



GREG NELSON



MARC DELLAGROTTE



ERIK PAULSON



GREG JACKSON

A NEW BREED OF MMA TRAINER IS RAISING THE BAR OF THE MEN IN THE CAGE.

By Kelly Crigger

Four Aces

Your favorite fighter strides toward the Octagon dangerously close to the fans as they grope at him or stretch to get their mug in the camera shot. There is a man behind the fighter looking more concerned than focused. He's the trainer, someone who's agonized over the game plan they've practiced and who has just as much invested in this fight as the man in the gloves. Except for the occasional shout out after a victory, he lives in relative anonymity.

Four men who have found satisfaction in coaching, training and mentoring some of today's best fighters represent a new breed of martial-arts guru. Unlike the single-discipline first-generation coaches of 1990s MMA, Mark DellaGrotte, Greg Nelson, Erik Paulson and Greg Jackson bring a well-rounded eclecticism to the game. Striving to develop new skills and strategies, these four men are shaping the sport during an era of rising stakes and rapid expansion.

Mark DellaGrotte: PRESERVING THE ART

If Mark DellaGrotte were fighting professionally today, his nickname would be The Gatekeeper. After years of studying Muay Thai, DellaGrotte was appointed by Master Yodtong Senanan to teach, conserve and promote the art as his U.S. representative. DellaGrotte established the Sityodtong U.S.A. martial arts academy in Somerville, Mass., and quickly found an able student in lightweight contender Kenny Florian. Since then, he's trained several UFC fighters including Pete Spratt, Marcus Davis and Stephan Bonnar.

Inside and outside the gym, DellaGrotte advocates the samurai belief that chaos in life causes poor performance in battle. "There's no doubt that when fight time comes, if you live good, you'll do good," he says. "If your foundation is poured right, then the house is stable. Imperfections in training equal imperfections everywhere else." His view on the balance of life comes from getting involved with the wrong crowd at an early age. Searching for an outlet during his tumultuous upbringing, DellaGrotte developed a respect and a passion for the ways of jeet kune do, jiu-jitsu and Muay Thai. "I've had many ups and downs like most people and always turned to martial arts in those dark times. I relied on it and



DellaGrotte (above, right) frequently travels to Thailand to train at Sityodtong, the namesake of his own gym in Massachusetts. This time he brought pupil Stephan Bonnar with him (above, left).



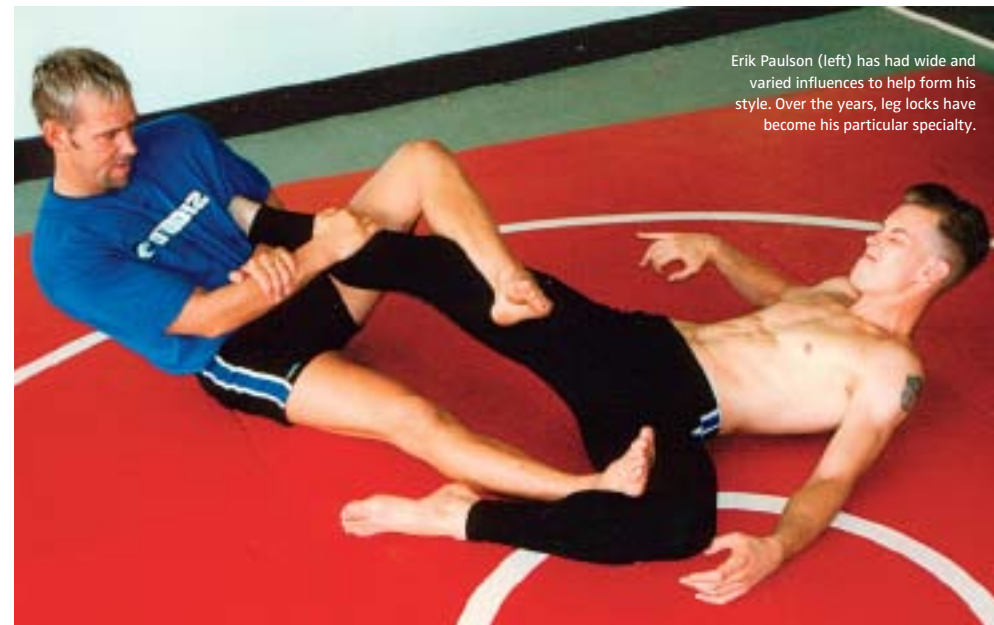
found inner peace and strength and it taught me to be a better person."

Accepting not only the physical lessons of MMA, but also the values that martial arts offer is a trademark of Sityodtong. Instead of focusing solely on short-term goals like winning the next fight, DellaGrotte and his staff establish long-term strategies to develop a fighter as a whole person based on the methods of his role model, Kru Yodtong Senanan. "He's a savior in so many ways. He's housed troubled teens in Thailand. Many families send their kids to him to keep them out of trouble. His students are his children. I try to follow his role model and be a mentor to my students and fighters."

Students are the future of martial arts and the way to preserve its teachings. A student with no background in MMA who's willing to open his mind and learn is welcome in Sityodtong; a know-it-all who is too proud to listen is not. During his time as the kickboxing instructor on "The Ultimate Fighter, Season 4," DellaGrotte had difficulty with a contestant. "This kid was adamant about doing it his own way even though it was wrong. He didn't make it to the finale. I prefer a first-timer who is willing to listen and develop and pass it to someone else."

While DellaGrotte cares deeply about his students, his training is about tough love. "He pushes you pretty good," says Florian. "I'd even say he's a perfectionist. He knows where he wants to take you and pushes you to get there."

COURTESY MARK DELLAGROTTE, PREVIOUS PAGE; LEFT TO RIGHT: RICKY NOTTENSETTE, COURTESY ERIC PAULSON; COURTESY MMAACOMBATZONE.COM; COURTESY MARK DELLAGROTTE



Erik Paulson (left) has had wide and varied influences to help form his style. Over the years, leg locks have become his particular specialty.



Erik Paulson: PIONEERS ARE COOL

While you can't find the word "overconditioned" in the dictionary, that doesn't stop Erik Paulson from using it freely. "My guys tend to be more overconditioned than underconditioned," says Paulson, the founder of Combat Submission Wrestling and trainer of world-class heavyweight Josh Barnett and young up-and-comer Cub Swanson. "No one's underconditioned in my gym. We grapple every day, and I mean

COURTESY ERIC PAULSON

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going to change the world with this," says Paulson, who became the Shooto light-heavyweight champion in 1994. Retiring from Shooto in 2000, Paulson decided to dedicate himself to training others full-time.

"He's definitely made my game better," Barnett says. "Before I only had a few skills that centered around wrestling, but with him I've improved everything."

It's the sheer volume of fighters today that stuns Paulson. With the worldwide explosion of MMA, his gyms are bursting at the seams and he's opened a second facility to meet the demand. "Everyone wants to fight today. I get so many guys off the street who want to get in the cage. It's the first thing out of their mouths. They don't realize it takes conditioning and skills."

The success of MMA today was borne on the backs of men like Paulson, who toiled many years for miniscule prize money and little notoriety. "Being a pioneer is cool, but it makes you sound old," he says. "I wish there was more money back then instead."

every day ... hard. Then we work striking and takedowns." Paulson has even coined two terms to describe his methods: "combat cross-training" and "martial athletics."

Physical conditioning is only one piece of his multifaceted approach. Taking a page from the U.S. Army, Paulson seeks to develop a strategy of "decisive point tactics," which focuses the strength of his fighter on the weakest point of his opponent. "When Josh fought Mark Hunt, I told him, 'Do not strike with him.' I told him to wrap him up and take him down and tap him out." And that's just what Barnett did to the New Zealander heavyweight during the Pride Open-Weight Grand Prix.

An accomplished MMA fighter before there was even a UFC, Paulson learned about Shooto in 1989 from its U.S. founder, Yori Nakamura, at the same time he was learning Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu in Rorion Gracie's garage. "I sat in Rorion Gracie's house when he was developing the concept for the UFC, and he said he was



Greg Nelson: ADAPT AND OVERCOME

Styles make fights, and two styles could hardly be more different than those of stout lightweight Sean Sherk and lanky welterweight Nick Thompson. But the responsibility for developing both fighters falls upon Greg Nelson, the head instructor of Minnesota Martial Arts Academy. “I am never going to fight like Sherk, and Sherk is never going to fight like me,” says BodogFight Welterweight Champion Nick Thompson. “We have different body types and do different things well. Nelson doesn’t have one cookie-cutter workout for the both of us, but he develops different workouts for every fighter.”

Adaptability is something Nelson has experience with. Diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma as well as a rare form of neurological cancer, he was physically restricted and forced to walk with a cane—not an easy pill to swallow for a former collegiate wrestler and gymnast. Unwilling to be stopped by illness, Nelson opened his academy in 1992 after years of training western boxing, Muay Thai and jeet kune do with Dan Inosanto and Erik Paulson. From all these forms, Nelson learned the value of adaptability.

“Look at Sean [Sherk], for instance. He’s not going to be the guy who’s fighting off his back, so we look at improving the other aspects of his ground game,” says Nelson. “Then you have Thompson. When he started training he had a real unorthodox style. He punched weird, he moved weird, but he also had a lot of success. So we adapted drills around that.”



Nelson has worked with his fair share of world-class fighters (top left) and has also spent plenty of time on the mats developing his own skills (above).

The best trainers see techniques that work and adapt them to their own style. Nelson, who’s trained extensively in Muay Thai, incorporates principles he’s learned from the masters of that sport. Native Muay Thai fighters find themselves in the ring monthly, a demanding schedule with a high potential for career-ending injury. For them, the need to drill without getting hurt necessitates the development of new approaches to training that reduce

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risk without sacrificing realism. Nelson learned these drills and adopted them in his academy, resulting in a lower injury rate without a loss in training value.

“I think what really sets us apart is the academy has everything under one roof,” says Nelson. “A lot of fighters have to go to this place and that for boxing, wrestling, jiu-jitsu or whatever. We’ve been able to consolidate everything in one place to offer more.”

Greg Jackson: A FAMILY AFFAIR

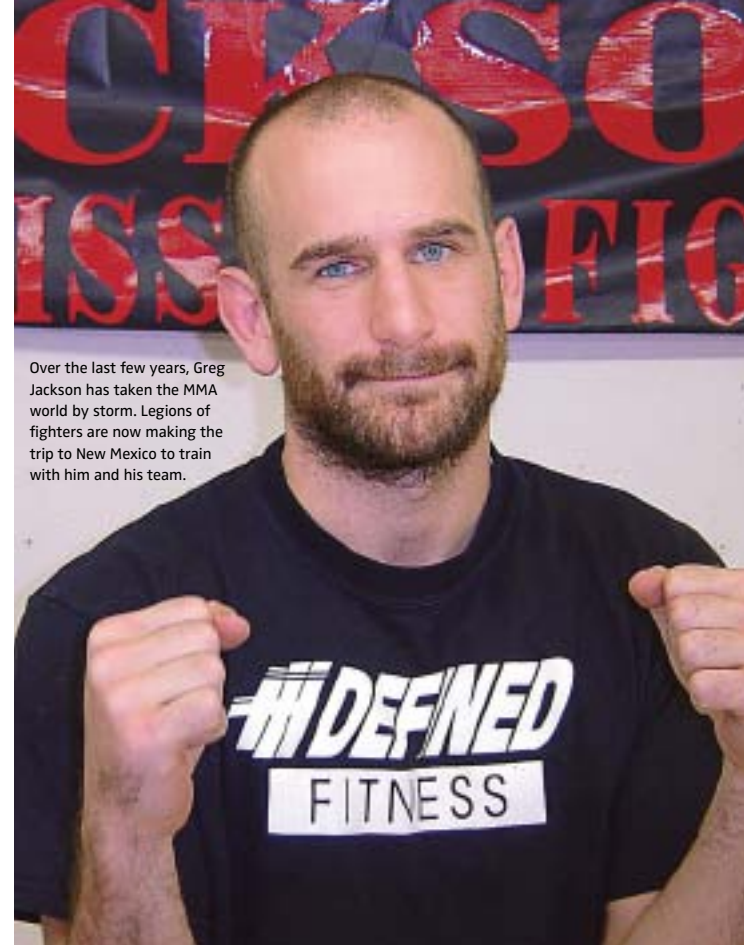
No one likes to be bullied. And when there’s no local Mr. Miyagi to mentor you, the only solution is to get beat up or get tough on your own. Greg Jackson chose the latter, teaching himself to kickbox with a friend, wrestle with family members and learn judo from a book. “Once you understand the basics of physics and geometry, it just builds from there,” says Jackson. “Half the battle is knowing how things work naturally.”

Today, Greg Jackson’s MMA academy in Albuquerque, N.M., is one of the top camps in the country—literally. It sits at 5,000 feet above sea level and bumps up against the Sandia Mountains. In the past year, Jackson has coached UFC standouts Nate Marquardt, Diego Sanchez, Rashad Evans and Keith Jardine, making him one of the most successful trainers in the sport. But for Jackson, high-altitude training is only a means to an end. “I believe in making the mind a muscle. You have to exceed your limitations in order to build your endurance and mental discipline.”

But it’s not just the combatants whose mental acuties get exercised. Where others would be content to have a fight go exactly as planned, Jackson welcomes the challenge of on-the-fly strategizing. “I get a buzz from being in the corner and entering the ring with a game plan and seeing it happen or solving problems on the spot in order to reach someone’s potential. That’s the best for me.” Keith Jardine’s upset of Forrest Griffin was certainly potential achieved. Jardine entered the fight an underdog against “The Ultimate Fighter, Season 1” winner, who’s legendary for taking punishment, and won by TKO in the first round. “We went in with a solid game plan and executed it well. Greg’s awesome to work with,” says Jardine.

It’s a warm, fuzzy cliché, but teamwork may be the key to the success of Jackson’s MMA academy. With a robust stable of fighters all training for upcoming events, it’s a challenge to spend quality time on each one. To counter this, Jackson’s fighters have a policy of closing ranks on whomever is next to fight and becoming assistant trainers. It creates an atmosphere of friendship before money. “If you put friendship, your teammates and your art first, then everything else falls into place, and that’s what we’ve got right now,” Jackson says. “It’s like playing jazz; each one has his own sound and style.”

Life skills also get team attention. Like Paulson, Nelson and DellaGrotte, Greg Jackson has a sincere desire to see a fighter develop as a person more than just as a combatant. He uses the team approach to get the best out of everyone on a personal level. “You could be the best fighter, but if you’re a jerk, then what’s the point? The personality has to be in balance.”



Over the last few years, Greg Jackson has taken the MMA world by storm. Legions of fighters are now making the trip to New Mexico to train with him and his team.

THE CHINESE CONNECTION: bruce lee and mma

Bruce Lee is the longtime hero to legions of traditional martial artists, inspiring generations of kids and adults to practice katas, reverse punches and horse stances. However, Lee’s impact on MMA tends to get overlooked. His book “Tao of Jeet Kune Do,” first published in 1973, can arguably be credited as the first mixed martial arts manual. By combining the elements of boxing, fencing and kung fu into his own style of jeet kune do (JKD), Lee crossed the once-rigid lines of three distinct combative forms and created a usable martial-arts style that sought to free his followers from narrow-minded tradition. It is no coincidence that three of the trainers featured in this story come



from serious JKD backgrounds.

“With the exceptions of rules, weight classes and rings, it was the first form of competitive MMA,” says Mark DellaGrotte. Dan Inosanto, a student of Lee’s in the 1960s, had a direct impact on the martial arts development of Erik Paulson, Greg Nelson and DellaGrotte, who each utilize his principles to this day. It was Inosanto who incorporated MMA mainstay arts Muay Thai and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu into the current JKD curriculum. “Absorb what is useful, reject what is useless, accept what is your own,” says Greg Nelson of the JKD philosophy. Erik Paulson agrees. “Dan Inosanto was developing the world of

MMA a long time ago. Back then we were just street fighting and weren’t into submissions.”

Although Bruce Lee was too small for even the lightweight division of the UFC, his impact on a sport he never lived to see remains significant.