

Conor McGregor Basking In UFC Hype

Written by Ronan Keenan
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BOSTON -- Most pro fighters don't enter a South Boston boxing gym wearing shades, a buttoned up shirt and tight maroon trousers. But Conor McGregor does, and it's not the only thing he does his own way. Just a few months ago he was back home in Ireland lining up to collect unemployment benefits, listening to pleas from his parents to do something productive

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with his life instead of wasting time doing mixed martial arts.

He tried the traditional route through life, taking on an apprenticeship as a plumber, but it didn't last long. "I hated it," says McGregor. "Getting bossed around. I just decided (expletive) this, I'll have a go at MMA."

Early this year he applied for a part time job at an Irish bookmaking firm to help finance his training. He didn't get a response at the time, but after making his UFC debut in April he finally heard back from the company; they now wanted to sponsor him.

His near-perfect striking performance in a 67 second demolition of Marcus Brimage led UFC president Dana White to say that McGregor had one of the most scintillating debuts since he took over the organization in 2002. On Saturday, McGregor will make his second UFC appearance, facing Max Holloway in a featherweight (145 pounds) bout on a Boston card to be screened live on the launch-day of Fox Sports 1. The event is one of the most significant for the UFC as it will be available to 93 million homes across the US.

White has taken such a liking to McGregor's aggressive fighting style and single-minded personality that last month he invited the Irishman to Las Vegas to meet local media and afterwards took him out on the town in a Ferrari. In many ways McGregor is a promoter's dream; he is a terrific striker, he says what he thinks and has the potential to engender support from a passionate Irish-American fanbase. With many of the UFC's top stars reaching the twilight of their careers, new personalities such as McGregor are needed.

Despite not being in the main event on Saturday, McGregor has generated as much publicity as headliners Chael Sonnen and Mauricio Rua. He had probably the funniest line at Thursday's pre-fight press conference when responding to a reporter who questioned his idiosyncratic clothing style.

"There are two things I really like to do: whoop ass and look good," remarked McGregor, sporting a bow-tie. "I'm doing one of them now and will do the other on Saturday."

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But there is more to McGregor than funny quips. He prides himself on having a philosophical view to fighting, and believes a strong mentality is the driver of success.

"I know how positive thinking matters," said McGregor in April. "People in Ireland, all over the world, have that negative mindset. They focus on what if something bad happens. That's not the way to live. Think what happens when it goes right. Why worry, it'll only bring more worry. When you focus on the positive, negative shrinks away. What you think about, it'll happen. You are never wrong and that's just what I believe in."

There has been plenty of positivity bestowed on McGregor by the UFC this week. On Tuesday he was given his own media day at a Boston gym and Thursday's press conference was opened by the unveiling of the winning entry in a fan competition to design a Conor McGregor poster. Such hype for a fighter having only his second UFC fight is rare and McGregor certainly plays up to it. Even though his bout is on the preliminary part of the card, he was quoted as saying "I'm the real main event".

There is a fine line between confident and cocky, but McGregor's coach John Kavanagh will endeavor to keep his fighter in check. Kavanagh exudes composure and isn't one for excuses.

"It'll be your training that decides if you're going to win," said Kavanagh earlier this year. "You can get caught up in what your opponent can do. People make strategies for particular opponents but I tend to focus on what we can do. Maybe your opponent will have a new style [on the night]. So don't get too caught up in who you're fighting, instead focus on yourself." Kavanagh is fast becoming one of the sport's foremost young teachers and in addition to McGregor, his stable includes UFC welterweight Gunnar Nelson and also Cathal Pendred, who is regarded among the premier non-UFC 170-pounders.

But a former Kavanagh pupil provides a cautionary example of the unforgiving nature of MMA. In 2009 Tom Egan became the first Irishman to fight in the UFC. A lot was expected from Egan, but he lost his UFC debut and was cut from the organization. Egan will be part of McGregor's corner on Saturday and will be a reminder that one false step can quickly change a career.

McGregor has the talent and personality to become a UFC star. Big paydays and glamorous events may await, but as Dana White warned: "This is McGregor's second fight in UFC, he still

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has work to do."

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