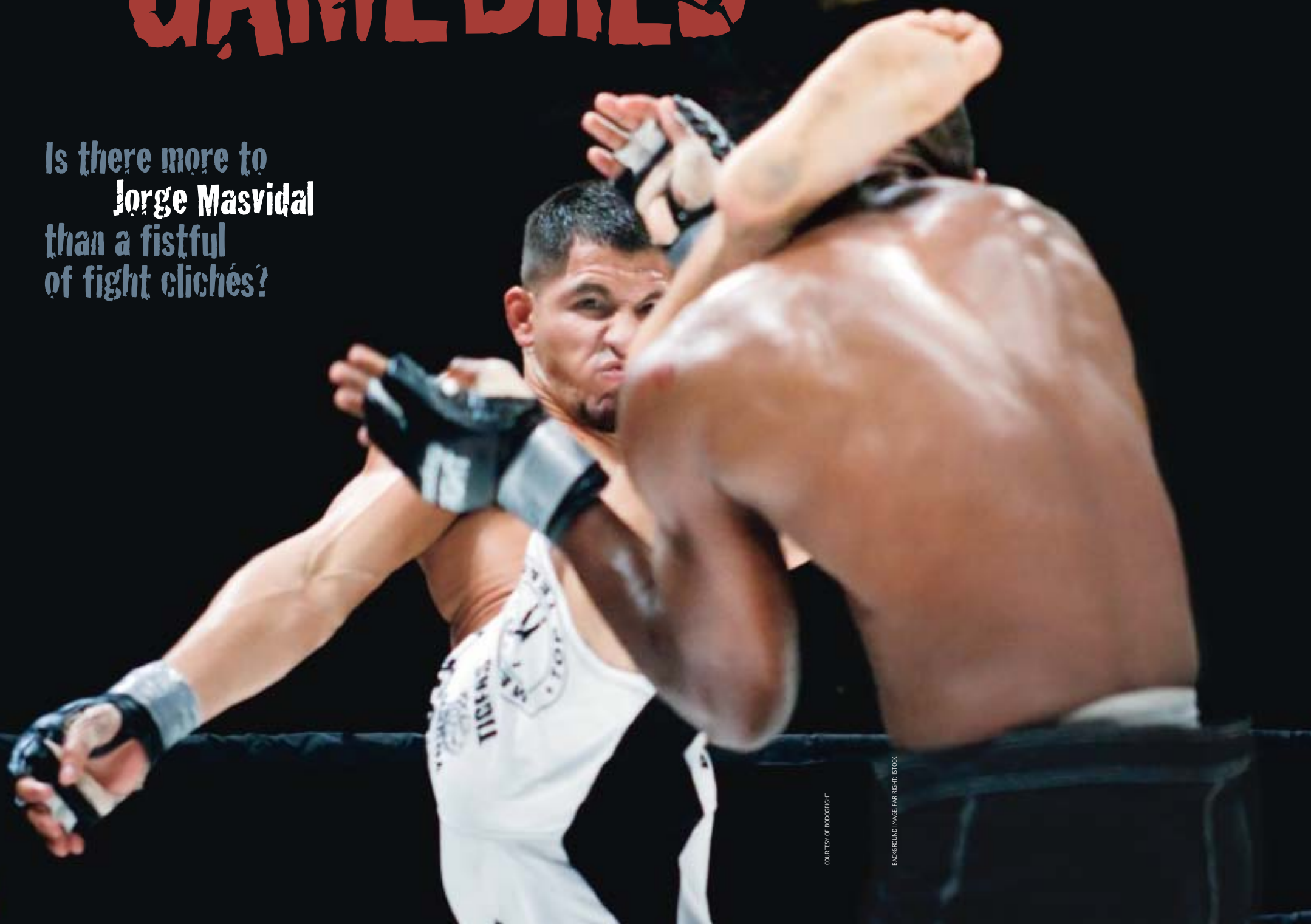


TAMING GAMEBRED

Is there more to
Jorge Masvidal
than a fistful
of fight clichés?



COURTESY OF BODOGFIGHT

BACKGROUND IMAGE, FAR RIGHT: ISTOCK

AT FIRST GLANCE, Jorge “Gamebred” Masvidal seems to embody every stereotype of the inner-city-youth-saved-by-sports scenario. He’s got the sideways brim, a pit bull for a pet and more attitude than Terrell Owens. His father spent 18 years in the pen for drug trafficking, leaving him to be raised with a minimum of supervision by his mother and several cousins. He dropped out of school at 14 and got fired from every job he ever held. If it wasn’t for his un-gangsta Nissan Maxima, you might write him off as just another wayward 20-something pimping for his piece of the high life. (By his own admission, the Maxima is just temporary until he gets his first million-dollar paycheck and a pair of Hummers dripping with bikini-clad groupies.) If not for mixed martial arts, he might now be picking out a black suit and velvet coffin liner for a “Scarface”-like exit from the physical world.

So why in the world should fight fans root for this guy?

BY KELLY CRIGGER



Masvidal vs. Edwards
BodogFight
July 14, 2007

Yves Edwards was a major step up in competition for Masvidal, as he had previously fought for the UFC lightweight title. It was sweet irony when Masvidal used a high kick to KO the kickboxing ace in the second round.

Well, if you look beyond the bling

and braggadocio, you might just see other facets of Masvidal's personality that aren't generally on view in the very public arena of MMA. There's his solid professionalism, manifested in a dedicated training regimen and a preference for challenging matchups rather than lame-duck opponents. There's his patient willingness to share his hard-earned ring advice with students. There's his unshakeable loyalty to family, including forgiveness and compassion for his father, with whom he now lives.

It's true that the disciplined life of a professional fighter probably saved Masvidal from himself. Growing up in Kimbo Slice's hometown of Miami, his personal skill set suited him to only one real career choice: street fighter. Now a man-child of 23, he can still be seen on a pair of YouTube videos beating the crap out of another street brawler named Ray Powers in South Florida barrios.

He claims he needed the experience of a couple of unregulated fights to enhance his training, even though that makes about as much sense as lighting your hair on fire to determine the flash point of mousse.

"I wouldn't do that now," Masvidal concedes after an intense training session at American Top Team north of Miami. He's dripping with sweat and gasping for air as he tries to remove his gloves with his teeth. "If I had a chance I wouldn't do

Masvidal vs. Wisniewski
BodogFight, August 22, 2006
Masvidal decisions rugged Keith Wisniewski after beating his brother, Justin, two years prior.



it again, you know? I could have gotten real hurt." He was paid nothing for the street fights and risked serious injury both times since the matches were completely illegal and void of any protective gear. But ever since ending his academic career before it really started, he'd heard a calling to fight.

He walked out of school in the ninth grade, middle finger held high because "it just wasn't my thing," and started fighting. At 17 he entered Eric Castellanos' Young Tigers gym, a gritty Rocky Balboa-style facility, strapped on a pair of gloves and trained his ass off. Young Tigers was established for guys like Masvidal, who needed an outlet for their aggression and a place to keep them out of trouble. It's little more than a garage with donated weights and mechanically unsound equipment, but it's also full of good intentions. Castellanos funded the space above a Latin market out of his own pocket.

Masvidal admits that Castellanos has been a positive influence. "Not just in the gym, but he pushes me every day to make sure that I'm training. If I'm not training and I'm taking time off for whatever reason,



he makes sure that I stay out of trouble, you know? Probably out of everybody I know, he's like a brother." Back home, however, there was always tension.



Masvidal's mother tried to hold him to standards, but without school to provide discipline or a father to crack the whip, Jorge was soon dictating his own pace and rewriting the curriculum in the school of hard knocks. At least part of his anger was directed at his AWOL father. His mother told Jorge he was away serving his country.

"Until I was 13, I thought he was in the military," he says. "I was pissed 'cause I thought he wasn't sending any money home. I know they make money in the military... and here we were broke and poor with no money."

Once he'd learned the truth, Masvidal rationalized that his father was just trying to provide for his family, even if he had to break the law to do it. And so he began mending fences by visiting him in prison. Even though his parents are split up, it's obvious that he cares for them both and, equally important, cares what they think of him. "I see my mom every day. No matter what, she's always there for me. When I go out of town, she's the first to take the dog. She's my number one, and she knows it. I love my pop, too."

"The reason he wants to make money is so he can take care of his family. You can't get on a guy for that," says Liborio.

Masvidal made his MMA debut in

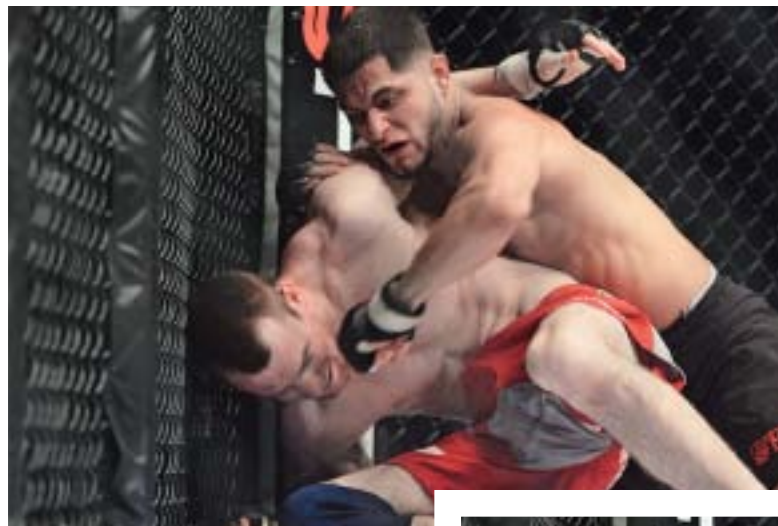
2003 with a KO victory over Brandon Bledsoe at the Absolute Fighting Championships 3, the start of an impressive five-win streak before Raphael Assuncao won a unanimous decision. Masvidal quickly rebounded with a high-profile TKO of UFC star Joe Lauzon in 2005. But realizing he needed to elevate his training in order to continue his ascent up the MMA ladder, he gravitated in 2007 to the best MMA training camp in the Miami area, and arguably the whole country: American Top Team.

ATT head trainer Ricardo Liborio is another mentor who was quick to recognize Masvidal's upside. "I like this guy," Liborio says. "He comes across bad, but he's a good kid inside. He has good intentions. The real reason he wants to make money is so he can take care of his family. They took care of him for a

long time and he wants to pay them back. You can't get on a guy for that."

But as much as Liborio and his world-class team strive to distance Masvidal from the street, they can't always take the street out of Masvidal. One ever-present reminder of his gritty roots is the official stamp of rebellion he got at 18: the tattoo across his neck that reads "Gamebred." He chose that word out of his love for dogs and his respect for their tenacity. He courts the stereotype by owning a pit bull, but subverts it through his disdain for dog fighting. "They're the best dogs in the world. They get a bad rap from people who say they attack kids and s--t, but those are the ones that no one takes care of. I just think it's cool to have a dog that will fight to the death for you." Unfortunately, the \$50 tattoo obtained at someone's house didn't exactly come out looking like Miami Ink. "It's supposed to say 'Gamebred,'" Masvidal says. "But it looks more like an 'S'; some people say an 'H.' I always get s--t for it. I get 'Hamburger,' 'Hambread,' 'Homebred.' I'm gonna wait 'til I get my money, and I'm gonna get it tattooed nicely, you know?"

Masvidal vs. Lee
Strikeforce
Playboy Mansion
September 29, 2007
Masvidal and Matt Lee, both previously of BodogFight, met at the first MMA bouts ever hosted at the legendary Playboy Mansion. Even though Lee had gone the distance with former BodogFight champ Eddie Alvarez, he lasted only 93 seconds with Masvidal.



**Masvidal vs. Healy
Strikeforce at the Dome
February 23, 2008**

Masvidal had his hands full with the durable Ryan Healy, but was able to remain the aggressor throughout all three rounds. Masvidal got the “W,” but injured his shin and had to pull out of a Strikeforce title fight.



Masvidal is also relentlessly, defiantly street in his preference for the Tito Ortiz method of public relations, whereby any press is good press and trash talk pushes the boundaries of honesty.

“Some people don’t say what’s on their minds. I just say what’s on my mind. People are gonna hate me or love me. They might say, ‘I hate him and I hope he gets his ass kicked,’ but those people will still be standing on their chairs rooting for me to get my ass kicked. If they love me, they’re still gonna be standing on their chairs. Either way, it’s gonna be exciting and I’m gonna be making a lot of money.”

Every sport has its soft-spoken ambassadors, like Tim Duncan and Randy Couture, and its over-

the-top attention whores, like Floyd Mayweather Jr. Masvidal’s approach is to just be honest, no matter how that honesty is taken or how it will affect him in the end.

On one side of American Top Team is a sign that reads “Principles of a Black Belt: Self-Control, Modesty, Courtesy, Integrity, Perseverance, Indomitable Spirit.” Masvidal has seen it

100 times, but it hasn’t yet become a guidepost for his life. “Should I be trying to live my life like that? Yeah. Do I? No. I’m just me, you know?”

On some level, Masvidal, who still lives in hedonistic Miami, realizes that in order to achieve his goals, he has to make sacrifices. That means ratcheting up the discipline and dialing down the wild behavior, including and especially drinking. “It brings up my weight, that’s the thing,” Masvidal says. “I used to drink more, hang out with my friends more, stay out a lot. I never did drink or just get drunk when I started fighting. I stopped cold turkey and only drink now on occasion, like if I win a big fight or it’s my birthday or my mom’s birthday.”

To help keep him focused, his mother insisted he get his GED, saying he needed to be educated to survive in the real world. He didn’t want to, but admits that she “busted my ass” until he did. Apparently the GED went to his head, because whenever there’s a camera around, Masvidal is sure to strike a “thinking man” pose, putting his hand on his chin and gazing into the distance like Rodin’s statue.

Mixed martial arts is nothing if not a cerebral sport, wherein fighters who rely on brute force and ignorance are quickly dispatched. Quick hands and feet and an impressive skill set that includes superb striking and some very respectable Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu more than compensate for Masvidal’s lack of a formal education. His decision to compete in MMA, in which he’s amassed a 13-2 record, makes him part of a new breed of fighter that recognizes the marketing potential in this quickly growing sport.

Now part of San Jose’s Strikeforce organization, Masvidal’s seven-fight win streak—which includes victories over three UFC veterans and a highlight-reel KO of knockout artist Yves Edwards—is good enough to get him a title shot. Unfortunately, an injury to his shin postponed his March meeting with Strikeforce Lightweight Champion Gilbert Melendez until later this year.

Masvidal may come off like the MMA

version of “Neon” Deion Sanders, but one suspects that his bad-boy attitude is at least partly manufactured as a psychological tool to psyche himself up and psyche opponents out. And while he cheerfully admits to being in the sport to make money, his motivations aren’t purely selfish. He wants to return the favor to those who took care of him growing up. Masvidal has a place in his life for his newly freed father, despite the latter’s absence during Jorge’s formative years.

“I want my parents to be proud of me, and I want

The Ink of No Return

The beauty of a tattoo is in the eye of the beholder, and its placement can be just as important as the art itself. Getting ink done in areas like the hand, neck or face makes the art public knowledge, like Congressional salaries. Only don’t expect to get a job working in the Capitol rotunda once you get that pair of flaming dice across your trachea. The hand grenade on UFC welterweight John Koppenhaver’s neck is not only impossible to hide, but it’s also a billboard of bad tidings that few corporate entities would look favorably upon. But the fact is, most young MMA fighters aren’t exactly the Fortune 500 demographic.

“My hands and neck are inked, but I’m also in the business,” says King of the Cage Super Heavyweight Champion and tattoo artist Eric Pele. “I think some guys get a neck tattoo to make a statement, which is cool if it’s something you believe in. But

some guy off the streets doing it is stupid.” Making a statement is tough in a sport where the mere act of stepping into the cage is itself a bold declaration of dedication and *cajones*. And tattoos have become so *de rigeur* in MMA as to almost make them passé. But the neck tattoo is still special. It’s a throwback to a time when

that career in accounting. “Many fighters get tattoos because their friends do. They don’t think about the consequences,” says Pele. “I’m almost 40. I’ve been working on my body suit over the years as my life progresses, but these young guys just do what everyone else is doing.” Tattoos above the neckline are far from



body art represented a nearly pathological disinterest in the normative social strata. Getting a neck tattoo is a bit like the explorer Hernando Cortez burning the ships once they landed in Mexico: there’s no going back to

being haute couture, and actually show a dedication above and beyond the wannabe with the fraternity crest on his ankle. “Tattoos on the neck are stingers, man,” Pele laughs. “They freakin’ hurt!”

to show the world that Latinos aren’t all drug dealers,” he says.

Masvidal is fortunate to have found MMA, which has helped keep him behind ring ropes rather than behind steel bars, but lest anyone be tempted to view his life story through a “Jerry Springer Final Thought on Society” perspective, part of Masvidal will always be the unrepentant street fighter who sets out to deliberately inflict pain and suffering.

“I’m gonna try to hurt somebody,” he admits. “I’m not trying to mess with no one’s career, but I am trying to hurt them. I’m trying to make the ref stop the fight.”

That single-minded ferocity is largely what draws fans in ever-increasing numbers to his fights, whether they’re rooting for or against him. And that rough and brutal attitude is what makes Masvidal a natural for the sport.

“I’ve been doing this since I was 10, you know? It’s what I do.” 🤖