





THE BULLY'S PULPIT



HECTOR LOMBARD

is the UFC's newest high-profile acquisition, and the monster of the middleweights is ready to get the heads rolling and tempers flaring.

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



The Internet knows two stories about Hector Lombard, and neither is flattering.

The most famous is the Cuban-Australian's beef with one-time training partner and Strikeforce heavyweight Josh Barnett. The other is an on-the-mat dispute with UFC welterweight Jacob Volkmann that turned bloody.

With Barnett, there seemed to be a traditional fighter's spat—two guys with big fists using them to excess—which resulted in some hurt feelings and Lombard's eventual departure from the Combat Submission Wrestling Training Center where Barnett trained. The Volkmann incident happened at American Top Team, with the All-American wrestler recounting a soap opera-like incident capped by a frustrated Lombard punching him in the face. The stories have been cut-and-pasted so often around message boards and blogs that they've acquired that unmistakable scent of legitimacy-via-cyberspace.

Bloody-noses and tete-a-tetes with training partners have earned Lombard a sticky reputation for being a bully (it's the third most Google'd add-on to his name). Unfortunately for Lombard, being called a bully in this decade is on par with clubbing baby seals. We live in the age of *Oprah*, *Anderson 360*, and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*—mainstream culture cares little for aggression. Lombard's negative reputation isn't helped by the fact that he's essentially an exposed nerve wrapped in

a Thor-like body, or that he's carrying a six-year, 25-fight unbeaten streak. There's plenty to talk about when the world's largest MMA promotion signs a fighter that few people have met, and fewer understand.

Behind the front desk at the American Top Team training facility in Coconut Creek, Florida, is an enormous indoor archway. It's impressive for its size, like the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, except wooden and painted in the image of the Stars and Stripes. The arch is decorative, serving no purpose but to possibly reorient any international Top Team members to what continent they are currently training on, but surrounding it is the championship hardware earned by teams and individuals from the gym—trophies ranging from Florida's Grappler's Quest tournament to the belts of former UFC title-holders. There are 20,000-square-feet of workout space, two cages, and, like the gym from *The Ultimate Fighter*, the rafters are decorated with images of the gym's top warriors: Thiago Silva, Alexis Vila, and, of course, Lombard.

It's here, in a hiding place behind the archway, that I stop to observe Lombard. I want to see the wild man in his unguarded moments before he greets the reporter. Maybe I could catch him face-mushing a friend or drop-kicking a trainer. Maybe he'd fall into an unhinged blackout



Hector Lombard works the pads at American Top Team in Coconut Creek, Florida

before buttoning up for my softballs as he puffs up for the camera.

Unfortunately, nothing physical is taking place, no validation that Lombard is just another prime time special on unchecked anger. I eventually walk over and am met midway by Lombard, who's reaching out his massive right arm and thick hand. It takes effort, but after several slaps, we make our way through an awkward greeting and seal it with a shoulder bump. Lombard is solid enough to nudge me back a step even when being polite, and I'm taken aback by how much shorter he is than expected (5'9" on paper, 5'7" in real life). He's a tank. He's a fire hydrant. On occasion, his traps rub his ears. The man has many muscles.

The stat line on Lombard is as impressive as his physique. In addition to his 25-fight unbeaten streak, he's got an overall record of 31-2-1, with 17 knockouts and seven submissions. It's those numbers, and the gnarly habit he's created in finishing with bloody and delightful power, that got him snatched up by the UFC (and sponsored).

Lombard's ability to stop an opponent is important to keep in mind when discussing his accomplishments. Yes, he's a judoka at first, but it's the striking and jiu-jitsu that have made him a successful and marketable fighter. He throws bombs, sometimes with his head down, but always with the intention to maim. There are no short jabs and no pulling guard. Lombard isn't a vulture looking for a free meal, he's a grizzly,

pawing and gnawing his way to a better dinner.

The opportunity to fight better opponents in the UFC means Lombard can answer critics and win over fans by pitting his hyperbolic aggressiveness against the best fighters in the world. Maybe he should have already earned that admiration, but it never seemed to matter that Lombard won all eight of his fights in Bellator, because each had media-predictable outcomes. Lombard's reputation was open for review because his opponents were never talented or hyped enough to allow for good theater—he was never permitted to display courage or show in-cage cunning. Instead, every fight uncorked new doubts and recruited new naysayers on the Internet.

"I have a goal to be the very best in MMA. I want to win the title in the UFC and be remembered for a good legacy as a great fighter," says Lombard. "It's why I train so hard. It's simple. I don't care what the media says, it's not important."

Vital or not, Lombard will get a platform to rebuff the doubters on August 4 in Los Angeles when he faces off against "All-American" Brian Stann. Unlike Bellator, which is relegated to a smaller viewership, Lombard will fight on Fox's main card against one of the sport's most beloved fighters. If Lombard stops Stann and earns the title shot, it won't just validate his past eight fights, it'll confirm a life thus far of prioritizing

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upward mobility and self-improvement over stability and status quo.

For the majority of Cubans, growing up on Fidel's island is a life sentence of hard work and scraping by. Jobs are few, the educational system is broken, and people are left to either make do with little or fight for extra. However, if you have athletic prowess, the system is ingrained from a young age with the implementation of sports academies, which essentially operate as premier boarding schools for many of the country's most talented athletes. Like Alexis Vila and Yoel Romero in wrestling, Lombard's judo skills were impressive, so he was voluntarily relocated to a national academy in Havana, leaving behind his mother and father.

According to Lombard, the judo academy is where he first experienced how winning translated into better food, a more comfortable bed, and an escape to a world outside of his sheltered island. "My goal was always to win so that I could travel on the trips and see the different places," he says. "Cuba is an island, and you can only see so much."

Lombard's judo took him all the way to the 2000 Sydney Olympics, where he competed as Cuba's entrant at 73 kg (160 lbs). Although he cut weight to make the class, the 22-year-old looked every bit as much of the monster that he does today. The weight classes are different, but the muscles were all in place beneath his gi.

Lombard competed on the world's biggest stage, only to return to Cuba without a medal. But that's not to imply that Lombard returned to his island empty handed. Among the dozens of barrel-chested judoka's was a female manager named Nicole, a Brit living in Australia who had been hired to help manage some of the Olympic teams. They'd fallen in love, and Lombard married her on a return trip to Australia in 2001. He has not returned to Cuba since—although he could. The Cuban government doesn't consider him a defector because he moved for marriage.

Lombard continued to dabble in judo until 2004, when he took, and won, his first cage fight in Queensland, Australia. By 2006, PRIDE was interested, and he was on a plane to Japan. The plan for his first trip had been to sign a few documents and return home, but Hector says that the Japanese made him stay to fight two weeks later—a decision loss to Akihiro Gono. Six months passed before he lost another decision, this time to Gegard Mousasi.

"I lost my fights, but I was like, 'Ah, man. I didn't train much, and I didn't have a goal.' I thought to myself, if I dedicate and make a goal, I can be very good," says Lombard.

In 2006, Lombard also welcomed the birth of his son, a moment he says was "life-changing." In 2007, he inked his first deal with the UFC, but he couldn't fly into the States on his Cuban passport—"I could've fucking swam," he jokes. Following that setback, he registered for an Australian passport, and in 2009, with the backdrop of a failing relationship, he made the decision to train full-time in America. "It was the only way to be a champion," he says.

It was the only way to eat a better meal.



"Hector always trains, and he always fights with one goal," says Conan Silveira. "Yeah, you gotta use the word 'bully,' but it's not 'bully.' All kinds of fighters like to take time off to enjoy the money or the fame. In Hector's case, he really doesn't care about anything except fighting."

Conan is 6'5" and tips the scales around 280 pounds. He's bearded and has the presence of someone who is unlikely to ever be bullshitted or mugged. He's also savvy. A Brazilian by birth, he immigrated to the United States and became one of the founding members of ATT, a stalwart among the country's most successful MMA training facilities.

Lombard adores Conan. He downplays it when asked directly, referring to him only as, "My boy," but in three hours, Conan twice fed Lombard half-eaten protein bars and brought him red Powerades from a nearby cooler. Over the course of day, the two exchanged a half-dozen hugs, Lombard never reaching above his coach's mid-chest. Later, as they parted, Conan kissed Lombard on the head.

"I know that most people would never believe me, because I am his coach, but I know him better than anyone, and he would never take any drugs or steroids." Conan isn't selling—he's just expecting where the questions are headed. "He wants to fight all the time. I can't even get him to drink a protein shake. I mean, it's crazy because he only started lifting three weeks ago for the first time."

The coach in Conan is aware of the hard-hitting middle-

weight's affection for a tough scrap and admits that they do have to bring in "outside training toys." The guys in the gym can hang with him on occasion, but it's tough because his level of intensity is so high and his punches so powerful, says Conan. Inevitably, he wears down his teammates, creating a constant search for new partners.

It was just one of those partners, UFC welterweight Jacob Volkmann, who made the most descriptive "bullying" claims against Lombard. The NCAA Division I All-American wrestler said that during a wrestling workout, a frustrated Lombard lost his temper and punched him in the nose, causing it to bleed. Volkmann went on to make sure that his audience knew that afterward he just "played" with Lombard, taking him down a few times and sweeping him to his back.

"People say these things about Hector all the time," says Conan. "You know why? One, they don't have 'it.' Two, they want to have 'it.' Three, they never gonna have 'it.'"

Conan knows Lombard's strength is his aggression, the indefinable quality that he sees as what separates "him" from "them." That type of mentality is probably no way to make new friends and would make the 205-pound fighter a terrible kindergarten teacher. But he's not in the friend-making business, and he's not cleaning up after five-year-olds. The guy gets paid to punch other humans in the face, and, for that, he's equipped.

"I think that [Volkmann] went on the Internet to stir it up," Conan says. "Now that Hector is in the UFC, I hope, for him, that they don't

end up on the same card."

"Also," Conan interjects, eyebrows raised, "I don't think you should say anything about him to Hector."

When we started this grappling session, it wasn't clear how long Lombard intended to spar—or how hard. Now, 30 minutes after being pulled into this impromptu hand-fighting/grappling/head-snapping session with MMA's biggest "bully," it's apparent that we're joking, but we're not playing around. Just to be safe, I keep Volkmann's name out of our conversation.

I attack Lombard's legs and initiate a standing scramble for position. He reacts with a strong overhook on my right arm, blocks my right knee with his left, and uses all 20 pounds of his extra muscle to throw me down and in front of him—a modified uchi-gara.

He follows me to the mat, but instead of tumbling to my knees, I manage to regain my balance and touch only my hands to the mat. This excites Lombard. I'd gone at him hard, he'd countered, and now I've reacted well. I expected some laughs. Lombard expected more.

"You take me down? It's impossible!" he screams. "Immmm-possible!"

I would guess it's this type of escalation that started the man-spat between him and Josh Barnett—the intensity getting juiced up until, eventually, some unwritten code of training is violated. The story from Combat Submission Wrestling Training Center is that Barnett lost his cool with Lombard's "bullying" in a sparring session, and by peppering

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him with unanswerable attacks, forced Lombard to quit the gym.

Maybe. Maybe not.

It could have been any number of realities, but the only people who know are Barnett and Lombard, and for his part, Lombard says he feels that “at the end of the day, I know what happened, I have the confidence.”

The sparring-gone-wrong episode led to one of the most peculiar chapters in Lombard’s biography—calling out heavyweight Barnett after Lombard beat Herbert Goodman at Bellator 24. After dispatching of Goodman in 38 seconds, Lombard grabbed the mic, and, with Barnett in attendance, said, “Hey Josh Barnett, I want to fight you, too. I don’t care how much you weigh, I want to fight you.”

According to Conan, Barnett came into the locker room to find out why, and a very hyped-up and gloved Lombard wanted to fight him right there. “Barnett, he was apologizing, like ‘Oh, I thought we were friends, Hector,’ and all of this,” says Conan.” But I am thinking like, ‘Oh my god, Hector is going to kill him right now in the locker room.’”

Nothing happened, and the two have kept their distance since that incident.

Our hand fighting intensifies until finally the photographer calls Lombard over to finish up the day’s shots. I’m left breathing deeply, and Lombard walks by, taunting me in a chuckle, “He’s tired, man, he’s so tired!”

He then pats me on the back and whispers, “You’re so strong, my man.”

According to Lombard, La Parilla is the best Dominican restaurant in South Florida. He may be right. Even at 4 p.m. on a Saturday, the

small restaurant is packed with patrons. When Lombard arrives, few diners seem to take notice. The kitchen staff and the owner, however, drop their fry baskets and rush out to give the recent UFC signee some love.

“I eat here all the time, since I first moved here. Eventually, we talked, and they came to my fights, and then they started sponsoring me,” Lombard says, as he walks behind the counter to grab several orders of flan from a small desert fridge. “Mmmm. This is my favorite.” He’s snickering, the look of a child in his eyes.

The owner comes with Lombard’s food first, and they speak in Spanish, the owner explaining that he made the fish without deep-frying it, “Just pan-fry it for you.” When Lombard begins eating, it becomes a full-body activity, as he powers spoonful after spoonful of rice into his mouth. He’s a man of habits, and he begins mixing together the black beans, rice, pollo, and vinegar-soaked onions into perfect-sized portions. Bite after bite, mouthful after mouthful, Lombard becomes more animated, more alive. Food makes the man happy.

The conversation lasts well past the food on Lombard’s plate. He’s relaxed, an excited gleam in his eyes when talking about his next fight. After more than an hour of conversation, we leave La Parilla. Lombard enjoyed the wrestling, and tells me that he felt a good challenge and to send him some more wrestlers. He wants toys—it’s unclear if he has plans to break them.

Later that night, I get a text on my phone from Lombard, “Let me know when you are back here to Florida brother, I will take you out for dinner. I know lots of nice places.” A second later, before I can type my response, a follow-up buzz hits my phone, “I also will take you down in wrestling, LOL!”

That’s Hector, one speed and no apologies. 🇵🇷