

FIGHTING TALK

IMPROVE YOUR COMBAT SKILLS

MARCO'S RECENT TRIP TO THE UFC PROMOTION IN NOTTINGHAM MADE HIM WONDER **WHY SO MANY ELITE FIGHTERS GO ABROAD TO IMPROVE THEIR CONDITIONING**

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA CHIARINI



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Hardy hits the heavy bag



Dan Hardy holds November's Muscle & Fitness

The UFC has done a wonderful job enhancing the profile of combat sports and improving levels of conditioning. It has made fighting, and fighters, more professional.

If you want to strive to be in the UFC you can't afford to be in anything less than top shape. Miss your chance and you are back at the end of the queue.

The impact of the UFC on combat sports was apparent when the organisation brought its combat circus to the Capital FM Arena in Nottingham. Fans flooded in to watch, the fighters put on a great show and the atmosphere was absolutely crazy.

I was fortunate to represent *Muscle & Fitness* in the media area close to the cage. It was a top-notch production, although one flaw was that some press photographers were situated too far away to shoot, which denied a great event and sport some major coverage.

Dana White, the UFC president, is hiring the best executives and it's paying off. The UFC turns sales into gold, wherever it goes. In Nottingham, ticket prices ranged from £75 to

£250 and besides the spectators that came from across Europe hundreds of thousands more watched on pay per view. The UFC is a worldwide phenomenon.

The preliminary and main cards featured a lot of fighters from Britain, Europe and Americas. Officially, the main event was a heavyweight clash between Stefan Struve, a gigantic young Dutch fighter who has already had 30 MMA fights and Stipe Miocic, a stocky former Golden Gloves boxing champion who was defending a perfect 9-0 record. Miocic, who lost, is based in the United States but has European origins.

But the real highlight for most fans was the welterweight contest between local idol, Dan "The Outlaw" Hardy, who is famous for his striking, and the Iranian/American Amir Sadollah, who won *The Ultimate Fighter 7*. He was a tough opponent for Hardy, who fought well to win on points.

WHY FIGHTERS GO TO AMERICA

Being a representative of the media, I

was given a brochure containing statistics on every fighter. I was struck by how many were born in Europe but now live and/or train in the United States.

This aroused my professional curiosity and got me thinking about how conditioning for sport has become a matter of geography as well as methods. For elite UFC fighters, training hard and having good coaches at home is not enough. They need the best facilities and set-up and they invariably exist in the United States.

Training in your own backyard can limit a fighter's chances of fame and success. Sure, they can train just as hard but if they go to America they get better sparring partners to improve their skills, a wider choice of opponents and have a better chance of getting their faces known.

The UK is the birthplace of boxing and it has produced many fine boxers. In the past they could get all the hard sparring and great coaches they needed at home but in recent



decades an increasing number have moved to America.

This is because Americans understand the absolutely fundamental importance of conditioning in fight preparation. Other nations have acquired a reputation as destinations for specific skills, eg Thailand for Muay Thai and Brazil for Brazilian jiu-jitsu. If it were not for the language and cultural barriers, eastern European countries would also be a popular place to train. But the United States remains THE destination when it comes to fight camps and conditioning for MMA.

America is such a multicultural country that you will probably encounter coaches from different nationalities and training styles at the same gym. Above all, the facilities are incredible. So it's no surprise to see so many of Europe's best athletes going to the United States.

I spoke to Dan Hardy at the UFC press conference. He and fellow British UFC fighters Michael Bisping and Brad Pickett all live in America or spend time there training. So does Amir Khan.

THE US UNDERSTANDS THE KEY ROLE OF CONDITIONING

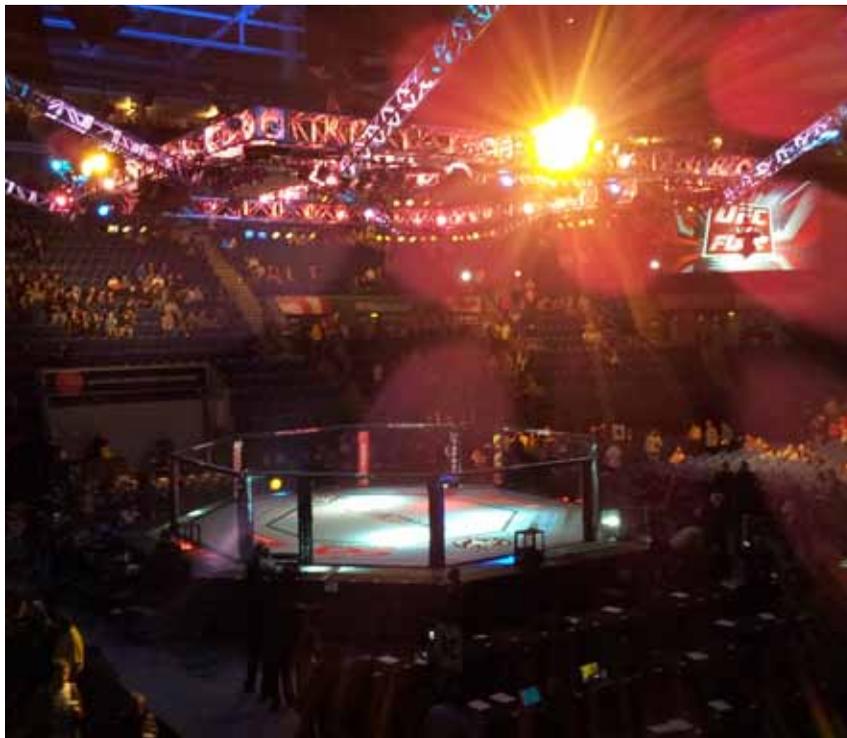
In America they can raise their profile and get in the best shape of their lives. I doubt the trainers are any better than the ones in Europe but the way training is organised makes a difference.

Americans see sport from a more organised perspective. They also understand the fact, which is crucial to MMA, that any fighter is only as good as his conditioning after the first round or two.

This UFC event in Nottingham demonstrated this. The fighters had amazing skill but the outcomes often boiled down to conditioning (mental and physical, which are often related).

Being in shape enables fighters to demonstrate their skills, absorb strikes and generally perform. They can take punishment and keep going forward.

The United States is the first country to approach fighting sports as



professional disciplines. The rest of the world is slowly following but it will take time. This trend reflects how performance training is now much more highly regarded in fighting sports than it used to be.

In America, professional coaches work in synergy to help fighters. The spirit and aura that comes with this kind of structure releases not only sense of security in fighters, but it also gives them huge confidence to feel part of such a professional, multi-level structure.

SOME ENGLISH COACHES FAIL ON CONDITIONING

Unfortunately—and this is not only the case in England—some coaches still have limited visions and inner fears. They refuse to broaden the crew or seek external help to fill any gaps in the complex task of conditioning. They prefer to keep their athletes in house, letting them believe that the world ends at their gym door.

For too many coaches, conditioning is still a fad that has nothing to do with fighting. For them, running, sparring and hitting the pads is all you need. There

are some positive signs, for instance the emergence of new strength and conditioning gyms. But the world is a big place and athletes must exploit the opportunities that exist and learn how to merge the best of new and old methods to form their own unique and personal training programmes.

The UFC shows that fighters do not need a coaching team under the same roof. They need to take responsibility for their development and be willing to travel and try new experiences that help them evolve into a better athlete. After all, isn't **Evolving** one of the main concepts in martial arts? **M&F**

Look out for a training feature with Dan Hardy in Muscle & Fitness soon

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