

The CARRIER in the CAGE

If Jered Andrus looks a little battered and bruised while walking his route, don't worry—the other guy probably looks worse.

In his spare time, Andrus, a member of Grand Rapids, MI Branch 56 and current Leadership Academy student, fights professionally in mixed martial arts (MMA) competitions. He is undefeated in two official bouts and two exhibitions.

After many years as an amateur wrestler, Andrus turned to mixed martial arts because of the complexity of the sport. Instead of pitting wrestlers against wrestlers or boxers against boxers, MMA puts fighters of any style together, with few rules. The competitors often meet inside an octagon-shaped ring surrounded by a chain-link fence, giving the sport its other common name: cage fighting.

It takes a special kind of fighter to enter a cage, and Andrus fits the bill. "I originally got into MMA because I loved watching it and figured, 'why not give it a shot?'" he said. "It didn't look that hard."

Driven by the "Ultimate Fighting Championship" series on pay-per-view television, MMA

is threatening to eclipse boxing as the nation's most popular fighting sport. The fast pace, shorter fights and wider variety of action seem to appeal to a younger generation of fight fans.

Combining different fighting techniques in one ring often has been used to settle friendly disputes over which fighting style works best in any situation. Perhaps the greatest example was martial arts master and actor Bruce Lee, who took the idea to a new level by developing the concept as an art unto itself. Lee took the best techniques from every style and turned himself into an ultimate fighter adapted to face any opponent.

Most MMA fighters specialize in one kind of martial art and work from there. That makes every match different, Andrus said. "I love that aspect of the challenge. You don't know your matchup very far in advance."

MMA allows virtually any kind of fighting style using the knees, legs and feet as well as upper body. Contestants often specialize in certain styles, such as boxing, wrestling, taekwondo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, muay Thai (a style from Thailand that uses knee and elbow strikes along with fists and feet), kickboxing, judo or karate.

The sport overcame most of its image problems in the 1990s with rule changes that made serious injuries less likely, such as allowing the referee, or a fighter caught in a painful wrestling hold, to end a match at any time. Proponents say it is safer than boxing, which typically involves many more hits to the head than an MMA fight. The new rules led to greater acceptance by authorities and broadcasters, though a few states still have laws banning MMA matches.

Fighters may use holds to convince an opponent to submit by

Jered Andrus (in yellow) poses with other winning fighters on the night of his first fight. He hopes to fight again and reach a title fight for a shot at winning a championship belt.



“tapping out”—using a finger to tap on the floor to signal the referee that he is giving in. While holds don’t look as violent as hitting or kicking, they still can inflict intense pain. A fighter may choke an opponent, squeeze a muscle against a bone, or twist a joint to encourage a tap out.

Despite the changes, MMA is not for the faint-hearted. After a fight, helpers come into the ring with towels to clean up sweat—and sometimes blood. The threat of injuries such as lost teeth, broken bones, ripped tendons or concussions looms during every match.

“It’s a full-contact sport,” Andrus said. “You know what you’re getting into when you go into it.”

When it comes to injuries, Andrus has been lucky so far. “No real injuries from fighting,” he said, “just bumps and bruises and a lot of sore muscles.”

Andrus has been wrestling since he was 5, and came to MMA with 15 years as a wrestler and six as a coach. When he enters the cage, he wants to play on that experience by getting close to his opponent or grounding him so he can work him with wrestling moves.

“I still consider myself a wrestling-style fighter. Real close or on the ground—that’s where my comfort zone is,” he said. Andrus wrestled as a kid, and then at Camp Lejeune as a Navy corpsman serving with a Marine Corps unit. He credits his military service for giving him the physical toughness for the sport and the discipline to train two to three hours a day leading up to a fight.

Andrus’ biggest challenge, though, is his age. At 33, he’s in a sport dominated by much younger men. Nevertheless, in both of his two official matches, he defeated each opponent, aged 19 and 22, in the first round.

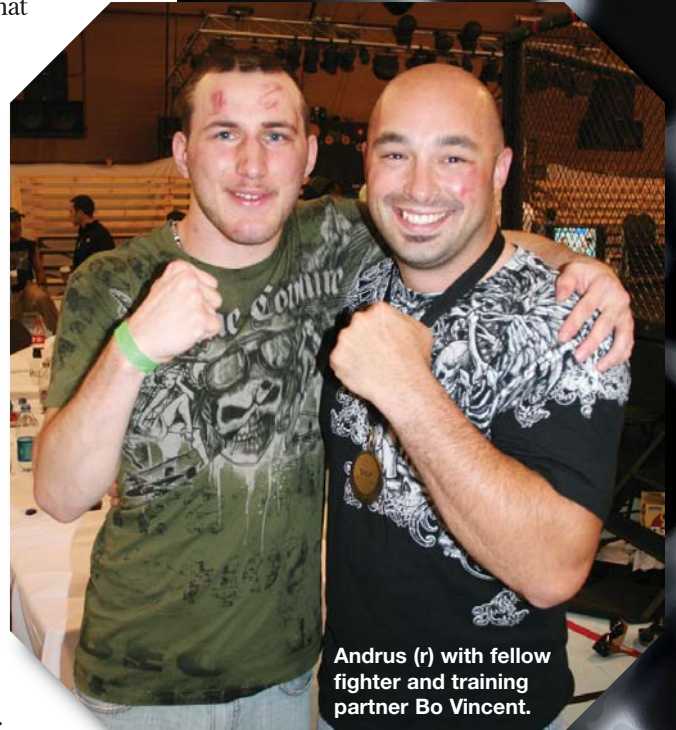
His family and fellow postal workers have had mixed reactions to his chosen sport, Andrus said. “I don’t tell my family until a few days before I have a fight,” he said. “It builds up to it; puts them in a frenzy of stress.”

Letter carriers in his station worry about career-threatening injuries. “Most of my friends and co-workers worry that all it will take is one shot to the leg or head and then my postal career is done. But all of them enjoy watching it,” he said. “There have been quite a few co-workers who have come to my fights so far.”

Patrons on Andrus’ route also have mixed reactions. A fight can leave his face black and blue for a few weeks. When customers learn the cause of his injuries, the responses range from, “Why would you do that?” to “Cool!” Customers also recognize him at fights. After one bout, he heard people in the crowd exclaim, “Hey, that’s the mailman!”

Andrus wants to compete in two or three fights in Grand Rapids this fall, including, he hopes, a local title fight. He fights for a Grand Rapids MMA promotion company called “Ground and Pound Promotions,” which takes its name from the technique of flooring and then repeatedly hitting an opponent. It’s one of many companies nationwide that arrange fights. For Andrus to move up in his sport, he would need to travel to larger cities for fights with bigger promoters. He would also have to overcome the knee injury he suffered while serving in the military. “If I can, I will fight as long as it will let me,” he said. “My knee will determine if I fight this coming fall or if I will start training other fighters.”

Would he move on to a less dangerous and challenging hobby? “Maybe rock climbing,” he said. ✉



Andrus (r) with fellow fighter and training partner Bo Vincent.