

# THE PROJECT: An up-close look at an 'always underestimated' fighter

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By Jeremy Luchau

Hanford, Calif.— *Sentinel Sports Reporter Jeremy Luchau is training to be a mixed martial artist, a project that will end with the bout... in Oct. 2007.*

His nickname is “**The Underdog**” and logo on his clothing line reads “Always Underestimated.”

Fans in attendance at the Save Mart Center on Oct. 7 for the Strikeforce MMA show now know quite a different **Casey Olson**.

The former Fresno State wrestler was transformed into a local MMA celebrity and any fighter who would underestimate this 155-pounder would be a fool.

Olson is 5-0, winning four of his five bouts in the World Extreme Cagefighting Championships that are held at the Tachi Palace Hotel & Casino in Lemoore. This was his first time fighting at home [Fresno] and away from the WEC [Lemoore].

For the guy that all his friends affectionately call “Casey O,” it was just another day at the office.

It started like any other fight day:

10:31 a.m. — Casey wakes up at his Fresno homes, lies in bed for a few [minutes] and then takes a shower.

11:51 a.m. — Nine friends and family member pile into cars and head down Cedar Avenue to BJ’s Kountry Kitchen for breakfast. Casey orders a ham-and-cheese omelette, hash browns and toast.

During the 45-minute feast there is no mention of fights or fighting. His friends continuously make Casey laugh and they field calls from fans wanting tickets or shirts throughout the meal.

“Those guys keep me sane,” Casey said. “They joke like that all day long. I really like to have all my close friends around on fight day.”

12:42 p.m. — Casey arrive back at home and takes a seat in the living room to catch a little of the Florida/LSU game. Everyone seems restless and for some reason wants to swim.

“I just want to splash around,” says Casey’s friend and training partner Antonio Banuelos. Antonio is the World Extreme Cagefighting 135-pound champion and trains with Casey at The Pit in San Luis Obispo.

The TV quickly switches to the Texas/Oklahoma game and Olson slips into the back room to get some rest.

“These guys understand that I just want to keep my mind off things today,” Casey said.

1:06 p.m. — Casey and Antonio leave to a friend’s house to pick up some Muay Thai pads for Casey to train with prior to his fight with Rancho Cucamonga’s Bobby “The Kid” Sanchez.

1:27 p.m. — Casey and Antonio return to Casey’s house and by 2 p.m. the majority of the house is napping.

3 p.m. — Casey opens his eyes from a nap. Antonio and some of Casey’s friends have taken off to train. Casey watches some more TV and then takes off to his room for more rest.

3:20 p.m. — Casey’s father, Andy, shows up to organize the T-shirts that will be sold at the fight. Casey owns Underdog Fight Gear, a clothing company that carries T-shirts, sweat shirts, hats and beanies.

“My very first fight I think we made 100 shirts just for friends and family,” Casey said. “People just keep asking for them.

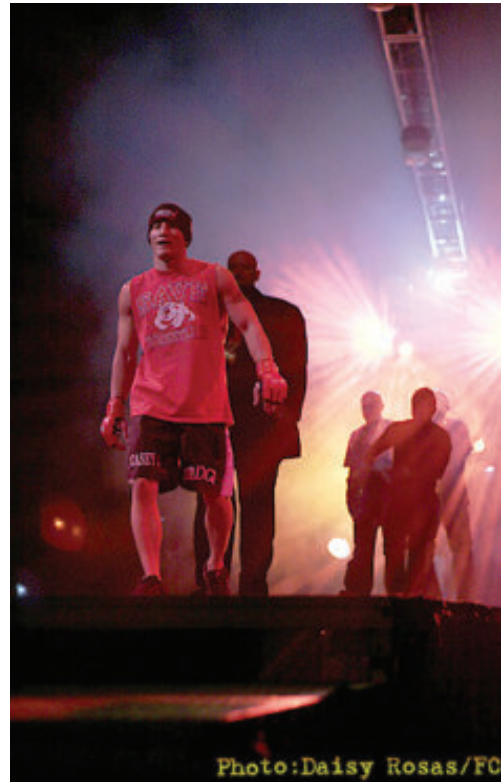


Photo:Daisy Rosas/FCF



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Photos:  
Jeff Sherwood/sherdog.com  
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This isn't a company [that] I am pushing to make money [on]. It's just so people can show their support and so that people know who you support."

Casey's garage is full of clothing. By the end of the night, his family and friends have nearly sold everything. People stop by throughout the day to try and get shirts and are turned away.

"When you wear an underdog shirt, you're showing your support," Casey said. "You can see someone wearing it at the fight and know that he or she got that from us.

4:08 p.m. — Casey takes his girlfriend Kelli McCollister home. Casey and Kelli have known each other since... [attending] Fresno City [College together].

We've been on-and-off since back in junior college, but been going pretty strong now for about a year-and-a-half," Casey said. "She's been to all of my fights. She doesn't like the fights too much, but she won't miss them. She is really supportive."

Kelli and her friends needed to finish up making shirts for the fights. They like

[theirs] to be a little different from the rest of the crowd.

"Every fight they make a little something different," Casey said. "It's the way they show their support."

4:35 p.m. — Casey arrives back home.

4:37 p.m. — Andy rallies everyone around Casey for a prayer.

4:42 p.m. — Casey's roommate Ryan Warren starts making pasta. Casey lies down to take another nap. He isn't expected to be at the Save Mart Center until 6:45.

"It's my job to make sure he is just comfortable," Antonio said. "I need to keep him relaxed. We switch roles when it's my turn to fight. We're here to just keep his mind off things. You don't want him getting tense. If he starts to get tense, I just tell him to kick back. Once we get to the show it is go time."

5:13 p.m. — Ryan serves Casey a plate of pasta and a Gatorade. After finishing his food, Casey disappears to his room [to rest once again]. He later wakes up and showers.

6:21 p.m. — Casey and Antonio leave for the Save Mart Center.

6:28 p.m. — Casey and Antonio arrive at the Save Mart Center.

6:33 p.m. — Casey and Antonio meet with Ultimate Fighting Championship veteran Josh Koscheck. Antonio, Josh and American Kickboxing Academy's Bob Cook will corner Casey for the fight. Normally Casey is cornered for his fights by UFC light heavyweight champion Chuck Liddell.

"It's time to relax," Antonio said. "We have to wait for the fight. He isn't supposed to go on 'til 8:30 or 9. We will start to go over what he needs to do and get him warmed up. We just need to make sure he is awake and focused. Get

his hands taped and do all the small things.”

6:57 p.m. — Cruz Gomes begins taping Casey’s right hand.

7:19 p.m. — Cruz finishes the right hand.

7:20 p.m. — Cruz starts taping the left hand.

7:31 p.m. — Cruz finishes the left hand. After taping the hands, they are checked by the California State Athletic Commission and signed off.

7:32 p.m. — Casey starts to shadow box.

7:39 p.m. — Casey changes into his fight shorts.

7:40 p.m. — Casey starts to stretch and by 7:49 p.m. He is working [with] the Thai pads with Antonio. After getting nice and warm, Josh steps in and gives Casey some advice.

“I just let him know to relax [and] that training is over,” Josh said. “Training was the hard part and the fight is the easy part. He needs to stay loose and keep warm, then let it all hang out. It’s really a mental game right now.”

8:17 p.m. — Casey is called to the green room. He is on deck [fighting in the next bout]. Casey watches Phillip Perez and Brandon Shuey fight on a TV in the green room. Casey is rooting for Perez, who like Casey, trains out of Pacific Martial Arts in Fresno. Perez defeats Shuey with a triangle choke by 8:30 p.m.

8:35 p.m. — Casey comes out to a huge standing ovation by the Fresno crowd. Casey [and his father, Andy] personally sold nearly 2,000 of the 5,000 tickets at the event.



“This is the time when I’m most nervous,” Kelli said. “It’s so awesome to see all the support for Casey and how everyone here loves him, but this is where my heart rate really goes up.

8:37 p.m. — The fight starts. Casey comes out quickly and forces Sanchez to the canvas. It doesn’t take long before Casey sinks a guillotine choke on Sanchez. Casey has his back to the fence and is looking into his corner.

“He kept moving his head around and finally, for some reason, he reached for a double and left his neck up,” Casey says later. “I just got my arm in deeper and he tapped [out].”

The fight take all of 1:58. It’s Casey’s first-ever victory by submission.

“It was quicker than I expected and a lot quicker than I would like,” Casey says. “I know that he was a lot tougher than people gave him credit for. He had some good defense and moved his hips well.

Koscheck is impressed.

“[Casey] is an up-and-comer and a local celebrity here in Fresno,” Josh says. “He’s a good guy, too. He has a great heart and would drop anything to help a friend. His fight career is really taking off. He also sold something like 2,000 tickets for this fight on his own. That

right there shows you his dedication to the sport.”

8:42 p.m. — Casey, who is now 5-0, is interviewed in the cage by UFC veteran Phil Baroni.

8:45 p.m. — Casey is back in the dressing room and has the tape cut off his hands.

8:49 p.m. — Casey receives his check for the victory.

8:52 p.m. — After a shower, Casey begins [post-]fight interviews.

“It was an awesome experience. I remember back to my senior year wrestling here [at the Save Mart Center]. It was kind of like that. Fresno is really loyal,” Casey says. “Once that noise came I was really pumped up.”

9:18 p.m. — Casey is interviewed by CBS [affiliate KGPE] Channel 47.

9:22 p.m. — Kelli gets her first hug and kiss after the bout.

“I’m glad [that] there was no blood and that it wasn’t a long fight,” she says. “I like it when they end quickly. Once I know that he is on top or in [a] position to win, I feel so much better.”

9:26 p.m. — Casey takes a seat in the stands to watch Josh Thomson and



Duane Ludwig fight. Thomson is a teammate of Casey's at American Kickboxing Academy.

9:38 p.m. — Casey gives Thomson a standing ovation for his submission victory.

9:45 p.m. — Casey visits his dad [who's sitting in the stands].

9:56 p.m. — The main event starts and Casey stand to watch UFC legend David "Tank" Abbott and Paul Buentello fight.

"This will be quick," Casey said.

9:58 p.m. — Casey and Antonio are in the parking lot. It took Buentello just 43 seconds to knock out Abbott, and Casey and Antonio hurried out the back [door] of the Save Mart Center.

10:02 p.m. — Get in line at the Jack In The Box drive through. Casey orders an ultimate cheeseburger.

10:12 p.m. — Casey calls Liddell to tell him about the win.



10:20 p.m. — Casey arrives at home. He showers and talks with friends.

10:39 p.m. — Casey and his friends pile into cars and [they] head out to party.

"End of story," Casey said.

*Photos:  
Jeff Sherwood/sherdog.com  
Clay Sorrick/FUNews  
Daisy Rosas/FCF*