



Mixed martial arts fighter Tom Vanderhorst, 20, trains at Bedroc Gym in Greece.

It's (almost) time

Mixed martial arts warriors eagerly await vote that could lift a state ban on their sport

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On a recent Monday afternoon, the sounds of emphatic thuds echo off the walls of Bedroc Martial Arts Academy — a dungeon-like facility in the back of Xtreme Fitness, a gym in Greece.

The resounding “oomph” has become commonplace at Bedroc, where 20-year-old Tom Vanderhorst trains seven days a week. Vanderhorst is locked in an intimidating zone as he kicks away at pads. Onlookers can take solace in one comforting fact — it’s not them he’s laying into.

This is just another routine practice for Vanderhorst, an amateur mixed martial arts — or MMA — fighter. Real fights take place in an octagon cage, where, in the coming years, he hopes to spend much of his time. Vanderhorst is on the verge of going pro in a sport that’s widely considered by many, including ESPN, to be the fastest-growing in the world.

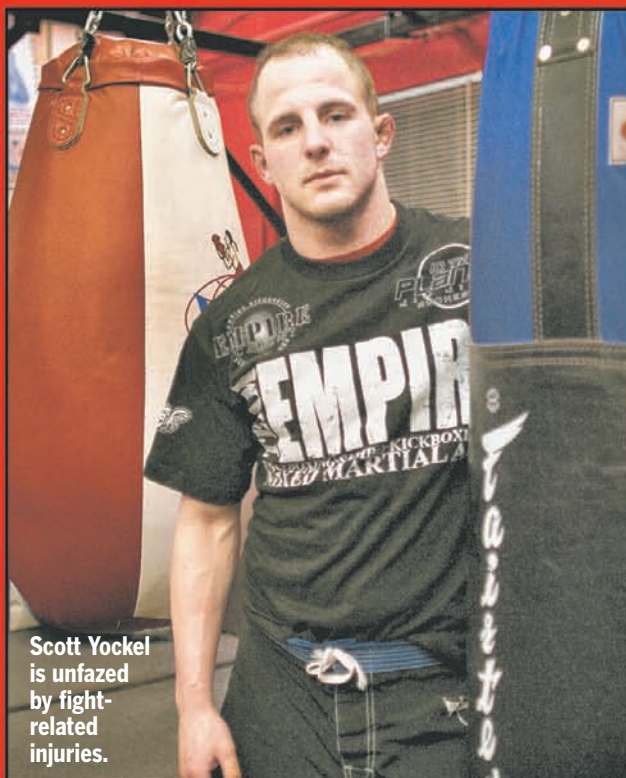
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— Fighter Wally “The Weapon” McDonald



MMA fighter Wally McDonald, 29, throws a punch at MMA fighter Scott Yockel, 25, during a practice session at Empire Academy in Rochester, which McDonald also owns.



Scott Yockel is unfazed by fight-related injuries.

>> from page 17

However, if he wants to fight here, he’ll have to wait. MMA competitions are banned in New York and seven other states that have athletic commissions. So he (and others like him) will have to continue traveling to places like New Jersey and Pennsylvania to compete. Although that may not be the case for long.

UFC representative Julie Wood expects that a proposed bill to lift the ban on MMA in New York state will be put to a vote at the end of this month or in early May. If it passes, there may be no limit to how popular and lucrative MMA could be for fighters and business owners, even amid these harsh economic times.

A study put together by New York City-based HR&A Advisors Inc. estimates that legalized MMA competitions would generate \$16.5 million in economic activity throughout the state — \$4 million of it in upstate.

MMA’s ascent to the mainstream began in January 2005 with the premiere of *The Ultimate Fighting Championship’s* reality show *The Ultimate Fighter* on Spike TV. The UFC is MMA’s leading promotional company/fight league and, thanks to the popularity of *The Ultimate Fighter*, has become to MMA what the NFL is to football.

“As soon as that show hit, MMA was everywhere,” says Bedroc owner Sensei John Farrar, whose academy has grown 30 percent each year since 2005. “It’s to the point now where you go to a bar like Rookies (in Gates) on a UFC night and it’s like, wow — it’s huge.”

In 2006 the UFC surpassed boxing with its pay-per-view take. It was estimated to be worth more than \$1 billion in a *Time* magazine article that same year, and it shows no signs of slowing down. According to Nielsen Media Research, the recent premiere of *The Ultimate Fighter’s* ninth season

(airing at 10 p.m. Wednesdays), drew more men ages 18 to 49 than anything else on cable in its timeslot, including MTV’s *The Real World* and the NBA on ESPN.

The sport’s growth has provided academy owners like Farrar with promising students such as Vanderhorst, who joined Bedroc in August 2007.

“(MMA training) is at the top of my priorities,” says Vanderhorst, adding that his ultimate goal is to fight in the UFC, where top competitors make six-figure incomes. The way things stand, there are no tangible benefits for an amateur fighter like Vanderhorst. There is no money awarded for winning amateur tournaments.

Vanderhorst admits that plenty of people tell him he’s crazy and that he gets lots of confused looks from girls unimpressed by a sport they know little about.

“I can’t play that card at all,” he says with a laugh.



At left, Tom Vanderhorst throws an opponent to the ground during a practice session at Bedroc. Above, Scott Yockel, right, and Wally McDonald (also pictured below) practice at Empire Academy.

Still, that hasn't stopped Vanderhorst. He trains religiously while also attending SUNY Brockport full time and working 16 hours a week at Wegmans. And he's not alone.

Scott Yockel trains at Empire Academy near Cobbs Hill while working full time as a mechanic at Doan Dodge. With just one amateur MMA fight under his belt, the 25-year-old Chili resident is undeterred by concussions, cauliflower ear and recent surgery to remove bone chips from his elbow.

"It's all worth it," he says. "The second your music hits and you get to walk to the ring for that fight, everything stops. There's nothing like it."

Assemblyman Bob Reilly of Albany disagrees. He says that the sport is barbaric and believes that its potential economic benefits are overblown, which is why he worked to defeat a bill in 2008 that also sought to legalize MMA.

"I think we have to reject it just

because of the violence," Reilly says. "I believe it is harmful to the fighters and people in general. We can't tell kids in school not to bully other kids if, in fact, we allow this ultimate fighting."

However, the sport's money-making potential is hard to ignore. In 2008, MMA generated \$3 million in gate revenues, according to the HR&A Advisors study. And Wood says that's only the tip of the iceberg.

"Everyone — from referees, to hotels, to restaurants, to cab companies — is set to benefit from this," she says.

Wood also says that the UFC has already committed to holding at least one event in upstate New York during the first year that MMA is legal.

The benefit for someone like Wally "The Weapon" McDonald could be substantial. McDonald owns Empire Academy, and, at 29, he is in the prime of his professional fighting career. Having MMA fights locally

could give him the big break he's been waiting for, both as a business owner and a fighter.

"That'd be great for us," McDonald says. "When I started fighting, people didn't know what it was. Now you can't even get into the damn bar on a UFC night. The exposure would be great, too. I would definitely love the opportunity to fight in the UFC."

With a record of 4-0 as a professional MMA fighter, he's had almost as many injuries as he's had fights. Two of those injuries were severe. In 2006, McDonald hurt his back so badly that he was sidelined for a year. Recently, he tore two quadriceps.

Yet, he looks forward to his next chance to fight. Maybe it's because of the financial benefits that are seemingly on the horizon. Or perhaps, like a lot of MMA fighters, he's motivated by something else — something he sums up with a boyish grin and three simple words: "I love it." ♦

