

Raising the fight game

In a sport traditionally dominated by men, local conditioning coach Shara Vigeant has taken mixed martial artist Tim Hague from 'fluffy' to a lean, mean, grappling machine

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Strength and conditioning coach Shara Vigeant and Ultimate Fighting Championship fighter Tim Hague.

Photograph by: Rick MacWilliam, edmontonjournal.com

She is a self-described former "fat kid." He was a kindergarten teacher.

Yet through a long, winding and arduous path, Edmonton's Shara Vigeant and Sherwood Park's Tim Hague will make history Saturday night at the Fort Hood, Texas, army base.

Vigeant will be one of the -- if not "the" --first Canadian females to be in the corner with a mixed martial arts fighter in an Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) bout.

"It's a rarity," Vigeant readily and proudly admits. "I think I'm just the third girl to be in an MMA fighter's corner."

"Shara is as strong-willed as any of the men I have trained with. She is one of the best strength and conditioning coaches in North America," Hague said of Vigeant, who also works with four other MMA fighters, not including two more currently between fights.

Kyle Cardinal, Hague's jiu-jitsu and MMA coach will be plotting the strategy. But Vigeant will be there

to offer mental, emotional and physical support.

It's all part of the package, all part of the team.

"I consider myself a coach, not just a trainer," she said.

Then again, by the time Hague steps into the cage Vigeant's pre-fight work will be done, anyway.

"I make him strong, conditioned and powerful; I give him the gas to apply his skill, whether that is jiu-jitsu, boxing, wrestling, grappling or muay thai."

Growing up, none of those disciplines made Vigeant's vocabulary list.

"I was never involved in sports. I disliked it. I hated the idea of playing with others. I'm not a team player," said Vigeant, 34. "I'm too bossy."

"I didn't play soccer, baseball ... nothing. I was a chunky, fat kid who got teased a lot."

Hague, 27, was kind of like that, too.

"When I started with him in 2009, he was 293 pounds. He was fluffy," said Vigeant.

But when she was finished with him, Hague, who goes by the fighting name "The Thrashing Machine," he was down to a walking weight of 273 pounds and will likely weigh in at 255.

"If you put crap in your body, then you will fight like crap. The cleaner the fuel, the better the machine runs," Vigeant said. "When he started with me, he could barely do 30 seconds on the Versaclimber. Now he can do five five-minute rounds."

For a big man, Hague moves very quickly.

"Just being able to out-wrestle an opponent is a big part of mixed martial arts and usually, if you're a better wrestler, you can win the fight just on attrition," Hague said after one of his training sessions with Vigeant.

"Taking my conditioning to another level every fight is a huge mental advantage for me, knowing that I'm going into every fight in better shape than I was for the last one."

Vigeant doesn't care what it takes to whip a fighter into shape. One of the fighters she trained got so exasperated he yelled that she "could burn in hell."

"I make grown men cry," she said, and smiles as she says it.

Vigeant originally intended to be a lawyer and majored in sociology, which she said helps understand a fighter's emotions. She also minored in religion.

"MMA is so popular these days that everybody wants to do it. But if they aren't willing to train two to three times a day, then I don't want to have anything to do with them," said Vigeant, who can be as

nasty as a drill sergeant or a five-km walk in shoes three sizes too small.

"It's not about riding a bike while you read a book or just doing bicep curls. If you want results, you have to put in the work."

Vigeant says she is now at the point where she can be picky.

"Because I can be," Vigeant said of also working with Mitch Clarke, holder of The Fight Club lightweight belt and one of the top 10 MMA fighters in Canada, Zack Balker and Levi Krump.

She also worked with Travis Galbraith, who won two belts -- light heavyweight and middleweight in the King of the Cage -- and Nick Penner.

While Vigeant uses the word "intense" a lot to describe her training workouts, Penner took a simpler more direct approach.

"Brutal," he said.

But until the calendar turns to Sunday, this week is all about Hague, who will take on Matt Mitrione, a former NFL player with the Minnesota Vikings and New York Giants who is undefeated in three fights, two by knockout.

The summary on Mitrione's bio reads: "Strong, quick, kinda scary."

Vigeant isn't worried.

"Tim's chances are excellent," she said of her six-foot-four fighter, who holds a 12-4 record after having won his last two fights against veterans by first-round knockouts.

"He has a great chance of winning the fight. We know all the holes in Mitrione's game and we will attack those holes."

"I'm feeling quite confident. I've had a good camp," said Hague, who used to play hockey and, naturally, said he liked to fight.

"I was a rough player."

The fight is special for several reasons. Not only is it a UFC bout -- the top of MMA's ladder rungs -- it will also be live on Spike TV. Estimated viewership? Millions.

Not only is it the second annual UFC Fight for the Troops that raises money for U.S. soldiers injured in Afghanistan, this one will also raise money and provide support programs for injured Canadian soldiers -- many, of course, based in Edmonton -- through Wounded-Warriors.ca.

"It's a huge deal to fight for Wounded Warriors and to represent and raise awareness for them," said Hague, who is originally from Boyle, southeast of Athabasca.

"I would do anything for those guys because they would do anything for us. Soldiers are a huge part

as to why we have so much freedom in Canada. They're just fighting for us every day, and it takes a brave person to do that."

Two years ago, Hague taught a class of eight kids in the hamlet of Rochester, an hour's drive north of Edmonton.

"Very rewarding," said Hague, who got his elementary education degree at the University of Alberta.

After winning his 2009 UFC debut over Pat Barry with a guillotine choke just 1:42 into the first round two years ago, Hague immediately credited Vigeant.

"I believed in myself because the people who mattered believed in me. Like Shara," he said. "When I'm not training with Shara, I have gone into fights out of shape and have not performed the greatest. When I am training with Shara, I'm always in shape and perform like a professional."

Vigeant's plans to become a lawyer changed because, "I couldn't imagine living in a cubicle."

So she decided to live in a gym, where she found bodybuilding.

"I thought I was doing the right thing. But my body was breaking down. I realized there were more important things to worry about than cosmetics or a six-pack."

It was still her ticket to becoming a personal trainer, opening her own studio and training MMA fighters.

Certified by the North American National Strength and Conditioning Association, one of her first clients was Galbraith.

"I knew the principles that were needed in the sport. I saw how other trainers worked and I didn't agree with what they were doing. I felt they were training incorrectly," said Vigeant, who also took a course at the Institute of Human Performance in Boca Raton, Fla.

"When other people saw what great shape (Galbraith) was in, other fighters started coming to me.

"I started training other people. Then I moved to fighters. Then I opened up my own studio."

The first month, she said she might have cleared \$250.

"So I guess you could say I got thrown into MMA," said Vigeant. "Many of the best athletes don't make the best coaches. But I understand biomechanics and physiology. I get that. I still train. I still train extremely hard. I know what they are feeling. I get it. I've never experienced a fight, but I know what is needed for them in a cage."

Vigeant said victory for her comes when she sees the results, not just a referee's scorecard.

"I love to see change, improvement and progress. It's a rush for me to train hard in a gym and then see it all come together in the cage."

Now she can only wait until Saturday and see if all the hard work both of them have put in will pay off.

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