

# HEARTBEAT HUSTLE

## MARK "FIGHT SHARK" MILLER'S SURVIVOR TALE

By Danny Acosta - Photos by Cherie Carlson

Mark Miller's brown eyes betray his lack of sleep. In fact, "Fight Shark" doesn't like to slip into unconsciousness in bed or the ring. He walks around Los Angeles at night for hours, for miles. Through skid row no problem. Sleep is the hardest conquest for the 42-year-old. He's lived like a hustler and a survivor. The lines between the two are blurry for Miller.

"I didn't care about my life," says Miller, surrounded by leather firecracker sounds of legs exploding on heavy bags at the Pico Blvd. Tapout Los Angeles gym. "Drinking, drugs, sex. It was a conquest. How much can I drink? How much can I smoke? How much can I get laid in Vegas? That's all it was." The Pennsylvania native describes straying from his martial arts journey.

Losing his identity would leave deeper wounds than losing a fight ever could. In 2010, Mark Miller had forgotten how he was a fighter from day one. Kung-fu movies once illuminated the path he would follow for the rest of his life. Martial arts and athletics were easily an obsession. Fast forward to a "tooth and nail" rise through the ranks all the way to rare representation of America in K-1—the world's prime proving ground for a stand-up fighter—and Miller's shiftless days don't fit in.

"There was no realization of seriously coming back to fight," he says.

Miller was away from competing, busy baptizing his demons. Rather than live in Las Vegas, Nevada, the world's fight capital, Miller lived in Sin City, the world's nightly neon oasis that teeters on well-lit nightmares. He prepared for combat six days a week, tricking himself into believing fighting was on the horizon. All the hours in the gym were outweighed by the 21 hours left in the day spent chasing the bottle, the women (mostly strippers) and the highs associated with a party lifestyle.

"You're living a lie," says Miller. "I had open-heart surgery. My brother, mother and father died in a four-month span. I was in a horrific car accident. So that's how I justified it."

During his roughest years on record, 2006-2007, Miller's family tragedies, one after another, robbed him of his emotional strength in spite of his newly repaired physical state.

Miller had a cadaver valve surgically implanted in his heart to save his life. A congenital heart defect stopped him in his tracks a decade into his fighting career. The aortic valve replacement would have made him the first fighter in any combat sport to compete after open-heart surgery. But Miller's demons spared him that achievement at the time. He got by with an East Coast gift of gab from his father, a New Yorker, while he descended into addiction.

"I think that's how I fooled myself because my whole life I was always on a [martial arts] quest," he explains, "You fool yourself and say you're still on a quest. For what? There's nothing at the end of it."

People knew Miller was drifting away. His dark, sinking eyes scream of his Mongolian ancestry, but at that point, they only spoke of his addiction and pointed to the habits that chipped away at his physical prowess. He was "scare crow" skinny at 183-pounds, telling circles he'd compete in mixed martial arts at middleweight. Muscle definition disappeared. The bones he beat into heavy bags grew pronounced on his once heavyweight frame. His choices were contradictory. He tried to justify he was healthy with a vegan diet. Meanwhile, he would do cocaine to stay awake to drink longer. Alcohol dominated his father's narrative, so it never appealed to Mark. Yet here he was.

On the party circuit it was about being there, but not about contributing anything—the opposite of marital arts. Miller could get by with his mouth on the party scene and keep to himself the vast knowledge he might have acquired through fighting and teaching. It was a way to distance himself from Mark Miller. Hiding in the broad Vegas night-lights, the script was completely flipped for a man who originally embraced martial arts to discover and become the exact person he wanted to be.



Miller's mouth could only take him so far, and ultimately his lifestyle belied his struggles with his demons. "I was telling people I was coming back, but there's no guarantee," he says. Miller appeared to be in good spirits following heart surgery, but that was to mask the tragedies he was enduring. He burdened himself with their deaths by chasing his own.

Miller relays the Texas-sized tragedy he fled to the desert to get past:

"I was in a car with someone else who was drunk out of their mind. We wrecked. It was horrific. I went head first through the windshield. I shouldn't have lived. It was just one of those deals where we're talking, but yeah, as the bang happened—I went out. I feel like water's pouring on my head from a tap. Feels like a hose over my head. Oh, it's my own blood? You sober up real quick."

Miller had been relying on fighting to satisfy his competitive spirit, so without it, he turned to poor substitutes. "It's not anything against you; I'm always fighting myself," he says. "I'm looking for any challenge." Vying to be the best turned into if you could drink 10 beers, he'd prove he could drink 20. It was drinking, drugs, repeat, gym time the big bow on the ruined gift. Drinking in the life lessons in martial arts went away in favor of drowning in his sorrow stories. His natural gifts—the ability to dunk, throw a baseball 90-miles-per-hour-plus, pack a knockout punch—were not nurtured. Self-destruction reigned.

Former UFC heavyweight title challenger Paul Buentello summed up Mark Miller's post-surgery stagnation.

"He said, 'Who's the guy who came back from open heart surgery? Nobody.'"

"I hadn't fought yet. Until it happens, I'm just a guy talking about it," says Miller. "That was a weird feeling. It was really hard to really deal with that. It didn't sink in."

Committing to sobriety since January 1, 2010, Miller went on to be the first fighter to enter the ring after open-heart surgery.

## The Red Signals Go

Mark wears a white shirt with a black and white still from a Bruce Lee flick. He points to Shelby Belfast Jones getting ready for her workout. Her long hair is autumn red on fire. She saved him, he says with the gesture. He would verbalize it, but she'd probably be upset at the thought.

"I don't know if Mark ever had anyone say it's okay to be vulnerable," explains Shelby. "It's okay to be a human being and not this sort of mechanical robot that's out to conquer everything."

They didn't talk about fighting when they met. Mostly art and literature. That granted Miller the ability to avoid conversations he really needed. Once she discovered his family misfortune, Shelby realized why he would act like a career drinker. Three boys—Benjamin, now 9, and twins Ronin and Patrick, 6—from a previous marriage didn't deserve him this way. She didn't either.

On a snowy Christmas night in Pennsylvania, she called hospitals and jails across country from Los Angeles to see if he turned up dead after Miller uncharacteristically didn't return her messages. He would never drive drunk yet he had no problem getting into a vehicle with a drunk driver. That is an easy visit into a ditch, a premature dance with death. Shelby relays Mark is too smart to be that irresponsible for so long. He could only avoid himself to a point. It turns out Miller passed out on a couch that night safely, but that wouldn't be the case next time if he didn't change. Clarity of mind—sobriety—was necessary for everything his life required.

"Suddenly he had to deal with shit," she says. "Suddenly he had feelings."

## Rediscovering, Redefining the First

Harry Miller played in the first ever NBA game. Mark's father was a Marine in the Pacific in World War II. Loud, boisterous, 6'5, 240-pounds with a size 15 shoe, "Moose" Miller's presence was always known. He was a PHYS ED instructor for exceptional children. He had Mark with his fourth wife, Helen Rose Miller, a secretary, who he met working door at a bar when he was 52-years-old.

"He intimidated everybody," recalls Mark. "He intimidated me. He was powerful and he made sure you knew it."

Harry Miller never dealt with fools. The problem was he viewed everyone as the fool. "Moose" had no reservation about slapping another man. In Mark's childhood, a newspaper ran Jerry Rice's handprint for its marvelous size, impressing Mark until his father walked over and covered the outline completely with his own hand. His philosophy on fatherhood, according to Mark, was trial by fire. Surviving the hardest situation



without any knowledge on how to do so meant knowing what you were doing. In Pennsylvania's rust belt, Harry obliged Mark athletic interests with cruel practicality.

"Basketball, he took me to the hood, drop me off, and play against the biggest black kids there are," he says of his father. "Boxing, I was the only white guy in the gym, he dropped me off, and I learned how to box. It might have worked, but when you're a kid..."

These are the racially tense and crime-ridden parts of Pennsylvania that became infamous in 1999 when a gunman walked into McDonald's, murdering five white victims in cold blood, never shooting black patrons.

"I didn't believe much of what my father would tell me, but he would tell me, if a coach stops talking to you, that's when you worry," says Miller. "If a coach is on your ass, that's a good thing. That means he believes in you. They're going to stay on you because they want your full potential."

In the summer of 1984, a nine-year-old Miller first saw kickboxing. Denis Alexio versus Don Wilson on the Wide World of Sports engaged him. Rick Roufus and Maurice Smith illuminated the sport. By 17, he notched his first fight, a smoker in Altoona, Pennsylvania. He was

sparring 12 rounds in preparation, but the adrenaline dump made it "the longest six minutes" of his life. In 1993, he witnessed K-1.

"It came down to where do I want to go? Milwaukee or Seattle," he remembers. "I chose Seattle. I chose Maurice Smith."

The quickest way Mark could see to achieving his goals was seek out someone who already did it. That was Mark Miller's initial attraction to Smith—a way to get into K-1. It's the old coattail hustle: adhere to the schedule of someone that's been there before.

He picked up hustling from his father through osmosis. Miller hung around St. Vincent College on rainy days until Pittsburgh Steeler practices were forced indoors to the basketball courts. There he baited the NFL players into betting this white guy couldn't slam the rock. He loved letting people believe they weren't suckers in that scenario (hence the "Shark" moniker). Hustling is a survival skill. In fighting, Miller enjoyed packing a deceptively heavy punch. It won him enough fights to earn his K-1 bid in 2000, nearly a decade after linking up with Smith.

His first K-1 fight versus Musashi fell through. He debuted versus Tommy Glanville, losing a unanimous decision.

"It's weird enough that its K-1, which is like being in the Super Bowl," he says. "Then you have Michael Buffer who you've kind of grown up hearing through boxing fights announcing your name as you're walking in the ring. I didn't do drugs or alcohol in those days but I'm pretty sure was something like that when you're really high or really drunk. It was surreal."

He fought "spotty" and "inconsistent" in K-1. At the time, the company only featured tournaments and was beginning to gravitate toward freak shows following Andy Hug's death. Miller left for Thailand and competed in the muay Thai mecca. While preparing for Thailand's S1 Fights, Miller became aware of his heart defect. Doctors said he required surgery immediately. Bullheaded, he pretended nothing was wrong and headed for training.

"A guy by the name of Justin Hurzeler was holding pads for me. He said, 'We're done' after the first round."

"What do you mean we're done? It's the first round."

"He goes, we're done."

"Why are we done?"

"Go in the locker room and look at yourself motherfucker, you're blue. I'm not holding pads for you."

Mark can't describe the lifeless blue he was. His cardiac output was slashed more than a third of a healthy heart. He had no symptoms yet was on the verge of death. He called the doctor right away.

"So what? I die in the ring. I die happy," he thought. "I'll die in the ring."

The surgery sidelined him for 16 weeks. He waited 17 weeks. A wire holding his ribs together unhinged. The wire can be felt to this day by pressing a thumb to his chest. He was cleared to fight anyway.

Following his father's passing from congestive heart failure, his mother's from liver disease, and his brother Colin's drug overdose, Miller was hustling in the fight game, pretending to be a fighter despite several years away from competing in the ring. He had to give up the hustle if he wanted to thrive again instead of survive. He had to fight.

"The way the surgery worked was I was able to come back to fight because a particular kind of surgery," he says, "The trade off is I have to do it again. It only has a 15, maybe 20-year lifespan. I have to get surgery again" within in the next 10 years.

The reminder ticks in his chest. "My thought process at the time was I'll be retired by my early 50's," says the three-time mixed martial arts veteran, "So it's worth it to me. So I did it."

He became the first fighter to compete after open-heart surgery with his May 2011 KO of Nikolaj Falin in less than 10 seconds. A moment Shelby insists is "beautiful" for how it captures Miller's passionate rediscovery on this quest. He lost back-to-back contests via knockout since, going down to Sergei Kharitonov and Koichi Pettas. He prides himself on an anytime, anywhere, anybody fighting mentality. It was unrealistic for him to sign to fight Kharitonov on two weeks notice without first climbing back up the ladder to earn his spot opposite the malicious Russian puncher. He did it though.

Getting to headline above K-1 king Semmy Schilt sure pretends to be a feel good story, but it wasn't deserved. It made him want to work that much harder for it, especially while battling promotions who want to cash in on his comeback by feeding him to potentially more lucrative opposition. Against Koichi, he learned his management was intrigued by Koichi's potential in Hollywood, so they backed Koichi's corner instead.

With fight game headaches back in full effect, the passion remains for Miller. He's feeling impossible to lose after rediscovering fighting just in time during a life saving period.

Hanging up the gloves isn't something Miller thinks about anymore. Tapping into his vulnerability granted him the wisdom to travel new roads to success. While he was an addict? He absolutely thought his career was over. Now? He regrets the chapter in his life where fighting and family weren't his main priorities. Those realities reminded him of his father, letting his demons dominate him. All he can do now is win each day. To be a father and a fighter—a dedicated individual—rather than a man gambling on his life.

"I can't put a number on [retirement] because then I'll know," he says. "I'll know when it's time. I still have some things left. The fire is still there."

Miller has never bled in a fight. He hopes without the physical manifestation of blood he still inspires observers to understand sacrifice. Miller is a rare athlete: a type-1 diabetic and the first combatant to compete after open-heart surgery. Being the first is one of few things he shares with his father. To gain a sliver of fame is to evaluate the role model burden, one he's glad to tackle. Addiction degraded the values he adheres and



works to pass along to his children and any child with CHD or type-1 diabetes.

"When those kids seen what I've done," he says, "What I'm doing at my age, it becomes important."

One of the most important lessons Miller learned from the fight game is perhaps something his father's bullying imparted upon him: "If you don't stand up for yourself, they'll try to run you over."

To avoid being run over, Miller relies on his instincts. The instincts he picked up in years spent hustling shine in his counter strikes.

The instincts he acquired as a survivor show in his resilience in the ring and willingness to accept challenges. Failure happens. No one is exempt unless

they never strive for their true loves, the rhythms thumping to break out of their beating hearts.

"As far as challenging yourself, there's not a better way to do it than take knots on your head," says Miller. "There's so much you have to put into it, you really have to be on the straight and narrow to do it properly."

Sometimes surviving is the only thing. Sometimes it's just enough. Sometimes it doesn't mean anything because it's not living. After years of taking knots on the head from far more formidable foes, Miller is finally living, thriving beyond the hustle of sheer survival.