

## UFC 81: "Breaking Point: Lesnar, Mir, Sylvia

Written by David A. Avila

Thursday, 31 January 2008 19:00

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LAS VEGAS-Former pro wrestler Brock Lesnar makes his debut in Ultimate Fighting Championship against no less than former UFC heavyweight champion Frank Mir on Saturday.

"Everybody is wondering if Brock Lesnar can fight," said Dana White, president of UFC.

When Lesnar (1-0) steps into the Octagon against the formidable Mir (10-3) at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino for UFC 81: "Breaking Point," he unwillingly brings with him the hopes and dreams of thousands of other pro wrestlers who toiled and broke themselves training every day, wondering if they could beat a world champion.

"A lot of pro wrestlers will be watching," says Dan Madigan, author of *Mondo Lucha A-Go-Go*, a book about Mexican pro wrestling. "Brock is going to surprise a lot of people with his athleticism."

Along with Lesnar and Mir, former heavyweight champions Tim Sylvia and Antonio Nogueira showed up at the press conference inside the Las Vegas casino. Both former champions will vie for the interim UFC heavyweight title. Randy Couture has the actual heavyweight title and is engaged in a lawsuit with UFC.

The fights will be shown on pay-per-view television.

For decades pro wrestlers have fought with a veneer hanging over them that their sport is fake. But few outside of the inner circles realize the training and injuries these athletes sustain.

"That was one of my fears," said Lesnar a few months ago. "I felt that I would never be able to compete in other sports because of injuries."

In one wrestling episode, Lesnar was asked to perform a stunt called a "shooting star press" and flung himself from the top strand of the ring and missed his mark.

"He almost broke his neck," said Madigan, who has scripted many pro wrestling events and also has written a screenplay about pro wrestling. "It was only because of his incredible athletic ability that he wasn't more seriously injured."

Ironically, Lesnar's opponent Mir is attempting to prove that a motorcycle accident that forced him to relinquish the title back in 2004, is no longer a factor in his fighting abilities.

White says that it wasn't long ago that Mir was tabbed the next great thing and now can prove he's back against the question mark of Lesnar.

Mir isn't belittling Lesnar's abilities.

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"Anyone who won an NCAA title has a lot of drive and devotion," said Mir, 28, who will risk his standing as a top heavyweight contender. "I know he's stronger than I am."

Lesnar, a native of South Dakota, is a four-time All American amateur wrestling champion and dominated in that arena before accepting a pro wrestling bid. After nearing his eligibility limits to wrestle in college, he was approached by pro wrestling honcho Vince McMahon and enticed with cash.

"I took the \$200,000," said Lesnar (1-0). "I didn't have a dime to my name."

But competition is what drives the former pro wrestler, and now at 30 years old, Lesnar knows he doesn't have time to slowly submerge into MMA. He has to jump in against the best.

"I'm expecting him to bring his A game," Lesnar said of his opponent.

Mir has his game plan and says it's not the first time he's an underdog with Las Vegas bookmakers tabbing Lesnar an almost 2-1 favorite.

"When I fought Tank Abbott they said he was going to tear my head off," said Mir of a bout that took place in 2003. "I won that fight in 46 seconds."

Almost forgotten is the match up between big Tim Sylvia who is attempting to win the UFC heavyweight title a record third time and Nogueira, the former Pride FC heavyweight champion.

It's a dream match for Sylvia.

"I've watched him for a long time," said Sylvia, who dreamed of one day fighting Nogueira who fought primarily in Japan. "He's a stud."

Last year UFC bought Japan-based Pride FC that owned Nogueira's contract and then signed the Brazilian superstar. If Nogueira wins he could become the first heavyweight to win the Pride and UFC heavyweight championships.

"It feels good to be in this situation," Nogueira says.

Standing on the podium White looked over at Lesnar, wondering if he can be the next UFC superstar. Or maybe the start a new trend of pro wrestlers finding a home in MMA.

"A lot of WWE guys are coming to this fight," said White as he eyed Lesnar. "A lot of guys respect this guy."

### Other bouts

Jeremy Horn (88-16-5) meets Nate Marquardt (28-7-1) in a middleweight bout. Marvin Eastman (14-7-1) faces Terry Martin (18-3) in another middleweight bout. Lightweights Tyson Griffin (10-1) and Gleison Tibau (27-3) square off in a three-round fight. Chris Lytle (34-15-4) and Kyle

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Bradley (13-4-1) clash in a lightweight contest.