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Passion, Pain, and Demon Slaying

How an outstanding wrestling career became the chance of a lifetime in MMA.

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On January 26, 2019, arriving at the Richard J. Ernst Community Cultural Center in Annandale, Virginia for his first MMA fight, Garrett Lineberger was calm. Several fighters were scattered around the lobby, nervously pacing and practicing their moves. It was the inaugural event of the Cowboy Fight Series, designed by MMA star Cowboy Cerrone to showcase the best amateur mixed martial arts fighters.

In September, Lineberger had received a call from an MMA agent that he knew, offering him a spot in the fight series. At the time, Lineberger was working as an assistant wrestling coach at his alma mater, Notre Dame. Acknowledging the magnitude of the opportunity, Lineberger accepted.

But three days after he accepted, Lineberger blew out his ACL and MCL. He had never been seriously injured before; over the next five months, he rehabilitated while continuing his training. Still, his knee was not fully healed in the days leading up to the fight.

Standing in the arena, Lineberger felt ready, but then he learned there was a last-minute opponent change. His new competition was Jose Soto, a fighter with more experience than his initial opponent. As soon as the fight started, Lineberger faced his expertise. Lineberger struck, but was stuffed by his opponent, who followed up with a kick.

"I'm pretty sure I broke my elbow in the first thirty seconds." Lineberger later remarked.

Then Lineberger found himself in an arm bar, a classic submission technique. Both of their bodies were dry since the fight was in its early stages, making it even more difficult to escape. Fans watched, assuming these would be the final moments of the match.

But Lineberger had other plans. He knew his life had led him to this moment, and he knew what had to be done.

Around age three, Lineberger was introduced to wrestling by his father. Admittedly, he did not enjoy wrestling at all. His short attention span kept him from focusing; however, in his third year participating, he decided it was time to get serious and see if hard work could pay off.

From watching DVR recordings of college wrestling matches to checking FloWrestling, a groundbreaking wrestling website, each day, Lineberger studied his sport meticulously. Lineberger was well educated in his sport. He watched the performances of top ranked wrestlers and tried to emulate their moves.

During his wrestling career at Thomas Stone High School, Lineberger covered his bedroom walls with sources of motivation. A newspaper clipping secured to his wall with a thumbtack listed the names of the All Metropolitan Area wrestlers from recent years. Beside it hung a sticky note where he'd written a list of his goals.

SMAC (Southern Maryland Athletic Conference) Champion
Regional Champion
State Champion

The packed stands at the University of Maryland erupted with cheers as the 2012 State Final wrestling match between Thomas Stone High School and Huntington High School ended. Lineberger, a Junior, leaped into the arms of his father. Thomas Stone hadn't won a state championship in 21 years— until today.

His blue eyes met the gaze of Head Coach Mike Kositzke standing across the gym, and Lineberger approached him.

"I'm sorry." Lineberger said, his disappointment displayed across his blushed and dampened face.

Coach Kositzke looked at him, baffled. "What could you possibly be sorry for?"

“That match was way too close. That kid did not deserve to be that close to me. That will never happen again.”

Lineberger won every match for the remainder of his high school career, finishing with his second state championship win.

Lineberger made numerous college visits in trying to determine where to wrestle collegiately. He soon noticed that all the schools and coaches promised things that seemed too good to be true. He could see through the politics of a lot of the programs, and he wanted an authentic experience.

In early Spring, he traveled from Southern Maryland to a Division 2 college outside of Cleveland, Ohio. Immediately, Lineberger was drawn to Notre Dame because the program was a melting pot of talent. After Notre Dame, Lineberger cancelled the rest of his college visits. He knew where he was headed.

Lineberger initially redshirted his freshman year. But his coaches noticed his performances in tournaments during that time and stripped his red shirt right before the 2014 National Duals, the first tournament of the second half of the year. In his first match in a Notre Dame singlet, Lineberger matched up against the #1 wrestler in the country in the 197-pound weight class. He ultimately won, and he secured the win for his team.

Lineberger won his first National Championship in his freshman season. He had watched wrestlers win it before, and now he knew what it felt like.

"I was able to manifest everything I had ever hoped for," he said. "In that moment, I thought nothing could top it."

But after the championship, he was confronted by new pressures. At a celebratory party, a new teammate told him to "watch out," as they would be in the same weight class the next year. That summer, his teammate's voice ran like a mantra through Lineberger's head.

Lineberger's sophomore year was rough. He was on track to win the national tournament again until he lost to an easy opponent in a semi-final, and ultimately lost his title.

It was dark for a while. Lineberger had always dealt with his emotions by secluding himself and thinking through his problems on his own. During his junior year, his friends didn't see him as often, and he spent long nights at the gym alone. By the end of the year, falling in the National

Tournament again, he knew he had no choice but to work as hard as he could to win his senior year. If not, he would never be happy with himself.

A few days before the National Tournament his senior year, while riding around in his car, Lineberger's friend played him a few songs from a Kid Cudi album entitled *Passion, Pain, and Demon Slayin.* He didn't know why, but the songs made him feel less nervous.

On the day of the match, Lineberger walked around the arena with a smile. One by one, he went up to past opponents, placing his hand on their shoulders and thanking them for the memories they shared.

Peace. Peace is what he felt as he outwrestled his opponent and the referee called the match, signifying Lineberger's National Championship win.

"All the pain was let out," Lineberger said. "A lot of the skeletons and demons in the closet. All of it was gone."

After college, Lineberger tried to pursue a career in professional wrestling. He attended a couple of tournaments, but similar to his college visits, he discovered a lack of authenticity. He was bothered by the politics of the business side of the sport.

During this time, Lineberger's best friend Joey Davis had begun a career in MMA and invited him to a fight. Davis had pursued MMA training, as well as other skills like Jiu Jitsu, at a gym run by an MMA legend, Master Lloyd Irvin. On the day of Davis' fight, Lineberger watched from behind the scenes and found what professional wrestling was missing for him: heart.

Shit.

Lineberger thought to himself as he felt the ligaments in his arm stretch to their maximum tension. Soto had just put him in an arm bar, a hyperextension of the elbow that causes inexperienced fighters to tap out immediately. But he knew he couldn't submit. Lineberger did a front flip to gain the advantage over Soto, shocking the audience. From that point forward, Lineberger dominated the fight, ultimately winning by unanimous decision.

He felt relieved, but he did not know what his career would look like after winning his first MMA fight. He started working full time, instead of pursuing an MMA career, practicing Jiu Jitsu at night at Master Lloyd's gym.

In the summer of 2019, Lineberger started reading *The Alchemist*, a book about a young man who learns to listen to his heart and follow the language of omens. He received a Facebook message from a man asking Lineberger if he could offer his name to an MMA organization. Lineberger initially ignored the message, but he eventually answered, assuming there was no harm in saying yes. After that, he went to bed, finishing *The Alchemist* before falling asleep.

The next day, he received his own omen. He was offered a professional contract with the largest martial arts organization in the world, One Championship. In early September, Lineberger quit working and began full time training twice a day. His next fight was scheduled for April, but since the COVID-19 outbreak, the fight and his training have been indefinitely postponed.

The postponement adds to the long list of adversity Lineberger has faced in his career. When asked why he has continued to persevere, he answered simply.

“I’m just in love with competing.”