

SOUTH DAKOTA STRONG

SECURITY FORCES AIRMAN TACKLES THE WORLD OF MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

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Staff Sgt. Rachel Nelson is a mixed martial arts fighter when not on duty as a security forces Airman at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D. Her primary responsibilities include maintaining mobility readiness for her squadron and supporting mass casualty exercises.

photo by Lance Cheung



The ring announcer steps awkwardly over the ropes of the Las Vegas ring. Wearing a suit, he parades around the blood-covered mat calling out the next pair of fighters. Behind the crowd, wearing blue headgear and pads, her blonde ponytail sticking up like a Roman centurion's helmet plume, Staff Sgt. Rachel Nelson paces while anticipating the next six minutes.

At 115 pounds, Sergeant Nelson doesn't necessarily look like a mixed martial artist in her security forces

uniform. When her shift is done, the beret and weapon are exchanged for grappling gloves and Muay Thai shorts. Scrapes and bruises that decorate her legs, arms and knuckles testify to her training regimen, which often includes sparring with men easily twice her size.

"We're all fighters here," Sergeant Nelson said, referring to the South Dakota gym where she trains with other Airmen. "I'm not afraid to train with dudes. It's a different level of intensity, and if I can hold my own against a 200-pound guy I'll be fine

when I fight a chick in my weight class."

Her tenacity makes her more like one of the guys in a sport dominated by men. This disregard for her gender is evident from the way her trainers treat her in the ring.

"She's got as much fire in her as anyone here," said 1st Lt. Jason Carter, a medical readiness officer who also trains with Sergeant Nelson. "No one takes it easy on her because she's a woman. She can hold her own, and taking it easier on her would probably just [make her more angry]."

None of her training partners want to see her when she's mad. Sergeant Nelson is a lightweight only on the scale.

Fighting is a progressive part of Sergeant Nelson's life. She worked through the ranks of Taekwondo in her teen years, but when it wasn't enough of a challenge, she looked elsewhere, eventually joining the Air Force.

"After graduating high school, I waited tables for a year," Sergeant Nelson said. "I knew I wanted more of a challenge, so I joined the Air Force. I became a cop because I wanted to be in the thick of the fight."



Staff Sgt. Rachel Nelson weighs in before her bout.

(Below) Sergeant Nelson faces her opponent in a Muay Thai fight. At the end of the season, four fighters will have earned a chance to train in Thailand under Muay Thai masters.



After basic training and technical school Sergeant Nelson eventually moved to Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D. It was there that she was invited by another security forces Airman to visit the Dynamic Martial Arts gym where a few Airmen trained to fight at both amateur and pro levels. In the ring she's competing for a title.

"Fighting out of the blue corner, from Rapid City, South Dakota, Rachel," the announcer barks into the microphone. He says her name in a rolling voice, holding the last syllable for a second or two before Sergeant Nelson crosses to her corner.

She meets her opponent in the center of the ring and bumps gloves to signal the beginning of the fight. Sergeant Nelson and her opponent each take a step back before unleashing a violent volley.

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— Staff Sgt. Rachel Nelson

Sergeant Nelson's quick right jab and right front kick combination land, but her opponent lands a kick of her own to Sergeant Nelson's thigh. The next minute follows that pattern: punch, kick, punch, kick. The thwack of blows and the women's abrupt exhalations while throwing punches and kicks punctuate the noise of the crowd.

As if tiring of the steady kicks to her thigh, Sergeant Nelson catches her opponent's leg and with a quick open-palmed blow to the chest drops

her adversary to the mat.

The referee resets the women, and the exchange of blows resumes. With her opponent keeping her distance, Sergeant Nelson delivers kick after kick while receiving only an occasional strike from her adversary. Like a patient predator, Sergeant Nelson looks for another mistake. When her foe ventures too close in an attempt to kick back, Sergeant Nelson sweeps out her supporting leg. Her opponent hits the mat for the second time; the intended roundhouse kick is useless from the flat-on-her-back position.



Before the first of three, two-minute rounds ends, Sergeant Nelson throws her enemy to the mat. Though her opponent lands punches of her own, they only seem to antagonize Sergeant Nelson.

At just 5-foot-4, Sergeant Nelson still looms over her opponent, who resorts to grabbing her and "locking up." Sergeant Nelson sends a knee to her opponent's ribs for the trouble.

The bell rings, signaling the end of round one. Sergeant Nelson returns to her corner but she isn't done and she hasn't lost her energy.

Working in a career field that deploys often, MMA offers many advantages and creates its own set of difficulties. Perhaps the biggest benefit is the level of physical fitness the training provides.

"I've never been in such good shape," Sergeant Nelson said. "Nothing compares to grappling in terms of fitness. When you get done grappling with a dude that outweighs you by 100 pounds you're totally exhausted. Running during unit PT is nothing now since I've been training."

The biggest difficulty Sergeant Nelson said she faces is finding the time to fight and train while balancing her duties as a security forces NCO. She says fights, like the recent one in Las Vegas, are usually paid out-of-pocket and she is on leave status for them. Even local fights can prove difficult if they fall during deployment or scheduled training.

"It's more likely that a fight comes up and I have three weeks' notice," she said. "If we're training or getting ready to deploy I can't fight. The Air Force comes first, but it's frustrating when it happens."

This tournament is a good example of the schedule for amateur fighters. Sergeant Nelson found out she



was selected to compete in the Tuff Girls competition. About 25 female fighters were selected a few weeks before the fight. While the chance to compete is all that was needed to get Sergeant Nelson on a plane to Las Vegas, this fight has added complications for a warrior Airman.

"If I win this fight it improves my amateur record, but after the tournament a few fighters will be selected to train in Thailand with Muay Thai masters," she said.

If selected, Sergeant Nelson would spend about 45 days training in Thailand and culminating in a fight against a Thai champion. The entire journey will be recorded as part of a reality television show.

It's an opportunity Sergeant Nelson has been looking forward to for a long time but it isn't the top thing on her mind. Her training regimen is a little more intense since she found out she has an upcoming deployment.

"It looks like the deployment won't fall on the same dates as Tuff Girls but if it does I know the decision I'll make," she said. "I'm an Air Force cop first and the reason I joined security forces is to deploy. It's an easy choice to make."

The bell sounds and round two starts out with both women rushing to the middle of the ring. Sergeant Nelson's right jab stops her foe in her tracks. Kicking her opponent around like a practice dummy, she

lands kick after kick to the midsection and head, taking only a few punches during the exchange.

At minute two of the second round Sergeant Nelson unleashes a right jab, left cross, kick combination. Her coach yells out instructions to string combinations together. Conditioning is starting to play its part. After three minutes, both fighters are visibly winded, breathing with open mouths and showing less aggression. They lock up more, but Rachel's MMA skills come into play and she strikes her opponent's legs and abdomen.

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The bell rings and both fighters exchange fist bumps before returning to their corners to await the judges' decision. Sergeant Nelson's corner man, Master Sgt. Sean Concepcion, a Reservist aerial porter, tells her what she did right and what she did wrong. Meanwhile, the crowd is silent with anticipation. She takes it in. Sergeant Nelson appears to be the picture of martial calm though new bruises are beginning to show among her already impressive collection.



Advancing an Air Force career and working her way up the ranks as an amateur MMA fighter is difficult, to say the least. Her fellow Airmen fighters recognize it's her drive to be the best that keeps her at the top.

"She's incredibly focused to be able to do this," Lieutenant Carter said. "Working through the amateur ranks of MMA is like trying to go pro in basketball or another major sport. There's so much competition. To be the best you have to put in long hours at the gym. When she's not doing the cop thing she's in the gym. She's going to be one of the best."

The boisterous ring announcer makes his way back to the ring to give his announcement. "In a unanimous decision, fighting out of the blue corner, Rachel...Nelson," he echoes.

In a calm manner she bows, says a few words of thanks to God in the offered microphone and leaves the ring silently as abruptly as she filled it with violence. 🦋

Hard training and dedicated focus gave Staff Sgt. Rachel Nelson the upper hand. She knocked her opponent to the mat several times during the bout.

The judges awarded Sergeant Nelson the win by unanimous decision.