

THE MAN COMES AROUND

BRIAN BOWLES IS TAKING NAMES

BY JIM CASEY / PHOTOS BY PAUL THATCHER

It's brutally hot in Athens, GA, so sitting on a stool in the air conditioning of The HardCore Gym is a welcome reprieve, even if the track blaring over the sound system is Lady Gaga's Bad Romance. You get the feeling that owners/coaches/brothers Adam and Rory Singer know every lyric. They unwittingly hum along—Rah-rah-ah-ah-ah-ah—as a ripped, bantamweight effortlessly hits the pads in the background.

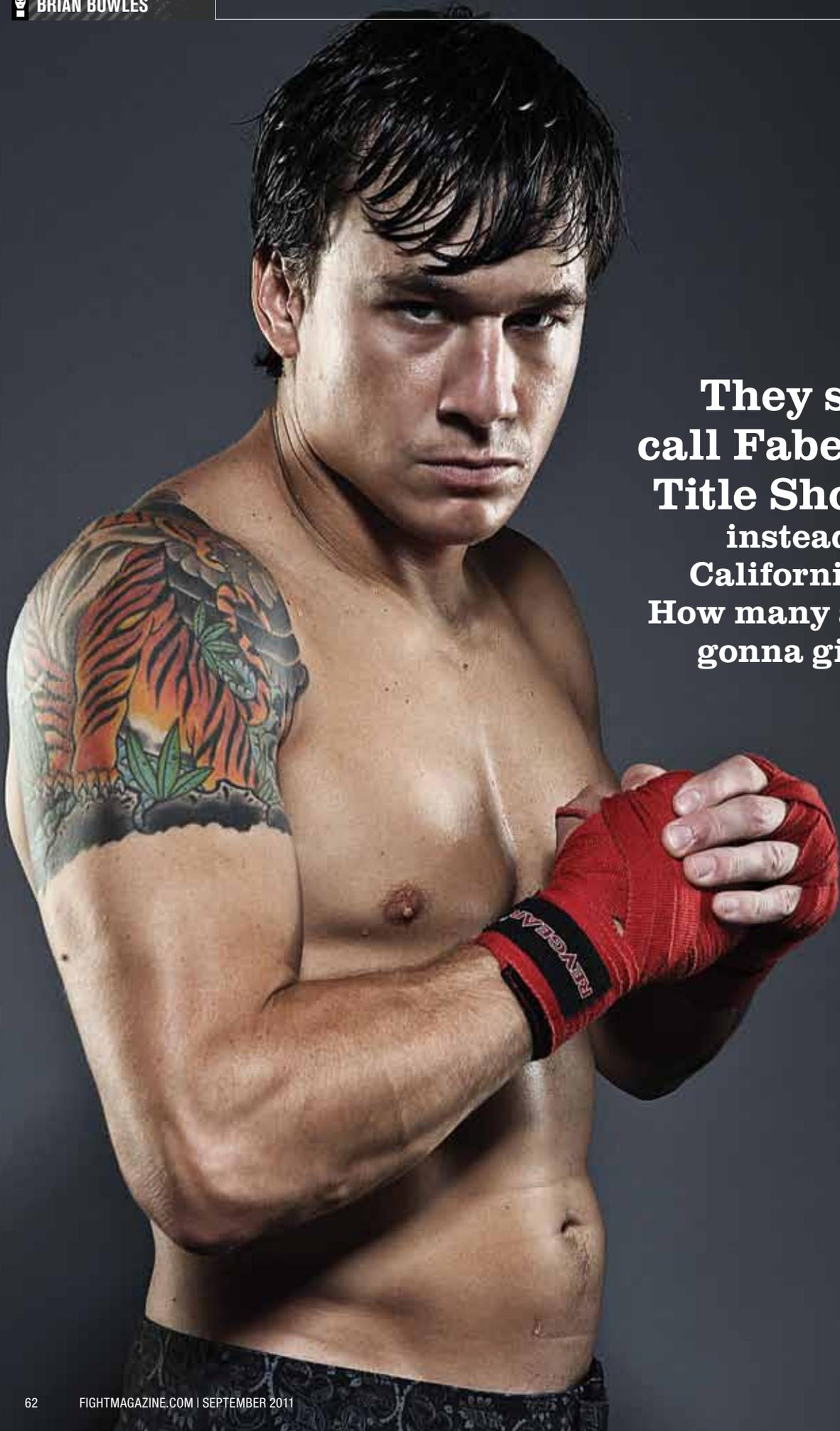
Athens is just a small college town 71 miles east of Atlanta, and how the Singer brothers ended up here—displaced from their New York roots and operating The HardCore Gym—is another story. But, they are here, running a damn fine gym. It's got its own cage, ample mat space, a bevy of bags, fitness equipment, and a bunch of guys with beards—including both Singers, coach Chad Shafer, and some dudes that could be homeless or just refusing to shave since all the hot girls from the University of Georgia aren't back in town for fall semester just yet. At

UGA—the 2011 Princeton Review #2 party school in the country—it's cool to have a beard, even in the summer.

If The HardCore Gym sounds familiar, it might be because the UFC's most famous world champion/author/runner got his start here—Mr. Forrest Griffin. However, HardCore has produced two world champions, and that's where the ripped, bantamweight who's hitting the pads name comes up—or doesn't come up for that matter, because not many people know who the hell he is.

His name is Brian Bowles. If you recognize Urijah Faber, Miguel Torres, Dominick Cruz, or Carlos Condit, Bowles should be no problem. He's a former WEC Champion, too—and not back in the prehistoric, pre-Zuffa years. We're talking 2009 and 2010. Yet, if you were holding your breath in anticipation of his appearance on the pay-per-view telecast at UFC 132 in July, you would be blue in the face, because he wasn't one of the 10 fighters on the main card, nor was he one of the four fighters





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Hardcore Gym's head coach Adam Singer, demonstrates the proper way to defeat cheese dip.



featured on the televised preliminary card on Spike TV. How's that for a former world champ with a 10-1 record, nine freaking finishes, and four Fight Night bonuses in his last seven fights.

Now, it just so happens that his UFC 132 fight against Takeya Mizugaki is his only fight that has gone to a judges' decision. Coincidence? Definitely. Bowles is a shrewd cat. Don't let the union of a West Virginian/Georgian twang in his voice fool you. He knew that he was probably just one victory away from a title shot against UFC Bantamweight Champion Dominick Cruz, who went on to best Urijah Faber in the main event that night. Bowles wasn't just trying to get a win against Mizugaki, like so many other UFC fighters who value the ends over the means. That's not how Bowles fights.

"I'm a natural finisher," says Bowles. "But, those Japanese fighters are hard to sub. Mizugaki's only been subbed once in 22 fights. I tried to sink in that rear-naked choke when I had his back, I just couldn't get under his chin."

Bowles got the unanimous decision win, but he didn't get the title shot. Instead, it's going to Demetrius Johnson, who won a controversial decision over Miguel Torres in May. Bowles was vacationing in Charleston, SC, when he found out the news via Twitter. He also found out who his next opponent was the same way.

"I saw that Rory [Singer] called, but I was chilling on vacation," Bowles says. "The next thing I know, I'm getting all these Tweets about my new opponent—Urijah Faber."

There's an interesting fact in this subtext. Bowles never verbally accepted the fight against Faber because he didn't actually answer Singer's call, however, the fight was made.

"Rory knows I'll fight anyone," Bowles says, shrugging his shoulders. The kid has confidence. Quiet confidence.

TITLE SHOT KID

The cheese dip at Sr. Sol Mexican Restaurant in Athens is the finest east of the Chattahoochee River. If Bowles' coach Adam Singer knows anything, it's cheese dip. His BJJ knowledge is a close second, as he's a black belt under Roberto Traven. The cheese dip is more impressive at the moment, and Bowles and Singer are digging in.

"That's chorizo sausage in there," says Singer. "You could drink that stuff." Bowles is a mini-celebrity in Athens, and the cheese dip was on the house. When a couple of passing girls give him a smile, it's not so far fetched to think that Bowles and

Faber have more in common than just their weight class. You've seen the women swoon after Faber. Do you think Faber gets free cheese dip in Sacramento, too? Probably.

Bowles is 14 weeks away from his fight with Faber at UFC 139 in San Jose, CA, on Nov. 19. He's walking around at 144 pounds, so his weight is not an issue. Neither is his height. In fact, he's been approximately this size since eighth grade. He peaked at 14 years old. Bowles pulls out his old driver's license that he got when he was in high school. Sure enough, 5'6", 135 pounds. He feels small right now and wants to pack on a couple of pounds because Faber is as solid as a cast iron fire hydrant. The burritos, chimichangas, and tacos are flowing. Sr. Sol has great green sauce, too. It's got a little fire in it, and now the boys have made a concoction of chorizo cheese dip and green sauce. It looks like a serum that could turn Bruce Banner into the Hulk.

Bowles is a quiet guy, but that doesn't mean he's not confident. He knows exactly who he is in this world, and he doesn't mind flying under the radar—and he doesn't talk any shit to try and change that. Bowles just states facts in that interstate twang and gives a little grin. He's funny...kinda like an actor who does a bunch of serious films, but then scores a comedy and you say to friend, "Hey, did you see Christopher Walken on Saturday Night Live with a prescription for more cowbell?"

"They should call Faber 'The Title Shot Kid' instead of 'The California Kid,'" Bowles says with a smile. "How many are they gonna give him? But at least Faber is a real fighter and not some jackass in a yellow jumpsuit hopping around on TUF acting like he's a fighter."

Bowles has mad respect for Faber's skills, but he makes a good point. Four of Faber's last eight fights have been for the title—and it's four fights that Faber has lost. In fact, the winner of their scrap will get the next title crack at the winner of Dominick Cruz vs. Demetrius Johnson.

"I love the way Faber fights," he says. "He's creative and he fights in the moment. He's fast, strong, well-rounded. No holes in his game. He's a very complete fighter. I like him as a person,



WEC 47 March 6, 2010. Brian Bowles grimaces as he throws a broken right hand at Dominick Cruz in a failed title defense.

and I really don't have anything bad to say about him."

Bowles knows firsthand many of the skills that Faber is bringing to the table when the Octagon door slams shut. He actually trained with Faber at Team Alpha Male for two weeks before his fight with Will Riberio in 2008. It's a small world when you're a small fighter. In a lot of ways, Bowles and Faber's styles mirror each other. They both like to throw their hands and then lock in fight-ending guillotines or rear-naked chokes once they have felled their opponents.

"I've got a gameplan for Faber," Bowles says with another smile. "And when I beat him, he should come hang out with me in Athens and have a good time."

HOW THINGS ARE MADE

Bowles was born in Charleston, WV. His mom raised him. His dad wasn't around. She worked odd jobs—even working for the coalmines. In fact, Bowles grandfather died of black lung. They were on welfare. It wasn't the carefree life that children are supposed to have. Naturally, Bowles was an angry kid who turned to the streets and began fighting at a young age. You've heard that old chestnut before, except that's not the case with Bowles. He wasn't an angry kid. He just kept puttering along. World-class athletes are born this way, too.

When Bowles was 14 years old, his mom moved to Jefferson City, GA, to take a new job. Brian was enrolled at

Jackson County High School where the high school wrestling coach saw him getting off the bus. Nothing flashy here. Bowles wrestled for a few years and enjoyed it, placing in the state, but showing few signs of his future prowess.

High school graduation in 2000. No college. Police Academy. Jailer. Pepsi rep. Bowles meandered the next few years, working as a cop and then as a jailer in the pen. When he got sick of being around scumbags, he took a job as a Pepsi salesman. But those were just jobs. In 2004, one of Bowles' old high school wrestling buddies—Stephen Ledbetter—decided to give jiu-jitsu a shot. He convinced Bowles to give it a go. Bowles was looking for something—something bet-



Standing at the UGA campus arches in Athens, GA.

ter than selling Pepsi or locking down criminals. He missed the competitive nature of life, of high school wrestling, of the grind. Enter Adam and Rory Singer.

How the Singers transformed Bowles into a world champion with less than five years of training is nothing short of a Rocky Balboa phenomenon. It's virtually impossible to do. Bowles wasn't a collegiate wrestler. He wasn't a Golden Gloves boxer. He wasn't a BJJer. He just became a fighter who can do all those things. He'll out-wrestle (Charlie Valencia). He'll out-strike (Miguel Torres). He'll out-BJJ (Will Riberio).

"We built him from the ground up," says Adam Singer. "He came in one day and started beating on the guys who were in our intermediate class, so we just kept adding pieces to the puzzle. Punch, choke, kick, takedown. Eventually, he became a monster."

Bowles was like a miniature MMA Frankenstein that Adam and Rory were constructing inside the concrete walls of The HardCore Gym. Their first creation—The Forrest Griffin Project—had already relocated to Xtreme Couture in Las Vegas. The mad scientists needed a new specimen, and Bowles fit the bill, but the Singers weren't the only ones interested in how to create a monster.

"I'm fascinated with how things are made," says Bowles, as he sits next to the famous Arch on the UGA campus. It's probably one of the reasons his favorite television show is *Modern Marvels* on the History Channel. "Have you seen the one on the logging industry? They built these huge flumes—a 50-mile flume in California in the 1800s—to shoot logs down the mountains and then chained all these logs together and floated them down to the Pacific. It's insane how..."

Just then, another pretty girl walks by and smiles at Bowles, and the 31-year-old stops talking about logs, levels his right hand, and breaks out the famous Wooderson quote from *Dazed and Confused* about getting older and the girls staying the same age.

When the laughter subsides, Bowles' leveled right hand becomes the focal point of the conversation, because it's noticeably lacking a knuckle on the pointer finger. Quick: name a UFC bantamweight with knockout power. There aren't many, but Miguel Torres would probably say Brian Bowles. A 3:1 underdog, Bowles KO'd Torres in their WEC



Chad Shafer holds the focus mitts for a focused Brian Bowles at The Hardcore Gym in Athens, GA.

Bantamweight Title fight in 2009. The defeat put an end to Torres' 17-fight win streak and talk of his pound-for-pound proliferation. Bowles put himself on the map with that signature victory, proving that Torres was indeed human when the Georgian's fists were dive-bombing onto his face. Brian had beaten the odds and the champ, but his title reign would be short-lived.

Bowles clenches his fists when the subject of Dominick Cruz comes up. It's not that he dislikes Cruz—he dislikes the way Cruz fights. Some people think Cruz's footwork and style is a thing of beauty. Others think Cruz is boring and avoids fighting by jumping around and backing up. Bowles is in the latter camp. It may have something to do with the fact that Cruz is the only man to defeat Bowles—a doctor's stoppage after the second round of their title fight in 2010. Bowles took a lot of shit for the stoppage, because he didn't protest it. Some fans

think he just quit.

"I know what pain is like," says Bowles. "I broke my left hand knocking out Miguel Torres in 2009. I thought I broke my hand against Mizugaki last month. When I shattered my right hand against Cruz on the first punch, bones were crunching around in there for two rounds. There wasn't anything I could do. I couldn't grab him. I sure as hell couldn't punch with it. Not only was my whole gameplan shot, but the pain was radiating up my arm. I knew something was seriously wrong."

HARDCORE REDEMPTION

And then, Bowles up and vanished like a shadow at high noon. The broken hand required surgery and then a foot injury sustained during training kept Bowles out of the cage for 12 months. While Bowles was being forgotten, Cruz was successfully defending the title against

Joseph Benavidez and Scott Jorgensen.

"The year-long layoff was depressing," Bowles says. "Training keeps my mind clear. I couldn't train, I couldn't do anything except sit around the house watching Bonanza reruns after my daily rehab. It was awful. I was losing my mind. I knew I was losing my fan base, too. Out of sight, out of mind. It's the nature of the MMA beast."

The one thing that Bowles had going for him—even if Hoss and Little Joe Cartwright couldn't lift his spirits—was that he always had the guys at The HardCore Gym. Bowles reached the pinnacle of his sport with that victory over Torres in 2009. Other fighters who got their start at HardCore—including Forrest Griffin and heavyweight Todd Duffee—left small-town Athens behind in search of the \$3.95 steak dinners and the world-class training in Las Vegas. However, Bowles never seriously entertained that thought. He's a small-town guy. He

Brian Bowles finishes Damacio Page for the second time by guillotine choke.



likes living and training in Athens. He likes those cute Southern girls. He likes free cheese dip. He likes his coaches and training partners at Hardcore, who were stealthily masterminding his comeback after those arduous 12 months.

Step one was his déjà vu destruction of Damacio Page on March 3. The fight ended the exact same way their first scrap ended in 2008—guillotine choke at 3:30 of round one. Bowles was back, and it felt good.

Step two was to get past Takeya Mizugaki on July 2, which he did with a unanimous decision win. Bowles had some gravitational momentum again, like the eight-fight-rolling-ball-of-butcher-knives win streak that he began his career with.

Step three is the highest profile fight of his career—against Mr. Faber on Nov. 19. The highest profile fight of any bantamweight or featherweight's career is usually against Faber. The California Kid has mojo, the libido, the life force, the essence, the right stuff, what the French call a certain...I don't know what.

Bowles plans on stealing that mojo—Dr. Evil style.

Step four is exacting revenge on the man who currently has his bantamweight title—Dominick Cruz, who faces Demetrious Johnson on Oct. 1. If Johnson wins that fight, no problem. Bowles will be ready to take the title from him, too. However, he wants that Cruz fight back. There are certain things that gnaw on a man, and the Cruz fight gnaws on Bowles.

For now, Bowles is not looking past Faber. Bowles likes Faber. Bowles respects Faber. He also knows he can beat Faber. And he's going to do that in San Jose on Nov. 19 as he walks out to the Octagon to the familiar sound of Johnny Cash singing "The Man Comes Around." For this fight, the song seems appropriate for Bowles on many different levels—it's the second coming of The Man on the biggest stage of his life. Bowles will be taking names, specifically Faber's. The ripped, little Man will be the whirlwind in the thorn tree.

It's the only way he will get the redemption that he seeks. 📍

TEED OFF

Just how good of a natural athlete is Brian Bowles? Well, not that golf is the end-all-be-all of athletic barometers, but Bowles recently took up the pastime, and he's doing pretty well.

"I started playing about a year ago, and I'm already beating the guys who taught me how to play," says Bowles. "The last time out, I shot an 81. The game is great. I can train MMA in the morning, play 18 holes in the afternoon, and be back in the gym for my night session."

You don't see many bantamweight golfers on the pro tour, but when Bowles gets done pounding people's heads inside the Octagon, maybe you'll see him knocking a few balls around on the links.

