



A VILLAIN UNMASKED

By Jim Casey / Photos by Paul Thatcher

U

FC welterweight Johnny Hendricks isn't in training camp at the moment, meaning he's walking around at a comfortable 210 pounds and his beard is more cropped than his Rasputin-like whiskers on fight night. Actually, he's not entirely comfortable—FIGHT! photog Paul Thatcher is spraying him down with a cold water bottle, trying to get him to make a mean mug for the camera.

"Grrrrrrr, Johnny, growl like a bear," says Thatcher in his British accent. He's not doing an Austin Powers impression, but he might as well be. "Yeah, Johnny, grrrrrr."

Hendricks loses it and starts laughing. Now, it's become a game to see how much we can get Hendricks to laugh. Every time Hendricks tries to get serious, a smile creeps across his face—like a kid trying not to crack up in church when something funny pops into his head—and he busts out laughing. For the remainder of the photo shoot, Hendricks can't make a mean face. Here's the problem: Hendricks is not a mean guy...but he knows what it's like to play the villain.

In 2007, Hendricks was a senior at Oklahoma State University and the bad boy of college wrestling, but for all the wrong reasons. The two-time NCAA Wrestling Champion rubbed purists of the sport the wrong way in the 2006 NCAA finals when he beat the University of Michigan's Ryan Churella.

Here are the CliffsNotes: Churella was the number one seed, Hendricks was the number two seed. In the closing seconds

of the second period, Churella dumped Hendricks to his back with an inside cradle off of a scramble. By most accounts, Hendricks was pinned. The referee didn't call it, and Hendricks battled back in the third period to earn his second NCAA Championship, which happened to take place in his home arena. The OSU fans cheered wildly while Hendricks jumped up and down, flexed, lifted his coach John Smith (two-time Olympic Champion) in the air, draped himself in an OSU flag, and raised both of his index fingers, pointing to the 3,000 Cowboy faithful. The other 12,000 fans booed, and booed, and booed. And just like that, Johnny Hendricks was now the jerk of college wrestling.

Fast forward to Hendricks' senior season in 2007, and if you weren't wearing orange, booing Hendricks was the posh thing to do. All season long, Hendricks played the role of the villain, while compiling an undefeated record of 56-0. In the NCAA finals, he faced longtime nemesis Mark Perry (who was John Smith's nephew) from the University of Iowa. There were enough plot twists in this wrestling soap opera to keep keyboard warriors busy for hours on message boards.

Perry defeated Hendricks by one point in the finals, and wrestling karma (according to the haters) had come full circle. Take that, Johnny Hendricks...jerk.

The hate had finally gotten to Hendricks. It never fueled him. He's not that kind of guy. After 12 of the toughest months of his life, his senior year was capped with a loss, and the entire wrestling community was ecstatic. The one-

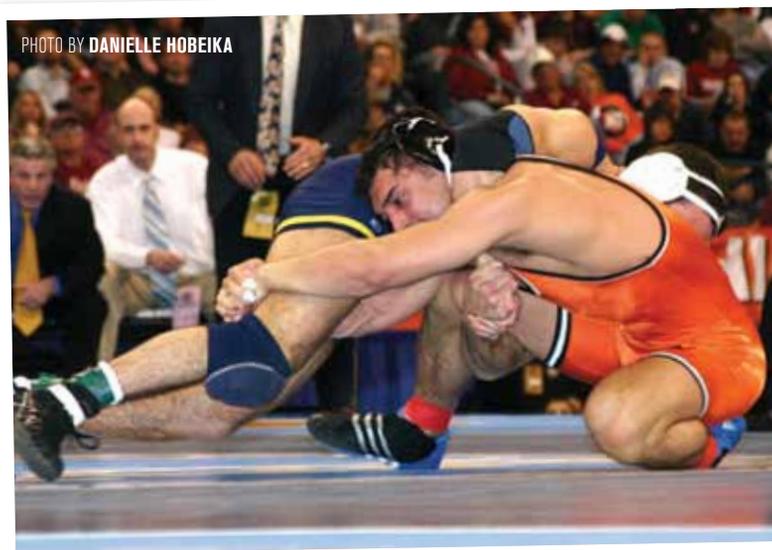
time international and Olympic hopeful decided to give up the sport that no longer wanted him.

"I love the United States—I had dreamed of wrestling in the Olympics since I was a little kid," says Hendricks. "But why would I want to represent this community of people that suddenly hated me? My mind switched. I stopped caring about wrestling. For two weeks after my loss, all I did was pray. I didn't know what to do with my life."

There was one man who knew what Hendricks could do with his life, and his name was Ted Ehrhardt, the mastermind behind Team Takedown—a unique management deal that formed in March 2007 when it signed collegiate wrestling standouts Jake Rosholt, Shane Roller, and Hendricks to seven-year MMA deals. The team members earn a salary and have their living and training expenses paid for in exchange of half of their fight earnings.

Just like that, Hendricks was finished with wrestling—he had found a new competitive outlet. Welcome to MMA.

Now, five years later, Hendricks has reinvented himself, sort of. It's stupid to reinvent yourself when there's nothing wrong with you in the first place. So Hendricks did the next best thing—he grew a beard. Most of the time, you only grow facial hair if you're the villain (see evil Spock from Star Trek or evil David Hasselhoff from Knight Rider). However, the beard helped MMA fans figure out some-





thing about Hendricks that wrestling fans didn't want to believe—he's a good guy, and it shows.

MMA fans love them some Johny Hendricks, and Johny loves them right back.

At UFC 146 in Las Vegas in May, Hendricks is the happy-go-lucky, 210-pound, smiling bear who's been flown in from his home in Arlington, Texas, to make a few PR appearances and attend the event. Along the way, he's constantly stopped by fans who want to take a picture or get an autograph—and he takes time to snap and sign each one. With Hendricks, you get a genuine smile and a handshake and a pic, and if you're a little one, he'll drop to a knee to ask you how your double-leg is coming along or if you've been behaving.

"They're so rewarding—it always is with the kids," Hendricks says. "Whenever you meet a kid who says you're one of his favorites or an inspiration to watch fight—it's pretty cool to know that somebody's looking up to you. It makes you want to be that much of a better person so you never let them down."

Right now, Hendricks has two young daughters—two-year-old Abri and nine-month-old Adli Jo—who he doesn't want to let down. Two girls. In wrestling circles, that's known as "The Curse." For some reason, it seems that all wrestlers have daughters...and Johny has his own theories, which he shares half joking, half serious.

"Working out three times a day and spending time in saunas ain't good for the boys," he says with a laugh. And by "boys," he means testicles. "But having daughters is no curse, they're my life. I'll have a couple more."

What he doesn't want any more of are the two cauliflowered ears sticking off the side of his head right now. The veggie-like clusters are staples for any wrestler with Hendricks' résumé. In fact, in many cliques (where a mother's opinion is ignored), they're badges of honor. At this moment, the left one is especially painful, and he has Josh Koscheck to thank for that.

Hendricks' win against Koscheck at UFC on FOX 3 in May was his biggest MMA victory to-date, but it wasn't without some drama, including a first-round eye poke that left Hendricks squinting in pain and unable to see clearly until the second round.

The eye poke is to Koscheck what the heel hook is to Rousimar Palhares—you'd better expect it. In Koscheck's last six fights, at least three of his opponents—Anthony Johnson, Mike Pierce, and Hendricks—have suffered significant eye pokes. Hendricks even went so far as to bring this bit of info to the ref's attention during the pre-fight briefing, but to no avail.

"I was seeing double the first three minutes of the fight, so of course he landed some shots," says Hendricks. "But what can you do? You can't tell the ref that you can't see, or he'll stop the fight. I tried to move my head more than normal to try and avoid it, but he landed it with that straight-handed-pawing motion that he always does. Was it intentional? Yeah, he does it every fight."

You'd think Koscheck would have more respect for a fellow NCAA Wrestling Champion. In fact, when the two grapplers faced off, it represented the greatest set of collegiate wrestling credentials to ever step inside the Octagon. In college, Koscheck finished 4th, 2nd, 1st, and 3rd, while Hendricks finished 4th, 1st, 1st, and 2nd.

Most pundits agreed that the second round belonged to Hendricks, while the third round belonged to Koscheck. In the end, it came down to that eye-popping first-round. This time—like the 2006 NCAA finals—it went Hendricks' way, and he earned the split-decision victory.

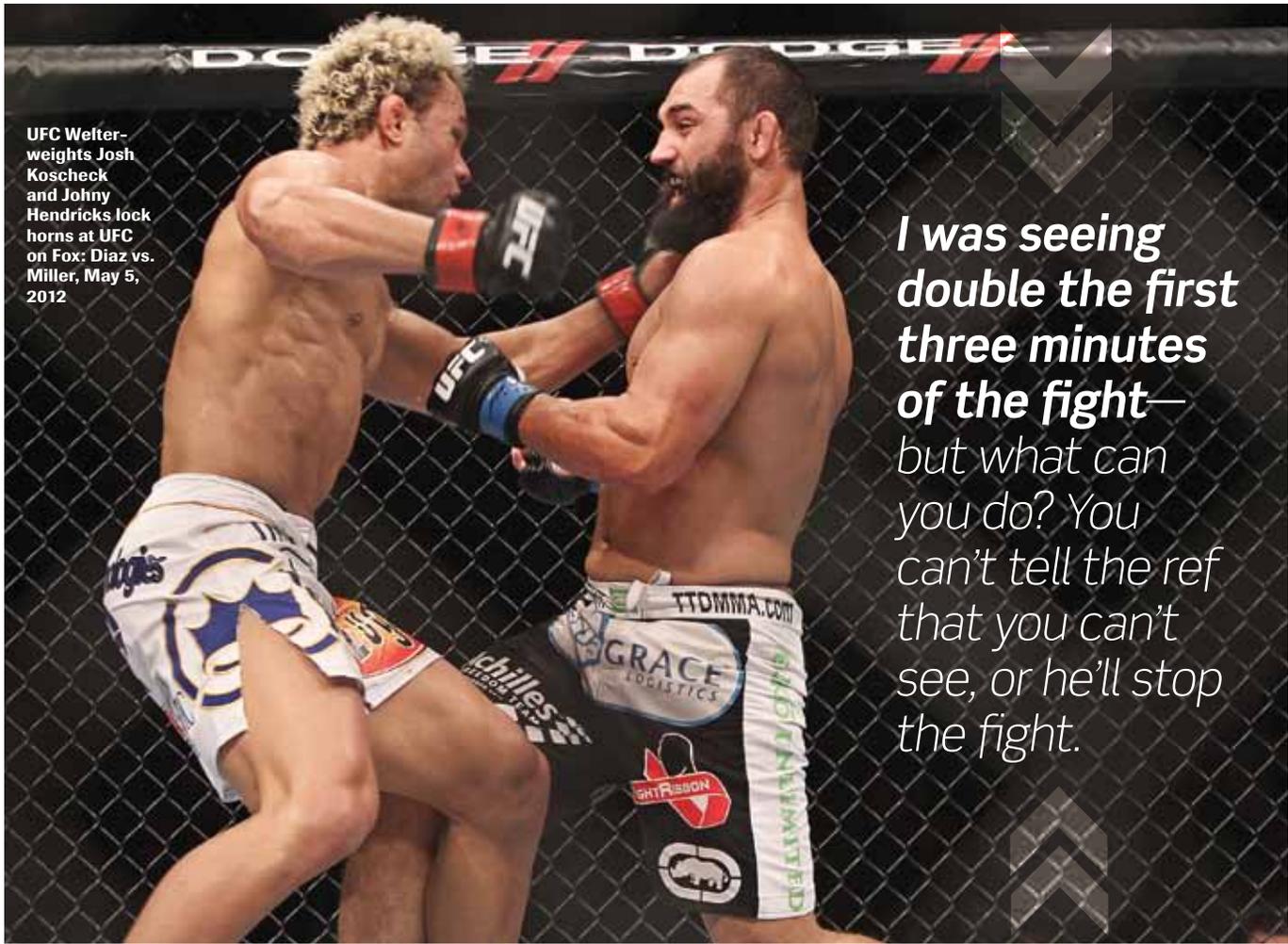
"I thought I won the first and second rounds," says Hendricks. "When he took my back in the third and was trying to lock in a rear naked, I didn't feel in any real danger. I was defending it. You know,



*Whenever you meet a kid who says you're one of his favorites or an inspiration to watch fight—***It makes you want to be that much of a better person so you never let them down.**







UFC Welterweights Josh Koscheck and Johnny Hendricks lock horns at UFC on Fox: Diaz vs. Miller, May 5, 2012

I was seeing double the first three minutes of the fight—but what can you do? You can't tell the ref that you can't see, or he'll stop the fight.

there's a counter sweep that I could have tried, but you put yourself at risk doing it. So, I just defended it. And I think that's when my ear bubbled up again. I can't even sleep on my left side right now."

It was still a loss, but Koscheck fared better against Hendricks than his long-time training partner Jon Fitch, who Hendricks knocked cold in 12 seconds at UFC 130 in December.

With his signature wins over Fitch and Koscheck—who represent two of the last six opponents of UFC Welterweight Champion Georges St-Pierre—Hendricks entered the hallowed contender talks. However, there's a logjam at welterweight until GSP can recover from knee surgery and get back in the cage to face well-rested Carlos Condit. Where does that leave Johnny? With some time to kill, campaigning for a possible Interim Championship against Condit since GSP's recovery date is nebulous. It's the only fight on the welterweight totem pole that moves Hendricks north. However, this is Hendricks,

and he'll fight just about anyone the UFC puts in front of him.

Driving though the Vegas desert on an excessively windy Saturday morning, Hendricks points in the mountainous direction where he once saw a herd of wild horses. Hendricks knows Vegas. He lived there for three years, during the infancy of Team Takedown.

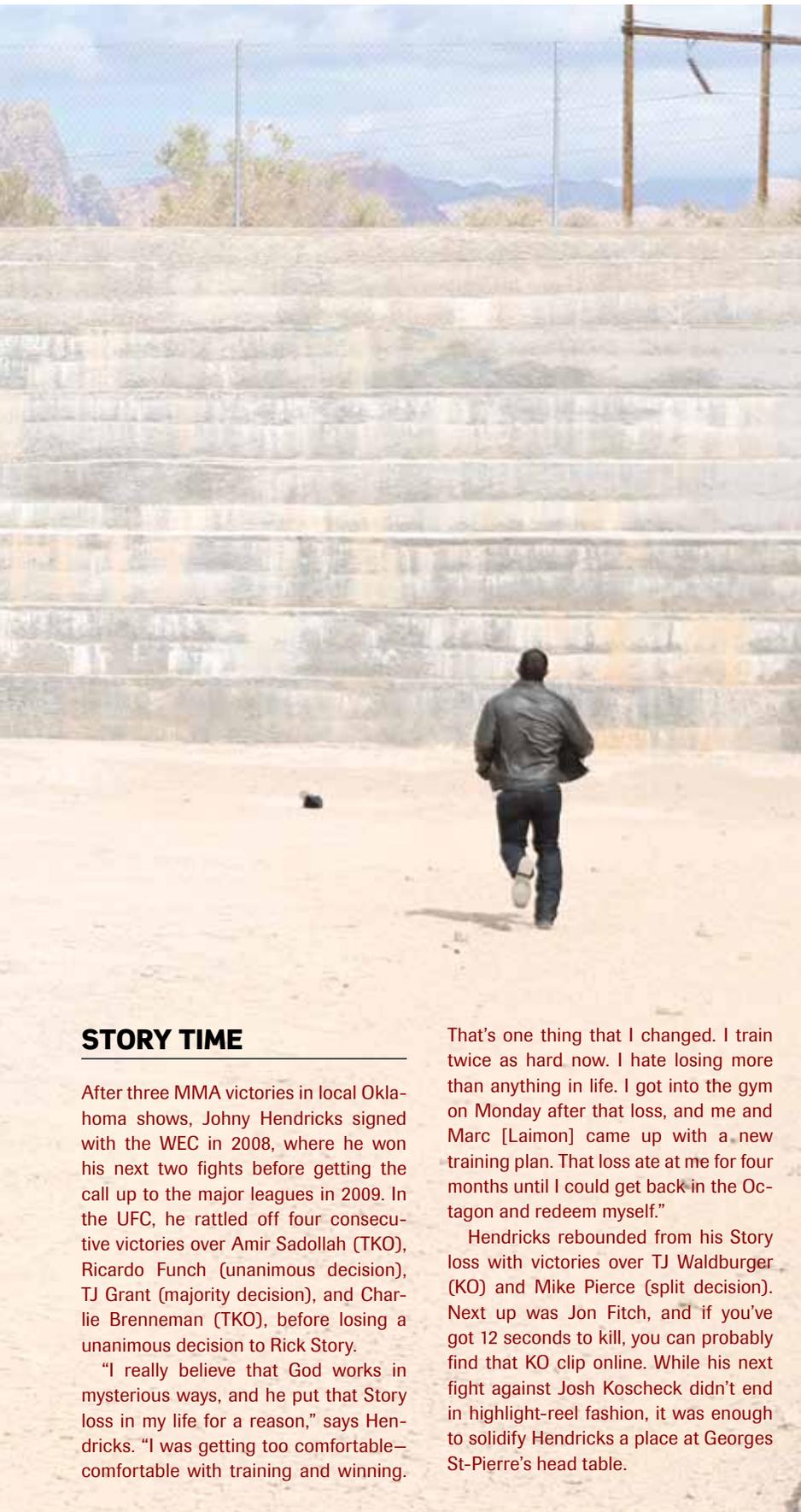
In 2010, Team Takedown relocated to the Lone Star State, settling into a 30,000-square-foot training facility in Arlington, Texas. Team Takedown coach Marc Laimon, a Nova Uniao black belt, also relocated with the group.

"Marc is the bread and butter of everything that I do," says Hendricks. "He's a great coach—so humble. If he doesn't know the answer to a question, he'll find someone who does. He's not the kind of coach who thinks he knows everything. In fact, I took him up to OSU and he was

blown away by their wrestling-room mentality. He thought it was awesome. Now, he's becoming my MMA version of John Smith."

That's high praise from Hendricks, who still reveres Smith—arguably the greatest U.S. wrestler (two-time Olympic Champion, four-time World Champion, two-time NCAA Champion, and five-time NCAA Champion coach)—as sort of a father figure.

"I learned a ton from watching John Smith coach and work with Johnny when I visited OSU," says Laimon. "He has a way to motivate Johnny that is second to none. Getting to be a fly on the wall and listen to John Smith coach and talk to his wrestlers was great. I don't think the wrestlers fully understand what important life lesson Coach Smith is communicating to them—to be mentally tough. One of the biggest reasons Johnny is successful is his will to win and push himself. Being mentally tough in very difficult situations has made him excel in MMA."



STORY TIME

After three MMA victories in local Oklahoma shows, Johnny Hendricks signed with the WEC in 2008, where he won his next two fights before getting the call up to the major leagues in 2009. In the UFC, he rattled off four consecutive victories over Amir Sadollah (TKO), Ricardo Funch (unanimous decision), TJ Grant (majority decision), and Charlie Brenneman (TKO), before losing a unanimous decision to Rick Story.

"I really believe that God works in mysterious ways, and he put that Story loss in my life for a reason," says Hendricks. "I was getting too comfortable—comfortable with training and winning.

That's one thing that I changed. I train twice as hard now. I hate losing more than anything in life. I got into the gym on Monday after that loss, and me and Marc [Laimon] came up with a new training plan. That loss ate at me for four months until I could get back in the Octagon and redeem myself."

Hendricks rebounded from his Story loss with victories over TJ Waldburger (KO) and Mike Pierce (split decision). Next up was Jon Fitch, and if you've got 12 seconds to kill, you can probably find that KO clip online. While his next fight against Josh Koscheck didn't end in highlight-reel fashion, it was enough to solidify Hendricks a place at Georges St-Pierre's head table.

Now, we're driving over some rough terrain in the desert, and Hendricks is talking toughness—cactus toughness, and how they will pop the sidewall of a tire if you're not careful. They'll even go through a shoe—but not his Double-H cowboy boots. There are two items of clothing that make Hendricks happy—his boots and his baseball cap. When's he not training or fighting, Hendricks is typically wearing both. But that damn Vegas wind really kicks up as we get out of the truck, and his hat tumbleweeds off his head and blows 100 yards away toward an empty reservoir.

"Don't worry, I'll get it," he yells, as he takes off in a dead sprint in those boots. Graceful? No. Successful? Yes. But that's Hendricks M.O. He was never the technical master on the wrestling mats. He's not exactly Anderson Silva in the cage, either. He's more Dan Henderson (left hand instead of right). Tough. Utilitarian. Like a tank. He just gets the job done.

He snatches the hat just before it reaches the reservoir wall, and meanders back toward the truck, satisfied. The Vegas desert brings back that sly smile that was painted across his face during the earlier photo shoot.

"I used to come down here and shoot my guns," Hendricks says. "You've got a clear line of sight for like 800 yards. To be a hunter and a college wrestling coach—that's what I want to do when I'm finished fighting. To be both of those—that would be the best of both worlds because I love being able to teach wrestling to kids. There was an assistant coach at OSU named Pat Smith [younger brother of John Smith, and the first four-time NCAA Wrestling Champion], and I could tell that guy anything, and he was always there for me no matter what time of day or night. I had a coach that was there for me, and that's something I want to be able to give back to kids. And there's nothing sweeter than hunting and getting up every day and getting paid to hunt."

But that's down the line. Right now, there's nothing sweeter than waking up the UFC Welterweight Champion. And that's something Hendricks is confident he can do when he gets the chance. He's just waiting on that chance. He's got time. He's got wrestling. He's got a left hand. And, he's got a high tolerance for pain, both physical and emotional.

For Hendricks, pain or damage don't end the world. Or beatings or losses or hate. He learned that in college. There's happiness in his life now. He's no longer the villain. And MMA is a big part of that. 📍