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Meet The New Contenders

CONOR MCGREGOR

Properly Notorious

Irish striker **Conor McGregor** burst into the UFC last April; don't expect him to go anywhere but up
By E. SPENCER KYTE Photography by BARRY McCALL

According to Conor McGregor he's been a superstar for quite some time; it just took everybody else a while to finally take notice.

"In my head, I was always this guy," he says with a laugh, darting down the narrow Dublin streets on his way to Louis Copeland & Sons to pick up some new threads for his photo shoot. "I was always the coolest [expletive] ever floatin' around, taking pictures with people in my own head, even when nobody wanted them."

Imaginary pictures with fans passing on the street have been replaced by the real deal in the months since the 24-year-old announced himself as a threat in the featherweight division with a dynamic performance in his UFC debut back in April.

After striding to the cage bare-chested and draped in the Irish tricolor, McGregor needed just 67 seconds to dispatch a very durable Marcus Brimage, becoming the first Irish fighter to earn a victory inside the Octagon.

But McGregor didn't just win; he stole the show, emerging from Stockholm as one of the hottest, most talked about prospects in the sport. His dominant striking performance in the Octagon turned heads and earned him Knockout of the Night honors, while his magnetic personality has kept fans and media both engaged and entertained.

He looked right at home seated next to teammate Cathal Pendred when the two made an appearance on *The Late Late Show*. And his combination of talent, skill, and personality have him on the brink of stardom, which is precisely where McGregor knew he would be all along.

"Act the way you want to become, and then before you know it, it just happens, and then you don't know what was going on," he says with a



laugh. "It just happened. It's weird how it was just like that [snaps fingers]—67 seconds—and everything changed. I wouldn't say everything changes because nothing changed in my head, but it just kind of happened that everything that was in my head is now kind of happening.

"Since my debut, everybody in the gym—all the pros like Cathal—everyone is just upping their game now. They see the possibilities. That's going to benefit me and benefit everybody in the gym. The whole gym is going to keep going to that next level. It's like when I



saw Gunni on, that made me realize I could do it, you know what I mean?"

"Gunny" is UFC welterweight prospect Gunnar Nelson, a frequent training partner and good friend who McGregor was introduced to through his coach at Straight Blast Gym (SBG) Ireland, John Kavanagh.

"He's very much like Gunnar in that he's very curious about why things work," Kavanagh says of McGregor, who has won nine straight contests. "Some fighters will come to me and say, 'What do I do?' and it's kind of like Rock'em Sock'em. With him it was always a discussion. It'll be like 2:00 a.m. and he'll be sending me

videos of two gorillas fighting, saying 'Look at this technique. Why are they moving this way?' or two crocodiles fighting.

"When Conor's on, he's frightening. When he's off, he's gone," continues Kavanagh, who has guided McGregor's training from the outset. "Something clicked with him a couple of years ago. He's been on since then, and he's obsessive about it. But he's like that with anything. He got into cooking, and within a week he was probably a chef-standard cook, you know?"

"I'm just very glad now that he's obsessive about being healthy, and training, and about

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having a good mindset. It's a juggernaut, and I'm just happy to keep the juggernaut moving forward."

While Kavanagh suggests his charge would be successful at anything he put his mind to, McGregor views his passionate focus on mixed martial arts as a result of having few other options.

After earning Knockout of the Night honors for his tidy dismissal of Brimage, he revealed that he was on social welfare. Having stood in line for a government check, McGregor doesn't mind standing by the mailbox waiting for the postman to turn up, but that doesn't mean he plans on lessening his focus and drive any time soon.

"I don't know how to do anything else. What else was I going to do?" he asks rhetorically. "Coming from where I'm from, you either go one way or the other way, and I just got lost in this. Sometimes I don't know why I was doing it, but it just becomes a habit. I have to do it. I can't stop now."

The spirited and gifted McGregor will get his next chance to step into the cage on August 17 as part of the UFC on FOX Sports 1 event at the TD Garden in Boston. At first, McGregor wanted no part of a five-month break between fights.

"When he came out of the fight, he was trying to get another fight for the next three or four days," Kavanagh recalls with a smirk, happy to let his fired-up fighter get the energy out of his system on social media. "He would have fought anybody. He was picking fights with middleweights at the weigh-ins. He kind of came out of the fight with that fire still going; I'm holding the reins."

To Kavanagh, the timing was perfect. Five months between appearances in the Octagon meant one month could be dedicated to the "boring, logistical paperwork" as he calls it, another could be spent making the media ☛

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rounds, and there would still be three uninterrupted months to prepare. McGregor chafed at the idea at first, chomping at the bit to get back into competition, but came around quickly, much to the amusement of his coach.

“At the start, I wasn’t happy that the fight was August 17; I wanted to keep busy,” he explains as a bemused Kavanagh looks on. “It’s actually a good thing that that happened. The funny thing is that that was a blessing in disguise because I needed time to adjust to everything. For the first two or three weeks the training wasn’t going great because there’s so much to deal with. Now I’m starting to get a little balance of it.”

He pulls into an empty spot across the street from Louis Copeland & Sons on Capel Street, steps out of the car, and right on cue, the first person passing on the sidewalk offers congratulations on his debut win.

As does the second person, and another 30 seconds later, and two more as he crosses the street.

Inside the shop, he’s greeted with handshakes and smiles from everyone before an assortment of bowties—“Dickie bows” as McGregor calls them—turn up for him to peruse. He slips into a three-piece suit that arrives from the back. Crisply attired, McGregor preens in the mirror and likes what he sees both in terms of the latest addition to his growing wardrobe and the direction his career is headed. After years of believing he was a superstar when few others would, he’s become the face of the surging Irish MMA scene, and he couldn’t be happier.

“There’s a lot of bums out there training MMA and teaching MMA and going around saying they’re this and that. We work hard, we’re a dedicated gym, and to be representing Irish MMA, SBG, and my coach John, to be representing all of that is brilliant; it means so much to us.” ○



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Always At The Ready

Rather than working through designated fight camps, Kavanagh (pictured at left) employs a year-round approach with McGregor and the rest of the pros at SBG Ireland.

“I try to go at a medium pace all year so that all my guys are ready for short-notice fights. Cathal’s ready for short-notice fights, but I certainly wouldn’t want him to have three months to train, two of them are interviews, and then one which is training. I know it wouldn’t be good for him.”