

Clarke relies on skill, instead of gimmicks

Soft-spoken Edmontonian defies fighter stereotypes

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EDMONTON -- Mitch Clarke knows he isn't your typical mixed martial arts fighter.

If you've seen the 24-year-old Edmonton product in action, you've already been tipped off as well. That is, if you can remember who he is.

"Everyone needs a gimmick to kind of come into the forefront," he said. "I don't really have one, probably because I've got my crappy dry humour and that's it."

Clarke's fighting non-persona isn't his fault. The five-foot-10, 170-pounder doesn't make any efforts to play up the MMA fighter image. He takes his entrance music -- the song that plays as he makes his way to the cage to fight -- as a chance to make his friends in the crowd laugh.

"I usually come out to something different every time," he explained. When fighting Paul Grandbois in Lloydminster in March of last year, Clarke used the entrance music of 1990s WWF star the Ultimate Warrior.

"I've used The Safety Dance, by Men Without Hats," he said. "I like music that's not going to get me amped up, because I'm very calm, or at least that's the plan."

"I used a really, really old reggae song called Liquidator (by The Harry J All Stars) and it's used with an organ, mostly and man, did it bomb. It just bombed so bad," he said, laughing.

"There was an eerie silence in the crowd and the only people laughing were my friends."

"The point is, I'm not a stereotype of fighters. This time I'll probably have something a little better. Maybe some Hall and Oates."

While you could pass Clarke on the street and never think he was a fighter, he's proven himself in the ring. Something of a submission specialist, he's a perfect 7-0 since his first fight in 2007. Tonight at The Fight Club's Full Force card, he'll battle for the TFC Canadian Lightweight Championship against Red Deer's Josh Machan (7-3).

"(He's) pretty well-rounded, decent boxing fundamentals, OK wrestling, good ju-jitsu," Clarke said of Machan. "The thing is, he's always looking to finish with his ju-jitsu and I appreciate that because I'm the same way. I've been to decision once and I hated it."

A wrestler before he took up MMA, Clarke grappled for the University of Saskatchewan while he completed a degree in environmental sciences. He knew his wrestling experience would give him an

edge in the sport that he had come to love. He said watching the Ultimate Ultimate in 1996 gave him his first MMA hero in wrestler Don Frye.

Convincing his family that he'd excel in the physically brutal sport was a tough sell.

"They were not impressed. Definitely not impressed, not happy," he recalled.

"The big thing was, they're really protective. I'm not a very ... aggressive guy, or angry or anything like that, so it was very out of character too.

"I remember one of my aunts, she was like, 'Why are you doing this? You're an intelligent, soft-spoken guy. This isn't for you.' I think that's what's made me the fighter I am."

Shara Vigeant, Clarke's strength and conditioning coach, said that his work ethic and heart set him apart from other fighters.

"You can't teach that kind of stuff. I have other guys that are in other fights that I have to try and teach them work ethic," she said.

"You have to teach them the no-pain, no-gain thing and they don't get it.

Clarke said summers spent on farms taught him work ethic early. Knowing that he has so many trainers, coaches and sponsors backing him up, he said, keeps him motivated as well.

"I tore my patella tendon before one fight and I still fought. I knew I had to fight, because there are so many people that believe in me," he said.

"I don't fight out of anger or hatred or wanting to hurt people. I want to show the people around me that the sacrifices they make are worth it."

Vigeant has been most impressed by Clarke's patience. He aims to be a top-five lightweight fighter in Canada and dreams of fighting for the Ultimate Fighting Championship, World Extreme Cagefighting, or taking his talents to Japan, where submission artists are celebrated.

"That's my biggest impression of Mitch is that he's doing everything the smart way, not the quick and easy way and that's the difference," Vigeant said.