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## The grassroots world of Ultimate Fighting

by Michelle Chihara

Frank Black's mother is standing with the palm of her hand pressed to her chin, her fingers covering her mouth as if to keep herself from crying out. "This is like high school," she says, shaking her head, "like when he played sports in high school."

Inside a hangar-like garage in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, her son is about to compete before a crowd of 700 people, including about 70 of Frank's friends, co-workers, and gym buddies, as well as his mom and his wife, Tracy.

This is not high-school football, or even boxing. Black is the 12th fight on the card in a sport called vale tudo, a Portuguese phrase meaning, unfortunately for Frank's mom, "anything goes."

The lights go down and a door flies open behind the ring. Frank Black appears framed in smoke from a fog machine, his cadre of fans scream Frankie!, and a thudding bass line follows the MC's introduction. Black enters the ring and strips down to his trunks. At the call "Fight!", he squares off against Pierre Gouillet, a lanky fighter with a tribal tattoo across one shoulder.

"Oh God," his mother says. "I gotta talk him into taking up golf."

Thirty-four seconds later the fight is over. After a flurry of blows, Gouillet executes a quick takedown and pins Frank Black in a submission hold with his elbow hyperextended; Black, helpless, taps his free hand on the mat to signal that he submits. He gets off easy: he has taken few blows -- as they say in vale tudo, very little punishment. He has not, like a fighter in tonight's first middleweight match, been straddled by his opponent and had his head whacked into the mat until blood was gushing from his nose, with the ref calling out, "Hit the gong, hit the gong!"

Black walks away shaking his head. His mother exhales and lets her hand fall to her side. "He caught him with a good kick, Tracy," says one of Frank's buddies, comforting Frank's wife.

"Yeah." She almost laughs. "But he's gonna be all fired up now, and he's gonna want to do another one."

Fight fans call it pure. Promoters call it "no holds barred." Critics call it gladiatorial violence. Massachusetts calls it illegal, which is why a Brockton guy like Frank Black is traveling down to Rhode Island to compete.

Vale tudo is basically the local amateur circuit of ultimate fighting, a combat sport you may have seen or heard about in the early '90s. Like its participants, ultimate fighting came on big and then lost big -- in 1993, it was a heavily promoted sport advertised as a bloody spectacle with "no rules," but within a few years, opposition from parents, Congress, and boxing commissions had relegated it to the status of a sideshow on the fringes of pay-per-view cable TV.

At the grassroots level, however, the sport caught on, even though fighters in the US know that big purses are scarce, even on the professional circuit. Only Japanese fights award huge prizes. For the most part, these guys are in it for the thrill of the fight. They vary in height, weight, and race; most are (unsurprisingly) young, with shaved heads and tattoos.

Promoters these days tend to leave the garish term "ultimate fighting" to the professional league, the Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC), instead referring to the sport as "mixed martial arts." (A sport of many names, it's also called "submission fighting," since fights tend to end when one opponent gives up; "extreme fighting"; and "no-holds-barred fighting.") Like Frank Black, who has a background in Muay Thai kickboxing and a Brazilian version of jujitsu, its competitors are usually trained in one or two martial arts -- judo, jujitsu, Greco-Roman wrestling, boxing, kickboxing, karate, tae kwon do. They're matched according to fight experience and weight.

There are also a few rules, although just how many rules depends on the organizers of each tournament. At the vale tudo tournament in Rhode Island, fighters are not allowed to hit each other with a closed fist -- it's open-palm strikes only. Chokeholds are fine. But they cannot gouge each other's eyes, bite, kick a downed opponent, hit the opponent in the throat, or do something called "fish-hooking," which consists of sticking your thumb in somebody's mouth and pulling.

The list is not long, but it is meaningful: moves and blows with a higher-than-average chance of causing paralysis, death, or serious damage are not allowed. For a sport concerned on all levels with legitimacy, seriously damaged or dead competitors are not an asset.

THE MC of the Pawtucket fight is Kipp Kollar. Sales director for a medical scanning company by day, Kollar is the president and founder of the North American Grappling Association and the man responsible for introducing much of New England to submission fighting. He looks a little bit like the Joker. He sports a golden tan and a shining shaved pate, and he smiles a lot -- a sudden, brilliant, pointed grin.

Kollar loves ultimate fighting because it's "exciting" and "realistic," and because "it really works."

"A lot of wrestling and boxing matches go to the time limit, and then how do you pick a winner?" he asks. Ultimate fighting, in contrast, is usually crystal clear.

Clear, and sometimes brutal. For fight fans, part of the excitement is undeniably rooted in blood lust. In Pawtucket, the crowd cheers loudest for the big, heavy blows, and one man cheers a prolonged leg bar by shouting, "The pain! The pain!"

An official of the UFC calls ultimate fighting "the perfect blend of sport and spectacle," and points out: "A lot of fans watch auto racing and boxing and hockey to see blood. Whether it's our instinct or blood lust, who knows? But it's true for all sports."

For the fighters themselves, however, the appeal is different. It's about how their discipline measures up.

The Ultimate Fighting Championships were born in 1993, when Rorion Gracie walked into the offices of the Semaphore Entertainment Group in New York City with a videotape of Gracie victories in Brazil. The Gracies are Brazilian fighting superstars who

had taken an established Japanese grappling discipline -- jujitsu -- and put their own spin on it, increasing the emphasis on joint manipulations and submission holds. The Gracies had issued open-door, winner-take-all challenges in Brazil, daring any fighter to beat them in open fights with no rules. Almost no one could.

No one at Semaphore had ever heard of the Gracies, but Rorion's videotape looked like the pay-per-view hit they needed. Rorion's younger brother, Royce, helped prove them right.

The first Ultimate Fighting Championships pitted sumo wrestling against French Savate kickboxing, Thai kickboxing against karate, and boxing against Royce Gracie. For that fight and for four tournaments to come, Royce Gracie blew just about everyone else out of the water. He would seem lost under a hail of blows, until he would reverse the fight all at once by pinning the other guy -- maybe a guy 60 to 90 pounds heavier than he was -- in a chokehold with his legs.

Gracie jujitsu proved itself almost as unbeatable in America as it had been in Brazil. Another of the brothers, Rickson, showed up in the US in 1993 with one of the typical Gracie challenges: \$100,000 to anyone who beat him.

Kipp Kollar, who at the time had spent a decade teaching the graceful kicking arts of taekwon do, remembers the shock. "We went there thinking we were going to do well against this guy," Kollar says of himself and his martial-arts buddies. "And he smashed everybody."

One glimpse of Gracie was enough to set a generation of martial-arts buffs down a whole new path. The "strikers" -- the boxers and the acrobatic high-kickers -- can do damage. Kickboxing can beat sumo. But the real badasses, the people who could win in an ultimate-fighting ring, finish their fights on the ground.

"A karate guy throws one kick or punch," says Kollar, "and immediately gets taken down. The grappler throws some sort of submission moves, and -- think about a street situation, in a bar, a fight always ends up going to the ground. It's much more practical in a real-life self-defense situation."

The consensus among mixed martial artists is that the best fighters are "well-rounded" fighters who know both a striking and a grappling art.

Showing them both off, though, can be difficult. In most states mixed martial arts is more or less illegal. Combat sports need licenses from athletic or boxing commissions. Most commissions banned true no-holds-barred fighting in the mid '90s, especially after Senator John McCain went after the sport for what he deemed its sick brutality. The UFC's early promotional campaigns, trumpeting the bloody-brute "two men enter, one man leaves" side of the fights, turned the sport into a political scapegoat for violence in society.

Organizers are just now starting to recover. They're working hard with the commissions in the hopes of getting sanctioning bodies across the country to license them. They've toned down the hype, instated new rules, and beefed up safety precautions. At least one huge market, California, is about to legalize the UFC.

But as this kind of fighting becomes legitimized as mixed martial arts -- a sport with governing bodies, commissions, and rules -- those drawn to its darker side are heading

deeper underground. There are certain people, for instance, who do not consider the valedudo in Rhode Island to be "true" no-holds-barred fighting.

"You'll hear guys talk, like on the Internet boards, about how much it's split into two groups," says Kevin MacDonald, a 25-year-old Watertown native who works as a funeral director in Boston. On one side are mixed martial artists in favor of legitimacy. On the other side, "You've got guys that are more like myself, in the sense of being in it for the pure form -- the 'anything goes' sense."

An experienced fighter, MacDonald is a compact Irish guy with a crew cut and a puckish sense of humor. Ask him why he fights, and he'll say, "Because it's fun," with a devilish raise of his eyebrows. Then he'll laugh.

He's leery of promoters and money men and the other trappings of professional sports. "A lot of guys are saying we should just take the elbow out, work with the commissions," he says. "All that's going to happen is it'll get like boxing. It'll get watered down. You'll have complete professional fighters, where this is all they do. The promoters start making more money. Then you get your Don King, with no connection to the sport, throwing a fight, demanding all this money."

MacDonald isn't sure the sport he loves is destined for legitimacy: "The public is never going to accept things where there's a lot of blood."

With a background in Muay Thai kickboxing, jujitsu, and what he calls "freestyle grappling," MacDonald has a professional record of five wins, three losses, and one tie. He says he'll fight anywhere, anytime, any rules. He's also run with the bulls in Pamplona, twice. "This time I touched one of them on the ass," he says, laughing. "I'll do anything with adrenaline."

Including fight underground. The UFC may have trouble getting fully licensed, but the underground "no eye-gouging, no biting, end of rules" fights are outright illegal. MacDonald remembers being sent downstairs at an underground fight in Los Angeles because he and his opponent were "quite bloody" and the promoter needed to "make things look respectable" for the police, who had just arrived.

In another underground fight, in Houston, MacDonald's training partner Eve Edwards caught an opponent in a head clench. "[Edwards] was throwing knees into the kid's face," he recalls. "They stopped and checked to see if he was okay. He was bleeding a little, but they let him go back. And my buddy gets him in another clench, he's bombing knees. And then the kid just opened his mouth. It looked like he had taken a quart of blood in his mouth. And then three things fell out. I stared at 'em.

"Turns out he had split the kid's upper palate in half, and three of his teeth, it wasn't just the teeth that we were seeing. It was the entire root, everything. The promoter picked 'em up and put 'em in an empty cup and said, 'Here, kid.' "

None of this deters MacDonald. "There are always going to be flukes," he says. "Look at how many guys will never walk again because of football. And this is one of the most intense exercises of the mind. 'Where am I? Where is he? If I try this, will he try this?' "

For MacDonald, the fewer the rules, the truer the test. "I've done boxing, kickboxing, judo. Some guy'll win on something stupid, some point or whatever, and then he's jumping around like he's a badass. With this, you know when you won, you know when you lost. It's exciting."

Ultimate Fighters take on challenges the way other people climb Mount Everest: for the searing purity of the challenge; as a way to reach the irreducible conflict of man and obstacle. People watch ultimate fighting the way people watch movies about Everest expeditions. Half the motivation is the possibility of redemption, reversal, human victory against all odds. Half is the possibility of . . . cannibalism.

Ultimate fighters, in this light, are a fringe group who take society's logic -- that it's manly and good to be able to defend yourself in a fight -- to its logical extreme. And for the most part, society doesn't want to recognize the violence inherent in being "manly." Extreme sports are one thing. But society frowns upon true extremists.

"Anything truly exciting in this society is suppressed," MacDonald says.

Ultimate fighters seem not to be people whom society has handed a golden ticket. They're not like the protagonists in the movie *Fight Club* -- white-collar yuppies who are fed up with the emptiness of an Ikea-as-identity culture. They seem, primarily, to be people searching for something -- validation, sense of self -- who have found it only in the cage.

Luciano DeOlivera, 22, is a fighter who trains with Joao Amaral in Everett. Amaral fought, and won, his first American professional fight at the World Extreme Fighting tournament in June in Atlanta (his academy is called New England Brazilian Jiu Jitsu). DeOlivera is a Brazilian immigrant who works, sometimes, refilling vending machines. A talented jujitsu grappler, he lost his vale tudo match at the Pawtucket tournament out of pure exhaustion: he spent everything he had in the first few minutes of the match, a common mistake for first-time fighters.

DeOlivera's heel is swollen and distended, with a dark spot at the center. He's limping. But Amaral tells me, "Luciano will fight again. He'll be a good fighter." They're hoping he'll compete in September's tournament.

This comes as a surprise to DeOlivera's girlfriend, who's sitting next to him in the studio. Watching Luciano fight in Pawtucket, she says, was "awful."

"I was crying," she says. "I couldn't stay in my chair."

I tell DeOlivera she doesn't want him to fight.

"I know," he says. "But I have to do it for her. She doesn't respect me."

His girlfriend rolls her eyes. He laughs and squeezes her shoulders. "I have to prove myself," he says softly.

"Can't you prove yourself here?" she says, jutting her chin at the jujitsu students rolling around on the mats. "You can prove yourself here."

Luciano touches her hair, tenderly, and doesn't answer.