

Training Secrets of Mixed Martial Arts Fighters

A backstage pass into the controversial world of this popular combat sport

Mixed martial arts (MMA) is a combat sport that is unquestionably the fastest-growing spectator sport in the world. The Ultimate Fighting Championships were created in 1993, generating a huge fan base as well as numerous magazines and websites. Training facilities have been springing up in all the major cities. The champions of the sport are millionaires, major events earn millions at the gate, and last year pay-per-view revenues

exceeded \$240 million! Because of such financial incentives, serious MMA fighters are looking for the most knowledgeable strength coaches and therapists to keep them healthy and in fighting form—individuals such as Jay Kiss and Paul Gagné.

Kiss and Gagné are co-owners of the Sports Performance Center in Montreal, Canada, a state-of-the-art sports medicine and strength and conditioning facility with an elite staff of sports medicine specialists and

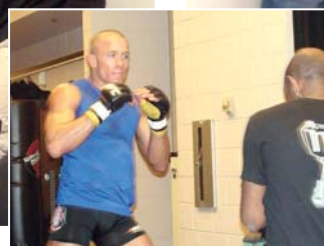
medical doctors. In his practice, Kiss, who is a boxer, is trained in *applied somatherapy*, a form of hands-on soft-tissue therapy that focuses on addressing the root cause of an injury. Gagné is a Posturologist and strength and conditioning coach who is a regular contributor to *BFS* magazine. Among their clients are many MMA fighters, including current UFC world welterweight champion Georges St-Pierre.

Although MMA is a controversial sport that many critics believe is too

dangerous, Kiss says that the sport has evolved to protect the fighters. “In the early days of the sport you didn’t have matches between mixed martial artists,” says Kiss. “What you had was *discipline versus discipline*, with perhaps the boxer versus the wrestler, or the wrestler versus the jujitsu fighter.” The skill levels of the competitors varied, and there were few rules to protect the fighters; consequently the risks of injury were extremely high. Today’s mixed martial artists are trained in a variety of fighting disciplines, and many more rules have been implemented to protect the fighters.

Kiss also believes that MMA fighting is safer than the sport of professional boxing; take for instance the tragic death of Duk Koo Kim after his fatal bout with Ray Mancini in 1982. In the 13th round of that fight, Mancini landed 39 unanswered punches. Kiss says that if an MMA fighter can’t defend themselves, the fight is over; in contrast, during a professional boxing match the referee can stop the fight for an 8-count and then let the fight continue. “I’m a boxer, and I can tell you that there are some fighters whose heads and jaws seem to be made out of steel and can take a lot of hits; but you put them in an armlock or a knee lock and the pain of that hold will force them to tap out. So I would say that from the standpoint of punishment, MMA is much safer than many other fighting sports.” Kiss also says he has not seen many concussions in MMA fighters.

Regarding injuries, Kiss says that he has treated everything from groin strains to overuse injuries of the shoulder but he has not seen any specific patterns of injury among MMA fighters. He says that he favors manual therapy, such as Active Release®



Strength coach Paul Gagné (left) and applied somatherapist Jay Kiss (right) with current UFC world welterweight champion Georges St-Pierre. Gagné and Kiss are co-owners of a sports medicine and training facility in Montreal that works with many elite MMA fighters.

and frequency-specific microcurrent (which was examined in the January 2005 issue of *BFS* magazine). Kiss says that his staff also promotes the use of restoration methods, such as water therapy and massage, to enable MMA fighters to recover faster and avoid overtraining.

In the area of conditioning, Gagné says that the training of a mixed martial artist more closely resembles that of a wrestler than a boxer. “Because of the longer duration of the rounds, and because there is a lot of pushing and shoving and different types of attack, MMA fighting is much more demanding on the energy system than boxing.” He says that although there is an aerobic component to the sport, MMA fighters have to be careful about overdoing any distance running because it’s very demanding on the nervous system and the immune system. “I prefer having them do more interval type of training; for example, run for 30 seconds, jog for 90.”

Regarding strength training, Gagné says that MMA fighters gener-

ally need to be stronger and more powerful. For this, he recommends that MMA fighters perform several six-week cycles during the year of fast-twitch muscle exercises such as power cleans, along with heavy lower-body exercises such as Hex bar deadlifts. He adds that some fighters focus on being strong at the expense of endurance, but this is a mistake that intelligent competitors will exploit. “If those types of fighters go against an opponent who has a good defense, they are in trouble. That’s what happened to Kimbo Slice when he lost, and in fact that is what happened to Mike Tyson when he lost against Buster Douglas – Tyson rarely got beat in the opening rounds because he was so powerful.”

As the popularity of MMA fighting continues to grow, there is certain to be considerably more research into the area of how to train these warrior athletes and keep them healthy. But for now, it appears that fighters who work with Jay Kiss and Paul Gagné have a definite edge in the octagon. **BFS**