

Diaz is built for 'Baddest' UFC event

The left-hander's bold, confrontational ethos suits his 'BMF' fight against Masvidal.

BY MANOUK AKOPYAN

Nate Diaz is always ready for a fight, no matter who the opponent is.

It could be UFC President Dana White one day, an anti-doping official the other. It could be his next foe, Jorge Masvidal on Saturday, or even himself, as he did through a self-imposed three-year ban.

The no-nonsense Diaz (20-11) started his career in combat sports as a ninth-grader after squabbling in local Stockton parks, as nearly a 100 people watched, and on Saturday, he's graduating at age 34 to Madison Square Garden in New York, a locale where only a select few can headline, to mark UFC's 500th event when he takes on Masvidal (34-13) for the inaugural and appropriately named BMF title.

The R-rated acronym ("Baddest...") is not-made-for-print, much like Diaz's explicit speech, but the championship belt appropriately embodies the essence of Diaz, an MMA mainstay since the age of 19 who proudly represents his economically depressed city and never backs down from confrontation.

"I don't ever have to fight again. I didn't have to fight a long time ago. But what am I going to do? I don't like not fighting," said Diaz, who returned to the octagon for the first time since 2016 when he beat Anthony Pettis by decision in August.

"It's self-destructive fighting, and it's self-destructive not fighting, so kill or be killed. I don't want to do this ... at all but sitting back watching someone else do it does not come from me."

Just as Diaz and his career have never followed a straight line, neither did his path to Masvidal. Last week, Diaz declared he was dropping out of the fight because of an adverse finding by the United States Anti-Doping Agency in a pre-fight drug test taken this month.

Diaz was adamant he'd done nothing wrong, and wanted his name to be cleared immediately, going as far as alleging that the UFC tainted his tests. Twenty-four hours later, he had support from Masvidal, White and a slew of others and it was ruled that he'd not committed an anti-doping policy violation, because the vegan fighter had fallen victim to a contaminated supplement.

Seconds before he spoke to a huddled group of reporters to further explain the situation Thursday, Diaz grabbed a bottle of water as if to take a sip and said, "There better not be steroids in here."

"This is warfare. They were telling me 'I'm on drugs.' I told them, 'No I'm not, fix your test,'" continued Diaz. "I continued taking my Whole Foods supplements, and I only eat out of the garden. I live by the code. Only the strong survive. I don't need [performance-enhancing drugs]. They messed up everything and what I believe in. It made me lose sleep at night, and it wasn't fair. You ain't ruining my whole legacy. I'm all natural. If we was cavemen, I'd be the hardest caveman out there."

Even White, who has employed Diaz since 2007, is not sure how to handle the unpredictable Diaz at times.

"The last thing I try to do is figure out why Nate thinks the way he does," said White. "I have no clue. This whole thing that happened with USADA ... he thinks that we did that to him to keep him in check. This is a massive fight for us. The last thing we would do is mess with a fighter, but that's the way he thinks. When somebody thinks that way, what do you do?"

Said Diaz, "You know, I shouldn't be getting into the details, but every time after a fight, relationships change with the whole company. I made all this happen. So the title is already mine.... And I'm not trying to bust nobody out, but I feel like they need some type of leverage over me to keep me from being the ... king of the whole ... you know what I'm saying? They have been the whole time. They live on me."



NATE DIAZ, at a September news conference for UFC 244, said he's "only getting stronger and better." He is the UFC's seventh-ranked welterweight.

White said he has a good relationship with Diaz despite the rough exterior that gives Diaz an uneven appearance and eventually raises even more questions than answers.

"Nate has this thing that people love about him. He's like ... 'I'm not doing what the man tells me to do,'" said White. "But he never actually really does it in a disrespectful way, or actually says it. Every time I see him, Na-

te's one of the nicest guys you'll ever meet."

After incessantly lambasting the UFC and White the last three years for not giving him the right fights and paydays he wanted following a thrilling win over Conor McGregor, Diaz emerged from a haze of marijuana smoke and a self-imposed hiatus this year to run through Pettis and has since resumed screaming from the mountaintops that he's

the best fighter in the world.

He defines the term "fighter" as someone who brings relentless pressure every second of the fight, throwing fists, legs, middle fingers and shouting expletives in no particular order. He's not interested in a wrestling match or poking his jab toward a decision. The cardiac king who trains via triathlons prides himself on frenetic pressure that has earned him 15 post-fight bo-

nuses, the second most in UFC history.

"When you give a real fight, all the attention is on you. That's my fight every time," said Diaz, a 6-foot southpaw who is a well-rounded Brazilian jujitsu black belt with four wins by knockout, 12 via submission.

The UFC's seventh-ranked welterweight is an anti-hero yet one of the biggest stars of the sport despite a crooked record and a lack of a championship. His fan base is so fervent that he can legitimately pull an audience from the counterprogrammed Canelo Alvarez fight in Las Vegas as the Mexican boxer chases history.

Diaz believes he's ready for the resurgent Masvidal, another all-action fighter who recently scored a five-second knockout over Ben Askren, the fastest in UFC history. Masvidal, a Cuban from Miami who grew up in street-fighting competitions, will present the old school Diaz an East Coast versus West Coast challenge as if it were a '90s rap duel.

"I feel like I'm only getting stronger and better," said Diaz, shortly before declaring "Westside!" at the end of his media session. "I was always train, train, train. The second I took three years off, everything started coming together with time."

Should Diaz win the BMF belt, which cost \$50,000 just to make, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson will bestow the strap to him immediately after.

White can't determine what the unpredictable Diaz will do next should he come away victorious — fights with Khabib Nurmagomedov and McGregor are always thrown around — but he's undoubtedly certain the combat star values his respect and legacy over money no matter the decisions he makes, or the fights he picks.

"His pay doesn't suck, but it's more than that for him," said White. "Some guys act a certain way or have a shtick, but he's 100% authentic. People know it, feel it and love him for his personality and his fighting style. They love that combination, and that's what makes him so special."



SERGEY KOVALEV, getting hit during a match in Texas in February, will fight Canelo Alvarez on Saturday.

Mitigated fear factor makes Kovalev an ideal opponent

Alvarez is stepping up from middleweight to light-heavyweight in bid for a fourth title.

BY NORM FRAUENHEIM

LAS VEGAS — Sergey Kovalev never said thanks to opponents a few years ago. He didn't have to. He was the "Krusher" and that's what he did. He crushed. No apology or thanks necessary.

But there's been a different Kovalev evident this week in the days before his looming fight with Canelo Alvarez at the MGM Grand. He might still live up to his Krusher nickname and logo. But it's a polite Krush.

"Thanks," he said to Alvarez at the final news conference this week.

There's plenty to be

thankful for, of course. According to people with Kovalev's management team, the Russian is getting a career-high \$12 million for fighting Alvarez, who is jumping up the scale from middleweight to light-heavyweight in a bid for his fourth title at a fourth weight.

It's a quick turnaround. Kovalev last fought on Aug. 24, scoring an 11th-round stoppage of British light-heavyweight Anthony Yarde in his native Russia. Within days, he got a call with an offer to fight Alvarez. He never hesitated. He never had second thoughts or considered some time away from the training grind.

"I didn't have an option," Kovalev said. "I got a call. I say: I'm ready."

It was a chance at life-changing money. It was also a chance at a fight that might allow him to regain

what he lost in the couple of years since a controversial loss — a unanimous decision — to Andre Ward in 2016. Then, there was a devastating loss by eighth-round TKO to Ward in June 2017.

The Ward losses changed him. But exactly how is a question that won't be answered until he faces the ever-evolving Alvarez. Did Ward strip him of the fear factor he projected in his 175-pound reign? He was at the top of the pound-for-pound debate, the bully at the top of light-heavyweight division, until he ran into Ward.

Did Ward take from Kovalev what Evander Holyfield took from Mike Tyson? Tyson was never the same, never again feared, after two losses to Holyfield, first in November 1996 and then again in the infamous Bite Fight in June 1997. That's one of the theories. A Kovalev no longer feared is a beatable

Kovalev.

But fear isn't wisdom, says Kovalev and his new trainer Buddy McGirt. Fear won't beat Alvarez, they say. But some smarts might.

"I told Sergey: 'You are an older person and that means you've got to be a smarter person,'" McGirt said.

In boxing terms, smarts are called ring IQ. For Kovalev, that means muscle memory. He's been snarling less and jabbing more. There's more technique in his language than taunts. He's not somebody Ward would recognize. But it's clear Alvarez likes him. They smile at each other in nose-to-nose, eyeball-to-eyeball face-offs. This is the same Alvarez who did some head-banging and nearly brawled with Gennady Golovkin at their last two weigh-ins.

Alvarez doesn't fear him. Maybe, that's why he's fighting him.

Alvarez's aim is to be Mexico's greatest fighter

[Hernandez, from D1] predictably destroyed him.

"There is no comparison between me and Canelo," Chavez Sr. told The Times in the buildup to that fight.

The Mexican people would agree.

Chavez won his first 87 fights, administering savage beatings to the likes of Edwin Rosario, Jose Luis Ramirez, Hector Camacho and Greg Haugen. Ironically, it was his most controversial win that transformed him into an iconic figure: a come-from-behind victory over Meldrick Taylor in which referee Richard Steele stopped the fight with two seconds remaining.

Alvarez was wiped out in his first megafight, a decision loss to Floyd Mayweather when he was 23. The two most important fights of his career were against Gennady Golovkin; he was awarded a draw in the initial encounter and a controversial decision victory in the rematch. The two other most notable wins also came on close decisions, against Austin Trout and Erislandy Lara.

There's also the subject of style. Alvarez's versatility has sometimes resulted in criticism, such as when Alvarez elected to stick and move in his first showdown with the power-punching Golovkin. Alvarez's emphasis on defense has created an impression he has more to offer, something trainer Eddy Reynoso confirmed was the case.

"There are many things he does in the gym that he doesn't do in fights because they're unnecessary," Reynoso told reporters in Spanish this week. "He knows how to do many

things you haven't seen."

Chavez, on the other hand, looked as if he held nothing back. He was fearless. He was relentless. He was always on the attack. His style resonated with Mexicans, who believed that his style represented their national character.

Alvarez has yet to inspire the same level of passion. He might never.

Perhaps because of that, Alvarez and his camp sound as if they are focused on reaching more tangible benchmarks.

A victory over the 175-pound champion Kovalev will give Alvarez something Chavez never had, a world title in a fourth weight class. Chavez won world championships at 130, 135 and 140 pounds; Alvarez has won titles at 154, 160 and 168 pounds.

Alvarez was measured when he spoke about his ambitions at a news conference this week.

"The reality is that I want to continue making history in this sport, to leave a great legacy," he said in Spanish. "I think the day I retire, the numbers, the history and the championships I've won will reflect my position as a fighter."

Reynoso was bolder. "I've always told him if he continues down this road, without doubt he will be the greatest boxer Mexico has ever produced, whether people like it or not," Reynoso said.

As Reynoso spoke, Alvarez crossed himself and tapped his knuckles on the table in front of him.

Reynoso didn't mention whom Alvarez would have to surpass to reach that position, but he didn't have to.