







# *The* UNFORGIVEN

Undefeated Strikeforce Heavyweight Grand Prix Champion Daniel Cormier has proven to be a quick study in the cage, but can he wrestle free from his past while fighting for his future?

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

**D**aniel Cormier's frustration is booming across the racquetball court that's been converted into a boxing facility at American Kickboxing Academy in San Jose, CA. "Duuude! How do you throw this right hook?" he yells.

The shirtless heavyweight is circling the ring, on break between several five-minute periods of pad work with AKA striking instructor Javier Mendez. He's exposing a prodigious belly, and his roundness is being exaggerated by his decision to wear full-length black spandex leggings. It's a sarto-

rial combination that makes Cormier seem cartoonish with top-heaviness.

An unseen fighter is poaching looks from the skyway above the court, "Hey, DC! Is that a rib I'm seeing? Damn boy!"

Cormier chuckles. He isn't bothered by the critique de physique, and starts back in on muttering something about his troublesome right hook. He sashays to his right, and then back to his left. "Okay, so here, and then... SHIT," he says, as his gloves drop to his side.

Fresh-faced AKA prospect Gabriel Carrasco is done training for the day and leaning against the wall, talking with former





UFC Heavyweight Champion Cain Velasquez, when he hears Cormier's belt of building frustration. The bantamweight pulls the resting Cormier from the ring and takes him through the footwork and angles. "Step out here, and then, boom, there."

Cormier slows it down and repeats it once on his own. He calls back Carrasco for a test drive and unloads four crisp right hook combos. At 135 pounds, Carrasco cowers under the thumping and jogs back to the safety of Velasquez.

Cormier, in his brief but exalted MMA career, hasn't prepared for a southpaw striker. The footwork, the approach, it's all a little different. Cormier wants to make sure he's ready for anyone coming his way—righty or lefty.

"He started playing with a head kick a

few weeks before his Barnett fight," says Velasquez. "He tried it once or twice in the fight and missed, and then boop, he puts a shin on Barnett's face. When you're as flexible and athletic as Cormier, why not throw a head kick?"

Cormier has a unique ability to capture, memorize, and repeat complicated actions. Physical intellect has sparked him from an MMA newbie in 2009 to an undefeated 10-0 record.

Cormier's striking lesson with AKA coach Javier Mendez ends with a few minutes of trying to connect his newly acquired right hook with a few wrestling attacks. The footwork is fumbled, and Cormier, normally as bouncy as a grasshopper, is heavy on his heels and spinning

afoul. "How would you do it in wrestling?" asks Mendez. Cormier steps slowly. Mendez nods and makes an adjustment.

Now, half-speed. Okay. Full-speed. Boop. Connected.

Cormier parks his white Ford Expedition outside the front door of the Golden House Chinese restaurant. If he's trying to avoid a discussion of his weight, he's done himself a horrific injustice.

"If I don't watch what I eat during the week, then I'll be 260 pounds, no joke," Cormier says, as he pats himself on the stomach and walks to the counter. The 245-pound fighter orders "something not too greasy" for his girlfriend and sweet-and-sour chicken and





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fried rice for himself. On this Saturday afternoon, Cormier tells me that the weekend is his time to "let go a little."

Cormier places the to-go order and shuffles to his seat and immediately starts in on "the weight thing," and how it's directed his life. "You gotta know it, I'm just built this way. I'm always going to have this extra stuff around my belly. This is the ..."

I interrupt him before he unwinds the web that could lead to the rumored drop to 205 pounds to fight UFC Light Heavyweight Champion Jon Jones. "What happened at the 2008 Games?" I ask. "How did you miss weight at the Olympics?"

Cormier's eyes open wide, then soften. "The Olympic stuff. Yeah, it sucks. I made

weight. My body just started acting up."

He goes through everything that happened with remorse lingering in every consonant. After weigh-ins, the trouble began almost immediately. "I was in the back room and not doing well," Cormier says. He was vomiting, then he crawled to the bathroom and began violently shitting. Okay, that's not too abnormal, he thought. But then he was taken off the IVs, and he started sweating and shivering.

The doctors gave Cormier a dozen potassium pills, because, as he describes it, the medical staff was "freaking out." Cormier couldn't stand, he could hardly find the energy to talk. That night, when he arrived back at the Olympic Village, they took him to the medics where they ran tests and found that his kidneys were running at 20 percent. "It was all bad. All bad, man."

Cormier tried to wrestle, but the USOC wouldn't let him get near the arena. He was sidelined for the biggest tournament of his life. Online, the U.S. wrestling community eviscerated Cormier, tore through his career and work ethic, giving him an unapologetic digital dress down. Coaches, youth wrestlers, friends, teammates—everyone heard the news, and everyone had a comment. One online keyboard warrior asked for Cormier's passport, "Just stay in Beijing. We don't need you!"

"Dude, it was bad. I could've died," says Cormier. "And it was my fault, but when I

started hearing everything, that I let everyone down, it was awful. I was devastated."

A large bag of Chinese food is placed at our table. Cormier continues to explain the fallout, what happened when he got home, the yearlong depression, the alienation. He's settling into the confessional.

"I let down the entire wrestling community, and I thought, 'I'm finished, man.' They're never going to forgive me. Never."



Cormier's apartment is 20 minutes north of the AKA gym. Unlike Cormier's best friend and training partner Muhammed "King Mo" Lawal, who secured a nice bachelor pad minutes from AKA's front doors, Cormier needed space for a fast-expanding family. In the wealthy Silicon Valley, that means you're driving more often than your single buddies.

Cormier has brought the takeout home to feed his girlfriend Salina, who's resting with the couple's two young children, Daniel, 19 months, and Markita, six months. Cormier pulls up some college football games on the television and mutes the sound so he can listen for Markita to wake up from her nap. He's talking in a hushed tone about their milestones and what it's like to have a son and a daughter.

"I know you hear it all the time, but it's true, kids change everything. You know, I might have been wrestling for myself at some points, but here, like now, I'm fighting



to support my family,” Cormier says from the recliner in his living room. When Markita wakes up, he places her on his knee and bounces her gingerly. She’s an impossibly gorgeous toddler, with dark, round eyes and a tall-standing head of black curls that spring up and down.

Cormier is best known for his flub at the 2008 Olympics, but his family life—and the ginger nature for which he cares for friends and family—began in Lafayette, Louisiana, where he grew up the middle of three children to a single mother. His parents divorced when he was still young and his father remarried. Then, on Thanksgiving Day 1986, his father was murdered by his step-grandfather during a family altercation. Cormier was only seven years old, and because there were never any charges brought against the killer (the claim was self-defense), he was left to suture his own emotional wounds.

Cormier learned to deal with the tragedy of losing his father by relying on his family and on the recruitment of local junior wrestling coach Steven Lotief. The combination of socializing with family, making friends on the mat, and expressing himself physically was a productive therapeutic stew. It was the childhood lessons of losing his father—and the tools he had in place—that helped him deal with the next loss in his life, the 2003 death of his infant daughter.

It happened only weeks before the 2003 Wrestling World Team Trials. Cormier was the favorite to make the team and was at home in Stillwater, Oklahoma, relaxing with teammates Lawal and Jamill Kelly, when he received the phone call that his daughter had been killed in a car accident involving a tractor-trailer.

“It was the worst thing I’ve ever seen,” says Lawal. “He hushed the room and kept repeating ‘What?’ louder and louder, and he was crying. It was heartbreaking. Awful.”

USA Wrestling agreed to postpone Cormier’s wrestle-off for the World Team spot to allow him time to grieve. Most pundits in the wrestling community thought he’d come out as a rag, too battered by emotion to tie his shoes. But something had been sparked in Cormier that wasn’t coming undone. After he dropped the first match, he charged the mat in a best-of-three series against Dean Morrison and won the final two matches.

“Daniel’s first love is wrestling, but I can’t tell you how he managed to deal with this,” says Lawal. “He practiced like shit, he was depressed, but the moment he stepped on



the mat, everything changed.”

Cormier earned his spot on five more World Teams, placing fourth in the 2004 Olympics and earning a bronze medal at the 2007 World Championships. Lawal was also training during those years, but as they crept into the final years of their wrestling careers, the two had divergent plans for the future. Cormier was being paid \$1250 per month (six months a year) from USA Wrestling’s governing body and pulling in another \$850 from Gator Club Wrestling. He just had to keep wrestling, do well, and stay injury free.

“I told him that we should get into fighting in, like, 2007,” says Lawal. “But all he could talk about was wrestling and how ‘I can make \$30k as a coach and then start a kids club and make \$15k more.’ I’m like, ‘Daniel, we could make millions fighting.’” Wrestling was Cormier’s counselor, and his international career was baptized in the pain of losing his father, and then his daughter. Friends could change, but wrestling was always there, a cathedral as much

as it was a stage.

After the failures of the 2008 Olympics, Cormier shut the doors on everyone except his closest friends. He didn’t work out, ballooned to 265 pounds, and floundered when it came to keeping a good job, or even finding one in wrestling. “I did everything right for so many years, but all of the sudden, I kinda felt like it didn’t matter,” says Cormier. “I always thought I’d be a college coach. Now, nobody wanted to hire me.”

The larger wrestling community had left Cormier to suffer on his own, but a few friends stood close by. Olympic teammate Jamill Kelly texted and called. Former USA head wrestling coach Kevin Jackson called every week, despite having just lost his job as the National Team coach. Cormier was floundering in Stillwater, trying to make money at a local television station by writing commercial scripts and starring as on-air talent for a local wrestling show called *On the Mat*.

In early 2009, Lawal visited Cormier at his home. The two sat down to watch





some fights and catch up. Lawal had always been in Cormier's ear about joining the fight game, but now, after four fights in Japan, Lawal had made real money, and the charismatic fighter had Cormier's full attention.

The next week, Cormier was sitting outside his house, gazing into the horizon, when Lawal called for another appeal to start training. This time Cormier accepted.

The food is served, and Salina takes a seat next to Cormier. She brings over a plate of sweet-and-sour chicken as Cormier shakes out a mixture of Cajun seasoning made by some friends back in Lafayette. Salina's been here for every step of Cormier's ascension. They met at a sushi restaurant in Fresno in 2009 when Cormier was hanging

out with manager DeWayne Zinkin.

"She was beautiful, but I'm shy, so DeWayne had to walk over and introduce us," says Cormier, darting eyes back in Salina's direction. The couple moved in together three months later, and soon enough, Salina was pregnant with Cormier's son Daniel. Three months after Daniel was born, Salina was pregnant with Markita. "She's been with me every step of my MMA career," says Cormier.

Those steps have seemed more like triple jumps. By nobody's estimation should Cormier really be peeking around the corner at a UFC title shot after three years in the cage. But if the powers that be wanted to sandbag a heavyweight prospect, choosing Cormier as an alternate for the Strikeforce Heavyweight Grand Prix was a terrible decision.

Cormier wasn't an original selection for the tournament, but when Dutch heavyweight Alistair Overeem was pulled from the competition, Strikeforce called on Cormier to be the replacement. "I wanted





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a shot at those big guys. I felt like I could fight with them two fights before that, so I knew I’d be ready, even on short notice.” It was nice symmetry. Cormier, the man who had it all and fell from grace at the biggest tournament in his life just four years ago,

could now be resurrected as the underdog fighting for a chance at a tournament title.

Cormier faced Antonio “Bigfoot” Silva in his first fight, a man coming off a second-round stoppage victory over Fedor Emelianenko. The fight was never contested. In the fourth minute of the first round, the wrestler unfurled a suffocating bombardment of punches to Silva’s face and won by knockout.

“Daniel’s crazy like that,” says Lawal. “He might goof off in practice or bullshit, but when he steps on the mat...dude’s a gamer.”

Cormier would go on to dominate Josh Barnett for all five rounds of their fight in May, earning the title as Grand Prix Champion after less than three years in the sport.

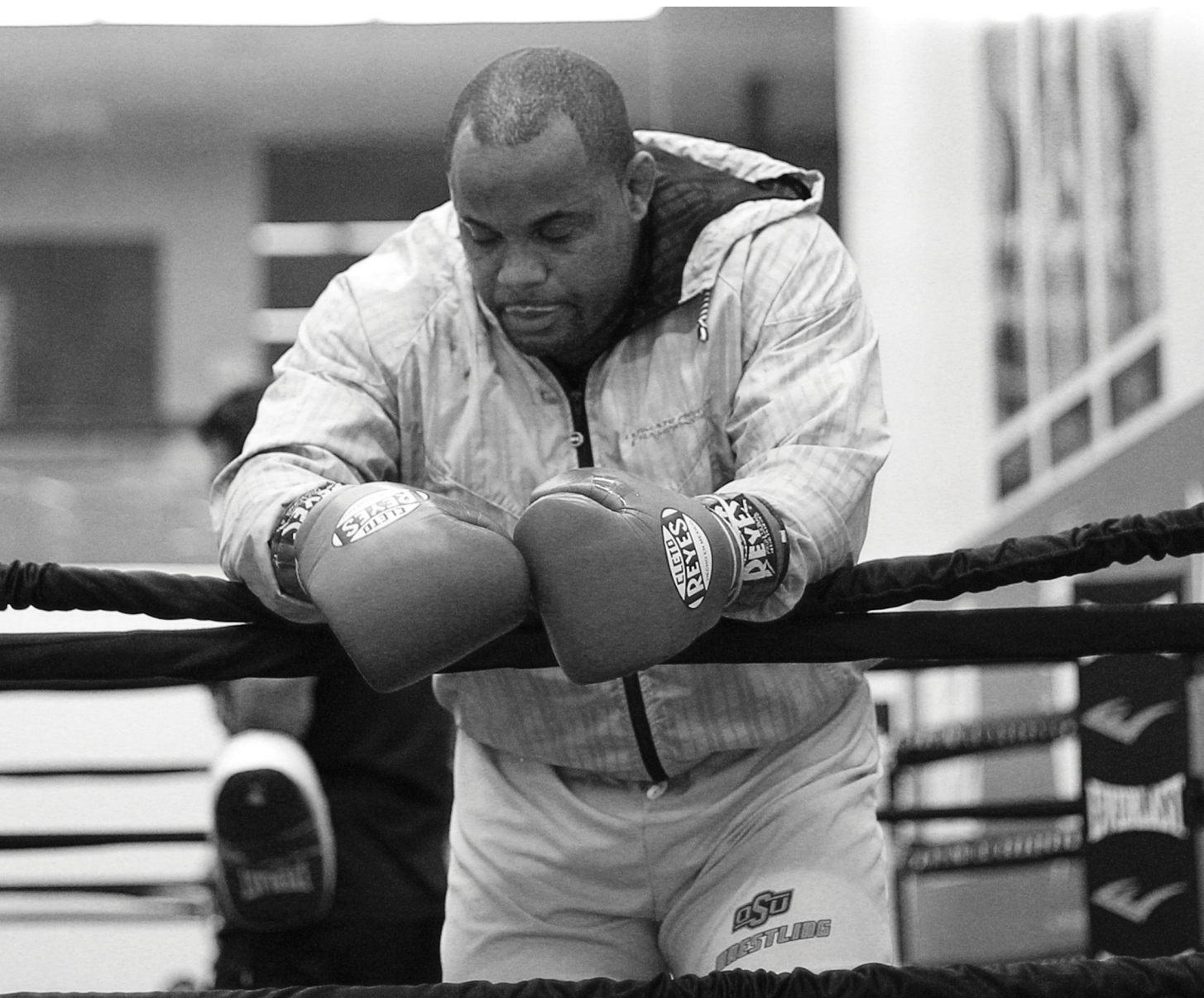
It’s that story of Cormier’s rebirth that attracted Shawn Bunch, a superlative wrestling talent who lost out on his chance to represent the U.S. team at this year’s Olympics in a heart-wrenching, nationally televised wrestle-off loss. “Daniel was sending me text messages right after my match

and saying he knew what it felt like to be down like that,” says Bunch, who now takes his wrestling direction from Cormier. “He promised me that AKA would be a good place to train, so that’s where I came.”

The gym isn’t just a place for Cormier to curry favor with his wrestling buddies who have fallen from the Olympic ladder. When visitors come into AKA, one of the first things they see is a bulletin board filled with photographs of scrawny local kids in their wrestling stances in signature black and red AKA singlets. Those are Cormier’s students—they’re his renewal. “It doesn’t make any sense for him financially,” says trainer Bob Cook. “But he loves coaching the kids and traveling to tournaments. I don’t even know how many wrestlers he has, but it’s a herd.”

The guys at AKA are his new family, a support system adapted to the unique challenges of life in MMA. They’ve helped Cormier learn to strike and have given him back his wrestling, but also joy and reparation from the events of the 2008.





It's Salina and their children, however, that are the foundation, and with the increase in his marketability and the financial boon that comes with it, Cormier finally feels confident enough to buy his family a new home. "We're going to start looking right after his next fight," says Salina. "I don't want him to think about that right now. I want him to focus and not rush anything. We want to make sure the house is the perfect place to raise our family."

Look at his potential. Then look again at his belly.

It's the weight that'll be the next psychological challenge for Cormier. He's an emerging heavyweight star in a world sparsely populated with marketable fighters, but that

belly is potential. It's potential energy and potential income. Should he stay at heavy-weight, a fight against Velasquez seems plausible when he makes his move to the UFC after his final Strikeforce bout, but he could also move down to 205 pounds to face UFC Light Heavyweight Champion Jon Jones. He'd avoid personal conflict, but would he be risking his health? What about his reputation?

"What if I got to 205 pounds and the wrestling community turned on me?" asks Cormier. "That means something to me. I like that small community. I like that small feel. Because this...this MMA thing is way bigger. It's not as much of a family community. The wrestling community backs you, they're passionate about you. I don't wanna lose what part of that I might have left. I don't want them to say, 'For a whole bunch of money, this guy can lose six

pounds, but he can't wrestle in the Olympics.'"

He won't know unless he tries, but he has reason to believe that his community is back on his side. During his September press trip to Oklahoma City, Cormier stopped on the campus of his alma mater Oklahoma State and stepped back into the wrestling room for a workout. Afterward, someone in media relations Tweeted a photo of Cormier with 2012 Olympic bronze medalist Coleman Scott, which was then re-Tweeted by dozens of fans, all with messages of love and encouragement for Cormier.

"WE LOVE YOU DC!" one of them read. "We're proud of our champions!"

Love, where before it was only hate. Suddenly, what had once seemed so difficult for his small community to grasp was now effortless. 