



MATTHEW POLLY

AUTHOR OF
AMERICAN SHAOLIN

TAPPED OUT

Rear Naked Chokes,
the Octagon, and
the Last Emperor:

**AN ODYSSEY IN
MIXED MARTIAL ARTS**

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G O T H A M B O O K S

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For my teachers

tapped out, *adj*, [origins: A *tap* is used to make liquid flow from its source. *Tapped out* means there is nothing left to flow. "This keg is tapped out."] **1**: Out of money; broke, penniless. "Can you grab the check? I'm tapped out." **2**: Tired, exhausted, depleted. "After pulling three all-nighters, I was tapped out." ~ *vi* **1**: To signal submission. Used in grappling and mixed martial arts competitions. "When I tightened the choke hold, my opponent tapped out."

A NOTE ON NAMES

I have used actual names except when a subject requested anonymity. The most notable is my better half.

"I don't want you to write about me," she announced, after I was well into this project.

"When we first met I told you I wrote memoirs," I said. "Which part of that didn't you understand?"

"The writing about me part."

"It won't work without you," I declared. "You make me seem likable."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," she relented. "But you can't use my name."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"You can do what they used to do: the first letter of my name followed by a dash."

"You want me to call you M—? That's a visual nightmare."

"Your problem."

"It's my book."

"Would you prefer to sleep on the couch?"

I try not to argue with her. Not only is she smarter than I, she's also tougher. The only advantages I have are height and reach.

"Yes, dear," I conceded. "How about Em Dash?"

"I prefer just Em."

PROLOGUE

My Cup Runneth Over

"Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear—
not absence of fear."

—MARK TWAIN

The morning of my fight, I went to Vegas's biggest mixed martial arts (MMA) equipment store to buy a protective cup. I had been training for four months at Xtreme Couture, the Las Vegas gym founded by Hall of Famer Randy Couture. My coach, Joey Varnner, had signed me up for Xtreme Couture's upcoming smoker. (The term comes from the smoke-filled rooms where private clubs held unsanctioned boxing matches in the nineteenth century. Like MMA, boxing used to be illegal in a number of states.) One of the smoker's rules was you had to wear a cup.

It's a dumb rule. Not only are cups uncomfortable, but they don't really work. Whether the illegal knee to the groin reverberates through plastic or lands directly on the nads, it'll drop you

just the same. Until someone invents the Airbag Cup, which inflates on impact, they will continue to be relatively useless.

I was comparing brands when Scott, the manager of the store and an occasional coach at Xtreme Couture, came over.

"You're fighting tonight, right?" he asked. "Good luck."

Taking my uncomfortable protective cup with me, I drove over to the gym to meet with Joey for our pre-fight prep. Xtreme Couture was a converted warehouse, located near McCarran Airport. In the lobby, there were offices to the left and a retail store to the right, selling MMA equipment and Xtreme Couture clothing. It was an embarrassment of space—two floors, eleven thousand square feet. It made all the previous gyms I had trained in seem like broom closets. There was a full-size boxing ring and an Octagon cage, a cardio area, and a jiu-jitsu mat as big as half a football field. But my favorite part was the physical therapy center with licensed therapists on staff. Only a millionaire fighter in his forties would think to include a physical therapy center in his gym.

The gym's décor was army camouflage. Randy joined the service at eighteen when he inadvertently knocked up his high school sweetheart. In the army he took up Greco-Roman wrestling, nearly making the Olympic team four times, before he switched at the ripe old age of thirty-four to MMA, almost as a lark, and won the heavyweight belt in his first try. The military motif pervaded Xtreme Couture's brand management. The coaches didn't have titles; they had army rankings. Randy was the major general. The coaches were majors and captains.

I guess that made me the cannon fodder.

As I arrived at Xtreme, Joey started talking excitedly. This was a good sign. The only times Joey was quiet was when he was trying not to lose his temper—as if he were counting to ten in his

head. In both looks and personality, Joey reminded me of Special Agent Anthony Dinozzo on the TV show *NCIS*: a constant stream of teasing, jokes, movie references, and impressions. He was also loyal to a fault—if you were one of his boys there was nothing he wouldn't do for you.

"You nervous about John?" Joey asked, referring to my opponent—a southpaw who was twenty pounds bigger, ten years younger, and looked like he belonged in the sport. Unlike myself.

"Me? Not at all," I lied, unconvincingly.

"Remember," Joey said. "You're a martial artist, not a fighter."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked, sensitive to a possible insult.

"A fighter trains to defeat his opponent. A martial artist trains to defeat himself," Joey said. "You're not fighting John. You're fighting yourself."

"Can you tell John that?"

"This smoker is in-house," Joey continued. "All the fighters will be your teammates. So will most of the audience. No need to be nervous. It's just another practice. I want you to gear up. I'm going to walk you through each stage of what will happen tonight, so you'll know what to expect."

"Okay, Coach."

The smoker was an amateur kickboxing match, not MMA, so I put on the more extensive protective gear: shin guards, cup, boxing gloves (what MMA fighters call "the big gloves," as opposed to the four-ounce gloves they usually wear), mouthpiece, and headgear. Almost as useless as a cup is headgear: The minimal extra protection from the padding does not compensate for the loss of peripheral vision. Also, wearing one always made me feel like a dork.

Joey held the pads up for me to punch and kick and repeated

our three-round strategy: "I want you to establish your jab in the first round. Nothing fancy: just jabs. Pop, pop, pop. Keep him at the end of your reach. What's your strength?"

"My length."

"Your strength is your length. Don't let him inside. Make him fear the jab. Then second round, just jabs and crosses for the first half. Keep him at range. Listen to my voice. If it is going well, I'll tell you to let go. Then you hit him with high kicks. You've got crack in that kick. Third round, you knock him out."

"Yes, Coach."

"Breathe, just breathe," Joey continued. "In and out. Deep breaths. When you get tired, what did we work on in practice? What do you tell yourself?"

"I can do this."

"You can do this. You are never going to be more tired than you were that day you sparred the English guy. What was his name, Fred?"

"Chris."

"After two rounds you were kneeling on the ground begging, 'Coach, Coach, let me stop. I can't breathe. I can't fight another round.' You remember?"

"Unfortunately."

"And what did I say to you?"

"Get your ass off the ground, you old, fat, pussy writer before I put on the gloves and beat you myself."

"Ha!" Joey laughed. "No, what did I say?"

"Do you want an easy fight?" I said.

"And what did you say?"

"Easy fight, Coach," I said, although truthfully I would have taken a moderately more difficult fight in exchange for some extra rest.

"You've trained hard," Joey said. "So this will be an easy fight."

"Yes, Coach."

"I want you to say this after me: 'There's no place I'd rather be than right here right now.'"

"There's no place I'd rather be than right here right now," I said, trying not to smile. I could think of a lot of places I would have preferred.

"Yeah!" Joey enthused. "Now we're going to walk to the ring. I want you to climb in and circle it. Look strong. First impressions matter. There won't be any judges at this smoker. But you need to practice looking strong for your upcoming MMA fight."

I circled the ring and came over to the corner where Joey was standing.

"I'm running the event," he said. "But I'll be cornering you tonight."

It was quite an honor that of all his students he'd choose to corner me, so I said with sincerity, "Thank you, Coach."

"Listen to my voice. You do as I tell you and you'll be fine. Now I want you to shadowbox for three rounds and listen to my commands."

When the three rounds were over, Joey gave me permission to return home for the afternoon. Covered in sweat, I walked into the lobby and bumped into Randy Couture's son Ryan. The best amateur in the gym, Ryan was looking to turn pro and follow in his father's footsteps. He was fighting in the smoker as well. Fortunately, I didn't have to face him. Every time we had sparred together, he had battered my legs so badly I couldn't walk without a limp for days afterward.

"You ready?" Ryan asked.

"The scary thing is I think Joey wants me to win more than I do,"

I said. "If I fall down, he'll personally drag my ass across the finish line."

"You're lucky to have a coach who cares so much," Ryan said, looking askance at me, ungrateful fool that I was.

"You're right," I agreed. "I'll see you tonight."

I was hoping to relax and clear my mind. Instead, all afternoon was spent clearing my bladder. I was like an eighty-year-old. Every thirty minutes I was running to the bathroom. And these weren't little dribbles; they were wake-up-in-the-morning streams. I'd had stage fright and pre-fight jitters before, but this was ridiculous. I must have lost three pounds in water weight.

Not only did this continue after I returned to Xtreme Couture in the evening, but the pace quickened. Every ten minutes I was pulling my cup down and holding forth. It didn't help that this was the sign above the urinals:

**IF YOU BLEED OR VOMIT . . .
PLEASE CLEAN UP YOUR MESS**

**THERE ARE LYSOL AND RUBBER GLOVES UNDERNEATH
THE SINK NEAR THE SHAKE MACHINE.**

—THANKS

The only relief against my feelings of shame at being so frightened was that I was not the only one repeatedly relieving myself. Another fighter on the night's card, Mike, kept joining me at the next urinal. Then again, he had better reason than me to have a weak bladder: He was matched up against Ryan Couture.

"Been like this all afternoon for you?" I asked.

"Yeah, man," he said. "It's fucking embarrassing."

Joey gathered all the fighters on the second floor. Standing next to him was Randy Couture, wearing an Affliction T-shirt, a

major MMA sponsor whose aesthetic style is Goth barf. We all tried not to stare at him. To us he was a living legend: It was like being in the presence of Achilles.

"So we have a special treat for you tonight," Joey said. "Randy has graciously offered to serve as your referee. Do you have anything you'd like to add, Randy?"

"You are all teammates," Randy said. "So be safe and have fun."

As soon as Randy finished speaking, Mike and I ran to the bathroom.

In an effort to calm my nerves, Joey had assigned Carlos (age eight) and his brother Giovanni (age seven) as my other cornermen. They were Xtreme Couture's mascots, not because they were so cute (although they were) but because they were so technically skilled in every aspect of the sport. When their doting dad, on his knees, held the pads for them, even the pros would stop and watch. "That's the future of MMA," Joey said to me once. "And it's frightening."

"Yeah," I responded. "They'll be the first generation of MMA fighters who actually like their father."

"Joey says it's time for me to wrap up your gloves," Carlos informed me, holding a roll of athletic tape in his little hands.

"Okay, Carlos," I said.

"You ready?" Joey asked impatiently when my hands were finally wrapped.

I had a problem. I felt yet another urgent need to use the bathroom again, but Carlos had already taped up my gloves. Should I humiliate myself and ask Joey to unwrap my gloves or should I hold it? Was the shame or the discomfort worse?

"Coach, I kinda need to go. Is there time?"

"Is this a real pee?" Joey asked, imitating a kindergarten teacher speaking to a toddler. "Or a nervous pee?"

Trying to save face by making a joke out of it, I said in a little-boy voice, "It's a little nervous pee."

"Let's go."

As I walked toward the ring, more than a little worried I might piss my pants, I wondered, not for the first or last time, how I had gotten myself into this mess.

TAPPED OUT