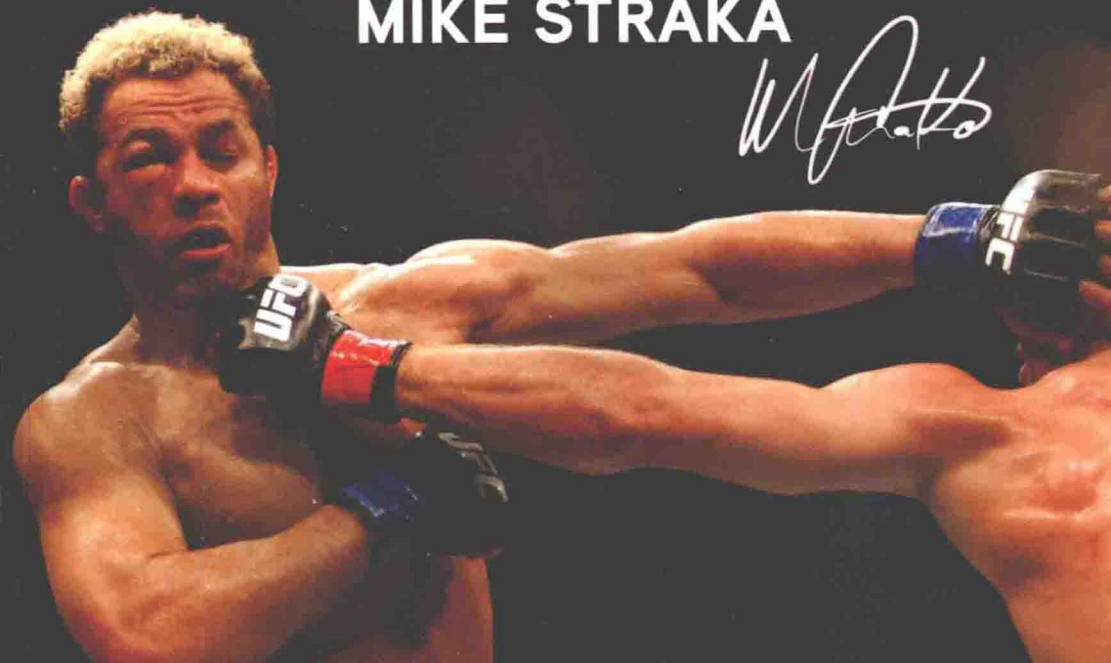


FIGHTING WORDS

**In-Depth Interviews *with*
the Biggest Names in Mixed Martial Arts**

MIKE STRAKA

A stylized, handwritten signature of Mike Straka in white ink, positioned to the right of his name.

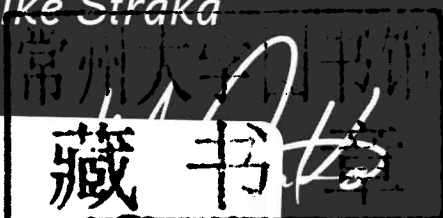




FIGHTING WORDS

In-Depth Interviews with the
Biggest Names in Mixed Martial Arts

Mike Straka



TRIUMPHBOOKS.COM

HDNet

Copyright © 2011 by Mike Straka

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher, Triumph Books, 542 South Dearborn Street, Suite 750, Chicago, Illinois 60605.

Triumph Books and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Straka, Mike.

Fighting words : in-depth interviews with the biggest names in mixed martial arts / Mike Straka.
p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-60078-563-4

1. Martial arts. 2. Martial artists—Interviews. I. Title.

GV1112.S75 2011

796.6—dc22

2011005591

This book is available in quantity at special discounts for your group or organization. For further information, contact:

Triumph Books

542 South Dearborn Street

Suite 750

Chicago, Illinois 60605

(312) 939-3330

Fax (312) 663-3557

www.triumphbooks.com

Printed in U.S.A.

ISBN: 978-1-60078-563-4

Cover design by Paul Petrowsky

Interior design by Amy Carter

Photos courtesy of AP Images (Pages 1, 29, 57, 99, 125, 141, 181, and 209)
& Getty Images (Pages 15, 45, 71, 87, 111, 157, and 195)

Fighting Words with Mike Straka logo designed by Todd Mueller

This book is dedicated to my girls, Emily, Maxine, and Olive, for their unconditional love, and to the late Charles “Mask” Lewis, who took this squirrel trying to get a nut and made me feel like family, made me *believe*, and inspired me to go for it by living his own dream of making TapouT the biggest MMA clothing brand on the planet.

You were taken too soon, Mask. I miss hearing “Big Miiiiiiiiike,” but I still hear it in my mind and feel it in my heart. Your legacy lives on through every person wearing the TapouT logo.

FOREWORD

I've known Mike Straka for several years now, dating back to the days when the UFC's biggest shows were in places like the Mohegan Sun Casino in Connecticut or Atlantic City's Boardwalk Hall.

MMA has come a long way since then, and Mike has been one of the constants in a sport that has seen its share of fair-weather friends. I first met Mike in Geraldo Rivera's office at FOX News in 2001. I had just done a spot on Geraldo's show, and Mike was doing a little web show called *FOX Fight Game*. I knew right away Mike's enthusiasm for MMA came from a sincere place, and he asked knowledgeable questions that, for those days, were unique in that they weren't the typical mainstream media questions we in the MMA world were used to getting.

Since then, MMA has blossomed into the fastest-growing sport in the world—just as Dana White predicted it would—and my career, as well as Mike's, has come a long way. These days Mike hosts *Fighting Words with Mike Straka* on Mark Cuban's HDNet. It is the only one-on-one interview show for guys like me, and this book will give you an in-depth look at what makes us cage fighters tick.

— Randy Couture

INTRODUCTION

HDNet's *Fighting Words with Mike Straka* is the brainchild of Mark Cuban and Andrew Simon. They wanted a no-frills interview program where fans could learn a lot more about their favorite fighters than just how they trained for their last fight or when they think they'll be ready for a title shot.

When I sit down to interview fighters, I do as much research about their fight careers and lives as possible, but I don't ever go into an interview with a stringent list of questions. To me, listening to where my guest is taking an interview is part of the process, and I always try to have a conversation, rather than a linear question-and-answer session.

When I asked Frank Shamrock how he was coping with the death of his adoptive father, Bob (also Ken Shamrock's adoptive father), Frank said he was at peace but wished he got to say some more things before he died. I could have left it at that, but I asked him what things he wished he could have said, and when he elaborated his eyes welled up with tears.

It wasn't my intention to get one of the toughest guys in the sport to cry, but it was a special moment that made for good television.

When I interviewed middleweight Chael Sonnen the day after he suffered a heartbreaking title-fight loss to Anderson Silva at UFC 117, Sonnen was not his typical full-of-bravado self. He was raw and vulnerable, and viewers who went into that interview hating the guy for his cocky persona came out of it as Sonnen fans.

In the episode with Roger Huerta—the first MMA fighter to ever be on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*—viewers saw an introspective man who was still struggling with the demons of a childhood rife with abuse. Abandoned by his parents before the age of seven, he was at one point homeless, walking the streets of El Salvador selling picture frames for money. A reunion with his father and stepmother in Texas was worse, and Huerta has told stories of the physical and mental harm he suffered at their hands.

When I interviewed Roger, one of the things that struck me as notable was that when he talked about fighting, he didn't seem very happy. During the interview it became apparent that every time he steps into the cage, he's fighting his past more than he's fighting his opponent. However, contrast that to when we talked about his fledgling acting career and studying the craft of acting with his friend, actor Mickey Rourke, and everything about Huerta livened up. His back straightened, his eyes smiled, and his voice became animated.

These are the types of revelations we strive for on *Fighting Words*, and inside these pages I've written each chapter based on an episode of the show.

This book is *not* a hard-hitting look at the sport of mixed martial arts, nor is it a history of the sport. There are several books like that out there, and my favorites are written by authors such as Jonathan Snowden, Sam Sheridan, Kelly Crigger, Loretta Hunt, Stitch Duran, Erich Krauss, and Jon Wertheim.

This is a book for fans who love MMA and who want to know more about the fighters and industry leaders who make the fastest-growing sport in the world what it is today.

I hope you enjoy it.



CONTENTS

FOREWORD <i>BY RANDY COUTURE</i>	vii
INTRODUCTION	ix
CHAPTER 1 DANA WHITE , UFC President	1
CHAPTER 2 FRANKIE EDGAR , UFC Fighter	15
CHAPTER 3 FRANK SHAMROCK , MMA Pioneer	29
CHAPTER 4 JON JONES , UFC Fighter	45
CHAPTER 5 BIG JOHN McCARTHY , MMA Referee	57
CHAPTER 6 JOSH THOMSON , Strikeforce Fighter	71
CHAPTER 7 BAS RUTTEN , MMA Pioneer	87
CHAPTER 8 CAIN VELASQUEZ , UFC Fighter	99
CHAPTER 9 MATT HUGHES , UFC Hall of Famer	111

CHAPTER 10	
SCOTT COKER , Strikeforce Founder and CEO	125
CHAPTER 11	
RANDY COUTURE , UFC Hall of Famer	141
CHAPTER 12	
KEN SHAMROCK , UFC Hall of Famer	157
CHAPTER 13	
CLAY GUIDA , UFC Fighter	181
CHAPTER 14	
RENZO GRACIE , Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Legend	195
CHAPTER 15	
CHUCK LIDDELL , UFC Hall of Famer	209
EPILOGUE	221
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	225

CHAPTER 1

DANA WHITE, UFC PRESIDENT

I admire Dana White for his fortitude, his work ethic, and his passion for mixed martial arts and the UFC brand of which he is captain. If it weren't for Dana White, people like me who make a living in the MMA industry, whether we are journalists, commentators, fighters, promoters, managers, agents, retailers, or ring girls—wouldn't be where we are today, and like it or not, we owe Dana White for that.

I've interviewed Dana more than 50 times over the past decade, but no matter how many times I do, I'm always a bit intimidated. He is after all, the Godfather of MMA, the Grand Poobah of the UFC.

The first time I interviewed Dana was in 2001 when I was the weekend sports contributor on FOX News Channel, and I think the first thing he said to me was, "I don't know if we're going to fucking make it, but I love this sport more than anything." Right there I fell in love with his honesty. Most people in his position would try to sell me a bill of goods about his company and the fledgling sport, but not Dana. He's honest and frank, and he's proven throughout the years that he has no problem telling anyone what's on his mind.

White was Chuck Liddell's and Tito Ortiz's manager before he became the president of the UFC. In 2001 he convinced his high school friends, Lorenzo and Frank Fertitta, the billionaire owners of the Nevada-based Station Casino Group, to purchase the organization for some \$2 million dollars.

Today, the UFC is estimated to be worth over \$2 billion. A lot of that success comes from White's brash, in-your-face style of doing business. Dana did me the honor of being my first guest on *Fighting Words*, even at a time when he was having issues with HDNet, which goes to show you what kind of a guy he is.

"People think I'm brash, I'm this and that. Listen, this is the fight game, this isn't Microsoft or McDonald's," White says. "This is the fight game, and it's blown out of proportion too, the whole bad guy image thing."

Indeed, Dana is probably one of the nicest guys when it comes to the fans. In business, however, he can be as tough as the most hardened Fortune 500 CEO.

Dana is not afraid of controversy. He speaks his mind and often takes to Twitter or YouTube with messages to fans, journalists, fighters, judges, referees, and competitors. He has single-handedly increased sales at Pinkberry frozen yogurt stores across the country by announcing UFC ticket giveaways there, in cities where events are taking place—while he enjoys his favorite Pinkberry treat: a large original with Fruity Pebbles.

"To be honest with you, the whole social network thing and Twitter is because I don't have the greatest relationship with the media all the time," he says.

"I feel I call the media out on a lot of things and the whole internet has changed the world of media. Anybody with a website is a 'journalist,' so I just don't play their games. The thing I love about Twitter and a lot of the social networking is I can talk directly to the fans. I can cut out the middleman. I can say exactly what I want to say the way I want to say it without somebody else interpreting what I said."

White has been known to call out members of the media by name when something they say or write gets under his skin, including Sherdog.com's Loretta Hunt and Jake Rossen.

He even tweeted a four-letter salvo to the *San Francisco Chronicle* when the paper's sports editors refused to cover UFC 117 in Oakland, writing:

“San fran chronicle says they hate UFC and would NEVER cover the UFC and were such rude dickheads to our pr girl. Hey SFC, fuck u!!!! ...San jose mercury, oakland tribune, contra costa times, west county times, valley times and many more thanks 4 ur support!”

White makes no apologies for his public lashings.

“This isn’t 1986 anymore, where the media can say anything they want about anybody and there’s no way for you to respond, so when I see the media doing something that is wrong—or misquotes or misinformation or flat-out lying—I’m going to call them out on that. And I don’t see what’s so controversial about that,” says White.

Whatever people may want to call it, it’s working. The UFC has supplanted boxing and the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) as the world’s biggest pay-per-view draws, and ratings for its TV productions on SpikeTV and Versus have far exceeded network executive expectations. A network television deal with ABC, CBS, NBC, or FOX is in the cards in the very near future, and even an Initial Public Offering on Wall Street is not so far-fetched.

While Dana is widely credited for taking the UFC to where it is today, he doesn’t always make unilateral decisions. Majority owners Lorenzo and Frank Fertitta, the billionaire brothers who own the Stations Casino Group in Las Vegas, Nevada, and founded Zuffa, LLC (UFC’s parent company) with White, have a big say in what goes on.

“There are a lot of decisions I make on my own, or Frank and Lorenzo and I will get together as a team and make decisions,” he says. “The greatest thing I have is I’ve been in the fight game a long time. I know this business better than anyone does. Having two really smart, really open-minded businessmen as my partners is huge. Part of the reason this thing has become so big is because of the friendship and the trust that we have in each other.”

White's critics like to say he was just a guy in the right place at the right time, lucky to have friends with deep pockets. But contrary to the petty jealousy of some of those critics, it takes a lot more than convincing two rich friends to invest in a controversial company and concept to get to where he is today. After all, the Fertittas have a lot of friends. How many of them are multimillionaires after going into business with them?

Dana laughs when I ask him if he got lucky knowing the Fertitta brothers.

"The timing and everything lined up perfectly, but people think Frank and Lorenzo and I had been hanging together for 15 years," he says. "What people don't know is Lorenzo and I hadn't seen each other for 10 years, until we bumped into each other at a wedding. Timing is everything, and anyone who knows me knows that I've put the work and dedication and time into this thing, but yeah, I've been very lucky, I wouldn't disagree with that, you know."

Before White "got lucky," he was offered a position to run another mixed martial arts promotion, the World Fighting Alliance, a rival Las Vegas promotion that had fighters such as Quinton "Rampage" Jackson, Matt Lindland, and Ricco Rodriguez on its roster. I ask Dana if the UFC and the sport of mixed martial arts would be where it is today if he had taken that job.

"I don't think so," says White. "Like I said, it was a combination of me and the Fertittas that made this what it is today. Listen, I knew the fight business, but the reality is the Fertittas are big businessmen. Back when we started the UFC, I ran some gyms dealing with hundreds of thousands of dollars. We deal with billions of dollars now, and that is the Fertittas' area. They are aggressive, smart, big thinkers. I knew the fight game, but like I said, this awesome relationship that we've had together is one of the big reasons that MMA is where it is today and why the UFC is where it is today."

It wasn't always easy, even for the Fertittas, especially in the early days of their UFC ownership. There was a lot of opposition within the Station Casino business that looked at the UFC as nothing more than

a money-wasting distraction. That's why it was a big day in June 2008 for Dana when Lorenzo stepped down from his position as president of Station Casinos to become CEO of the UFC.

"When you look at it from my point of view, Station Casinos is the reason the UFC exists today. These guys made a lot of money through Station, and through Station they were able to fund the UFC. The UFC was the red-headed stepchild of the Fertitta business family. Everybody who worked with them and around them said, 'You're going to lose your money. This is insane. I don't know why you're doing this.' But they believed in it and they believed in me. And when the day came that Lorenzo was going to leave that business and come full time with us, that was a big day for me. It meant a lot to me because I felt I was key to getting us to where it [the league] was, for him to leave to come over and join us. I knew what he was going to bring to the table when he came. If you look at what he's done internationally in the last year, he's kicked some serious ass."

Indeed, during 2010 Lorenzo was able to sell 10 percent of the UFC to Flash Entertainment, a government-owned concert and events promotion in Abu Dhabi, for an estimated \$120 million. The brothers and White diluted their own shares to make room for their new partners, and the UFC would go on to present UFC 112 on Yas Island in Abu Dhabi.

In August 2010, the UFC announced the hiring of Mark Fischer, a 12-year NBA executive who built NBA China into a \$2 billion enterprise, to head a UFC operation in Asia.

"I think as successful as the NBA was there, I think we can do just as much with the UFC," Fischer said, telling me later the potential big areas for expansion include China, Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong.

The Zuffa-era UFC's biggest foray into Europe was in April 2007, at UFC 70: Nations Collide, in London's O2 Arena. The promotion spent millions of dollars announcing its presence to the British MMA fans, however, much of that money was not recouped after dismal pay-per-view buys. MMA bloggers made much of the fact that the

UFC spent more money marketing that fight than it brought in for the event.

White, however, says the marketing spend was worth every penny, despite the short-term losses.

"I believed in it," he says. "I knew. Just like when we started this thing back in 2001. I knew England was going to be big. And the reason we got crushed over there is because I spent so much money. I went over there guns a blazing, especially with the marketing.

"When we put on that fight in London, I don't care if you lived in some small cow town, you knew the UFC was coming to England, that's how big I went on the marketing. You know, when you look back you're like, 'God, we spent this much money, we lost this much money.' But you never know, had I not done that, would it be where it is today? Would it have grown throughout Europe the way that it has, who knows? Now that it's all worked you don't know if it was the right answer or the wrong answer."

In 2006, prior to the first season of *The Ultimate Fighter* (TUF) reality show on SpikeTV, the Fertitta brothers were [\$30] million in the red with the UFC. White was tasked with finding a buyer for the promotion.

“I thought it was over,” says Dana. “Lorenzo called and said, ‘I can’t keep pumping money into this thing, get out on the streets and see what you can get for it.’ That day I was making calls all day finding out how much we could sell it for. And by the end of the night it was anywhere between \$4–6 million, and I called him and gave him the number. And he said, ‘All right, I’ll call you in the morning.’ And he called me back the next day and said, ‘Fuck it, let’s keep going.’”

While he was relieved the UFC would get an extension, the pressure was certainly on White to perform, and he was already eating, sleeping, and breathing UFC. White had some dark days during that time.

“I never said, ‘I’m in over my head. I was just like, that was a close one, this thing is about to be over. You know, I was working as hard as somebody could work, but I said, I’ve got to step it up even more and put this thing into overdrive.”

If the fiduciary success of the UFC isn’t enough to prove that that overdrive worked, in 2010 White was awarded an extremely prestigious honor, the inaugural PromaxBDA “Game Changer” Sports Marketing Award.

The award recognizes an innovator who’s transformed the business of sports media and sports-media marketing through the development of new technologies, applications, business models, and industries.

PromaxBDA is a worldwide organization consisting of over 3,000 companies in 70 countries, dedicated to the development of the entertainment industry. Among the panel voting for the Game Changer Award were execs from ESPN, HBO, and HDNet’s Mark Cuban (my boss).

“In selecting a recipient for our inaugural Game Changer Award, we felt Dana White perfectly embodies the type of sports-marketing figure worthy of setting precedent for this honor,” PromaxBDA president Jonathan Block-Verk stated. “Shift in perception, evolution of the UFC brand, and its meteoric rise under his watch perfectly exemplify what it means to be a game changer in the sports-marketing arena.”

White was born in Manchester, Connecticut, and grew up back and forth between Las Vegas, Nevada, and Levant, Maine. His parents were divorced and his mother raised him alone as best as she could. Dana was street smart from a very young age, and although he attended University of Massachusetts Boston, he dropped out to start his own business: Dana White Enterprises, a boxing instruction company that eventually led to managing two unknown mixed martial arts fighters named Tito Ortiz and Chuck Liddell.

Dana’s humble beginnings keep him grounded even as he hobnobs with the world’s biggest celebrities and richest business moguls.