



MARKED MAN

Bellator Lightweight Champion Michael Chandler doesn't walk in the counsel of his doubters—he knocks them down.

BY TR FOLEY // PHOTOS COURTESY BELLATOR FIGHTING CHAMPIONSHIPS

Mike Chandler has two tattoos, which is a relatively small number for a championship fighter in mixed martial arts—a world stacked with bodies etched in green and black ink often swirling with conflicting emotions and ideas. Chandler is only 24 years old, but the consistency and simplicity of his messages are brief, clear, and strong. His faith—absent the salty sermon of a proselytizing preacher—gives him direction and strength.

“Blessed,” reads the cursive green-inked tattoo above his left pectoral. On the right side of his 185-pound frame, which he cuts to 155 pounds for fights, reads Isaiah 45:17: “No weapon formed against you shall prosper, And every tongue which rises against you in judgment, you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, And their righteousness is from Me, Says the LORD.” Chandler is accustomed to converting his MMA doubters.

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In 2004, the University of Missouri wrestling team was improving, and high school senior Mike Chandler wanted to be a part of their success. He finished second in the state his senior season and where other wrestlers were given scholarships, Chandler was asked by head Mizzou wrestling coach Brian Smith to walk-on his emergent program. No scholarships, no expectations—another body in the room for others to sharpen themselves upon.

Smith was in the midst of leading arguably the largest turnaround in Mizzou athletics history, and to do so, he recruited some of the best wrestling talent in the country, producing a Tigers’ lineup that at one time consisted of two-time National Champion Ben Askren, two-time All-American Raymond Jordan, and two-time All-American Matt Pell.

How’s that for middleweight shark bait? No matter where he landed in live groups during practice, Chandler was guaranteed to be the guppy chum.

“That team was special, all those guys knew what it was like to win, and I wanted to be just like that, I wanted to learn how to win,” says Chandler. “I watched them, I worked out with them, and I just made sure I learned everything I could about wrestling.”

Chandler won his spot in the starting lineup in his first year and every year afterwards, earning a bid to the NCAA tournament four times and placing fifth in the country as a senior in 2009. Success didn’t come without sacrifice. While others partied, Chandler spent his time between workouts under the guidance and friendship of his roommate Raymond Jordan (currently ranked second on the Olympic ladder at 84kg).

“I don’t think I had a drop of alcohol until I was 21 years old,” he says. “I knew that I needed to work harder than other guys, and I didn’t need the distractions.”

Wrestling ended for Chandler in 2009, but he entered his next endeavor much the same way he began wrestling as a youth—a runt

determined to lay claim to a title. Unfortunately for his future opponents, Chandler had practice rising to the competition.

Chandler didn’t remake himself when transitioning to MMA, he continued along the same projection, dictating his journey to the top with unparalleled commitment. After hanging around the Mizzou wrestling team for a season as the volunteer assistant coach and training sporadically at gyms across the country with former teammate and current undefeated Strikeforce standout Tyron Woodley, Chandler decided to commit completely to the goal of becoming the best lightweight in the world.

“I couldn’t hop around anymore,” says Chandler. “I needed coaches to correct me every day. I needed to train for fighting like I did wrestling—wake up, train, eat, train, sleep. I moved to Las Vegas, bought a house, and made Xtreme Couture my home. I made a commitment to myself.”

He immediately went to work on the areas that he needed to improve, namely his non-existent striking game. “It felt like an unnatural motion to throw a punch, but I had basics when I got to Vegas, and then I met Gil.”

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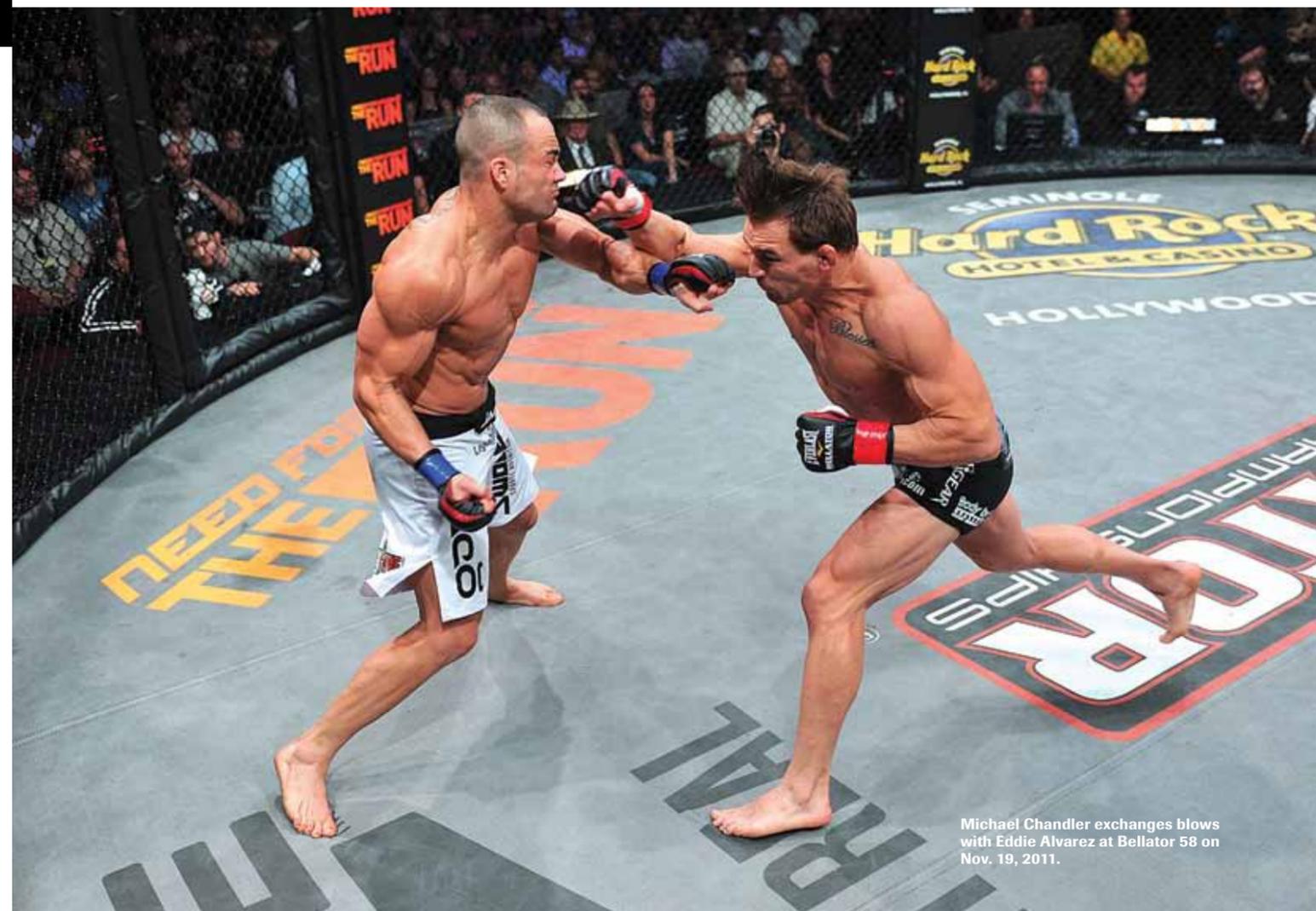
Striking coach Gil Martinez has taken Chandler’s natural aggressiveness and crafted a unique style that moves the thick-chested fighter around the cage. “I want him to be himself in the cage, I want him to outwork his opponent, exhaust him, and eventually knock his ass out,” says Martinez.

The other important key to Chandler’s 18 months at Xtreme Couture has been learning to submit opponents. As a lifelong wrestler, the idea of pulling guard or playing from his back was antithetical, a submission to another man’s aggressiveness that would impede his progress.

“We taught him how to defend,” says Martinez in reference to the knee-bar submission Chandler defended in the Bellator quarterfinals against BJJ brown belt Marcin Held. “That guy is a submission expert, and we submitted him.” Chandler finished the Polish native in the second round via arm triangle.

“That’s Chandler, he doesn’t just want to win, he wants to beat a guy at what they’re good at, he wants to take it from them on their home turf,” says Martinez.

In November, the scouting report for Bellator Lightweight Champion Eddie Alvarez—who was mentioned as one of the top three lightweights in the world—was that he had quick, heavy hands that were



Michael Chandler exchanges blows with Eddie Alvarez at Bellator 58 on Nov. 19, 2011.



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bolstered by a wrestling pedigree capable of avoiding and landing takedowns.

“Chandler was all over that tape,” says Martinez. “We had a gameplan for Eddie. Pressure him, pressure him, pressure him—don’t give him an inch. Where everyone else had screwed up was playing defense, which is what Eddie wanted.”

Chandler was the underdog heading into the fight. Most pundits saw him as an opponent with a bright future, but who had too soon run into the buzzsaw of Alvarez. As the media minds melted in the glow of Alvarez’s strengths, Chandler became more focused.

“I knew that I could beat him, no matter what anyone was saying,” says Chandler. “I really knew that he couldn’t handle my gameplan.”

By now you know the result—the crashing of fists to skulls, the flash knockouts, and the dramatic swings in momentum. What was missing was the intangible that Chandler was feeling for the final few moments of the third period, when it looked like he might be taking a loss as a result of being pelted in the head for three minutes by the heavy hands of Alvarez.

“I kicked him and hurt my foot. When I put pressure on it, I bent down a bit and got a face full of knee. That stung me,” says Chandler. From there, he received his three-minute lashing to end the third period. “It was the best thing that could’ve happened to me because now I know I can take a beating, and fans know I can take a beating. They know that I’m here to fight.”

Chandler doesn’t just appreciate his survival skills from a distance, he saw it as the power to penetrate the fighting spirit of his

opponent when the start of the fourth round began. Chandler saw a man he knew that he would defeat. Chandler smelled blood and went in for the kill.

“He was already kinda going through the motions, but when I got on top of him and started unleashing, he defended it differently,” he says. “Then he rolled over to his stomach, and it was over. I knew it was over.”

Chandler’s submission was almost misleading in the stat line, because it was his attack of Alvarez from the inside that had won the fight.

The next step for Chandler is watching the Bellator Lightweight Tournament for which Chandler has confidence that Bjorn Rebney, CEO of Bellator, will have new and exciting opponents. In the meantime, Chandler has decided to take time to heal from his battle with Alvarez and spend his free moments with family. He wants to inspire others by telling them his story of overcoming doubt to become a champion.

“My goal is to be known as the best lightweight in the world,” says Chandler. “I’ll keep working hard to get there, but I also have goals of reaching people outside the cage.”

Chandler’s story to listeners would combine the doctrines tattooed to his chest with his belief in hard work as a determinate of future success. With a lightweight title and an undefeated record, he has substantial reason to believe it’s a reason for success.

“I’m not the biggest name yet, but I want to use whatever I can to give back,” says Chandler. “I know I’ve truly been blessed.” 📌