

Someone Said He Was Training At 5

Written by Kaelan Smith
Sunday, 15 March 2009 19:00

The forthcoming book “Brute” follows two Sacramento boxers: Mike Simms, a cruiserweight who trained with the Olympic team in 2000, who when I found him had lost five successive fights; and Stan Martyniuk, a young, Estonian-born featherweight, who when I found him had just fought and won his professional debut by decision, despite breaking his right hand in the first round.

Over the next few months I look forward to sharing the stories of these two fighters with the readers of the Sweet Science, and I look forward to hearing from any and all of you. –KS

The Monday after my lunch with Mark Wilkie, I called Ultimate Fitness in midtown Sacramento. Stan Martyniuk trained there and I supposed I could find him in the gym. I supposed also that four days before the fight he was already polished to his brightest shine, and his trainers had him covered in the garage. The man who answered the phone said Stan would be in after five, and on the off chance he had a final sparring workout planned, I went in.

Ultimate Fitness stands on the corner of I Street and 17th. The building is a steel and glass rectangle of recent vintage, purchased, I assume, from a steel and glass rectangular building manufacturer. It has the aesthetic appeal of a temporary church, and smelled, when I walked through the glass doors, as if it had been rubbed down with a filthy towel. In the center of the space was the empty boxing ring. To my right a kickboxing class was underway. The student body was largely female, and I stood watching them for a moment. One girl in green pants was on her back, straddling an upright heavy bag with her knees, and sitting up to strike at it, alternately, with her elbows. To my left was the counter and the man behind it asked if he could help me with anything.

“I’m here to see Stan Martyniuk,” I said. “Someone said he was training at five.”

The man looked at me with a mixture of confusion and ambivalence, as if I’d asked him where I could buy flowers. Then he told me that I could wait around if I wanted. I said that I would do just that, and wandered farther into the gym. In the back room—which is less a room than a high school auditorium—someone was teaching a Jiu-Jitsu course. There was a circle of men, all shirtless, doing synchronized push-ups to the metronomic slap of a green foam noodle, the type of which one purchases at the grocery store to enable floating, drunkenly, in a lake. On the wall to my left was a series of posters commemorating the events overseen by the Northern California mixed martial arts organization, King of the Cage. On the one nearest me was Urijah Faber, a Sacramento-based fighter who had won the WEC Featherweight title in 2006 by punching a supine Joe Pearson in the face until he tapped out. As is the tendency of MMA organizations following in the footsteps of the UFC, King of the Cage had named all of its events something ominous. On the one bearing Urijah Faber was the title, “Mortal Sins,” which reminded me less of a clash of kings on the battlefield, and more of one king sleeping with the other’s wife in a tent.

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I went back to the front of the gym and stared through the glass façade into the parking lot. I suppose I was searching for Stan's car, although I had no idea what he drove. As I stood looking out, a man walked in with a teenaged girl and leaned on the counter. "She'd like to sign up for a class," he said. The young man behind the counter got off his stool and asked if he, the older man, were the girl's father, because only a parent or legal guardian could vouch for a minor (or, words to that effect). "Her parents are in Los Angeles," said the man, now resting on the points of his elbows. I wondered, then, who on earth he was, and why he couldn't wait for the girl's parents to return before she joined the class. But before I got an opportunity to ask—I was, after all, there as a journalist, and might have used that authority to dis-confuse myself—a kid, perhaps fifteen or sixteen, climbed through the ropes and into the boxing ring. A Japanese man wearing only warm-up pants joined him. There was a string of offices along the western wall of the gym, and from out of them, like the wolves that sense the charging ions in the air before lightning strikes, came a pack of fighters baying and pawing at each other. They gathered near the counter, all half-naked, all holding water bottles, and watched as the kid danced and jabbed.

"If my kid was that young," one near me said, "I'd get him into MMA."

The man to whom this comment was addressed nodded in agreement and drank from his bottle.

The kickboxing class had ended in the eastern wing, and a woman, still wet from the exertion, came up to the counter, rose on her toes, and put her cheek forward. The man behind it, who a few minutes earlier had permitted the non-guardian to sign for his non-guarded, recoiled.

"Give me a kiss," the woman said.

"No," the man said. "You're sweaty."

At this she deflated, and standing flat-footed again, said that she was on her way. She went out and I turned back to the ring, where the Japanese man was ducking and feinting to avoid the punches thrown by the young boxer. At one point he found himself in the corner, unable to move because of the ropes, and took a few solid punches from the protégé. This aroused the pack, which was beginning to vibrate with excitement. Referring to the boy in the ring, one of the fighters said to the man beside me, who was watching the sparring intently, "You want to give that guy a (deeply personal kiss)." The statement was not negated.

When the sparring was over, and with Stan still truant, I went over to the drinking fountain and drank. When I turned around, on the ledge of the ring I saw a man mounting a woman from behind. He was, as was the uniform, shirtless, and had his right leg slung over hers so that his calf rested in the notch of her hip. From that position he slipped his right arm under her throat, in preparation for a rear naked choke. She was laughing, I realized, and though I supposed the man was demonstrating the preparation for the submission, I also assumed he was getting more out of the lesson than his student. When they uncoupled, he stood breathing deeply with his hands on his hips. The woman wiped off her brow. They seemed familiar with each other. The man asked her something, but I heard only her response. "I'm going with Renee and your

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wife,” she said. As she spoke, a man who had been participating in the Jiu-Jitsu class passed by, put his hand on her lower back, and with his nose almost touching her skin, sniffed from where his hand lay, up her spine, to the crown of her head. She did not acknowledge him, as if she’d dealt with such advances before and now they bored her.

I checked my phone, and found that it was past five-thirty. I looked around to ensure that I hadn’t missed Stan coming in. Satisfying myself that I hadn’t, I went out into the parking lot and called Mehrad. I explained that I’d come to the gym to see Stan, but that the man himself had not appeared. “He was there this morning,” Mehrad said.

“Someone told me he was sparring at five.”

“I’ll call him and call you back,” said Mehrad.

When Mehrad called back half an hour later he informed me that Stan was now expecting me the following evening—Tuesday, as it happened—if I should be able to make it.