

The Stuff of Champions

By Art Davie

Mixed martial arts has produced, in a relatively short time, a great crop of champions. But out of all the fighters to enter and brave the Octagon, who was the best?

While mixed martial arts hasn't had a champ like Joe Louis, who reigned as heavyweight boxing champion for 12 years and defended his title 25 times, we are developing our share of great ones. As matchmaker for the "Old UFC" and Ultimate Fighting Alliance Commissioner, I had a unique opportunity to book, match, and see some of the greatest fighters in our sport. I sat down recently to rate the big guns in MMA - the ones I knew personally from 1993 through 1997. I used a version of *Ring* magazine's formula for comparing boxing champs from different eras and came up with a simple rating system. Here, in order of importance, are my judging criteria for rating fighters:

- 1. Fighting Skills** - Punching, kicking, takedown and submission techniques.
- 2. Mental Toughness** - The ability to hang tough and intimidate opponents.
- 3. Physical Qualities** - Brute strength and stamina.
- 4. Cage Generalship** - The ability to outsmart opponents and win when it counts.
- 5. Crowd Appeal** - Showmanship and physical presence.

As a promoter, I left out personal considerations. I liked some fighters and wasn't too fond of others. I didn't let that influence me here. Promoters, as a rule, are interested in a fighter's crowd appeal. We want to sell tickets. Colorful, popular fighters do that. For my purposes here, that's just one factor among five. If I used ticket-selling power alone, Royce Gracie and Tank Abbott would be rated first and second!

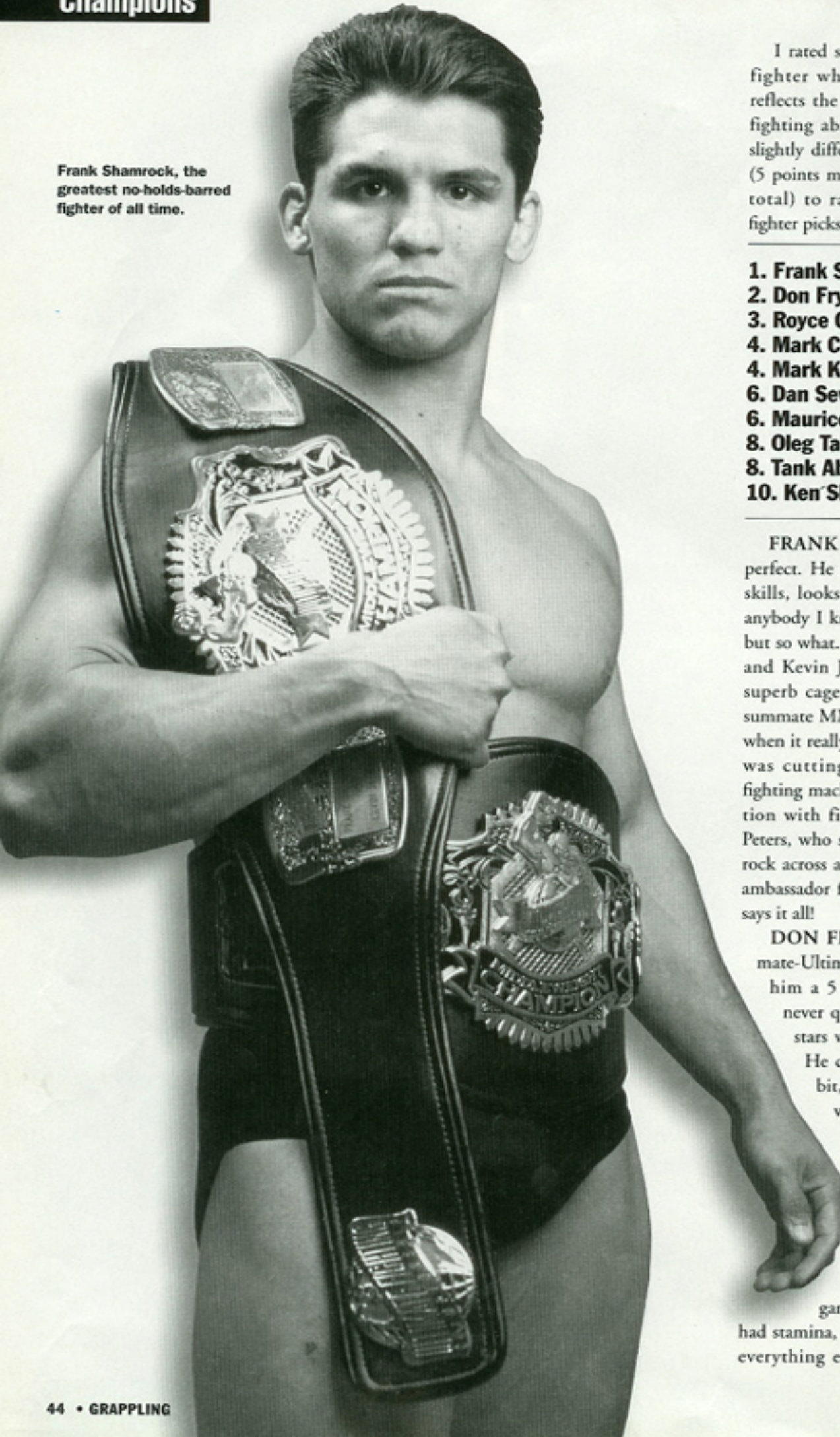
What about the quality of opponents a champion has faced compared to other champs? I believe you have to evaluate fighters during the time they fought. To compare the quality of opponents from different eras is a tricky proposition. Champs shine under the stars that were in the heavens on the nights they won. That's good enough for me.





Royce Gracie battling Ken Shamrock
in the highest rated American MMA
show in history.

Frank Shamrock, the greatest no-holds-barred fighter of all time.



I rated some fighters higher than the fighter who actually beat him. This reflects the overall criteria. Rating pure fighting ability alone would produce a slightly different score. Using a 1-5 scale (5 points max and 5 criteria = 25 points total) to rate them, here are my top fighter picks:

- 1. Frank Shamrock** – 23 points
- 2. Don Frye** – 22 points
- 3. Royce Gracie** – 21 points
- 4. Mark Coleman** – 20 points
- 4. Mark Kerr** – 20 points
- 6. Dan Severn** – 19 points
- 6. Maurice Smith** – 19 points
- 8. Oleg Taktarov** – 18 points
- 8. Tank Abbott** – 18 points
- 10. Ken Shamrock** – 17 points

FRANK SHAMROCK was almost perfect. He possessed the best arsenal of skills, looks, courage and toughness of anybody I knew. He's not a heavyweight, but so what. His victories over Tito Ortiz and Kevin Jackson are a tribute to his superb cage generalship. He's the consummate MMA professional. He can win when it really counts. His training regime was cutting edge and turned him a fighting machine. I remember a conversation with film executive producer Jon Peters, who said to me looking at Shamrock across a room, "There is the perfect ambassador for Ultimate Fighting!" That says it all!

DON FRYE won the second Ultimate-Ultimate in December '96. I gave him a 5 on mental toughness. He never quit. He was one of the early stars with a cross section of skills.

He could punch some, wrestle a bit, knew a choke or two, but wasn't the best at any of them. He was strong, but not as strong as Tank Abbott who he choked that night for the title.

His style was similar to the stronger Coleman's and he didn't have the right game plan to beat him. But he had stamina, heart, and the brains to win everything else. Lots of women found



Don Frye "The Predator."



Royce Gracie,
the King of the
Octagon.

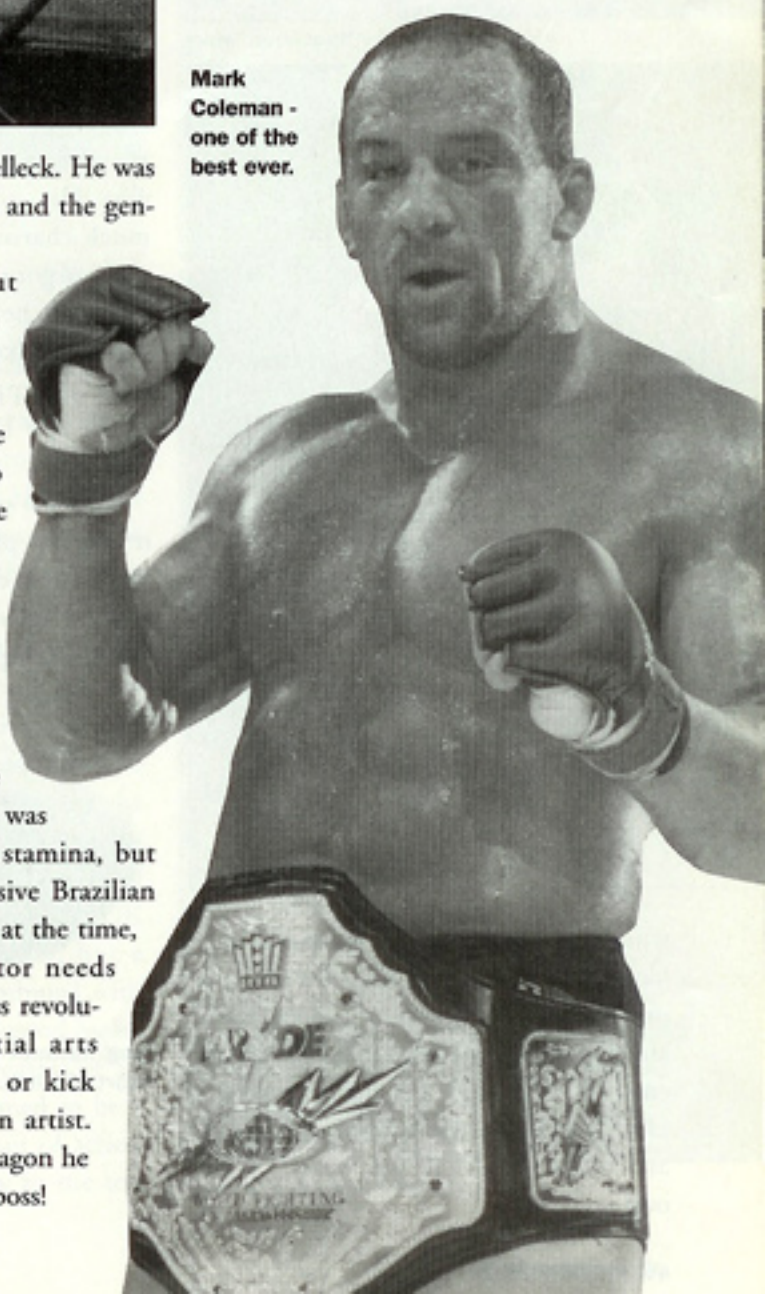
him as handsome as Tom Selleck. He was an athlete the hardcore fans and the general public loved!

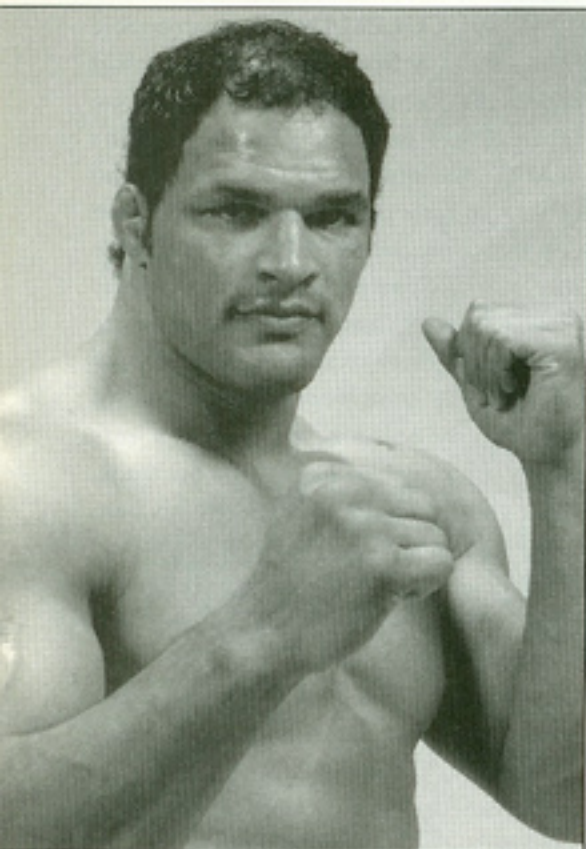
ROYCE GRACIE put Ultimate Fighting on the map. For that alone, he stands head and shoulders above everyone. The Gracie family charisma was his to wear like a halo and he wore it well. Size wise, he was a leopard among lions and tigers. It's amazing to consider how he intimidated much larger opponents at the time. Deep down, they were afraid of him! He could choke them out! He was mentally tough with good stamina, but not very strong. His defensive Brazilian jiu-jitsu skills were a puzzle at the time, but today a top competitor needs more. His grappling prowess revolutionized the whole martial arts world. He couldn't punch or kick and wasn't a great takedown artist. But when he was in the Octagon he was magic - and he was the boss!

MARK COLEMAN was unstoppable for a while. A first-class wrestler, he had enormous strength and was a fearsome "ground and pounder." But he couldn't kick and was vulnerable to someone who could. And his cage generalship left him vulnerable to smarter fighters like Maurice Smith. What he brought to the party was an overwhelming physical presence and a good cross section of skills. Opponents at the time were plenty scared of him. In my opinion, he needed a very strong manager to keep him on track, otherwise he would not give you his best. Overall, he was one of the very best heavyweights to ever enter and compete at MMA. Fans liked him too!

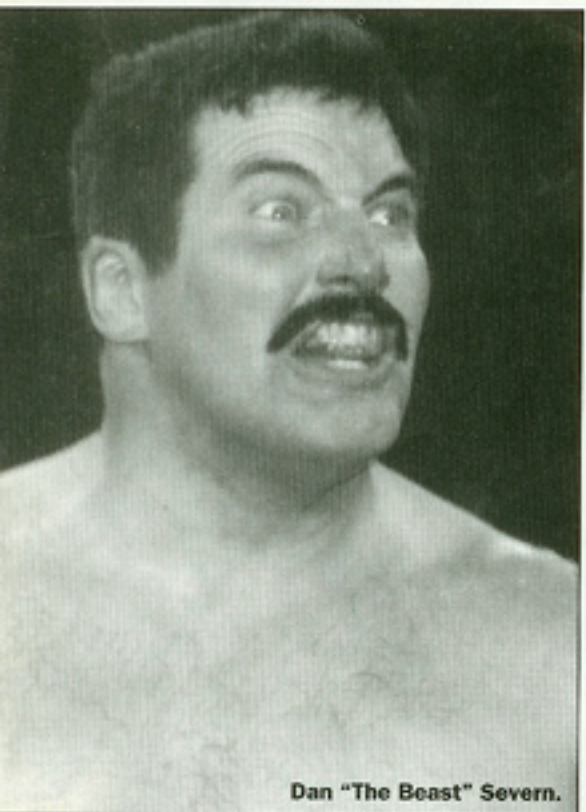
MARK KERR was, like Coleman, a heavyweight battleship among the cruisers. When he first burst on the scene he became "the smashing machine." He beat Brazilians and during his UFC days

Mark
Coleman -
one of the
best ever.





Mark "The Specimen" Kerr



Dan "The Beast" Severn.

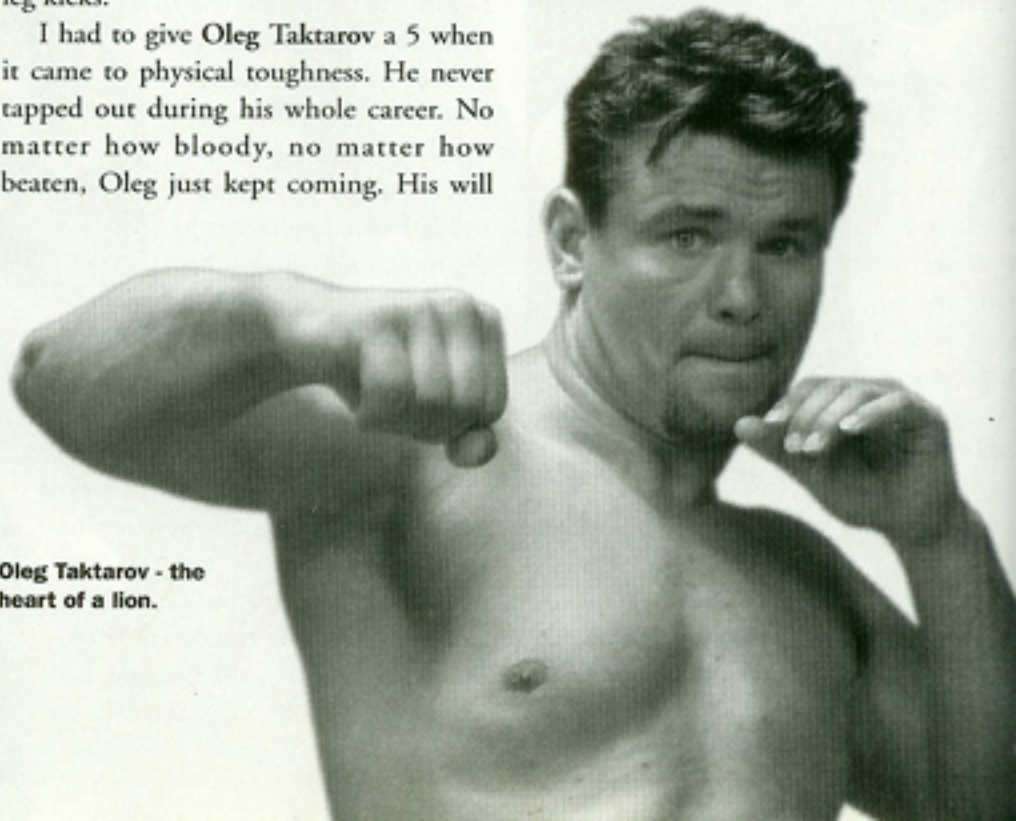
was the man! Not as charismatic as Coleman, he had great wrestling skills, an overwhelming ground-and-pound game and stamina too! His physique was the envy of every other athlete in the sport. He has since added to his standing skills as a striker, an area he was weak in previously.

Dan Severn was the first Ultimate-Ultimate Champ in '95. He was the first wrestler of national caliber to compete in MMA. Despite a low-key personal style, he became "The Beast" when he won UFC 5. A smart fighter most of the time (let's forget his matches with Ken Shamrock!), he had stamina. What he lacked was standing skills. He wasn't effective in this range and had a problem the longer his career continued. But he was fearless and had the will and the guts to beat back everyone in '95. Not the most naturally charismatic of competitors, he became a solid ambassador for the sport.

Maurice Smith was maybe the smartest man to ever step into a cage. He was a cool customer who outthought his opponents. The best kickfighter who crossed the line into MMA, he was a sensation when he stopped Conan Slivera and decisioned Coleman. Why didn't I rate him higher? His greatest asset, his brains, was also his greatest liability. He was too smart to take risks and would rather win by decision than by knockout. He always seemed to do just enough to win. His conservatism didn't produce much charisma. I gave him only a 2 in this category. Nevertheless, when he beat Coleman, he was king of the hill. He was the first striker to show the world how to beat a grappler, it was fascinating to watch how he chopped down Tank with leg kicks.

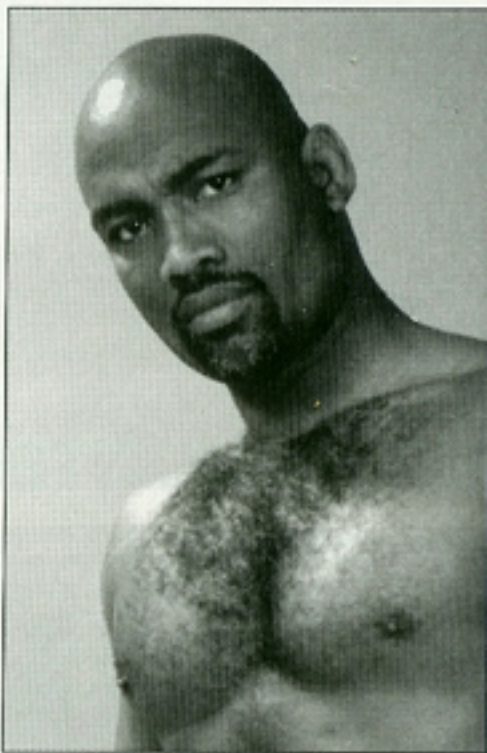
I had to give Oleg Taktarov a 5 when it came to physical toughness. He never tapped out during his whole career. No matter how bloody, no matter how beaten, Oleg just kept coming. His will

Oleg Taktarov - the heart of a lion.



was indomitable. A master of lower body locks, he couldn't punch, but kept trying to become a knock-out artist. It wasn't meant to be. His combination of skill earned him only a 3. And he wasn't the best ticket seller in UFC history. But he was a warrior, who gave it everything he had. Bad knees limited his career.

The greatest showman ever to step into the Octagon was Tank Abbott, the original "Huntington Beach Bad Boy." The Mike Tyson of MMA, he intimi-

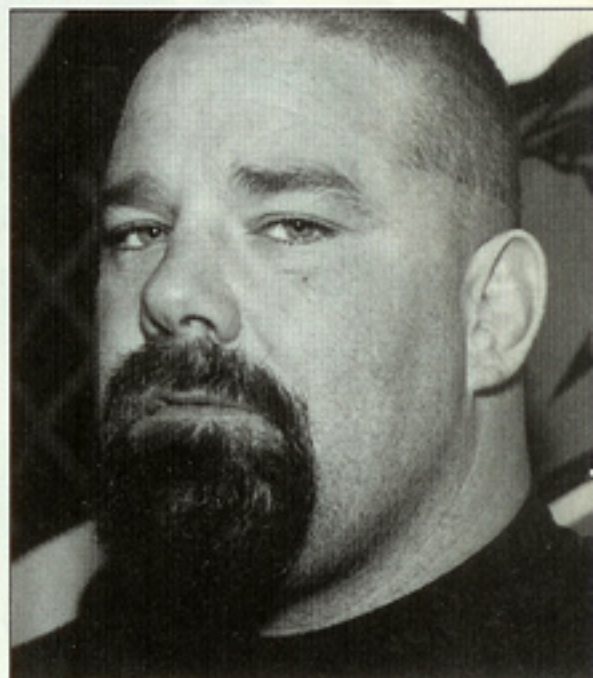


Maurice Smith - the Octagon's smartest fighter.

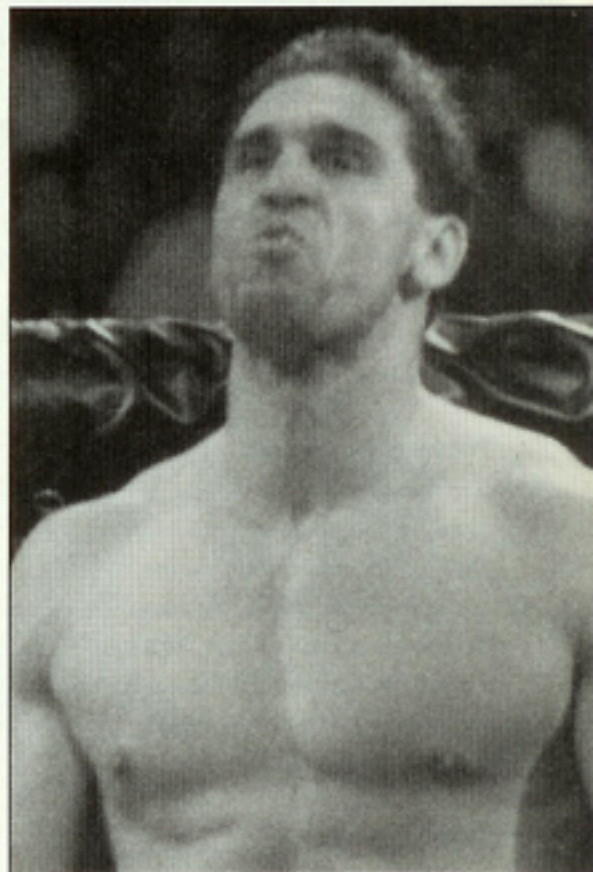


Coleman battling Vovchanchin in Pride.

position, in most fans' minds, was not to be. Incidentally, there was a real bitter rivalry between Shamrock and Abbott. Many people wanted to see the Golden Boy and the Bad Boy of MMA get it on. It almost happened at Ultimate-Ultimate '96. But Shamrock broke his hand on a first round opponent's head and the match that everyone wanted never came together. P.S. I think Tank would have won that night!



Fearless Tank Abbott.



"Golden Boy" Ken Shamrock.

dated opponents. A wickedly effective bar brawler, he liked to fight and would do it for free. Combined with a power lifter's strength (he could bench press 625 lbs. for reps!), he picked up other heavyweights (remember Worsham?) and almost threw them out of the cage! His weaknesses were his lack of submission skills, poor stamina, and a bad knee. He lost to men like Taktarov and Frye when he ran out of gas. And he did that often. Relying on murderous hooks and uppercuts to win, he even developed a jab and a straight right against Frye in Ultimate-Ultimate '96 - but you needed more as MMA kept evolving. Abbott never learned new tricks; he was content to do what had always worked for him. And he could never seem to win the Big One! But when he came into the arena, crowds went nuts for him! The man you loved to

hate, he was one of only two or three superstars the sport has ever produced.

Ken Shamrock was the Hamlet of MMA. "To be or not to be" seemed to be his mantra. Did he want to be the baddest man in the world's most brutal sport - or not? It seemed to affect his performance in the cage more than once. As the Golden Boy, he had more chances than anyone, with the possible exception of Abbott, to shine. Fans remember that he never won a tournament. And yet his rivalry with Royce generated the high point in MMA history. He was an OK puncher, not much of a kicker, but a skilled submission artist. Combined with a bodybuilder's physique and good looks, he should have been the greatest of all time. Physical brittleness seemed to be a factor, as injuries took him out of action several times. His ascendancy to the top