

BELLATOR'S BEN ASKREN IS... THE COMPUTER THAT WORE WRESTLING SHOES

BY T.R. FOLEY

An odd thing happened in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, this summer. Bellator's Welterweight Champion Ben Askren challenged his younger brother Max to a wrestling match in the gym on the campus of Bucknell University. The brothers—both of whom were NCAA Champions at the University of Missouri—were in town to teach a wrestling clinic to local youth wrestlers.

The brothers put on a circus-like performance of gasp-inducing flexibility, flips, kicks, twirls, and dives. Ben walked off the mat a 5-2 victor, an almost inconsequential result for the young fans in the crowd who were undoubtedly planning their entry into a “funkier” style of wrestling, eschewing the more modest, risk-averse techniques of the other coaches present.

In wrestling terms, “funk” is loosely defined as a style of non-traditional moves that requires athletes to put themselves in risky, often physically precarious positions in order to secure larger bunches of points and possibly match-ending falls. Nobody in the history of NCAA wrestling had more success or created more discussion with funk than Ben Askren did during his four years at Mizzou.

Askren grew up in Hartland, Wisconsin. Unlike a majority of Midwestern studs that populate Big Ten and Big 12 wrestling schools,





Askren didn't blossom until seventh grade when he won his first state title. Headed into his freshman year at Mizzou, he was thought of as a three- or four-star recruit, couple time All-American, with an outside shot of becoming a National Champion.

"Most guys come out of high school and are burned out in the sport," says Askren. "They show up to college and want to party and get away from their dad's who are screaming at them all the time. For me, I couldn't get enough of being in the room. I loved to wrestle."

Askren's commitment paid off with an impressive tableau of mind-bending statistics and accolades. He was a two-time NCAA Champion, four-time finalist with a 153-8 record, 93 falls, and two Dan Hodge Awards (wrestling's Heisman). But it wasn't the numbers that impacted the NCAA wrestling community, making him a heel to some and a hero to others. It was that Askren entered a straight-edged strict world of shoulder-forward, crew-cut grapplers and persisted in pursuing a style that eschewed forever-held beliefs about the possible—and did so wearing a mop of fading, dirty blonde curls.

Askren's junior NCAA finals had him wrestling future two-time NCAA Champion and World silver medalist Jake Herbert—a stronger contrast couldn't have been drawn. Herbert, a sculpted 6-foot



figure ripped from the pages of Greek mythology (Western Pennsylvania), faced the clown-haired, thin-legged, and big-chinned Askren. Seven minutes after it started, Askren held his head up high, smirking ear-to-ear as Herbert hung his head. The score was 14-2.

"I got my ass beat. I was lost," says Herbert. "I couldn't say it then, but I love watching Askren wrestle—he's the man. There's almost nothing he can't figure out. In his head is just a bunch of wrestling techniques and situational stuff that nobody else gets. He's like the computer that wore wrestling shoes."

Askren went 1-1 in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, a disappointing performance for a nation that held lofty expectations for his career. He exposed his back and lost points. He was pushed out of the circle and lost points. Freestyle, he said, had become "Freakstyle," and he wasn't interested in untangling the bureaucracy of the ever-changing international rules.

If wrestling wasn't going to adapt, then Askren was pleased to share it with another unimaginative, straight-edged crew-cut world of non-believers with wiggle in their rules. He might even earn an oversized paycheck.

STRIKING OUTWARD

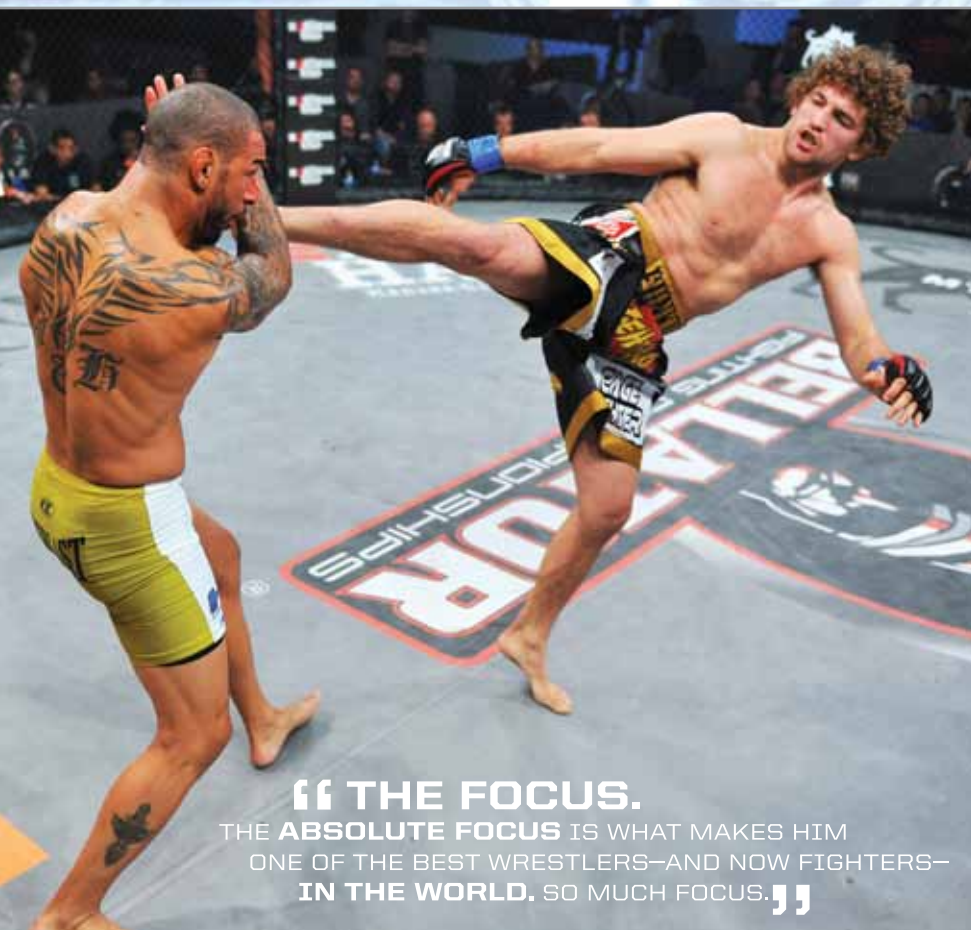
MMA fans commenting on Askren's most recent fight against Jay Hieron had less-than-flattering reviews for the "fucking wrestler." Twitter tweeters vilified Askren for cockiness and convicted him of intentional laziness in the later rounds. Most pundits flat-out disagreed with the split-decision and Hieron immediately labeled himself "The People's Champion."

Few fans seemed to recognize that the top critic of his performance was Askren, who belittled his own effort.

"That last fight kind of sucked, I mean there were lots of things I could've done better, and I was pathetic in the fifth round," he says. "It wasn't the fight I wanted to fight, but I know that I won, and I know that I'm getting better."

"He cares about wins and losses, but it's all about the focus and concentration he uses inside a fight that lets him know if he's done a good job or not," says Renee Mapes, who was the sport psychologist for Askren and the rest of the Missouri wrestling team during his time in Colombia. "He's not a normal athlete when it comes to confidence. Most believe they're loved, that they have skills, but nobody I've ever seen trusts their own focus and preparation like Ben. When that doesn't go well in a performance, he gets critical."

Which isn't to say he loses confidence.



THE FOCUS.

THE ABSOLUTE FOCUS IS WHAT MAKES HIM ONE OF THE BEST WRESTLERS—AND NOW FIGHTERS—IN THE WORLD. SO MUCH FOCUS.

Mark Ellis, a walk-on heavyweight wrestler when he converted from the University of Missouri football team, was Askren's roommate for four years. "He'd have us go and drill in the basement after dinner. I'm 240 pounds and he's 190 pounds, and we're just wrestling around when most guys were playing video games and relaxing."

Askren's work ethic was impossible to avoid, but his brashness also rubbed off on those in his immediate orbit. During Ellis' junior season, he sat in front of a camera and declared that he'd too be an NCAA Champion even though he was a walk-on who failed to even place at the NCAA tournament the year before.

In March, his hand was being raised in the NCAA finals.

"You can't be around a guy like Ben and not have some of that cockiness rub off on you," says Ellis. I saw what it was like to think like a champion. I knew what it took. I knew I could do it too." Ellis has since followed his roommate into MMA and trains at AKA in San Jose, California.

UPGRADING THE SERVER

There is little question that Askren has room for improvement. His wrestling has given him five straight victories in Bellator, but all of those fights have gone to a decision, something fans—and Askren—agree

aren't desirable. His lack of striking power was the impetus for his recent move to Milwaukee and the gym of Duke Roufus.

"He showed up training MMA full-time on August 1," says Roufus. "We had nine weeks to prepare him for this fight. We worked the striking, but if it ain't broke, don't fix it. The last thing I'd want to change is Ben's aura and everything he's done to this point to win."

Brock Lesnar and Askren feed into the popular misnomer that wrestlers don't like to be punched. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that most fighters don't desire to be punched, but the logic is that grapplers avoid or shrink away from punches—somehow making them less-masculine. But why would Askren choose to stand in front of another human and have his orbital bone smashed to sawdust when he has total confidence in his ability to ground, pound, and control his opponent?

Askren understands the dynamics of MMA and the inability to keep excelling if he doesn't pick up a better striking game. The move to Duke's academy wasn't just an effort to acclimatize himself to the taste of leather on his lips—Roufus has Askren standing toe-to-toe with his opponents and taking 16 oz. mitts to the face, albeit lightly—he wants to use the weapons of Muay

Thai, boxing, and kickboxing to create, develop, and re-imagine the way in which striking and grappling are combined.

"It's tougher in MMA to find the advantages in transition because cross-training is difficult to do without getting hurt," says Askren. "I can't go full out in MMA like I could in wrestling unless I'm wearing 16 oz. gloves and pads, and, of course, that's a different feel. Still, I think it's definitely going to be one of my strengths."

Askren has the advantage of being immune to takedowns. Unlike Josh Koscheck, who suffered a minor wrestling humiliation when GSP took him down repeatedly in their first match, Askren won't be giving up similar situations, which he knows gives him a striking advantage.

"I can risk the learning process in my striking game because even if someone gets lucky and fires off a takedown, they'll never hold me down—I'd pop right back up."

That extra confidence gives Askren chances to problem solve on his feet.

"Ben thinks of everything as a puzzle to figure out, but if he was just a mental guy, he'd never make it far. He also has the physical gifts that make him exceptional," says Mapes. "The focus. The absolute focus is what makes him one of the best wrestlers—and now fighters—in the world. So much focus."

Askren sees his approach to learning about fighting, much like Josh Waitzkin (author of the *Art of Learning*) approached chess—they both want to know their opponents level of comfort with chaos. In Waitzkin's example, he liked to see how fellow chess players reacted to sudden thunderstorms during a walk on the beach—if they fled, they needed order, if they walk along, they enjoyed chaos. In his chess matches, Waitzkin would either ratchet up the chaos or play a slow, methodical game. Askren sees MMA in the same light. If he has an opponent who needs chaos, he'll play it straight. If he wants it straight, Askren will create chaos. "Whatever it takes to make him feel uncomfortable. I want him to fight from where I feel strongest and he feels uneasy."

The former NCAA Champion was a transformative figure in wrestling, turning wrestlers from opponents and doubters into friends and believers. Askren wants to do the same in MMA, but with crowded divisions and an almost limitless number of things to learn, memorize, and correct, his success may never be as genre-shifting as it was in wrestling, but fighting the funk will never be just another walk on the beach for opposing fighters.