

## Fight Day Arrives in Toronto: Ghost of Past Opponents, Current Opportunities and Future Hopes Lingers

Written by Brian J. D'Souza SPECIAL TO TSS  
Saturday, 30 April 2011 12:10

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*Jon Fitch and Josh Koscheck sign autographs at National Sports in Pickering.*

A fortuitous series of events has led to the most anticipated live MMA show in recent memory becoming a reality as UFC 129 comes to Toronto's Rogers Center tonight. Those in attendance will be watching the spectacle from monitors rather than squinting at a miniature cage—but all week, upcoming and veteran fighters were hanging around the city, available up-close and personal to talk about what MMA means to them.

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“Jake Shields can definitely submit St-Pierre from a couple of positions on the ground,” explained former Shields training partner and welterweight title challenger Josh Koscheck to a fan at a signing event. “If he gets top position, it’s over.”

Shields used to make the effort to train at San Jose’s American Kickboxing Academy where guys like Koscheck and Jon Fitch were there for him to measure himself against.

Fitch himself fought Georges St-Pierre back in 2008 to a tough decision loss. He made the critical error of throwing a leg kick without properly setting it up, and paid for it with a straight right hand that sent him to the deck early in the first round. After the fight, he traveled as far as Thailand to improve his stand-up, and now with 5 wins and one disputed draw (to former two-division champion B.J. Penn in his last fight) he eagerly awaits the rehabilitation of a shoulder injury so he can win a UFC title.

“Jake is a good guy,” Fitch says, supportive of the Cesar Gracie protégé, while speaking highly of his character outside the ring.

At Wednesday’s re-launch party for Canadian television channel ‘Fight Network,’ the lavish event boasted appearances by former UFC lightweight champion Sean Sherk, TUF finalist Brandon Schaub, and lightweight contender Spencer Fisher.

(Read more about the re-launch party <http://www.dailyxy.com/lead-stories/punch-drunk-greed-ufc-and-the-new-fight-network/>)

“About a year after I fought Matt Hughes, I had to walk away from the sport,” says Sherk of the pre-TUF dark ages of MMA when opportunities weren’t as abundant. “I had so many fights cancelled on me. I was getting all these fights cancelled on me, one after the other, and I couldn’t make a living doing this anymore, so I had to walk away and start doing hardwood floors.”

Sherk boasts an impressive resume where he’s only dropped fights to four UFC champions—Matt Hughes, Georges St-Pierre, Frankie Edgar and B.J. Penn. Yet with the acquisition of Strikeforce, a surplus of lightweights means that every UFC lightweight will be even more conscious of how much each win counts.

Schaub talked about his recent win over K-1 and PRIDE legend Mirko ‘Cro Cop’ Filipovic, whom he knocked out in the third round of UFC 128.

“He broke my nose. He had a lot for me,” says Schaub, who was still comfortable in the knowledge that he was ahead on the cards, even if the fight went to the judges.

Also worthy of discussion—what happens to the women’s division of Strikeforce with the Zuffa buy-out? The folks who run the UFC have always been openly dismissive of bringing women into the UFC.

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“I want to fight Strikeforce 145 lb champion Cris Cyborg,” says Andrea Watson, a Cambridge-based Muay Thai fighter (17-4 pro-am) who is modifying her training to become an MMA fighter. “We need to see more women out there who are as good as the men—putting on great fights.”

With Cyborg now seeking fights outside of Strikeforce, perhaps the nineteen-year old Watson will get her wish, but it might not occur on the large stage of a big show. MMA pinup Gina Carano can still woo top MMA promotions with her drawing power; perhaps Carano can single-handedly save the women's division from obscurity when decision makers see the ratings she garners for her next fight.

Fighter woes aside, the show must go on.

Tonight, of course, it'll be a well-publicized scrap between GSP and Jake Shields that headlines a good card at UFC 129. The energy inside the Rogers Center will be electric for the Jose Aldo-Mark Hominick bout—one that is expected to be an all-out war. And Randy Couture will get the longest ovation if he decides to leave his shoes on the center of the mat, and accepts retirement at the age of 47.

It'll be the same dream of recognition and acceptance that powers the new generation of MMA fighters forward. Let's hope the sport evolves to serve them better than the school of hard knocks that all the current stars were forced to endure to fight at the highest level.

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