

# the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

## Fight Camp

With Ryan Parsons and Dan Henderson

Becca Borawski



Trainer Ryan Parsons looks on while Dan Henderson and Chael Sonnen spar. Photo courtesy of Team Quest.

Becca Borawski talks with a trainer who's been working with MMA fighters and world class wrestlers for decades, about how he incorporates strength and conditioning work with skills training and how he peaks and tapers training leading up to a fight.

Ideally, when preparing for a mixed martial arts (MMA) fight, an individual would like to have eight to ten weeks of preparation, a period known as a "fight camp." Frequently, however, for younger competitors fighting in smaller organizations, or even a fighter the level of current Pride Welterweight champion Dan Henderson, fights can come up with as little as three to six weeks notice.

A fight camp, regardless of length, consists of three elements of training: skill, strength, and conditioning. How often do you see skilled fighters "gassed" halfway through a fight and left unable to execute their well-honed techniques? Or see fighters with great muscular and cardiovascular endurance but only rudimentary skills to pair with it? All three elements must be trained, but this must be done in such a way that the athlete is

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not overtrained by the time of the fight.

CrossFit is particularly suited to athletes training for mixed martial arts, kickboxing, Brazilian Jiu-jitsu, and other combat sports. CrossFit combines strength and conditioning in full-body functional movements, can be scaled to varying intensities, and is efficient in nature. For a martial artist trying to incorporate skill training and sparring into his schedule, in addition to strength and conditioning, this efficiency is essential.

The changes in intensity within a workout, the constantly shifting nature of the demands placed on the body, and the emphasis on power and functional movement patterns in CrossFit also parallel the types of demands made on an athlete during an MMA fight. There is no sense spending hours a week running long distances in attempt to build endurance when the intensity levels and requirements on the body have no relation to the sport.

At Dan Henderson's Team Quest gym in Temecula, California, fighters train with CrossFit-style workouts and have successfully incorporated them into their MMA fight camps. Ryan Parsons, a chiropractor and peak performance coach who heads up Henderson's fight camps, states, "When we're in the middle of a training camp, I like to combine strength and conditioning training and cardio into one workout. It saves time and gives the athlete a more realistic feel for what they will be doing in the ring."

At the beginning of a fight camp, workouts are longer in duration and lower in intensity. As the event approaches, the workouts get shorter while intensity continues to rise. The actual number of workouts per day and per week will vary with each athlete. Older athletes or those working around injuries may have fewer workouts scheduled to allow for more recovery time.

When scheduling workouts, take into account the time of day of the actual fight. As the fight camp progresses and the fight gets closer, the athlete should be accustomed to peaking physically and mentally at the appropriate time of day.

In general, Parsons's fight camps often include two workouts a day, three to five days of the week. Two of those days will include hard sparring workouts with 16-ounce gloves. Other days might include lighter sparring, using the smaller MMA style gloves. Three days a week is the typical allotment for strength and conditioning workouts.

The focus of the workouts during fight camp varies. Someone with a high level of conditioning may spend more time on skill work, or vice versa. Beginner athletes will require more time on skill training than a more experienced fighter. Skill training is important because it is the repetition of movements that increases the likelihood of successful execution when under the stress of the actual fight. More experienced fighters will have the luxury of spending time on strategy.

The only major difference between a fight camp for MMA, versus BJJ or any other combat sport, is the skill training element. BJJ competitors would need wrestling and jiu-jitsu skill training, whereas MMA athletes would require work on additional skills, such as using striking to set up takedowns, ground and pound techniques, and boxing and kickboxing skills in general. And, whenever fight moves are inserted into strength and conditioning workouts, they will be sport-specific skills. For example, a jiu-jitsu practitioner would not bother with kicking during conditioning drills but instead might incorporate sprawls.

The time format of the classic CrossFit workout "Fight Gone Bad" (designed originally for MMA fighter B.J. Penn) is one that many MMA athletes incorporate into their strength and conditioning training. At Team Quest, Parsons likes to tailor the workouts to mimic the round times of the scheduled fight. "If someone is competing in Pride where the first round is ten minutes, the first round of the circuit is ten minutes. If a fighter is training for a fight that has five minutes rounds, all of the rounds will be five minutes."

In the Team Quest workouts, Parsons sometimes incorporates randomness and listening skills. During the course of a round, he will call out the names of specific exercises for the fighter to perform, drawing from a repertoire of exercises and tools including plyometrics, kettlebells, clubbells, sledgehammers, calisthenics, striking, grappling, and rope climbs.

The goal is to increase the stress level and help the athlete learn to cope with that and with pain while pushing through to the end of the round. Having to listen for Parsons to call out the specific exercises and when to switch, trains the athlete to focus and listen while under stress. Says Parsons, "I use every opportunity to help athletes develop their mental skills during training so when it comes to fight time, they are used to controlling and directing their mind and body together." Interacting

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with Parsons during the workout also helps him build rapport and trust with the fighters. It is essential that they are comfortable with his voice and his commands come fight day.

Keeping the context of the fight in mind while training is what should tie all the elements of the fight camp together. Even in their GPP and strength and conditioning training, can be useful for athletes to visualize the functionality of the movements they are executing. Knowing how it is applicable to their fight will help them to focus when training and better apply themselves during the fight. For example, a burpee might be not just a burpee, but a sprawl and recovery to a standing position. A kettlebell swing might be thought of as the powerful thrust and hip drive needed to execute a takedown.

Parsons cautions not to neglect any aspect of your body during the fight camp, including recovery mechanisms. Be sure to get enough rest. If schedule allows, try to get a forty-five minute nap between workouts, and attempt to keep workouts four to six hours apart. Do not fail to keep up with regular chiropractic and massage therapy, as well. Small injuries can be prevented or kept in check by regular maintenance of the body. When Dan Henderson is training for a fight, he might have chiropractic adjustments and soft-tissue work several times a week.

Ceasing strength and conditioning workouts five to ten days before the fight will allow sufficient time for recovery. The overall training, including skill work, will begin to taper anywhere from three to ten days before the scheduled fight. The age and condition of each athlete determines how long the taper should be and how much recovery time is required. Failing to taper is a common mistake of novice fighters and results in their

being overtrained come fight day. The final workouts leading up the fight will be very short, mimicking the length of the fight. The intensity, however, will be high.

Effective programming for a fight camp will incorporate varied, functional, efficient strength and conditioning, skill training, and sparring—all in contexts relating them to the fight—plus sufficient recovery time. This kind of training both prepares a fighter technically and puts him in peak physical and mental condition for fight day.

Try a workout using Ryan's style of randomness and verbal communication.

### **Pride style:**

3 rounds:

The first round is 10 minutes;  
the second two are 5 minutes.

Possible exercises:

Box jumps, kettlebell swings, sprawls, wall ball, burpees, rope climbs, ball slams, heavy bag work, etc. Use whatever equipment you have that provides inherent variances in intensity levels and physical demands.

Athletes should have all their equipment laid out and ready. The coach lets the athletes know when to commence and conclude each round. The coach will also call out the exercise to be performed and when to switch to another exercise. The order of exercises will be random and unknown to the athletes. Intensity can be varied by the coach through exercise selection, since some exercises are inherently more intense. Use this intensity variance to mimic the rise and fall of intensity during a fight.



Becca Borawski teaches and trains at [Petranek Fitness/CrossFit Los Angeles](#) in Santa Monica. She has a master's degree in film from the University of Southern California and a background in martial arts training. She has blended these skills together to produce DVDs and build websites for professional fighters. Her main job is as the music editor on the TV show *Scrubs* and she currently trains jiu-jitsu under Eddie Bravo at 10th Planet Jiu-Jitsu in Hollywood.