

THE TOP 20 MMA Gyms in America

Some places just kick more ass than others
BY KELLY CRIGGER

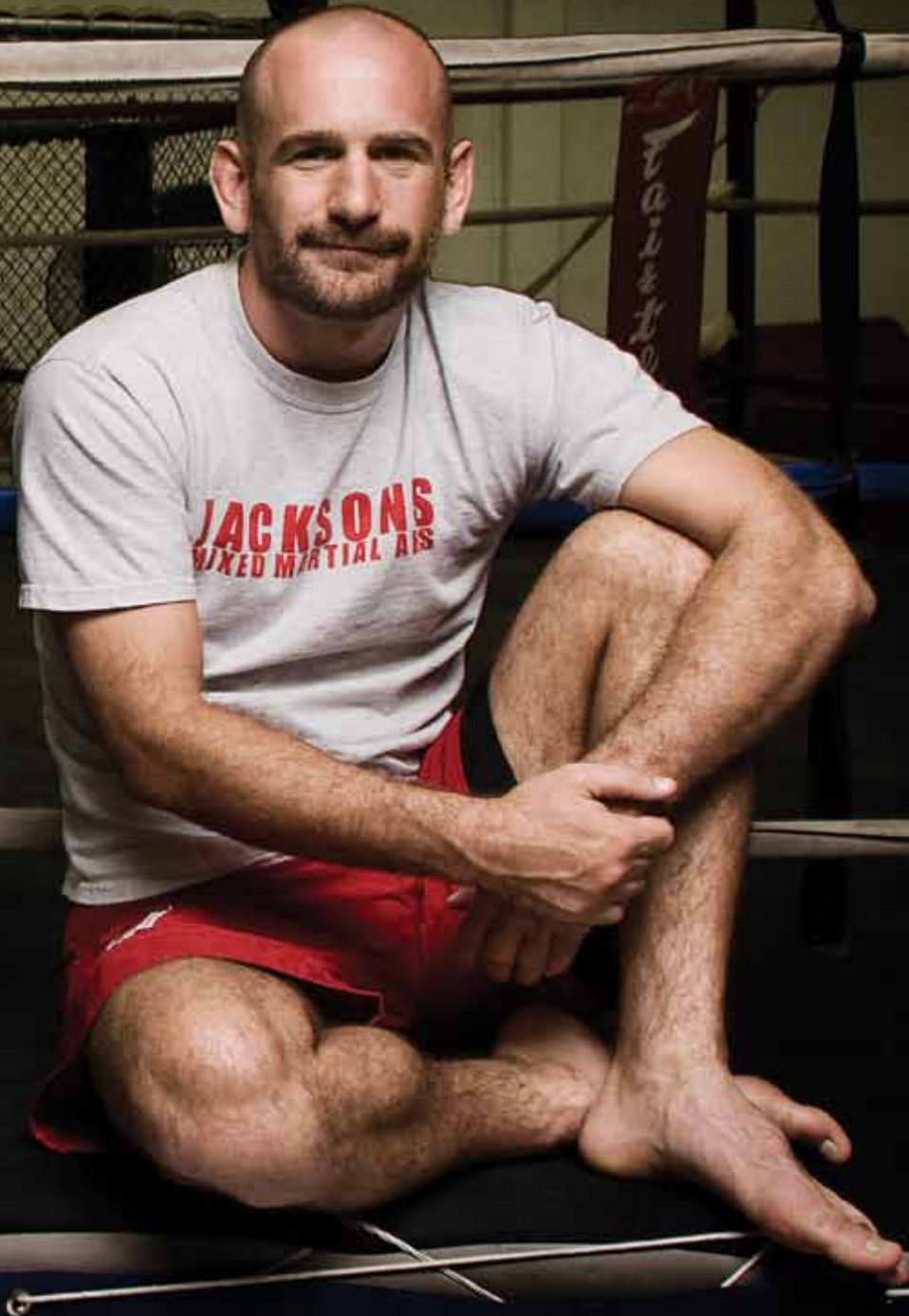
Champions gravitate toward each other. Fortunately for MMA, the sport has grown to a point where ultra-talented fighters and trainers are no longer restricted to only a handful of facilities like they were five years ago. Before the 2005 explosion of MMA, there were less than ten gyms producing all the top tier talent of the sport. Today thousands of dojos have removed the words “Karate, Kung Fu, and Rex Kwon Do” from their windows and replaced them with MMA. So with the rapid growth of gyms across the country, which ones have proven themselves to be the best in terms of contenders produced and facilities offered? Here’s our top 20:

Note – Before anyone cries foul because Black House isn’t on the list, read the words of powerful MMA manager Ed Soares, who admits Black House is simply a training facility for a few select individuals. “The guys that we represent, they have their own teams. What we’re doing is this Black House is going to be the name of the facility that we’re going to have in Los Angeles where all the guys that we represent are going to train at because all of the guys that we represent pretty much train together, too. When they’re in Los Angeles, they’re all going to be training at Black House.” Sounds like having an apartment for your girlfriend behind your wife’s back.

1. JACKSON'S MMA

Greg Jackson doesn't have a Midas touch, but every fighter he agrees to train shows marked improvement. Before MMA got big, Jackson's MMA boasted more grappling trophies than Hugh Hefner's collection of girlfriends. Beside veterans Rashad Evans, Nate Marquardt, and Joey Villaseñor, Jackson's has a new crop of recruits making names for themselves in every MMA promotion like Jon Jones and Rolles Gracie. Jackson's striking coach, Mike Winkeljohn is a master in his own right with more pugilistic credentials than China. With a boxing ring and cage, Jackson's has everything a fighter needs under one roof, but if that isn't enough, Jackson has an alliance with Renzo Gracie Jiu Jitsu in New York City, Tristar Martial Arts Center in Montreal, and Grudge Training Center in Denver so his fighters don't stagnate. With these facilities and credentials, it's hard to dispute Jackson's place on top of the MMA heap.

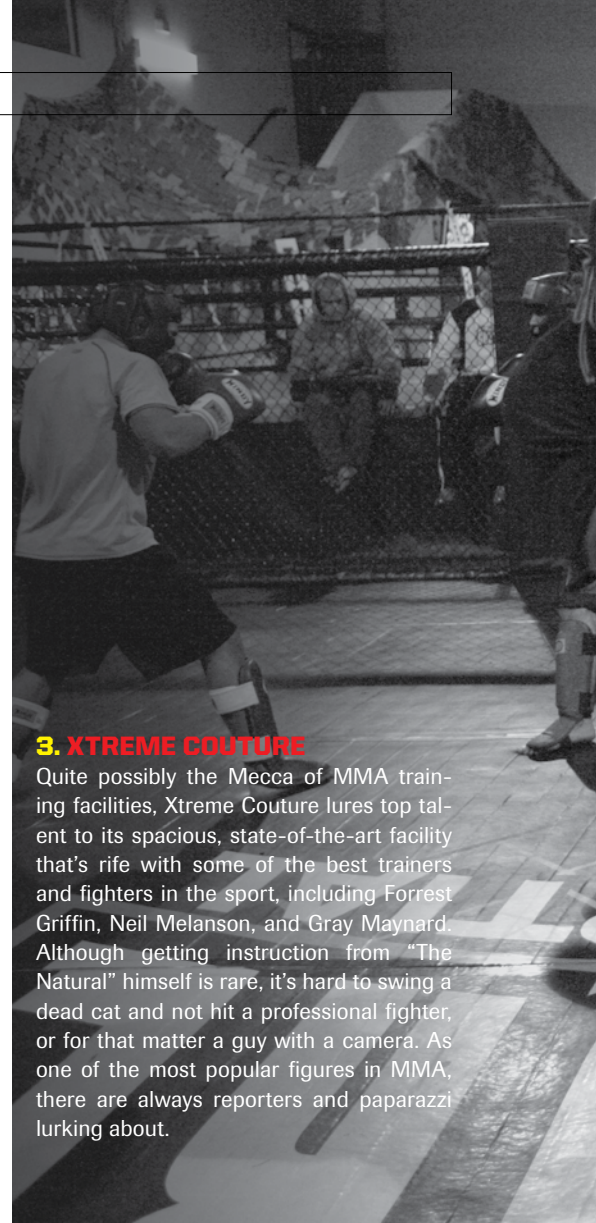
Greg Jackson
// PHOTO BY TOM BEAR





2. AMERICAN TOP TEAM

Betty Grable is a good way to describe ATT – stacked and wondrous to gaze upon. With credentials too long to list and an array of championship belts to its credit, Dan Lambert’s vision of producing a top tier gym within five years of opening its doors has been fully realized. ATT has a heavy Brazilian influence and is a hotbed of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu evolution, but the presence of Olympic gold medal boxer Howard Davis Junior, makes its striking department formidable. Like most of the gyms in this list, ATT has the world at its fingertips with everything a fighter needs in one massive space. Living in south Florida ain’t too shabby, either.



3. XTREME COUTURE

Quite possibly the Mecca of MMA training facilities, Xtreme Couture lures top talent to its spacious, state-of-the-art facility that’s rife with some of the best trainers and fighters in the sport, including Forrest Griffin, Neil Melanson, and Gray Maynard. Although getting instruction from “The Natural” himself is rare, it’s hard to swing a dead cat and not hit a professional fighter, or for that matter a guy with a camera. As one of the most popular figures in MMA, there are always reporters and paparazzi lurking about.

TOP LEFT: ATT
Head instructor,
Ricardo Liborio
watches his stu-
dents.

LEFT: ATT’s
Florida facility.

ABOVE: Students
spar at Xtreme
Couture in Las
Vegas.

RIGHT: Strike-
force lightweight
Josh Thomson
kicks his sparring
partner at AKA.





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4. AMERICAN KICKBOXING ACADEMY

One of the best kept secrets in MMA is no longer a secret. Under the tutelage of trainers Bob Cook, Javier Mendez, and Dave Camarillo, San Jose's AKA has steadily built a solid foundation of contenders and champions like Cain Velasquez, Mike Swick, Josh Koscheck, and Jon Fitch while evolving their style to change with the sport. Besides these four marquee fighters, AKA attracts a crop of young athletes every year, making it the most popular MMA gym in the bay area, which says a lot since there are nearly two hundred to choose from.

5. MINNESOTA MARTIAL ARTS ACADEMY

The lone MMA gym in the great north on our list is Greg Nelson's MMMA in Brooklyn Center, just outside of Minneapolis. With a plethora of notable names like Brock Lesnar, Sean Sherk, and Nick Thompson, MMMA has made a name for itself and offers a great deal to the prospective fighter, including Bruce Lee. Nelson is a fully qualified instructor of Jeet Kune Do under Dan Inosanto, who is one of only three men Bruce Lee personally accredited to teach his fighting system. Nelson is easily one of the premier trainers in MMA and his facility offers everything a fighter could want.

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6. ARIZONA COMBAT SPORTS

Established in 2007 by twin brothers Trevor and Todd Lally, Arizona Combat Sports has risen quickly through the ranks of successful MMA gyms. ACS capitalizes on its hometown natural resource – Arizona State University wrestlers, which influences their brand of fighting. But don't call them a wrestling gym or you might get knocked out by Jamie Varner, C.B. Dollaway, Ryan Bader, Gerald Harris, or Carlos Condit. Though the Lally's are martial arts vets, their gym has risen through the ranks faster than any other facility in the country.



7. SITYODTONG

Mark DellaGrotte's Muay Thai Academy on the north end of Boston is small and crowded, but they like it that way. "There's nowhere to run," DellaGrotte says. "You learn to face your opponent and engage him because there's no way out." Originally an apartment under a law office, DellaGrotte slowly transformed it into one of the best Muay Thai gyms in the country and DellaGrotte is the official US representative of Kru Yodtong in the US. With Marcus Davis and Stephen Bonnar among his pupils, Sityodtong has lately become a staple for anyone wanting to improve their striking, including Frank Mir, Rich Franklin, and Patrick Cote. Sityodtong is quite possibly the cleanest gym in MMA since the students have a Lysol and Clorox party every night.



8. MILETICH FIGHTING SYSTEM

One of the pioneers of MMA, Militech is synonymous with champions, but is no longer the king of the MMA mountain. At one time, MFS boasted three of the five UFC title holders with Rich Franklin, Tim Sylvia, and Matt Hughes all training under Papa Pat's roof. Though Miletich hasn't had a UFC champion in a few years now, it remains one of the most talked about gyms in the country. But to train here, you have to have a Jolly Green Giant's heart and Rhinoceros skin not just for the training regimen, but the Iowa winter. Prior to arriving, do your research by reading "Blood in the Cage" by L. Jon Wertheim.

9. TEAM NOGUEIRA MMA

At the tip of Florida, Team Nogueira is a large facility, spanning over 15,000 square feet and offering strength and cardiovascular training equipment, spacious locker rooms, and acres of mat space. Though it has an obvious focus on Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (Wald Bloise is the head BJJ trainer), the Nogueira twins are also world-class boxers with a reputation for endurance and a gift for being able to absorb punishment.

10. FAIRTEX GYM AND CESAR GRACIE JIU JITSU

The Fairtex gyms were established as a labor of love by Phillip Wong who wanted to provide the youth of Thailand with a place to train and stay off the streets. He brought his operation to the USA in 2004 and planted his flag on some prime real estate in San Francisco. In contrast to the other top Muay Thai gym in the country (like Sityodtong), Fairtex is large and can accommodate many people. It also features a strength and conditioning area as well as ample grappling space for guys like Jake Shields, Gilbert Melendez, and

Nick and Nate Diaz who split their time between Fairtex and Cesar Gracie Jiu Jitsu in Concord, California. Cesar's brand of Jiu Jitsu is slightly different. He embraced leg locks (normally disdained by the BJJ community) and added Sambo techniques, so the training he offers is not the same as other Gracie family academies. The two-gym alliance produces some incredible talent and offers some of the best training on the West Coast.



11. TEAM QUEST SOUTH

Established by Dan Henderson as an offshoot of the original Team Quest in Oregon, TQ South offers the same champion caliber instruction as the original and leans more toward wrestling techniques than BJJ for their ground fighting. With talent like Henderson, Thierry Sokoudjou, Krzysztof Soszynski, and Mayhem Miller tossing giant tires and Volkswagens like they were midgets, TQS remains a contender in the ranks of MMA gyms.

12. TEAM QUEST

One of the original MMA gyms, Team Quest was once a used car lot that Matt Lindland, Dan Henderson, and Randy Couture transformed into an MMA gym in their spare time. Though Henderson and Couture have struck out on their own and started individual gyms, the champion breeding grounds of Team Quest remains intact just east of Portland. With expansive mats and plenty of bags, students get firsthand knowledge of Team Quest's signature style – Ground and Pound – while protégé's Ed Herman, Chael Sonnen, and Jesse Taylor stalk the mats.

13. ERIK PAULSON'S CSW TRAINING CENTER

"Being a pioneer is cool," Erik Paulson once admitted, "But it doesn't pay the bills." Fortunately his status as one of the early trailblazers of the sport helps attract students to his school in Fullerton, California. Paulson was the Shooto light heavyweight champion in 1994; the first westerner to earn such heights in Japanese MMA. Paulson is proud of the rigorous conditioning he puts his pupils through in every workout, so the faint of heart beware, especially when Josh Barnett, Cub Swanson, and Babalu Sobral take you down.

14. WAND FIGHT TEAM

One big difference between all other MMA facilities and Wand Fight team is the presence of the gym's namesake. Wanderlei Silva is ALWAYS in his gym. Don't be surprised if you see him sleeping under the front counter with his binkie when the first students arrive in the morning. With guys like Damien Maia in house, Wand's MMA style is centered on BJJ, but anyone who's seen The Axe Murderer fight knows how aggressive and efficient his striking is. The gym is clean, new, and ample size for the still-growing fight team and features a one-of-a-kind high altitude training room where fighters can spar in rarefied air. Besides the Axe Murderer, Damien Maia, Kit Cope, and Mike Whitehead are mainstays of Wand Fight Team.

15. LLOYD IRVIN MMA

Lloyd Irvin may not be a recognizable name to the casual MMA fan, but he's been around the martial arts for decades and has a stable of young fighters who dominate the mid-Atlantic regional shows. With a focus on BJJ, Irvin frequently brings black belts from around the world to his schools for seminars, which get crowded fast. The main facility, just outside Washington DC, is a full service gym with everything under one roof, including a cadre of instructors and up-and-coming fighters with ample pedigrees.



16. JORGE GURGEL MMA

Most gyms take pride in their familial atmosphere and innate ability to weed out assholes. Jorge Gurgel is practically Draconian at it, sending guys packing if they don't contribute to the gym in a positive way. Only two years old, JGMMA is a haven in the midwest with one of the largest seamless grappling mats in the country. Located just outside Cincinnati, JGMMA offers everything an MMA fighter could want, including his best friend, Rich Franklin. Check your ego at the door.



Robbie Lawler works the pads at the HIT Squad gym

17. HIT SQUAD

An offshoot of Militech Fighting Systems, Matt Hughes established his own gym, the HIT (Hughes Intensive Training) Squad in 2008 with long time trainer and friend, Marc Fiore. Just outside St Louis (on the Illinois side), the HIT Squad gym was once part of an old Air Force Base so it's large and offers barrack rooms for students needing a place to stay. Of course the greatest asset to the HIT Squad is training with the most dominate welterweight of all time (as well as Strikeforce brawler Robbie Lawler), so bring a duffel bag full of determination if you intend to train here.

18. ULTIMATE FITNESS

Flying under the radar, Ultimate Fitness was put on the map by The California Kid, Urijah Faber and WEC contender Joe Benavidez. Spacious, well equipped and maintained, UF is just as much a main street center for locals to meet and workout as it is a professional MMA training facility. In contrast to other gyms, and the MMA community as a whole, UF shuns the skulls and dark gothic imagery for California sunshine and smiles filled with good dentistry. But let your focus lapse for a second here and Faber will knock those pearly whites out and send you to hockey.



19. PENN TRAINING AND FITNESS CENTER

Remodeled from an old cracker factory, BJ Penn's gym in Hilo, Hawaii, is the most remote facility in our list. But its austere location on the Big Island doesn't mean it's less crowded than any other gym. Many devotees of The Prodigy cross the ocean to train in the small town of Hilo, so Penn makes it worth the trip by leading most of the classes himself. With 14,000 total square feet, all the equipment you could want, and a prime location in the Aloha State, the only drawback to embarking on a pilgrimage to the 50th state is the jet lag.

20. TEAM CURRAN MMA

Just a short drive North by Northwest of Chicago is the largest overall training center on our list, The Big Frog's Team Curran. Founded by WEC contender Jeff Curran, the facility is a whopping 24,000 square feet of massiveness and talent, like Bart Palaszewski and Amir Saddollah. Of course it features most of the things you would expect from a pro MMA gym, but it also has a few things you wouldn't. A Crossfit training room, a multi-purpose room, a speed and agility facility, a co-located wrestling school, a video room, a large pro shop, a lounge, a dorm, and an on-site chiropractor makes Curran MMA more like a clandestine Special Forces compound than merely a large place to train. 📍