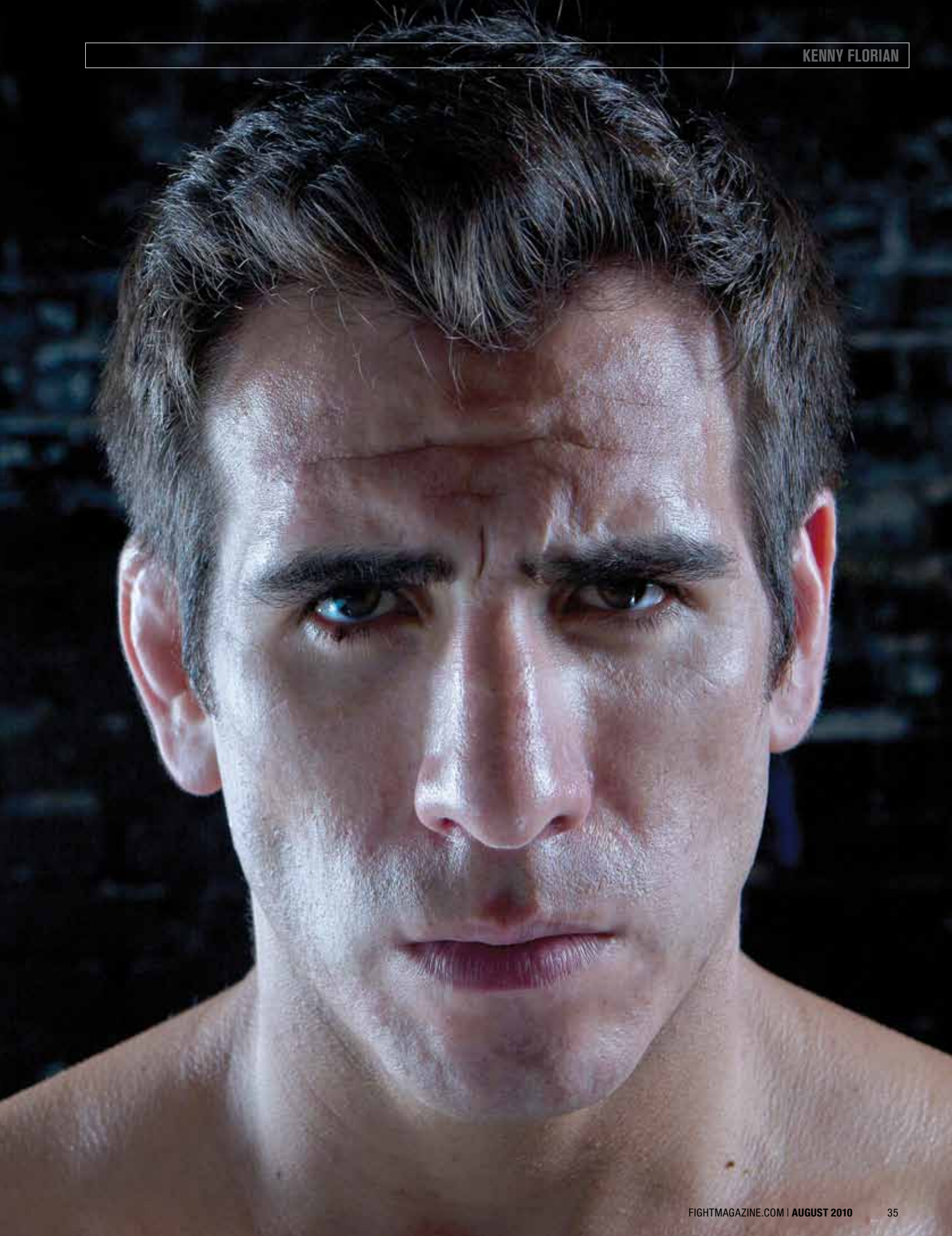


THE FINISHER

Kenny Florian's quiet manner and cerebral approach to the sport conceal one of Mixed Martial Arts' deadliest competitors.

BY KELLY CRIGGER // PHOTOS BY PAUL THATCHER

The Trident Bookstore and Café is just how it sounds - a sleepy, pseudo hippie hangout on the west side of Boston set in an old Brownstone with several floors of reading material and acoustic tunes to enhance your reading experience. Surprisingly Kenny Florian avoids the decadent Cape Codder sandwich and orders a mandarin orange salad, despite his lightweight showdown with Gray Maynard still being eight weeks away. He's not one to binge between fights and maximizes his spare time by studying fights on his iPhone or laptop here in this quiet space where he's rarely recognized. For Florian, the life of a professional fighter is all about dedicating himself completely to the sport and honing the strategic elements of his game inside and outside the gym to get an edge on the competition. A perfectionist who believes MMA is a century behind boxing in its evolutionary process, he knows what's true today might not be true tomorrow.





Boston Uncommon

Unimposing and raised in the tranquil setting of Dover, Massachusetts, Kenny is an unlikely candidate for a professional fighter. “We live in a quiet town. There’s one set of lights and five thousand people,” laughs Keith Florian, Kenny’s younger brother. If you’re looking for a ‘wayward kid turns to fighting to save himself from himself’ story, you won’t find it here.

“We didn’t have any problems with fighting growing up,” Kenny adds. “We watched boxing and Kung Fu theater and always thought that the coolest thing was to say that you were a great fighter. We talked about who would beat who, and who would be the best martial artist.”

The son of a thoracic surgeon and dedicated mother who stayed at home while their father worked eighteen hour days, Florian’s home life bordered on the idyllic. Hard work and education was the family way, so the studious Kenny (the 4th of six siblings) naturally gravitated toward Boston’s greatest asset – its Universities. But staying focused on studies got harder after his sophomore year when he was captivated by the early success of Royce Gracie.

“I forget who found the basic tapes online, but after seeing the UFC we both decided we wanted to learn more,” says Keith. “We thought if we ever needed to defend ourselves this was the way to do it.”

Neither Florian had Octagon dreams, but the Brazilian Jiu Jitsu bug sunk its teeth deep into the brothers. Though he graduated Boston College with a Bachelor’s degree in Communications, Kenny was fully obsessed with MMA and turned every available moment toward training, eventually earning a BJJ black belt from Roberto Maia of Gracie Barra Boston.

“I Finish Fights!”

But BJJ didn’t pay the bills, so Kenny started a career as a financial translator with a local Boston company around the same time the UFC was purchased by Dana White and the Fertitta brothers. Mixed Martial Arts was far from successful when Kenny first decided to test himself and entered a cage in Taunton, Massachusetts and defeated Nuri Shakir. By 2004, he was just 3-0

when he was discovered by Dana White during a slugfest with Drew Fickett in Revere, a small town north of Boston. Though he lost that fight, White was impressed with Kenny's tenacity and invited him to be on a new reality TV show called *The Ultimate Fighter*, but there was a catch. He had to fight at middleweight – heavier than he was used to.

Though defeated by Diego Sanchez in the finals of that season, Kenny dropped down to his natural lightweight and climbed the ladder to a title shot with Sean Sherk, only to lose a very bloody five-round battle that saw Sherk's scalp opened up by Kenny's hellbowl. Nine months later he was a respectable 7-3 in MMA, but wasn't feeling any love from the fans, so he decided to stir up the pot. After submitting Alvin Robinson at UFC 73 he grabbed the microphone in a moment of exuberance and declared, "I finish fights!" The combat sports have always been about equal parts skill and self-promotion, so Kenny decided to push his own brand.

"I was fighting good guys, but I was kind of written off after the Sherk fight and that was my way of getting a little attention from the fans and the guys in the division."

It was his line in the sand. The moment when humility took a back seat to ambition. He had good reason to tout his skills as a finisher. Florian had finished all seven of his fights by TKO or submission at that point and then went on to defeat three of his next four opponents the same way. The statistics speak for themselves; of his 13 wins, 12 have ended by TKO or submission (only his win over Roger Huerta went the distance) Earning Florian and incredible 94 percent finish rate. Of the other top lightweights in the world only Eddie Alvarez comes close to Florian's finish rate with 18 of 20 wins by TKO or submission (90 percent).

"I've always thought it's not a win unless you finish a guy," he says. "I think the true nature of martial arts is to defeat a guy with that one blow or single technique that renders my opponent helpless. I've always had that mentality. Obviously I've gone to a decision, but I've tried to finish every fight."

A key to Kenny's success in stopping his opponents is his mastery of one

DON'T LEAVE IT TO THE JUDGES

When Ken Flo drove a stake in the ground at UFC 73 and yelled "I Finish Fights," he had no idea how true that statement would be. His lone decision win against Roger Huerta keeps him out of the 100% club for wins before the final bell. A look at the top ten fighters of each division reveals that Florian is in an elite group when it comes to winning fights decisively. Here's a list of the best finishers in MMA (Percentage of wins coming before the final bell with at least 8 professional fights-top ten ranked fighters only).

THE PERFECTION CLUB: 100%

Shane Carwin (12 of 12)
Junior Dos Santos (11 of 11)
Brett Rogers (10 of 10)
Brian Bowles (8 of 8)

THE "A" CROWD: 90%

Kenny Florian – 94% (12 of 13)
Yoshihiro Akiyama – 94% (12 of 13)
Gegard Mousasi – 93% (26 of 28)
Thiago Silva – 93% (13 of 14)
Josh Grispi – 93% (13 of 14)
Eddie Alvarez – 90% (18 of 20)
Mauricio Rua – 90% (17 of 19)
Donald Cerrone – 90% (10 of 11)

Although no longer a top-10 fighter, Gabriel Gonzaga has finished all of his wins before the final bell (11 of 11). However, Gonzaga also has a 100% "finished" rate. All five of his losses were by TKO, so he has never gone the distance.

*Statistics provided by Reed Kuhn of Fight Metric



of MMA's most basic yet devastating techniques. Once Kenny gets an opponent's back, a rear naked choke is close to inevitable. Seven of his wins are due to RNC and another win was due to strikes from the back. An opponent would be better served to let Florian stay in the full mount than to roll over, but even if the fight doesn't go to ground, his calculated strategies and crisp striking are deadly. During his lone decision win against Huerta he

was composed and stealthy, staying out of Huerta's striking range and denying him the ability to launch his powerful attacks while picking him apart with carefully selected shots. It was a mixed martial artist applying boxing's golden rule: hit but don't get hit. Returning to his bread and butter, Florian then defeated Joe Stevenson by RNC and got his wish – a second lightweight title shot against the new champ, BJ Penn. That's when the wheels came off.



“When you make a mistake during a fight you’ll go back and analyze it and see where you went wrong and not just that one mistake, but all the factors that led up to it.”

A Dose of His Own Medicine

Being beaten sucks. Being beaten with your own favorite weapon after a grueling training camp is soul-crushingly depressing. In the fourth round of a fight where nothing went right, Kenny found himself in BJ Penn’s rear naked vice grip and tapped out for the first time in his career.

“I felt off from the moment I entered that cage,” he says. “It was hard to get over that, but when I look at it, I’m thankful for that fight because it brought me to a better place as an athlete. When you make a mistake during a fight you’ll go back and analyze it and see where you went wrong and not just that one mistake, but all the factors that led up to it.”

Florian obsessively analyzes his mistakes and continuously seeks perfec-

tion in the cage. He asks himself ‘What are you going to do to make sure that doesn’t happen again?’ and adjusts his training to eliminate the flaws. So what did he learn from the loss to Penn?

“My range was terrible. I was too far then too close. I moved to land punches and my timing was off, my balance was off, my takedowns were off and certainly my defense on the ground wasn’t where it needed to be.”

To correct these weaknesses, Keith (a BJJ black belt and respected grappler in his own right) repeatedly put Kenny in a rear naked choke and forced him to get out of it. It was an uncomfortable position, but one that ultimately improved Kenny’s offense by eliminating the flaws in his defense. It’s that ability to adapt and overcome that may define his legacy in MMA and keep him from

losing when he passes his prime like other fighters. He mentions the cautionary example of Chuck Liddell.

In 2007, Liddell had all the answers. He threw nuclear bombs with his hands and mastered the art of psychological warfare by scaring the beejesus out of his opponents. Just three years later, he’d been knocked out four times in six fights and was being left in MMA’s wake, a decline Kenny watched with particular interest.

“Chuck was ahead of the curve, but the sport has passed him by,” he says. “You have to constantly evolve. [Chuck] thought he could throw punches like he always does, but he went in there with his chin up and you just can’t do that anymore. One of the worst things you can do is have success without evolution because you start to think that you

have the right answer and you rely on that past success as being the answer. The key is never believing your own hype and looking for ways to be honest with yourself and telling yourself you have to evolve and get better. If you're not evolving, you're getting worse."

Changing Masters

That's a great sound byte, but does he follow his own philosophy? The Penn loss highlighted holes not just in his ground game, but his striking, so he mustered up his courage and made a very difficult decision. After years of training with Mark DellaGrotte's Sityodtong Muay Thai Academy, Kenny loaded up and moved to the great white north to spend weeks at a time with Georges St Pierre and Firas Zahabi in Montreal, though speculation persists over the true nature of the split with DellaGrotte.

"Really it was over training," Kenny says. "As a fighter I couldn't grow anymore [with DellaGrotte]. I was very impressed with Firas' approach and I started to believe in Peter Welch's approach to striking. I needed to make the move for my own career."

Welch wanted Kenny to abandon the Muay Thai stance that he'd known for so long while Zahabi stressed the jab and the multitude of attacks that can be launched from it.

"Muay Thai fighters stand straight up and don't get their legs into their punches," Welch says. "I wanted Kenny to lower his stance and sit down on his punches more."

"When Kenny came to us, I wanted him to shorten his punches and concentrate on counter punching instead of striking first," Zahabi says. "I like to call it 'going second.' When a boxer punches, he exposes himself so I wanted him to work on striking second and taking advantage of that moment."

The proof is in the pudding. Two minutes into the second round of Florian's UFC 107 fight with the ever-resilient Clay Guida, a clean right cross dropped The Carpenter as he pushed forward and provided Florian an opening to finish him off with another rear naked choke.

This new approach to training was verified at Ultimate Fight Night 21 when he used patience and precision

to extinguish "The Fireball Kid" Takatori Gomi. Florian continually mixed up his strikes and waited for Gomi to abandon his ultra-low stance and make him desperate. In the third round, Gomi stood upright and left himself open for the takedown that Florian capitalized on, setting up yet another rear naked choke.

"When it comes down to it, if it is going to make you a better fighter then it has to be an easy choice," Kenny says about the change in training camps. "It was tough, but it made me better."

Obsession

Florian admits that he has no real hobbies to speak of outside the sport. He's a self-professed MMA addict who watches EVERY event and has a Verizon bill greater than Haiti's Gross Domestic Product. He's a voracious viewer of fights who critiques them as a hobby and even got hired as an ESPN fight analyst to fuel his addiction. He fills in as a UFC and WEC commentator just

so he can stay intimately close to the sport.

"I always feel that the more you can do something the better you'll be at it over other people," he says. "The best way to be the best is to immerse yourself in something and get better at it. The more repetition, the more practice, the more visualization, the more I'm watching it and understanding it, the better I become."

"He has such an open mind," adds Zahabi. "He keeps moving forward and is never satisfied with his performance. He's like GSP, always on the quest for perfection. That's the right attitude."

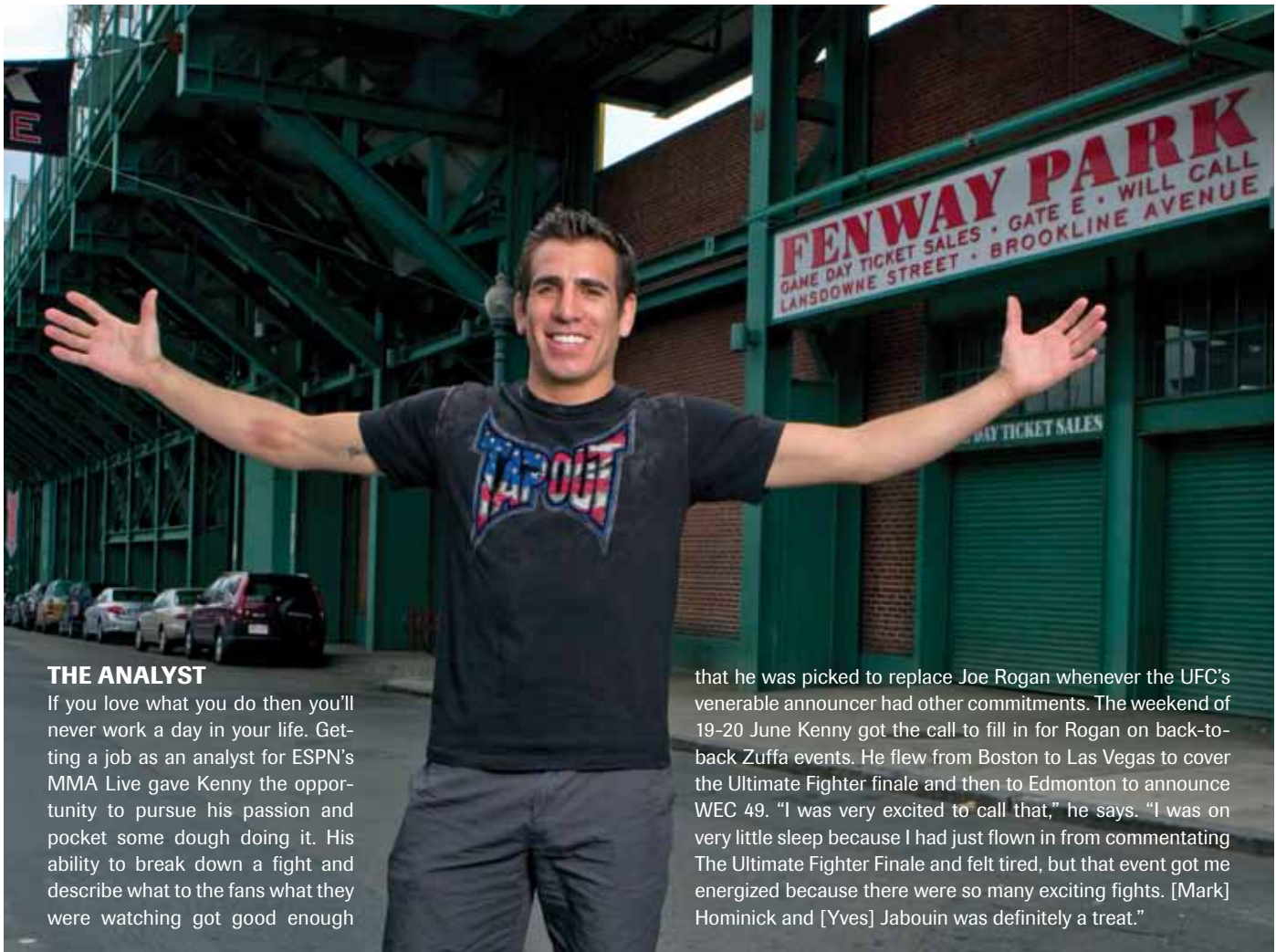
Being a bachelor helps too. Despite several failed relationships, Florian still pines for a family, but admits that the life of a professional fighter is difficult on prospective girlfriends. Even when he's home, he's not home, a characteristic passed down from his father who worked from dawn to dusk in a hospital.

Outside the Trident Bookstore and Café, Newberry Street is abuzz with

"The key is never believing your own hype and looking for ways to be honest with yourself and telling yourself you have to evolve and get better. If you're not evolving, you're getting worse."



Kenny's new striking coach, Peter Welch, studies Kenny carefully in order to help his striking evolve.



THE ANALYST

If you love what you do then you'll never work a day in your life. Getting a job as an analyst for ESPN's MMA Live gave Kenny the opportunity to pursue his passion and pocket some dough doing it. His ability to break down a fight and describe what to the fans what they were watching got good enough

that he was picked to replace Joe Rogan whenever the UFC's venerable announcer had other commitments. The weekend of 19-20 June Kenny got the call to fill in for Rogan on back-to-back Zuffa events. He flew from Boston to Las Vegas to cover the Ultimate Fighter finale and then to Edmonton to announce WEC 49. "I was very excited to call that," he says. "I was on very little sleep because I had just flown in from commentating The Ultimate Fighter Finale and felt tired, but that event got me energized because there were so many exciting fights. [Mark] Hominick and [Yves] Jabouin was definitely a treat."

Celtic pride on the eve of game 7 of the NBA finals. The entire city of Boston is resplendent in green yet Kenny sports a white Tapout shirt. It's not that he doesn't love his city and its championship sports tradition. He's so entranced by MMA that he barely notices anything else.

I Think I'll Go to Boston

It's a testament to the evolution of combat sports that a suburban kid from a good upbringing can be compared to the brawlers that made Boston an icon of boxing. While fighting found John L Sullivan, Joe Wolcott, and the legendary Rocky Marciano, it was the opposite for Florian. He sought pugilism on his own, though his father's passion for boxing had an undeniable influence. Kenny grew up idolizing Marciano and cried as a kid when Brockton's Marvelous Marvin Hagler lost to Sugar Ray Leonard in an epic 1987 bout. But the lack of a boxing program close to the Florian's home and the fears of a protective mother squashed his ring dreams until he found BJJ in college.

Compare Kenny to any of these Boston boxers and he'll humbly dismiss it and be quick to tell you that he's not a fighter in the same regard as those legends. He's a martial artist who put fighters on a pedestal in his youth and never took them

down. It's not his humility that drives this opinion, but a belief that the two sports really aren't comparable yet.

"I don't think MMA has seen the greatest fighter or coach yet. The Cus D'Amato and Angelo Dundee of MMA have yet to be discovered. Nothing against the current trainers out there, but MMA still has 150 years before it catches up to boxing."

Because he learned his New England style boxing from the trainers who learned it from their trainers and their trainers before them, he's still part of the same lineage as his boxing heroes. As Mixed Martial Arts takes its place alongside the sweet science in the minds of the fight fans, Kenny Florian could be the first of many great Boston Mixed Martial Artists extending the age old fighting tradition of this city into the new century.

He didn't have to tour the country offering anyone who could beat him \$500 in a bare-knuckled fight like John L Sullivan. He didn't grow up poor like Sam "the Boston Terror" Langford. He wasn't a ditch digger who learned striking on a stuffed mailbag hanging from a tree like Rocky Marciano and he didn't have to flee deadly rioting in Newark to settle in Brockton like Marvin Hagler. Instead he's an average guy with a TV smile sitting quietly in a trendy Boston coffee shop buried deep in contemplation on how to make himself a better fighter than all of them. ☎