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LOCKED ON SUCCESS

PHIL DAVIS SAYS HE'S 'NOBODY,' BUT HE'S GOT RASHAD EVANS ON THE RADAR … AND THEN A TITLE SHOT?

By **Anthony Springer, Jr.**

Look at Phil Davis today.

He's 6 feet 2 and a solid 205 pounds. It's hard to believe that this UFC light-heavyweight fighter was once a target for bigger kids, but it's true.

The Penn State graduate and NCAA All-American grew up fighting. His antagonists weren't schoolyard bullies, looking to nab his money or intimidate him for no apparent reason. Instead, they were his big brothers.

"I had two brothers," says Davis. "They used to beat me up, and I would run around scared," he recounts with a laugh.

Each story of flying fists and grappling in the living room is told in a jovial manner, a testament to how minor the arguments that turned into full-on brawls were.

"You can only argue for about five minutes," Davis says of what led to the confrontations. "Anything beyond that is a fight. We could be watching TV, [and it's], 'Who sits in the front seat?' Whatever, you've gotta fight it out."

Today, as you might imagine, it's a different story. And lucky for them, there are no hard feelings.

"As far as I know, I'm a young dude working my way up. I haven't done anything yet. I haven't done anything spectacular. Right now, I'm nobody. — Phil Davis

Phil Davis

Phil Davis, who is known as "Mr. Wonderful," has many reasons to celebrate. A victory over former champ Rashad Evans could lead to a title shot.

Zuffa LLC via Getty Images

LURED BY THE GRACIES

Wrestling is often the anchor sport for many of today's top fighters, and Davis is no different.

The Pennsylvania native compiled a 112-17 record as a four-year team captain at Harrisburg High. The impressive feat earned him a scholarship and a slot on Penn State's wrestling team, where he went 116-17.

Despite his athleticism, Davis had no caged combat aspirations early on.

"It always seemed too real," the former pro wrestling fan said of the early days of MMA. "We used to watch pro wrestling."

The black box changed things, however.

"We watched UFC on the black box," he says. "The Gracies, Kimo. All that. None of that was fake. That killed pro wrestling for me."

Davis subsequently took a closer look at mixed martial arts in his last year at Penn State. He was treated to an up-close-and-personal look courtesy of fellow Pennsylvanian Josh Koscheck. After watching Kos excel, Davis was intrigued, but his interest in the sport really developed after taking a closer look at the man in the mirror.

"I remember watching Josh on TUF and saying, 'This cat is crazy,'" he says of his former coach. "It didn't seem like anything I wanted to do, but I loved to watch. Come my senior year, I said, 'You know what? I'm crazy too. People need to watch out.'"

After completing his studies at Penn State, Davis took up MMA. The young Davis got a crash course in the sport, studying Brazilian jiu-jitsu, boxing, wrestling and muay Thai. He also trained with rising stars and current UFC champions Dominick Cruz and Jon "Bones" Jones. And it all led to his first fight.

FIGHT NO. 1

Davis took his first professional fight in 2008, and the experience was anything but pleasant.

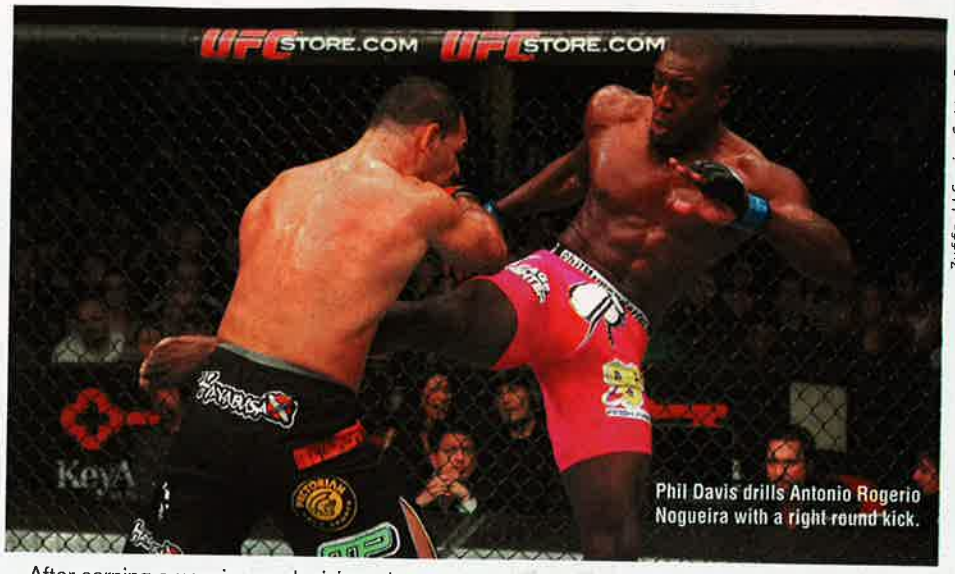
"In wrestling, if you're not on time, you are no longer in the tournament," says Davis.

His opponent showed up late and overweight, which netted Davis some extra cash. With the weigh-in calamity out of the way, one more minor hiccup almost derailed his state of mind going into the bout.

"When I came out, [the DJ] played 'Fly Like an Eagle,'" he recalls.

A visibly annoyed Davis had a less than stellar entrance, but he would not allow the mishap to get the better of him.

"Just cut the music. I'll walk out to nothing," he told the DJ.



Phil Davis drills Antonio Rogerio Nogueira with a right round kick.

Zuffa LLC via Getty Images

After earning a unanimous-decision win, Davis racked up another four professional victories before getting a life-changing call from the UFC. He was given two choices: appear on an upcoming season of "The Ultimate Fighter" or take a short-notice fight.

As history shows, Davis took the latter and was matched with former WEC light heavyweight champ Brian Stann at UFC 109. The unknown Davis throttled Stann en route to a unanimous decision victory.

"I was an outsider," says Davis. "[Stann] used to be the WEC champion. It's crazy when you go from local shows to fighting guys you've seen on television. I didn't have to Google him; I knew who he was."

And now, the world knew who Phil Davis is.

KEEPS ON ROLLING

As the wins continued, Davis' star rose.

If people didn't know him after wins over Stann, Alexander Gustaffson and Rodney Wallace, all eyes were on "Mr. Wonderful" after his UFC 117 bout with Tim Boetsch.

Davis locked "The Barbarian" into a spectacular modified kimura in the second frame to finish the fight. The hold dazzled the crowd as well as commentator Joe Rogan, who immediately dubbed the move "The Mr. Wonderful." Little did everyone know that the seemingly random—and flashy—finisher was the end result of hard work in the gym.

"That's something we'd been working on," explains Davis. "It's that old adage, 'If at first you don't succeed.' That's so true. Keep at it and stay focused."

The rising profile earned Davis his biggest test to date in battle-tested veteran Antonio Rogerio Nogueira. After three rounds, Davis emerged victorious via unanimous decision and the talk of an imminent title shot continued.

> ***[MMA] didn't seem like anything I wanted to do, but I loved to watch. Come my senior year, I said, 'You know what? I'm crazy too. People need to watch out.***
>
> ***— Phil Davis***

Davis dismissed the claims, saying he wanted to continue a slow and steady ascent to the top.

"As far as I know, I'm a young dude working my way up," the humble Davis says. "I haven't done anything yet. I haven't done anything spectacular. Once I have a belt, there might be some hype. Right now, I'm nobody."

EVANS ON THE HORIZON

Davis will need to be somebody when he steps into the ring for his second headlining bout, a potential No. 1 contender match this August with Rashad Evans, a former champion.

With the biggest fight of his career on the horizon, "Mr. Wonderful" could pull another trick out of his extensive bag.

"I've got a bunch of things that I do," he says, alluding to his flashy kimura finish. "My college teammates always told me, 'The moves you do, only you can do.' My team in San Diego tells me the same thing."

Which is why a lot of people are looking at Phil Davis today.

The Writer: *Anthony Springer, Jr. is an avid MMA fan and frequent contributor. He is a founding member and editor at TheWellVersed.com. He lives in the Fight Capital of the World, Las Vegas, Nevada.* MMA