

The “Uncrowned Champ”

Blood is all over his face. He constantly rubs his eyes, so he can see the next punch coming his way. Every punch to his face lands with a thud. His vision gets blurry, but he still stands.

“Jab and move, Calvin! Jab and keep moving!” his coach yells. If he doesn’t move, he may not survive the onslaught. He absorbs a combination of punches and stumbles back towards the fence, but throws a vicious uppercut that misses the target.

He’s still fighting, but for how much longer? It’s the last round, so survival is the priority. With every punch he takes, he throws one back, signaling to the referee that he’s still in the fight. Applause and cheers roar in the arena as time expires. His opponent, Max Holloway, raises his arms and screams in a victorious tone. Calvin walks towards his corner with his head held high, and the medic comes over with a towel to clean the blood off his face.

“Damn it,” said Calvin Kattar, who competes in the 145-pound featherweight division of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, the UFC. Currently ranked #5, Kattar is a title contender, believed to be one fight away from an opportunity to fight for the championship belt. He spits out blood and circles the cage, as he shakes his head in disappointment. The referee grabs Calvin and Max’s hands, awaiting Bruce Buffer’s announcement of the winner. Calvin, still covered in blood, knows he lost. He knew this fight could bring him to the title, but the title would have to wait a little longer.

It’s almost been a year since his “Fight of the Year” against Max Holloway. Calvin, in the midst of his longest layoff of his career, strides onto the mat as he adjusts his gloves. He’s wearing gray sweatpants, a red hoodie and black Adidas shoes. The padded floor is soft and squishy, mimicking how the floor of a cage feels. His dark blue eyes focus on his target, a punching bag, which dangles from a metal chain attached to the ceiling. He begins hitting the bag, throwing simple jabs to warm up. Behind him on the wall, 4-foot-tall black letters spell out the name of his Boston-born mixed martial arts team, New England Cartel, and two flags advertise 1st Phorm, a nutritional performance company and a sponsor of Calvin. The window shades are pulled down, so the sun doesn’t interfere with Calvin’s vision. Boxing gloves, mitts, and knee pads lie around in the room and on the window sill. A huge fan on the floor blows cool air towards the mat. Calvin breathes heavily as he circles the bag. He throws multiple combos as he practices his striking for his upcoming fight against Giga Chikadze.

Giga is the No. 9 ranked featherweight in the division and riding a six fight winning streak, making him the favorite to win this fight. Calvin’s teammate and long-time friend, Rob Font, places his phone against the wall and begins a five-minute timer. He loves to observe and take notes of Calvin.

“I love watching him work. It teaches me a lot, while allowing me to correct him on something I see. We teach and learn from each other,” Font said. Not only is Font a teammate of Calvin’s, but he is also the #7 ranked fighter in the UFC 135-pound bantamweight division.

“I credit our success in the UFC to not only our work ethic, hard work, and dedication, but to that man too,” Font said, pointing to their coach, Tyson Chartier. Chartier observes Kattar intensely, watching him finish his round of bag work.

He’s wearing black sweatpants with a red New England Cartel t-shirt. His sunglasses are propped up on his bald head and he holds his gold iPhone 14 Plus in his right hand. The timer goes off and Calvin throws one final punch. The pounding of the bag echoes in the room and heavy breathing becomes audible. Sweat pours down Calvin’s short, brown hair. He rubs his groomed brown beard with a towel and squeezes the sweat out of it.

Sandra Kattar nervously watches Calvin train. She sits on a chair with her brown Chanel handbag next to her. She fixes her blonde hair and removes her black sunglasses. She has always supported her son’s career, but worries because his job is extremely dangerous. “It’s hard to watch. These fights make me ask myself why he chose to do this for a living. Seeing my boy doing that is not easy to watch. I just hope he comes out healthy. I want my boy to come back home.” Having that mindset was put to the test when Calvin fought Max Holloway a year ago. In a fight that saw Calvin absorb a UFC-record 445 significant strikes, the damage endured in that fight would make a lot of fighters question their career. Despite the one-sided loss, Sandra was confident that Calvin would see himself back in the title conversation and prove people wrong.

Tyson smacks Calvin’s rear end and compliments his striking, as he removes the gloves and hand wraps. “If you keep doing that, there ain’t no stopping you. Giga ain’t gonna be able to see what’s coming. Trust me on that!” Tyson Chartier, the man behind New England Cartel, has been an MMA coach/manager for 15 years, managing mixed martial arts fighters like Font and Tony Martin. Kattar and Tyson met when they were both extras on the Kevin James film, “Here Comes the Boom,” a film involving mixed martial arts. “We really connected during that time. He’s incredibly poised, humble and so disciplined. At that time, he was still finding his footing in the MMA world, but when he gave me a call in 2015 and said he wanted in on the UFC, I was all in,” Tyson said. Now, Calvin and Tyson, 34-years-old and 42-years-old respectively, prepare to get back on track to a shot at the title.

As he cools off from training, Calvin closes his eyes to reflect. “It’s something he always does,” Font says. “I describe it as his way to ground himself and clear his head, like meditation.” Looking back on the fight with Max, Calvin says, “I took the worst beating of my life. Going in there against someone like Max, who many considered the real champion, I wanted to prove myself. I proved that I’m tough as nails. You’re gonna need to bring an army to bring me down. Win or lose, I ain’t going out. You won’t see me unconscious on the ground. I’ll always be standing in the end. But, Max was better than me on that night. Simple as that.” Calvin looks at

the wall. Every time he looks at the New England Cartel sign, he remembers that he must become a champion to make the people around him happy. He reminds himself why he's doing this. "My story is definitely a unique one," Calvin says.

Born in Methuen, Massachusetts, fighting has been Calvin's life since he was an 18-year-old who fought and beat a 35-year-old in his first cage fight in Derry, New Hampshire. "Was I a lunatic for taking a fight against someone 100 pounds heavier than me? Absolutely," he said. "Do I regret it? Absolutely not." Wrestling in high school opened the door for Calvin to compete in combat sports, which was at the same time when the UFC was growing as a sport. His interest in mixed martial arts was piqued when his sister, Kylee, took Kattar to a local competition at Club Lido in Revere to watch her friend, Dave George, fight in an MMA event. "I remember hearing the crowd going wild every time a punch landed and it just looked awesome. A sport where you fight in a cage and fight another man, now that's some tough shit. I was hooked," Calvin said. From there, he won 16 of his first 18 battles fighting for regional promotions like CES, World Championship Fighting, American Steel Cage Fighter and the Xtreme Championship Fight League. He developed into a more comprehensive fighter, working with boxing and jiu-jitsu coaches to complement his wrestling foundation. With his success in regional competition and being ranked the No.1 mixed martial arts fighter in New England at 145 pounds, a career in the UFC seemed to be on the horizon.

However, in 2013, Calvin's momentum stalled and he found himself at a career crossroads. "So, I decided to take over the ownership of a local fight promotion business, Combat Zone MMA, which Dave George owned and I fought in their events a couple of times." Calvin realized that he can make more money as an owner and wouldn't have to go through the hard lifestyle of a fighter. "I figured ownership was a good thing. It did keep me involved with the sport for a three-year limbo period where I didn't know what my next move was." Once again proving to be a catalyst in her brother's career, Kylee signed up Calvin as an extra in, "Here Comes the Boom," starring James and Salma Hayek. He spent two weeks on set and learned a lot about what goes on behind the scenes of a movie, but also met and befriended his coach, Tyson. "I consider it a blessing that Tyson and I met during that because we formed a great friendship and he gave my fighting career new life."

A UFC event in TD Garden was seen as the opportunity of a lifetime for Calvin. Font was already scheduled for a fight there and Calvin wanted in on a hometown fight too. "Calvin called me and asked if I could get him on the card. At that time, I wasn't sure how it worked since Calvin wasn't on the UFC roster nor a fighter of mine, but I told him I'll try and that he needed to sign a managerial contract with me. He did and Calvin's career was resurrected," Tyson said. To prove to the UFC that he belonged on the roster, Calvin won two regional fights in quick and easy fashion. Then, he got the call from the UFC to be a fill-in for an injured fighter at UFC Anaheim. Unfortunately, he only had eight days to make weight and prepare for the fight. "In a lot of people's eyes, taking that fight on short notice and it being my very first UFC

fight, it was insane to do.” Despite the odds, Calvin went toe-to-toe with Andre Fili and won via unanimous decision. With that victory, he got his wish to fight in front of family and friends in his next fight as the UFC returned to Boston, squaring off against an undefeated Shane Burgos at UFC 220 on January 20, 2018. As the underdog once again, Calvin defeated Burgos by technical knockout. “What’s my best moment in the UFC so far? Getting the win at home in front of everybody that’s supported me since day one,” Calvin says. “I fought the July prior for my debut in the UFC, but it’s not really a debut until you come home and everyone can watch you live at the TD Garden, right? That was special.”

Kaylee Reynolds sits down next to Calvin as they sip their coffee. It’s Sunday, Calvin’s recovery day. It’s early in the morning and the sun is beginning to rise. The Dunkin Donuts we’re in is quiet, as the workers prepare for the day. As Calvin’s girlfriend for five years now, Kaylee has seen the best and worst moments of Calvin’s career. She has been supportive of his career and looks forward to being with Calvin for the foreseeable future. “Calvin has become the light of my life and I love being with him and being there for him. Seeing him go through what he goes through on a daily basis is so motivating and amazing, I’m so proud of him.” The two met through mutual friends and began dating shortly after. Kaylee didn’t know what to expect in dating a UFC fighter, but it’s proven to be one of the best choices in her life. With all of Calvin’s traveling and training, Kaylee tries to balance her work and taking care of him. Though it has been difficult at times, she is always willing to be there for him in any way he needs. “I’d do everything a million times over. Cooking him meals, preparing his equipment and anything else, I love every moment.” She sips her coffee and Calvin expresses his appreciation for Kaylee and what she’s done for him. “She is the best part of my life and makes my job easier. When I go into the cage to fight, I think about her and how much a win makes her happy. I wanna be a champion for her.”

Blood is all over his face again, but this time, it isn’t his. Giga and Calvin wrap their arms around each other, walking towards the fence. Giga rubs his face on Calvin’s face and chest, trying to catch his breath. Calvin pushes off Giga and throws elbows as he exits the clinch. He lands and Giga wobbles. He’s hurt and Calvin smells blood. Calvin punches and elbows with ruthless aggression as the five minutes come to an end. He grabs his mouthpiece, throws it to the crowd, and celebratorily yells. On the one-year anniversary of his fight against Max Holloway, where he suffered the worst defeat of his career and many questioned what comes next in his career, Calvin proved the doubters wrong again. “How will Calvin come into this fight? Will he be the same fighter? Does he stand a chance against a vicious fighter in Giga? Can he get back on track to that championship fight?” These were all questions that Calvin answered in this win. The referee raises Calvin’s hand as Bruce Buffer announces him as the winner by unanimous decision. In his post-fight interview, Calvin reflects on his win and his plan moving forward. “It’s been a long road back. I’ve scratched and clawed my way to get here. I ain’t going nowhere. People doubted me and look what I did. I came out here and showed who I am. I’m a dog and will never quit. I will be champion one day.”

