

Forty-five year-old legend Randy Couture (left) and relative newcomer 31-year-old Brock Lesnar trade words with FLEX before they step into the ring and trade blows in the biggest fight in UFC history



FIGHT FOR THE AGES

BY JON FINKEL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAVEL YTHJALL AND ISAAC HINDS

CAPTAIN AMERICA RETURNS

FLEX gets in the cage and into the mind of UFC legend Randy Couture as he trains for his fight with Brock Lesnar

As president, Teddy Roosevelt believed in speaking softly and carrying a big stick. As a colonel, Jack Nicholson's character in *A Few Good Men*, Nathan Jessep, believed in walking softly and carrying an armored tank division. As a certified badass, Randy Couture speaks softly but carries the ability to ground and pound his opponents into submission. This obviously isn't a huge sampling, but it's safe to say that tough guys, whether they're real or in the movies, are cut from the same cloth — though few have been cut in combat, literally, as many times as Randy "The Natural" Couture. He's like the Brett Favre of the UFC, but instead of a career with the Green Bay Packers, he packs punches. And kicks. And chokeholds. And his career isn't filled with stats. It's filled with scars. And it isn't a career about one discipline, but all of them.



READY TO BROCK THE WORLD

Two months from his much anticipated UFC bout with Randy Couture, Brock Lesnar granted FLEX access to watch him train and endure pain as he prepares for the fight of his life

Florists aren't named Brock. Neither are sommeliers or interior decorators. No, when your name sounds like the words "brick" and "rock" smashed together, there's really only one calling tough enough to justify your signature: fighter. Luckily, this is exactly what Brock Lesnar is.

From his All-American wrestling days at the University of Minnesota to his reign at the top of the WWE to his entry into mixed martial arts, Lesnar seems drawn to one-on-one combat the way Clint Eastwood was drawn to playing tough guys. Just as nobody else could have starred as Dirty Harry and nobody else could have

pulled off the line "Go ahead, make my day," nobody else could have gone from a titan of fake fighting to a contender in Ultimate Fighting in just a few short years. To pull off that feat, you can't just decide to try mixed martial arts; you have to commit to it.

It's a career that's taken spectacular advantage of the word "mixed" in mixed martial arts. Wrestling? He won his first championship in that discipline when he was 18 years old. Then he was a three-time NCAA Division I All-American wrestler at Oklahoma State University. Hand-to-hand combat? Couture spent six years in the United States Army. Muay Thai? Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu? Ask the men who have submitted to him in agony if he's mastered those. Couture made his UFC debut in 1997, winning the heavyweight tournament. Since then, he became one of only two MMA fighters to hold a championship title in two different divisions: light heavyweight and heavyweight. He is also the only five-time champion in UFC history.

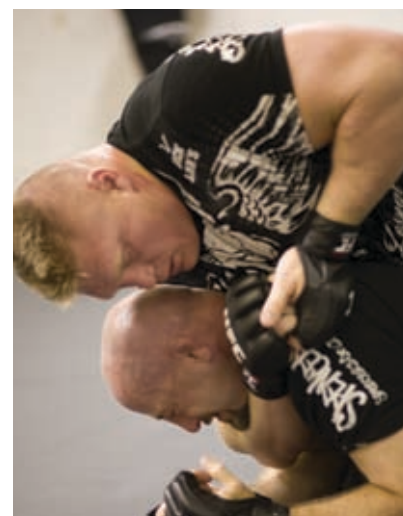
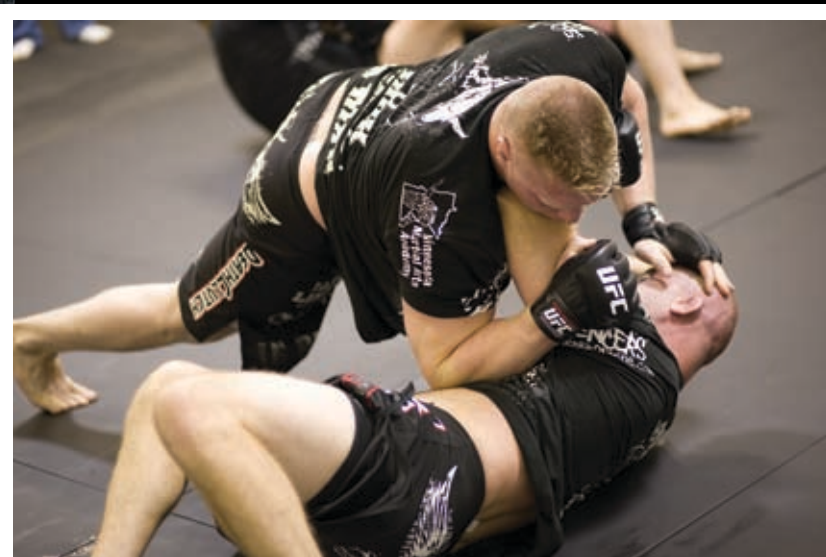
Or, you if you want a testament to his greatness, you could just ask one of the dozens of worldclass mixed martial artists who flock to train with him. Wanderlei Silva. Forrest Griffin. *The Ultimate Fighter 7* winner, Amir Sadollah. These are just a few of the guys squaring off when we step foot into the Xtreme Couture training facility on a steamy September day in Las Vegas for Couture's photo shoot. There's so much talent in this room you could sell footage from the security cameras to Spike TV for a couple million dollars. It's like wandering into a gym and finding Jay Cutler spotting Phil Heath on a set of bench presses.

But at the center of it all at *this* particular gym is Couture. When he walks in, the room slows for just a moment as everyone puts an eye on him. After all, it's the house that he built. Would you be able to keep your eyes off Babe Ruth as he strolled through Yankee Stadium? Didn't think so.

And just like that, Couture is standing in front of you. You hesitate to introduce yourself. Not because he's too intimidating (which he almost is) but because you realize you're holding a bottle of Xtreme Couture natural water in one hand with an official Xtreme Couture T-shirt in the other.



Top: Couture in the middle of a flurry of punches with trainer Ron Frazier; **middle:** Couture ends his rounds with a bang, then rests on the cage for support; **bottom:** the view from the top level of the Xtreme Couture training facility.



Top: Lesnar takes an elbow to the throat as he trains; **middle:** Lesnar works on his chokehold and then catches some air in the middle of his marathon training session; **bottom:** Lesnar bull rushes training partner Marty Morgan in Lesnar's prep for locking horns with Couture.



And in so doing, you commit to the big things, like the idea that you could be seriously injured during a fight, and the little things, like the fact that breaking in a new pair of gloves can make your hands look like you stuck them in a blender.

"I try to work in new pairs of gloves as often as possible," Lesnar says. "This way I get used to doing the clinches and holds with tight gloves."

Lesnar says this standing in his gym in Alexandria, Minnesota. The gym is two and a half hours north of St. Paul, which means it's two and a half hours from anything resembling a big city, which is exactly how the fighter wants it. "I'm a country boy," he says, referring to his roots in South Dakota. "I moved here a few weeks ago and we just finished putting this training facility together. It's perfect for me."

Perfect, to him, means perfectly anonymous.

"This is how I like to train," he says. "I just need the equipment and my training partners. Nobody else has to be here."

This last statement seems a bit redundant, because if you don't have specific directions to the training facility, you have absolutely no chance of accidentally stumbling into it. It's in a nondescript building in a nondescript part of a nondescript farming town (although nondescript in northern Minnesota means that its breathtaking scenery blends in with all the other breathtaking scenery — an embarrassment of country riches, if you will). Still, compared to the star-studded training facility that his opponent, Randy Couture, is training at in Las Vegas, you can't help but feel like you just stepped into the scene in *Rocky IV* when Rocky arrives at the remote Russian cabin he was given for some old-school training — except that, unlike the Italian Stallion, Lesnar won't be facing a Russian giant at the end of his training; rather, he'll be taking on just the opposite: Randy Couture, a.k.a. Captain America.

No, you're not intimidated. You just feel like a fight geek. But with a job to do, you look at the icon, who is about two months out from his major heavy-weight championship fight with Brock Lesnar, introduce yourself and dive right in with a question: "It's been over a year since your last fight. After all the battles you've been through, are you training differently now because there's been so much time between title defenses?" "I've been training my whole life," Couture says. "As with all my fights, I always start to zone in 10 weeks out. I've been doing this for so long, I know exactly how to prepare my body. The only difference this time is that I have to train for someone with my opponent's size."

The size he's referring to is the 6'4" and nearly 300 pounds of muscle that is Lesnar.

"We've brought in some big guys to spar with me," Couture says. "These guys are helping me prepare for everything that Brock might do. He's like a freight train that just keeps coming straight at you."

This is why this fight is so intriguing. It's not just old lion against young lion (Couture is 45, Lesnar is 31), it's also strong versus stronger; force plus experience versus brute force. It's like a scientific equation for combat.

"I think people are excited because both of our backgrounds are in wrestling," Couture explains. "Plus, he brings all of his fans from WWE, so there's going to be a lot of eyeballs watching this fight."

Acknowledgment of the fight's huge draw, however, doesn't mean that Couture concerns himself with the hype. "You can't let yourself think about all the other stuff going on," he says. "All I do is focus on training."

That training currently involves two sessions a day at Xtreme Couture. The first session is cardio, strength and conditioning; and the second session is sparring and technique. "I do a lot of core training now," Couture says. "I still lift some weights, but I'll do lighter weights for lots of reps. Everything I do is to try to simulate the intensity of the fight. All the training is based on getting my internal



Eye of the tiger

clock in sync. I want to know exactly how I'll be feeling in every situation that could arise when I'm in the ring with Brock, so if that situation occurs, regardless of where we are in the fight, I'll be ready."

This last statement is easy to believe once you witness a Couture mitt session with trainer Ron Frazier. They've been working together for three years, but it might as well be three hundred. With barely a grunt, they descend into a flurry of punches, blocks and weaves that would make Hollywood's finest fight choreographers proud. This particular fist frenzy lasts 45 minutes and it involves almost every square inch of the ring, from floor to fence.

"I can tell when Randy wants to pick up the intensity level and I just bring it," Frazier says. "He's looking really good right now. Really sharp."

When the 45-minute session comes to an end, Couture sits dog-tired on the edge of the octagon, his soaked shirt against the cage. He rolls his neck a bit and you can see that he's not running from the pain. He's absorbing it. His eyes dart around the

gym. Above him hangs a massive fighting mat that was used in a live UFC event. Gallons of dried blood and sweat stain the canvas. It's like a Picasso of pain. Below him, a legion of martial artists work through drills, no doubt trying to catch the eye of their hero. And in front of him, barely two months into the future, sits Brock Lesnar.

"I've already started visualizing the fight," Couture says. "The night before, I'll go through everything I want to do. The first round, the first contact, everything. Then I visualize all the things that could happen. But right now, I'm putting together my game plan."

Which is?

"I'm going to be the aggressor," he says. "Nobody has ever really punched Brock in the mouth. I'm going after him. That's what I'm going to do."

If Randy Couture can pull it off, *UFC 91* might be remembered as the day a 45-year-old man stopped a freight train with a single punch. No other tough guy has ever done that.



"Most of the guys that I've brought in to work with me have wrestled with Randy at some point," Lesnar says. "This way they can fight like him and help me prepare."

Sparring with partners like your upcoming opponent is standard boxing, wrestling and MMA dogma, but when you look at the size and ability of the guys that Lesnar will be throwing down with every day for the months leading up to the fight, you figure out that in order for him to beat Randy Couture, he actually has to fight a half-dozen Randy Coutures every day. That says just as much about the caliber of his opponent as it does about the desire of Lesnar himself. He's willing to do whatever it takes.

On this particular day, he's putting himself through a gauntlet of wrestling drills. And since he protects his training regiment like Colonel Sanders protected his secret blend of 11 herbs and spices, we can't go into specifics about the workout we're allowed to witness, but suffice to say, it's punishing — punishing in its physicality and punishing in its methodology. Fight. Grunt. Sweat.

Repeat. Over and over again.

In fact, there are so many rounds being fought and techniques being worked on we couldn't keep track if we wanted to. One minute Lesnar's taking down a man about his size, the next minute he's escaping a hold from someone who's built just like Couture. Every second brings a new challenge, with each partner giving everything he has to push Lesnar to the limit. Round after round. Minute after minute.

After an hour of practice, the once-dry Zebra wrestling mat is splattered with sweat — like a water balloon fight broke out and everyone just fled. As partners rotate in to tussle with Lesnar, it becomes apparent that, although he's working hard, he's not wasting energy . . . nor is he getting hurt, because despite his training partners' best efforts, sometimes their blows land like tennis balls being lobbed at an M1 Abrams tank. He's simply too big and too strong.

"All of the lifting I do now is circuit training," he says. "It's all to fatigue the muscle and just keep pushing. I want to push the muscle to failure and keep doing it so that I can hold my strength longer."

In the last round of the day, we get

proof that the training is working when he takes down his biggest sparring partner with the same ferocity that he did when the morning began. Then the buzzer sounds from the Everlast timer and the marathon session of one hour, 45 minutes is over. Finally.

After a quick cooldown, Lesnar lumbers into the weight room and sits down on an incline bench to, well, the only word that seems to apply is "drain." Water pours out of his body like a glacier that suddenly found itself off the coast of Hawaii. In no time, pools of sweat large enough to be koi ponds begin to develop on the floor below him.

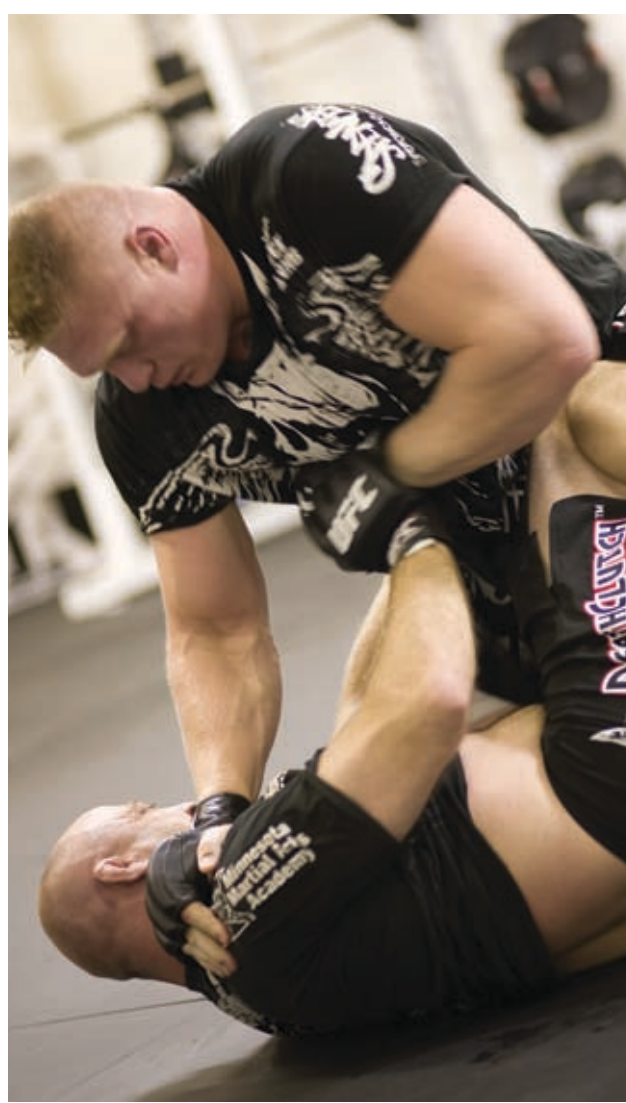
"Here comes lake Lesnar," one of his training partners, Greg Nelson, jokes. Lesnar smiles and looks down, amused.

"I've got two of them going now," he says pointing at them. "That one's Lake Superior and that one's Lake Michigan."

Everyone cracks up and Lesnar smiles wistfully. At that moment, it's clear. If it takes two lakes of sweat a day to drown Couture in the cage, Lesnar will put in the work. If it takes an ocean, he'll do that too, because Brock Lesnar is a fighter, and that's what fighters do.

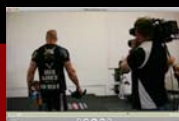


Before the storm, Couture (left) and Lesnar wait.



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>> **UFC 91: Couture vs. Lesnar**

takes place live Saturday, November 15, 2008,
at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas, Nevada.

>> **UFC 91: Couture vs. Lesnar** will be available
live on pay-per-view at 10 PM EST/7 PM PST on iN DEMAND,
DirecTV, DISH Network, TVN, Bell TV,
Shaw Communications and Viewer's Choice Canada.