



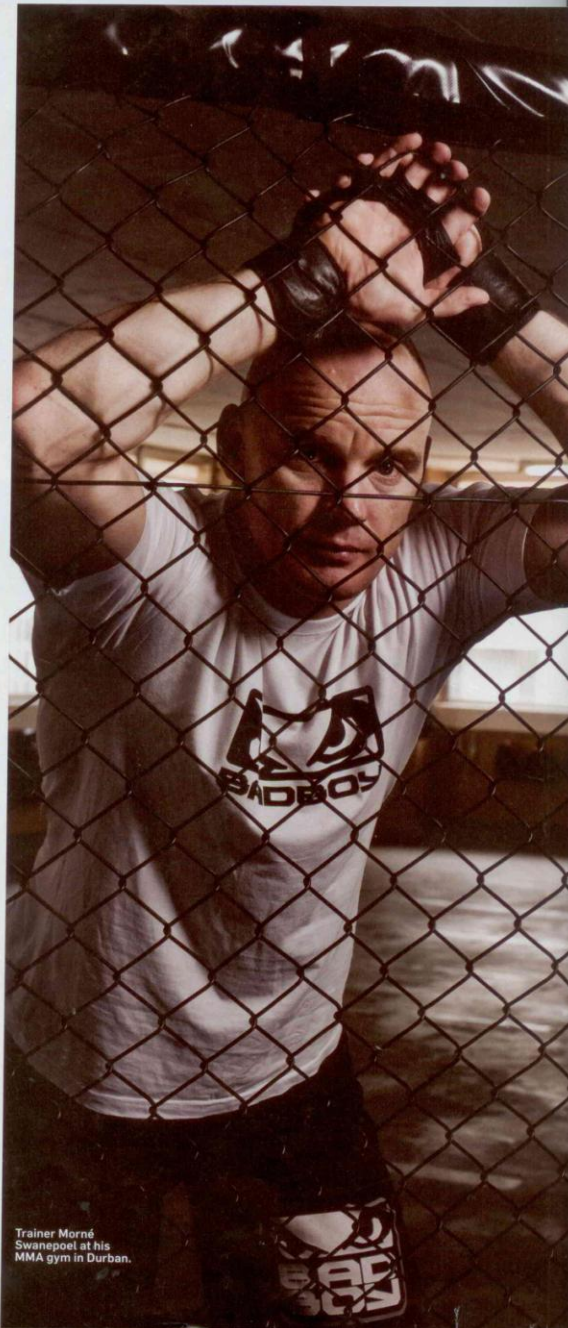
# FIGHT

Mixed Martial Arts is slugging its way out of underground fight clubs and into mainstream South African sport. Does MMA deserve its bad-boy reputation, or can it help you become fighting fit?

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BY MARK VAN DIJK  
PHOTOGRAPHS MARC SHOUL  
AND CRAIG SCOTT

Two fighters step nervously around the octagonal cage. The one from the blue corner whips a few tentative kicks at his red opponent's legs. They each *mik* back and forth, and then – suddenly, explosively – Red launches himself at Blue. The slap of impact sends both fighters slamming to the floor. Red holds Blue down, slowly cutting off the blood supply to his head. Red wins by submission.



Trainer Morné Swanepoel at his MMA gym in Durban.

# R

Red is Dolf van Vuuren, a softly-spoken 41-year-old artisan from Vanderbijlpark. Blue is Jonathan Bailey, a 24-year-old Eskom senior parts operator from Secunda. Both are amateurs, and both have just completed their first Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) cage fight.

Theirs is one of 20 bouts on the card at Rise of the Warrior VI, a full amateur MMA event at the Matsport Hall in suburban Centurion. It's one of at least three big events this week (there was a similar contest in Durban the night before, and there's a big pro event at the Standard Bank Arena later in the week).

Following the trend of the US, where MMA's Ultimate Fighting Championship has now overtaken boxing as the biggest pay-per-view TV draw, MMA – or cage-fighting, as non-initiates tend to call it – is tearing off its underground roots and punching its way to sporting legitimacy.

"It's a place where you can get in a fight and not get arrested," says Morné Swanepoel, explaining the sport's growing appeal. "The testosterone and adrenaline excite a lot of youngsters, and for the more mature athletes, fighting – the training and preparation – is a way of life. The fight itself doesn't take much. The preparation is the blood and guts and glory. That's the difficult part."

Swanepoel runs Combat Coaching out of Amanzimtoti, offering personal training, reality-based personal protection and MMA fighting

instruction. With his background in combat sports – his father enrolled him in wrestling classes when he was four and, as an adult, he graded third dan in karate – Swanepoel was a natural fit for MMA.

The sport grew out of the ultimate bar-room question: if you took a wrestler, a sumo wrestler, a boxer, a kick-boxer, a jiu-jitsu fighter and a karate champion, put them all in a cage and ordered them to fight to the finish, who would be the last man standing?

"Mixed martial arts is exactly what it says," says Swanepoel. "It's a mixture of martial arts, like Bruce Lee had in mind with Jeet Kune Do when he said: 'Use what is useful, reject what is useless.' So you take what works for you and you make up your own fighting package. In cage fighting we get different kinds of fighters: grounders and pounders, submission specialists, stand-up specialists... These guys train in all the ranges, but their fighting style is what identifies them."

That random blend of fighting styles has, strangely enough, proven to be MMA's greatest leveller: in the sport's first official competition, 1993's Ultimate Fighting Championship, 1.85m/80kg Brazilian jiu-jitsu fighter Royce Gracie overcame bigger and heavier opponents (1.96m/98kg Savateur Gerard Gordeau, 1.83m/111kg wrestler Ken Shamrock and 1.85m/89kg boxer Art Jimmerson) to win the inaugural championship in Denver, Colorado.

Now, 18 years later in a quiet neighbourhood in Eldoraigne, Centurion, 40 amateur fighters – with fighting backgrounds as varied as wrestling, kick-boxing and club rugby – are nervously weighing up their own chances in the cage.

"It's not about size or strength; it's about stamina," says Herme Visser, a 29-year-old fighter and instructor at a Combat Coaching affiliated gym in Hermanstad. "You have to think during the fight – and when you get tired, you don't think. Going into an amateur fight, you don't know the other guy, so you don't know his skills. His background could be karate, jiu-jitsu, Krav Maga... anything."

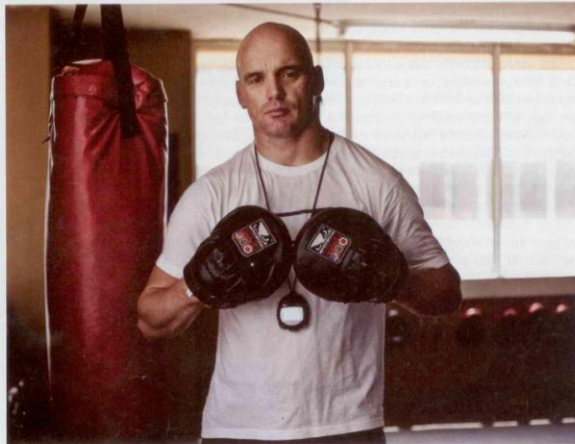
"That's half the fun of it," says 18-year-old former kick-boxer Gavin Brits. "You can't do your homework. When you get in there, it's more based on your skill than on your plan. It becomes more a reaction, where you don't think. *Okay, I'm going to turn him now and hit him in the ribs, I'm going to stand here. Oh look, he threw a jab at me, I'm going to dodge and jab back...* It's not based on what you plan, it's based on what you know."

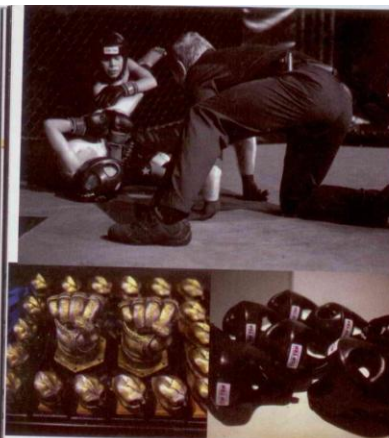
This will be Brits' first fight in the cage, but he still has the telltale yellow leftovers of a black eye picked up in practice.

But training doesn't have to be about fighting – and even if you sign up at an MMA gym, you don't ever have to step into the octagon.

"We currently have about a thousand MMA students countrywide, and only about a hundred of them compete," says Swanepoel. "The other 90% are here for the benefits: the conditioning and the healthy lifestyle."

Take Dolf van Vuuren, for example: although he won his debut cage fight, he'd only been training for three months. "I've wrestled before, and done a bit of judo," he says. "But when I saw MMA on TV, I knew this is what I wanted to do. The training is hectic, and I'm still getting fit – but I've already lost 13kg in just a few months."





Amateur MMA fighters in the cage at Rise of the Warrior VI.

**F** or a sport which advertises its events as "No Rules Cage Fighting", MMA isn't short on rules and regulations. The basic laws, as recorded on the sport's local mouthpiece Smacktalk.co.za, forbid competitors from clawing, pinching, biting, spiking, elbowing, head-butting, eye-gouging, fish-hooking, spitting at, swearing at – and among other no-nos – avoiding eye contact with your opponent.

(The latter is called "timidity", and it has no place in the octagon.)

Eight of the fights on the card at Rise of the Warrior VI are classed as "light contact", with fighters scoring points for well-placed blows, much like in amateur boxing.

On the afternoon of the event, Gavin Brits – who at 65kg has entered a light-contact featherweight bout – is still coming to grips with the rules. "The difference between light contact and full contact is that in light contact you're more out to score points, and they don't let you load the shot from here" – he cocks his arm back, fist clenched, until it's just past his shoulder – "and you have to remember to pull your punches. That can be hard, because you train to swing a full punch, and they ask you to do the exact opposite in competition."

As it turns out, Brits wins his fight by walk-over. His opponent is forced to withdraw when the event's medical team detect swelling under his ribs. Brits doesn't even get to throw a punch in anger.

Hosted by Shido Fighting Systems, Rise of the Warrior VI is run under the auspices of the International Sports Combat Federation (ISCF), and under ISCF rules every competitor must undergo a pre-fight medical test.

Event doctor Riaan Coetzee explains: "We check each fighter's vital signs: blood pressure, pupils, whether the lungs are clear, medical history, the last time they had a concussion...

If you're concussed you're not allowed back in the cage for at least three months. If you have high blood pressure you can't compete. If you're hit in the head the risk of bursting a vein in your brain is very high."

The doctor expects a few bruises and lacerations at tonight's event, but from an injury point of view, MMA competitions are surprisingly safe. A 2006 study at Johns Hopkins University found that the sport "has injury rates compatible with other combat sports involving striking", but with fewer KOs than boxing, MMA has a relatively lower risk of brain injury.

Each fighter wears nine-ounce open-palm gloves and rugby-style scrumcaps. This has a lot to do with safety, but a lot more to do with the sport's ongoing fight against government lawmakers. Professional MMA competitions are still illegal in four US states, while Germany has banned televised MMA events and Australia has banned cage fighting. In South Africa, the Department of Sports and Recreation recently floated a bill which would make both pro and amateur fights illegal and – according to the language of the bill – "a person who participates in or promotes such an ultimate fight shall be guilty of an offence and, on conviction, be liable to a fine or five years' imprisonment or to both..." In other words, the story you're reading right now could be against the law.

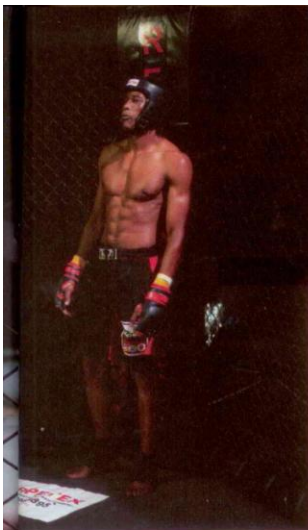
"The government has insisted on fighters wearing that protective gear," Swanepoel

explains, "because if anybody gets injured and the proper precautions were not taken, they will ban the sport in this country."

It's not hard to see why MMA courts so much controversy. In South Africa, the sport is in many ways still in its amateur infancy. Both Brits and Visser see their fights called off (Visser has to wait until three hours after the event begins to learn that his opponent hasn't shown up), and at least four of the 20 fights – including the final bout, billed as the "main event" – will be total mismatches, won and lost within a few seconds.

(One fighter, Riaan Schmahl, who wins on a 17-second TKO – although it looked a lot more like timidity from where the audience was sitting – is later found shrugging his shoulders in the communal red dressing room. "I've been psyching myself up for this all week, and now this happens," he says, shaking his head. "At the end of the day, these fights are all about heart. The other guy hasn't been training long, and I guess he just gave up.")

Some fighters lack the skills; others are simply not fighting fit. You may think that that's understandable, given that they're all amateurs. Swanepoel doesn't. "When my fighters prepare for a fight they'll go on at least an eight-to 10-week camp, training six days a week, some-times four or five hours a day," he says. "It's pretty intense. Compared to other martial arts systems, MMA is on a different level of preparation.



## It's been around for thousands of years – you can't take combat away from the human being

"I would say that 80% of the fight lies in the conditioning, so if you're an athlete it could take you three months from when you start till when I allow you into the cage. Otherwise, I make some guys wait for six months or as long as a year after they start training. Often you'll have guys who are out of shape, but who have greedy trainers who're looking to make a quick buck out of entering these guys in events."

When I ask Coetzee whether there are doping tests for amateur fighters, he shakes his head. "Not that I know of. I think they have to go for an Aids test once a year, but there are no doping tests."

Is it possible that some of the fighters at tonight's event are juicing? "I think so," Coetzee replies. "They must muscle up, and there's no testing, so why wouldn't they? It will have to be regulated as the sport gets bigger."

The benefits of MMA training are clear, but the sport has an unmistakable dark side as well. The night's first fight sees two juniors – an eight-year-old and a nine-year-old – face off in what is billed as a light contact contest. But early in the first round the younger boy takes a punch to the nose, and fights on with blood streaming down his face and chest.

Before the event – in the interminable three-hour wait between the pre-fight weigh-ins and that opening bout – nervous contestants loiter around the Matsport Hall. While explaining benefits of MMA to me, one describes the time some guy stole his girlfriend's cellphone in a bar. "I tracked him down and put him in hospital," he says, while his mates nod their approval.

"This sport has the wrong people representing it," Visser says. "You see the blood and the gore, and it puts you off. And then you don't realise the benefits." Visser – who is also a trainer for the South African Police Services

– uses MMA techniques to get our country's cops into stomach-in-chest-out condition.

"I train the new recruits," he says, "and the ground game helps a lot. In MMA, almost every fight goes to the ground, so this is the best way to train police officers in hand-to-hand combat."

One of the single-round mismatches at Rise of the Warrior VI is won by a 25-year-old soldier, Corporal Zimasa Mamela. "We've been using MMA in our army training for the past four months," he says after his win. "But what you see in the cage is just the basis of what we do," Mamela adds knowingly. "The version of MMA we do in the army is much more dangerous."

Perhaps that's what has the government (and the sport's many armchair detractors) so up in arms: the idea that it's turning a generation of angry young men into overgrown playground bullies.

"We get that question quite often," nods Swanepoel. "Aren't we just creating people who can beat up other people? But because you fight and train every day of your life, you actually..." – he smiles – "... you actually don't want to fight. You're so sick and tired of fighting that you don't want to fight any more. Most bar-room fights have to do with ego and insecurity, and when you train at an MMA school you build up confidence so that you can deal with those situations. Going up against the drunken brawler is not a challenge for you. In our gyms, if any guy is caught fighting in a nightclub he'll face a disciplinary hearing. Simple as that. We're very strict on this. You do not come here to train to hurt other people."

As to the legal issues: "There's been more politics in MMA in the past three months than in the previous 15 years," Swanepoel says.

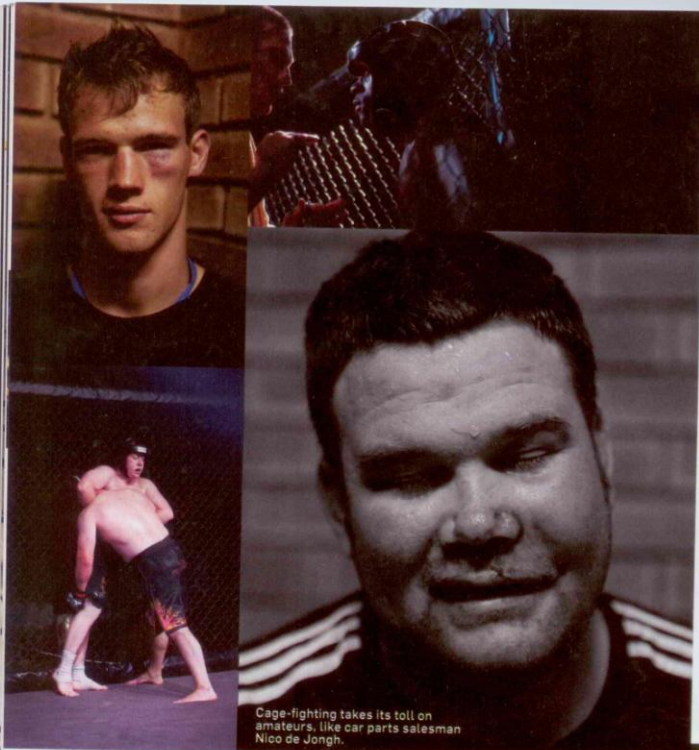
"But if it's banned, it will just go back underground. They're not going to stop the sport now. It's been around for thousands of years – you can't take combat away from the human being."

**T**hroughout the night, a large figure looms around the fringes of the arena. Nico de Jongh looks like a candidate for the *Men's Health* Belly Off! Club – but although he tipped the weigh-in scales at 153kg, he's not massively overweight. A self-confessed Free State boykie ("You know our diet: red meat and beer," he jokes), De Jongh is built like the proverbial brick outhouse.

He used to play rugby – prop forward, of course – and says that when he stopped he missed the physical contact. "I got so frustrated," he says, his quiet voice and gentle manner belying his gigantic figure. "Then, when the guys in Bloemfontein introduced me to MMA I was hooked."

De Jongh's job as a car parts salesman comes with its stresses, and without rugby as an outlet, he found he was directing his frustrations at the wrong people. "I have a very short temper," he says, "and I was taking it out on people who didn't deserve it. I also used to get into fights in night clubs – I didn't start them but, you know, I'm a big target."

Since he took up MMA, he's been calmer, more relaxed and hasn't been in a single fight out of the practice ring. He's been training for the past eight months, and tonight is his first



Cage-fighting takes its toll on amateurs, like car parts salesman Nico de Jongh.

fight in the cage. His opponent, 20-year-old Krugersdorp trainee commercial pilot Jean van den Heever, is a lean 120kg.

"Although I'm a big believer in team spirit, MMA is very individual in the sense that you don't have to compete with the rest," says Swanepoel. "You're competing with yourself the whole time. As long as you do your best and progress, that's cool with me. You don't have to do a thousand push-ups like the pro fighters do, compared to the 10 that you can do, as long as you keep on improving."

The De Jongh-Van den Heever bout is the penultimate fight of Rise of the Warrior VI, and – with it being a super-heavyweight contest, and the final fight ending in an anticlimactic 13-second knockout – it is the high point of the night.

The latch slams down on the cage door, the fighters size each other up across the octagonal floor and, at the sound of the hooter, the fight begins as all MMA fights do: with both men tip-toeing back and forth around each other, fists raised like boxers. A few jabs fly out as they test the air between them.

As these two giants trade early punches, my conversation with Swanepoel echoes like a running commentary. "We use a lot of MMA-based drills and conditioning to give a firm foundation for our reality-based personal

protection training," says Swanepoel. "I get police officers and bouncers in my personal protection classes, but they can't last five minutes with the MMA guys because all they rely on is that one punch or that aggressive 10-second burst."

De Jongh and Van den Heever trade punches, jabbing and shoving until they reach the next inevitable step of an MMA fight: the Sprawl-and-Brawl, where each man tries to prevent the takedown with stand-up boxing and kick-boxing defence. It turns, inevitably, into the Clinch, where both fighters hold their opponent and try to take him down while not being taken down himself. It's about raw strength now: Van den Heever's unstoppable force against De Jongh's immovable object.

I recall Swanepoel's words: "We teach functional fitness, combat athletics. We don't do running or cycling; we want muscle that can do more in a high-resistance environment. There's always that isometric resistance that you have to deal with throughout the fight. In boxing you can take a few shots and move around and catch your breath, but as soon as you get into a wrestling environment there's that constant fight for position."

Swanepoel compares this phase of the fight to rugby, where big oaks like De Jongh ruck or

## The fighters size each other up and the fight begins

maul for the ball for a few seconds, and then rest when the play moves away. "In MMA, the pros have to fight for four to five minutes," he says, "so fitness is very important. Our training targets different kinds of fitness and conditioning exercises. An MMA fighter has to be more than just 'gym fit'; he has to use his partner's bodyweight as a tool, picking him up and putting him down and moving that weight around."

On cue, De Jongh and Van den Heever fall – *boom!* – to the floor. Now it's a battle for position, as both grapple for dominance in the Ground-and-Pound phase. The aim now is to strike, hold or pressurise the other man into tapping out or crying in submission.

Ultimately, the man with the boxer's build beats the man with the prop forward's build, and De Jongh – his nose bloodied and his cheek already swollen – admits defeat.

Later, as he slumps in the red dressing room

at the end of a long night, De Jongh tries to analyse what he did wrong this time, what he'll do right next time and where he needs to work on his fitness.

"I get a lot of guys coming into the gym who're the street-brawler type," Swanepoel says. "But there's a discipline involved in MMA. We get doctors, lawyers, professionals – it's not just guys who rock up here looking for a fight. And once you've established that kind of brotherhood and influence, you'll keep on drawing those kind of people to your gym."

Even with the law still hovering over it, South African men will continue to be drawn to no-rules, no-holds-barred, Mixed Martial Arts cage fighting. Under the shadow of that octagon, many will use the sport's dynamic, intense training to get into the best shape of their lives.

Most will never fight.

MMA