

STATE TO STATE:

NORTH CAROLINA

By Jerry MacReady

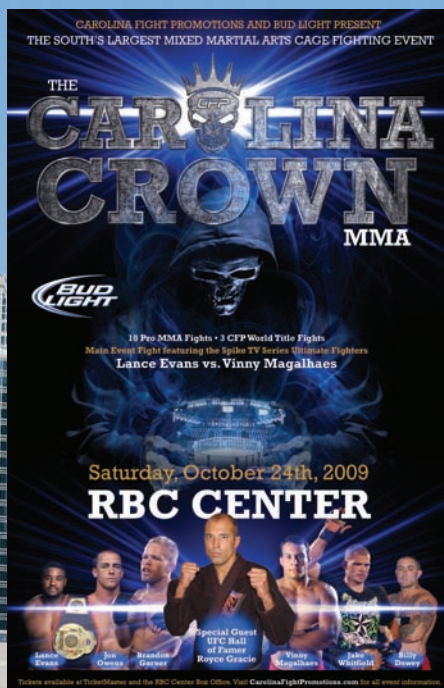
Last month we examined the history of MMA in Colorado, site for the inaugural UFC. This month we travel east — make that upper south — to North Carolina, which hosted the third and fifth installments of the UFC before the state banned the sport outright. North Carolina is the birthplace of Andy Griffith and Howard Cosell, serves as the setting for the cult classic *Evil Dead 2*, and is regarded as the nation's largest producer of furniture, tobacco, brick and textiles. Just three years ago, MMA was still banned in the state, but due to the efforts of one of the country's oldest MMA gyms and a never-say-die former college football player, today it's MMA friendly.

HISTORY

After Denver, Colorado hosted the first two UFC events, the political pressure was already mounting when SEG (which originally owned the UFC) ventured to Charlotte, North Carolina for the third event on September 9, 1994. With no law on the books, the Charlotte city council couldn't do anything, but that didn't stop the police from showing up with video cameras on the night of the show. When SEG tried to stop them, they threatened arrest; police officer Steve Jennum almost backed out of the event for fear of retaliation. Despite the circus nature of the show with Kimo's

cross and the 600-pound Manny Yarborough, Jennum won the grand prize, but the war was far from over.

After failing to stop UFC V on April 7, 1995, the Charlotte city council voted on May 24, 1995, to ban the promotion from ever returning. With word the city and state couldn't do anything until the law officially went into effect, the World Combat Championship, the UFC's first U.S.-based competition, held a show in Charlotte on October 17th of that year. On November 18, 1995, up-start Extreme Fighting moved its show from



SOCP

(SPECIAL OPERATIONS
COMBATIVES PROGRAM)

Since Team ROC's inception, Greg Thompson has been involved with developing combatives programs for the military, working closely with personnel stationed at Ft. Bragg. Originally he started working with Matt Larsen, creator of the Modern Army Combatives Program, and became a Level 3 and 4 instructor. After 9/11, Thompson worked with air marshals and AFT in an effort to refine close quarter combat for realistic settings in tight spaces and around furniture.

"Some stuff from sport MMA didn't translate well, so we adapted further techniques for what I call 'dirty MMA' made for realistic fighting," said Thompson. "This kind of training spawned a whole revolution of combative training called SOCP (Special Operations Combatives Program). For the last eight years I've been developing this program through Team ROC and others, to refine it for the first-ever, nationwide combatives program for the Army.

The Modern Army Combatives program provided a solid foundation, but it didn't have the cuffing and other practical scenarios in mind that our soldiers face overseas. As of last week, I've trained every special forces operation except for one. It is now the program of record for the NSF.' Thompson spends the majority of his time on SOCP (www.usocp.com) and currently holds four patents on the system he developed. Look for a future in-depth article on SOCP with techniques.

the Park Slope Armory in Brooklyn to Wilmington, North Carolina, due to political pressure. That would be the last MMA event for 13 years as a statute that became known as the "Ultimate Warrior Law" went firmly into effect banning MMA from the entire state.

LIKE A ROC

Fayetteville, North Carolina native Greg Thompson started his martial arts journey at age eight, and earned black belts in karate and tae kwon do, before moving onto boxing and Muay Thai. When the UFC debuted, Thompson was amazed by Royce Gracie and what he was doing with Brazilian jiu-jitsu. After chipping in a Royce Gracie instructional set with his buddies, Thompson was invited to train with the man himself in California; he earned his blue belt from him after six months.

While in California, he befriended police officer Brent Pierce, who not only ran a martial arts school, but originally hailed from North Carolina. When Pierce moved back home and started up a school, the two men didn't want a rivalry. "We didn't want to fight one another so we started calling ourselves Team ROC (www.teamroc.net), which stands for 'reality of combat,'" said Thompson. "We started fighting under that banner and changed the name of both schools to fight under that name in North Carolina."

Team ROC was born in 1997 and the school became the foundation for MMA training in North Carolina, spawning

several affiliates in Raleigh, Chapel Hill, Eden (run by Pierce), Charlotte, Greenville, South Pines, Angier and Burlington. (When Royce Gracie left Rorion to journey out on his own, he ended up handing out his first five black belts at Thompson's school in North Carolina; Thompson got one of them.) Over the years, Team ROC has produced several professional mixed martial artists including Tim Kennedy, Tara LaRosa, Jason Palacios and Brandon Garner, in addition to the number of top fighters who have trained there like Randy Couture and Josh Koscheck.

"One of the things that we have always done, when we went our separate ways, was we always looked out for each other and have that good Carolina hospitality," said Thompson. "Whenever someone was training for a fight, no matter where he was in the state, he always had a place to train, rotating from different schools. That's the essence of Team ROC."

There are several other MMA gyms in the state as well. Michael Rattenni runs Raleigh-based Rapid Fitness (www.rapidfitness.com) with a full-blown MMA/boxing center. Larry Kidd runs the Evolution Fight Academy (www.evolutionfightacademy.com) out of High Point. Rob and Guy Pendergrass run the Pendergrass Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Academy (www.bjjnc.com) in Wake Forest. Other schools include: The Rock MMA (www.therockmma.com) in Huntersville, Lejeune MMA (www.lejeunemma.com) in Camp Lejeune, Gracie Barra (www.graciebarramebanenc.com) in Mebane, Asheville MMA (www.ashevilmma.com) in Asheville,

Photo: Micley Kosloff for www.DrNOWorks.com



Doug Muhle interviews Royce Gracie, flanked on the left by Greg Thompson and his son, Cody, and on the right by Rodrigo Gracie.

and Octagon Gym MMA (www.octagongymgso.com) in Greensboro. For dozens of listings in North Carolina, check out www.findmagym.com.

300-POUND ANGEL

One of Greg Thompson's students was a 6'5", 300-pound former East Carolina University football player named Doug Muhle, who watched the sport blossom everywhere except for North Carolina. With the tremendous military presence and fighters coming onto the scene, he was disheartened over the idea that someone couldn't fight in his hometown. "I put up the money to hire two high profile lobbyists here in North Carolina to go to bat for me so I could start talking about MMA to state senators," said Muhle, who began this process in 2006. It took a year for Muhle to comfortably make his way through the system, costing him over \$75,000 in the process, but he was determined to make the state a safe haven for MMA.

Muhle found a sponsor for legislation in state senator Tony Rand, who helped him get inside to speak to the different senators representing different counties. "It came down to me talking about the history and safety of the sport, and how MMA had changed over the years into something the state could get behind," said Muhle. In August of 2007, a law was unanimously passed to legalize MMA in North Carolina, but it would take several months to get the judges, referees and formalities ready for it to take effect.

According to Muhle, he was also responsible for getting the laws changed in South Carolina a year later. On Saturday, April 26, 2008, Carolina Fight Promotions (www.carolinafightpromotions.com) produced the first legal MMA event, dubbed "The Return," in North Carolina. Team ROC's Brent Pierce and Jason Culbreth were also instrumental in getting CFP launched, and part of the revenue from the event went to pay back Muhle for the money he spent on lobbyists. Today Muhle runs CFP, which is the largest MMA promotion in the state, and

every year holds a super event called the Carolina Crown in Raleigh, which drew 5,500 people last year. Team ROC's Brandon Garner and 3x NCAA Division 2 All-American wrestler Derek Brunson are two fighters in CFP's stable.

Promotions (www.fightlabpros.com) has been going strong for over a year, making Charlotte its home. Paul Marinaccio runs Jawbreaker Promotions (www.jawbreakerevents.com) out of Raleigh for amateur talent. Xtreme Fight Promotions (www.xtremefightpromo-

Photo: Credit: Team ROC



Greg Thompson works top side at Team ROC in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

BACK IN BUSINESS

On December 10, 2008, the UFC returned to North Carolina for the first time since 1995, staging UFC: Fight for the Troops in Fayetteville with free admittance for military personnel from Ft. Bragg. The UFC held another show on March 21, 2010 in Charlotte. In addition to Carolina Fight Promotions, there are several other worthy events that take place in the state. Fight Lab

tions.net) runs events out of Wilmington, and sometimes partners with Jaw Breakers. Black Eye Entertainment (www.blackeyepromotions.com) enters the scene for the first time in November, and hopes to make a home for fighters in Asheville.

Are you a fan, fighter, promoter, instructor or commissioner who did something special in your state to promote MMA? If so, drop me a line and tell me about it at mmastate@yahoo.com. Next month we'll chronicle yet another state and its history with MMA.

Photo: Noah Rosenblatt-Farrell, PhD



Keith Nevins lands a blow on Zebulon Moore at CFP Summer Fight Series.