

Cage Rage

Paul Buentello is a nice guy from Amarillo, with a wife and two daughters. So why does he like to knock people out? And why did he leave his family to move to San Jose to learn how to do it?

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By Matt Reed

Two nights before his big fight in Las Vegas, Paul Buentello of San Jose steps onto a blue, foam mat in a small conference room in the out-of-the-way basement of the gigantic, gold-colored Mandalay Bay Resort and starts jabbing and punching and kicking.

Lords of the Ring: *Paul Buentello (right) throws a punch at opponent Justin Eilers in their recent Las Vegas Ultimate Fighting showdown.*

Photograph by Rick Pineda



He pops a left, then a right and then a left.

His trainer, David Velasquez, holds a square-shaped punching bag and shouts encouragement: "Come on! Let's go! Come on!" Buentello drops to his knees and hits the bag again. But this time it is right, left, right.

Hip-hop music blares from a small boom box in the corner, and a few fighters and supporters stand along the wall, next to the water cooler and a half-dozen gym bags lying on the carpeted floor.

Buentello and Velasquez stand up again and dance around another trainer and ultimate fighter: Gideon Ray.

Ray kicks, and Buentello punches. The room is just barely big enough for the two of them. Buentello is a heavyweight who likes to knock people out. He stands 6-foot-3 and weighs 240 pounds. He has a goatee and a few scars on his forehead along his eyebrows, but flashes an easy smile and acts with a friendly and polite manner.

Tonight, he is wearing a shirt that says "Puro Mexicano," a nod to his heritage but also an acknowledgement of his hopes to attract a fan following in the homeland of his mother and father.

The day before the fight, known as UFC 51, I find Buentello in the same basement, near the same conference room. He is giving a radio interview to MMA Weekly, a multimedia website that covers ultimate fighting.

"I feel no pressure. I have nothing to lose," he says. "It took me seven years to get here. So I've already won."

Then he adds: "It's easier to be the underdog."

After another question: "A few years ago, I lost three straight fights. I left my family behind in Amarillo to train in California."

After the interview, Buentello heads back into the same room with Velasquez and Ted Lucio, another trainer. But this time there is less of a crowd and Buentello and Velasquez have the blue mat to themselves.



Left, right, left. After a few minutes, Velasquez tells Buentello to rest. He walks off the mat with what sounds like a bad cough. It develops into a dry heave. Then Buentello is red in the face. He spits into a garbage can.

"Must be getting nervous," Lucio says.

After months of intense training, these workouts are meant to keep Buentello's body limber and sharp and his mind focused. A minute later, Buentello walks off the other side of the mat and does the same thing.

"This is normal for me," he explains.

On fight day, in the hours before his big bout, he would throw up more than a dozen times before walking into the arena and entering a black metal cage known as the Octagon to battle without heavy gloves against a man just as big as him.

The Headhunter: *Paul Buentello*

No Biting. No Kicking to the Head. No Timidity.

Buentello's fight took place on Feb. 5, the day before the Super Bowl. There were eight other matches on the card, including one that featured a fighter from Stockton, another that featured a man from Santa Rosa and a heavyweight showdown that pitted a guy from Sacramento against Mike Kyle, a training partner of Buentello's who also lives in San Jose and trains at AKA gym.

The Mandalay Bay had set odds on all of them. During the week before the fights, they were posted on the side of the huge electronic board at the front of the casino's betting room. Buentello is listed as an underdog.

California, apparently, is a main center in the United States for training in ultimate fighting, known more broadly as mixed martial arts. There are gyms all over the Bay Area and Southern California devoted to Brazilian jujitsu, muay Thai and other forms of martial arts.

Buentello and Kyle moved to San Jose several years ago to broaden their fighting game—Buentello has been practicing his wrestling moves at AKA—and to work with Javier Mendez, a former world kickboxing champion.

AKA gym sits in a storefront in a strip mall on Hillsdale Avenue. There's a boxing ring near the windows, large blue mats on the floor, posters of fighters on the wall and punching bags and an open training area in the back. People like Buentello come to AKA because Mendez and his gym have trained more than a dozen mixed martial arts fighters and because they want to compete in the Ultimate Fighting Championship organization.

The first UFC fight event took place in 1994 in Denver, and since then the organization has changed ownership and made itself into the big leagues for mixed martial artists. It stages pay-per-view fight events about once every three months and has drawn a core following, one that is growing now that a reality show, *The Ultimate Fighter*, has hit TV on the Spike network. The reality show features two fighters from AKA: Bobby Southworth, a former UC-Davis point guard, and Mike Swick, a Houston native who has competed in mixed martial arts events in Russia and Thailand.

Followers and fighters are convinced that this is the year that ultimate fighting goes big-time. Traditional boxing is a dying sport, they are saying, and UFC is ready to fill the void. The reality show has given

ultimate fighting more recognition, which promoters hope will send more viewers to watch the pay-per-view fights or to become fighters themselves. And they hope it will spawn more television deals.

This is a big comeback from the late 1990s, when Sen. John McCain waged a successful campaign against the sport. McCain, a boxing fan, was horrified by ultimate fighting, which then had very few rules and sold itself as a kind of blood sport. McCain considered it pure barbarity—a form of human cockfighting. He wrote letters to all 50 state governors and pressured cable companies to stop broadcasting the fights.

Viewership shrank, and the UFC was eventually sold to its current owner, Zuffa LLC of Las Vegas. The company began working on a new set of rules, and in 2001, the Nevada State Athletic Commission approved the sport.

Finger Roll: *Bobby Southworth, originally from Santa Cruz, and now a reality show star.*

Now, ultimate fighting has some structure. There are five weight classes: heavyweight, light heavyweight, middleweight, welterweight and lightweight. The rounds last five minute, with one-minute breaks in between. And the sport now has rules, including:

- No groin attacks of any kind
- No putting a finger into any orifice
- No kicking to the kidney with the heel
- No kicking or kneeing the head of a grounded opponent
- No spiking an opponent to the canvas on his head or neck
- No throwing an opponent out of the ring



Not to mention: no biting, no hair pulling, no spitting and "no using abusive language in the ring or fenced area." Timidity or "avoiding contact with an opponent" is also forbidden. There are 31 rules in all.

People who obsessively follow the sport say that ultimate fighting requires a great amount of skill and technique. Winning is not about who is bigger and tougher, but about who knows the most moves and who can get out of the toughest holds. The sport is not just about putting two dangerous big guys in a cage and seeing who can survive.

For these people, the serious, informed enthusiasts, the ground game is where the most impressive work is done—that's when the two fighters are rolling around on the mat, and sometimes one guy is on top throwing fists and elbows. Sometimes the guy on the bottom knows Russian sambo or Brazilian jujitsu and is working his way into a submission hold, a position that will require his opponent to either give up or risk getting his arm or ankle broken.

But the blood-sport marketing remains, and UFC television ads show basketball star Shaquille O'Neal staring coldly into the camera and intoning that ultimate fighting is about "Grown Men! Begging for Mercy!"

The Cadillac Ranch

When the first UFC fights were broadcast from Denver in 1994, Buentello was watching. He was a bouncer in a bar in Amarillo, Texas, called the Cadillac Ranch. Even though he knew how to handle unruly customers—he had been a regular participant in local street fights during his childhood—Buentello was still thought of as too nice. He was eventually fired.

But the ultimate fighting that he had seen on television intrigued him. He started fighting in local, less-showy events known as tough-man contests. "I did tae kwon do right when I got out of high school," Buentello says. "I didn't do any other sports. I always fought when I was growing up; my two scars are

from being struck on the face with a pipe, and the other is when I fell and my head collided with a car bumper."

He fought at a tough-man contest in Lubbock and won. He fought in San Angelo and in Amarillo, and he continued to win. In the meantime, he married Stacy—one of the managers at the Cadillac Ranch.

After several years of working construction, training on his own and occasionally fighting, Buentello heard about a tournament at an Indian reservation near Fresno. He spent a month training himself, and then rented a car and drove to California with his wife and their new baby.

"I walked into this hotel holding my baby daughter, and everybody was looking at me like, 'Who is this guy?' I guess I don't really look like a fighter. I didn't have a trainer, a manager or a corner man. So I asked my wife to just feed me water in between rounds."

Buentello's first opponent was well known; he had fought a lot of guys, but Buentello knocked him out. Buentello fought again about an hour later against a man who had knocked out his previous opponent in 12 seconds. But Buentello beat him, too.

Buentello was fighting in an old hotel several thousand miles from home, on his own dime, simply because he liked the sport. And he didn't know anyone in Fresno. So he went outside, by himself, to sit on a bench for awhile.

Then he went back in and faced a guy who was about 6-foot-10 and weighed more than 300 pounds. He lost that fight, but his two wins woke him up to a surprising and welcome reality: he could compete with some very tough fighters. And maybe he could fight in one of those Ultimate Fighting Championships that he had watched when he was a bouncer at the Cadillac Ranch.

After Fresno, a promoter called Buentello, and he started fighting regularly. He soon won a championship fight with the IFC (International Fighting Championships), a mixed martial arts organization that has a smaller following than the UFC.

But the word got out that Buentello was susceptible to the ground game. Fighters would wrestle him to the mat and then strangle him. He lost three fights in a row in 2001, all by submission. Buentello liked to stand and slug it out, and he didn't know how to defend himself from fighters who took him down to the canvas.



"I thought, 'I don't know if I can compete with these guys.' But then a woman named Helen Miller approached me about becoming my manager. She thought I had a lot of heart and she told me about Javier [Mendez]."

Up until then, Buentello had trained and managed himself. If a promoter offered a few hundred dollars for a fight, Buentello would accept it without question. He didn't want to leave his family, but Stacy convinced him to go, saying that she didn't want to be blamed down the road for blocking the fulfillment of his dream, which is to fight in the UFC.

He has been renting a house near Oakridge Mall since then, seeing his family in Texas about once a month and doing construction work. The rest of the time, he trains at AKA. He has learned to avoid takedowns. If his opponent gets him down, then Buentello tries to get back up as quickly as possible.

Kick in the Head: *Sparring time at the American Kickboxing Academy includes training in various forms of mixed martial arts fighting.*

Photograph by Felipe Buitrago

"It's been a struggle this whole time. It still is a struggle," he admits. "In November, my rent was late and my landlord warned me about eviction. My fight that month was a must-win."

Typically, Buentello fights every few months and earns about \$3,000 or \$4,000 each time. Meanwhile, his wife works as a paralegal in Amarillo. His fight in Las Vegas earlier this month paid \$8,000.



Just Say Rope: *Former world kickboxing champ Javier Mendez attracts fighters from all over the country to train at his San Jose gym.*

Photograph by Felipe Buitrago

Walking around the Mandalay Bay in the days before the fight, Buentello says several times over, to anyone who asks: "I didn't think it would take seven years to get here."

The Show

In the early afternoon before the fight, Buentello, Velasquez, Lucio and Buentello's wife, Stacy, leave Buentello's hotel room and quietly ride the elevator down 14 floors. They walk out into a crowded lobby, greet a few friends and then walk through the brightly lit casino.

They have to skirt the edges of the slot machines and blackjack tables, walking on crowded, softly carpeted pathways filled with tourists, shoppers and show-goers. Not everyone who comes to Las Vegas these days is here to gamble, but there are plenty of gamblers at the tables, and for the most part, they are well dressed and respectable.

A constant hum of noise springs from the tables and slots, as well as from the nightclub, built on the other side of the casino in the form of an island. Trees and plants and running water have been placed throughout the Mandalay, giving it a South Seas theme. It is a way to convince customers that Las Vegas isn't just about gambling—it's about entertainment.

Elsewhere in the hotel, zebra sharks, bonnet head sharks, and black-tipped reef sharks glide through an aquarium. Outside, a wave machine is set up to generate endless breakers for bathers at a man-made beach.

Buentello and crew pass by neatly decorated buffet restaurants with lines winding out the entrance and to the edges of the casino. They walk on the carpet and then on marble as they pass four-star restaurants with wine racks that climb to the high ceiling.

Large signs direct customers to the conference center, the theater, the restaurants, the shopping mall and the hotel. Other ultimate fighters walk through the Mandalay, and they identify themselves not necessarily by their athleticism but by their black-colored T-shirts that advertise a martial arts gym or say things like "Phreek."

In the hallway, Buentello stops to sign a few autographs. He poses in a fighting stance for photographs. "It happens sometimes. After tonight, it's going to happen more and more. He'll come into his own. People are going to recognize him," Lucio says.

The Calm Before the Storm: Justin Eilers (left) and Buentello square up for photographs the day before the fight.

Buentello heads downstairs into the basement conference center—the same place where he has been training. He holds his wife's hand and asks UFC officials about finding an extra pass for her. He gives another interview, this time in Spanish: "For all the MMA fans in Mexico, Texas and the United States, watch this fight. I'm going to hit this guy very hard. This white boy don't have anything for me."



The white guy is Justin Eilers, and he is just as big as Buentello and apparently just as nice. Earlier in the week, the two men came across each other in the lobby. They said hello, shook hands and wished each other good luck. Their fight will be the fifth of the night.

Back in his room, Buentello turns off the lights and tries to sleep for a few hours. At the arena, workers set up the Octagon and the flashing overhead lights. They clean up after the previous night's event—a Tim McGraw concert. And they test the video screens and the audio system. Shaquille O'Neal's ominous voice blares and brawling highlights from previous fights are repeated over and over.

Just after 4pm, the first fight begins, and fans start trickling into the arena. All the showy aspects of both boxing and big-time wrestling are combined: blaring heavy metal, flashing lights, celebrities at ringside, gorgeous girls in bikinis carrying placards announcing the next round. Several hours later, when it is time for Buentello to fight, most seats are full. They roar when Buentello and Eilers start throwing punches, and they roar again when Buentello catches his opponent with a right and drops him.

Just like that, after years of training, a move across the country, 17 wins and seven losses and several recent hours of vomiting, Buentello had achieved his dream. "I was on a stage that I can't imagine. And I performed. I exceeded my expectations. Twelve thousand people were watching me. That was my three minutes of fame."

In a sport that plans to go big-time this year and attract more fans, Buentello hopes to ride along with it. "It's all about business now. My paydays could skyrocket to \$20,000 a fight," he says. "I could sign up again with UFC or I might go fight in Japan. I'm passport-ready."

The day after the fight, Buentello toured the casinos. He walked up one side of the Strip, then down the other, stopping off at each of the mammoth casinos. There's the one modeled after the medieval castle, the one that is supposed to be a mini-New York and another that replicates Paris. There's an Egyptian pyramid and a Treasure Island, where two groups of pirates stage sea battles throughout the day.

Buentello and his crew stopped at each of them. At one casino, Buentello won \$500 playing Keno. They moved on and played roulette and craps at other casinos, and Buentello continued to win.

At the end of the night, he was up \$650, putting him well ahead of the majority of Las Vegas visitors who fly in for an average of three days, spend and gamble away several thousand dollars, and then leave it behind, chalking it all up to a good time. But when Paul Buentello boarded a plane to San Jose on Monday, two days after his knockout win, he could look back and say that he was leaving Las Vegas a winner.

"I had a great weekend," he said.

~The End~