

THE BUSINESS OF BEING BLACKZILIAN

The newest MMA powerhouse is home to some of the UFC's biggest superstars and a business-first manager who built the team with a little bit of risk and a lot of trust.

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

UFC lightweight Abel Trujillo sits against the padded blue walls of the JACO Hybrid Training Center, mulling the job he's done wrapping his hands for practice. He lifts the yellow wraps in the air, inspects them, and pulls gently at his thumb. Trujillo gives a quick nod of satisfaction at his work and walks across the blue mats to pick up his sparring gloves.

Henri Hooft, the Dutch kickboxing coach brought in to teach the Blackzilians team the aggressive style of striking seen in fight halls across the Netherlands, slaps Trujillo on the back as he passes. The young fighter adds a hop to his step, and within a minute, along with 30 other fighters, he takes a position in the room to await Hooft's instructions.

The practice was scheduled to begin at 10 a.m., but this is South Florida, and the team that was born of Brazilian blood still runs on Brazilian time. Hooft knows it, too. He waits patiently for Thiago Silva and Matt Mitrione to grab their pads before hustling the team into the center of the mat to deliver the sharp commands and expectations for the day's workout.

The Blackzilians' workout space is twinkling with newness. Set in the backroom of a larger consumer gym, the Dodger-blue Zebra mats cover a 100-foot by 30-foot area. There are blue mats on two sides, a seating area with black chairs on a third, and a black chain-link fence is bolted to the ground that runs the length of the mat. Far wall, near wall, cement wall—every open space has been plastered in the brands JACO, F3 Nutrition, and Blackzilians.

Hooft blows his whistle, and the team commences kicking and punching. Trujillo lays into each strike like it's the one that'll win him the Knockout of the Night bonus. Every dollar counts to a fighter like Trujillo, and earning more green is why he changed allegiance from freelancing fisticuffs to full-fledged Blackzilian.



Henri Hooft goes over some of the finer points of the day's lessons.



The Blackzilian-Authentic Sports Management-JACO conglomeration started in 2010 with a simple request from former UFC fighter Jorge Santiago. “I wanted to be treated fairly,” he says. “I was sick of dealing with all the different people and not getting the types of fights and money I wanted.”

Santiago was looking for a new arrangement—better fights, bigger sponsorships, and less of a skim every time he paid his support staff. Glenn Robinson, a local businessman Santiago befriended at a regional MMA show in Florida, agreed to be his manager. A tool designer by trade, Robinson had already earned millions as the founder and CEO of IronBridge Tools, a drafting and manufacturing firm he opened in 2006.

“I wanted to help a friend,” says Robinson. “And when I saw how most of these management deals were structured, I knew I could do better for Jorge.”

After six months, Robinson acquired the management duties of Yuri Villefort, Danillo Villefort, and Gesias Cavalcante. All were close friends of Santiago, and until they signed with Robinson, were also members of nearby American Top Team. Robinson saw the expansion as an opportunity—he paid rent at a workout facility in Boca Raton, opened Authentic Sports Management (ASM) to handle the day-to-day operations, and purchased the JACO brand out of bankruptcy. Next, he brought in Jen Wenk, former head of UFC public relations, to handle Blackzilian PR. Robinson was setting his chessboard.

Robinson’s seminal moment as a manager came when a mutual friend introduced him to former UFC Light Heavyweight Champion Rashad Evans, who was in South Florida in the summer of 2011 to sit in on some new business ideas of his own. He’d been in the “I’m a PC!” ad campaign and was looking to branch into broadcasting and other on-air opportunities. Robinson floated Evans some ideas, and the former champ said he felt “an instant connection” and signed with ASM in late 2011. Evans’ instant contribution might have been to add name-recognition heft to the organization, but he also gave it an original and fun-to-repeat name: Blackzilians, a moniker he described as an ode to the team’s bi-ethnic identity as either Black or Brazilian.

After Evans, the big names started to roll through the organization. There were the ASM-only guys who weren’t ready to move, such as Philadelphia-native Eddie Alvarez, and then there were those who gained full citizenship, including UFC fighters Michael Johnson and Matt Mitrione. In February 2012, Robinson signed Alistair Overeem. In August, he signed former UFC Light Heavyweight Champion Vitor Belfort. The roster that started with Evans and a few Brazilians has grown to include more than two dozen ASM-run athletes in the UFC and Bellator.

“Glenn is a big picture guy,” Evans says. “He’s trying to think of new ways for our guys to make money in fighting and make them more marketable. He’s got ideas, but he’s not trying to overwork you to make extra money for himself. He does it for his fighters. He gives us the best of everything.”

Many of Robinson’s fighters share more than ethnicity—many were acquired during personal or professional slumps. Evans joined during his famous fallout with Greg Jackson; Overeem hopped the Atlantic after a contract dispute with Golden Glory; Matt Mitrione was coming off an injury; and Thiago Silva was on



Rashad and Vitor lightly spar.



Abel Trujillo takes time out to reflect.



Team members keep their heart rates up between rounds.

"I had a shitty record. I was making \$1,000 to show and \$1,000 to win...I needed a place where I could prove myself."

"The biggest challenge for me is to get these guys to understand that there is a money stream, but it's not unlimited," says Robinson. "I want them to trust me that if we work hard, they're going to have a better life, and in the meantime, I'll try not to run this thing at a loss."

Hooft spends time correcting form, but he's insistent on aggression. Brazilian welterweight Nicolae Cury floats in the back of the room, hands held high, kicking the pads as hard as possible. Like everyone else in the room, he is wearing full JACO gear and occasionally gets the courteous wrath of Hooft. "Your knees need to be faster."

After a practice that includes 15 minutes of throttling his opponent from inside the guard, Cury collapses alongside Trujillo.

"I'm trying to get on the new World Series of Fighting," says Cury, as he unwraps his hands. "Hopefully, I will get another shot at the UFC, but for now, I'm just going to keep training hard and hope for the best."

Trujillo recently signed the dotted line with Zuffa, but in a room with Overeem, Evans, Belfort, and Silva, it can be easy to neglect the medium-sized men with just-burgeoning careers and potential. Like many of his lesser-known teammates, Trujillo says he can deal with being overlooked if it means more money and a brighter future. Just 10 months

HEAVY HITTERS

Big Blackzilians in the UFC

Rashad Evans

Record: 17-2-1

Joined Blackzilians: February 2011

Next Fight: UFC 156: 2/2/13: Antonio Rogerio Nogueira

Alistair Overeem

Record: 36-11-1

Joined Blackzilians: February 2012

Next Fight: UFC 156: 2/2/13: Antonio Silva

Thiago Silva

Record: 14-3-2

Joined Blackzilians: July 2012

Next Fight: TBD

Vitor Belfort

Record: 21-10

Joined Blackzilians: August 2012

Next Fight: UFC on FUEL TV 7: 1/19/13: Michael Bisping

Matt Mitrione

Record: 5-2

Joined Blackzilians: January 2012

Next Fight: TBD



Jorge Santiago has a lot to look forward to with his new team.

ago, he was loading pallets in a warehouse, and now he's signed with the UFC.

"I don't know why Glenn took me," says Trujillo. "I had a shitty record. I was making \$1,000 to show and \$1,000 to win. That's embarrassing for a grown man with a daughter. I needed a place where I could prove myself."

The Robinson-centered organization of fighters, coaches, and support personnel has been busy adding Blackzilians, ASM clients, and JACO-brand endorsers like Trujillo. More is better, but all that addition has complicated a challenging problem of dividing attention and services equally among the team. How much time should you spend on the needs of each fighter? Who gets the extra PR? The extra bag work with Hooft? The one-on-one time with new head coach Mario Sperry?

They're ancillary questions for fighters who don't share in-house resources, but at Blackzilian, those numbers, dollars, and hours can easily be measured against each other. Providing that much support and tethering it to ideals of friendship and family can leave the professionally unfulfilled feeling personally ignored or ostracized. Off the mat, Trujillo and others fighters saunter and laugh, but their temperaments can

change during practice. Elbows slip. Punches land with too much oomph.

"We get into it sometimes," says Trujillo. "We yell and stuff, but when it's done, I still trust Glenn with everything. It's a family like that. You can get mad, but it doesn't mean things aren't fixable."

As a pressure release, the team undergoes occasional mat-chats, the familiar post-workout circle of men hashing out the mundane alongside the more important. Humor is the accelerant of brotherhood and the Blackzilians claim that they're an atypically humorous collaboration of fighters.

"I know we can all get jealous of each other, but we have to understand where we are in our careers and be thankful," says Trujillo. "I'm learning from my teammates how to be a better fighter, but also, things like how to be better with media and all that."

Trujillo's sweat is drying up, and Overeem is drinking a recovery shake as the team sits around bullshitting. All is normal in Blackzilia when Trujillo takes his head out of his phone, splits open a big smile, and blurts out, "Oh my god, Dana White just followed me on Twitter!"

Overeem slaps him on the back and drops a few cordialities. He pauses a moment, then turns back to Trujillo, saying, "That's how you know you've made it, man. You're a big deal now." 🗣️