December 2001

The Worlds of Justin Eilers

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Recommended Citation
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*based on the 2001 American College Health Association National College Health Assessment (conducted by the Student Health Center).
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"He only knows one speed," says John Skladany, ISU's defensive coordinator.

All the fighting you do just takes away from your reps...

That first year, I didn’t listen," Eilers says.

"I like going out there and whacking people."

ISU linebacker Justin Eilers doesn’t want me to say this, but after high school five years ago, he became a street fighter.

Ultimate fighter to be more precise. Eilers admits it was basically street fights. Vicious affairs, these fights. Only eye gouging and biting were disallowed.

Eilers showed me his old fight tapes one night in his room. Not the fights seen on pay-per-view. In fact, the sometimes-grainy film we watched that night took place at Eilers' high school in Boise, Idaho. Ultimate Fighting, he says, mixes wrestling with karate and boxing. Eilers is 9-0 in his Ultimate Fighting career.

Eilers on tape is not as thick with muscle as current-day Eilers. He looks more sinewy and tense. As he bounces the balls of his feet on the wrestling mat before tangling with his opponent — who is shorter, stouter, broader — Eilers looks coiled.

First Eilers grabs enough of his opponent to lift him from the mat and returns him on his backside. Then he lies horizontally across his
opponent's chest and pinches his left arm around his opponent's neck. He cocks his right and delivers blow after savage blow to his opponent's face. One after another from maybe 6 inches away. Boom, boom, boom, "This guy was super strong," Eilers says, watching from his bed. "I'm just trying to land a real hard blow. You can only have so much strategy in these fights."

The crowd loves it. "Get him Justin, get 'em." Eilers continues for a few more seconds before his opponent escapes. In Ultimate Fighting, there is no time limit, no three-time, knock-down rule. Ultimate fighters brawl until they're still watching, so we quit before he can win. "It was fun though. It was a lot of fun to do," he says.

"He's always liked violence. Some people are born with more of a temper," he reasons. He got in fights coming to and from school during his childhood. He's always liked contact. He loves to build himself into a frenzied state and then release it — all of it — on the field. He likes to kick people's asses. He likes to do the hittin'. And his body today looks like it was meant for such activities.

"He's just so mannerly."
The thick neck extends through a bulked-up chest, shoulders and arms. Baggy sweatshirts couldn't conceal much. Not that he wears any. He often goes with a long john undershirt or a T-shirt while at home. He has some that are torn at the shoulders and some that are not. On occasion, he parades around without a shirt, wearing sweat pants pulled around the waist to show off the calves he's worked hard for. He's listed as 6-2 and 220. When he stands in public) and when the hat's off and he's in public) and shorter still on the sides. His ears are slightly cauliflowered at the tips, a remnant from his Ultimate Fighting days and high school wrestling. And during a football game, when he takes out his cardinal and gold mouthpiece, you can see he is missing a tooth — a gap smack dab in the middle of his upper gum. His only loss from fighting. After the game, he quickly puts the fake in his mouth.

Eilers doesn't want to dwell on this match we're still watching, so we quit before he can win. "It was fun though. It was a lot of fun to do," he says.

"You can hand me the poker?" Puhrman asks.

Eilers does. "Thank you," she says, singsong.

He tells her about his thumb, how difficult it is to push the tack all the way through the pumpkin. Puhrman coos and brings her forehead to his. "Oh, you only just stab it," she says, meaning you just pierce it. Eilers looks slightly disgusted with himself, yet willing to accept the love that Puhrman is giving him. They gaze in each other's eyes for a moment. Perhaps they would have kissed had I not been there.

This masquerades as pumpkin carving, but tonight is first and foremost a chance for Puhrman and Eilers to be together. "I ain't never done this before," Eilers says of pumpkin carving. He has a small tack in his right hand, and the pumpkin lets loose a small "pop" every time he pushes the tack through. Soon his thumb is white and blistered.

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Meticulous designs take shape. Soon they've been carving for two hours, with Eilers passing from time to time to watch his Pittsburgh Steelers beat up on the Tennessee Titans. (Ask him which team is his favorite and without hesitation: "Pittsburgh Steelers.")

Now, the Steelers have won, 34-7. The late local news is on. Pumpkins are nearly finished.

"I think mine wins," he says.

"It does not," "Uhh-huh.

"Why?"

Eilers drops the rough guy monotone he normally employs. In a higher register, a childlike register, a near feminine register, he says, "Because mine's coo-ooler."

"He has this little baby talk he does," Puhrman would say later. "He has the biggest, softest side to him." Even when they two pumpkins earlier today as well as two pieces of paper with carving designs on them.

Eilers has chosen "Dr. Death" for his pumpkin's design. It is a picture of the Grim Reaper. The black hood shows his skeletal face and missing-teeth smile. That big, menacing blade the Reaper carries around is swung behind his back, and his face is laughing so fully you can almost hear the cackling.

Taping the paper to the pumpkin, and with something sharp enough to pierce both, Eilers carves by pushing holes through the outline of Dr. Death.

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Eilers says, "what to say next. He's considering "em outside. Then we ask. The monotone from e chill of the night. can stand and look at longer; they really are Puhrman Dr. Dear kles. me that cooing baby talk, when they're finished. "Have

She says she only sees the macho Eilers when small sticks. The small ones hurt less. "We did ing 'We did his father who's waiting in side . Greg Eilers rears back and smacks the stick across his son's butt. The stick breaks in two. Greg tells him to go get another one. Justin runs back outside looking for a larger stick.

This is how he and his older brother, Traun, were disciplined. "I don't think they were disciplined any more than anybody else," Greg Eilers says.

"I wouldn't say I hated my dad," Eilers says. "He was real harsh on us sometimes. You drop a glass doing dishes, you'd get a whippin'." It wasn't abuse. Just discipline. Eilers says it didn't happen all the time. In fact, today he respects his dad for it. "That was the way he was raised," he says of his dad. "He didn't know no better." Nor did his son.

Traun was in second grade when Justin was in kindergarten. Justin would come home from school many days with another pink slip, the result of another fight. "He wasn't a guy that looked for it," Traun says. "But he wasn't going to back down."

Forty-five thousand people live in Nampa, 20 minutes outside Boise. The Eilers family lived among the poorer ones. A Spanish ghetto is how Eilers describes his neighborhood. "A lot of little gangsters, a lot of little kids really is all they were, just like me, trying to be tough," Eilers says. "Whenever me and my brother would walk home from school, they'd try to jump us," he says of the Spanish ghetto, smirking now. "We would whoop their ass. I mean, we would whoop their ass."

His freshman year of high school, Greg and Gwen, Eilers' mom, divorced. Joint custody was assigned. "That was the hardest part," Eilers says. Traun and he were always moving between rural Nampa, where Greg lived, and Nampa, where Gwen lived. "That was real hard on the kids," Greg says.

Eilers turned to football. Eilers liked hockey. Hitting was legal. Hurting was legal For the junior varsity team, he played running back and outside linebacker his freshman and sophomore year — the latter, Eilers says, was also the year his dad decided his son was finally a man, and no more would a belt or stick slap his backside. "I respect him for that," he says now.

Eilers played tight end and linebacker his junior season. He was named first-team all-Southern Idaho Conference as a tight end. His team lost in the title game at state. No time to talk though. Eilers spent his winters wrestling. At 189 pounds, he placed fifth at the Idaho State Wrestling Tournament his junior season.

His senior year, Eilers was again named to the first-team all-Southern Idaho Conference as a tight end. He also started at linebacker. Despite his offensive accolades, Eilers liked defense. "It's just been more fun for me," he says. "I like going out there and whacking people."

After another runner-up finish at state, Eilers, wrestling at 189 pounds, placed third at state wrestling.

Learning How to Choke People

Poor marks in high school meant no one looked at him for college. "I was a non-qualifier," he says, which is another way to say his tests scores stunk. He didn't know you don't need "grades" to get into junior college. He didn't know anyone could just go. Eilers was unemployed. Ultimate Fighting was a job.

He knew a guy who was a karate instructor in Boise. Long days put in training — sometimes nine-hour days. Eilers and Brandon Shuey, his buddy, ran six and a half miles in the morning, lifted weight for two and a half hours, ate somewhere along the way, spent two more hours working on chokes, locks, leg locks and arm locks, then they'd box and kickbox for another hour.

After about a month of this, Eilers and Shuey traveled around Idaho fighting. Eilers was a natural. His wrestling techniques helped him as much as his childhood brawls did. "We were winning all these fights that we went to, you know, and we were training for a couple months, and we started beating all these guys that had been training for years, you know. And people started taking notice," Eilers says. They were winning, but the money was poor. "It wasn't enough to live off," he says. They looked for bigger venues. They fought in Salt Lake City. Fought once in L.A. "But you know, we never got to the bigger money fights, where you can make $60,000 to $70,000," he says.

So Eilers worked as a bouncer three nights a week at a strip club and three nights a week at a nightclub in Boise.

The nightclub was the tougher crowd. Six hundred fifty people would drink, dance and mingle. And when 550 people of different races mingled, fights broke out — sometimes 30 a night. "Break up one fight, and another would need breaking up," Eilers says.

That's why he liked the strip club. Less work needed from him there. Sure, some guys got too frisky and couldn't keep their hands off the women — Eilers would step in then — but mostly people chilled. Especially when the Hell's Angels, the notorious biker gang, stopped by. No one misbehaved with those guys around.

Eilers knew one of them. "They're pretty cool guys, too, man," he says. "They have a pretty bad reputation, but there are some pretty nice guys. They just got a bad rap for who they are and what they've done in the past."

Two years after graduation, and still money wasn't great. Eilers was undefeated in both kickboxing and Ultimate Fighting. He debated signing a contract with an agent for three years, but then he would be considered a pro and unable to compete collegiately. His dad watched two of his fights. "I didn't like him doing it. It was hard to watch it," Greg says.

He decided to enroll at Butte Community College in Chico, Calif., and try football. "I'm glad he made the decision to leave," Greg says.

What did Eilers learn from Ultimate Fighting?

He chuckles. "I learned how to choke people, and I learned how to put people in armed bars and leg locks and ankle locks and all kinds of stuff. That's basically all I really learned."
Back on the Field

At Butte, 13 men wanted to start at linebacker. Eilers was among them. He started his third game and every game thereafter.

Eilers finished his freshman year with 65 tackles, one interception and six sacks. He was named first team all-conference. He was older than nearly everyone, and bigger than most. He dominated, Willie Judd says.

Judd went to Butte with Eilers. He’s now a Cyclone with Eilers, Judd, a defensive lineman, like nearly everyone who meets Eilers, was curious about his fighting past. “The first thing I see as I walk into the coaches’ trailer is this fight tape on. And I’m like ‘Who the hell’s that? He’s beating the crap out of everybody.’ One of the coaches says, ‘Oh, that’s one of our new linebackers that’s coming down from Idaho.’ We kind of clicked from then on.

They hung out and became best friends. “We both have similar personalities as far as mellow­ness,” Judd says. “You know, he’s got a little quicker spark than I do, but besides that, we’re pretty even-keel guys.”

Eilers made 71 tackles and six sacks as a sophomore, leading the top-ranked Butte defense to the championship game, where his team lost. He was a first-team all-California Community College selection. He was ranked the 42nd best junior college player in the nation by SuperPrep.

As he closed in for the tackle, he saw the oncoming running back from above. As he closed in for the tackle, he saw the oncoming running back from above. He en­tered the winter into spring practice. “It’s not like he’s going to head but the guy, but more like I’m going to go through the air like a missile trying to kill somebody,” Judd says.

Judd says it wasn’t like that. “You know, you know. I just smacked him on the head, and I’m like ‘Who the hell is that?’ He’s got to be a sophomore, leading the top junior college player in the country.”

Eilers fought at least 10 different times in two-a-days alone, the lace summer twice-a-day practices. “Possibly more. Probably not less,” he laments. He wanted to start. He wanted to prove his worth to his team, though he had little concept of it. “I’d come in and drill someone when they didn’t expect it.”

“Justin’s personality is, he’s not going to take shit from anybody,” Judd adds. “Even if the offensive lineman’s doing his job and blocking him, Justin doesn’t like to get blocked, so he gets in fights with them.”

The coaching staff knew they had something volatile. They too, had seen the fighting tapes. Eilers split time with senior linebacker Ab Turner his junior year. Eilers one series. Turner the next. Eilers would look at the stat sheet after the game. Sometimes Turner played twice as long as he, depending on how long the defense was on the field. He didn’t like it. He’d get into more fights on the practice field.

And after the game. “There’ll be guys coming up to me, talking trash to me, because Justin got in a fight with them the weekend before,” Judd says.

Eilers says it wasn’t like that. “I was older than nearly everyone, and bigger than most. He dominated, Willie Judd says. He was a first-team all-conference. He was named first team all-conference. He was named first team all-conference. He was the 42nd best junior college player in the nation by SuperPrep. He lived large off the field as well.

“We were in Chico. Halloween,” Judd says. “Thirteen thousand people in the town and another thirty thousand coming just for Halloween. I’m all decked out in 70s-style leather coat and stuff. Justin came out as Goldberg [the professional wrestler]. It’s just a 70s-thong thing – he’s a real muscular guy. He’s got a good build. And all he has on is sandals and black underwear. And we’re cruis­ing all night like that. That’s just Justin. He’s crazy like that.”

Eilers says he knows now that violence only provokes more. He says he’s only been in two scuffles this season, “and those were with scout-teammates just being stupid.” Maybe it’s something to applaud, but it’s progress. “He’s kind of got the team concept down. He knows that these guys need to get better as well as him.”

Judd says, “Has he matured, Ennis? ’Most definitely.’

When he goes out this season, it’s often with Puhrmann. And, if you remember, Eilers acts ‘just so mannerly’ around Puhrmann.

There was a picture in the paper of Eilers recently. He’s mid-flight, arms at his side, looking like he’s attempting to head-butt the oncoming running back from above.

Eilers says it wasn’t like that.

As he closed in for the tackle, he saw two offensive linemen coming for him. He jumped. They blocked him below the knees. He pressed off of them with his hands. The picture snapped just as he had pressed off, just as his hands were at his sides. Yet the linemen had flipped him to nearly parallel with the grass below. Flying through the afternoon. “It ain’t like I go through the air like a missile trying to kill somebody,” he says.

Let’s hope not.

Paul Kix is a junior in journalism and mass communications. He is a senior editor for Ethos.