

# Fallon Fox: A Queer Body in the Octagon

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**Abstract:** Based on gender studies and Queer Theory, this paper analyzes Fallon Fox's place as a professional athlete in Mixed Martial Arts, more specifically, Fox' fight against Allanna Jones at the semifinals of the Championship Fighting Alliance. It examines 510 comments posted on three specific cultural media related to fighting sports, seeking to understand their users' discourses about participation of a transgender athlete. By analyzing empirical data, we found that the arguments pointing out the improper nature of the dispute were based on two perspectives: the use of legal and medical discourses to prove Fallon Fox's advantage over the opponent and transphobia, understood as aversion or repulsion towards "trans" people.

**Keywords:** Mixed Martial Arts. Transgender. Athletes.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Seen as a sport characterized by the use of techniques derived from several martial arts and fighting sports, MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) has gained a special place in the cultural universe of fights, especially after it was widely publicized in sports media, largely by the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), the world's largest MMA organization.<sup>1</sup> Websites, blogs, specialized magazines, television programs, dedicated channels and other media are

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<sup>1</sup>In 2013, the UFC promoted 33 events in 27 different cities, totaling 65 hours of fighting, breaking its expansion record in the year of its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. According to the website MMA Junkie, UFC's total audience was 407,452 paying viewers, with an income of US\$ 52.8 million (DEHÓ, 2014).

easily viewed in our daily lives, gathering an increasing number of products and consumers.

Despite powerful media production around MMA, 2013 saw a very significant event<sup>2</sup> for that sport, also aimed at expanding its range of consumers: the first women's fight in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). On February 23, in Los Angeles, American fighters Ronda Rousey and Liz Carmouche disputed the bantamweight championship. The event did not go unnoticed by news producers and consumers, generating several opinions about the presence of women in a field represented as male-dominated. Although that fight was not exactly a novelty in MMA disputes, its official character and the wide publicity it received contributed for women to gain visibility and recognition in that sport. Let's remember that at UFC 168, held on December 28, 2013, in Las Vegas, the fight between Ronda Rousey and Miesha Tate was part of the main card, preceding the rematch between Anderson Silva and Chris Weidman, and was considered the fight of the night.

Even though formalization of women's fights was an important achievement for MMA athletes, 2013 brought another novelty: the fight between transsexual athlete Fallon Fox and Allanna Jones on March 24, at the semifinals of the Championship Fighting Alliance.<sup>3</sup> The event was widely reported in several media, triggering varied reactions, especially for placing a queer body into the scene – an eccentric and ambiguous body that challenges regulatory standards; “a foreign body, which bothers, disturbs, provokes and fascinates” (LOURO, 2004, p. 7-8).

Based on gender studies and queer theory,<sup>4</sup> this article examines issues related to Fallon Fox's inclusion in MMA fights. We look into

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<sup>2</sup>We adopt Michel Foucault's notion of event, which identifies it as the emergence of historical uniqueness (REVEL, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>US MMA organization founded in 2001 and based in Miami.

<sup>4</sup>On Queer Theory and its appropriation in Brazil, see Guacira Louro (2004), Richard Miskolci (2012) and Sara Salih (2012).

comments posted on two websites and one blog dedicated to fights, in order to understand how users of those social media reacted to the presence of a transgender athlete in the Octagon. Two categories of analysis emerged from the observation of empirical data: the biomedical discourse,<sup>5</sup> which is used to explain the workings of the human body and therefore justify the improper nature of that fight, and transphobia, understood as aversion or discrimination against “trans” (transgender, transsexuals and transvestites) people.

## 2 DIALOGUES WITH THE OCTAGON: THE QUEEN OF SWORDS<sup>6</sup>

When she declares herself transsexual, Fallon Fox gave interviews narrating how Boyd Burton, born in 1975 in Toledo, USA, became the Queen of Swords. Fox points out that Burton’s family were very conservative and Christian, which meant that at 17, after assuming his homosexuality, he was subjected to religious gay conversion therapy. At 19, he got a girl pregnant, married her and enlisted in the Navy in order to support the family, which he later did as a truck driver. Unhappy with his body since childhood, Fox began her process of sexual reframing in 2003, having her first surgery in 2006 at Bangkok’s National Hospital, and the last one in 2011, when she “feminized” her face, correcting her brow bones, her jaw line and her baldness. She started taking part in fights in the midst of that process, and since 2008 she has participated in wrestling, jiu-jitsu and muay thai competitions. She debuted in the Octagon in May 2012; in June 2011, she competed in her first professional fight and had three consecutive victories.

<sup>5</sup>We use Michel Foucault’s concept of discourse: signification systems and codes that constitute the set of statements of a given field of knowledge, historically constructed within power relations. Thus, discourse is “the object of desire; [...] that for which we struggle, the power we want to seize” (FOUCAULT, 1996, p. 10).

<sup>6</sup>The athlete began to call herself that way because of her identification with the image of the Queen of Swords in the tarot deck. In an interview, she says: “She’s strong, she’s proud, she’s intelligent and all these different things. ... that’s how I want to be. That’s the persona I want to try and put out there. It was a very emotional time for me, and I just decided that I would keep it as my fight name”. Available at: <<http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1648786-transgender-trailblazer-fallon-fox-talks-jason-collins-x-men-being-a-pioneer>> Accessed on Jan. 18, 2014.

Fallon Fox's official participation in MMA sparked discussions regarding the legitimacy of her presence in that sport. Several of the arguments used to show the arbitrariness of the event were based on biological discourse and medical knowledge. By emphasizing her transsexuality, they challenged the idea that a biological man who had been anatomically transformed into a woman could fight other women. In response to that controversy, former athlete and transsexual athletes' advocate Hellen Carroll argues that transsexual women ingest hormone (testosterone) blockers in the reframing process, that is, they have less testosterone in their body than their competitors, thus requiring more training to maintain muscle mass and strength than a woman-born athlete. It also shows that proliferation of estrogen in their bodies hinders speed and the ability to reduce body weight (HUNT, 2013). Finally, she points out the disadvantages of that technically transformed body as opposed to several arguments that underscore that the fact that Fox was born a man would give her more physical strength, despite transgenering.

In addition to biologically based discussions, Fallon Fox's queer body, by breaking up the sex-gender-sexuality linearity,<sup>7</sup> exposed other characteristics of the dominant representation on femininity, thus contributing to reveal the power of the heteronormative<sup>8</sup> discourse in and out of the sports field.

### 3 INVESTIGATIVE PATHS

One way used by MMA organizers to increase the practitioner and consumer public for their events and products is media that allow sending and receiving real-time information and interacting with that public, such as blogs, websites and channels to broadcast fights.

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<sup>7</sup>In the early nineteenth century, "male and the female bodies started to be perceived as normal different and complementary by medicine. Science and especially medicine work hard to assign a number of distinct emotional and behavioral attributes to each sex. Such imposition of behaviors on a biological basis ends up suggesting a sex-gender-sexuality linearity, where man-masculine relates only to woman-feminine, since they are opposite and complementary" (SILVESTRIN, 2013, p. 7).

<sup>8</sup>Heteronormativity is understood here as "the sexual order of the present, based on a heterosexual, family-based and reproductive model. It is imposed through symbolic and physical violence directed mainly at those who breach gender norms" (MISKOLCI, 2012, p. 44).

Considering this interactivity, we chose to analyze how sports websites users referred to the presence of a transsexual athlete in the Octagon. Our criteria to choose the media that make up our empirical field were that they had ties with exclusive broadcast of UFC fights on pay TV and magazines recognized in the field of combat sports. After that screening, we elected the websites *Combat* and *Tatame* and the blog *Na Grade do MMA*,<sup>9</sup> whose focus was only on news and comments posted about the fight between Fallon Fox and Allanna Jones at the semifinals of the Championship Fighting Alliance (CFA). Our timeframe was the period from March 6 (the day after the athlete declare herself a transsexual)<sup>10</sup> and May 25 (the day after she won the fight). On the websites analyzed, we found 15 articles about the fight – seven of them published on *Combate*, seven on *Tatame* and one on *Na Grade do MMA*, in a total of 510 comments from users, three of them exceeding 100 posts: “Transsexual female wrestler considers having to reveal her medical history unfair”;<sup>11</sup> “Transsexual faces trouble getting license and fighting in women’s MMA”;<sup>12</sup> and “After criticizing transsexual fighter, Matt Mittrione is suspended from the UFC”.<sup>13</sup>

For a detailed description of the content of messages posted, we used content analysis (BARDIN, 2011). All 510 posts were selected and examined, first separately and then in relation to each other, in order to understand the main issues they set in motion, as well as the ways users reacted to that event. All posts were cataloged preserving their authors’ identity and their wording. Of 510 comments posted in the three media analyzed, 483 were signed

<sup>9</sup>Available respectively at: <<http://sportv.globo.com/site/eventos/combate>>; <<http://tatame.com.br>>; <<http://nagradedomma.blogosfera.uol.com.br>>.

<sup>10</sup>Interview to Cyd Ziegler. Available at <<http://www.outsports.com/2013/3/5/4068840/fallon-fox-trans-pro-mma-fighter>>. Accessed on May 28, 2013.

<sup>11</sup>Available at: <<http://sportv.globo.com/site/combate/noticia/2013/03/lutadora-transsexual-considera-injusto-ter-de-revelar-seu-historico-medico.html>>. Accessed on March 20, 2013.

<sup>12</sup>Available at <<http://sportv.globo.com/site/combate/noticia/2013/03/transsexual-enfrenta-problemas-para-obter-licenca-e-lutar-no-mma-feminino.html>>. Accessed on February 7, 2014.

<sup>13</sup>Available at: <<http://sportv.globo.com/site/combate/noticia/2013/04/apos-criticas-fallon-fox-lutador-matt-mittrione-e-suspenso-do-ufc.html>>. Accessed on February 9, 2014.

by men and 27 by women, which helps to see how much sport and – in this particular case – the MMA are mostly experienced by men.

Against the backdrop of the controversy surrounding the properness (or not) of a man who underwent sexual reframing surgery fighting a woman in MMA, two themes were recurrent in the material analyzed: the medical discourse to justify differences between a transsexual and a “natural” woman and transphobic and homophobic criticism.

#### 4 “ONLY TESTS AND DOCTORS CAN SAY WHO THE FIGHTER IS (?)”<sup>14</sup>

On March 6, 2013, the website *Combate* posted the following article: “Transsexual faces trouble getting license and fighting in women’s MMA – 37-year-old Fallon Fox already has two professional victories, but may have her license revoked after assuming that she underwent sex change in 2006”.<sup>15</sup> The article received 104 comments, nearly all using the biomedical discourse to justify the unfairness of the fight, since Fox’s body had a priori advantages. Among those comments, we highlight Felix Abreu’s:

To be fair you have to forget the phenotype (appearance) and analyze genotype (genetic makeup). If the body structure and hormones are female it is fair to fight women but if not, it is unequal and unfair to women. In short, appearance does not dictate sex, but sexual option. Sex, in turn, is defined by the individual’s genetic makeup and there are only male and female. Only tests and doctors can say who the fighter is. (TRANSEXUAL..., 2013)

The binary model behind the message has been widely accepted since the mid-eighteenth century and it presupposes the

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<sup>14</sup> Expression from the comment posted by Felix Abreu on the website *Combate* on February 6, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Available at: <<http://sportv.globo.com/site/combate/noticia/2013/03/transsexual-enfrenta-problemas-para-obter-licenca-e-lutar-no-mma-feminino.html>>. Accessed on February 7, 2014.

existence of two distinct sexes, which results in truths about being a man and being a woman, establishing fixed representations of masculinity and femininity.<sup>16</sup> Multiple users who saw the fight between the two athletes as inadequate resorted to that model, such as Loudre, Johnny Be Gude, Fábio and Mérick:

That's absurd! Even with all appearance she is a MAN!! While they don't create a category for Trans she can't fight WOMEN!!!! The biological aspect will make a lot of difference!!! (TRANSEXUAL, 2013) (sic)

Mitrione just expressed what everyone already knows: that the transsexual has the physical complexion of a man. And that is not taken into account; it's not fair. Only the gay gang could challenge something so obvious and scientific... (CORREA, 2013) (sic)

Totally agree with the punishment! No respect at all!!! But a transsexual to fight women is different. I have no medical training, but it seems disadvantageous to fight an opponent who has a superior physique! I'm not a machoist at all, I'm just realistic; if men and women were physically equivalent there wouldn't be those big differences in records. (APÓS..., 2013) (sic)

I think it's unfair [because] even after surgery the guy does not stop being genetically male and will still have man's power. (RONDA..., 2013) (sic)

The messages above show how much sport is a gendered (marked by gender difference) and gendering (it produces gender difference) territory – a characteristic that is reinforced by the way it is widely experienced and valued and that is deeply marked the by the man/woman binary division. According to Ferretti and Knijnik (2007, p. 58):

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<sup>16</sup>In *Inventando o sexo: corpo e gênero dos gregos a Freud*, Thomas Laqueur (2001) shows how, in distinct historical moments, the biological body was taken to justify political, cultural and social differences between sexes.

[...] it is one of the scenarios where many definitions of what a man or a woman is develop – that is, sport is one of the social institutions where, even because of its corporeality, male and female ideologies manifest themselves and are in permanent tension [...] thus favoring the use of biological differences to justify the social construction of gender as natural.

The discursive order that sustains the harmony between body, sex and gender (vagina/woman/feminine as opposed to penis/man/masculine) is a performative act that renders the existence of other nuances invisible, even because their existence puts such linearity under suspicion.

Those bodies whose gender is not a consequence of their anatomical sex, those bodies whose sexual practices and desires do not correspond to heterosexual desire, and even those bodies that do not have a clear definition of their anatomical status (as in the case of intersexuals) fall outside the intelligibility matrix, being unintelligible or incomprehensible. Those bodies will therefore be rejected, marginalized, excluded and sometimes pathologized. (MELONI, 2008, p. 77).

By breaking the harmony of the binary order of sexes and deconstructing historically produced representations whose effects normalize<sup>17</sup> bodies, their genders and their sexualities, Fallon Fox's body challenges what medical knowledge sees as normal. Therefore, it is considered inappropriate for the space it claims to belong to, that is, the universe of fighting, in which attributes that are socially considered masculine are experienced with power and rigor. Users Vanderlei Silva, Jacques Henrique, Leandro Vianna and Fernando Ferz express such tension:

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<sup>17</sup> Normalizing means – arbitrarily – electing a specific identity in relation to which other identities are evaluated and hierarchized. Normalizing means ascribing all the positive characteristics possible to that identity, in relation to which other identities can only be evaluated negatively. The regular identity is “natural” desirable and unique. The strength of the normal identity is such that it is not even seen as an identity, simply as *the* identity. Paradoxically, the other identities are those marked as such. (SILVA, 2009, p. 83)



Hey bro look at the news, that's a man, he should get a life, find a girlfriend a job and move on with his life, gee the guy has balls, hair, Adam's apple, and he wants to fight a woman, gee underneath the man has 60% more brute force than the woman. Some news made me sick. (TRANSEXUAL..., 2013) (sic)

I agree, a man is a man and a woman is a woman, that's nature! Any other thing is a freak. (TRANSEXUAL...), 2013 (sic)

So for decades the body (muscles, nerves etc) developed full of testosterone, then you take progesterone for a few years and it's OK; your body is now a woman's body. It's not even close to ridiculous, because it's far beyond that. But the worst of it is that no famous sports commentator, doctor, athlete has the courage to speak out directly against such nonsense, even having consciousness of those improper statements. (LUTADORA..., 2013) (sic)

It's not because she/he thinks as a woman that the body and frame are a woman's! This thing is getting weiiiiird! (RONDA..., 2013) (sic)

Targeted by insults, the queer<sup>18</sup> subject, here personalized in the figure of Fallon Fox, materializes a will and also an ability for self-inventing, self-transforming, self-situating in the world (LE BRETON, 2012). As a technological artifact, the fighter's body is a consequence of different investments, such as surgical, hormonal and aesthetic interventions, whose results challenge society's regulatory norms and assume the discomfort "of ambiguity, of the 'between places', the undecidable" (LOURO, 2004, p. 7-8). Sandro Vilanova, Gustavo Rodrigues and Cezar Costa underscore that discomfort:

<sup>18</sup>Richard Miskolci (2012, p. 24) warns that the English word *queer* is a curse, a bad word, an offense. It emerged as such as a result of the AIDS epidemic. In this context, the reference to Queer Nation was that "part of that nation was rejected, humiliated, considered abject, a reason for contempt and disgust, for fear of contamination. That is how *queer* appears – as reaction and resistance to a new bio-political situation established by AIDS".

I doubt, how is that only because he took female hormones he lost all strength, that is she no longer reaches force peaks from when he was a man, for how long? if stopped how can we prove that she no longer produces it... (COMISSÃO..., 2013) (sic)

My friend, is not only “testosterone that makes a man stronger than a woman”. It is the physiological, anatomical and structural whole... If it was just hormones it would be easy. Each person makes choices and lives with their consequences. Saying in turn that “man becomes woman” and that’s it, it’s just killing science, logic, reality... To make what one wants prevail, even if it’s unreal (LUTADORA..., 2013) (sic)

No way, Ronda fought Camouche who is an assumed lesbian but is a woman, the problem with that one is that it’s clear that he is a man, no use in trying to deceive. The athletic committee should deny licenses to any fighter who is on hormonal treatment, either to replace or delete, since those substances are illegal and anti-sports besides being against nature. (LUTADORA..., 2013) (sic)

The expressions that point to Queen of Swords’ alleged physical advantage over her opponents indicate how much the use of body technologies to build femininity into male bodies and masculinity into women’s bodies evokes and unsettles the place of truth enjoyed by the binary sex model. Reengineering the queer body and its exhibition in the combat sports field allowed broadening horizons on the body’s limits, its plurality and ambivalence. They also allowed us to observe the biomedical discourse’s power to distinguish and hierarchize what is normal or pathological in order to normalize individuals and populations. The abjection towards the transsexual body makes sense when we analyze the power of medical knowledge which, according to Foucault (2001), has been concerned with issues that go beyond illness since the eighteenth century, calling upon itself the “perpetual task of restoring the normalcy system”. It is not without reason that users’ arguments

establish Fallon Fox's body and identity as deviant, and whose truth can only be stated or announced by medicine, by its knowledge and power.

## **5 TRANSPHOBIA AND HOMOPHOBIA: "SOON THESE FREAKS WILL WANT TO PLAY WOMEN'S FOOTBALL"<sup>19</sup>**

Based on Judith Butler's theory (2010), queer studies propose that sex exists in processes of meaning of the male/female binary, an intelligibility matrix according to which construction of women can only take place on women's bodies and vice versa.

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (Butler, 2010, p. 24-25).

These multiple possibilities indicate that the body, as well as subjectivities, is unique. In the case of transsexuality, that uniqueness adds other meanings because it subverts the gender identity represented as normal, while evidencing the absence of a primary identity.

Fallon Fox's abject body in MMA provoked comments that extrapolated the universe of fights and brought up situations in which it was possible to identify phobia, aversion and revulsion to subjects who subvert the normalized representations of gender and sexuality, here exemplified in postings by Márcio Tokashiki, Mario Mendonça, Maicon Sousa, Fredson Lavra and Jader Rosa:

[...] Totally against it no way what a fucking mess I'm totally against man who became a woman compete with woman I hope he gets beat up clown. (COMISSÃO..., 2013) (sic)

The truth is that this country is a tremendous

<sup>19</sup>Rodrigo Pires, in a comment on *Combate*, on April 8, 2013.

shame, and women saying they love women men saying they love men and everything. Ok some say that this is normal alright: let's say a family man go with his family to a mall on the weekend and his daughters see two women kissing passionately or even two men. Tell me what will those children think? How a father or a mother can explain such a disgusting thing? You say it's normal? Brazil country of shame, Gays, thief and politician rule!!! (APÓS..., 2013) (sic)

What a shame that the Holocaust could not eliminate such freak of nature that time, maybe today there would be less of that garbage. (APÓS..., 2013) (sic)

NATURE FREAK ... (TRANSEXUAL ..., 2013) (sic)

Alright those who want to tel what they think, what's the problem? now we are forced to swallow all sorts of gay and lesbians that appear without questioning? that's a shame alright if you want a sex change, do it, after all the world is upside down anyway but changing and competing against women is really ludicrous. That will never be a woman in life, just like Gays will never be, ever. (APÓS..., 2013) (sic)

Within the binary logic of the man-woman pair, issues related to transsexuality and homosexuality provoke reactions that pathologize both the fighter and her supporters. Bento and Pelúcio (2012, p. 571) contribute to understanding why this way of addressing the issue emerges:

Gender performances, sexuality and subjectivity are levels of the subject's identity that come together. The masculine and the feminine only meet through complementariness of heterosexuality. When there is any detachment, there must be specialized intervention, particularly in some specialist in psychological sciences, to restore order and "consistency" of body, gender and sexuality. This map will provide the foundations for building the genre diagnostics.

In the case of comments posted on the websites analyzed, the association between transsexuality and homosexuality, besides recurrent, generated dramatic reactions. Let us look at the words of Tiago Oliveira, Leonardo Oliveira, Gustavo Pinheiro and José Silva:

Wow fights like a man.. I'd hit him so much in the face until he'll want to become a man again.. (LUTADORA..., 2013) (sic)

A mam against a woman .... why doesn't Fallon Fox fight people like him ... let's do this if he wins the next fight he should take Demetrius Johnson (CURTINHAS..., 2013) (sic)

sure these aberrations have to stop, being gay ain't normal, why there is male and female for after all??? if it was for everyone to be gay, so why 2 kind of sex?? and seriously if this thing goes to ufc will fight in female or male? (APÓS..., 2013) (sic)

they will put him to fight with women, to show that everything is normal, man become woman is normal, then fight with a woman is normal, all freaks! I hope he takes a beating just like that lesbian took from ronda rousey in the last fight. (APÓS..., 2013) (sic)

Sport, just like other social practices, is a place for knowledge and power disputes that define and delimit normality standards on the appearance of bodies, the exercise of sexuality and experimentation of gender representations. For people who posted the comments, both Fallon' body and the athlete as a subject are abject. According to Butler (2003, p. 162), that abjection is closely related to the fact that she does not belong anywhere, which implies denial of the possibility of being, because a subject who does not fit into any gender of the binary order falls “outside the human, indeed, constitutes the domain of the dehumanized and the abject against which the human itself is constituted”.

Non-acceptance of what they see as deviant identities shows the power to perpetuate and maintain what Adrienne Rich (1980) called “compulsory heterosexuality – the dominant order in which

men and women are required or even forced to be heterosexual” (SALIH, 2012, p. 71). Fallon Fox, as well as other subjects “of deviant sexuality – gays, bisexuals, transgenders, transvestites, drag queens” (LOURO, 2004, p. 7-8) subverted that order, crossing rigid boundaries that, being demarcated by the biomedical discourse, inscribed the mark of normalcy in subjects. The insults that appeared in users’ messages showed that homophobia and transphobia easily emerge in situations in which the body-gender-sex-desire linearity is deconstructed, whether in the sports field or out of it.

## 6 FINAL REMARKS

The arrival of a transsexual fighter in a sport in which attributes linked to a certain representation of masculinity proliferate can be read in different ways and with different intentions. We chose to emphasize the pedagogical and political character of that presence, both because it showed the plurality of bodies, genders and sexualities and because, by choosing to practice a combat sport, Fallon Fox, a man turned into a woman, again broke away from what would supposedly be expected: by feminizing himself, he did not seek body practices that were culturally most suitable for his reframed sex. On the contrary, he took on a body practice that requires discipline, dedication and investment, whose effects produce a strong and agile body that can withstand many strikes and hits. A body culturally signified as virile, which, in his case, was erased and rebuilt with other attributes and meanings. A queer body – indecipherable, eccentric and ambiguous. A body that, by being displayed in the Octagon, brings new horizons and possibilities to the sport.

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