

Overcoming Pre-Fight Anxiety

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I'd played nearly 100 football games, wrestled about 500 matches and boxed a few dozen bouts before my first Mixed Martial Arts fight at age 32, so I wasn't too anxious entering the cage that first time. When the gate closed behind me, I had an eerily comfortable feeling that I was exactly where I wanted to be. It wasn't always that way, though. Not by a long shot.

In my formative years as a combative athlete I experienced my share of gut-wrenching nervousness before competitions. Moments before my early wrestling matches my thoughts were an excruciating swirl of aggression, self-doubt and fear of cowardice. Wracked with anxiety during those early bouts, I abandoned technique, failed to see scoring opportunities, and couldn't distinguish my coach's voice from the noise of the crowd. On the football field, I was no less keyed up. Not once, but twice at the outset of a game, I was so tightly wound in anticipation of the first snap of the ball that I threw up on the offensive tackle across the line of scrimmage.

Nerves. Butterflies. Jitters. Whatever the term, every fighter has experienced those sensations to some degree. In this column I'll enlist the help of a few professional fighters in addressing two of the most common questions I receive at seminars throughout the country from young competitors.

The first question:

When I have a fight scheduled, how do I avoid obsessing about it in the preceding weeks to the point where I get overanxious and overtrain?

Clearly there's no substitute for experience in avoiding undue nervousness before a fight. Poised for his UFC debut, Eric Wray (9-0, 7 submissions) from San Jose's esteemed American Kickboxing Academy notes, "Every fight is a learning experience. You take something away from the last fight and apply that knowledge to the next." Familiarity with the combative arena, confidence in your training regimen and an awareness of your body's requirements all come with competitive experience and each is essential to developing a professional, workman-like approach to fight preparation.

UFC veteran Keith Rockel of the Massachusetts Submission Academy offers this advice: "Early on as a fighter you have to do a little 'trial and error.' When starting out, everyone is a little overanxious. But this is the learning process that enables you to become a pro and know your own body. For example, my first couple of fights I'd heard most of the fighters would start training 8-9 weeks out, so this is what I did. I found out that this was too much time for me. Now I pay attention to how I feel before workouts and use a heart monitor to guard against overtraining. I also train 5-6 times a week even when I am not scheduled to fight, so I keep myself in pretty good shape. I have found that 5-6 weeks before the fight works best for me. Now another individual may need the extra time just

to get in training shape. So I guess what I am saying is every individual will be a bit different. It all depends on your workout schedule when you are not in pre-fight mode."

Until you've acquired that experience, remember that your conditioning is best attained in a systematic, step-by-step manner. Together with your coach, develop a training regimen that acknowledges your present level of fitness and gradually progresses towards reaching fighting shape. Then stick to the plan, making adjustments when necessary to account for injury, illness or signs of overtraining. When possible, incorporate a heart rate monitor in your workouts to gauge the intensity of your training. Frank Shamrock, who set the early standard for conditioning in MMA, was among the first in the sport to use a heart rate monitor as a training tool. Now nearly every professional fighter I've come across uses one. When used properly during your workouts the monitor essentially eliminates the guesswork of whether you are training too hard or not hard enough. Also, checking your resting heart rate in the morning will let you know if you've sufficiently recovered from the previous day's training. If your heart rate upon waking is elevated ten or more beats per minute above your normal resting rate, you've got to ease up on training that day or risk overtraining.

World Extreme Cagefighting champion James Irvin is one fighter willing to take that risk. Regarded for the emotional intensity he brings to his bouts, Irvin brings the same all-out, all-the-time mentality to his workouts. He explains the rationale behind his training:

"Dave Marinoble, my striking coach, works me so hard I sometimes leave the gym in tears. Dave believes in the 'more is better' approach to training and our workouts can last five hours. He tries to break me mentally. The last two weeks before the bout he pushes me to the point where it's almost impossible to train any harder. I'm probably over-trained, in fact I'm sure I am, but when I get into the fight I feel like there's nothing I can't handle."

Irvin's disregard for the possibility of overtraining may run counter to popular physical conditioning theories, but as Rockel reminds, "Trial and error". Take responsibility for your training and pay attention to what works. Remember, your workouts should build your body and your guts.

A final note on the subject, for what it's worth. One of the things you'll discover early in your MMA career is that the elements of a fight can change so many times in the weeks, even minutes, before a bout that there's seldom anything concrete to obsess on even if you're inclined to. Wray says, "From the time you accept a fight until the moment the cage door clicks shut, the opponent or the agreed upon weight can, and often will, change three or four times." True enough. I've been involved in fights where, without notice, the opponent I faced in the ring wasn't the guy who'd weighed in. The moral? Focus on intelligent training; the rest will take care of itself.

The second question I often get from young fighters is:

I get really nervous before fights. How do I manage the "pre-fight jitters" so that they don't negatively affect my performance?

Most fighters recognize that some level of stress before a fight is normal, even beneficial. Rockel notes, "I know fighters that have had 20 fights and still get all nerved up. Personally I think a little nervousness and excitement is good. It will keep you sharp." For James Irvin the issue is absolute. "I need to be nervous," Irvin maintains.

Research in sports psychology, in fact, supports Rockel's contention. Sports psychologists refer to an athlete's degree of nervousness and excitement as his "level of arousal." If a fighter's level of arousal is too low, his performance will likely be uninspired and lethargic; too high and the excessive nervous tension interferes with the fighter's mental clarity and causes his body to seize up. One of the keys to peak performance is to achieve that optimal level of arousal. For some fighters, like James Irvin, it means getting "psyched up". He explains his mindset before a fight.

"I'd played football, but never any one-on-one sports, so I'd never gotten used to being under the spotlight. It's pretty nerve-wracking. I see these wrestlers walking around in their street clothes an hour before the fight like it's just another day at the office. I can't do that."

"The day of the fight I just stay quiet and force myself to contain the intensity that's building up inside of me. I've got my hat pulled down to the bridge of my nose and try to shut everyone out. I keep my thoughts positive and replay scenarios of me winning. All the while that tension is building. When the fight starts, all that energy is released and it throws me into a 5th and 6th gear. It's no fun to go through all that nervousness, but I know it's necessary for me."

"My only loss happened in my UFC debut, where I entered the fight without that nervousness. Everyone told me that being in the UFC was the experience of a lifetime and to enjoy it. I tried not to let the pressure of the event get to me, so on the day of the fight I didn't really think about it. I was too relaxed and when the fight began, I got overwhelmed."

Asked if his heightened level of intensity ever had a negative effect on his performance, Irvin replies, "I fought a rematch with an opponent I'd beaten once before and really wanted to put on a show. I put my earphones on and got really amped before the fight. Well, I got overamped. When the fight started I couldn't remember anything, including keeping my hands up. I took a lot of punches I didn't need to take before beating the guy."

Most fighters preparing to enter the cage are brimming with motivation and anticipation

and don't have Irvin's capacity to contain all that emotional stress. For them, reaching an optimal arousal level means dialing down their emotional intensity. There are several mental techniques involving deep breathing and visualization that can effectively reduce anxiety (see last month's issue), but until those skills are developed the most valuable asset a young fighter has is a coach who understands how to manage his fighter's nervous tension.

Recalls Wray, "My first bout took place in Idaho where I was the co-main event, the second to last fight on the card. Every single guy they put in our locker room was brought in by the promoter to lose to the local fighter. Sure enough, one after another, each guy got wheeled back to our locker room bleeding and lumped up. I kept telling myself, 'That's not gonna be me.' My trainer at the time just kept repeating, 'Confidence, confidence.'"

"Man, how was I going to be confident? I'd never wrestled in school or competed in anything like MMA, so I didn't know how to be confident. His words just made me more nervous."

Since training at American Kickboxing Academy under Bob Cook, Wray's ability to stay calm and focused before fights has improved drastically.

"In the locker room and on the way to the ring Bob reminds me simply, calmly and clearly of the techniques and strategies I want to bring into the fight. I trust what he says and with each fight I feel more relaxed and ready beforehand. After my last bout, my coaches and teammates noticed how relaxed I was leading up to the fight and said I was finally handling myself like a real professional."

And, of course, confidence in your preparation plays a big role in your pre-fight mindset. Rockel advises, "Again, every individual is different, but I think if you are training in the right school and do your pre-fight homework you should feel confident and keep the nervousness to a minimum. A lot of guys get nervous when they second-guess if they have done enough to get in shape. The night of the fight is not the time you should be asking this question. You need to feel confident in all the training that you have put in all the weeks before the fight."

Finally, instead of wasting nervous energy waiting in the hotel before the fight, Wray follows the counsel of his mentor (my friend and longtime training partner) Eugene Jackson. Get out on the street and wander around or take in a movie. Don't worry that the distraction will impair your performance. Both Wray and Rockel maintain that the motivation and drive will be there when you need it without obsessing about it. Wray's advice, "When you're in the cage, just turn on the switch." Or, as Rockel says, "Once you are out there it will come naturally, so let it flow."

Train smart, fight hard, and enjoy yourself.