

Chapter 1

Mixed Martial Arts: Past and Present

In This Chapter

- ▶ Digging into MMA's roots
- ▶ Understanding that the art of fighting is the art of living

Mixed martial arts (MMA), a lifestyle that focuses on the mixture of martial arts in full-contact combat, has come a long way since I first started practicing the sport in 1994. It can now be found around the globe, from Canada and Brazil to Russia and Japan. It appears on both national and cable television networks in the form of reality programming, sporting leagues, and title championships. Mixed martial artists have become celebrities who star in blockbuster movies, appear as characters in video games, and show up on larger-than-life billboards in some of the biggest cities; some of these stars have even become household names.

With MMA so in the spotlight these days, you may be surprised to know it wasn't always that way. In this chapter, I give you a little insight into MMA's history and introduce you to what MMA is all about as a sport.

From Olympia to America: MMA Reborn as an American Martial Art

The earliest known form of MMA can be traced back to the Olympics of ancient Greece. This hand-to-hand combat performed as a sport was called *pankration*, which comes from the Greek words *pan* and *kratos* and means "all powers." The competitors had only two rules to abide by: no biting and no eye gouging. Pankration was a popular event, and the competitors became heroes and the subjects of legends.

The teachings of pankration spread to India thanks to Alexander the Great and his habit of recruiting athletes as soldiers because of their strength and combat knowledge. A Buddhist monk traveling through India picked up on aspects of pankration and brought that knowledge to China, where it birthed Asian martial arts such as kung fu, judo, and karate. As people branched into new lands, they took these arts and built on them, often creating a new style or form of martial art. For example, an expert in judo traveled the globe and ended up in Brazil to spread his teachings, an act that gave birth to the art of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu.

As martial arts spread, so did the idea of mixed-style competitions. Often a practitioner of one martial art challenged a practitioner of a different one for ultimate bragging rights. These mixed-style competitions took place worldwide for several decades, eventually gaining intense popularity in the United States.

Participants in these competitions learned from their opponents and began to realize that in order to become well-rounded fighters, they must study any combative art form that could give them an edge in the game. For instance, if a kickboxer was matched with a Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu practitioner, the kickboxer would realize that he must become more adept at defending takedowns, thus prompting him to train with Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu fighters. From that point forward, competitions were no longer between athletes who focused on a singular martial art but between two mixed martial arts athletes.

The Many Faces of MMA

The sport of MMA exists in many countries around the world under different names. Here's a look at the different forms of MMA from an assortment of cultures:

- ✔ **Lucha libre in Mexico:** Spanish for “free wrestling,” *lucha libre* is a Mexican form of professional wrestling, but some luchadores perform in MMA competitions.
- ✔ **Pankration in Greece:** From the Greek words *pan* and *kratos*, *pankration* means “all powers,” a fitting definition considering Greek fighters could do anything except bite an opponent or gouge his eye.
- ✔ **Shooto in Japan:** The combat sport of shoot wrestling (also known as *Shooto* or shoot boxing) originated in Japan.
- ✔ **Systema in Russia:** Translating to “the system,” *Systema* is the Russian martial art of hand-to-hand combat.
- ✔ **Vale tudo in Brazil:** In Portuguese, *vale tudo* means “anything goes,” with *vale* meaning “is allowed” and *tudo* meaning “everything.” Consequently, any and every move is allowed in a vale tudo bout except biting, eye gouging, and fish hooking.

In the United States, MMA takes the “no holds barred” approach, meaning there's a decided lack of restrictions in hand-to-hand combat competitions. The phrase “no holds barred” has become synonymous with American MMA, which relies on fighting organizations to host *fighting promotions* (events). These groups often have a roster of fighters, as well as their own championship belts and title events. For more on MMA organizations and fighting promotions, see Chapter 2.

Breaking Down the MMA Skill Set

MMA is a mix of many different styles of martial arts, but you can break down the skill sets into two main categories: stand-up fighting and ground fighting.

Stand-up fighting

Stand-up fighting encompasses all fighting done while standing. Punches, kicks, knee-and-elbow moves, and *takedowns* (moving your opponent to the ground from a standing position) are all a part of stand-up fighting. Some of the fighting styles used in stand-up are western boxing, Muay Thai, and American kickboxing. Part II of this book delves into the various aspects of stand-up fighting.

Ground fighting

Ground fighting consists of engaging from positions like the guard and the mount, strikes from ground-based positions, and *submissions* (obtaining a hold that manipulates your opponent's joints in the hopes that he'll remove himself from the fight due to pain or fear of injury). Two of the fighting styles used in ground fighting are Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and wrestling. Part III of this book introduces you to the ground game.

Setting Training Goals

What do you want to accomplish by practicing MMA? If you look at MMA as a fun way to keep in shape, you'll have different goals than someone who wants to fight in a professional bout. That's perfectly okay, so long as you set goals for yourself.



After you know what you want to accomplish, stay focused in your training by setting small goals each week. Smaller goals are easier to reach, and accomplishing these goals builds self-confidence and feeds your drive to succeed.



If you want to become a professional fighter, focus one week on perfecting a specific submission hold (like those presented in Chapter 9). The next week you can turn your attention to a specific takedown (see Chapter 6), and the week after that you can work on a specific training game (see Chapter 13). If you just want a fun way to stay in shape, you can focus on a goal like the amount of time you can last in a sparring session. Try sparring with a partner for five minutes and build the number of rounds each week.

I cover training — both mental and physical — in Chapters 12 and 13.

The Shamrock Way: The Art of Fighting Is the Art of Living

My fighting philosophy, which I call the *Shamrock Way*, centers on the idea that the art of fighting is the art of living a rich, fulfilled life. A key tenet of the Shamrock Way is that you must be honest with yourself and others. In doing so, you strengthen your spirit and the spirits of those around you.

In addition to being truthful, following the Shamrock Way means you should join a community, serve a greater cause, and embrace humility. Many MMA communities serve the greater cause by working with the community at large. For example, at my schools, I offer training to underprivileged young men and veterans. Often members of my schools run together in marathons benefiting nonprofit organizations.

Being part of an MMA community also teaches you humility. After all, studying MMA means admitting you're not an expert. Humility also comes into play when working with partners. If your partner obtains a submission hold on you, you must respect yourself and your partner by admitting that he has won. Embracing humility allows you to learn at the best of your ability and grow exponentially as a fighter and a person.

The plus sign (+), equal sign (=), and minus sign (–) represent the core of the Shamrock Way: the three people you need to make you the best you can be.

- ✔ The plus sign represents the one person who knows more than you and has better skills in order to teach you what you need to learn.
- ✔ The equal sign represents the one person who has equal knowledge and skill to spar with you.
- ✔ The minus sign represents the one person who knows less than you and can help you test your knowledge.



You can certainly train at MMA on your own, but if you want to grow your skills, training with others and finding a solid MMA community (such as a school or gym) is the best way to go. When searching for that community, be aware of the people training there and see whether they have the potential to be one of these three kinds of people for you. Finding training partners and friends is a rewarding experience for all involved.

The Shamrock Way is derived from Bushido, which means “way of the warrior.” *Bushido* was the ancient code of the samurai; it directed the warriors to live their lives respectfully, honestly, and morally.

Respecting and Sharing Your New Power

Studying and practicing MMA gives you knowledge of dangerous and powerful techniques that most people you encounter won't have. Respect yourself and others by using your new knowledge and skills appropriately and sharing them in the proper venues and situations, as explained in the following sections.

Choosing the right path

You ultimately have to choose whether to use your knowledge and skills for good or for bad. On the good side, you can choose to maintain a healthy lifestyle and share what you know by, say, teaching a family member self-defense techniques. Or you can go down the bad path and act like a bully, intimidate people, and get into bar fights.



If you want to be a true mixed martial artist, don't abuse your knowledge. Instead, show your humility by applying your skills in the right situations, not when you have something to gain.

Treating your body well

How you treat your body directly affects both your MMA training and your life. Always protect your body. When training, wear the right protective gear and work under the supervision of a skilled instructor. Plan a training schedule and stick to it. In your personal life, be sure to eat enough fruits and vegetables, drink enough water, and get enough sleep. Always, always listen to your body and never train if you're feeling tired or hurt. (Flip to Chapter 12 for specific recommendations regarding nutrition, hydration, and rest.)

Getting involved in an MMA community

Being a part of a community is essential, so you should work to find others with similar interests. After all, staying on a desired path is easier when you have friends and supporters by your side. The good news is you can form the foundation for a community with just one other person (although ideally your community should have the three people who can help you be a better person and fighter, as described earlier in this chapter). I provide you with specific tips on finding a good instructor and gym in Chapter 3.

