

Starting a Fight

Fifteen years after they revolutionized combat sports, athletes and organizers remember the very first UFC.

By Jake Rossen

"I wrote up a 65-page business plan and made a presentation to Rorion's students, family and friends. We were able to raise a quarter of a million dollars." — Art Davie

If you're looking to birth an international phenomenon, there are probably more glamorous places than Denver in the winter. It's cold—minus 20 below or worse is on record—the altitude constricts lungs, and the high point of local culture is found in the parking lot of Mile High Stadium before a Broncos game.

But it was precisely Denver's lack of polish—no athletic commission to intervene, plenty of limited-liability coverage—that led a group of nervous athletes and even more nervous financiers to convene there on November 12, 1993, for a bizarre pay-per-view curiosity with a sensationally overcooked title: the Ultimate Fighting Championship.

Violent and raw, the UFC took 10 practitioners of disparate martial arts and watched as they galvanized a skeptical stateside audience. Blood flowed, bones cracked, and the frailest-looking participant earned respect for his art in the most visceral way possible: by squeezing the wind out of not only his opponents, but also years of traditional beliefs about self-defense.



The Art of the Deal
Art Davie brought the necessary marketing savvy to the ancient idea of no-holds-barred combat.

In honor of the promotion's 15th anniversary, the participants and deal brokers of the inaugural UFC spoke to *Real Fighter* and in their own words remembered—oftentimes contentiously and with varying degrees of consistency—the jitters, the posturing and the flying teeth, all of which conspired to forever transform how American culture viewed martial arts.



Past His USDA Prime
His best years admittedly behind him, Kevin Rosier (right) won his first match against Zane Frazier on sheer toughness.

“I was doing underground fights in San Francisco, Chinatown, bare-knuckle tournaments in New York City back in the '80s.”— Kevin Rosier

Believing the American public would be infatuated with his family's joint-torquing martial art of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, Rorion Gracie had imported himself to California in 1978. When he moved his teaching from his garage to a dojo in Torrance in the late '80s, one of his first students was Art Davie, an advertising man who was mesmerized by Gracie's taped challenge matches, and offered to help distribute them.

Art Davie: Rorion had 25,000 names in a database he had collected over the years. We did a mailing list and grossed over \$100,000.

“Big” John McCarthy (Gracie student and future UFC referee): My [challenge matches] were pretty easy. Usually, I'd take everybody down and choke them, and that was it.

Rorion Gracie: We discussed the possibility of doing a live [no holds barred] show with somebody else, but they weren't really as focused as I'd like them to be. So Art came along and said, “Rorion, let's do this.” We've had shows like this in Brazil for 30 years. It's nothing new.

Davie: I wrote up a 65-page business plan and made a presentation to Rorion's students, family and friends. We were able to raise a quarter of a million dollars.



Historic Heel Hook
Ken Shamrock holds the notable achievement of being the first fighter to win by submission on pay per view television. For many North American viewers, it was their first glimpse of a submission hold.

After HBO and Showtime rebuffed Davie's advances, he and Gracie—collaborating as W.O.W. Promotions—teamed up with content provider Semaphore Entertainment Group (SEG) and secured a pay per view arrangement. Davie went looking for participants.

Davie: I approached Don Wilson, who turned us down. I approached Dennis Alexio. I was talking to WCW about Meng, a big Samoan who I understood could fight. They didn't want him to do this type of thing.

Rorion Gracie: We talked to everybody we could. James “Bonecrusher” Smith, all those guys.

Gerard Gordeau: I was a Savate champion in Europe. Because I am a high kicker, they take me. I don't look for [street fights], but if the people want it, they get it.

Davie: Gordeau came out of the same school that Ernesto Hoost came from—I couldn't afford Hoost. But I knew who Gordeau was, and I knew he was going to be devastating.

Zane Frazier: The pro karate tournaments in California are unlike anywhere else. There was a fighter I basically got into a street fight with. I wound up taking him to the ground with a sweep and stomping him. Rorion put his arm around me and said, “I like you, kid! You can fight!”

Davie: I had recruited Ken Shamrock because [his student] Scott Bessac had sent in an application, and in talking to him, I realized that the guy I really wanted was his teacher.

Shamrock: I never thought the event would happen. I thought somewhere along the line there was going to be a gimmick.

Kevin Rosier: I was the ISKA kickboxing champ for 13 years and nobody would fight me. I was doing underground fights in San Francisco, Chinatown, bare-knuckle tournaments in New York City back

in the '80s. I took the fight even though I was way overweight. I had a school next to a McDonald's.

Taylor Wily (formerly Teila Tuli): They were looking to see if any Sumo wrestlers wanted to get into it. Four days before I left for Denver, I broke a knuckle in a street fight. It was 8 on 1.

Art Jimmerson: I was ranked in the top 10 light heavyweights in boxing. I did verbally commit to it, [but] came back after I found out what was happening and backed out. They said, “Well, you already verbally committed. Your name is on a poster, we're promoting you. We're going to sue you.” They told me I would have the lightest guy in the tournament.

Indeed he would. Six-foot-one, 175-pound Royce Gracie was Rorion's choice to represent his family's style. While the idea of a rail-thin martial artist making muscular types beg for mercy was an impressive visual, the selection also stemmed from the gulf created over business dealings between Rorion and acknowledged family champion Rickson.

Davie: Rorion had a falling out with his brother over teaching people privately at his house rather than

over at the Academy. After that, Rorion and Rickson hardly ever talked.

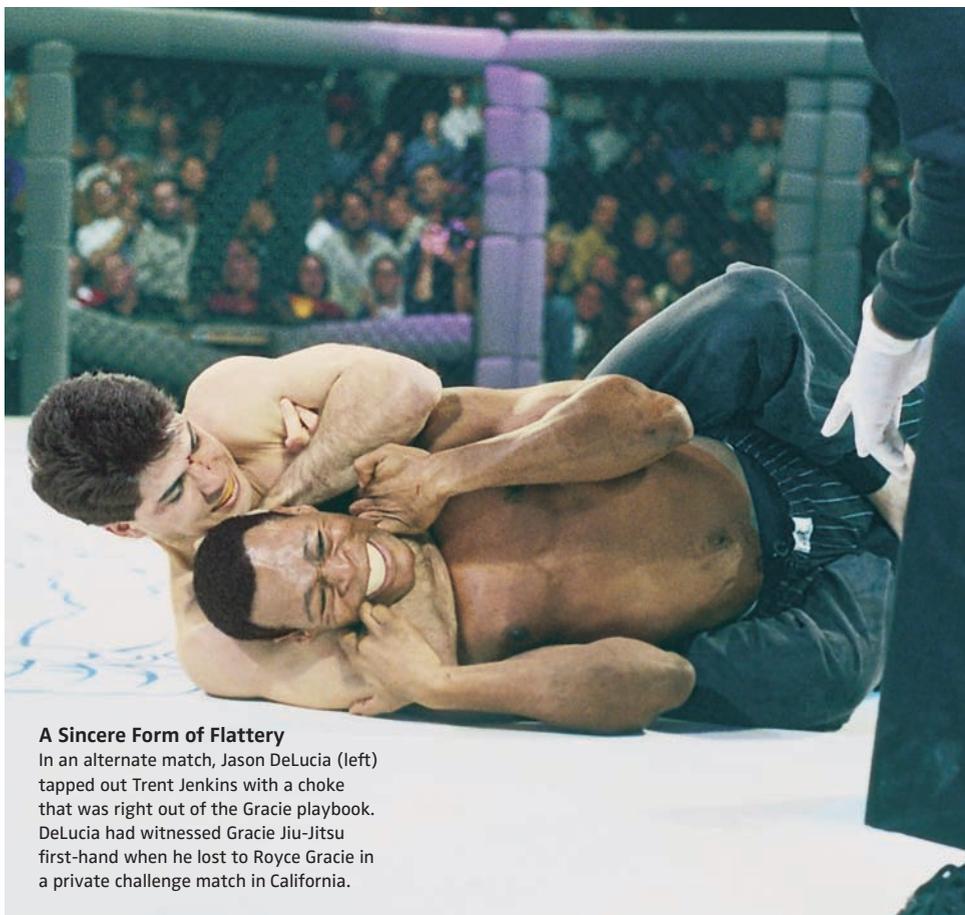
McCarthy: I had put in my application for it. Rorion said, "What are you doing? You can't fight. You're with us. When Royce is done, we'll put you in there."

Royce Gracie: We're gonna get into a fight in a cage, a ring, or the street...man, doesn't make a difference. A fight's a fight.

Frazier: At the time, Rorion had said the surface was going to be gravel. Then it was going to be dirt, then it was going to be clay. Then he said mats, then grass. He said all these different things. We really didn't know what it was going to be.

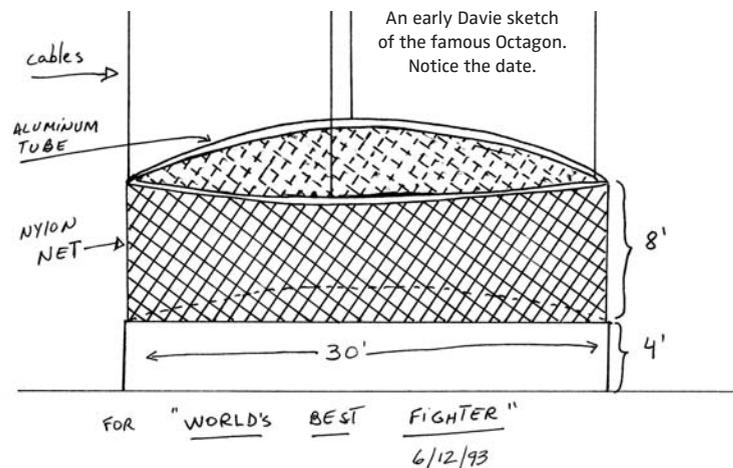
Rorion Gracie: We thought of a ring that had a moat and we could put alligators on the outside, [or] chariots running around the ring and dropping the fighters off, people with trumpets and Roman togas announcing them. This is Hollywood.

Davie: I don't think I came up with the moat idea. But the electrified copper fence was mine.



A Sincere Form of Flattery
In an alternate match, Jason DeLucia (left) tapped out Trent Jenkins with a choke that was right out of the Gracie playbook. DeLucia had witnessed Gracie Jiu-Jitsu first-hand when he lost to Royce Gracie in a private challenge match in California.

"We thought of a ring that had a moat and we could put alligators on the outside, [or] chariots running around the ring and dropping the fighters off...This is Hollywood."
— Rorion Gracie



A California fencing company realized the more pragmatic Octagon schematic. The week of the show, fighters descended on Denver from all corners of the map. McCarthy's wife, who was in charge of travel arrangements, was told to book them on separate floors of the hotel to avoid confrontations. It didn't quite work.

Davie: There was a lot of posturing down in the lobby. I would get reports on the walkie-talkie from security down there that the Samoans with Tuli were having face-offs, staring matches with the Brazilians.

Frazier: I saw Ken Shamrock. He was all bundled up and I couldn't see his physique or anything. He said, "My name's Ken Shamrock." I said, "So f---ing what. I'm going to kick your f---ing ass. You're going to leave here in a body bag." And that's how I was to everybody.

Shamrock: Frazier would've never gotten in my face, because at that time, I would've knocked his ass out. I didn't have the control I have now.

Davie: Shamrock was nervous. He kept thinking up until that week that maybe it was going to be a partial "work."

Shamrock: I went over to Japan and fought [in Pancrase] and then went to Denver four days later because I didn't think it was going to be a real fight.

Rosier: It was a great chance to see my daughter in Colorado. I was about 340 pounds. I was having cake and ice cream.

McCarthy: Jimmerson said, "How in the world do you think Royce is going to beat me when I'm flicking out a jab? He can't get past that." We went into a back ballroom area and I grabbed him in a double leg and put him on the ground. He looked up at me and said, "Oh, my God. He's going to break my arms and legs, isn't he?"

Friday's bouts almost began prematurely when Frazier and his handlers caused a stir at the rules meeting, believing Rorion was stacking the deck in favor of his brother by not allowing strikers to wrap their knuckles.

Frazier: He and I got into a huge, huge argument. I told Rorion, "You're changing the rules to set this up for your brother."

Rorion Gracie: If you're in a fight on the street, are you going to go run home and wrap your hand?

Jason DeLucia (alternate): Rickson was saying something and he stood up when he said it. And all I thought was, *The next thing that happens is going to be either very good or very bad.*

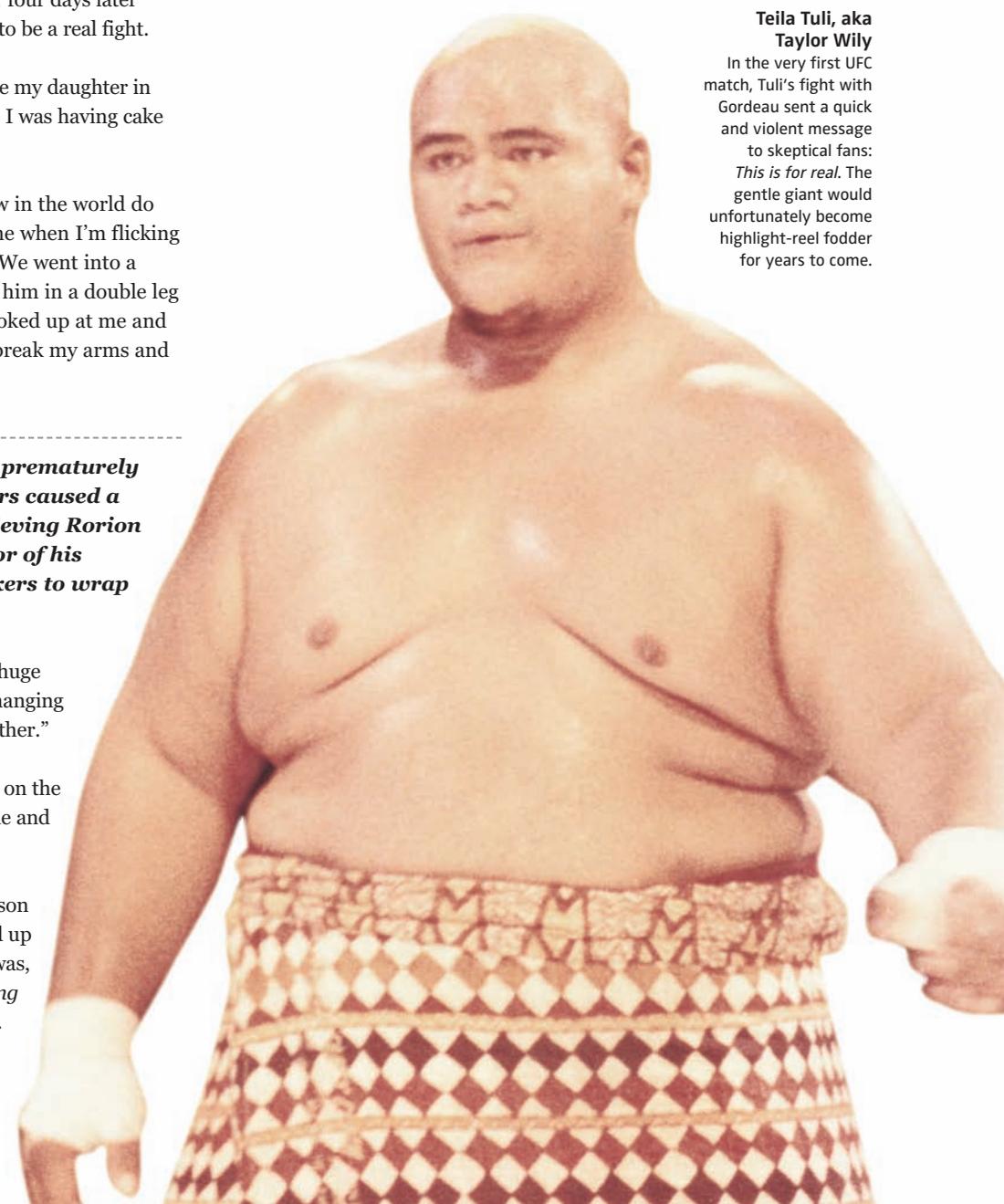
Frazier: I charged Rorion and all the Gracies and Brazilians jumped

up. I got in Rickson's face. I said, "Me and you can go right now."

Wily: I just signed my paper. The whole room got quiet. I turned to them and said, "Hey, I don't know about you guys, but I came here to fight. If anyone came here to party, I'll see you tomorrow night at the arena."

Gordeau: I sign the paper and I go. The rest stayed there to explain what is allowed and what is not allowed. But if you have no rules, you are finished explaining in two seconds.

Teila Tuli, aka Taylor Wily
In the very first UFC match, Tuli's fight with Gordeau sent a quick and violent message to skeptical fans: *This is for real.* The gentle giant would unfortunately become highlight-reel fodder for years to come.





Fight night, November 12, 1993. Nearly 5,000 tickets were sold for Denver's McNichols Sports Arena; couch-bound spectators paid \$14.95 for a cable broadcast. As commentator Bill Wallace burped through an introduction, the fighters prepared themselves for whatever might lay ahead.

Semifinal Savagery Rosier's chutzpah and durability were no match for the ice-cold killer instinct and superior technique of Gerard Gordeau (standing).

Gordeau: I broke my hand and a little bone in my foot. If his head was farther away from the fence, I could kick with my shin. And then I think maybe he would be dead.

Wily: I'm glad that my brother threw in the towel, but I was angry at first. It was life or death to me at that point. I would've really embarrassed myself by going for his groin or his eyes or his throat. The dirtiest stuff came into my mind.

DeLucia: Gordeau's foot was broken in two with teeth lodged in the side of it. He fought the next two fights with teeth in his foot.

Gordeau: You have to take medicines for six weeks because the teeth are very dirty.

Rosier: [Frazier] hit me with that overhand right. He hurt me unbelievably. He got me in the groin, got me in the solar-plexus, cracked my ribs. He destroyed me for the first two and a half minutes. I had to snap a few things back into place.

DeLucia: People were throwing s--t, swearing at you, calling you names, spitting. It was horrible.

Wily: I knew nothing about Gordeau, but I could see in his eyes he was experienced. I just got so nervous. I knew he was going to chop me down.

Shamrock: Tuli goes down to his knees and Gerard kicks him in the mouth and his teeth go flying into the front row. Prior to that, everyone [backstage] was hitting pads and trying to hide their fear. It went dead silent.

McCarthy: The tooth went flying right by my wife. She said, "That's it!" She got up and left.

Frazier: They carried me out of the ring. The paramedics listened to my chest and asked if I had asthma. My wife said, "Yes, he does." They put me on a gurney and I went right into respiratory failure. I woke up in the hospital with a tube in my throat.

Jimmerson: My managers at the time, who were not really boxing people but lawyers, looked at that and said, "Listen, if you don't want to do this, don't do it." What a confidence builder to go backstage and have your guys say, "Don't do it, man. You'll get hurt." I wore a glove on one hand to protect my hand and also to sucker Royce in. They [the Gracies] were, like, "You sure you don't want to wear two of them?" They loved it.

Royce Gracie: He said he was going to hit me so many times that he didn't want to break his hand.

Jimmerson: When he got me down, my whole thing was to just hold him. I knew it was a five-minute round.

Royce Gracie: It surprised me that he didn't even put up a fight, but it didn't surprise me he quit

because he didn't know anything. I could see he was lost, out of his environment.

Jimmerson: It's like a phobia, like you're in a closet or scared of heights. I started getting nervous. I'm used to moving around.

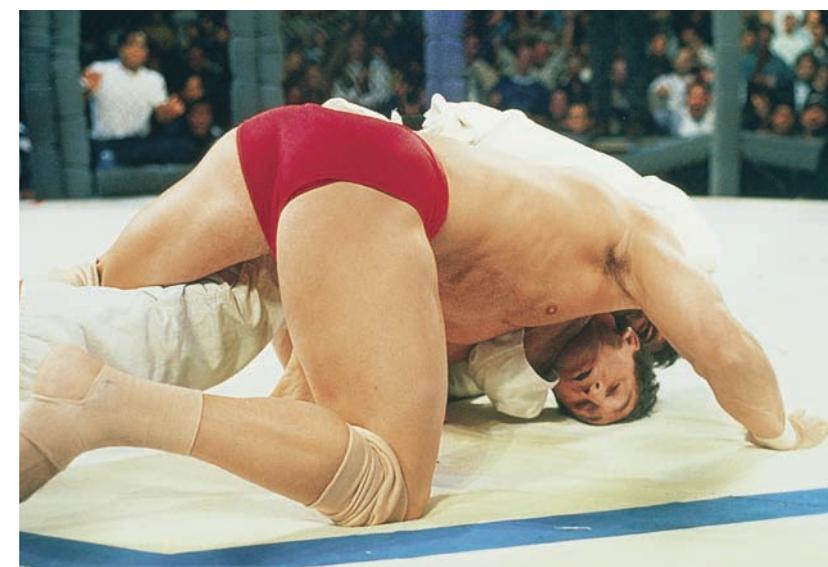
Shamrock: I was first to enter the ring. Patrick Smith was standing in the hallway. All his guys were screaming, "He's gonna kill you!" I had to hold my dad back because he was starting to run after them. My dad has never been in a fight in his life.

Patrick Smith: Ken wasn't going to stand up with me. He said afterward, "Man, there's no way I could beat you standing up."

Shamrock: I applied the first submission hold on pay per view. Even though it was short, I got tired. I didn't really get over my jet lag.

DeLucia: Royce had his own room with closed-circuit TV, that kind of thing. He had his own oxygen tank. We all had to share an oxygen tank.

"We watched about 10 minutes of [Gracie's] fights where he was throwing some armbars on guys, but I looked at it and went, Pffft, I could stop that. I had no idea how the gi worked until I got in there." — Ken Shamrock



Gracie vs. Shamrock: Part 1

The two First Families of American MMA met for the first time at UFC 1. It's a family feud that has spanned 14 years and included five different family members. While this generation appears ready to bury the hatchet, it might not be over. Both the Shamrocks and Gracies have sons and nephews who are pursuing careers in MMA.

“It allowed us to discover what the truth was in fighting. For the first time in the history of American martial arts, it was OK to say your system didn’t have all the answers.” – Zane Frazier



The \$50,000 Tap
After some dirty fighting on Gordeau’s part, which he freely admits, Royce Gracie sank in the choke at 1:44 to win the whole tournament.

Shamrock: I wasn’t interested in finding out who Royce Gracie was. We watched about 10 minutes of his fights where he was throwing some armbars on guys, but I looked at it and went, *Pfft, I could stop that.* I had no idea how the gi worked until I got in there.

Royce Gracie: He’s full of s--t. Ken Shamrock knew how to grapple. With gi, without the gi, he’s in the business. He quit, but as soon as I let go [of the choke], he regretted that he quit, so he tried to continue.

Shamrock: I got beat and I knew it. There was no thought of changing my mind. There was just disgust with myself because I didn’t take the guy seriously.

Royce Gracie: He knew what was going to happen to him if I put my hands on his neck again.

Rorion Gracie: I thought it would be a great idea to have a couple of kids mopping the blood off the canvas. One was my kid and one was my nephew. We did it one time and people went, “Oh, my God!”

Gordeau: When I feel Royce choking me, I say something to him, and then I have to bite him. You have to do something. Years from now, you still talk about it. And that’s the reason.

Royce Gracie: I’m talking to him, looking at him from the mount position, saying, “You cheated!” He gave me a look like, “So what?” That’s when I head-butted him a couple of times. So what? How about I hold on the choke a little longer?

Having conquered three other athletes to claim the \$50,000 prize, Gracie was held aloft by his family while the other combatants nursed injuries and relaxed.

McCarthy: They had a black-tie affair. Rorion wanted it to be a Carnival in Brazil type of atmosphere.

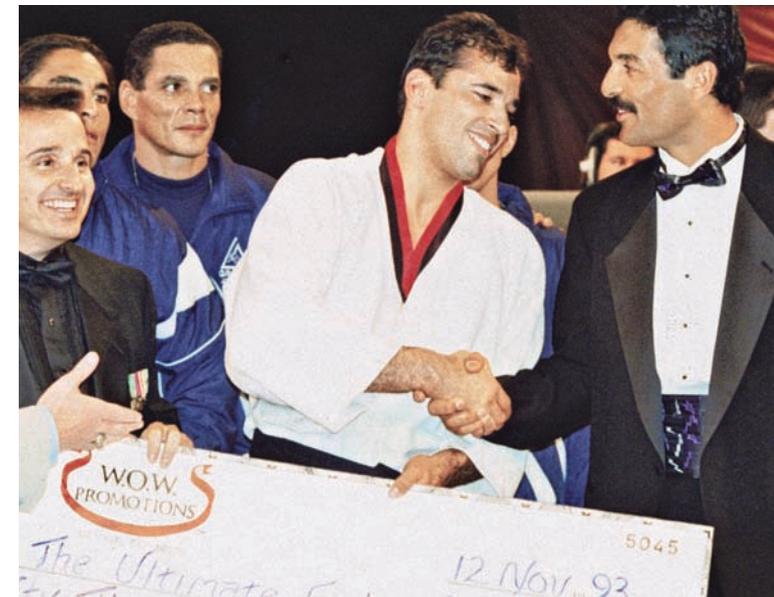
Wily: It was a tuxedo thing, but me and my brother ended up going in T-shirts and shorts.

Rosier: The Gracie women were taking care of their men, getting their plates and getting their dinners. It was great.

Shamrock: They gave a check to Royce and basically said there was a new sheriff in town. They put a medallion around his neck, a gold coin or something. We didn’t stay long, just enough to get paid. I just had a horrible taste in my mouth.

McCarthy: That was part of my responsibility. I had to guard that stupid gold medal.

Davie: Monday morning, I got a call from New York



Mission Completed
In just three fights, totaling four minutes and 47 seconds, Rorion (right) and Royce Gracie (center) had redefined American martial arts.

and they said, “We’re through the roof.” We started to get preliminary numbers in from the cable operators. We knew by Wednesday that we had done 86,000 buys.

McCarthy: At the time the UFC went off, Rorion probably had 120–150 students. After that show, he had to have 500 that month. It just exploded.

Frazier: It allowed us to discover what the truth was in fighting. For the first time in the history of American martial arts, it was OK to say your system didn’t have all the answers.

Davie: After the show, Rorion and I talked and he asked, “This is going to go on?” And I said, “Absolutely.” We didn’t build a \$40,000 Octagon for nothing. 🤝

EPILOGUE

- Royce Gracie** (41) went on to win two of the next three UFC tournaments before exiting the promotion in 1995. He continues to travel for seminars and maintains an irregular fight schedule. His last fight was a victory over Gracie family rival Kazushi Sakuraba in June 2007.
- Ken Shamrock** (44) became the UFC’s first Superfight champion before making a move into professional wrestling. He returned to MMA, fighting for Pride, the UFC and recently in England’s Cage Rage. His son, Ryan Shamrock, is 1-1 in MMA.
- Gerard Gordeau** (52) fought professionally in a freestyle bout only once more—a loss to Yuki Nakai in 1995—and now runs a mixed martial arts school in Holland.
- Art Jimmerson** (45) retired from boxing in 2002, accumulating a 33-18 record. He co-owns a boxing/MMA gym in St. Louis, Mo., and remains a long-time employee of Pepsi Cola.
- Zane Frazier** (42) continues to fight professionally; a loss to Richard Blake in January 2008 has his record standing at 4-11. He plans to open a health club in Phoenix, Ariz., by 2010.
- Kevin Rosier** (46) amassed a 2-6 professional MMA record and a 66-8 kickboxing record before retiring in 2000. He now works with inner-city children in Buffalo, N.Y., and has expressed interest in one last MMA fight.
- Patrick Smith** (45) faced Royce Gracie in the finals of UFC 2 and submitted from strikes. He returned to pay per view television in April 2008 with a dramatic TKO victory over Eric “Butterbean” Esch.
- Taylor Wily, aka Teila Tuli** (40) works with youth groups and has started his own music and entertainment label, All Heart Productions. He can be seen in the recent Judd Apatow-produced film “Forgetting Sarah Marshall.”
- Jason DeLucia** (39) went on to train with Ken Shamrock’s Lion’s Den and remains the most prolific of UFC 1 alumni, having developed a 33-21-1 record. In addition to teaching, he is developing a hybrid system of karate with throws and submissions, with the goal of submitting it to Olympic officials.
- Trent Jenkins** (40) has an 0-4 professional record. He currently works at Denver’s Pepsi Center, home to the Denver Nuggets.
- “Big” John McCarthy** officiated more than 1,000 bouts for the Ultimate Fighting Championship before retiring in 2007. He is currently an on-air personality for The Fight Network.
- Rorion Gracie** continues to spread the word of Gracie Jiu-Jitsu through his world-famous academy in Torrance, Calif. His son, Ralek, recently won his second MMA bout in Japan, submitting Alavutdin Gadzhiev with an armbar.
- Art Davie** invited controversy when he made disparaging comments about MMA after leaving the UFC to work for K-1 in 1997. He is currently chair of Davie Communications, a developer of television and Web content.
- The McNichols Arena** in Denver, Colo., was demolished in 1999.