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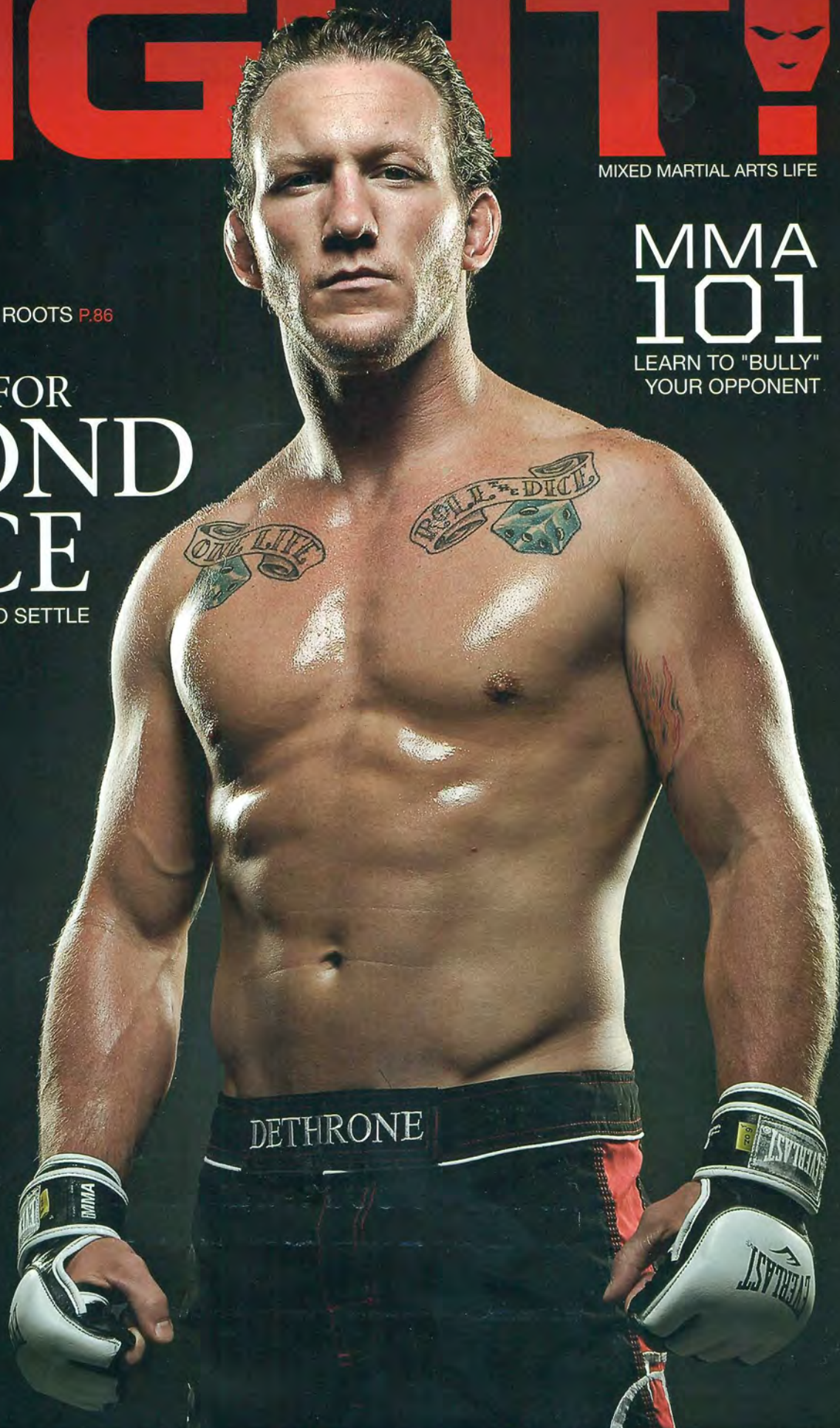


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MAY THE BEST JAB WIN

One punch is changing the way mixed martial artists fight.

BY ANTHONY SPRINGER JR. // PHOTOS BY PAUL THATCHER

Boxing hasn't always received the warmest reception in mixed martial arts. Maybe the immortal image of Art Jimmerson is seared into the minds of fighters and MMA aficionados. The one-gloved wonder from the inaugural UFC became a quick victim of tournament winner Royce Gracie and a footnote in what became the stranglehold that Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu held on the sport in its early years.

Maybe the inevitable war of words that has taken place between boxing purists and representatives of a young and growing MMA has yet to be muffled. Floyd Mayweather Jr. went on record with his disdain for all things caged-combat, and Internet message boards lit up with fan debates over which sport—boxing or MMA—was better. James Toney's representation of the Sweet Science at UFC 118 didn't go over all too well either, as he was quickly taken down and subbed by Randy Couture.

The evolution of caged MMA started with the rise of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. After Royce Gracie made his historic tear through the Octagon, everybody and their mother had to learn how to fight off their

backs. A surge of accomplished amateur wrestlers moved the sport toward takedowns and ground-and-pound fighting. If performances from the likes of Georges St-Pierre and Junior dos Santos are any indication, the next phase of MMA could be dominated by strikers, and one punch will undoubtedly pave the way for the next generation of champions—the jab.

At UFC 84, BJ Penn put on a boxing clinic against an overmatched Sean Sherk. Over the course of 15 minutes, "The Muscle Shark" contended with the swift hands of the former two division champion and blocked numerous punches with his face. While many credited the eventual stoppage to the fast hands of Penn, the jab anchored the victor's attack. Few took notice.

When current UFC Welterweight Champion Georges St-Pierre dissected Josh Koscheck at UFC 124, the world took notice. St-Pierre made no secret of his training regimen with world-renowned boxing coach Freddie Roach in the run up to the fight, and many speculated whether or not the tutelage of Roach would help the champ avoid Koscheck's one-hitter quitter in the form of an overhand right. Prior to the bout, GSP was no slouch with his hands, but working with Roach took the Canadian's game to another level.

"Georges thought he knew boxing, and then he realized he didn't know much," Roach famously said of St-Pierre. The answer to Koscheck's power right hand was a simple but effective jab. After 25 minutes of action, St-Pierre cruised to the win with the straight shot, turning Kos' face into something that resembled a bucket of crushed crabs.

Before fighters rushed out to learn the value of throwing a proper punch, looping haymakers were the order of the day. However, as

BJ Penn's left hand serves notice to Sean Sherk at UFC 84.



Xtreme Couture boxing coach Gil Martinez explains, a well-placed and properly thrown jab can be just as effective as the blows that dominated earlier eras of the sport.

"A jab can be almost as powerful as an overhand right if used correctly," Martinez says. "It's a very underused punch in MMA." Martinez points to the UFC 131 bout between Junior dos Santos and Shane Carwin as evidence. "A good jab with some snap behind it can create a lot of damage. Carwin's face looked pretty banged up, and Junior did a lot of that with jabs."

With the aid of four-ounce gloves, the jab may prove just as important as a solid Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu or wrestling pedigree. Conventional MMA wisdom dictates that wrestling is the sport's best base because a fighter can dictate where the fight goes. As Sherk, Koscheck, and Carwin found out the hard way, wrestling is a non-issue if a fighter can't secure a takedown. Since all fights start standing, the jab remains the perfect weapon for truly dictating where a fight goes, and it works against opponents of all styles.

"The jab can be used against pretty much anybody as long as you learn to keep the correct distance," Martinez says. "You can use it against a guy who moves a lot to keep him at the space you want. You can use it against a guy who comes forward to keep him at bay."

Martinez pupil Jay Hieron knows all about the virtue of the jab as a defensive weapon. In the finals of Bellator's Season 4 Welterweight Tournament, "The Thoroughbred" employed a largely defensive strategy en route to a unanimous decision win over Rick Hawn.

Hieron, who called his jab his most important punch, anchored his strategy with the straight shot. "Hawn was off-balance, and I was able to set up my shots," says Hieron, who fought that night with a broken nose.

The snap behind a good jab does more than keep an opponent from imposing his will on a defensive-minded fighter. A well-placed jab also serves as the building block of the evolving fighter's style. Unlike a looping right hand or uppercut, fighters can double-up and throw the jab in twos and threes. It also sets up other attacks in the arsenal.

"A jab is a wonderful tool because, not only is it a punch that can score and land, but also, it keeps you at a perfect distance from getting countered or taken down," says Martinez. "It's the perfect punch to set up everything. You can set up takedowns, kicks, or even the right hand."

In the wake of broken orbital bones and blood-soaked faces, all indications point to the jab as the next big thing in MMA. Fighters with solid or growing boxing pedigrees will be ahead of the curve. There are only two options at this point: love the jab or learn an effective counter. Those resistant to change will continue to find themselves on the wrong side of victory or on the end of a straight punch. In that respect, MMA and scientific evolution have a lot in common. Fighters who adapt will flourish. Fighters who don't will go the way of the one-dimensional fighter—extinct.

"The sport's gone through phases," Martinez says. "At one point, BJJ was very important. Then wrestling came in and started taking over. As these guys get more well-rounded, they're learning to stay out of submissions and they are learning takedown defense. Now that the sport is evolving and people are seeing guys that are sharp with their hands, it's going to be a huge push to use the jab more." ❏



Josh Koscheck had no answer to Georges St-Pierre's jab at UFC 124.