

THE NEW PHALANX

Some of MMA's most talented fighters are training under the guidance of Milwaukee-bred, Spartan-obsessed Duke Roufus.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY T.R. FOLEY



A sign gives warning to all who enter.

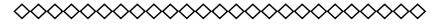
The small, yellow sign welcoming fighters to Roufusport in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, sits beneath the awning of the TCF Regional Bank drive-thru. The sign can't be seen from the road, and because the gym sits in the basement of the Soka Gakkai Buddhist Center, there aren't any large in-window advertisements to draw a passerby on to the premises. Roufusport doesn't aim to be hidden, this space just happened to be the most functional in town, the spot where Milwaukee-native and MMA coach Duke Roufus has quietly assembled a small and talented band of title-hunting fighters.

Milwaukee is only 90 minutes from my home in downtown Chicago, so Roufusport

seemed the logical place to start profiling gyms for *FIGHT!*, especially considering that UFC stars Erik Koch, Anthony Pettis, and Alan Belcher, as well as Bellator Welterweight Champion Ben Askren all take direction from Roufus.

Fight training is based on location, and when it comes to the number of residents and trainings partners, Milwaukee—a city of 500,000 people—is running a deficit to havens like Los Angeles, Miami, and New York City. And while those cities are synonymous with trendy gyms and Zen leaders, Milwaukee is a city of beers and bratwurst, perfect for Roufus' paunchy build and steely-eyed leadership. In the largest city of a state best known for its cheese, his fiery

and magnanimous leadership is steering a team of highly skilled, highly individualized fighters on the path to MMA greatness.



The Roufusport gym is 14,000-square-foot and features three mat areas, two cages, and a Muay-Thai ring, all painted in the flat blue and bright yellow of a circa-1985 Milwaukee Brewers jersey. If that subtle homage to the city was meant to go unnoticed, then so too was the secondary logo for Roufusport in the exact typeface of the Milwaukee Tool Co.—written in narrow, sharp-angled lettering and underlined with a thunderbolt. The logo is accentuated with the ever-recognizable helmet of the Spartan army.

It's not surprising. Milwaukee has always been Roufus' home, and he's all but obsessed with the successes of Spartan culture. He grew up 14 blocks from this new facility, by a family that owned and operated a series of gyms. When he decided to do the same, he opened his first gym on Third Avenue in a warehouse district where he actually lived in the same space as the gym. Although Roufus has traveled the world, winning almost 30 Muay Thai and kickboxing fights, he has always come back to Milwaukee.

As I enter the facility, I'm welcomed by Scott Joffre, who helps Roufus run the front of the gym. He takes my bag and points me to a large rectangular cage where Ben Askren is teaching UFC featherweight contender Erik Koch and 10 others how to escape a double-leg takedown against the cage. I head in, opening the cage door with a laminated sign "CAUTION: This is Sparta!" A stick-figure drawing depicts one guy kicking another backward, presumably into a deep well ala the movie *300*. Fortunately, there is no kicking going on at the moment, just grappling.

"You can probably just push his head away if you're going with a striker," Askren says, as he palms Koch in the face and limp-legs out of the double. He repositions himself for another example. "But if you're fighting a good wrestler like [Chad] Mendes, you're gonna want to face him up." Askren looks to Koch for affirmation of the dig. Koch smiles comfortably behind his mouth guard.

Mendes handed Koch the only loss of his career, a three-round decision at WEC 47 in March 2010, where Mendes took Koch down with ease. Since that loss, Koch's development under Roufus has been dynamic,

Duke Roufus doing what he does best.



The Roufusport proving grounds.



Roufusport team members show their unity.



Ben Askren gives advice and a ribbing to Erik Koch.

“I’m not going to take a guy like Ben—who is this incredible wrestler—and make him a shitty boxer”

growing from a wrestler with a knack for submissions to winning back-to-back “Knockout of the Night” honors against Francisco Rivera and Raphael Assunção. That type of talent maturation marks the progression of a Roufus-trained fighter. When UFC middleweight Alan Belcher first met Roufus, he was a BJJ blue belt who’d just been D’Arce choked by Kendall Grove. Five years later and now a black belt, Belcher destroyed ADCC runner-up Rousamir Palhares.

“He makes you more of what you already are,” Pettis says. “He doesn’t want you to be a shitty-something, he wants you to be the best-something.”

Askren is “Exhibit A” in becoming more of what you are, and then some. None of Askren’s opponents have been able to avoid being taken down by the two-time NCAA Champion wrestler and 2008 Olympian. His wrestling is a skill that has led some fans (including UFC president Dana White) to criticize his lack of action in fights, and although Askren acknowledges that he hasn’t finished fights recently, he says he also needs opponents willing to engage. “I think it’s their gameplan,” says Askren. “They de-

cide to lay there for 4:30 just so they can try to knock me out for 30 seconds at the beginning of the next round. It’s bullshit.”

“We are bringing in top guys to improve his submissions,” Roufus says. “He’ll be finishing guys. Just watch.”

Class wraps up and I change clothes in the hopes of grappling with Askren. I was a Division I All-American wrestler in 2004 and have trained jiu-jitsu the past few years, but in terms of wrestling ability, I occupy the lowest rung of recognition, while Askren swings from the highest. He wasn’t going to kick me or punch me, but entering into a grappling-only match with Ben Askren at an MMA gym is like entering into a punching-only match with Mike Tyson at an MMA gym.

Like wrestlers tend to do outside of a structured practice, Askren and I choose to forgo a warm-up, and we begin to roll. We both attempt guillotines, play a loose guard, and shake off back-takes. The Wisconsin-native might look like a hippie string bean, but don’t be fooled. His nickname “Funky” was derived from the innovative scrambles he created during his time at the University of Missouri, but that style wasn’t carefree.

Askren combines patience, calculation, and ruthlessness in order to break his opponents. Askren’s tactic is to allow an opponent to play to their strengths, which sometimes gets him on the wrong side of the action, but ultimately allows him to scout their game and learn about their weaknesses. It’s a style perfect for Roufus—tactical and intelligent.

“If they like structure, I give them funk,” says Askren. “If they like funk, I give them structure.” It’s an intellectual assessment Askren makes every fight, and it almost seems necessary when facing a field of MMA opponents with so many specialties and skills.

Askren intellectually assesses that I’m gassing, and after 15 minutes, I’m flat on my back attempting an over-the-head butterfly sweep. I kick Askren in the thighs while pulling on his triceps but get nothing for my efforts. Not a gasp of air or a grunt of frustration—he simply doesn’t budge, he just EXISTS in mid-air, lounging in an inverted “C” like an Olympic gymnast blasting off a vaulting horse. Askren’s legs begin to fall back to earth, and although I try to get beneath him, it’s too late. His hips slam into the mat next to me, and he secures a hand-

and-arm choke, cranks, and I submit. I get why Dan Hornbuckle lay there for 25 minutes. More than any human I've ever rolled with, Askren is a blanket.

"I'm not going to take a guy like Ben—who is this incredible wrestler—and make him a shitty boxer," says Roufus. He's standing behind the counter of his gym with the cords of his white earbuds hanging off his neck and wearing a mesh tank that reveals several tattoos. "Ben just needs to learn how to not get hit, and then how to finish fights. I want him submitting guys."

That shouldn't be a problem.

"I wouldn't take it hard. I've seen him beat black belts in competition. Embarrass 'em, embarrass 'em like 22-3," says Roufus.

Askren submitting, Belcher punching and grappling, and Pettis kicking people in the head—there is no profile of a Roufus fighter except the dependability that they'll be highly skilled and willing to scrap, which is equal parts technique and emotion. Unlike more popular MMA training facilities with influential guru-like leaders and a collection of athletes trained in a style that closely mimics each other's, Roufus inspires his athletes to become more of what they already are—to flourish in their individualism. He's become an accelerant of native talent and the firebrand that keeps them motivated and on task.

"I don't want 20 UFC guys that are mediocre. It's a waste of time," says Roufus. "That's a tough way to make a living. If you're a fighter, your goal should be champion—not just to be in the UFC."

As Roufus speaks, a student lumbers up in a sparkling white gi and matching belt. "Coach said that my top game is getting really good. He said if I keep it up, I can submit guys." Roufus is leaning on his elbow but stands up straight and looks up from his iPhone, where he's likely updating his Twitter, the avatar to which is a Spartan. "That's great. I told you that you'd find something on top. You should keep working that stuff every day," says Roufus.

Giving warm direction to the newbie is pleasant, but for fighters like Pettis, the respect they have for Roufus comes from more than accepting his verbal ass slaps. "If I strike with Duke," Pettis says, "I'll get my ass kicked. He's just too good a striker. It's like he's three steps ahead of me all the time." Pettis has been with Roufus since the gym in the warehouse, and he is as loyal of a fighter as there can be in the sometimes-shady world of MMA.

"Duke's a badass, and striking with him gives me complete confidence, because I know that he's the best there is."

Our roll complete, Askren heads out of the gym to do an interview in Milwaukee

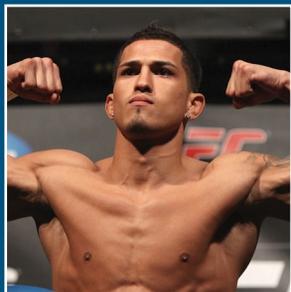
for Bellator. He'll be headlining their move to SpikeTV and is readying himself for more publicity. Roufus walks over to the bags where he's showing one of his amateur fighters how he wants him to improve on his leg kicks. I follow. He grabs a few pads and walks into the small Muay Thai cage that he built for no-escape striking sessions. His fighter is leaning into his practice kicks with serious umph. He's energized, and with each wallop he becomes more focused. Behind him is a 20-by-10-foot poster—a stop-action series of photos of Pettis' famous cage-climbing kick against UFC Lightweight Champion Benson Henderson. Next to that is a small Theravada Buddhist display for burning incense.

This is where Roufus stands, at the meeting of commerce and spirituality—the fight game where he's outnumbered by megagyms and out-shined by big names, but where he can lead similar-minded fighters with insane skills into battle, largely with good results.

"I'm trying to get our guys to be the very best in the sport," Roufus says. "My guys work just as hard as they are talented, which is a rarity. Most guys either work hard or are talented. Not with us—our guys are both, or they're not our guys."

Loyal, direct, and well trained—spoken like a true Spartan. 🇬🇷

ROUFUSPORT STARS



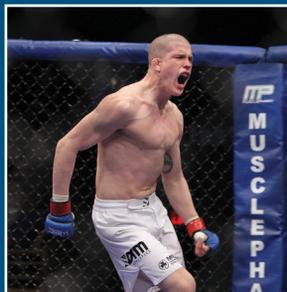
ANTHONY PETTIS, UFC LIGHTWEIGHT

Record: 15-2
 Significant Victories: Benson Henderson, Shane Roller, Joe Lauzon
 Next Up: Nothing confirmed, but a date with Donald "Cowboy" Cerrone is in the works.
 Years with Duke: 5



ALAN BELCHER, UFC MIDDLEWEIGHT

Record: 18-6
 Significant Victories: Rousimar Palhares, Jason MacDonald, Patrick Cote
 Next Up: Four straight stoppages have thrown Belcher's name into the contender mix.
 Years with Duke: 5.5



ERIK KOCH, UFC FEATHERWEIGHT

Record: 13-1
 Significant Victories: Raphael Assuncao, Francisco Rivera
 Next Up: Koch will be headlining UFC 153 against UFC Featherweight Champion Jose Aldo on October 13.
 Years with Duke: 3



BEN ASKREN, BELLATOR WELTERWEIGHT CHAMPION

Record: 10-0
 Significant Victories: Douglas Lima, Jay Hieron
 Next Up: Askren will face Karl Amoussou when Bellator's deal with SpikeTV begins in 2013.
 Years with Duke: 1.5