



Tough Enough

by S
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JULIE KEDZIE KICKS IT UP A NOTCH IN THE MIXED MARTIAL ARTS WORLD

Julie Kedzie's nose bleeds again, and her hair's a mess. Wisps of it have come free from her tight cornrows. She works hard to catch her breath.

Still, the professional mixed martial arts fighter beams like a cheerleader at the top of the pyramid. It's a clear case of "You should see the other guy."

The referee has called a stop to Kedzie's fight with Julia Berezekova at the Ice Palace in St. Petersburg, Russia. The packed venue erupts as Kedzie raises her arms in victory.

"In the middle of that fight I kind of got this, 'Oh my gosh, I'm getting beat up' feeling, and then, all of a sudden, the tide turned, and I realized that, 'You know, this is going to go my way,'" Kedzie recalls.

Things have been going her way a lot lately. The 27-year-old from Greenwood holds a third-degree black belt in tae kwon do and a blue belt in Brazilian jiu-jitsu, a ground fighting style emphasizing grappling, joint locks and chokes.

As with the increasingly popular Ultimate Fighting Championship mixed martial arts fights, Kedzie's three-round bouts are decided when an opponent loses consciousness or is deemed no longer able to competently defend herself. Fights also can end when one fighter "submits" another. Rather than suffer an injury, for instance, an opponent trapped in a particularly inescapable hold will tap her hand in quick succession on the mat or on her opponent to signal her surrender. Finally, any fights going a full three rounds without a knockout or submission are decided by judges' votes.

by Susan M. Brackney

photos by Tom Bear

A fast talker and quick to smile, Kedzie continues, "I'd like to change things so that I actually knock people out, but that hasn't happened for me yet." Her eyes brighten with the thought.

"Generally my victories come by way of decision or technical knockout," Kedzie explains. "One of my strongest areas is endurance and overpowering people. I get them into positions where they just can't fight back anymore."

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Getting attention

Sports commentators have dubbed Kedzie, as ebullient as she is tough, "the cheerleader on crack."

At five feet, five inches and weighing 135 pounds, Kedzie looks muscular and compact. Though she has yet to render an opponent unconscious, she quickly has advanced in her sport.

Just three years into her professional fighting career, Kedzie found herself brawling in the first women's mixed martial arts fight shown on Showtime last year. It was the first such women's event ever aired on cable TV.

Still, Kedzie didn't necessarily set out to break new ground, and she hadn't always dreamed of being a pro fighter. Born in Chicago, she grew up steeped in academia. When she was about 12, Kedzie's family moved to Bloomington, Ind., so her mother could pursue a doctorate in neurobiology from Indiana University.

Kedzie and her sister, Jenny Raff, were naturally voracious readers, and, Raff says, "Everybody

expected Julie would eventually go to graduate school to get an English degree because she really loved literature."

Kedzie did earn a bachelor's degree in English from IU, but, laughing, she confesses, "I've never picked up my diploma. It's over there, but I owe, like \$15 to the bursar before I can get it ... I have to go pay for that at some point."

Aside from a love of learning, Kedzie's parents instilled in their daughters an appreciation for physical activity. "I've been training in the martial arts since I was about 4 or 5," Kedzie says. "My father put me in taekwon do, and I excelled in it and kept training in it throughout my life."

An early fan of the UFC, Kedzie first was exposed to women's professional mixed martial arts at a friend's house.

"First we were watching I think it was the

Ken Shamrock versus Tito (Ortiz) fight, and then my friend put in this DVD called *Hook N Shoot Revolution*, and I saw these female fighters doing mixed martial arts. I was like, 'I could be doing this. I could be fighting this way!' I was just blown away by it."

Part of the sport's appeal? Combining kicks and throws, boxing, clinch-fighting and wrestling. Mixed martial arts presented Kedzie, who had, by now, nearly exhausted her study of taekwon do, with a new challenge. Incorporating three five-minute rounds for men and three three-minute rounds for women, mixed martial arts fighting also requires marked stamina, conditioning and mental toughness.

The new pursuit suited her in other ways too. "I have kind of a more muscular physique. It's not the typical woman's. I've got some muscle on me, so this was sort of the sport that fit me," Kedzie says.

A different path

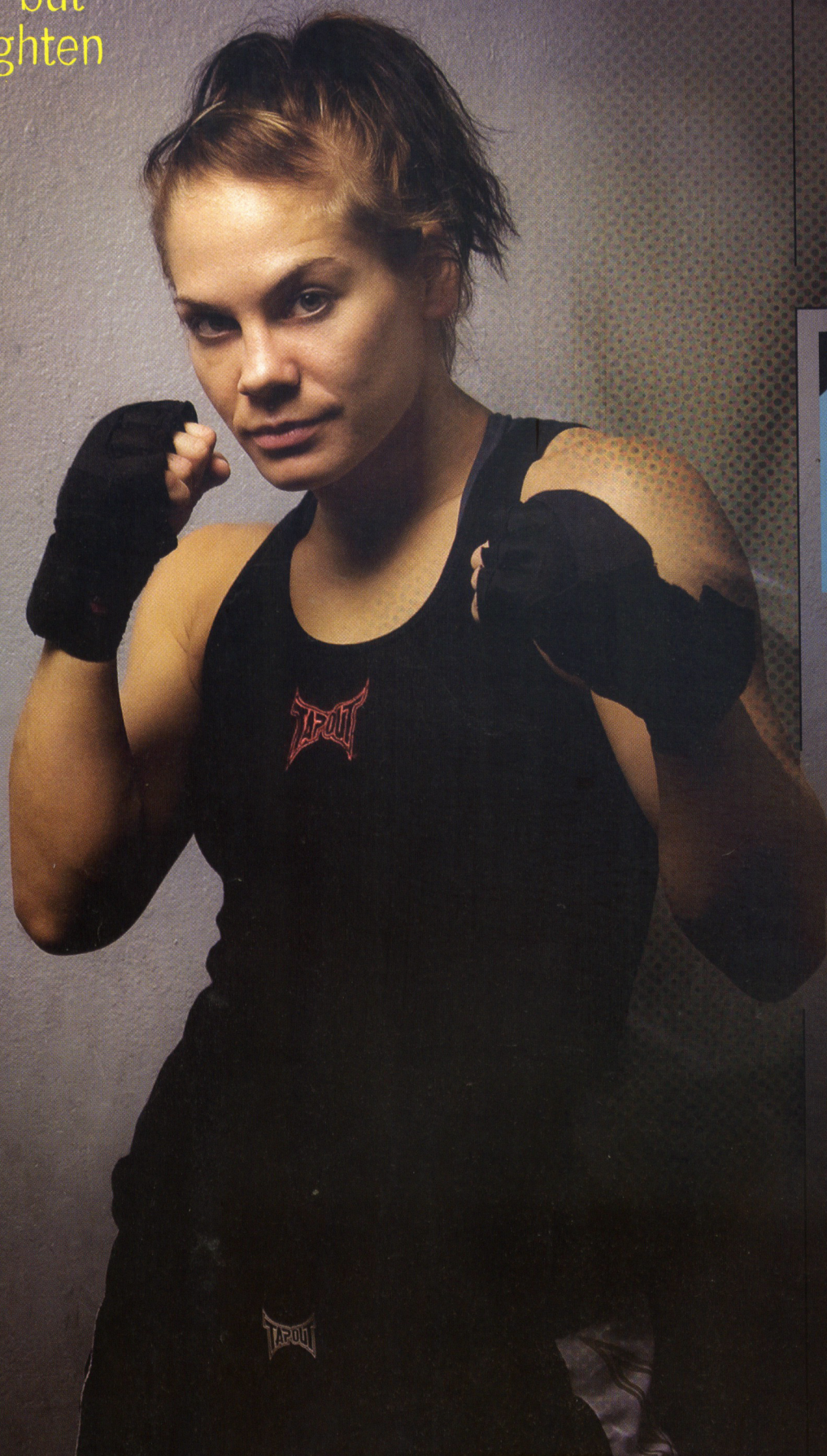
After graduating from IU, Kedzie moved in with her sister in Greenwood and began her mixed martial arts training in earnest.

"(My sister) was always wondering why I didn't go to law school or something like that with my degree because most of my family goes on to higher education. You know, it's kind of a source of pride for my family," Kedzie says. "But when she realized how far I wanted to take this and how what I'm doing is an art to me, she backed me 100 percent. I'll always be grateful to her — especially in my hungry years — for taking care of me."

Kedzie worked several different jobs after college, including the area GNC and a fitness center, and she trained with IU's Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Club and at Monroe County



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TALE OF THE TAPE

Julie Kedzie

Height: 5'5"

Weight: 135 pounds

Reach: 62.5"

Martial Arts in Bloomington. Eventually, she taught kickboxing at Indiana Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Academy in Greenwood, where she had trained with James Clingerman, in exchange for more advanced jiu-jitsu training.

"She would get up really early in the morning, and then do cardio at the gym and then she'd go and train basically most of the afternoon and the evening," Raff says.

That training paid off.

"It would've helped me to have more of an amateur career before I went pro right away, but there really weren't any amateur women to fight, so my first mixed martial arts fight was professional," Kedzie says.

Just a year after watching *Hook N Shoot Revolution*, she was invited to fight in the Evansville-based Hook N Shoot tournament. "I won by arm bar, and they actually took that fight and put it in the *Revolution II* DVD, so, for my first fight I came full circle. I was watching the DVD; then my first fight goes on the second DVD. It was wonderful," she says.

But not everyone has been so keen to see Kedzie's fights.

"My mother is afraid I'm going to have brain damage, but she is very supportive of me. She is amazing. She says, 'I can't believe you do this for a living,'" Kedzie says with a laugh.

As a result, she tries to keep her family and her fighting separate. "If they want to know, I'll tell them, but I don't offer up to them anytime I have a fight, because I feel responsible to talk to them about it. So, when it comes fight time, I usually turn my phone off. I don't want to talk to anybody. I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings."

On the fast track

To date, Kedzie has 19 bouts under her belt, 12 of them wins and seven losses. Turns out one of those losses — her Showtime debut against Gina Carano in February 2007 — would get Kedzie noticed by

Greg Jackson, one of the most accomplished mixed martial arts trainers in the business.

Although Carano, a devastating striker, landed several heavy right hands, Kedzie landed a few blows of her own and even forced Carano to fight her on the ground in what was said to be the most exciting fight of the night.

"Greg saw the fight and said, 'I really like the way you fight, and I really like your heart, and I actually want to have a female team. Would you consider moving?'" Kedzie says.

Based in Albuquerque, N.M., Jackson's Submission Fighting training camp has produced several champions, including current UFC welterweight champion Georges St. Pierre, as well as Keith "The Dean of Mean" Jardine, Rashad Evans and Nate Marquardt. To Kedzie, training with Jackson's team would be the opportunity of a lifetime.

"I thought, you know, I'm young. I really don't know how many chances I'm going to get for this, so I packed up my car and moved to Albuquerque," she says.

Kedzie regularly spars with some of her male teammates, and, she reports, her most memorable sparring partner to date has been Georges St. Pierre because of his phenomenal strength.

"I've sparred with 170-pounders before, but when you're sparring with Georges, it's like you're sparring with somebody who is 230 pounds," she says.

Kedzie works out up to three times a day. Those workouts include 20 to 40 minutes of running and sprinting in the morning, as well as treadmill and Aerodyne work. She also lifts weights then spars with the pro fighters.

In addition, there are conditioning classes, kickboxing sessions, evening sparring and once a week, Jackson's team sprints up area mountains, "The Hill of Tears," an exercise to promote mental rather than physical strength.

"Our motto is you have to suffer to win," he explains. "Everybody has a breaking point

— a point where they've had enough, and they don't want anymore. So I put them through hell — especially Julie. I put her through hell so that that breaking point, that line, gets pushed farther and farther back, and, hopefully, it gets pushed so far that your opponent will never get to it."

So far, the world-class trainer seems pleased with her progress. "I think she's an amazing fighter with a lot of potential," Jackson says. "These first couple of years together, we're just kind of learning about each other, seeing what she's good at and what she's not good at and what her weight class is."

While training in Albuquerque, Kedzie also has coached other fighters.

"(Jackson) said, 'You know, I would like you to coach my female team when your career is done.' So, eight or 10 years from now, I'll probably be coaching women, which is like a dream come true for me," she says.

Although her days are quite full, Kedzie's schedule isn't all work, all the time. On rest days, she plows through her favorite authors — Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin and Anne Lamott among others — and sometimes gets sucked into watching *America's Next Top Model* on TV.

"I'm kind of a loner, so when I'm done training, I just basically like to go into my cave. I go to my apartment and just kind of shut out the world. I really don't go out and socialize too much," she says.

Raff already has noticed a difference in her sister as a result of training full time.

"Since she moved out to New Mexico, her fighting has gotten even better," she says. "Her technique is sharper, and, with Greg, she's able to get a very well-rounded martial arts education and the resources she needs and the teammates she needs to succeed. She's doing great, and she's probably the happiest I've seen since she was a kid."

Even so, Kedzie still thinks of herself as

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"an Indiana girl" at heart.

"I do miss the trees and the storms and that kind of stuff," she says.

"But Albuquerque holds so much promise for me at this point in my life and so much potential, that I don't see myself leaving Albuquerque anytime soon. I've made a home for myself here."

The road ahead

For her part, Raff, also an amateur mixed martial arts practitioner, rarely misses one of her sister's fights, and she regularly gets first-hand reports on Kedzie's progress.

"Usually either she or Greg will give me a call after one of her fights ... one of her last fights she actually lost, and (Jackson) called me, and we talked about it a little bit. I was really glad to hear that she was not really upset about it, and they planned on what to do next," Raff says.

Just one minute and 16 seconds into the first round of that fight, her opponent Tonya Evinger was able to submit Kedzie with a rear naked choke. Sometimes also called a "blood choke," the rear naked choke, when properly applied, causes unconsciousness in as few as three seconds.

Unable to escape the chokehold, Kedzie quickly tapped.

"Honestly, one of my strong points is staying positive," Kedzie says, "but I would also say that one of the most challenging parts of all this for me is staying positive. Keeping a good head on my shoulders, because it's hard — especially when you face a loss or you face getting your butt kicked."

But she isn't too worried. "At this point, I still feel very young in my career ... I think maybe this past year has gotten me, hopefully, to a top 10 ranking in female fighters. I've never considered myself the first. I think you always have to climb steps, and I'll be on the top stair someday." **W**

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The Women of Mixed Martial Arts

A woman's role in mixed martial arts used to be relegated to that of the bikini-clad "ring girl." Hoisting a large number "1," "2" or "3" high above her head, she reeters on high heels, holding the crowd's attention between rounds, while the cornermen attend to their fighters.

There are still plenty of ring girls in mixed martial arts, but, these days, women like Julie Kedzie fight in the ring too. A professional mixed martial arts fighter since 2004, Kedzie wears loose-fitting, knee-length shorts, a cycling shirt, fingerless fighting gloves and a mouth guard to go toe-to-toe with her female opponents.

"The women's scene is starting to actually come to fruition now on major television like on Showtime. It is really nice to see that the women are getting their due because they are every bit as good as the guys are and every bit as exciting," says Greg Jackson, Kedzie's mixed martial arts trainer.

"I think two or three years from now (women's fighting) is going to be as mainstream as it is for the men," Kedzie predicts.

As it happens, Indiana long has encouraged women's mixed martial arts. In particular, Kedzie credits Jeff Osborne, founder of Evansville's Hook N Shoot mixed martial arts tournaments.

Now training in New Mexico, Kedzie often spars with top-ranked female boxer, Holly "The Preacher's Daughter" Holm, as well as mixed martial arts fighters Jodie Esquivel, Michelle Waterson and Nikki Garcia.

"What's lucky for me, is that there are all these up-and-coming fighters who started training when I started fighting," Kedzie says. "Now that they're able to get amateur fights, there are so many up-and-coming female fighters that the talent pool is getting bigger and bigger by the day."