

“A Fighting Colonel” “Born to MMA” (hope you guys can think of a good title! :p)

EKU Senior to be featured live on pay-per-view fight

At first glance, you probably wouldn't suspect anything unusual about ECU student Jessamyn Duke. This 24-year-old senior is a Fitness and Wellness major and, like most students, stays very busy with her 18 hours of classes. She is blonde headed, well spoken, and tall at 5' 11". She loves the movie Avatar (and will even be a Na'vi for Halloween this year), Comedy Central shows, and hard rock music.

Little would you know that this girl could take you down in the blink of an eye.

Jessamyn Duke spends her evenings as an MMA fighter. For those who may not know, MMA, or mixed martial arts, is a popular form of fighting seen in Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) matches that allows the use of multiple different fighting techniques and skills. Though men are more commonly associated with the sport, a fair number of women like Jessamyn are stepping up and proving themselves as well. To say that she has accomplished a lot in a short time is a vast understatement. Pointing to a wall covered with golden medals and belts in her gym, the AFS Academy in Richmond, she casually states, “About half of those up there are mine.” She is the women's WMA (World Muay Thai Association) Welterweight champion. She has a blue belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and is a nationally ranked competitor in grappling. She is also a certified instructor for the Thaiboxing Association of the USA, and is one of only two certified instructors in the state, the other being her trainer and teacher Scott Elliott. To achieve all of this requires an immense amount of commitment, and Jessamyn certainly has that covered. She typically spends two to three hours each day working out in some form, whether it's heavy lifting or running several miles around Richmond. And it is undeniably time-consuming. “You have to sacrifice a lot if you want to excel in this sport,” Jessamyn explains. “A social life and free time take a backseat to training and schoolwork.”

Her latest and greatest accomplishment is being asked to compete in an upcoming televised live pay-per-view event titled “Battle for Breast Cancer.” This will be the first ever all female MMA fight card in Kentucky, will include famous female fighters such as Kim Couture and Cristiane "Cyborg" Santos, and will later be re-broadcast on FSN. This is without doubt a huge deal, and the weight of her achievement is not lost on her. “I am still simply shocked by this whole situation,” Jessamyn exclaimed. “I seriously just lucked into it and could not be more grateful or excited.”

How she “lucked into it” is a long story, beginning in 1986 at Whitesburg, KY, her hometown. Born on June 24th, Jessamyn grew up in a very active household, with a mother who was a marathon runner featured in Runner's World magazine. Jessamyn too became an avid runner and joined her school's cross country and volleyball teams. Her family moved to Richmond, and she started attending ECU with hopes of obtaining an

English degree. Feeling alone in her new town and a bit bored, she decided to try something that she had never done before. She soon saw an ad for a kickboxing course online and immediately signed up. She quickly fell in love with this new challenging activity, and soon enough began learning a form of martial arts known as Muay Thai under the instruction of ECU teacher Scott Elliot. After several years, Jessamyn had become one of his best students, mastering a wide range of different fighting styles and techniques. In this time, Jessamyn had fought and trained with a large number of people, including a man from Louisville acquainted with the people in charge of the upcoming pay-per-view event. He mentioned to them how great of an athlete Jessamyn was, and soon after the deal was made for her to compete in the “Battle for Breast Cancer.”

By her side throughout all of this excitement has been her coach and mentor, Scott Elliot. “We are all extremely excited for Jessamyn,” Elliot stated. “This is a great opportunity for women’s fighting and I am very confident she’ll perform well in the event.” Fellow training partner and assistant instructor Sean Kelly agrees. “I think it’s tremendous. She has worked really hard for this and deserves every bit of the recognition.”

When asked how she personally feels about her involvement in this competition and what she hopes to attain from it, Jessamyn stated, “I feel very fortunate for this opportunity to compete in a professional MMA competition. Fights like these help to build an athlete’s “résumé” and make companies want to sponsor and pay you to fight, and I would love to make this sport my career.” Still, it is evident that she has more than personal gain on her mind. “I really hope that this competition will inspire other people, especially women, to get involved with the sport. I hear girls my age all the time say, ‘I could never be like you. I could never fight or train like that.’ Well, I was once in their shoes and I know from experience you can do this. It can change your life for the better.” She also hopes to bring more attention to women’s fighting as a legitimate sport. “It is obvious that right now women’s fighting doesn’t get nearly the amount of respect as men’s does,” Jessamyn mentions, “which is really a shame because there are some incredibly talented women competitors out there. Hopefully events like these can help change that.”

As the “Battle for Breast Cancer” rapidly approaches and Jessamyn continues her final days of preparation, it is clear that this is not only an important, historic event for Jessamyn, but for all of ECU, Kentucky, and women’s fighting. The event will be available to pay-per-view October 2nd at 6:30 PM or to attend in Florence, KY. For more information, go to www.aamma.net. If interested in becoming involved with martial arts yourself, you can check out Scott Elliot’s gym at www.afsacademy.com. And let us all wish congratulations and the best of luck to Jessamyn Duke on her big night.