



Ulysses' Voyage

A GUY WHO HAS YET TO LAND A PUNCH COULD BE THE FUTURE OF MMA'S SMALLEST DIVISION.

By Kelly Crigger

Ulysses Gomez has thrown two punches in his MMA career and neither one landed. Yet the Palace Fighting Championships is gambling that the young grappling superstar can bring notoriety to a division that's virtually unknown, even among MMA's hard-core fans. So far Gomez's life in the cage consists of two fights, two submissions and 92 seconds of mixed martial arts, but it's his potential impact on the flyweight division that has the sport buzzing.

Sibling Rivalry

"Where I come from you either boxed, played soccer or did construction," Gomez says of his upbringing in

Las Vegas, Nev. "My dad always wanted one of us to be a soccer player and [my brother] is a lot better than me. But I hate losing, especially to him, so I switched sports."

With more than enough boxers in his neighborhood and an aversion to getting punched in the face, Gomez focused on grappling in 2001 at the age of 18 because it was something no one else was doing. Within a couple of years he had won a slew of tournaments, including Grapplers Quest, the North American Grappling Association (NAGA) and the International Gracie Jiu-Jitsu Federation tournament. "I'm really proud of winning Grapplers Quest because

three or four years in a row I took second. Nobody thought I could win, but I did."

In 2005, Gomez started to take baby steps toward MMA. He moved into Pankration, a sport that combined grappling with strikes to the body and offered him a chance to evaluate whether or not he wanted to pursue MMA. He won the California Pankration Championships and earned a spot on the 2007 U.S. Pankration Team. Representing the United States, Gomez won the FILA World Wrestling Games in Antalya, Turkey, by dominating the men's 66-kilogram division.

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Shorting the Market

News of Gomez's ability and his potential impact on the mighty mites of MMA traveled fast. So Christian Printup, the president of Palace Fighting Championships, traveled just as fast to sign him.

"I knew he had the goods to transfer over to MMA," says Printup. "Also his personality stood out, which is important because I think a guy has to be the complete package to fight in MMA—physical, mental, everything. He has a charisma that some might think is cocky, but I think it's just confidence."

The drawback to being a flyweight is the dearth of publicity and the lack of depth in the domestic division. Anyone's rankings of the world's best 125-pound fighters is two things: short and mostly Japanese.

"I want to make it a better division," says Printup. "I'm trying to make it known that there's a home for those guys in the U.S. There's a tremendous amount of talent here."

A star needs competition, and the PFC has sought out talented flyweights and has virtually built a division around Gomez. In an expanding MMA market where promotions rise quickly and fall even faster, it was a bold move for Printup, but one that promised him his very own niche. Flyweight is a different kind of MMA, where speed is life, strength is a luxury, and a weight difference of just a single pound can be an advantage. With a stocky 5-foot-5-inch-frame, Gomez walks around at 160 pounds. He's big for a flyweight, and strong. That strength and his advanced grappling skills make him a multidimensional threat. "I think if Ulysses was a baseball player, he'd be what they call a five-tool player because he's very well rounded," Printup says.



Big Fish, Little Pond
Ulysses Gomez (top) not only brings a superior grappling acumen to each one of his fights, but also a size advantage. The Las Vegas native, who makes the flyweight limit of 126 pounds, walks around closer to 160 pounds when he's not training for a fight.

The Phantom Punches

Gomez's first two opponents, Hector Sandoval and Greg McDowell, never knew what submitted them. In 41 seconds Gomez choked out McDowell, and then armbarred Sandoval in just 51. It's a good bet his future opponents will take that into consideration, but Gomez has another surprise for them.

"Everyone thinks I'm the guy who can't strike right now, which is cool because when I do people will be surprised," says Gomez.

Every fighter faces a moment of truth when he gets punched in the face for the first time. All the training, preparation and emotion come to a vortex when he



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feels real pain and must overcome it and stick to his game plan. Conversely, the first time he lands a big punch he faces the same threat from getting either too eager and charging headlong or too passive and not following it up. When Gomez takes one on the chin or lands one in his opponent’s face, it will be a cross-roads in his young MMA career. That’s something Printup isn’t worried about. “His boxing skills are legit,” Printup says. “He’s been training with pro boxers and he’s good.”

Only The Lonely

After two professional MMA fights, Gomez’s foray into the sport hasn’t been everything he thought it would be. “Training for fights is real lonely, man,” he says. “You work a lot by yourself and you realize you’re doing it for those guys around you more than you’re doing it for yourself. You don’t want to let those guys down or disappoint the people who believe in you.”

Loneliness is something he’ll have to get used to if he wants to achieve his dream. Like Urijah Faber and Anderson Silva in their divisions, Gomez wants to be the first image people conjure up when they think of flyweights. For now, he’ll continue to sharpen those five-tool skills and make the cut down to 125 pounds until one of three things happens:

“Either I’ll get too big for the division and can’t cut weight; or there will be no one who’s competition and I’ll move up; or there will be one guy who I just can’t beat, like with Anderson Silva and Rich Franklin,” he says.

Outgrowing the division seems the most likely outcome, since Gomez is 25 years old and already cuts 35 pounds to make flyweight. Whatever the outcome, Ulysses Gomez is a small guy who will have a bigger impact on MMA than he would have had on the construction industry. 🖊️

Useless Knowledge

“When I was young, my friend Liz got real mad at me,” says Ulysses Gomez. “She was yelling at me, and when she tried to say my name she couldn’t. She just kept saying ‘Useless’ over and over again. Marc [Laimon] heard the story and thought it was hilarious and just kept calling me that.” Here’s some Useless knowledge about the best of the lighter weights in MMA.

Miguel Torres

“Gangster! He’s straight up money. He’s easily the best guy at [135 pounds]. His big advantage is his height. Fighting him is hard because of his reach. I’d have to avoid his jab and close the distance on him real quick and get on top of him.”

Jeff Curran

“I heard he’s dropping down to 135. He’s got good boxing and jiu-jitsu. I would try to push the pace on him and tire him out. I wouldn’t be able to get him down the first round so I wouldn’t even try. I’d bang with him for a while and then later ground-and-pound him.”

Manny Tapia

“That guy’s impressive. I always think he’s going to lose and then he shows you something new. You have to keep him on his feet and then take him

down later, but he always has strong hands. I’d let him get comfortable on his feet and then take him down when he wasn’t expecting it.”

Antonio Banuelos

“I grappled him once. He’s real tough to submit and hard to take down. He’s real scrappy and short like me. I’d have to take him down and pound him out right away. He’s got a lot of heart, though. He doesn’t stop and he’s great on top, so don’t let him get there.”

Brian Bowles

“He’s like Tapia, man. He always shows me something new and he’s a tough guy. It’s hard to stay with him because he keeps you guessing. He’s weird because he doesn’t always have the best performance but he always wins. I think you have to put him on his back.”