

STREAKING TO THE TOP

With 29 consecutive fights without a loss, UFC bantamweight Renan Barao (28-1-1) may be Brazil's most electrifying export—that's high praise for a fighter who shares his homeland with Anderson Silva, Jose Aldo, and Junior dos Santos.

BY TR FOLEY // PHOTOS BY PAUL THATCHER



Renan Barao lands a glancing, spinning hook kick on Scott Jorgensen on his way to a unanimous decision victory at UFC 143 on Feb. 4, 2012.

Renan Barao is enjoying one of the longest win streaks in MMA, but for the Brazilian bantamweight, winning started with a loss.

"There isn't anything that I want to forget about my first fight," says Barao of his split decision loss to Joao Pablo in his hometown of Natal, Brazil, in 2005. "I was nervous, and I was very young, but I learned from my mistakes."

The mistake was leaving it in the hands of the judges.

The 25-year-old Brazilian hasn't made many mistakes since his debut, dispatching six opponents by knockout and 13 by submission. In his first year on the UFC roster, he bested Cole Escovedo, Brad Pickett, and Scott Jorgensen. He's been as dominant in the cage as any of the current champions, deftly avoiding damage while delivering brutal beatings. Now, 29 consecutive fights without a loss begs the question: "Can Renan Barao be beaten?"

Of course, and it's something Barao reminds himself of during training.

"I try to not think about my invincibility," he says. "Winning is only a consequence of all my efforts and training."

Like many of Brazil's most revered legends of the cage, Barao grew up in a poor neighborhood with few opportunities outside of the ones created by hard work and family. Despite a lack of resources, Barao (a nickname that means "Baron" after a popular Brazilian soap star of the 1980s) found contentment in spending time with his family.

"All of the difficulties at the beginning of my life were important to my career," he says. "My family was very poor, but we were very rich in health and faith."

That family was also exceptionally large, with Barao sharing quarters with eight brothers and sisters. The size created an increased financial strain, so Barao spent much of his childhood working on farms to help his parents put food on the table.

"I was taught by my family to just do my work right, without stepping on people," says Barao. "Do your work right, and everything you strive for will be achieved someday."

Barao's father, Jose Pegado, worked as a local boxing instructor and spent time teaching his son hard work and respect at home and in the gym. Barao says that boxing was a fit for his personality, and even after a hard day working in the sun, he found

the energy and enthusiasm to throw his hands for hours at a time.

When Barao was 13 years old and showing exceptional talent in the ring (and exceptionally high energy levels), his father took him into the Kimura Nova União gym in Natal where Barao found his outlet on the jiu-jitsu mats. He began training under legendary grapplers Andre Pederneiras and Jair Lourenco—a relationship that's lasted 10 years.

"I'm Andre's 100th black belt, which is a very proud honor," he says. "But my biggest BJJ success was becoming a professional fighter."

Since moving to the UFC, Barao has chosen to continue the majority of his training in Natal where he still lives with his mother, grandmother, and aunt. A few weeks before



VITALS	
Name:	RENAN BARAO
Record:	28-1-1
Class:	Bantamweight (135 lbs.)
Age:	25
Fighting out of:	Natal, Brazil
Association:	Nova União

each fight, he heads to Rio de Janeiro for the intensive portion of his training camp with Pederneiras and the rest of the Nova União team, including UFC Featherweight Champion Jose Aldo and Bellator bantamweight Eduardo Dantas.

Should Barao defeat Ivan Menjivar in July at UFC 148, he'll almost certainly earn a title shot, facing the winner of *The Ultimate Fighter Live Finale* between UFC Bantamweight Champion Dominic Cruz and Urijah Faber. Even as that definitive moment of his fight career seems imminent, who he fights is of less concern to Barao than having the ability to enjoy the financial and personal windfalls of becoming champion. Barao says he wants a championship run that will change his life but not his values. Improving the comfort of his family—from grandparents and parents to siblings and his five-month-old daughter—is what keeps him focused and motivated. Like all parents, he wants better for his children than he had for himself.

Barao also isn't shy about his desire to be revered by the Brazilian fans. He sees the acclaim that the current Brazilian title-holders receive and desires to share in that praise. All three of the current Brazilian champions fought their ways from modest upbringings to become UFC champions and international celebrities. Barao sees himself in that class of Brazilian fighter—the type that the country can rally behind like they do their favorite soccer stars.

"My life has been tough, and I had to work hard to be here," he says. "But I think the people in my country are happy even with difficulties—they are my role models of dedication, determination, and solidarity. I want to show them that I can be a true champion"

Barao transmits that message in almost every interview he gives, a respect that's not overtly patriotic or nationalist, just cognizant that he's fortunate to be recognized for a hardiness he believes is incumbent in all Brazilians.

"In Brazil, the majority have the same poor background, so they really want to fight for their families and for a better life," Barao says.

He wants to be the best of what he sees in his neighbors, but also wants to rise above the commonplace fighter and become a champion of distinction.

"I want to be like all the Brazilians fighters who become great in MMA," says Barao. "But I really want to be me, and I want to have the opportunity to create my own history."

Life on the Farm

In 10 years, Barao sees himself not only holding the UFC Bantamweight Title but also arranging his affairs for early retirement. An avid fisherman and horseback rider, Barao says he'd like to buy a house for his family and own a small piece of land, preferably in Natal, where he can relax by the river and sun by the beach.

"I know that 35 years is not an age to stop working, but I hope I'll be retired," he says. "I hope to have my farm and have a peaceful life. I want to be stable here, to have a life here. I only want to live good, to live well."

