



[PRINT]

ESPN.com: Mixed Martial Arts

[[Print without images](#)]



Tuesday, December 18, 2007

Updated: December 19, 1:59 PM ET

## Women fighters carving their own niche in MMA

By Michael Woods  
Special to ESPN.com

Mixed martial arts can be an acquired taste, and the sight of one man sitting astride another, raining blows down on his opponent's face, isn't for everybody.

Even those who can see the scientific aspects to



Felice Herrig, right, hopes that fighting helps open doors into other career platforms.

boxing sometimes find the sight of a well-executed ground-and-pound session too gritty for their taste.

Those who can't stomach two men engaging in such fierce combat are even less likely to accept the concept of two women trading bombs and getting their faces rearranged.

But there is a large, ever-growing contingent of women who have gravitated to MMA. The runaway leader in the sport, UFC, hasn't latched on to the concept. But that hasn't dissuaded New Jersey's Tara LaRosa, a 29-year-old who excelled in field hockey at Catawba College, from amassing a 15-1 mark since turning professional in 2002.

Her reputation as a well-rounded practitioner of all facets of the sport, with a penchant for closing the show with an expertly applied submission, has elevated her into the highest ranks of females blazing the MMA trail.

The seed for her MMA career was planted when LaRosa saw scrawny Royce Gracie have his way with the jacked up Ken Shamrock in 1993. LaRosa didn't dive head-first into MMA then; she did the field hockey thing, and also picked up judo in college. Gracie's edge in technique remained in the back of her mind, and after graduating in 2004, LaRosa dove into MMA.

LaRosa trains at the Philadelphia Fight Factory, and proudly counts herself as the sole female in the crew of

a dozen male mixed martial artists.

"That's not unusual for females in this sport," she explains to ESPN.com. "That's usually been the case wherever I've trained. The first day you come in, they usually want to test you. They put me in with a guy that's notorious for going balls out, for not pulling punches. If I didn't complain, I was good. I didn't."

That toughness, in mind as well as body, came into play this summer, when the unfathomable occurred. LaRosa's boyfriend of two years, Sgt. Adrian Elizalde, was killed by an improvised explosive device near Baghdad. The truck he was in was struck on Aug. 23. He was just 30.



Tara LaRosa, right, is the one female in a crew of twelve mixed martial artists at the Philadelphia Fight Factory.

LaRosa was in Vancouver, doing some promotional work for Bodog. Elizalde's family called her on her cell phone and broke the tragic news.

"I lost it," she says.

Elizalde and LaRosa had met when she was an instructor in modern army combat in Fayetteville, N.C.

Was it love at first sight?

"It grew," she said with a laugh. "He taught me, I taught him."

Elizalde was due to return from his tour in October.

"He was going to propose," LaRosa says, her voice trailing off, her mind drifting perhaps to the little house with the swing on the porch she had pictured.

Her fighting career hasn't been derailed. LaRosa is now mulling her next step, as she continues the grieving process, continues to fight the black cloud that descends when she hears a song that reminds her of Elizalde, or she runs through a move during grappling that he specialized in.

Her Bodog contract is up Dec. 24, and she might re-sign with the organization or hook up with Showtime's EliteXC.

With the explosion of MMA the past several years, athletes like LaRosa, who previously hadn't been able to pursue their passion after college because of the lack of a viable revenue stream, are now able to chase their dreams.

With UFC the undeniable king of the MMA hill, other outfits have been cropping up, looking to establish a niche and make their mark. Elite XC, ProElite, the International Fight League (IFL), World Extreme Cagefighting, Bodog Fight, Spirit XC, Strikeforce and M1 are all looking to grow their niche, and employ various strategies to differentiate themselves. Since UFC chooses not to present female bouts, other organizations have tried to fill that vacuum.

Augie Schumatti wrestled in college and felt the urge to compete after he graduated from Arizona State in 1990. He has been riding the MMA popularity wave with a Web site, MMAWoman.com. The site has

attracted more than 400 women who have indicated that they want to take part in an MMA event, amateur or pro. Schumatti, who lives in New Jersey and has worked as a publisher of business directories, has signed up 50 female fighters. He hooks up fighters with promoters coast-to-coast who desire the presence of women on their card.

"I set up the Web site to help fighters earn a living in a sport they love so much," Schumatti tells ESPN.com. "I had found that there were a lot of wrestlers, who were capable, UFC-level fighters, out there. We do everything from helping fighters set up and promote their academies to helping them strategize for asking for larger purses and structure their events. We also protect fighters from dubious contracts presented by suspect promoters as the number of promoters in the U.S. keeps growing."

His site launched in May and gets around 8,000 unique visitors a month.

Although no female fighter has broken the bank as of yet, there is a march toward purse parity. When a fighter hooks on with Schumatti's collective, they can expect to get paid between \$1,500 and \$3,000 per appearance on a card. The fighter will pay out between 10-30 percent of the purse to Schumatti, he says.

He doesn't deny that attractiveness can go a long way in building a brand as a female fighter. Witness the sharp ascent of Gina Carano. The EliteXC fighter with a 5-0 record has parlayed her pleasant package of aesthetic facial symmetry, and her above-average genetic package (her dad, Glenn, played QB for the Dallas Cowboys from 1977-83) into a gig on the new version of "American Gladiators," which debuts on NBC in January. Carano will take on the moniker "Crush" for the midseason network offering.

"Physical features don't hurt, they help," said Schumatti, when asked about the elevation of fighters who might look more like an NFL cheerleader than combatant on first glance. "Talent combined with physical attractiveness can make for a dynamic character. On Spike's 'The Ultimate Fighter' show, how many guys that look the same can they shove down our throats? That show's the Trojan horse of MMA. Women's MMA is very dynamic, and it will draw viewership."

Felice Herrig has boxed, kickboxed and done Thai boxing on the Oxygen series "Fight Girls." The 23-year-old Illinois resident is planning to make her MMA debut (she hopes to do so with EliteXC) in the summer. Meanwhile, she's hooked on with Chuck Norris' World Combat League to keep her kickboxing skills in shape. Herrig acknowledges that looks do play a part in the growth of a female mixed martial artist's career prospects.

"The looks thing works to my benefit," she says. "The female athletes that get the most recognition are the best-looking ones. I do want to set aside the stereotype that you can't have the whole package. People don't think that an attractive woman would be a good fighter. Usually good-looking fighters don't fight as well, that's what I'm going for."

Herrig knows her shelf life as an active fighter is limited, so she wants to branch out, fairly quickly, and use the buzz from the fighting to get into films, or TV commentary. "I love fighting, though, and will fight as long as I can," she says.

Is there a chance we'll see Herrig or LaRosa in a UFC Octagon any time soon?

Don't count on it, says Dana White.

In an interview with Primit Mohapatra of the Baltimore Sun in January 2007, White mentioned he had

no plans of adding female fighters to his promotion.

"I'm not a huge fan of women fighting," he said. "Not to say that I don't acknowledge that there are amazing female athletes out there in every sport; I just think right now we had a hard enough time getting over the stigma of the men [fighting]."

Schumatti points to the recent appearance of two rising mixed martial artists, Lisa Ward and Lisa King, on NBC's "Today Show," as evidence that the female fighter wave is cresting. The fighters, from the Fatal Femmes Fighting stable out of California, gave a fight demo on Nov. 11, and FFF got a mention in a Time magazine piece in July. "It's just like any other sport," he says. "It's only a matter of time before it stands on its own."

Schumatti points to the inclusion of women's wrestling in the 2004 Olympics as a measure of acceptance for the public in being able to digest the sight of two women engaging in ferocious combat. "I don't believe there's any delineation between men and women," he said. "I've gotten my tail kicked by a woman in a gym five years during an MMA session!"

LaRosa, meanwhile, struggles with the current dynamic that places nearly equal emphasis on looks and skills. As she continues to grapple with her stance on the premium of looks over skills in the fighting female sphere, at least she can take some solace in her rising purses.

LaRosa's skills have certainly been opening eyes. She won't disclose her exact purses, but says she'll make between \$15,000-\$25,000 per fight, and aims to fight four times a year. No, it's not Chuck Liddell money, but it's full-time pay, and that's definite progress, for males and females alike.

"I represent the common folk," LaRosa says. "I'm a common chick, not a stellar athlete, who shows that anybody can do it. I want people to watch me and say, 'Wow, that girl is good,' as opposed to, 'Wow, that girl is hot but her ground game stinks.' On the looks thing, unfortunately, that's the way society can be. I'm not the quintessential hot chick, but I bring a skill set. I'm not going to get implants to impress people."

*Michael Woods, the managing editor for TheSweetScience.com, has written for ESPN The Magazine, GQ and The New York Observer.*

---

[ESPN.com: Help](#) | [PR Media Kit](#) | [Sales Media Kit](#) | [Report a Bug](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [News Archive](#) | [Site Map](#) | [ESPN Shop](#) | [Jobs at ESPN](#) | [Supplier Information](#)

©2008 ESPN Internet Ventures. [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy and Safety Information/Your California Privacy Rights](#) are applicable to you. All rights reserved.