

Story and photos by Bill Curry

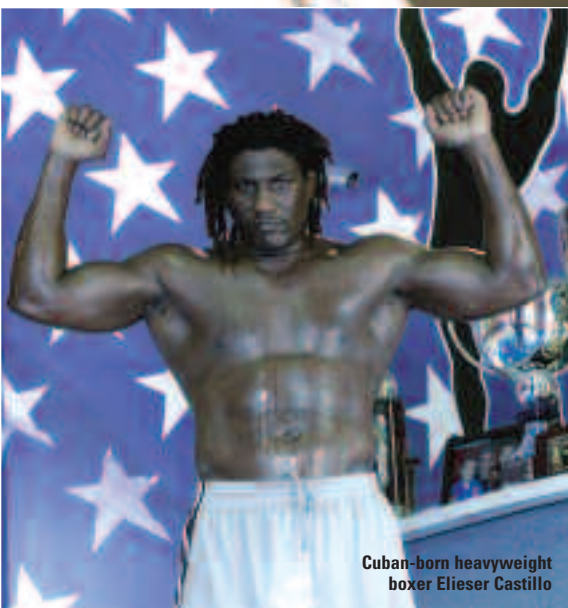
# American Top Team

## Making Mayhem and Mirth

One of the premiere combat sports training facilities in the world, the Florida-based American Top Team has gained a worldwide following with its relentless pursuit of excellence.



The unmistakable profile of grappling and MMA star Jeff Monson



Cuban-born heavyweight boxer Elieser Castillo

**C**oconut Creek, FL – Surrounded by four or five guys, sitting at his desk at the American Top Team front office, having to raise his voice to be heard over the gleeful laughter, general manager Richie Guerriero gives the details of his latest story: “So Monson is locked out of the gym with only his jockstrap on, yelling at us and banging on the door with one hand while trying to cover up his vital statistics with the other, when all of a sudden a car honks and...”

### A Spirit of Camaraderie

I had been at the American Top Team facility in Coconut Creek, Florida for only 15 minutes and already the sense of raucous camaraderie was apparent in the storytelling going on in the front office. On the walls hung 12 huge framed and glassed-covered posters from the most recent UFCs, autographed by everyone on each fight card. Seeing me gazing at the posters, Richie stops his story to the obvious disappointment of his audience, and guides me to the corner.

“That one with Tito and Ken Shamrock is my favorite,” laughs Richie. “Tito signed it after Ken and made sure his signature was sprawled across Ken’s face.” Laughter erupts from the other guys in the room but Richie ignores it and continues his wall of fame tour. “This one here is from the only fight in MMA history where a guy was submitted twice in the same match.” He’s pointing at the Matt Lindland and Murillo Bustamante poster from UFC 37.

“He didn’t tap that first time, dude!” insists sponsorship coordinator John Hartnett, referring to Lindland.

“Well, regardless,” retorts Richie, “a Brazilian jiu-jitsu guy tossed an Olympic silver medalist with a Greco-Roman throw, out-roman and out-grecoing him!”

Seeming to win the argument by sheer volume if nothing else when Hartnett doesn’t respond, Richie then asks me what I thought was the best jiu-jitsu vs. wrestler match in history. I think for second and then say the 40 minute draw between 185 lb. Murillo Bustamante and 280 lb. Tom Erikson at Dr. John Keatings MARS event in Birmingham, Alabama. It only takes me a second to realize I should have kept my mouth shut as all hell suddenly breaks loose with wrestlers and jiu-jitsu guys trading barbs with me in the line of fire!

“All Bustamante did was butt scoot!” taunts

wrestler and MMA fighter Mike Brown.

“Yeah, but Erikson was twice his size and was still afraid to get on the ground with a skinny Brazilian,” shouts out an obvious jiu-jitsu guy. “You’d think he would at least try to ground and pound him!”

Eddie “Primo” Miranda, the “can do” guy for ATT just sits silently, rolling his eyes and shaking his head in the resigned attitude of one who has seen these braggadocio encounters countless times before. Staying coolly aloof, one desk back, is Kelly Chigger, an army major just back from his latest tour of Afghanistan. He chimes in that in the caves of Tora Bora his platoon did some serious ground-and-pound on the Taliban. Kelly was at ATT spending a few days to interview fighters for an upcoming book. A full-on political discussion soon ensued and I fled the room from fear of verbal submission or worse!

### A High Level of Training

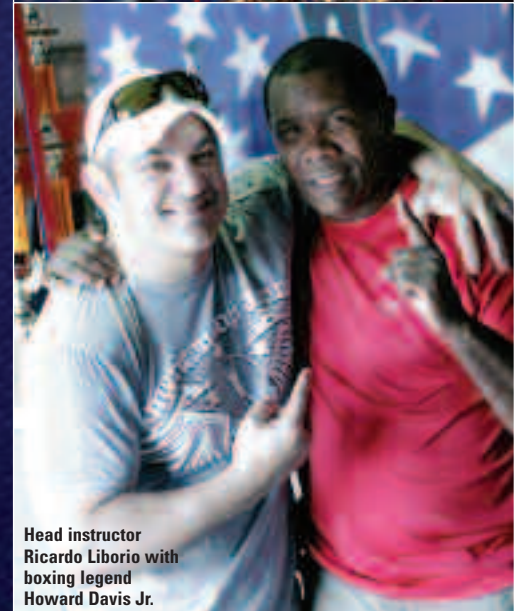
Outside the office in the gym proper, it was training day for the pro fighters. No death metal music or over-the-top hip-hop blares over the speakers. You only hear grunts and the sounds of pads being pounded as well as an occasional breakfall. ATT is a no-frills training facility with two pro rings, a full MMA cage, two grappling areas and a full weight room. No spa, no sauna, no pedicures, and no BS. It is an affirmation of “build it and they will come.” The members range in age from the six-year olds on the mat and in the ring, to AARP member “Papasito” pumping iron and throwing down daily. Pro fighters only before 5 pm, public training afterwards in boxing, jiu-jitsu, muay Thai, weight training, cross training, submission grappling, wrestling and beginning MMA.

But it’s early afternoon and not “amateur hour” yet. Beinke, the ever-gleeful taskmaster and conditioning guru tells me that all the ATT guys love him – but only during the two weeks while recuperate after their last fights. “They most truly love me during the short time that they forget about me,” he laughs. “Nobody likes their conditioning coach.”

“It is not like the Yankees training camp where they ease into training”, said Richie, who had slipped out the door unnoticed behind me. “Here the guys train all year round at a very high level. Their diet and focus is paramount to their success in the cage and ring. They have to be ready in a moments notice to step in for



ATT championship hardware on display!



Head instructor Ricardo Liborio with boxing legend Howard Davis Jr.



ATT General Manager Richie Guerrero

their shot at the big time.”

The lineage of American Top Team links back to Carlson Gracie and student Marcus “Conan” Silveira. Marcus came to south beach Miami in 1996 and opened his academy there with his brother Marcello. Both black belts at the time were nearly unbeatable in Brazilian jiu-jitsu and among their students were Richie Guerrero, now ATT general manager, and ATT president Dan Lambert.

Dan became guiding light to many of the top fighters of the world today by being a pioneer in the sponsorship Brazilian jiu-jitsu competitors who wanted to get into the extreme fighting game. He paid their way to fights and helped with financing so they could train nearly full time. He built a team with sound funda-

mentals in grappling and took it to new heights by being the first to get his fighters into multiple shows when everyone else were trying to align themselves with only one event. The response and success of his early fighters in Pride, UFC, Heroes, WEF, K-1, King of the Cage, Hook and Shoot, and others was so overwhelming that Dan decided to open a full-time training facility in the Fort Lauderdale area.

#### A Worldwide Reach

In 2002, phenomenal world champion Brazilian jiu-jitsu artist Ricardo Liborio joined forces with ATT after leaving the Brazilian Top Team of Murilo Bustamante, Mario Sperry and Bebel. The BTT athletes coached, managed, and trained themselves and others after sepa-



Antonio "Bigfoot" Silva with Jessica Aguilar



Members of the ATT youth program



Anyone wanna' fight?

rating from the late Carlson Gracie. Liborio sold his share in BTT, moved from Rio to Florida, and became a partner in American Top Team with Marcus Silveira and Dan Lambert.

Now in the so-called "modern" era of MMA the talent is so deep at 4631 Johnson Road in Coconut Creek, Florida that George Steinbrenner could do a lot worse than trade his beleaguered Yankees for the pure talent of the American Top Team. Over the years ATT has successfully branded their image, work ethic and team spirit, growing from just 35 stu-

dents to well over 600! They have at least 16 franchises nationwide and many more affiliations. There are over 50 pro fighters training at any given time at ATT. Fifteen have UFC contracts and as many as 20 at one time or another have been signed by them.

The numerous MMA televised events, pay-per-view shows, and live regional promotions shows are full of ATT fighters including Bodog, EliteXC, HDNet Fights, IFL, WEF, KOTC and numerous others. The skill level is so high at ATT that only the trainers themselves surpass

the level of fighting talent.


## World Class Coaches

In addition to Liborio there are at least 25 other BJJ black belts at the school. But there is far more to ATT training than just ground work. **Howard Davis Jr.**, a 1976 Olympic gold medalist as a lightweight in Montreal is now head boxing trainer. He was awarded the Val Barker trophy as the best boxer in the '76 Olympics that included Sugar Ray Leonard, Leon Spinks and Michael Spinks. He amassed a 36-6-1 pro boxing record and fought for the world title three times. His son Dyah Ali Davis has a 9-1 pro boxing record and is an ATT member.

**André "Beinke" Ferreira** is the world class-conditioning coach. Muay Thai champ and K-1 fighter Mohamed Ouali from Belgium is on-site to kick some sense into the grapplers while wrestling coach **Steve Williams**, a two-time Olympic Trials qualifier and two-time NCAA champ teaches strikers how to not get taken down.

## A Focus on the Future

These coaches are dedicated and focused on pushing their fighters to the top and protecting their careers, managing their best interests, and taking a long-term approach to making them world champions. Back in the office after the tour, an anonymous ATT employee motions me over and lowers his voice.

"If you want a great story," he says, "ask Richie to let you see the secret tape of the in-house grappling match between Jeff Monson's wet sheet and Dan Lamberts pellet gun. It's even better than the jockstrap story." I approach Richie and casually mention it. "That's top secret stuff, man," he says sternly. "Very hush-hush." Then he smiles and winks. "Maybe next time you come down." 

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