



Boxer overlooks Rio de Janeiro.

Journey of Vale Tudo

Photos and story by Tate Zandstra

**Editor Note: To differentiate between styles, the spelling “jujitsu” is for Japan and “jiu-jitsu” is for Brazil.*

Only the brightest stars pierce the orange, neon-tinged dome of Rio de Janeiro sky. There are fights tonight. A bank of dark clouds scuds off the Atlantic to drop sheets of rain, which sizzle off the scorched pavements of the city. Bottlenecked rush hour traffic labors in the flooded streets, but the fans won't be stopped. In the depths of Flamengo Stadium, close to the oil-stained bay, fighters tape up and chant their private mantras. The crowd waits and the cage waits for the glory and the violence of a Brazilian tradition known as *vale tudo*. Anything goes. Only the brightest stars will pierce the pall of anonymity of being just another fighter.

One local *lutador* (fighter) has agreed to be my guide through the rough world of Brazilian mixed martial arts. I wanted to visit the places where the sport of vale tudo (translated as “anything goes”) evolved from a Brazilian fighting tradition into a worldwide sports phenomenon, and to personally observe the lives of the participants who are the sport's attraction.

Aloisio “Dado” Barros is 34 now, and though he has met with moderate success, fighting several times in Japan, he is still chasing the big hit. His brother, Baixinho, fought last year in the UFC, but lost to Martin Kampmann in Dublin. Three

fights, his manager has told him, will give him a redemptive shot at the UFC once again. Currently he has won two.

Growing up poor, but surrounded by the faded glory and persistent decadence of Rio's Copacabana neighborhood, Dado made a Faustian deal he can't go back on; he has no higher education, no work experience and no fallback plan. He only bestows the skills garnered from nearly two decades as a fighter in this impoverished, crime-ridden city where the sport began. He is a freelancer in a community where allegiance to a specific gym is the norm; Dado takes his training from as

many specialists in as many places as he can, looking for an edge.

Brazilian fighters come from all social strata, noted fighter-turned promoter Cariao Barreto says; some stem from the desperate poverty and violence of the hillside slums called *favelas*, controlled by violent drug gangs. Others come from Rio de Janeiro's privileged neighborhoods, where shooting steroids and rolling jiu-jitsu go with waxing eyebrows and tanning on the beach. They are all chasing the same

electricity, and hopefully order to the violent and chaotic lives of the inhabitants, attempting to clean up before the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics brings the closer scrutiny of world opinion. A year ago, Dado says, it was very dangerous to come here; you would pass drug gang soldiers with machine guns. Now you only pass soldiers of the elite gang crime division BOPE, dressed in battle gear and carrying machine guns, patched with the *Faca e Caveira* symbol, a skull with crossed pistols, a dagger piercing the

around the ring with grace and science befuddling the slow, lumbering MMA guys, most of them based firmly in Brazilian jiu-jitsu. The MMA fighters eat the punches; it's good for them. They plod forward, undoubtedly believing that were it a real encounter, they would catch the boxer, drag him down, and finish him easily on the ground. "Punching is hard for me," says Dado, a luta livre stylist (street style of BJJ). "In my mind, I know I can always kick; leg kick, head kick, or takedown, but the punching...it's hard."



The fight ending armbar.

dream: a fat contract with a big US production, and the fame and glory attendant. The time has never been better; MMA continues to grow in the U.S. and the world, outpacing long-established combat sports like professional boxing in profit and popularity.

The steep road to Nobre Arte (noble art) boxing gym winds upward through narrow, brick-paved streets in one of Rio's many slums. The city is pumping money into the slums these days, bringing water,

crown. (UFC fighter Paulo Thiago is a current member of this elite squad.)

Nobre Arte itself sits atop of the slum with a clear view of the famous Rio skyline. It has the rancid smell of a classic boxing gym with a battered ring and old fight cards pasted to the peeling walls. Here local boxers and MMA fighters meet in the evenings to square off, training by pummeling each other.

The boxers are easy to spot; they glide

Dado's career began in his teens, training under local legends Marco Ruas and Pedro Rizzo. Given the chance to kick, he is dangerous, but notoriety has its price, as Dado's opponents have seen him fight over the last decade or so, and know what to look for.

Dado, like so many other fighters, cobbles together an existence training housewives and wannabes in Rio's expensive gyms and working bouncing shifts here and there. Sponsorships take many forms: free

Dado trying to finish with ground and pound.



food at one restaurant, a bit of cash here and supplements there. It's a tenuous lifestyle, but for many, it gets them by.

Dado, attaching his name nominally to Gracie Barra, in fact does his training at a wide variety of gyms. His days usually begin about 6 AM with a quick, scalding coffee; he's off into the chaotic Rio traffic on his motorcycle to train a client. Then it's onto wrestling practice, followed by lunch and jiu-jitsu. He will end his day boxing. The training schedule is grueling; often Dado spends twelve or more hours a day, six days a week, training himself between clients. The schedule takes a toll. "I have never fought at 100%. With many years punching, kicking and grappling, it hurts to get out of bed everyday." When I arrive, he is hurting from an elbow injury suffered in a submission tournament a couple weeks prior. Barely escaping an armbar in the first match, Dado was able to go on to win the tournament, but paid a price.

Forbes magazine reported that in 2008, the Ultimate Fighting Championship would net total revenue of around \$250 million, about 90% of the MMA market share. In 2009, despite the frigid economic conditions experienced around the world, the UFC barely stuttered.

The story of how the current MMA juggernaut has emerged from an obscure martial art devised in Japan's feudal era has taken on the thoroughly rehearsed quality of legend.

MMA, as it is now known throughout the world, evolved from vale tudo. Vale tudo itself evolved from a swirling burst of challenges among streetfighters, *capoeiristas*, karate practitioners, Brazilian jiu-jitsu stylists and their relative counterparts in *luta livre*, all bringing to the fight whatever they had.

Before all that, however, there was Jigoro Kano, who founded the Kodokan in Tokyo, yet today the ultimate judo training grounds, after having studied the dominant styles of Japanese martial arts. He made the training more aggressive and dispensed with ornamental techniques. Kodokan Judo defeated all challengers for years and seemed to be the invincible leader of all Japanese martial arts, until a lone wolf happened

in the door one day and challenged anyone in the school to a fight. Mataemon Tanabe, the jujitsu master, exposed a fatal weakness in judo; it was outdated. The heavy armor of the Samurai was no longer; throws and sweeps could only put an enemy on the ground, but alone could not defeat him.

Kano humbly invited the jujitsu master to teach at the Kodokan, and the seed for modern jiu-jitsu as we see today was planted.

resented the art that burst onto the collective consciousness in the Ultimate Fighting Championship.

“The greatest thing that Helio Gracie gave us is the core defense system,” says Sylvio Behring, Vice President of the Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Federation, himself a 7th Grau Black Belt, and the BJJ trainer to Anderson Silva. “If a guy is bigger, Gracie figured, when the fight goes to the ground, he will probably land on top, so how do you defend yourself?” The answer for Gracie,

Royce did; he could outlast them, then it’s a matter of conditioning, and he could fight for an hour easy.”

“So, these guys would go home and think ‘Why did I lose?’” Sylvio says. Royce’s early opponents would get ground training wherever they could, then come back, still bigger, still with a much more powerful punch, and with a clue how to avoid the BJJ traps. “And that,” says Sylvio, “is when it got hard for Royce to continue.” That is when the MMA arms race began.



Dado icing his injured elbow.

It was a young Mitsuyo Maeda however, who, after being admitted to train at the Kodokan, became the Japanese champion both in judo and jujitsu. Maeda traveled the world for competition and eventually ended up in Brazil early in the 20th century. There he took on crafting of brothers Helio and Carlos Gracie, the progenitors of “Gracie” or simply “Brazilian” jiu-jitsu. Training for years under Maeda, Carlos eventually opened his own school, and BJJ was set on its course to revolutionize fighting throughout the world. After decades of seclusion in Brazil, Helio’s son Royce Gracie rep-

slight of build, and constantly struggling with his health, was the flat on the back position we now call the guard. Using the legs to contain the opponent, a skilled jiu-jitsu fighter can end a fight innumerable ways, but even a beginner can protect himself.

That was Royce’s strategy way back in the early nineties when the renegade UFC struggled to find venues and employed very minimal rules by which a smaller fighter could defeat a bigger, stronger opponent. “I can’t beat you, but you can’t beat me,” Behring says. “That’s what

“You can’t mix boxing and jiu-jitsu,” says Behring, “Nothing is pure. If you want to get in (grappling range), train a little boxing, a little Muay Thai, then you get the rhythm; don’t play his game though. If I can’t punch, why take that gamble?” Behring says of the variety of skills needed to compete in modern MMA. “That’s a mistake a lot of guys make.”

The UFC however was not the originator of what we today call MMA. Helio and Carlos Gracie are gone, but there is one man left who lived through those early years when the now famous “Gracie

Challenge” was an open invitation, declared loudly and publicly, to fight given any style or size, to see who was better, which art was superior.

“He was on the front line in those days,” Sylvio Behring says. “You could fight Helio, Carlos, or Barreto; he is a warrior.” Master Joao Alberto Barreto most famously fought on the weekly Brazilian television show *Ring Heroes*, compiling 15 fights and 15 victories in one year.

“I was a vale tudo fighter; I fought luta livre, capoeira, judo... anyone, everyone,” Mestre Joao Barreto says from his massive art deco loft on Ipanema beach. He was one of the early Brazilian jiu-jitsu fighters alongside the Gracie brothers.



Dado boxing at Nobre Arte.

The idea for *Ring Heroes* itself was not original, Joao says. According to him, Carlson started off in the '50's by fighting capoeira guys around Rio. “Nothing organized, just challenges.” Then there was a catastrophic flood, and the Gracie's decided to hold a tournament where the proceeds would help repair the damage. They did well, and as the idea of tournaments grew, soon they were promoting fights for money; the *Ring Heroes* concept was born the following decade.

Like the UFC, *Ring Heroes* was a hit, and one of the most popular shows on Brazilian TV while it lasted. “That last fight on the show, I had this guy in the

Kimura and broke his arm.” Barreto says the media was against the show from the beginning because the violence was too real. “There were no gloves, very common broken hands... faces.”

Following the demise of *Ring Heroes*, Barreto went on to become involved in promoting and reffing fights. He refereed the first UFC, Royce Gracie's debut.

Little has changed in Rio. Even as the world cautiously embraces MMA as a mainstream sport, in the favelas, on the beaches, in sweaty back alley gyms, guys gather to fight. But, says Sylvio Behring, don't call it MMA. “MMA is an American marketing misrepresentation... vale tudo, it's 100% Brazilian right? They didn't

want to give us credit.”

“This generation will die,” Sylvio says soberly, “And what we will have is a generation of very precise fighters... warriors. It is coming.”

“Brazilians constantly evolve,” Carla Barreto says over hot Brazilian café overlooking the white sand stretch of Copacabana beach. “That works? They say, ‘Show me that!’” He says the creativity of Japanese jujitsu dojos remains shackled by traditional training practices. “So we have purple belts here going to Japan and teaching the masters!”

Barreto knows the fight game; as a

Brazilian jiu-jitsu black belt and former UFC competitor, he earned the moniker “Joe Rogan of Rio” and has become one of Rio's leading fight promoters. “All my friends have moved... Las Vegas... LA,” Carla says of the pull of higher paydays in the US on top Brazilian fighters. “I think in ten years, America will be the best in the world at BJJ.”

“Afraid?” he says, when asked if Dado is, about his fight. His face screws up in an expression of perplexity, as though grappling with philosophy. “No” he says finally, and continues hanging clothes to dry in the stifling heat of his small apartment. His fight approaching quickly, Dado is perpetually training, and perpetually in therapy, applying ice after every workout to battered joints.

Dado has prepared himself in his own way, as best he can, to fight a young, skilled, strong opponent who like himself, is hungry for the victory. Dado has an odd charisma; he has a huge jaw, a thick brow. He is compact and heavily muscled; his nickname “Dado” (meaning square head) was given to him by his grandmother. Whether by the mystique of his lifestyle or for his humorous, sometimes coarse personality, people are attracted to him.

From the opening bell Dado attacks. He puts his opponent down twice, physically throwing him to the ground, but presses too hard and nearly loses his back to the *mata leão*, the strangle we call “rear naked choke,” but which the Brazilians call “kill the lion.”

Twisting like a crocodile on a rope, Dado manages to escape, and from the guard pummels his enemy's face and body. From inches away, the shots have a dull echo. I can hear the impact on the ribs, like a kicked soccer ball, and on the head, the sound of flesh on flesh, bone striking bone, which is unmistakable. Alas, the first five minute round closes with the fight undecided.

A brief rest and the fighters rise, their corner men, in Dado's case being Gustavo Ximu and Jefferson Moura, leader of Gracie Barra, melting away. The trap door swings shut and Dado

kicks high, looking for a kill, but is backed up, sprawling and reversing his opponent's attempted takedown. On top once again, in the guard, Dado looks menacing and dominant, opening cuts over both the man's eyes. It is a primal position really; one man atop another, leaning his weight down to pin the enemy, punching at any vulnerable target. I think of Sylvio Behring quickly, his belief in Helio's system, and then look at Dado, strong and fierce, systematically beating his opponent until he can't take any more. Just inches from the action, I am in doubt.

That's when it happens. The guy on the bottom, the one with the bleeding face, catches Dado's arm as his pace begins to slow. Fatefully, it is the left arm, the injured one. As Dado shifts his weight and begins to power out of the armbar, his weakened elbow gives, his face goes white, and he is left gasping; the loser of the fight.

Had it been his right arm, I think he would have escaped. I've seen it before. Did the opponent know? Did he sense the weakness there? Dado goes to the locker room, devastated. For long, gritty weeks he has poured every ounce of power and energy into training for this event, over in around seven minutes. Briefly he speaks to his brother. What is said I never know, but when he turns to me, Dado says "I am so sorry, man" as though he were obligated to win for sake of this article.

Baixinho steps into the cage against a man outweighing him by over 20 pounds. He puts the big fighter down in seconds, but can't hold him there, and decides to back off, committing a transgression of one of the sport's primary laws: never back up straight.

Baixinho doesn't even see the kick which leaves him sprawled, unconscious, for a long 60 seconds.

What next for the brothers? It's simple; they look for the next fight, the next payday. Maybe Baixinho will still have his shot at the UFC. Dado awaits word from the embassy regarding his application for a US visa. He wants to go work with Renato Babalu Sobral in LA, teaching and looking for that one big fight.



Kids jiu-jitsu looking on.



Lagoa with Sugarloaf Mountain.