

LIFESTYLE

- Books
- Culture
- Religion & Ethics
- Home & Garden
- Food
- Travel
- Health
- Columnists
- Announcements
- Community

Previous Lifestyle

- Sunday, Apr 16
- Saturday, Apr 15
- Friday, Apr 14
- Thursday, Apr 13
- Wednesday, Apr 12
- Tuesday, Apr 11
- Monday, Apr 10

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Warriors retreat

U.S. Marines and ultimate fighters gather in Simi Valley for weekend of martial arts training

By Jeremy Pollack, Correspondent
March 28, 2006

When the head trainer for the United States Marine Corps' martial arts program flew across the country to California earlier this month, he had never even heard of Simi Valley.

But Master Gunnery Sgt. Shane Franklin would not pass up the opportunity to train with some of the world's most famous martial arts champions, and they were convening at Simi Valley's Grand Vista Hotel, the site of the sixth semi-annual Paradise Warrior Retreat.

The Arena Sports Bar attached to the Grand Vista was bustling on St. Patrick's Day morning, filled with locals and out-of-towners, but these folks were not here for the beer; they were ready to embark on the three-day seminar taught by martial arts and ultimate fighting legends.



Photos by Matt McClain / Star staff

Chance Proppe, left, of Hemet blocks a punch from Philip Foster of Fresno on Friday during a kickboxing class that was part of the Paradise Warrior Retreat at the Grand Vista Hotel in Simi Valley.



Jackie Charvet, left, of Port Hueneme faces off with Jay Ingleton of London, England, during a kickboxing class Friday during the Paradise Warrior Retreat. More than 70 attended the three-day event.

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Among the 70-plus students in attendance were a police officer, a firefighter, some teenagers and a retired kickboxing champ. All around the bar in every direction that day, there was talk of martial arts.

World champion kung fu grandmaster Eric Lee was chatting with kung fu master Eric Oram, who listened intently as Lee shared a quiet tale of his old training days with the late kung fu legend Bruce Lee.

Behind them were two other seminar teachers, international judo champ Gokor Chivichyan and kickboxing legend Benny "The Jet" Urquidez, talking to a pair of awestruck students from Florida about the future of martial arts.

To the strains of the National Anthem at the opening ceremony, some students bowed their heads, others covered their hearts; five in the crowd stood at complete attention, backs straight, arms at their sides, heads high.

These were the five head trainers for the Marines Corps, who were sent from Marine Training Headquarters at Quantico, Va., to attend the retreat.

The soldiers stood focused and proud. Throughout the song, they remained at attention behind their ranking officer, Franklin.

"We come to the retreat to see what the rest of America is learning," Franklin said.

Franklin and his team are instructor-trainers in charge of leading about 20,000 Marine Corp trainers across the country and more than 180,000 Marines overall.

"The teachers here are the leaders in the martial arts world right now," Franklin said, "and we wanted to see if there's anything we could take back and apply in our own training."

In fact, several champion martial artists and ultimate fighters have been out to Quantico to train Marines, including UFC legends Randy Couture, Ken Shamrock and Pat Miletich, one of the Paradise Warrior teachers this weekend.

Military training is a challenge, said Miletich, a five-time Ultimate Fighting Champion.

"You gotta remember these guys wear full combat packs, sometimes weighing up to 60 pounds on their backs," he said. "So the training for Marines is a bit different."



Matt McClain / Star staff

Above, Gokor Chivichyan, bottom, demonstrates a leg lock move to his longtime student, Ken Harte, during the Paradise Warrior Retreat in Simi Valley. Ultimate fighter Chuck Liddell, shown on the left in the poster at left, made an appearance at the three-day event.

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It was no different for them this weekend, though, as the five Marines got out onto the mat with everyone else and proceeded to learn kickboxing, Brazilian jujitsu, kung fu, judo and any other art form these teachers presented.

"It's a chance for my trainers to roll around with guys they'd normally only watch on TV," Franklin said.

Among the stars were current Pride Fighting champion Dan Henderson and, perhaps the most famous fighter in the country right now, Ultimate Fighting light-heavyweight champion Chuck Liddell, who was unable to teach because he had broken a leg in his last fight.

"It's a way to get back with the fans," Liddell said of his appearance at the seminar. He was there, he said, to support both the sport and his country, as he knew the Marine Corps would be sending representatives this weekend.

This was the second time the Paradise Warrior Retreat has taken place at Simi Valley's Grand Vista Hotel.

Why Simi Valley? The founders of the retreat say they decided on the Grand Vista not only for the large, accommodating ballroom but also for its unique location and environment.

Less than an hour from LAX and Burbank, the hotel is surrounded by foothills and rock formations and boasts a view of the entire Simi Valley. The fighters are able to attain a much-desired peace and seclusion, forcing both the champions and the students to "eat, sleep, relax and train together over the weekend," Urquidez said.

Each day consisted of about four different classes, for a total of almost 24 hours of training in various styles during the weekend.

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- Saturday, Apr 15
- Friday, Apr 14
- Thursday, Apr 13
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About ultimate fighting

March 28, 2006

Here are some frequently asked questions and answers from ufc.com:

What is the UFC? The entity of the new UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) is the world's leading mixed martial arts sports association, formed in January 2001 by Zuffa, a Las Vegas-based limited liability corporation. The new UFC features a spectrum of live event sports, television production and ancillary business development.

What is mixed martial arts? Mixed martial arts is an intense and evolving combat sport in which competitors use interdisciplinary forms of fighting that include jujitsu, judo, karate, boxing, kickboxing and wrestling to their strategic and tactical advantage in a supervised match. Scoring for mixed martial arts events in Nevada, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Florida is based on athletic commission-approved definitions and rules for striking (blows with the hands, feet, knees or elbows) and grappling (submission, chokeholds, throws or takedowns). No single discipline reigns.

What is ultimate fighting? Ultimate fighting is a proprietary term of the UFC. It is defined as "mixed martial arts competition between high-level professional fighters who use the disciplines of jujitsu, karate, boxing, kickboxing, wrestling and other forms in UFC live events."

How dangerous is it? While this is a highly intense sport, fighter safety is of paramount concern to UFC ownership and management. It is noteworthy that no competitor has ever been seriously injured in a UFC event.

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