

After mixed martial arts training, fighting is a relief

Conditioning coach Shara Vigeant enjoys 'kicking the butts' of her warriors to get them ready for the ring

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The Edmonton Journal

Thursday, May 28, 2009

When mixed martial arts fighters Luke Harris and Mitch Clarke step into the steel cage Saturday night at the Shaw Conference Centre for their respective bouts, they will already have faced their fiercest opponent.

At 5'3" and 125 pounds, Shara Vigeant has spent weeks preparing both men for battle, pushing them to their physical limits.

"I love my job. I make grown men cry," Vigeant said, jokingly.

"The whole idea is to put the work in beforehand, so that when they get into the cage it's a piece of cake. My job is to kick their butt."

A female strength and conditioning coach is an anomaly in the testosterone-filled, sometimes brutal and often bloody world of mixed martial arts, a sport that has eclipsed both boxing and wrestling in popularity, particularly in the U.S.

In Canada, it is sanctioned in B.C., Quebec, Manitoba and Alberta.

Its fan base is considered by many in the industry to be strongest here in Edmonton, where pay-per-view events pack sports bars and local tilts always draw noisy, enthusiastic standing-room-only crowds.

Saturday's fight card at the Shaw, TFC7 Full Throttle, features nine bouts. Nearly 80 per cent of the tickets have already been sold.

"For our last event in March we sold out, we had 2,000 people, so we've actually increased seating this time to 2,500," said Melanie Lubovac, associate promoter for The Fight Club, the local organization staging the event.

Vigeant's fighters -- she trains six men, all from the Edmonton area -- are winning more and more bouts.

"We're 7-0; six of the fighters have won their last seven fights," Vigeant said.



CREDIT: Bruce Edwards, the Journal
Shara Vigeant is a rarity -- a female strength and conditioning coach in the very male-dominated world of mixed martial arts. Luke Harris, left, and Mitch Clarke show the strain of their workout.

That winning record has the attention of the Las Vegas-based Ultimate Fighting Championship, the world's largest promotional organization of the sport.

One of Vigeant's fighters and former King of the Cage heavyweight champion, Tim (The Thrashing Machine) Hague, made his UFC debut at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas last week, winning a fight that oddsmakers expected him to lose.

Ask him how he did it and Vigeant's name is the first he mentions.

"I believed in myself because the people who mattered to me believed in me, like Shara," said Hague, 26.

"She texted me every day in Vegas, telling me I was stronger, bigger, faster; drilling it into my mind that I was going to win the fight."

Hague started training with Vigeant four months ago, after he signed a four-fight deal with UFC.

"Once I got the deal with UFC, I knew I had to take my conditioning to the next level, and I knew a couple of other guys who were already training with her," Hague said.

Travis (The Gladiator) Galbraith was one of those other guys.

One of the most respected fighters in Canada, Galbraith won at the MFC 21 event at River Cree Resort and Casino two weeks ago, taking down UFC veteran David Heath.

Galbraith, former King of the Cage light heavyweight and middleweight champion, has been fighting for eight years, but said since he started training with Vigeant 11/2 years ago, his endurance and stamina has increased twofold.

Theirs is a love-hate relationship.

"He told me once I was going to burn in hell," said Vigeant, laughing.

"I get called a lot of names during training sessions, actually, but I never take it personally.

"They love me when they know the end result is that they're going to have an easy fight."

Hague can attest to that.

"I was super nervous because it was my first fight in front of 13,000 people, but I wasn't nervous about my conditioning, and that's because of Shara," Hague said.

"It gave me a lot of confidence going in."

Vigeant, 32, is a former bodybuilder, a certified personal trainer, and runs her own business. Many of her clients, who range in age from 16 to 65, have no athletic background and simply want to get in shape. One is eight months pregnant.

For her fighters, Vigeant employs something called metabolic enhancement

training, a technique created by professional bodybuilder Scott Abel that combines speed, power and strength training.

"They have to have gas in the tank to be able to last the rounds," Vigeant said.

She characterizes the workout as "intense." Nick Penner calls it "brutal."

A former kickboxer, Penner's record in the ring is 8-1-0.

"Since the first day I worked with her, it's been brutal, but it's been good and I've had results, so I can't complain," Penner said.

"Anybody can be strong when they hop into the cage, but it's being strong when you're tired that counts."

Harris agreed.

"There are a lot of elements you can't control during a fight, but you can control strength and conditioning," he said.

"If you come to a fight fit and strong, you have a lot better chance. There's definitely a sense of confidence when you've put the work

in.

"And, with Shara, you put the work in -- she makes sure of that."

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