

## “IT’S GONNA BE CROWDED TONIGHT,”

a skinny guy in glasses says in an almost indecipherable language known as Bostonian. Eighteen students sprawl around a former basement apartment in various stretching positions, preparing for the intermediate Muay Thai class. A group this small wouldn't even register in a multi-thousand square foot gym, like the gargantuan one in Las Vegas that rhymes with Mextreme Shouture. But this is Sityodtong, a postage stamp on the envelope of most professional MMA training facilities, and is located just outside Boston, in Somerville, Massachusetts.

Despite its Napoleonic size, it's turned out some big names in the sport, like Kenny Florian, Marcus Davis, Jorge Rivera, Patrick Cote and Stephan Bonnar, all of whom have called it home at various stages. Ernest Hemmingway once criticized William Faulkner by saying, “He thinks big emotion comes from big words.” Sityodtong proves that big champions don't have to come from big gyms.

It is a Friday night, and those of us with no social life are underneath Ron DellaGrotte's law office on Cutter Street, stretching for class. Sityodtong lies beneath street level in what used to be Mark DellaGrotte's apartment before he transformed it into his first martial arts studio. Ever heard of a gym with a bedroom and kitchenette next to the mats? At Sityodtong, you can get tapped out and make an omelet two minutes later to ease your pain. UFC veteran and journeyman fighter Aaron Riley, who is only two weeks away from his next contest, occupies the Sityodtong Bed and Breakfast this particular week. Riley has employed the ser-

vices of DellaGrotte and Kenny Florian to sharpen his game, a common practice in this rapidly growing sport.

“Shadowboxing. I want to see aaams only,” DellaGrotte demands in his nearly foreign tongue after warming the class up with jump ropes. He stands around five feet nine inches, a slender welterweight whose face changes instantly from brooding scowl to pleasant smile. He has a crooked boxer's nose and a voice that resonates at just the right octave to fill the gym when he speaks. Born and raised in Somerville, he would have been a natural drill sergeant if he didn't bleed BoSox red and his feet weren't anchored in New England.

Because of the close confines, I shadowbox in an area about ten feet long between a padded wall and a brick column. There is just enough space for about four punches before turning around and going back the other way like a duck in a shooting gallery. Hanging on the wall that I keep running into is the flag of Thailand along with a series of Mongkol headbands (the Thai version

# THE BASEMENT

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KELLY CRIGGER

# LEGACY

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of belt rankings). DellaGrotte has spent so much time in the Kingdom that he is practically half Thai. He speaks the language fluently, bows in the traditional “wai” when entering the ring, and blasts Buddhist music through his stereo, a refreshing break from the usual death metal that drowns out conversations in most gyms. His students call him “Kru” in deference to the title he’s earned as a master instructor in the art of Muay Thai. Even the name of his gym, which means “son of Yodtong,” is an homage to his Thai training.

“Guys. Look here,” he says, stopping the class to show us what ‘right’ looks like. “Your strikes should flow like this.”

**LIKE ANYONE WHO WALKS** the walk, he leads by example, showing us poor schleps the proper way to step into an elbow, grab the plum when delivering a knee, and use footwork to combine them effectively. There are men of action and men of gaseous outbursts, and only one of these types earns credibility among a crowd whose lives revolve around violence. DellaGrotte’s ability to prove himself earns the attention and respect of these men, a critical combination for effective MMA training.

It isn’t rocket science, but his technique is impressive for a guy who hasn’t fought in years. He throws elbows that slice sweat beads and kicks that split pads. His forearms and shins are like steel folded by a master blacksmith that has been developed

from years of training here and in Thailand. He hunches over when he stalks his opponent, using his shoulders to protect his head. When he holds the pads and takes a hit, he growls in what I assume is some mystical Thai tradition, but sounds more like an angry badger in a turf war. Everything he does is mastery in motion and he maintains the physique of a man just a few weeks away from fighting shape—just in case the call ever comes to be the next Erik Paulson invited out of retirement. Instead of relegating the sparring to a hired gun or a boxing coach, he does it all himself, proudly gloving up against whomever, whether it be professional or amateur. DellaGrotte once gave Ninja Rua a few lumps when he questioned his methods.

“Use that scapula when you throw an elbow,” he tells the class while demonstrating the move. “It’s not just the aaam, it’s the whole shoulder getting into it. Now get cha shingaaads.”

“Ka-Pum,” they all respond, a Thai phrase apparently meaning, “Yes, your Lordship.”

The shadowboxing continues, but with combinations. Jab, cross, lead elbow, rear elbow, lead knee, front knee. Two students hit pads in the tiny ring while the rest of us made sure the walls take their deserved punishment. Halfway through the instruction, DellaGrotte finally hands out a few compliments. Being the father of three, I recognize the positive reinforcement as the same thing kids need to keep



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them from getting frustrated. Fledgling fighters and twenty-somethings are no different, but a middle-aged man like me doesn’t need it. Or do I?

When it’s my turn in the ring, I throw at least fifty kicks at an instructor who holds pads, before the unmistakable voice of the Kru breaks the air behind me. “Niiiiice,” he says, as my red shin retracts from the pad. “That’s the way you do it.”

The kick feels firm indeed, but the compliment feels better. It shouldn’t have because as an adult secure in my manhood, an attaboy loses its value around age thirty-eight. But even the most secure manly man



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finds reassurance in the voice of a proven veteran when he ventures outside his comfort zone. DellaGrotte is like the cool uncle whose house you wanted to go to as a kid because he had all the video games your parents didn't allow. But more importantly he is the undisputed king of this New England basement and a foremost authority on Muay Thai. So in this small corner of the MMA world, his compliment carries about as much weight as John Wayne's.

"Fighters need their asses rubbed more than kids," DellaGrotte tells me later. "With a kid, you can tell him right from wrong and if he doesn't listen, you let

him go out and learn. In the ring there's a lot more at stake, so if you go in there and the fighter lacks confidence or he doesn't believe in himself, then he's lost before the fight starts. You have to find the balance between over-confident and under-confident."

I momentarily wonder where he got his own reinforcement from when my moment in the sun turned into a brooding eclipse. DellaGrotte's compliment apparently sent me across the line into the over-confident crowd because the next punch I throw—a left hook—is way too hard. My glove crashes into the instructor's pad and my wrist pops,

sending jolts of pain all the way up my arm.

Oh crap! I thought. Play it off.

Rather than come to the rational conclusion that this is a simple Muay Thai class and not worth the risk of permanent injury, I drive on, damning the pain and hoping I remembered my bottles of Motrin and horse tranquilizers.

"Don't think so much, just do," DellaGrotte says as he calls out combinations. "Shake your foot out. Don't think, just kick. Keep moving forward. Remember Muay Thai always moves forward." I do as instructed and move forward punching timidly at best with the aching wrist.

**MUAY THAI ISN'T** the only thing with forward momentum here. Over the last fourteen months Sityodtong slowly but surely amassed a win streak that is unparalleled in MMA. Not since Jorge Rivera lost to Terry Martin at UFC 67 in February 2007, has Sityodtong lost a fight in the UFC. Kenny Florian was on a four-fight win streak and Marcus Davis has had an impressive eleven straight wins. Both Patrick Cote and Stephan Bonnar turned their misfortunes around after training with DellaGrotte and Aaron Riley is here hoping the Sityodtong magic will rub off on him.

"I don't think we've been past the second round in the past ten fights," DellaGrotte says after class, as I hide my injured wrist in my pocket. "And that's just the UFC. Globally we're on like a twenty-two win streak."

Kenny Florian is a key reason for that impressive number. Despite having no fight in his immediate future, Florian came down to Sityodtong on this night to work on Aaron Riley's ground game just a few feet from the Muay Thai class. Dripping with sweat, the two lounge against an independent piece of fence as the amateurs prepare for the nightly cleaning. Sityodtong doesn't have the space for a full-sized cage, so DellaGrotte installed two separate pieces of octagon-style fencing for his guys to work against, which Florian uses to show Riley a few of his favorite techniques.

Florian is just two weeks removed from his fight with fellow geek Joe Lauzon, which the media overplayed frenetically. The "geek you don't want to mess with" schtick was getting old.

"I do get tired of that," Florian said. "Everyone has this perception of the stereotypi-

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cal MMA fighter looking like...Phil Baroni. You know? They hear the term 'fighter' and have an instant perception of ripped abs and bulging muscles." I secretly think Florian takes satisfaction in being the anti-buff muscle monkey, but the criticism leveled at him for having such an un-fighter-like physique was wearing thin. "I hate that people conjure up an image based on a profession. I mean what if you went to a doctor's office and Baroni walked out? It could happen."

Marcus Davis suddenly appears in a pair of jeans held up with a huge hand grenade belt buckle.

"I got a text message from Jorge Gurgel, Mark," he says with a smile to DellaGrotte. "It says, 'Tell Mark my heart is broken.'"

The pros all laugh, getting the inside joke that no one else does. My confused expression earns an explanation from DellaGrotte.

"Gurgel wants to come and train, but I'm hesitant because of the Franklin-Lutter fight," he said.

"You're training Lutter?" I ask.

"Yeah. I like Jorge. He's a great guy and he's in through Marcus so I can't say no to him, but...I'm going to see Jorge across the Octagon with Rich and I'm going to be in there with Travis and I don't want there to be funny energy. So I told him after the Lutter-Franklin fight we'll get on the same page and I'll bring him in."

DellaGrotte met Lutter during season four of *The Ultimate Fighter* when DellaGrotte was a coach and Lutter was a contestant. They got along despite Lutter's renowned difficulties with trainers, and the relationship continued after the show. Lutter was on the verge of a major fight with Rich Franklin and enlisted the services of DellaGrotte to be in his corner for it.

"Mark says he'll make it up to you with a full body massage," Davis says out loud as he types in the text message with the ease and accuracy of a high school senior.

"That's fucked up," DellaGrotte says, as Davis laughs and hits the send button.

**THE TRAINING DAY** is over, which means it was time for the deepest ritual of Sityodtong. It isn't a pagan tradition of strapping on goat leggings and dancing around a bonfire, but for an MMA gym (and I've been to plenty of them), it may as well have been druids chanting to stone monoliths at the summer solstice. With a bottle of disinfectant in each hand, DellaGrotte cruises through the gym spraying down everything like a gunslinger at high noon in Dodge City while his students do the same.

"I can't stand dirt or things out of place," he says, as he sprays down each heavy bag. Everyone pitches in, mopping mats,



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wiping down mirrors, and scrubbing pads. Even the ring ropes get a thorough wipe down. "It's the old Samurai way," Della-Grotte practically chants like a mantra. "Everything has to be in place or I don't sleep well. It's a belief that if your foundation is right then your life is right."

Kenny Florian also has a belief. He believes gym bags are unnecessary when a reliable plastic grocery bag is available. "Sawatdee Kap," Florian says, bowing to Della-Grotte as he climbs the stairs to leave with a bag of sweaty clothes in a Whole Foods bag.

Saturday dawns overcast and chilly in

**"IT'S A BELIEF THAT IF YOUR FOUNDATION IS RIGHT THEN YOUR LIFE IS RIGHT"**

— DellaGrotte

metropolitan Boston. Getting to Sityodtong is like weaving through a labyrinth of oddly angled streets and row houses, all of which have fences, but no yards. The large houses of Somerville are ripe for gentrification, a process of reclaiming and improving historic neighborhoods to make them trendy and valuable. But no level of gentrification could ease the parking burden around Sityodtong, as my Somerville parking violation can attest to.

Only two things happened in Sityodtong on Saturdays: Johnny McDonough's MMA class and open gym for professionals. Both are daunting adventures when your lead wrist is swollen and sore. But that's why God invented prescription drugs, so with the miracle of synthetics numbing me up, I jump into McDonough's class and quickly discovered two things: shooting in for a takedown on the knees of a former paratrooper sucks, and leaving your neck exposed ends a fight quickly. But self-discovery is the heart of training, no matter what the discipline. Muay Thai, Jiu Jitsu, Judo, whatever...it's all about finding your inner strengths and weaknesses, both physical and mental, and overcoming them.

My training partner is a New Yorker transplanted to Boston named Joe Boffi.

The focus of McDonough's training is to fight our way out of a corner and the strategy to achieve it is to throw a combination and then shoot in for a takedown. Boffi lumps my face up a few times and when I shoot for his hips, he gives me a guided tour of the guillotine choke factory.

Boffi's story is similar to many MMA hopefuls. He'd taken martial arts classes growing up and had been in enough bar brawls to consider himself talented at fighting. Yet after a year of training at Sityodtong, Boffi can only recall one clear lesson he's learned above all others.

"I realized just how much I didn't know," he says, panting after class. "I want to get into the ring, but not until Johnny says I'm ready."

"And how long will that be?"

"He's got another year or so," McDonough says. "You can't rush it. I mean once you turn pro, your record is your record. It's permanent. Unfortunately a lot of people put faith in a fighter's record. They look at it and think they know how good or bad he is because of that simple set of numbers."

McDonough looks from one end of the gym to the other, which only requires a small turn of his head.

"We try to keep them out of the pro

ranks until they're one hundred percent ready," he continues. "The last thing they need, or this gym needs for that matter, is someone going into a fight unprepared. That preparation takes time. These are perishable skills that have to be mastered over a long period of time."

**JUST THEN AARON** Riley, who was a perfect example of this philosophy, rolls out of the Sityodtong B&B in a pair of shorts and white t-shirt, looking like he just woke up. Riley is only twenty-eight years old, but has thirty-three fights to his credit. He's been training for nine years, but still recognizes that he had much more to learn, especially in the wake of a three-fight losing streak. He gets his opportunity to expand on his knowledge a few moments later when DellaGrotte and the pros arrive.

Riley is the focus of the sparring session, which consists of five rounds of five minutes each. Jorge Rivera, Tateki Matsuda, and a variety of other fighters take Riley to his limits, but each time he responds with courage and determination while DellaGrotte barks out commands, like "Turn the cornaaa, Aaron," and, "Niiice, kid...now you're getting it." Having seen Riley fight before, I think he looks less like the guy who lost to Ryan Schultz at the International Fight League Finals six months prior and more like the kid who took Robbie Lawler to the brink in a 2002 slugfest at UFC 37.

Watching DellaGrotte work with him makes it clear that he has a talent for bringing out the best in his guys as long as they listen to him. When DellaGrotte speaks, Riley acts...and it works. He continually gets the better of his sparring partners and earns repeated praise from DellaGrotte. It is a symbiotic relationship, but at the same time it is really nothing outside the boundaries of any good fighter-trainer combination. Instead of criticizing Sityodtong's size, I start to wonder if it is actually its X factor. The limited space has to have some sort of beneficial effect on the training. But how? The small ring seems disorienting and there is no full-sized cage. These two factors alone must have cre-

ated a false sense of space in a real fight.

"None of my guys are runners because we don't have room to run," DellaGrotte explains after the open gym session. "My guy's timing and accuracy are sharper because they're forced to fight in a phone booth. It teaches them head movement and footwork because there's not enough room to get away from the guy you're sparring with."

Even if used to his advantage, the tiny gym still doesn't seem fitting. DellaGrotte is undeniably one of the best trainers in MMA, yet there is hardly a smaller facility in the entire sport.

"The gym is not the recipe for the wins," DellaGrotte says as we kick back in the kitchenette he once prepared Spaghetti-O's in. "A lot of the great gyms that I went to in Thailand that had sick fighters and champions were shitholes. As much as I want to get out of this basement...as much as I want the big globo-gym...and as much as I think I deserve it, not just for me, but for the name of Sityodtong, it's not a necessity to be successful. I wouldn't have that personal touch that I have right now with everybody."

He scratches his arms as Riley enters to retrieve his shower shoes. "A while back I thought that bigger was better and I wanted that, but to me the important thing is winning fights and keeping the team rolling."

And that is the heart of the matter. The warehouse gyms and chain McDojo's aren't what the man from Somerville is about. A palatial training facility would be a hollow, materialistic victory compared to the reputation of Sityodtong and the legacy of Mark DellaGrotte.

"God keeps me going," he says. "My faith that I was put on this earth to do what I do keeps me going. My family motivates the shit out of me. I want to do well for my family so my kid brother can see me on TV and say, 'That's my brother,' and when my kid says his name is DellaGrotte, people ask, 'Are you Mark's son?' I don't care if I die with a pocketful of sand, I really don't. But I want the name of DellaGrotte to be remembered in history."

Kids and fighters aren't the only ones who need reinforcement.