

BY SCOTT ROARK

THAT PROFILE IS HARD TO IGNORE — the Mohawk, the Asian tattoo on the side of the skull, the steely eyes — especially against a backdrop of thousands of screaming fans. Their volume intensifies into a roar when their favorite warrior enters the arena and methodically approaches the center ring, prepared to do battle.

Chuck “The Iceman” Liddell (BUS ’95) makes quite an entrance at the MGM Grand Arena in Las Vegas, a fitting prelude before a fight with an other fearsome opponent, played out in front of an audience that includes countless celebrities in the arena and hundreds of thousands of television viewers at home.

The 6-foot-2-inch, 220-pound accounting major held the title of Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) light heavyweight champion for two years, using skills he perfected on the Cal Poly wrestling team to take down opponents. He continues to be a huge draw for UFC’s live, multi-million dollar pay-per-view events.

But his professional world is quite a contrast from domestic life in San Luis Obispo, where the 38-year old father of two still resides and is often seen around town. You may bump into him at the local Starbucks one morning, grabbing a cup of coffee.

The Central Coast has always been home for Liddell and — for the most part — life has always been a battle.

Liddell came to Cal Poly on a financial aid scholarship, after serving as a starter on the San Marcos High School football team in Santa Barbara where he grew up. He was raised by a single mother with three siblings. The family was on assisted living. Money was scarce.

That continued when he got to Cal Poly. “I worked full time and went to school, sneaking into the dorms to eat because food was kind of a luxury

continued on page 16...



CHUCK LIDDELL

THE TOUGHEST ACCOUNTING MAJOR YOU WILL EVER MEET

CHUCK LIDDELL DOES NUMBERS, TAKE-DOWNS AND LIVES THE SLO LIFE



(L) The former Mustang enjoys time with the Cal Poly Wrestling Team.

back then,” recalls Liddell. “People don’t realize how hard it is to be a college athlete, the dedication it takes, the discipline. I don’t regret it – some of the best memories I have were playing and competing.”

Liddell played football during his first year at Cal Poly, before switching to wrestling in his sophomore year. “I loved football, but I couldn’t do both because of the training,” Liddell said.

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dell said. “What attracted me about wrestling is that it’s an individualized sport – it’s just you against the opponent.”

The Iceman learned to fight at an early age, sparring with construction workers and other locals at a Santa Barbara gym as part of his early training in Koei-Kan karate. He was 16 years old. When he wasn’t throwing punches, Liddell was an A-student and chess club member in high school.

“Numbers have always come easy for me,” said Liddell. “When I’m fighting, I’m calculating everything, keeping track of their punches and setting them up.”

Liddell worked as a bouncer and bartender downtown while attending Cal Poly. He began studying Kenpo karate with trainer John Hackleman at “The Pit,” a martial arts fa-

cility in Arroyo Grande. He continued his training in Koei-Kan karate and embraced its ideals. Ironically, Koei-Kan means “eternal peace and prosperity,” the meaning of the Japanese tattoo on the side of Liddell’s head.

It’s not a stretch for Liddell, who friends and fans describe as “mellow” and “laid back.” Retired Cal Poly wrestling coach and close friend Lennis Cowell said he is amazed by his former student’s success and the fact that it has never gone to his head. “People don’t realize how generous and humble Chuck is,” said Cowell. “He will always be a permanent part of the Cal Poly wrestling legacy.”

However, one of the biggest challenges of Liddell’s professional career has been fame. He regularly gets hit up, sometimes aggressively, for autographs and photos wherever he goes, whether it’s downtown Manhattan or a small Midwestern town.

“It’s like that classic Joe Walsh song – ‘everybody’s so different, I haven’t changed,’” said Liddell. “One of the biggest reasons I’m still grounded is because I have friends in San Luis Obispo who have known me for 15 years, when I was an average guy working at a bar. Making \$50,000 a year was the end of the rainbow back then.”

Now, Liddell is the most recognized face of UFC. He has appeared in the HBO show “Entourage” and the reality show “Ultimate Fighter,” along with other minor roles in television shows and movies. Liddell’s autobiography, “Liddell:

My Fighting Life,” was on *The New York Times* best seller list earlier this year. He is even a character in a video game.

“I have plenty of fights left in me,” said Liddell. “But I love acting and the process that goes into it.”

Liddell has no intention of ending his fighting career anytime soon. But when that time comes, he will leave a permanent mark on the UFC culture, playing a prominent role in moving an underground, controversial sport into the mainstream. He is truly the sport’s first bona-fide star and cultural icon.

“I spend all of my free time with my kids – I realize how lucky I am,” said Liddell. “I’m doing what I love for a living and have been able to call the Central Coast home, living with friends and family nearby. It’s been an incredible ride.” □