PREFACE

A lot of mixed martial arts autobiographies have hit shelves in the past few years. Their collective success is inextricably linked to their subjects: Randy Couture, Chuck Liddell, Tito Ortiz, Matt Hughes, B.J. Penn, and so on. On top of the fact that their names alone would help sell books, these fighters, their fights, and their stories are so tightly woven into the fabric of MMA that it seems necessary to read their memoirs.

Chronicling Gary Goodridge's journey is crucial for an altogether different reason.

Because MMA is rooted in the undying question of who is the "best fighter," its finicky onlookers tend to fetishize and dismiss anything less than absolute dominance. In this respect, MMA might be the ultimate "What have you done for me lately?" sport. Gary "Big Daddy" Goodridge was one of those fighters who helped to counteract this indifference: no one ever believed he would win a UFC tournament, a Pride heavyweight title, or the K-1 World Grand Prix, and yet his presence — which brought with it a promise of violence — became something that deeply excited fans. Big Daddy was one of the first fighters to make being a hard-swinging gatekeeper both valuable and engrossing.

Better still, he was suited to the role: Goodridge was a take-no-prisoners brawler who openly admits his indifference to — perhaps even contempt for — everything that isn't haymakers and headsmashing. Many like to believe that MMA preserves some ancient gladiatorial ethos about the valor and courage it takes to fight, and the idea of fighting anyone, at any time. Part of what makes Goodridge so intriguing is how he embodies that ethic while cutting through the bullshit: from the moment he debuted as a dubious "Kuk Sool Won" specialist and hacksawed into Paul Herrera's head with his elbow, Goodridge has stood in opposition to the mysticism of martial arts.

Few MMA competitors have the depth and breadth of stories that Goodridge has. He is a unique thread in the tapestry of the sport. The first 13 seconds of his bout against Herrera became some of the most famous — and *infamous* — in MMA history. For 15 years he fought the who's who of MMA and K-1. He played opponent to Coleman and Frye, then later Nogueira and Emelianenko. His August 2002 upset of K-1 stalwart Mike Bernardo was a crucial moment in changing the collective opinions about the nature of striking and the caliber of athletes in both MMA and K-1. Goodridge was an unapologetic brawler: few fighters have ever committed themselves or more honestly subscribed to the notion of fighting any man, anytime, anywhere.

Tragically, it is that same mentality that has made him one of the starkest and most chilling examples of what a reckless career in prizefighting can do to a competitor.

Fans of MMA and kickboxing like to believe that for a host of reasons, from rule structures to bout length, their sports are safer than boxing, where retired athletes often degenerate into frail, dementia-addled husks of their former selves, or football, where repeated concussions show their devastating impact long after players leave the gridiron. And yet, here is Gary Goodridge, once a fearsome physical specimen who was both charming and articulate, reduced to a punching bag.

What makes his writing so refreshing is its honesty. Goodridge is keenly aware of how lamentable and even pathetic his predicament

is. He admits he can barely train, and that given his physical state, such effort might not even be worth it. He knows he should hang them up and not be the "organic punching bag" — his words — that he's become. And yet, he fights on, not having tasted victory in years, chasing paydays. Most assume that a fighter's refusal to hang them up is born of delusion and the hope he can once again reach the heights he once enjoyed. Goodridge's words aren't deluded, and they convey the legitimate sickness and longing that is often behind a fighter's inability to lay down his sword.

Part of what made Goodridge so magnetic for fans, what allowed him to transcend fans' indifference toward the ditch-digging tough guys, was that in spite of his physical prowess, he seemed familiar, perhaps even fraternal. Goodridge is eminently likable: his blue-collar, working-class reputation and genuine assessments of his personal failings — from fatherhood to fidelity — humanize him in a way few fighters permit. During his prime, and even after it, many fans found it easy to imagine working at the auto plant with Goodridge, shooting the breeze in the break room. Something about Goodridge becoming a famous prizefighter feels democratic, like we all had a say in choosing one of our own to have that kind of success.

By chance, Gary Goodridge was present at several crucial junctions in MMA history, from the human cockfighting era to the dark ages of the UFC to the rise of MMA in Japan, the rivalry between K-1 and MMA, and today's sprawling, global climate in which a torn-up veteran might see the value in fighting on long past his prime. Goodridge helped transform the role of the gatekeeper in MMA and define what it meant to be a mid-card action fighter. With reckless abandon, he has found his way onto the winning and losing sides of highlight reels for generations to come, a conscious choice that now bears its vicious aftermath. The career of "Big Daddy" has been brutal, both for better and for worse.

Jordan Breen, January 2011

CHAPTER ONE

I am the little guy, the ditch digger, the farmer, the construction worker; I worked in a factory for many years, and every time I fight, I fight for those guys. I represent the heart and courage it takes for every average guy to get up in the morning and face another day. I represent the guys who take that shit-kicking and come home at the end of the day an accomplished person.

In late 2003, I was 37 years old and one of the most well-known mixed martial artists in the world. As the "Gatekeeper" of the Pride Fighting Championship's heavyweight division in Japan, I had fought the biggest, toughest, and most skilled heavyweights in the world. I didn't always win, but even when I lost, I always gave the fans an entertaining show. If I had been a cautious fighter, guarding my win-loss ratio like it was the last piece of cheesecake in the fridge, I'd look a lot better on paper. But I don't fight that way. In the era I was from, it didn't matter if you were a technical fighter, skilled in all of the various disciplines. The only thing the fans expected was that you fight with heart and keep going no matter what. Somebody's going to go home with a loss but at the end of the day, if you fought your heart out, you

earned respect. My biggest worry going into the ring was always that I might disappoint my fans.

Despite my success, fighting had taken its toll on my personal life. Not only was the mother of my daughter Trinity harassing me for more money in child support payments, she was also pushing to keep my daughter full-time. That meant I would have only been able to see her every other weekend. My ex-girlfriend and I had shared custody, but all of a sudden, out of nowhere, she wanted full custody; she didn't think I was in the country enough. The only reason I fought in the first place was to feed my children and give them a better life; if my career was getting in the way of my relationship with my kids, then maybe it was time to start thinking about retirement.

It wasn't just the personal problems that were forcing me to get out. My body was beaten down from so many exciting but brutal fights throughout the years. Among other injuries, I had torn the cartilage in my knees, broken multiple fingers, cracked my ribs, lost several teeth, and had 30 stitches put above my eyebrow from a head kick that left me with a gaping wound. I was also suffering from a recurring back problem that stemmed from a car accident I had been in as a teenager. Every now and then, the pain would hit me like a wave, and near the end of 2003, the pain was particularly bad.

One afternoon, I was lying in bed in complete agony when I got a call from Nobuyuki Sakakibara, president of Dreamstage Entertainment, the Japanese-based company that owned Pride. Sakakibara had an interesting proposal: he wanted me to fight Don Frye on New Year's Eve, at the Saitama Super Arena in Japan. Don "The Predator" Frye looks like Tom Selleck and has a similar, really deep, gruff voice. Originally, Frye had been a firefighter but in 1994 he left the fire department to pursue a full-time career in mixed martial arts. When he started in the sport at UFC 8, Don Frye was already a former pro boxer and a second-degree black belt in judo with over 700 competition victories. He was also a stellar wrestler, having been state champion in high school and an all-American Greco-Roman and freestyle wrestler with Arizona State

and Oklahoma State. Even though I had been bedridden for a month, I immediately knew that I wanted the fight. Earlier in my career, when I was still competing in the United States for the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), Don had defeated me on two separate occasions. In those fights Frye had beaten me with experience and superior wrestling, but that had been eight years ago. Now that I also had experience, I was sure that I could beat Frye and avenge those two losses.

I wanted to fight Frye, but before I could do so I needed a new contract with Pride. The only thing that would keep me in the fight game was a pay raise and some guaranteed fights. That way I would be able to give my daughters more money in child support. I was in tremendous physical pain, but I knew I could fight if it meant a better future for my family. It had been almost a year since my last contract, and I wanted Pride to renew it or let me go. When I told Sakakibara I needed a contract extension or else I wouldn't fight, he quickly tried to change the subject, telling me we would talk about it another time. I was insistent; I needed an answer.

Sakakibara knew I wasn't going to budge, so he told me he needed to talk to some of the other Pride executives about renewing my contract. He called back a few times, but we couldn't agree on any of the terms he kept offering. Finally I got sick of it and told him not to call me back until he had made a decision that was fair. A short while later, Sakakibara called with his final offer: my fight against Don Frye would be my retirement fight, and Pride would give me $100,000, win or lose. Since I was thinking about retirement anyway, it sounded good to me. I'd make a lot of money, have a big retirement fight, and hopefully avenge my earlier losses to Frye.

Going into Pride Shockwave 2003 on New Year's Eve, there was no doubt in my mind that Don Frye was going to take a beating from me. Even with all of the personal problems and injuries I was dealing with, I was still confident that I was going to kick Frye's ass. He had been away from the game for a number of years doing professional wrestling in Japan, so I knew he wasn't at the top of his game. If I couldn't

beat Frye at this point in our careers, I never would. There was no way I could allow myself to lose. Looking back, I didn't have many reasons to be so confident, but as a fighter, you can't allow doubt into your mind if you want to win.

During the trip over to Japan, I was in terrible pain. I could barely walk — the flight attendant had to keep bringing me ice packs. Backstage at the Saitama Super Arena, my back was still killing me. In order to try and get some mobility, I had one of the doctors shoot numbing agents into the muscles of my lower back. That helped for awhile. I used the respite from the pain to stretch out really well and throw a couple of high kicks at my assistant, Andrew McMichael, who was holding the pads. Due to my chronic injuries, that little bit of warming up was the only training I was able to do in the lead-up to the fight.

Frye was clearly having mobility problems of his own. Whenever he saw me looking, he'd jump up out of his seat as if there was nothing wrong. However, I could tell that just getting out of his chair was causing him a lot of pain. Don and I were both playing the game. Fighters always have to put their best foot forward. When you're going into battle, you want everybody to believe that you're functioning at full strength. Another option is to pretend you are a wimp, then come out there like a killer, but you have to be in control. In poker, you don't want somebody to see your hand before you show it. The same thing is true in fighting; despite appearances, it's largely a mental game.

When it was finally time to fight, I jogged and shadowboxed from my dressing room, down the main corridor leading into the arena, trying to loosen up. Emerging onto the long entrance ramp, I tried to stay calm as the crowd roared with anticipation. "We Will Rock You" by Queen came on, a laser light show started, and I began walking toward the ring. Along the way I pumped my fist in the air to the beat of the song, trying to block out all the other noise. Fighters who get caught up in all of the hoopla before a fight waste a lot of energy. You have to find a quiet, calm place in your mind. You don't want to be

mesmerized by all of the fans wishing you well and cheering you on. To most people I looked calm, but the fact that I hadn't trained before the fight made me scared as hell. I really needed to focus my energy and try to overcome my nerves if I was going to beat Frye. At 6'1", 216 pounds, Don Frye was a very lean, tough guy. I concentrated on my strategy: I knew I had to keep the fight standing, because even after working for years on my grappling, Frye still had the advantage on the ground. There were a lot of things running through my mind before the fight but I tried to harness my adrenaline and use it to my advantage instead of letting it become a problem.

After an intense stare down with Frye during the announcements, I grabbed the back of his neck in a gesture of respect. Rather than reciprocating, Frye pushed me away and aggressively raised his gloves. I guess he was letting me know we could only be friends *after* the fight; right now, we had to go to war. When the bell rang, the crowd roared, and Frye and I touched gloves. He came out swinging, but I backed out of the way and hit him with a hard outside low kick to try and make him think twice about wading in with wild punches. I stalked Frye around the ring and loaded up on a big one-two combination that rocked him pretty hard. When he tried to clinch, I pushed him away then stalked after him, hitting him with a hard left hook.

I took a brief pause and assessed the situation: Frye's background was wrestling and wrestlers are susceptible to being kicked in the head because they tend to keep their hands low. At that moment, Frye dropped his hands slightly, so I loaded up my right leg for a huge kick to the side of his head. The kick landed perfectly and knocked Frye out cold, sending him face down on the mat. When Frye hit the floor, the Japanese fans went absolutely crazy and gave me a huge standing ovation. It was a fantastic feeling. As Stephen Quadros, the announcer for Pride, said on the broadcast, Hollywood could not have scripted a better ending for my career. Nor could I have asked for a better opponent to fight. Don Frye had been so significant in my mixed martial arts life because he had beaten me twice in my first year as a pro fighter. A

win over him was a hurdle I had to clear, and the perfect ending to a long and turbulent career.

After a short celebration in the ring, I went over to make sure Frye was all right. From the mat, he winked at me as if to say, "Yeah, you got me," then sat up and gave me a hug. Next, the Pride head honchos, Nobuhiko Takada and Sakakibara, came in and gave me a giant trophy, two big bouquets of flowers, and my money. When Sakakibara told me to keep in touch, all I could manage to say in response was "Thank you. Thank you for all of the wonderful years." Takada called me "Mr. Pride," which was a huge honor for me: at the time, Pride was the best mixed martial arts organization in the world. Once Frye was up and walking around, he held up my hand with the trophy in it. Frye was my nemesis, but he was also a brother of mine in the art of war. We had started in the game at the exact same time.

My final fight was a really emotional time for me and as I hugged my team in the ring, the tears started to flow. I can't even describe the rush of emotions I was feeling. When given the microphone to address the crowd, I said "*Sumimasen*," which means "I'm sorry." "I'm really emotional," I continued, "because tonight means a lot to me. Thank you to all my Japanese fans for making me feel at home every time I come here." After my words were translated, the crowd cheered. I didn't want to stay in the ring all night, so I wished everybody a happy new year and left the ring to continue the celebration backstage. For a moment, everything was gone: the pain, the problems, the worries about what to do next — all of it. But just for a moment. Even at what I thought was the end of my career, it soon became clear my life would continue to be what it had been from the start: a fight.