

# STRONG ISLAND

Former collegiate wrestler Chris Weidman has always known how to trim off a few pounds, but when UFC matchmaker Joe Silva called his Long Island home in January with the offer to fight Demian Maia in less than two weeks, he knew without looking at the scale that this would be the largest weight cut of his life.

BY T.R. FOLEY // PHOTOS BY PAUL THATCHER

No matter what the numbers read, Weidman believed it was physically possible to lose the weight he needed—he'd done that gig for years, it was just a matter of discipline. The opportunity to fight on the UFC on Fox 2 would mean national television exposure and having his name mentioned in commercials and written on posters. The downside was that he would have to spend the next two weeks battling the impulse to chug a Gatorade or eat dinner with his family—a dinner much-like the tomato sauce and ground beef deliciousness of his wife's Sloppy Joes that he was left staring at when he got the call from the UFC.

"I debated not checking my weight until after I ate, but went ahead and gave it a look," says Weidman. "I was 217 pounds."

After skipping dinner and answering some back-and-forth phone calls with his manager and UFC brass, Weidman asked for the opinions of his family and coaches. They all agreed that it was a great opportunity—if he could lose the weight and still win the fight. He was at the gym in less than an hour.

The stakes couldn't have been higher: Shed the pounds and beat Maia, and Weidman would be an immediate title contender. Don't win or miss weight, and Weidman would be back on the middle-weight carousel with a dozen other fighters. A week into the weight loss process, there was some skepticism among friends and tearful pleas from family members to come in a few pounds over, but Weidman deflected them.

"I'm a wrestler. I'll never miss weight," says Weidman. "My thinking was that I wanted to show the UFC that I was a professional and that I deserved to get good fights."

Sucked out but composed, Weidman trotted across the stage at the Chicago Theater the night before the fights and smiled as his weight was read aloud by Joe Rogan, "Chris Weidman, 185 pounds!"

Weight is usually the last physical battle that fighters face before entering the cage—the conditioning and gameplanning consume the months leading up to a fight, including training sessions full of your opponents strengths and new counter-driven techniques. For Weidman, on a truncated schedule, fight camp was about the weight. There was no room for strategy. "I cut so much that I was actually sore from the weight cut on the night of the fight," he says. "It was definitely not the most ideal situation for a fight."

"My biggest concern was the weight loss, and I was right. It was absolutely brutal," says coach Ray Longo of Weidman's Serra-Longo fight camp on Long Island. "We watched some tapes and saw that Maia was a half-guard guy, which was good for Chris, so we didn't do a lot of gameplanning for him in particular, just kinda pieced things together that we already had."

Weidman had experience preparing for big fights on short notice, earning his first victory inside the Octagon against Alessio Sakara in March 2011—a fight that he also took on two weeks notice. He went on to finish the year with submission victories over Jesse Bongfeldt

and Tom Lawlor, earning the distinction of being named the UFC's Newcomer of Year.

Still, to lose 32 pounds in 11 days and fight a top five opponent was a task that Longo and Weidman thought was risky-at-best. The coaches trusted Weidman's jiu-jitsu, and he had just fought a south-paw in Lawlor. The big question was if could he lose the weight and recover fast enough to perform on fight night?

"It was an educated-stupid thing to do, and I never would've done it unless it was a guy like Weidman, who is just so mentally tough," says Longo. "It worked out this time, but I guarantee we won't do it again."



Weidman has been a hot commodity since graduating Baldwin High School in Long Island as a New York State Wrestling Champion in 2002. Every time Weidman has been offered a chance to leave Long Island, he's denied it, choosing instead to stay close to his family and friends.

"I could've left for junior college, but didn't," he says. "I could've left when I went D-1, but I chose to wrestle at Hofstra. When I graduated, I got offered jobs all around the country, but I stayed at Hofstra and got my Masters. I was born and bred in Long Island—it's my home."

Longo met Weidman in 2007 as the recent Hofstra grad was flirting with the idea of making the 2008 United States Freestyle Wrestling Team. Weidman wanted to continue competing but didn't want to leave his pregnant wife (also his high school sweetheart) to train full-time at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado.

"The first time I saw him roll, I couldn't believe how talented he was," says Longo. "Most wrestlers don't look that comfortable on their back, but he was totally at ease. But what impressed me was the rest of the night. He was a young guy with a wife and kid on the way, and we stayed up until 1 a.m. just talking about life. The kid is a total sweetheart."

When Weidman left wrestling behind in 2008 and chose Serra-Longa as his training camp, it was the first step to finding closure for a wrestling career the two-time All-American felt ended in failure.

As a senior, Weidman was one of the stars of the Hofstra program, having finished sixth in the NCAA's the previous year after a semifinals loss to eventual champion and former UFC fighter Jake Rosholt. Heading into the 2007 season, Weidman's goal was to become an NCAA Champion.

After a spectacular season with more than 30 wins, Weidman fell short again, placing third after another semifinal loss, this time to eventual champion Josh Glenn of American University.

Losing in the semifinals signaled another end to Weidman's chance to complete his dream of becoming a National Champion—

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he was on the doorstep of his goal once again, but somehow managed to fall short. In four years of college wrestling—two in junior college and two at the D-I level—he never made the finals, losing every season in the semifinals. Those losses still haunt him.

“I’ve had that failure over and over again, and that makes me strive to get that belt,” says Weidman. “I want to get that UFC championship. I won’t stop until I get it. Maybe if I was one of those guys who won an NCAA Championship, I would’ve lost some of that fire, but it’s all I want.”

“You don’t meet a lot of guys like Weidman, who’ve made it as high and far as they have—he’s not only talented but also a great guy,” says former Hofstra head wrestling coach Tom Shiflett. “It’s not an act with Chris. He’s a super, super nice guy and wants what is best for the people he loves, and he is always looking forward, 2012 and a way to give back to the people who helped him out. But, he’s also the guy who is the best at whatever he decides to do. He’s got his mind set on winning the belt, and I wouldn’t bet against him.”



In the hours following his hard-fought, three-round decision victory over Maia, Weidman’s managers and promoters wanted him to make an appearance at a pre-determined downtown Chicago nightclub. Weidman passed on taking the mandatory X-ray for a sprained foot, which resulted in an immediate 30-day suspension (later lifted) because he wanted to spend the night celebrating with his wife, coaches, workout partners, friends, and family. Back in the hotel room, Longo and Weidman shared a quick conversation and agreed to never do that again.

“He looked at me, and we were like, ‘What the hell just happened?’” says Longo. They both saw the past two weeks of rubber suits and saunas melt into a 15-minute cardio test. Weidman had won, but it hadn’t been the highlight-reel type victory Weidman had become accustomed to delivering.

“The worst part is that I pride myself on my conditioning and here I was gassing,” says Weidman. “Still, if you watch the fight, I’m moving forward the whole time. I was staying in his face.”

Like many of the night’s winning fighters, Weidman ended up surrounded by dozens of photo-seeking fans at a Chicago nightclub. “I love and appreciate the support, but it was a tough few weeks and I wanted to hang out with my friends and family after the fight. They’re the reason I’m in that spot, all those years of support.” Weidman slipped out of the club and into a nearby bar, where he had a few beers and laughed off the exhaustion as the soreness of his three-round battle crept into his bones.

Weidman’s next fight hasn’t been announced, but he’ll likely face another top five opponent, as Chael Sonnen battles UFC Middleweight Champion Anderson Silva in the summer. The pool of candidates has slimmed down, and Weidman’s next fight is looking like another semifinals match, a must-win that will give him a shot at the belt. As long as it’s not on two-week’s notice, Weidman says he’ll be ready to compete, surrounded by the friends and family that he felt got him to that point.

“I put a lot of pressure on myself back in college, and every time I lost, it felt like the end of the world,” says Weidman. “I don’t feel that same pressure now. I have friends and family who love me and I fight for them, but I know win or lose that they’ll be here for me. That’s something I’ve learned, and something that makes me stronger.”

**Chris Weidman drives home a knee to the side of Demian Maia’s head at UFC on FOX 2, January 28th 2012. Despite a tortuous ten day, 30 pound weight cut, Weidman was able to do enough to secure a unanimous decision victory and place himself squarely into the top ten of the UFC’s middleweight division.**





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