the underdog because they don't know me. But in my mind I'm not the underdog," said the 37-year-old. "They will definitely know who I am after this fight, especially after I beat the hell out of Quinton."

Henderson, 22-5, is no stranger to Jackson with both men having briefly trained together at the renowned Team Quest camp that is home to the likes of Matt Lindland, Rameau Thierry Sokoudjou and Nate Quarry.

"It's an advantage because I can train with Matt [Lindland at Team Quest], but I've trained with Quinton too," said Henderson. "I know what he's about."

Big transition?

Even so, Henderson will also have to prepare to compete inside an Octagon under UFC rules for the first time in nine years. The different regulations mean he will have to adjust his typically varied ground and pound game to adapt to the allowance of elbows and the outlawing of knee strikes on the deck.

But considering his age and the precarious financial situation surrounding the Pride organization, the Apple Valley native is willing to accommodate the new fighting environment if it means he can secure a UFC contract and enjoy some of the bigger paydays.

"Fighting in the cage is a big difference and I've got to prepare for that," he revealed. "I'm still

under Pride contract [but] it would be nice to get some of that [UFC] pay per view money."

The Pride champion at 205 and 185 pounds figures to be the naturally smaller man on Saturday, but that has been something he's dealt with throughout his decade-long MMA career. Whereas usually fighters move up in weight as they age, Henderson began his Pride career as a 205-pounder and only dropped the twenty pounds when the welterweight division was formed two years ago.

Despite competing at the lower weight, Henderson hasn't lost his ability to mix it with the heavier fighters, as was evidenced by his thrilling third round defeat of Silva last February in annexing the Pride 205-pound championship.

Although he entered the bout as underdog, Henderson showed a complete repertoire of skills; hurting Silva at stand-up, dominating him with a relentless ground and pound attack and even absorbing the Brazilian's most vaunted strikes.

In becoming the first ever MMA fighter to hold two titles simultaneously, Henderson could conceivably hold a psychological edge over 'Rampage', who must still have nightmares about Silva. Then again, Silva hasn't looked his formidable self in recent years and it is possible that Henderson beat a faded version of a once great fighter.

Either way, Henderson is aware that he faces a different challenge on Saturday.

Unique test

"Quinton is more skilled and technical as a striker than Silva," he assessed. "Quinton is going to try to take me down a little more than Silva. Quinton's athleticism and explosiveness gets him out of a lot of those mistakes that he makes.
"He gets caught in triangles and arm-bars and powers out of a lot of stuff that a lot of people don't when they get caught in those positions."
So what strategy should the Olympian adopt to combat Jackson's superior size and strength?
"Henderson has a unique mentality when it comes to fighting larger guys," believes Caplan.
"The challenge really drives him to perform at his best.

"I expect Henderson to try and avoid any type of upper body locking with Jackson even though he's a good Greco Roman wrestler. Jackson is a much better wrestler than Wanderlei Silva and Henderson could find himself at a disadvantage if they lock up and Jackson is in a position to go for one of his trademark slams.

Henderson would be best served trying to set up a double leg takedown early in the match with a combination of punches and put Jackson on his back with his shot."

Still, don't expect Jackson to lie down easily.

'Rampage' doesn't lack motivation and seems to carry the sort of grievances that a homecoming parade bout just wouldn't cure.

After icing Liddell for the UFC title, ‘Rampage’ was subjected to a chorus of boos from the packed crowd at the MGM Grand Arena in Las Vegas. It was supposed to be his coronation night on the big stage, but instead he was accused of being a joker. And ‘Rampage’ hasn’t forgotten.

“People say [I defeated Liddell with] a lucky punch,” Jackson told TheSweetScience.com’s David Avila. “I honestly think the reason they booed me is I’m more unknown in the UFC.”

“Now in September I get to fight the champion of Japan [Henderson]. He has the belt that I was trying to go for that I never got.”

Spike TV will telecast "UFC 75: Champion vs. Champion" on Saturday, September 8 at 9:00 PM ET/PT (same day tape).