

A full-page photograph of Zach Makovsky, a male mixed martial artist, in a boxing ring. He is shirtless, wearing black Everlast boxing gloves with blue wristbands. He has a determined, slightly pained expression on his face, with his eyes squinted and mouth open. His chest and arms are glistening with sweat. The background is dark with bright arena lights and a blurred crowd.

IT'S ALWAYS SUNNY IN PHILADELPHIA

Do you know who Zach Makovsky is? Not ringing a bell? Google "Bellator Bantam-weight Champion." His mug should be front-and-center.

BY T.R. FOLEY // PHOTOS COURTESY BELLATOR FC

Zach Makovsky keeps a low profile. He's the guy who tends to his opponent after the fight instead of straddling the cage. He's the guy who answers questions with careful consideration, while his peers unleash streams of random and emotional eviscerations. While MMA has gone mad for self-aggrandizement, Makovsky has remained an example of how an optimistic and hopeful fighter behaves before and after they've earned the belt.

Makovsky, a wrestler since grade school, grew up in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, arguably the epicenter of American wrestling. In addition to perennial top-10 Lehigh University, the area's high school programs are among the toughest in the country. Tap a bum on the shoulder in Bethlehem and he's likely to show you his favorite throw—or double-leg you to the pavement. Like football in Texas, wrestling is the sport of choice in Pennsylvania, and Bethlehem is a powerhouse.

Makovsky attended Bethlehem Catholic High School, which wasn't the area's best program, and Makovsky wasn't one of its stars. Still, because of where he grew up and his pleasant attitude, Makovsky was invited to walk on to the Drexel University wrestling team in 2001. He managed to stick around for five years, starting for two seasons and winning more than 70 matches.

"I got more serious about the sport when I got to college, and I think it taught me to work hard and enjoy the effort," says Makovsky. "I liked to be around the team, and I loved to train."

During the summer of his second season, Makovsky sought out a grappling classes in the area and met Steven Haigh, a Philly-based fighter who would later become the owner of the Philadelphia Fight Factory. They trained in the off-season, something that's tough on wrestlers given the brutal nature of their five-month season. From that first summer, a relationship grew, and Makovsky tried his hand at striking and more grappling. He ended up with a respectable college wrestling career for a guy who nobody recruited, but the big payoff was that Makovsky found a passion for fighting in Philly. Like the slew of other historical tough guys who've called The City of Brotherly Love home, Makovsky had a future in combat sports.

Five years after graduating from Drexel, Makovsky has 16 professional fights, with 14 wins against two losses. It's not an epic career, but it's one that has stayed north of needless bantering and pricking opponents' sensitivities. Makovsky chooses to fight by harnessing respect and a bright-eyed view that MMA is nothing more than a collection of techniques, training, and skills—assets to be tested, not a public forum where you can untangle the anger and disappointments of life.

Makovsky has also been doing more than just respecting his opponents—he's been befriending them.

"He's got no malicious intent," says Haigh. "These fighters share something in the cage that only they understand, so that doorway to friendship is already open. Zach has the right mentality—he sees it as a competition, not as gladiators entering the Coliseum."

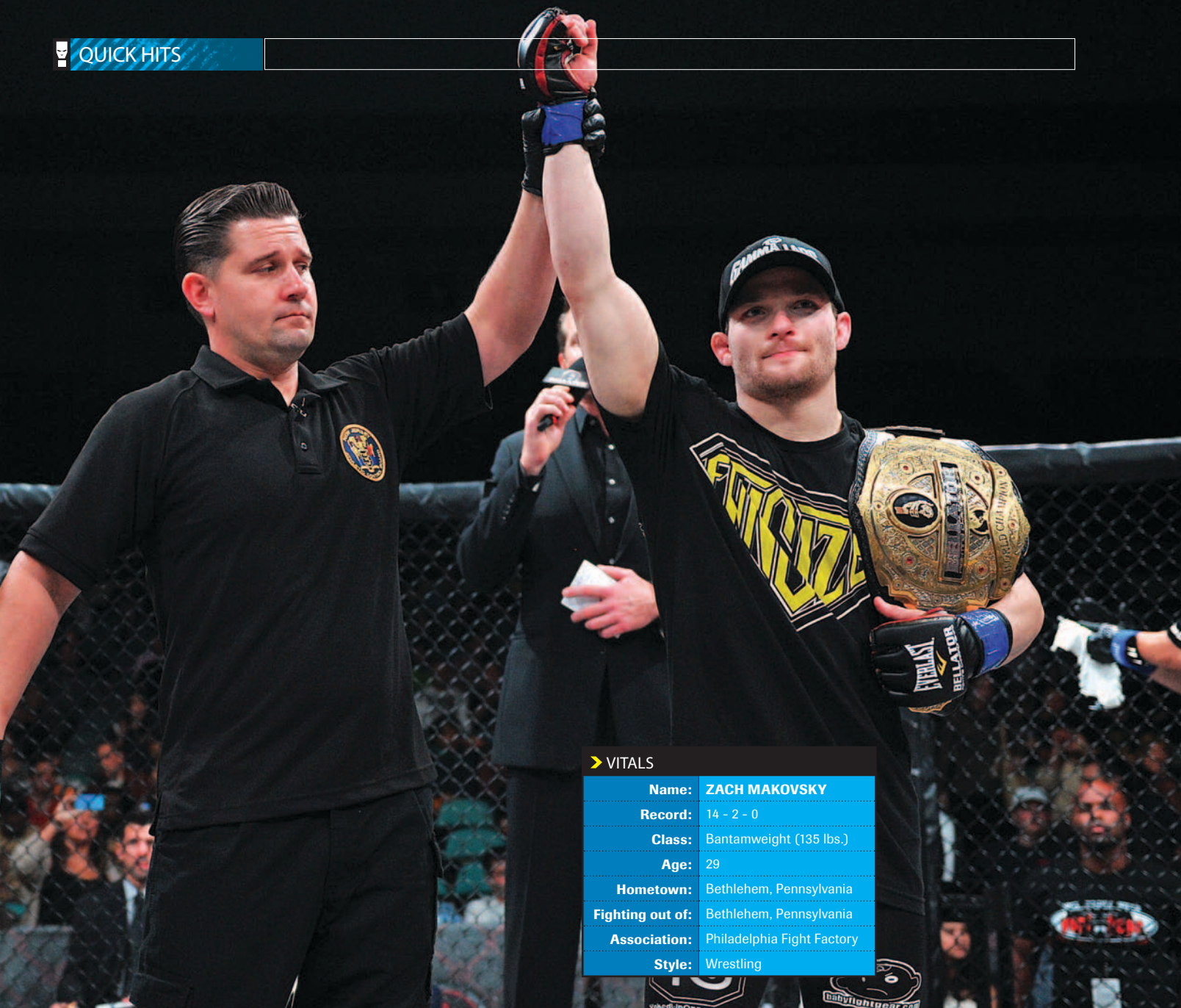
One of the 29-year-old's two losses came in 2008 via rear-naked choke to former Bellator fighter Wilson Reis. Not one to hold a grudge, Makovsky later sought out Reis for advice and sparring time.

"I'd see Wilson at regional fights all the time, and we'd always kind of joke about working out together, and finally we were able to make it happen," says Makovsky. "He's a great training partner, and I'm happy to see him doing well fighting in Brazil."



Makovsky unloads a left hook to Ryan Roberts's grill at Bellator 54.





> VITALS

Name:	ZACH MAKOVSKY
Record:	14 - 2 - 0
Class:	Bantamweight (135 lbs.)
Age:	29
Hometown:	Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
Fighting out of:	Bethlehem, Pennsylvania
Association:	Philadelphia Fight Factory
Style:	Wrestling

In February, Makovsky headed to Arizona for two weeks to train with another one of his former competitors, Ed West, the man he beat by decision in October 2010 to claim the Bantamweight belt. West is lankier than most bantamweights, and Makovsky thought that his build and skill set would help him prepare him for his title defense against Eduardo Dantas on April 13, the winner of the 2011 Bellator Bantamweight Tournament.

"West is definitely a good guy to train with for the Dantas fight because he has a similar body type, like the same height, and they've fought, so I know he'll have some insight." West, who is re-entered in this year's bantamweight tournament could be an opponent again very soon. However, Makovsky is confident that they'll make it work.

"I guess it would be weird," he says, "but for now, it's a great workout situation."

Makovsky is currently on an eight-fight win streak that dates back to February 2010. He's also become a finisher, submitting four opponents and knocking out another. With Dantas, Makovsky is well aware that he'll need his complete game if he's going to keep his belt.

"Dantas is good with straight-forward striking, and he's Nova Uniao, so he's great on the ground," says Makovsky. "My goal is to control where the fight goes and to make sure I have smooth transitions from my feet to the ground, and that my striking stays sharp."

Makovsky is undeterred by that fact that Dantas beat former Freestyle Wrestling World Champion Alexis Vila in the tournament finals. He believes that his ability to transition between disciplines and his utilization of wrestling for MMA are superior to Vila's.

Should he win that bout, it will be difficult to keep Makovsky's name out of the mouths of fight fans. He will be on one of the more impressive winning streaks in the sport, with finishes and quality wins over well-hyped opponents. But don't wait for Makovsky to recruit his own fans, says Haigh.

"In MMA, the squeaky wheel makes the noise and gets the oil, but that isn't Zach's style. Hopefully his skill set will warrant a bigger fan base."

Makovsky agrees, saying, "The goal is just to keep training and improving. To be the best takes a lot of work, and I want to be known one day as one of the best." 📢