



Instructor Alexander Stewart, of Ithaca, left, teaches David Canseco, of Groton, during a class at the Ultimate Athletics gym at The Shops at Ithaca Mall in Lansing. SIMON WHEELER / STAFF PHOTO

MMA grows as fitness alternative

Centers promise 'workout like no other'

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While activities such as running, walking, biking and swimming remain America's go-to methods of getting and staying in shape, one fairly new sport is quickly gaining popularity among a wide range of weekend warriors.

Mixed martial arts, made popular in the United States by the Ultimate Fighting Championship — which is now nationally televised on FOX — is not so discretely elbowing its way into the national spotlight, and staking its claim as an up-and-coming fitness interest.

According to The Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association's 2011 "Sports, Fitness & Recreational Activities Topline Participation Report," approximately 1.75 million Americans over the age of 6 participated in mixed martial arts for fitness in 2010.

While that number doesn't approach the 49.4 million who went jogging in the same year, the discipline of mixed martial arts is steadily showing its ability to attract participants of all ages, shapes and sizes.

The sport is well represented in Ithaca, where 300 students and 35 professional and amateur fighters train on a daily basis at Ultimate Athletics, a state-of-the-art mixed martial arts training and fitness center located in the Shops at Ithaca



Tasha Chamberlain, 24, of Elmira, kicks a muay-thai pad held by Donald Gates, 26, of Elmira, during a striking class at 5th Round Fitness in Horseheads. JASON WHONG / STAFF PHOTO

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Mall, between Best Buy and Dick's Sporting Goods. Just a few years ago, owner Ryan Ciotoli, a graduate of Ithaca College, started the business in Cortland, where he trained and managed a handful of local fighters, "basically out of our backyard."

The trend is also well under way in Elmira, where cousins John Franchi and Pat Audinwood operate 5th Round Fitness MMA, at the Elmira Fitness Center, a smaller but similar enterprise to Ultimate Athletics that currently counts 50 students. On Saturday night, First Arena just a few miles down the road will be hosting "Art of Combat," an amateur mixed martial arts event that will feature fighters based out of both Ultimate Athletics and 5th Round Fitness MMA.

Focus on fitness

Perhaps even more encouraging for the growth of the sport is that the majority of students training at these two local gyms are not fighters. "From when we first opened we had to kind of fight this stigma that you have to be a fighter to train here," said Don Carlo- Clauss, boxing instructor at Ultimate Athletics. "You don't." Opened in 2010 by Ciotoli, Ultimate Athletics serves as both dojo for Ithaca's own professional mixed martial arts team, called Bombsquad, and one-of-a-kind exercise haven for members of the general public. The gym offers personalized lessons in a wide variety of martial arts, from boxing and wrestling to more exotic disciplines such as Brazilian jiu-jitsu and muaythai. Also offered are martial arts-inspired CrossFit classes and youth programs such as "Fit and Focused," aimed at building self-confidence and self-discipline through fitness. "The majority of the people that ever come in here have no intention of getting punched in the face or anything like that," said Carlo-Clauss, who is a professional Bombsquad team member. "We cater to the beginner, the novice. We expect people to come in not knowing stuff and we want to help people get in shape and learn the skills. That's part of what we do." The same formula has also proved successful in Elmira for Franchi and Audinwood, also professional fighters with team Bombsquad, who teach classes such as women's kickboxing, striking, Full MMA and Kids MMA.

Franchi, a Thomas Edison High graduate with a professional mixed martial arts record of six wins and two losses, says the hardest part of starting his business has been convincing prospective students that working out at his facility doesn't mean they have to fight. "We try to keep a pretty laid-back atmosphere here," Franchi said. "If someone wants to just come in to get technique and get a good workout we accommodate that. We're not going to force somebody to do something they're not going to. At the same time, there's other people that want to do some contact stuff and we accommodate that, also."

Rapid growth

While Ciotoli said that many prospective students are still a little intimidated when first walking into his facility, he adds that the sport of mixed martial arts has come a long way in a just a few years.

"I think it's an easy sell for someone that's a little bit younger and that has grown up with the sport, because it has increased in popularity," Ciotoli said. "Ten years ago, the sport wasn't as big as it is now, and 20 years ago people didn't really know anything about it. Some of the older people that come in are kind of hesitant at first, but we allow people to try it out for a day for free. Try out the classes and see what we have to offer."

Both Ciotoli and Franchi said that a number of their students have crossed over to mixed martial arts from more traditional martial arts such as karate and judo, which have seen a decline in recent years. According to the same report from The Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, total participation in traditional martial arts dropped 15.8 percent from 2009 (6.5 million) to 2010 (5.9 million) and 10.9 percent over the last decade.

"Mixed martial arts is proving that it's an elite way to learn how to defend yourself," Ciotoli said. "The younger people and college students coming in, they know that and know it's a viable way to get a workout in and that it's something practical."

According to Carlo-Clauss, what those brave enough to breach the gym doors do get, when they sign up for a mixed martial arts lesson, is a workout like no other.

"It's unconventional, and I think that's good, because a lot of people that come in here to work out like the fact that they're going to get something new every day," Carlo-Clauss said. "It's not going to be get on a treadmill for 30 minutes. It's going to be flip this tire, swing a sledge hammer, pick up a sandbag, run down here, run back. It's tough."

"Intense," is how Myriah Fitterer, 24, chose to describe her Ultimate Fit class. "You sweat a lot. If you're not sweating then you're definitely not doing it right."

Confidence builder

More than offering a gut-busting workout, 5th Round Fitness MMA regular Mike Wheeler, 31, of Horseheads says mixed martial arts has boosted his self-esteem. Learning the tricks of the trade from two professionals with extensive fighting experience certainly doesn't hurt either, Wheeler said. "It gives me a lot of confidence," Wheeler said. "These guys are both professionals, number one. That says a lot about the kind of training you're going to get here. It's definitely an awesome way to stay in shape, and it's a fun sport to do."

Ciotoli, who had a largely successful wrestling career at Ithaca College before graduating in 2002, said practicing mixed martial arts is also beneficial for athletes competing in other sports. Ithaca High School's varsity baseball team and Ithaca College's varsity wrestling squad have done strength and conditioning workouts at Ultimate Athletics in the past, and many students at both facilities are ex-athletes looking to satisfy their competitive edge. "I came here originally for the cardio boxing," said Shannae Murray, 24, of Ithaca. "I joined about two years ago. I saw their Ultimate Fit Class, and I recognized a lot of the movements from when I played soccer in high school. They let me try it for free and I got hooked on it. ... it's a really good workout."

For Janelle Palermo, of Lansing, mixed martial arts classes have been a welcome new experience for her foster children, Grace and Luke Anderson, both 6. "They love it, they really do" Palermo said. "I think it's nice to show them something different, and especially with the little ones it's nice having them in an enclosed area and not having to worry about them so much."

Staff writer Jason Whong contributed to this report.



Christina Houck, left, and Kerry Schell, both of Ithaca, learn boxing moves during a class at the Ultimate Athletics gym at The Shops at Ithaca Mall in Lansing.

SIMON WHEELER / STAFF PHOTOS



Kai Rome, 13, of Dryden, and David Canseco, right, of Groton, work out during a class at the Ultimate Athletics gym.



Kerry Schell, of Ithaca, learns boxing from instructor Alexander Stewart, of Ithaca, during a class at Ultimate Athletics.



Mike Wheeler, 31, of Horseheads, left, and Victor Melendez, 15, of the Town of Elmira, work on their moves at 5th Round Fitness. JASON WHONG / STAFF PHOTO

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