

EDUARDO DANTAS IS AT HOME

Bellator Season 5 Bantamweight Tournament winner Eduardo Dantas survived the mean streets of his home with a passion for fighting... the right way.

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

Look around the athletic department of a major college campus and you're likely to see hundreds of teenagers worried about navigating the nightmare of calculus and the heart-ache of having to nuke 35-cent Ramen noodles for dinner. That life doesn't exist in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In 2007, when 18-year-old Eduardo Dantas was preparing for his first professional fight, he would have preferred the casual conversation of the college commons to the daily effort of dodging drug dealers and gang violence.

Rio isn't like the South Side of Chicago or East St. Louis—those cities are just dangerous. The Brazilian city of 6 million is one of the most violent city-states in the world. In 2010, the Brazilian government reported (and these statistics always favor tourism dollars more than accuracy) that there were 3,559 incidents of violent death in Rio. By comparison, New York—America's largest metropolis with 8 million people—ended 2010 with 536 homicides, or about six times fewer “violent deaths” than Rio.

The Brazilian government is spending billions to clean up the crime, tearing through narrow streets of the traditional ghettos (known as “favelas”) to evict stolid drug kingpins and make room for wide thoroughfares and chipper shopkeepers. The goal is to have the city ready for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and, later, the 2016 Olympics. The effort comes as a late consolation prize for many who've suffered through the street-gang barbarism of the last 20 years.

The streets would've claimed one more body, that of Dantas, were it not for his mother, who he says steered him clear of these dangers and sacrificed so much to provide for him and protect him. It's why he still lives with her in the Rio house where he grew up, and it's why he's committed to professional fighting to take care of her financially. “My mother is my inspiration,” he says, “and it's why I want to provide a better life for her.”

Like many of the Brazilian stars filtering through the upper ranks of BJJ and MMA, Dantas discovered his physical outlet in his early teens. With the help of a neighbor, Dantas found his way to the gym of jiu-jitsu ace Marlon Sandro, who would later become his coach and his mentor. The action of Sandro's gym excited the imagination of the young Dantas.

“I would watch Vitor Shaolin Ribeiro train,” says Dantas “He made me love the sport. And then with Sandro, my confidence grew, and



I began to become a winner.”

If the parallel exists between a tough life on the streets and one of success in the cage, it probably has less to do with the physical toughness a human exhibits—scars, muscles, and a shaved head—and more to do with how they've coped with the psychology of pain. What hurts a man's body is rarely what knocks him out of a fight.

The favela-surviving psychology is evident in each of Dantas' fights. Where others shirk, he stands and trades. Where some pace and plod, he rushes and lunges. His body is still developing—four years ago he was as lithe as Miguel Torres—but today, a few extra reps in the gym and some much needed post-teenage testosterone have his wiry frame rippled with muscle. Still, Dantas' physical presence belies his natural tendency toward aggressiveness and brutality. Pull up the YouTube clip of the then 18-year-old fighter going Pele on Aritano Silva Barbosa and you can see what happens when a pound of talent meets a gram of heart. Lights out.

Of course, Dantas lost that fight—even in Brazil you can't soccer kick an opponent's head—but everyone in the arena chanting his Brazilian nickname “DuDu” saw the passion from the baby-faced assassin and cheered him with gusto.

Aritano is one of two losses Dantas has suffered in his four-year fight career. The other loss came in a decision to Masakatsu Ueda during their 132-pound Shooto World Championship title fight in Japan. The decision loss—by the hands of the Japanese judges—left a sour taste in Dantas' mouth. He finished his next four opponents with a range of submissions and knockouts, perhaps none more complete, exhilarating or surprising than his airborne assault of Wilson Reis in the quarterfinals of the Bellator Season 5 Bantamweight Tournament.

Reis and Dantas came into the fight on even ground, until they actually entered the arena and Dantas strolled into his corner trailed by fellow Novo Uniao fighter and UFC Lightweight Champion Jose Aldo. You can look significantly more intimidating when cornered by the scariest lightweight Brazilian in the world.

Pot shots, a few clingy right hands and softening jabs marked most of the action in the first round, until Reis failed to follow through



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on a body kick and he was caught with his leg in the air by Dantas. Reis retreated to the other side of the cage as Dantas followed with an overhand right. After the separation—and hoping to continue the action—the exuberance of youth sent Dantas in pursuit of the fleeing Reis. As the fellow Brazilian turned to face the streaking Dantas, he was met by a flying knee to the jaw. Reis dropped—Dantas pounced and won via KO.

Dantas went on to win a split decision in the semifinals against Ed West, setting up a match against 40-year-old Cuban defector Alexis Vila in the tournament final. Vila, a world champion wrestler and arguably the best overall wrestler in MMA, had recently knocked out Bellator Featherweight Champion Joe Warren, earning him nominations for knockout of the year and causing at least some pause among Dantas' coaching staff, who were left to wonder where they could find an edge against the heavy-handed wrestler.

The gameplan was to survive the first round and then use his comparatively young lungs to tire out the explosive Vila. Dantas stuck to the plan and earned the decision win.

“Vila is a great wrestler, so I tried to push the pace the entire time and maintain the high guard,” says Dantas. “Thank God everything worked out. I was getting better every day, and my speed was improving for the fight.”

Next for Dantas is a chance to capture a belt, something that

has eluded him thus far in his brief fight career. He'll face Bellator Bantamweight Champion Zach Makovsky in the first few months of 2012.

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DuDu is back in Brazil, living with his mother and taking care of an ailing uncle until his fight with Makovsky is announced. He's committed to buying his mom a better house in a better neighborhood. The family that guided him through the troubled streets of Rio is still his force.

Dantas says that he's still focused on his training, even as the world around him seems to be focused on the battle scars he's accumulated climbing out of the Rio slums. Last year, a film company began editing a documentary that features his life. His team at Optimo Sports Management is betting that the story will combine with his in-cage heart to earn him more fans and eventually more money. The movie, *Fighting to Win*, will be released in 2012.

“I love this sport of MMA,” says Dantas. “When I am fighting, I am the happiest person in the world, so, while success comes and goes, what matters is that I am doing something that I love and that I am passionate about.” 