

NEW BLOOD

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Mixed martial arts is the fastest growing sport in the world. It garners more attention and new fans daily. The emergence of so many new athletes sometimes makes it hard for fans to notice some of the fighters on the verge of making it to the next level. MMAWeekly.com takes you deep inside the sport and presents you with some of the upcoming *New Blood*.

**BY RICARDO MENDOZA
AND KELLY CRIGGER**

Damien Stelly

BY KELLY CRIGGER // PHOTO BY KEITH MILLS

Damien Stelly walked into the FIAS World Sambo Championships armed only with a desire to see how far he could go in the competition. A lifelong wrestler, he had no delusions of grandeur, but when it was all over he'd won the whole tournament in what would prove to be an omen for his fighting career and his life.

Stelly approached the Army the same way. He just wanted to do it. Born and raised in Louisiana, he was a Golden Gloves boxer and a lifelong grappler who saw the Army as a logical step in pursuing Olympic glory in wrestling, so he joined up just before 9-11. But he quickly found a love for the service and transferred to the elite 75th Ranger Regiment to kick in doors, slide down ropes and shoot his way out of a bad situation. Three combat tours later, he was transferred to the Modern Army Combatives program (MACP) to teach troops how to fight while

training himself in his spare time; and that's the interesting part.

Stelly doesn't have the luxury of training with a laundry list of marquee names, like Jackson's MMA or American Top Team. Despite that handicap, he's still amassed a 10-2 record with a big win over a game Alex Andrade at Bellator's middleweight tournament. He trains out of Fort Benning's MACP gym in between classes where he teaches soldiers how to win hand-to-hand encounters on the battlefield instead of sport fights in a cage. Although fighting is his life, he doesn't have the resources of a professional MMA camp at his disposal. Yet he's still tearing up opponents any way he can.

He's an accomplished grappler with five submission victories, but his arsenal is well rounded. He has heavy punching power that resulted in four wins by KO, cardio to go the distance and a big frame for a middleweight. His two losses are forgivable. One was by a brutal knee from current UFC contender Luiz Cane, and the other was his second fight that he dropped by decision due to simple inexperience. If he were to move to a top-five MMA gym and get

individual, focused attention, his potential impact on the sport is unlimited. But he won't.

"I'm a soldier first," Stelly said. "I want to show that soldiers can hang in there with the best in the sport, too. There are so many hungry guys out there in the Army who don't get the time to train, but would be awesome in the cage if they did. I want to go out there and win for them."

If he continues to win, a clash of fellow soldiers may be on the horizon. In 2005, Stelly bested Army Green Beret and Strikeforce fighter Tim Kennedy by a slim margin at the Army MMA tournament. Both men have evolved since that day, but that early fight could be an omen of things to come.

Name: Damien Stelly
Professional Record: 10-2
Division: Light Heavyweight





Tyler Toner

BY RICARDO MENDOZA // PHOTOS BY APRIL PISHNA

Fighting out of the Rocky Mountain state of Colorado, Tyler Toner has solidified his position as one of the better mixed martial arts prospects in the region. He has spent most of his career in the well-respected Ring of Fire organization, going 6-1 in the promotion with his only loss coming at the hands of WEC bantamweight Scott Jorgensen. One of the bigger accolades up to this point in his career

is that he is the current Ring of Fire Young Guns featherweight champion.

Most fighters out of Colorado are rather quiet and keep to themselves, but Toner breaks that mold. He is young and brash, which gives him a colorful personality. In Toner's latest fight, he defended his title against David Fuentes and, because of several injuries on the card, made his way up to the co-main event of the evening. After getting tagged a couple of times by the challenger, Toner let loose and ended the fight in the first round with a vicious flurry of knees that dropped his opponent to the mat.

"He was really the first stand-up fighter that hit me a couple times in the fight, and kind of woke me up and made me mad a little bit," Toner said. "I kind of went after him (after that)."

With World Extreme Cagefighting concentrating its efforts on the smaller weight divisions, Toner could soon find himself in the big show. Another possibility for the young fighter could be Strikeforce, a promotion in which he has already competed. As the promotion grows and continues to run a myriad of shows, it can only be a matter of time before he returns to face tougher competition.

"I really enjoyed fighting for Strikeforce,"

he said. "I had a great fight there, and they treated me well. I felt I put on a good performance, and hopefully I can hear from them in the future," Toner said regarding a possible return to Strikeforce.

Toner has set himself up for success as he trains with some of the best fighters in Colorado like UFC middleweight contender Nate Marquardt, *Ultimate Fighter* veteran Eliot Marshall and Strikeforce lightweight Duane "Bang" Ludwig. One thing that he has learned from them is a hard work ethic.

"I've been talking to Eliot, Duane and everybody about it, and I just want to fight a lot," he stated.

"I feel like I'm getting better every day. We're working on my skills. I have such awesome trainers and I just want to fight a lot, get a lot of experience and start to take bigger steps up toward the top."

Soon enough, Toner will get the chance to show what he is really made of, and the MMA world may never be the same.

Name: Tyler Toner
Professional Record: 8-1
Division: Featherweight



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// PHOTO BY KEITH MILLS



Kris McCray

BY KELLY CRIGGER // PHOTO BY KEITH MILLS

“We call that a take-up instead of a take-down!” Kris McCray told the crowd at the Ultimate Warrior Challenge after violently defeating Ronnie Wuest by lifting him in the air, slamming him to the mat, and slapping on a rear naked choke in a mere 39 seconds. With an amateur record of 9-0 and a professional record of 3-0, McCray is an exciting up-and-comer in a division desperately in need of resuscitation ... middleweight.

Working and training at Gold Medal Grappling in Woodbridge, Va., McCray first fought in the pro-am promotion Operation Octagon, which specializes in giving fighters with military backgrounds a break in MMA. As an Army Reservist, he was a natural for the show and quickly tore through his competition, winning the middleweight belt and defending it four times before mov-

ing to the professional ranks in the biggest MMA show on the East Coast - the Ultimate Warrior Challenge.

In that promotion, he's had three fights, winning all of them by rear naked choke in the first round. He attacks aggressively, getting his opponent to the ground and transitioning to his back to end the fight. It isn't a revolutionary style, but it's one that has been working so far.

“Everyone thinks they can give up their back and defend the submission instead of defending the ground-and-pound, so they turn over - and that's when I get them,” McCray said.

It would be easy to label him as just another ground-and-pounder, but the “Savage” is anything but predictable. In his last fight, McCray got Wuest's back but couldn't achieve a position of leverage for the submission, so he resorted to an unorthodox skill.

“I threw a bunch of kidney punches to get him to lift his head up,” McCray said. “I couldn't sneak an arm under his head be-

cause he had it too low, so I punched him in the kidney so he would lift his head.”

Smart. Most of McCray's fights have ended in the first round, but his training regimen is designed to go the distance. Like so many smaller gyms Gold Medal Grappling conditions its guys to outlast a three-round fight by putting them through a ringer of pain. It's a template pioneered by the Couture-Liddell generation that's been improved upon by the up-and-coming generation of “TUFers,” which may be the next stop on the Kris McCray train.

His potential recently caught the eye of the juggernaut of the sport at the last *Ultimate Fighter* tryouts in Seattle on April 6. McCray got through the grueling trials in one piece and is currently waiting to hear what fate has in store for him. **!**

<p>Name: Kris McCray Professional Record: 3-0 Division: Middleweight</p>
