

Ultimate Fighter Gets his Kicks the Hard Way

Aug. 12, 2005

Listening to David Terrell -- polite, cheerful, relaxed -- it's easy to forget you're dealing with one of the most dangerous guys in the world.

In competition, Terrell has broken opponents' arms, legs and facial bones. He often wins a match by applying a chokehold, which, if an opponent is slow to concede defeat, leaves him unconscious.

"Most people think you're going for the trachea," he said. "Actually, you are cutting off the carotid arteries. Guys pass out all the time."

Terrell, 27, is one of the foremost practitioners of ultimate fighting, a newly evolved discipline in which the traditional Asian martial arts of tae kwon do, karate, jujitsu, kung fu, muay thai and judo are combined with boxing and wrestling.

The result is a sport much like a street fight set in a caged ring with only a few significant rules: no gouging the eyes, no biting and no stomping on an opponent. The fighters wear thin gloves, lighter than boxing gloves, which give a small degree of hand protection while allowing the flexibility to grab an opponent.

Pay-per-view television began broadcasting Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) tournaments 12 years ago, and the events have become some of the most-watched on cable. Clearly the allure stems from a basic question many have tossed around since childhood: "What would happen if a martial arts expert fought a boxer or wrestler?"

"My first fight, I fought a karate guy," Terrell said. "I was 19. It was in Stockton, sort of an underground fight because it wasn't legal in California yet. I caught one of the guy's kicks and took him down. He didn't want to get hit so he turned his back, so I sunk a naked choke on him."

"My third fight," he said, "I fought a tae kwon do guy. I took him down and arm-barred him, no problem. Later, I found out this guy was famous in the tae kwon do world. But he didn't know how to defend an arm bar if his life depended on it."

Although any style can prevail in a UFC fight, the largely unglamorous art of Brazilian jujitsu, which emphasizes on-the-ground techniques and submission holds, has become the cornerstone of the sport.

"If you had to choose one martial art, that's the best," Terrell said. "A lot of moves in the other martial arts are not practical, they don't work. You can be sure the moves in jujitsu are 100 percent legit."

In 1993, a 170-pound Brazilian named Royce Gracie stunned the fight world by using jujitsu to win the first two UFC open weight division world championships. He easily beat Top 10 cruiserweight boxer Art Jimmerson and then defeated six opponents from other disciplines, many of whom outweighed him by more than 50 pounds. Last year, in Japan, Gracie squared off against 484-pound sumo wrestler Yokozuna Akebono, whom he forced into submission in less than three minutes.

"Everyone knows jujitsu now," Terrell said. "But the techniques and transitions have evolved so much. People are training in ultimate fighting as its own martial art."

Peter Howes, a retired Bay Area boxer who has promoted world-title boxing matches, said he would definitely buy a ticket to watch ultimate fighting.

"There are some exceptional fighters and very promotable young athletes coming out of that genre," he said. "A well-rounded fighter today

has both boxing and grappling skills. I see the activities merging."

Terrell grew up in Santa Rosa. While competing on the Piner High School wrestling team, he began learning sambo, a Russian form of submission fighting, from his stepfather, who set up mats in the garage for him and his brothers. After graduating, Terrell fought and trained in Brazil and Japan, where mixed-martial arts, no-rules fighting has long been popular.

"I was at a newsstand in Japan and there were a ton of fighting magazines I'd never heard of," he said. "I opened them up, and I was in a lot of them."

By the time Terrell returned to the United States, he had decided to dedicate his life to martial arts. He opened a training academy in northern Santa Rosa in 2001 and began putting himself through daily four-hour training sessions, alternating between stand-up and ground disciplines.

His biggest break came last August when he was selected to fight Matt Lindland as part of a pay-per-view event televised in 40 countries. Lindland, an Olympic wrestling silver medalist, was considered by many the best 185-pound ultimate fighter in the world. Terrell made the most of the opportunity, dropping Lindland with an early straight left hand, instantly propelling himself into the consciousness of the ultimate fighting community on a world level.

"In the UFC, you don't admire your work when a guy is down though," Terrell said. "So I jumped on him fast and threw as many punches as I could to the chin, and they stopped it."

"After that fight, I had so many friends all of a sudden," he said.

Six months later, in February, Terrell was back in the cage at Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas, in front of 11,000 spectators and a worldwide TV audience, taking on Evan Tanner for the UFC world middleweight title.

Early on, Terrell nearly executed a deep-guillotine neck hold, which would have won the match, but Tanner escaped and was able to turn the tide, eventually winning by TKO.

"You learn valuable lessons after a loss," Terrell said. "I lost 90 percent of my friends."

Terrell was scheduled to make a comeback in Las Vegas on the August 20th UFC pay-per-view card, but an elbow injury he suffered while sparring forced him to withdraw.

"It's very frustrating," he said. "I haven't slept good since my loss. Everyone looks at me like, 'So what, you hurt your arm? You fight in the UFC!' But my body is a wreck right now. I've been fighting and grappling for so long."

-by Ted Gross

[Articles](#)