

TO WEAR THE CROWN

BY DANNY ACOSTA

HEAVY IS THE HEAD OF IRONHEART CROWN



Stephan Bonnar submits two opponents in less than four minutes (with just 20 minutes between contests) and wins a light heavyweight tournament in Hammond, Indiana, at Ironheart Crown III: Exodus. He says all that his father could talk about was “how awesome this Miguel Torres was.”

It was in Sin City that the “American Psycho” became one half of 2005’s Bonnar-Griffin Boom—a 15-minute scrap with Forrest Griffin that properly introduced mixed martial arts to America and changed the sport forever. That may have never happened if Chicago promoter Eric Moon hadn’t walked into Bonnar’s jiu-jitsu class four years earlier.

“Anyone want to sign up for the 205-pound tournament in a few months?” asked Moon. The future UFC star accepted the invite to ensure consistent training. While he prepared for a gauntlet of violence, Moon was trying to give MMA a legitimate sporting platform in fighting’s early Wild West days.

Moon assumed control of Chicago Challenge when the event he was supposed to compete in fell apart. The fighter-turned-promoter renamed it Ironheart Crown, wanting to “highlight the athleticism and skill involved rather than the blood and brutality.”

Despite Windy City neighborhoods refusing to display fight posters, Moon ran his first show in 1999, under rules that he’d designed around the wording that banned “Ultimate Fighting.” The second event came a year later. Johnny Law caught on and ran Moon out of Illinois in court. So, Moon set off to the Hammond Civic Center in Indiana for his third event. The for-

mer Relson Gracie Jiu-Jitsu student found a home for his passion-project promotion in Hammond thanks to a blessing named Miguel Torres.

“When I began fighting in Ironheart Crown, I was the first bout,” says Torres, who entered the event at 20 years old on the same night that Bonnar fought. “I sold 400 tickets. After my fight, everyone left.”

Moon panicked, thinking, *They’re leaving. They’re not buying beer. They’re not buying shirts. They’re killing the show.* The nightmares of promoting fights occupied Moon while he worked through medical school, where he eventually achieved a

doctorate in emergency medicine. A local hero like the mullet-sporting Mexican bringing in the house inspired Moon to continue his crazed night gig. Torres just required top billing.

Bonnar and Torres won their respective four-man tournaments on November 10, 2001, at IHC III. Thinking back, they impressed each other that night. Moon credits the two with exemplifying his vision of iron sharpening iron, heart battling heart, and the resulting classic fight moments.

“The Bonnar fight with Forrest Griffin,” says Torres, “I’ve seen Bonnar do four of those fights live in Ironheart Crown.”

The Show Before the Show

“I’m gonna find a guy whose gonna beat you,” Moon told Torres back in the day. “My goal was to find someone who was better than my champion, who could beat my champion, because that’s how you have a good fight.”

Quality comes at a price, and according to Torres, much of it came at Moon’s expense, but the hardships endured paid off as IHC garnered the attention of the North American Shooto Commission. Shooto designated Ironheart Crown as its primary destination in America. The association stretched its reach far beyond the Midwest.

Torres confides that the first belt that meant anything to him was the Shooto strap he held in Ironheart Crown. “Not only was I known in the Midwest, I was known in Japan,” he says. “It took me to a worldwide spectrum.”

Moon capitalized on Shooto’s organizational power by contacting promoters around the world to export top talent to challenge his homegrown stars. Against Canadian Richard Nanoo in 2006, Torres had a battle that changed the way he viewed fighting. Nanoo snapped Torres’ ankle, but the Carlson Gracie fighter persevered to beat his adversary’s eyes shut

and break his nose in a fight that Moon calls the greatest in the organization’s history. In defeat, Nanoo had to drive back to Ontario, Canada, that same night to return to his normal life and day job. It was his last fight ever.

“Is it worth it?” contemplated Torres. “It was. I remember the first time I got into the WEC, I thanked Eric Moon,” says the former WEC Bantamweight Champion. “Without the shows that he put on, I wouldn’t be here right now.” The decade-plus veteran credits Moon as a driving force behind the belief in sub-155-pound weight divisions (Moon also supported female MMA). “When you fight for a show like that, and you go to the UFC, its the same level of professionalism.”

Given Moon’s medical background, he ensured that fighters met medical requirements too—unheard of in a time where there was the option to find a pub, ask for a no-holds-barred fight, and get one.

Compelling talent was still available to regional organizations when the UFC and PRIDE—the major brands in MMA—only ran a handful of shows a year. As MMA became readily available on television, fighting’s success, ironically, cannibalized some of its havens like Ironheart Crown. The inflated market demands more capital for consistent, quality cards—these were the challenges that were facing Moon and

other regional promoters.

It’s bittersweet for Moon that IHC fell in the wake of the mixed martial arts’ boom, in which Bonnar played a significant role. However, after a two-year hiatus, Moon returned in 2008 to promoting in Chicago, eight years after being ejected. Ironheart Crown XII was properly dubbed “Resurrection.”

“It was the first sanctioned show within city limits,” Moon says, mentioning the UIC Pavilion is where the WEC brought Torres a year later. “It turned out to be our biggest show. We had just fewer than 4,000 people there.”

Ironheart Crown may never happen again. But the authors of its history may not be done writing its story. Torres says he will have a hand in reviving Ironheart Crown. “It’s not gonna be risky because it’s gonna be a success,” he says.

“When we do come back, I hope that there’ll be fighters out there that will be interested in fighting for us again,” says Moon, now 40-years-old. “We haven’t been forgotten.”

Ironheart Crown fashioned its prize-fighting legacy with only 12 shows in nine years. By comparison, the UFC held 24 in 2010. The unique spirit of Ironheart Crown is in its ahead-of-the-curve dedication to sport rather than embracing rebellious and careless attitudes of the time.

Torres, now in the UFC, compares the roar of IHC’s crowds to any current UFC. Bonnar echoes that sentiment, saying, “I know Ironheart seems so small compared to fighting on a big UFC card, but looking back on it, it feels just as big, you know? It feels just as meaningful, just as big—you still want to win just as bad.”

Before Bonnar returns to his life as a UFC fighter in Las Vegas and quits such nostalgia from back home, he reveals that he was supposed to fight Bobby Southworth for the Ironheart Crown Light Heavyweight title in 2004. Instead, both were cast on the inaugural season of *The*

Ultimate Fighter. “They actually made the event posters and everything,” Bonnar says. “I still have them.”

Millions of viewers watched Stephan Bonnar take a split decision over Bobby Southworth on Spike TV. In a way, they watched an Ironheart Crown title fight. Bonnar went on to the TUF tournament finals against Forrest Griffin. And the rest, as they say, is history. 📌

Ryan McKinnell, national mixed martial arts examiner for examiner.com, contributed to this story.