

Our Town

Milpitas' most unique and inspirational personalities

Fighting Changed His Life

Restaurant manager drops almost half his weight to focus on pro mixed martial arts

BY KEN YODER REED

Eighteen months ago Jai Rodriguez was the 24-year-old manager of a very successful family restaurant in Milpitas and the father of a delightful 2-year-old named Zoe who loved dressing up in Dora the Explorer outfits. He weighed 310 pounds and wore a necktie every day.

On July 19, 2008, his trainers paraded him down the aisle of San Francisco's Kezar Stadium — 168 pounds of him, dressed only in boxing shorts and his tattoos — and up into the 8-sided, wire mesh cage. Metallica was pounding heavy metal over the loudspeaker and no one could hear him over the yells of the 2,500 fans. Some cheered Rodriguez, some cheered his opponent, pro wrestler Matt Greene. Most of them cheered because mixed martial arts fights make you feel like cheering your head off.

The two months leading up to the fight, Rodriguez underwent grueling final preparation, enduring the biggest enemy of the fighter: injuries. A broken rib the day after he signed on for the fight, a staph infection that completely hobbled him a month before the fight and then in the final two weeks the push to lose weight, driving down from 215 to 170. "When I weighed in the night before the fight I felt so wobbly I could hardly stand. But seeing that 168, I felt I'd won the fight already."

Not quite. Greene was waiting inside the cage. "When they locked the gate between me and the outside, the feeling got very intense. I had no doubt I'd go three rounds. No doubt he'd have to break something to stop me."

Green quickly tripped Rodriguez and used his classic wrestling training to fend off the punches and kicks Rodriguez had prepared. But Greene couldn't close. In the third round, Rodriguez stood him up and began kicking. Two minutes on, Greene downed him again and used his gloved fists to pound Rodriguez's head and temples. The referee ended the fight as a TKO.

Rodriguez scrambled to his feet, upset, protesting. "I changed everything in my life to chase this dream ..." But he bowed to fight rules and shook Greene's hand. "You were a Mack truck," he told him.

Mixed martial arts is perhaps the hottest new sport in America. The fans are mostly men (88 percent), young



Jai Rodriguez dropped 142 pounds while training in mixed martial arts before his first large-scale match at Kezar Stadium last summer.

Photo by Ken Yoder Reed

(56 percent between 18 and 34) and make more than \$100,000 annually, according to StrikeForce, the fight promoter who arranged California's first legal MMA fight in March 2006. StrikeForce collaborates with NBC to produced "StrikeForce on NBC" and Kirian Fitzgibbons of Miletech, the dojo where Rodriguez trains, is a key supplier of trained fighters in Northern California.

Kirian picked Rodriguez out of the pack of 300-plus in the weekly classes he teaches at the Miletech dojo. MMA fighters learn three fighting disciplines — Western style boxing, Muay Thai boxing, which specializes in flying feet, knees and elbows, and jujitsu, which trains fighters to throw their opponents to the mat and then box the opponent's head and face until he submits. Fights can be unpredictable and spectacular. Not everyone is convinced. John McCain notoriously called mixed martial arts "human cockfighting."

So Kirian was in no mood to accommodate a journalist. "Yeah, Jai's an up-and-coming fighter. Whaddya want with him? Is this another bash-MMA story?" Convinced that the writer was a man of some integrity, Kirian opened up about his fighter.

"He has heart. He's aggressive. Excellent hand-eye coordination. He put up a heroic fight against Matt Greene."

Rodriguez said his relationship with Coach Kirian is close.

"He's like a dad. He calls me when I'm sick. He takes care of me."

The Academy of Self Defense dojo in Santa Clara is filled with young fighters every night. Rodriguez is training for his next professional fight and he lands roundhouse kicks against his sparring partner's handheld pads with tremendous THWACKS. He limps between kicks.

"I broke my toe at six o'clock. Hey, you gotta train

through it." He weighs 188 today but he'll diet away 18 pounds before the fight to qualify for the 170-pound welterweight class.

How does his family feel about his fights? "Cautious," he says. "And a fighter needs a loving family to keep going."

Four-year-old Zoe's not cautious, however. "Whaddya think about daddy fighting?"

Rodriguez throws an imaginary punch her direction. She's taking ballet lessons these days and pirouettes in front of the TV with the Nutcracker ballerina.

"We're gonna win, Daddy!"

"Come on, punch me."

Zoe stops mid-pirouette, spins and delivers a roundhouse foot kick against his thigh.

"Nothing will stop us, Daddy!"

"She picks it ups from the guys at the dojo," Rodriguez says. "I know it's cheesy but I love it."

Kirian has negotiated the date of the next fight with Gladiator Force: March 7 in Sacramento. Rodriguez knows where things are going. "I work harder than everyone else. I'm gonna be a world champion," he says.

Kirian believes in his fighter. "He's not a pro wrestler or a jujitsu blackbelt. He's the new style MMA. More balanced than wrestling pros like Matt Greene. It'll take longer but he'll progress evenly. His prospects are good."

Freelance writer Ken Yoder Reed runs a recruiting business for a living. He lived in Northern Japan for three years and earned his black belt there in judo. Contact him at kreed@tkophoenix.com. "Our Town" will run as a once monthly series, looking at unique individuals in Milpitas.