

UFC 80 Preview: Penn vs. Stevenson

Written by Ronan Keenan

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They may be two Americans contesting the UFC lightweight title in England this Saturday, but that's about all B.J. Penn and Joe Stevenson have in common.

While former welterweight champion Penn is dubbed "The Prodigy" for his extraordinary natural talent, Stevenson has had to fight professionally for nine years to achieve a title opportunity.

Many observers believe that Penn, 29, has the ability to earn recognition as the world's premier mixed martial artist, but his questionable work ethic has frequently hindered his career. Nonetheless his résumé makes impressive reading.

After becoming the first non-Brazilian to win a gold medal in the Black Belt division of the Mundial World Jiu-Jitsu Championships at the age of 21, Penn made his MMA debut in the UFC, where he has defeated some of the sport's most recognizable names.

But by Penn's own admission he used to "pride myself on how little training I could do and get away with it." That attitude led to an upset loss against Jens Pulver and a disappointing draw with veteran Caol Uno in a lightweight title fight.

Even though the Hawaiian scored a shocking submission over the favored Matt Hughes to claim the welterweight championship in 2004, a subsequent hiatus from the UFC saw Penn's weight balloon. Still, he performed commendably on his return to the organization in losing efforts against Hughes and Georges St. Pierre at 170 pounds.

It took the prospect of avenging his defeat to Pulver to entice Penn, 12-4-1, back down to his seemingly natural weight-class at 155, and his victorious performance over "Lil' Evil" last June sent the MMA community into a frenzy.

"B.J. can do things that very few guys have ever been able to do in there," believes UFC President Dana White.

But Joe "Daddy" Stevenson isn't intimidated by reputations.

"I'm not going to get mad at someone's opinion," says the 25-year-old. A rigorous nine week training camp in Big Bear, California has been typical of the diligence Stevenson has applied to his career.

Before he was 17, Stevenson fought the likes of Pulver and Chris Brennan, but he would have to wait another six years before getting a shot at a UFC contract. Stevenson, 33-7, made the most of his opportunity and won The Ultimate Fighter 2 welterweight competition to force his career into the big time.

Despite losing a decision to Josh Neer, Stevenson's imposing strength and superior cardio

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have seen him claim victories over the likes of Yves Edwards and Kurt Pellegrino, but Penn will represent an entirely different challenge at the Metro Arena in Newcastle.

“I’m going to have to be 110%,” admits Stevenson. “I’m going to have to be willing to go to war.”

Also on the UFC 80 card, heavyweight Gabriel Gonzaga, 9-2, will be looking to rebound from his game losing effort against current champion Randy Couture when he rematches with Fabricio Werdum.

Werdum, 9-3-1, won the first meeting in 2003, but the outcome of Saturday’s fight seems uncertain. Werdum has come up short at the highest level, losing decisions to Antonio Rodrigo Nogueira and Andrei Arlovski, while Gonzaga absorbed a lot of punishment in his battle with Couture. Yet Gonzaga’s spectacular upset of the revered Mirko “Cro Cop” Filipovic makes him the slight favorite.

Former professional boxer Marcus Davis, 18-4, will record his eleventh consecutive victory if he can get past the tricky Jess Liaudin, 12-8. Both fighters like to take an aggressive approach, raising the likelihood of a stormy welterweight contest.

The Ultimate Fighter 3 middleweight winner Kendall Grove, 10-4, lost much of his luster after getting knocked out by Patrick Cote last August, but a win over the hard-hitting Jorge Rivera, 14-6, would boost his damaged reputation.

Wilson Gouveia, 9-4, and Jason Lambert 23-6, meet in an intriguing battle of light heavyweight contenders. Gouveia performed impressively in defeat versus Keith Jardine in 2006 and has won three bouts since then. In contrast, Lambert’s victory over Renato Sobral has been his only outing since losing to Rashad Evans 16 months ago.

Undercard action:

Antoni Hardonk (5-4) vs. Colin Robinson (9-3)

Paul Kelly (7-0) vs. Paul Taylor (8-2-1)

James Lee (25-2) vs. Alessio Sakara (15-6-1)

Per Eklund (14-2-1) vs. Sam Stout (13-3-1)