

BJ Penn, World's Best Mixed Martial Artist

Written by Ronan Keenan
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“To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace” – George Washington

Over half an hour after the fight B.J. Penn could not hide his excitement.

“Oh man,” was all the new UFC lightweight champion could say as he raced down a flight of stairs in Newcastle’s Metro Radio Arena wearing his shorts and nothing else.

Countless admirers patted his glistening back, but Penn has grown well accustomed to high praise.

Since his early fighting days the Hawaiian has been dubbed “The Prodigy”, and his achievements initially backed up that moniker. At just 21 years of age he became the first non-Brazilian to win a gold medal in the Black Belt division of the Mundial World Jiu-Jitsu Championships. Four years later he would submit the legendary Matt Hughes to claim the welterweight crown.

But Penn could not win the title that best suited his natural fighting weight of 155 pounds. Fluctuations in weight and a self-confessed negligent attitude towards training resulted in a points defeat to Jens Pulver and an unsatisfactory draw with the lightly regarded Caol Uno.

Penn’s subsequent revulsion with the lightweight division even saw him compete at heavyweight rather than fight at a weight class that harboured so many bad memories.

But it took the promise of a rematch with Pulver to finally convince Penn to drop down to 155 pounds. Only an opportunity for redemption would motivate the Hilo resident.

And when the anguish of the original Pulver loss was emphatically erased last September Penn turned his attention to winning the seemingly unattainable title.

The chance to fight for the lightweight championship came about sooner than expected when Sean Sherk was stripped of the belt after failing a post fight drugs test last summer.

So the 29-year-old Penn would have to take his frustrations out on Joe Stevenson in order to claim the vacant crown.

“I came into mixed martial arts to win the lightweight championship,” declared Penn before two days before the fight. “It will be ‘third time’s a charm’.”

As he made his way to the octagon last Saturday, Penn carried the aura of the Prodigal Son as he returned to the situation that bestowed him so many bitter memories. Yet he appeared at ease with the impending task.

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His eyes were fixed on the caged enclosure ahead of him, but his toned neck and shoulder muscles seemed loose; prepared to go to war. The sold out crowd greeted his arrival with a noisy deference.

They also approved of his subsequent MMA master-class. Penn, who can comfortably extend his leg behind his head without the aid of his hands, utilized his freakish flexibility to dominate a visibly exasperated Stevenson on the ground. He employed slashing elbow strikes to open a deep gash on the Californian's forehead. In the second round he demonstrated his proficient boxing skills by brutally counter-striking his physically stronger opponent, before finishing off the prey with a rear-naked choke.

After the fight was halted, daring murmurs propagated around press row that the best fighter in mixed martial arts was being extolled in the above octagon.

Soon those whispers turned into declarations.

"Without a doubt B.J. Penn is the greatest fighter pound-for-pound in the world," said welterweight contender Marcus Davis after witnessing Penn's performance. "He's got all the tools."

"I agree with that," concurred lightweight fighter Sam Stout. "It looked like B.J. was seeing everything in slow motion tonight. He put on a phenomenal performance."

"B.J. is freakish," added UFC President Dana White. "Even great wrestlers can't take him down."

Not only did Penn seize the lightweight championship, he also became the second fighter in history, after Randy Couture, to win titles in two weight classes. His 13-4-1 record may not look legendary, but aesthetics don't play a part in the world of MMA.

"This isn't like boxing," said White. "The two sports are completely different. In boxing a fighter can go to 48-0 before he fights a real opponent."

"B.J. losing a few fights doesn't mean anything [to his legacy]," said Matt Hughes after he defeated Penn in 2006.

Yet Penn has looked great in the past only to appear apathetic about the sport in ensuing fights. Some observers believe his middle-class background has dulled a killer instinct. Nonetheless, Penn must now maintain complete focus on his career to be assured ubiquitous greatness.

"B.J. hasn't had focus," said White. "This sport is going through so many changes that it's easy to think you're a rock star. Fighters have to keep their eye on the prize and remain humble."

Penn seems willing to acquiesce with White's philosophy.

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“It’s time to be in shape or get your butt kicked,” said the new champion. “I was just a young punk when I didn’t train in the past. Now every top fighter is well rounded, it wasn’t like that before. There are so many good lightweight fighters like Kenny Florian, Roger Huerta, Frankie Edgar, Sam Stout.”

Penn will certainly be a marked man in the talented 155 pound division, but his first challenge will come from former champion Sherk in Las Vegas next May.

Given that Sherk didn’t lose the title in combat gives the impending lightweight showdown a prickly edge. Moreover, his remarkable strength and exceptional recent form will test Penn’s dedication to training.

“Sean Sherk is very motivated for the [Penn] fight,” said White. “He’s upset about the way he lost the title. I think Sherk has the ability to take B.J. down to the ground. It’s going to be all about conditioning.”

Penn will have to continue to remain a diligent trainer if he wants to distance himself from the fighter who used to “pride myself on how little training I could do and get away with it”.

But he has been making the effort.

“For this fight [against Stevenson] I did all my sparring at 11am to prepare for the time difference [between the US and UK],” said Penn.

If the Hawaiian warrior maintains this newfound attitude, the bustling lightweight division will soon take on a sense of serenity.

***image courtesy of BJPenn.com...thanks