The day I stepped into the cage

Interpreting for a sporting event is always exciting, but being right in the center of the action is the ultimate experience.

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The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is an event in which fighters compete using a mix of martial arts to defeat their opponent. It’s the fastest growing sport in Brazil, and the arenas are always sold out. And the cage (officially known as the Octagon) is the center of attention. I started out interpreting for UFC during press conferences, working from the "safety" of the booth, until one day I was asked to interpret inside the cage. From the moment the UFC returned to Brazil, I was looking forward to getting inside the Octagon, but when the day finally came, I got the famous UFC jitters.

The UFC, contrary to what some believe, is neither an event without rules nor a "no holds barred" fight. In fact, there are many rules but as it is a mixed martial arts fight, they have to be more encompassing and take into consideration all the various techniques.

A UFC fight night is broadcast to all corners of the world and countless viewers watch an average of 10 fights per fight night. The UFC is now broadcast to more than 145 countries and territories, reaching 800 million homes in 30 different languages. In recognition of such widespread popularity, the organizers decided to take the event itself on the road. When it is held in a country other than the U.S., usually half the fighters are locals, which obviously makes the crowd go crazy.

The UFC has an average of 30 fight nights a year, and in 2013 approximately six of them will be in Brazil. No one knows the exact number, but rumors say that approximately 1 billion people tune in to a title bout.

In the cage

At the end of most fights, an interviewer goes into the cage to ask the winner a few questions, which is where I come in. After the referee announces the victor, the interviewer and I approach the fighter. Thus, I become a consecutive interpreter inside a cage, right beside a very excited fighter - who very often has just won the bout of his life - with a big TV camera on top of my face broadcasting my image and voice to the world while thousands of spectators chant or boo, depending on the victor’s replies.

Sometimes the interviewer must ask the fighter to remove his mouthguard; he is so blissfully happy that he is incapable of remembering he still has it in his mouth when he starts talking. In some cases, despite having won, he is injured - his mouth cut or nose bleeding. Nothing much, just enough to spice up the already exciting event. Plus some fighters come from small towns in Brazil and it can
be difficult to understand their local accent.

As I said, the very first time I walked into the octagon I had the jitters, probably the same ones many fighters endure on their debut. My hands were sweating and I was absolutely convinced that when I opened my mouth nothing would come out. Luckily something did, and I was later told I actually looked very calm and composed. If they only knew!

Just as we do for any other job, I had prepared a glossary and studied all the terms, especially the names of the various techniques used. I was sure that one of the fights would end with a move whose correct translation I wouldn’t remember. But luck was on my side; I escaped unscathed.

Now, several UFCs later, I’ve gotten used to hearing a crowd of more than 15,000 boo or cheer madly after hearing my interpretation, but it took quite a few events for that to happen. Many in the audience now recognize me and ask what it feels like to be there beside the fighters they idolize. And some even ask me to take a photo with them. I must admit it is very rewarding to know the crowd acknowledges my work.

Like many fighters the world over, I now find myself longing to get back into the cage. And after many “fights,” I can definitely say that my dream has come true!

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