



Meet the SANDMAN

Hamilton mixed martial artist Samir Seif doesn't mind getting hit in the ring. But understand one thing. He likes doing the hitting a whole lot more. And he does that well.



Scott RADLEY

He can tell you it doesn't bother him all he wants. He can say he doesn't mind the discomfort. He can even go on about how much the experience expands his spiritual horizons and helps him grow as a person.

Ignore it all. The best advice you'll receive today is simple. Unless you have some kind of weird desire to experience facial reconstruction surgery without painkillers that's done with another man's fists serving as the surgical tools, don't hit Samir Seif. Ever.

Not just because he's a 6-foot-2, 230-pound package of dense muscle. And not just because despite his easy smile and gentle disposition, he looks more than just a little menacing. Like the kind of guy who'd shave his head with a weed whacker just to toughen the skin.

No, you're going to want to avoid violence with him mostly because he's been trained in about two dozen martial arts, is the Ontario super-heavyweight Muay Thai kick-boxing champion, a world bronze medallist, and a former national jiu jitsu champion. But mostly because no matter how badly you hurt him, history suggests he'll never give in.

Proof? OK. How about the time in one of his early fights when his opponent got his ankle in a lock and leaned back so hard the joint became dislocated. Then applied more and more pressure and just waited for him to tap out. Except ...

"I didn't tap," the 34-year-old says. "I actually kicked and popped my ankle back and caught him in an arm bar."

While you process that squeamish morsel of pushing-the-boundaries-of-pain-tolerance queasiness, keep in mind this isn't new to him. If fighting can be in the genes, he's almost certainly got the pugilistic chromosome.

Growing up the son and grandson of martial arts trainers who learned their craft during stints in the army on the West Bank, Seif (pronounced Sife) was introduced to the game as a six-year-old. Working on mats in

the basement of the family home, he started in judo and slowly moved in to other disciplines. But there was always something missing.

"I was always interested in a combative application," he says.

He breaks into a smile when asked if that doesn't simply mean he always wanted to fight. The answer, of course, is yes. But never out of anger. Merely as some kind of test of his mental and physical strength.

Still, it wasn't until he was 20 that he actually started competing. His first year, he won bronze in the national jiu jitsu championship. His family and other instructors thought he was crazy to mix his disciplines, but this was about the time the Ultimate Fighting Championship was getting rolling and he was in love with the idea of diversifying and becoming an all-round fighter. Besides, the individual martial arts alone just weren't extreme enough for him.

"It wasn't enough contact for me," he says. "Not even close."

Even when that meant eating a few beatings along the way. In one bout, he got absolutely pounded with what he estimates was 200 or more shots

to the head. But instead of being discouraged or angry, he was embarrassed and became more determined than ever to better himself.

After taking five years off following the birth of his son, he returned to the sport last August. First he opened his own gym on Barton Street directly across from Centre Mall. It's called Samir's Combat Reaction, named after the martial art he created. You can spot it pretty easily, mostly because it's the only building on the street decorated with a huge cutout of him pounding the living snot out of some other guy.

Then, with the business established, he began training six days a week for four hours a day. Then he showed up for his comeback fight in better shape than he'd ever been.

"I took him out with a knee to the liver," Seif says of his unfortunate opponent. "Fifty-six seconds, he was out."

Since then, he's gone 14-2, generally taking no more than a week off after each. Though that's barely enough time for his opponents' bruises to turn from purple to green, he says it's more than sufficient for him.

'I was going nowhere'

Sixteen is pretty young for an epiphany. But for Shane Campbell, the choice was so bloody obvious he really couldn't miss it.

The Hamilton kid could turn his party-all-the-time-and-never-go-to-school life around. Or he could just head a little further down to road toward ...

"I was going nowhere," he interjects.

That's blunt enough. Still, the way he was able to get his life turned on a dime and headed in a positive direction seems more than a little bit touched by some supernatural plan.

Because of all the guys that could've been his best friend, he had one who'd started going to a martial arts gym shortly before Campbell decided to change things. And at the same time this decision was made, this best buddy began urging him to come along for a workout and see if he liked it.

That was four years ago. Turns out he loved it. The direction. The goal-setting. The physical challenge. The mental discipline.

"This gave me something to do," he says.

More accurately, something he could kick butt at. Literally. A couple of months after starting training, he had his first fight and

won. A couple of months later, same thing. And again. Then, two years after he first walked through the gym door, he won his first title, claiming the Ontario middleweight belt in only his 10th fight.

Today at 20, he has a collection of six belts. If he wins tonight in Florida, he'll have a huge win to really start building a lucrative pro career.

Either way, he says he has a passion for the game and can overlook the darker side of his sport — specifically the pain involved.

Like many martial arts, Muay Thai kick-boxing involved punching and other striking. But its unique feature is the sickening kicks that cause shins to clack against shins at high velocity. You can train all you want, but you can't completely obscure the sharp stinging of bone-on-bone clacking.

"I've had a couple fights where my shins were so badly hurt, I was almost in tears," he admits.

Then he pauses for a few seconds before throwing a curveball.

"But when I've been in the ring a couple times and kicked shin to shin, I liked it."

It's not just pain that marks his sport

How to see them

The Shin Do Kumate — tonight's Muay Thai event from Jacksonville — is available on pay per view in this area. The event starts at 7 p.m. tonight and can be purchased for \$29.99. Contact your cable provider for more details. In addition to Samir Seif and Shane Campbell, two other Hamilton fighters are on the card against tough opponents. Mukai Maromo (7-1) will battle in a middleweight tilt against a French fighter who is not only 45-7 with 32 knockouts, but he's the three-time champion of this event. Meanwhile, David Hale (4-0) will be slugging it out with a more experienced fighter from West Virginia. ■ Plus, check out a video of Seif and Campbell in which they talk about their sport and their accomplishments in their own words at thespec.com.

Like this week. On Saturday, he fought in Cambridge. Today, he's fighting in a pay-per-view in Florida. This one's a full Muay Thai event in which almost anything goes, including punishing elbows to the face that are banned in many events because of their ability to open gruesome cuts.

Yeah, it can be brutal. He prefers to think of it as beautiful though.

"It's probably the most ultimate level right now," he says. "You only can't bite, gouge eyes, or kick the groin."

Assuming things go well, he has his eyes on a berth in the Ultimate Fighting Championship or the

Japanese-based K1 circuit next. Seif figures he's got five good years left in his career before he retires to a life of training the next batch of guys like him. That's enough time to make a name for himself and collect a few decent purses along the way.

If nothing else, he knows he won't get in his own getting there. On the third finger of his left hand, the letters DBD are tattooed. Death Before Dishonour. His code for living and for fighting.

It begs the question. Has he ever tapped out of any fight?

"Not yet," he says.

Somehow this isn't much of a surprise. If you're not going to give in

with your ankle out of joint ... well ... would anything make him quit?

"No. I'd take it until the ref stops it."

No matter what?

"No matter what."

He smiles again. It's the grin of someone who insists that every heavy blow that lands flush on his face is a growth tool of sorts. No, most folks can't understand that kind of thinking. But most of us can't do what he can, either.

Like that fight on Saturday. He won — you probably guessed that — but how he did it is a little more remarkable. He ended it in just four seconds. Four. Just one punch to the other guy's jaw and it was over.

One thousand and one. One thousand and two. One thousand and three. One thousand and four. Done. You can watch it on YouTube.

So go ahead and hit him if you really want. But understand there's a good reason he's known as The Sandman.

And you probably don't want to find out first-hand.

sradley@thespec.com
905-526-2440



PHOTOS BY BARRY GRAY / THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

SHANE CAMPBELL. Muay Thai kick-boxing helped him turn his life around. Today he's a champion.

though. Nicks and bruises go away. Serious injuries — and this game can produce them — might not. Still, that's a risk he takes, even if it means long-term planning and future goals aren't easy to chart out. If you don't know what the next fight will bring, you can't very easily lay out much of a road map.

"You could easily get your neck broken and be paralyzed for the rest of your life," he says. "I'm well aware of that ... You can die

in your next fight, so I'm not putting goals too far ahead."

Except two. Keep winning. And now that he's gone back and finished school, get involved with kids who were like he was. Help them find a way to get their life on track, whether it's through the martial arts or something else.

He's been there.

He knows.