

King of the screen

MMA filmmaker Razak signed a mega cable deal

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By Nicki Jhabvala, SI.com

Hollywood has hijacked mixed martial arts. Think *Karate Kid* meets *Bring it On* (you know, that cheerleading movie).

According to *Never Back Down*, the world of underground fighting works a little something like this: boy (and likely Calvin Klein underwear model) moves to a new town. Boy lusts after innocent, cute girl. Boy encounters bully. Boy works his butt off to beat up bully. Boy becomes hero.

How quaint.

"That stuff just doesn't happen in real life," says **Bobby Razak**. "The guys in the movie are not fighters, the whole story is cheesy, and in my 13, 14 years in MMA, I've never seen any story like that."

For dedicated MMA followers, the film is a double-edged sword, cheaply, and inaccurately, promoting a sport that's growing but still struggling for acceptance. And Razak understands first-hand the battles the sport has endured -- in and out of the cage.

As a former MMA fighter, he not only admires the sport, but also has borne the sport's die-hard regimen. Judo, boxing, martial arts, ultimate fighting -- he's done it all and probably seen it all. And as an independent filmmaker, he's also put it all on screen.

His first documentary, *Rites of Passage*, which was screened at the Sundance Festival, follows the lives of multiple fighters, combining personal drama with in-the-ring action. Delving into the technique and tactics of MMA, his next film, *Pit Fight*, was the first to capture bare-knuckle fighting live on 35 mm film. Follow-ups *Invincible Warrior* and *Underground NHB* earned him recognition among many in the MMA circle as he followed star **Chuck Liddell** and **John Lewis** on their quest for the best techniques and bare-knuckle brawls in Holland.

After watching Razak's series, it will be clear how **Quinton Jackson** (center), the UFC light heavyweight champion, earned his nickname "Rampage."

Courtesy of Niki Faldemolaei



Warning: there's nothing comparable to "the Iceman" in *Never Back Down*. Yes, Hollywood's take is, well, tacky, but it's also a big-screen advertisement for the sport. Capturing the real stuff, the hard-core fights and psychological unrest is a task Razak has taken on himself. And so far, his popularity is growing almost as fast the sport itself.

Razak recently inked a deal with Time Warner, the parent company of SI.com, to put his latest mixed martial arts reality series *Underground Kings of MMA* on the media megacorp's video-on-demand channel. Starting in May, the series will be carried on six cable networks and syndicated across broadband and mobile. That's 22 episodes of complete 24/7 access to the training routines, unseen brawls, mental breakdowns, fighter-manager clashes, legal conflicts and high-profile matchups of many of the MMA's best: **Quinton "Rampage" Jackson, Frank Shamrock, Riddick Bowe** and Lewis.

While Razak's other films were popular among the MMA enthused, it wasn't until recently that the sport itself took off across multiple platforms and outlets. In February, CBS signed ProElite's EliteXC fight division to a primetime slot, and, a week later, NBC signed *Strikeforce* to late-night. Spike TV currently has the reality show *The Ultimate Fighter* and BET is airing *Iron Ring*.

And, of course (and certainly not surprisingly) **Mark Cuban** has taken part in the action, broadcasting numerous fights on his HDNet.

Still, to many, MMA is simply a legalized form of bestial bloodshed -- brutal, bloody, and just downright disturbing. An act Sen. **John McCain** called "human cockfighting." Razak, however, sees an art form, a beauty unlike any other.

"The sport isn't brutal at all," he says. "You have two professional individuals who are agreeing to fight and they're doing it within the realm of competition and finance. It's like the canvas of the blood -- very beautiful, poetic. Like two people engaged in a dance."

So Chuck Liddell equals **Fred Astaire**? Quite the scene, eh?

"I'm the director, so I'm probably being excessively poetic about it," he says. "But I want the viewers to go inside the minds of the fighter, feel what he's feeling and then go on the journey with him."

Razak's fighting journey brought him to America from Tottenham, England. Introduced to judo by his father at the meager age of 5, Razak made the rounds from many types of fighting. But 1999 marked the start and end to his professional MMA career. After earning a two-round decision against **Danny Rushton** in Night of the Samurai 3 in England, Razak took his perfect record (1-0) and moved on to his aspiration.

"I came here to keep pushing my goal of boxing," he says. "But I had two simultaneous dreams: to be a filmmaker and to be **Bruce Lee**. I didn't become Bruce Lee, so I became a filmmaker."

It's the "unknown" that keeps a man swinging while his entire face is bruised and smashed in -- that's what will win a fight, according to Razak. A fighter's mental toughness will determine his longevity. The sane one standing will get the belt.

"I think a lot of fighters are kind of insane, not Joe Schmo personalities," he says. "I mean, they're sweethearts but they have a switch. I try to see what makes the fighters tick, and, yeah,

[Underground Kings] is really candid. There's some really off-the wall stuff because I'm really exploring the mental aspect of MMA. A lot of people don't realize that the physical aspect of MMA is really a mute point because if you aren't mentally strong then you're going to break down in the fights. And that's something that's always really fascinated me."

The required mental tenacity and the inevitable personality clashes. If the Real World incorporated ultimate fighting, you telling me you wouldn't be interested?

In Razak's series, it's the meshing of the bad-asses with the do-gooders, the **Mike Tyson**s in the ring meshing with the **Tiger Woods** types outside the ring. The storylines that can interest fans more than **A-Rod**'s dynamic personal life, but still provide the knock-out thrillers. And Razak not only tapes, but also encourages the almost-bipolar tendencies, egging on fighters, looking to pull out the psychological extremes.

"The last guy that we filmed was butting heads with his trainer pretty hardcore, to the point where he was having a physical and mental breakdown," Razak says. "It was a combination of me badgering him, and his trainers badgering him, and I could see he was breaking down. My style is to see how the fighters are mentally, because I think that's the mark of a champion."

The real kicker, though, may be the anti-drama sides of the fighters. As contradictory as it may seem, the fighters' humble and soft-spoken demeanors set the sport apart from the **Vince McMahan**s. Sure, Liddell is in a minority being able to make a 200-pounder drop to his knees, wincing in pain. But he's in an even smaller crowd with his lost-puppy visage and barely audible tone. Unlike the staged WWE, mixed martial artists treat their craft as a sport, not a show.

As MMA continues to grow, surprises may continue to pop up for the non-followers -- within the sport and especially within Razak's new series. Having just finished filming **He-Man Gipson**, an ex-pro heavyweight from America who was taking on the growing talent pool in Scotland, Razak sheds light on the conflicts between the Scottish Parliament and MMA -- a battle reminiscent of 10 years ago here and an issue still happening with the International Olympic Committee. Few want the sport, but even fewer know much about it. Yes, MMA is rough. It's real and it's raw. But Razak and Underground Kings are determined to provide a different outlook on MMA.

"It's a beautiful art, but if you are not educated in the sport, then I guess you can perceive it as brutal. I want to educate people."

Source: Sports Illustrated April 2008