

THE ENDURANCE TEST

Mixed martial arts are growing in popularity, as eager students seek a mix of mental and physical strength that only comes with combat training.

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On a recent Wednesday evening, a group of working professionals gathered in a circle at Epic MMA Club in Central for a mixed martial arts (MMA) session. The training started with 15 minutes of dynamic warm-up routines, incorporating elements of striking and wrestling – as well as clinch fights and callisthenics – as Alberto Mina, Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) competitor and Ultimate Challenge MMA welterweight champion, gave orders.

The next 45 minutes of training were harder. Students

paired up to practice a set of techniques learned from Mina. First came a series of striking drills, followed by a long session of free sparring or rolling. As the fights went on, students applied other grappling techniques and put more snap into their punches.

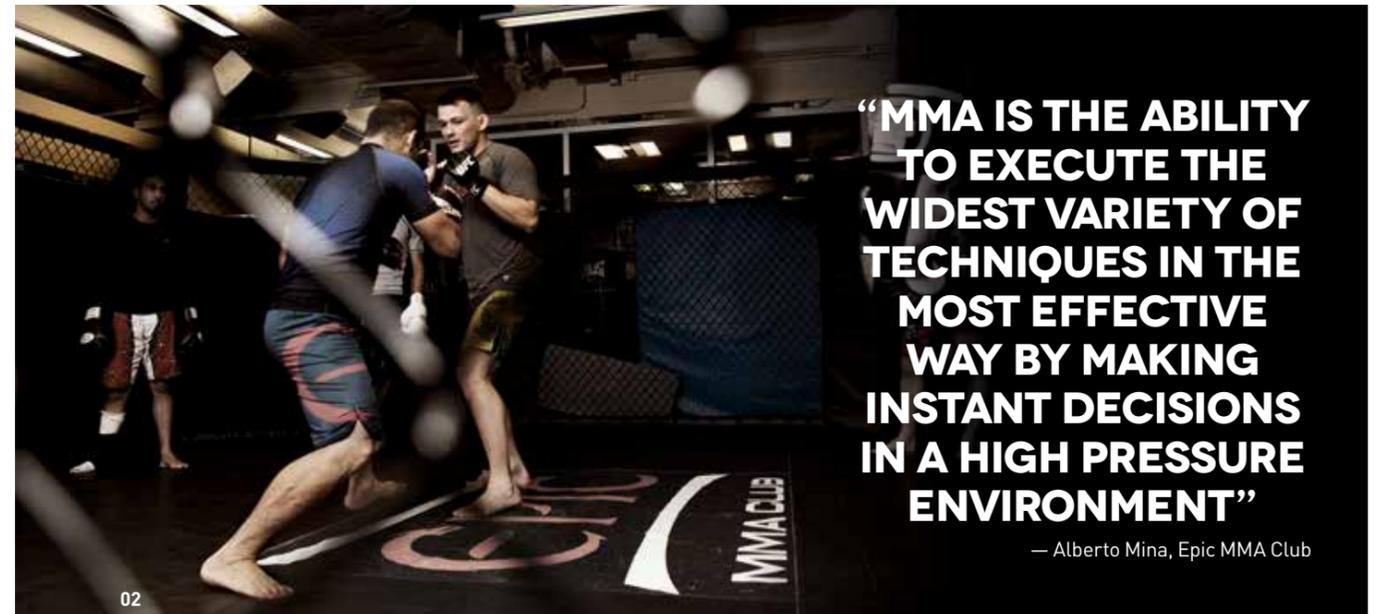
To some, this type of full-contact combat sport is simply human cockfighting, but to its practitioners it is a finely honed skill.

“The common misconception is that MMA is associated with violence and rage, and that it is barbaric and inhumane,” says Brazilian-born Mina. “What people

OPENING PAGE & 01 Brazilian Alberto Mina is a newly signed UFC fighter and instructor at Epic MMA Club.

02 Alberto Mina demonstrates his techniques to his students.

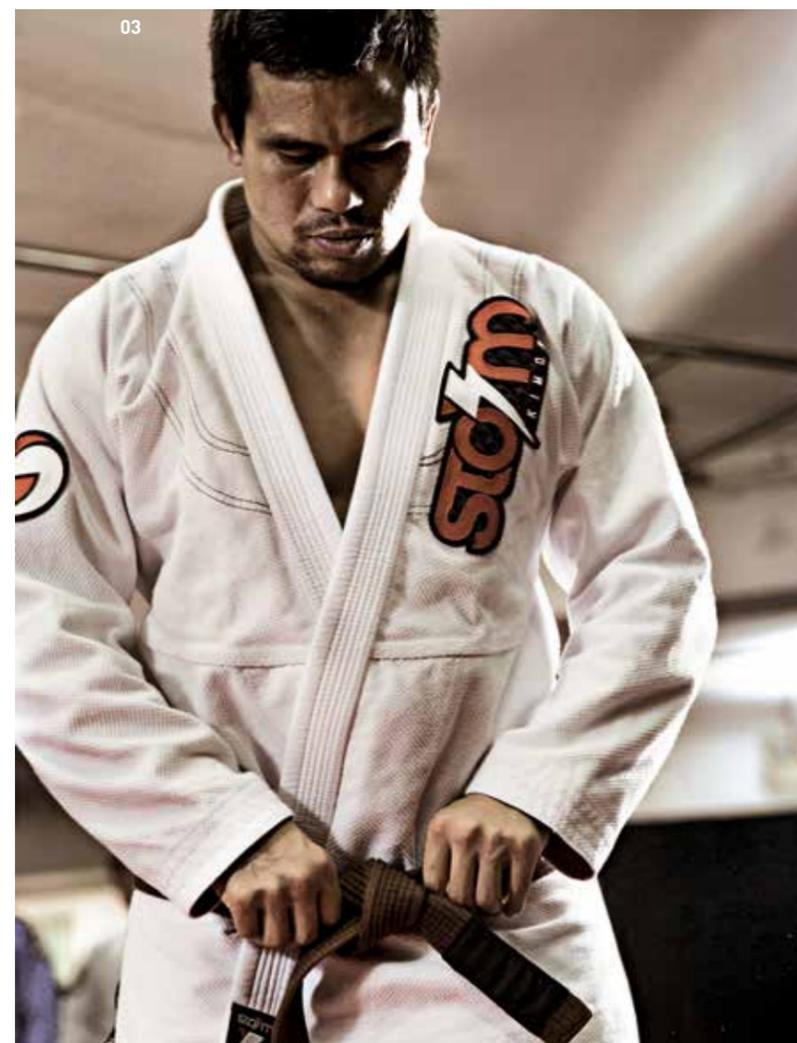
03 New Zealand-born Andrew Wong Kee is the managing director of Jab in Central.



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“MMA IS THE ABILITY TO EXECUTE THE WIDEST VARIETY OF TECHNIQUES IN THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY BY MAKING INSTANT DECISIONS IN A HIGH PRESSURE ENVIRONMENT”

— Alberto Mina, Epic MMA Club



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don't understand are the deep-rooted techniques that stem from traditional martial arts, which have been passed down from generations. MMA is the ability to execute the widest variety of techniques in the most effective way by making instant decisions in a high pressure environment.”

That kind of training and focus on mental and physical endurance is attracting MMA interest from Hong Kong businesspeople. Alex Lin, a 41-year-old senior portfolio manager at an Asia-based hedge fund and a student at Epic, says he enjoys fighting because it helps him focus entirely on the present and leave other thoughts or worries behind him.

“Your mind is actually engaged in a strategy on your next move, almost as if you are standing outside and observing the activity,” says Lin. “No matter how physically tired I feel after training, I always feel mentally refreshed.”

Andy Bachtar, head of listed equity derivatives sales for HSBC and a student at Jab, a semi-private training studio in Central, also enjoys the intellectual aspect of MMA. “I was more intrigued about taking all the various martial arts I have learned over the years, combining the best aspects and turning it into a viable strategy to win a fight – sort of putting a puzzle together,” says Bachtar, 45. “MMA is a very cerebral sport; it is brutal, but you have to be able to think.”

DEVELOPING A FIGHTING MENTALITY

A fight involves mental toughness as much as physical preparation, and it is this mental toughness that is key to winning. “MMA is really a fight or flight mechanism,” says



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04 Alain Ngalani, nicknamed 'The Panther', is a full-time instructor at Impakt in Central.

05 The battle rope workout is one of the many popular regimens for muscle building and endurance offered at Triquest MMA & Fitness Academy in Tsim Sha Tsui.

06 Thomas Fan is a co-owner and instructor at Triquest MMA & Fitness Academy. He is also a referee for UFC fights.

New Zealand-born Andrew Wong Kee, managing director of Jab, which has been training fighters for 10 years in Hong Kong. Wong emphasises the need for self-control, particularly in the face of a physical challenge. "MMA is a human chess game," says Wong Kee, a former professional rugby player who also holds a black belt in karate. "It's always a push-pull or action-reaction sort of thing."

Developing a fighting mentality can only be achieved through intense training that pushes students beyond their physical limits. Cardiovascular training, weightlifting and other forms of normal fitness workouts are not enough for would-be fighters expecting to face another combatant.

Cameroonian Alain Ngalani, a full-time trainer at Impakt in Central, has encountered novice fighters and white-collar boxers who signed up for MMA training but gave up after just a few sessions. For Ngalani, what matters most is seeing students pushing their bodies to the limit and struggling through.

"I have students who really know what they want,

and others who have already been injured but they are still trying to push," says Ngalani, who also has a black belt in judo and is known for being a fast heavyweight fighter. Ngalani acknowledges that some of his students are there without such purpose.

"If you manage to challenge yourself on what I ask you to do, manage to struggle and keep trying, manage to put on hours and accept the pain, then you're already a winner," says Ngalani. "Your mind has to really want this fight, even if you are injured or tired, because the mind is the only thing that will keep you going."

In his or her first few real fights, a student is likely to get knocked down five or even 10 times every round, says Wong Kee. By the time a student gets to the third and fourth fight, his or her body and mind have to be working together, and the mind has to be calm. If not, doubt creeps in.

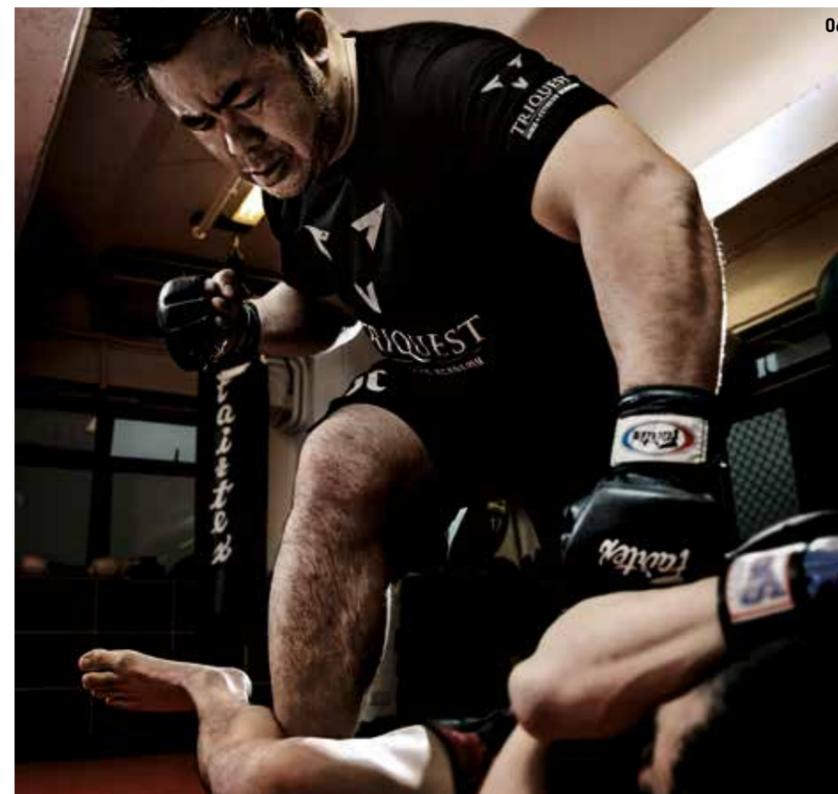
"In fighting, the conscious mind tells you to fight your game, win at all cost, don't let down yourself, your team and your family," says Thomas Fan, co-owner and



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— Alain Ngalani, Impakt



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instructor at Triquest MMA & Fitness Academy in Tsim Sha Tsui. "Subconsciously, the mind is giving you a fight-or-flight response and fear of pain, damage or death."

Fan also emphasises the emotional aspects of MMA, which includes how one deals with feelings such as fear, frustration and pain, as well as the ability to listen and trust the fighter's coaches and training partners.

"Fighting or hand-to-hand combat could be said to be one of the purest ways to express a person's emotions, so he cannot pretend or hide anything," says Fan, who has been a judge and a referee at UFC fights in Tokyo and Macau.

MMA does involve plenty of trauma, and aspiring fighters should be ready to deal with knockouts and concussions. According to University of Toronto researchers who studied all UFC fight results from 2006 to 2012, MMA fighters suffered traumatic brain injuries in nearly 30 per cent of professional fights. This is higher than the traumatic brain injury rate for football, hockey or even boxing. "You have to take some form of trauma if you are an MMA fighter," says Wong Kee.

And there can be drawbacks to being so mentally toughened by years of hard training. "The biggest downfall for MMA fighters is that when they are mentally too strong, they push their bodies and keep fighting past their peak," says Wong Kee, who does note that MMA promotes control as well as confidence. "When you're thrown in a position, you become humble. And if you're humble, your attitude changes to things. That's the deeper side of MMA – it's not just about fitness."

MMA has taken a giant leap in popularity in recent years, eclipsing boxing as a spectator sport and attracting legions of participants who are as much interested in the fitness and endurance training as in actual fighting. Popularity in the US has been growing since the early 1990s, but interest in Asia, where many say the sport originated, is also growing quickly. The Ultimate Fighting Championship, the world's largest organiser and promoter of MMA competitions, has been expanding rapidly in Asia, staging events in Macau, Tokyo and Singapore, with a new event to be held in May in Manila.

So as MMA gains popularity in Asia and competitive professionals and businesspeople flock to beef up their physical fitness and mental toughness, expect to see combat gyms in Hong Kong filling to capacity.

"It's the ultimate reality check, as you will not tell yourself you are a good wrestler when you prefer to keep a distance, or that you can kick like Bruce Lee when in reality you can barely get your feet above waist level," says Lin. "You fight using the best techniques and abilities in your arsenal, and structure the fight to maximise those advantages against your opponent's weaknesses." 🕒