

Jon Jones vs Rashad Evans: Black-on-Black conflict

Written by Brian J. D'Souza SPECIAL TO TSS
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Jon Jones being interviewed by Dave Mair at MMA Live.

What started with the opportunity of a lifetime—the promise of a long-awaited and much-deserved title shot has turned into a bush league feud between former UFC light heavyweight champion Rashad Evans and current UFC light heavyweight champion Jon Jones.

The deeper issue that lit the fuse started with the idea that Jon Jones had betrayed Rashad Evans by agreeing to face his former teammate after Jones won the title from Mauricio ‘Shogun’ Rua at UFC 128 in New Jersey.

Put on the spot at UFC 128 by commentator Joe Rogan during the post-fight interview, Jones had this to say about facing Evans: “You know, we are teammates and it sucks that I have to do this, but this is my dream and everything I believe in. And I know that God wouldn’t bring me this far to leave me, so I’ve got to do exactly what I’ve got to do.”

Perhaps Jones was coerced into this position by unseen currents—the UFC brass has been adamant about encouraging teammates to face-off for years. Some correlate MMA drama to ratings and viewer interest; others view the sowing of conflict between friends as a clever way to divide and conquer MMA fighters contractually.

The end result has been Rashad Evans leaving longtime trainer Greg Jackson. For his part, Jackson bowed out of cornering either fighter—but Evans felt that as the senior member of Team Jackson, he was entitled to his coach’s support.

Last week, Jon Jones explained to me that Greg Jackson didn’t take a cent from his professional fighters for coaching services rendered.

“He just says, ‘Pay me what you feel you have to pay me,’” said Jones while making a promotional appearance at ‘MMA Live’ in London, Ontario.

Jackson’s altruism might make sense for the myriad of MMA fighters who live from fight purse to fight purse with zero passive income or a day job to support them, but his desire to please everyone is directly responsible for the current predicament between Evans and Jones.

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“You can't say you are not going to have anything to do with it when you are a big part of the reason why the situation originated,” Evans said in an interview with BloodyElbow.com of Greg Jackson's refusal to take sides.

As for Jon Jones, the weight of holding the 205 lb strap meant he needed the absolute best people to lean on. Distractions in training, combined with incidental injuries and the cloud of self-doubt can be fatal to any fighter—no matter what physical gifts they possess.

“Who knows what would have happened if I had decided to go somewhere else,” said Jones, “Jackson's seemed like the place for me.”

Citing a hand injury, Jon Jones pulled out of his tentative bout at UFC 133 with number one contender Rashad Evans. Rising American Kickboxing Academy star Phil Davis stepped in for Jones, creating yet another sticky situation, as Evans would be risking his title shot against a dangerous undefeated opponent in Davis.

The drama continued to build, thanks to a nightclub altercation, as well as a series of back-and-forth text messages between Evans and Jones. The upshot of all these events is yet to be revealed, as Jones' most likely next opponent will be either Lyoto Machida or Quinton ‘Rampage’ Jackson, pending this weekend's bout between Jackson and Matt Hamill at UFC 130.

What most people agree on with the benefit of hindsight is that it was a mistake for this conflict to spill out into the public sphere. The arguments made both parties look bad, and the dispute could have been handled differently from the start. With multiple trainers and camps affiliated with Greg Jackson's team—some sort of mutually beneficial arrangement could have been agreed upon in private, just as Matt Serra insisted his coach Renzo Gracie have nothing to do with training Georges St-Pierre before the GSP-Serra rematch in 2008.

It's going to be difficult going forward for Rashad Evans, who sat out for over a year since beating Quinton Jackson in May of 2010 in order to guarantee his place in line to face an injured Mauricio ‘Shogun’ Rua. Ironically, when Evans injured his knee in practice, Jon Jones then stepped in and snapped up the belt.

As for Jones, the accolades bestowed upon him for smashing Shogun Rua so convincingly have turned into criticism for allegedly ducking Evans. In the end, people may not remember who started the feud, but they will remember who comes out on top if Jon Jones and Rashad Evans meet in the near future.

Watch this video of D'Souza interviewing Jones. <http://bit.ly/ju7mc8>

Brian J. D'Souza is a Canadian writer who has covered Mixed Martial Arts for ESPN.com, FoxSports.com and FIGHT! magazine.