

Cage fighter with a heart of gold

Tribal member Jonathan Brandon readiness for third cage contest

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

Tribal member Jonathan Brandon, 28, has two professional cage fight wins under his belt, and on Oct. 3 he fights again.

For his first match, against another first-time fighter, Rich Campbell, he dropped 45 pounds.

"It was a battle," Jonathan says.

Photos make him look like a monster, but his approach to the fights is very different.

"It was his first fight, too," Jonathan recalls from his health store, Nutrishop, in Norco, Calif., which is near Riverside. "He was a guy who played rugby at Oregon State University when I was there wrestling. He was friends with my high school friends. We were talking about it a little before, and we hung out a little after the fight."

"You develop a different mentality. You're not trying to hurt the person, or go in angry; it's a sport."

Here's Jonathan's breakdown of the three-rounders:

"In the first round, I did pretty decent; we tied up a lot; I picked him up and slammed him once. I was in pretty good shape cardio-wise, but I ended up gassing out in the first round; I got really tired really fast."

"In the second round, it was the same kind of thing. He got some really good hits on me and I got a few good ones on him; I think I slammed him again."

"In the third round, I didn't have hardly anything left as far as energy, but we came out in the third round and we got into a little bit of an exchange. Eighteen seconds in, I caught him perfectly on the chin with an overhand right; knocked him out."

"It's funny, at the time, when I was thinking about it, there was quite a bit of time from when I hit him and he dropped to the ground. I rushed over and tried to decide whether to hit him again, and nobody was stopping me, so I went to hit him and the ref rushed over to stop me. It seemed like it took a good 20-30 seconds, but on the film, it was one second, maybe."

"Before the fight, some of the guys I had trained with, we were joking around, and they made me promise to do a back flip if I won. I was so tired I thought I would land on my head, but I tried it and did a pretty decent one."

That was Oct. 4, 2008, for King of the Cage title at the Avi Casino in Laughlin, Nev. In row after row at the back of the venue, Jonathan's fans were on their feet, arms raised, decked out in his trademark orange, and cheering wildly.

Raised in Estacada with his mother and brother, Tribal member Jesse Brandon, an accomplished musician who also works mainte-

nance for the Portland Tribal office, Jonathan also spent time with his father, Tribal member Larry Brandon, in Grand Ronde.

"I've been to a few powwows when I was in high school and stuff. I still have a lot of friends and family up there that I go to visit," Jonathan says.

"He always pushed himself to the limits," says his father. "He was the one that liked to jump off cliffs at the river and do those crazy bicycle stunts. And he was really outstanding with his roller blades. Jonathan was the one that would do the 360 flips in the air and land on his feet. He was always the kid that stood out from everyone else. And he was always determined about what he wanted to do."

"Because of my handicap (from a broken back, Larry's now a partial paraplegic), he would never let me get out of doing things. There were fishing holes that I couldn't get down to, so he would tie me up on a rope and lower me down 30-40 feet over a cliff to get to the fishing hole, and then pull me back up after. When I couldn't get to a football game at OSU, he would carry me in."

When Jonathan was 16, his mother and stepfather bought him a 1955 Jeep Willys pickup 4-wheel drive for his birthday "and," his dad, Larry, adds, "Jonathan fixed it up with summer job earnings."

"We put a couple thousand dollars into it," remembers younger brother, Jesse, "and fixed it up really nice. We had our initials embroidered on each side of it. It was beautiful. He taught me a lot about fixing cars."

"We were always competing in sports and stuff. I kind of found out I was more of a musician than an athlete, but we both supported each other's ways."

They did a lot of inline skating, and Jesse remembers a competition at Pioneer Courthouse Square in downtown Portland.

"They had this giant half pipe and I remember he did this huge back flip off this half-pipe and the crowd went wild," Jesse says.

"He was always teaching people and helping people out with their sports, in football and skating, and always looking out for the underdog. He's really a good-hearted man, and he always has been."

Thanks to a scholarship and grants from the Tribe, Jonathan wrestled for two years at Oregon State University and almost two more at California State University in Fullerton.

"If it wasn't for (Tribal assistance), there's definitely no way I would have been able to go to college," Jonathan says. Even with the help, he ran out of money in his fourth year and spent many more years in California wrestling with

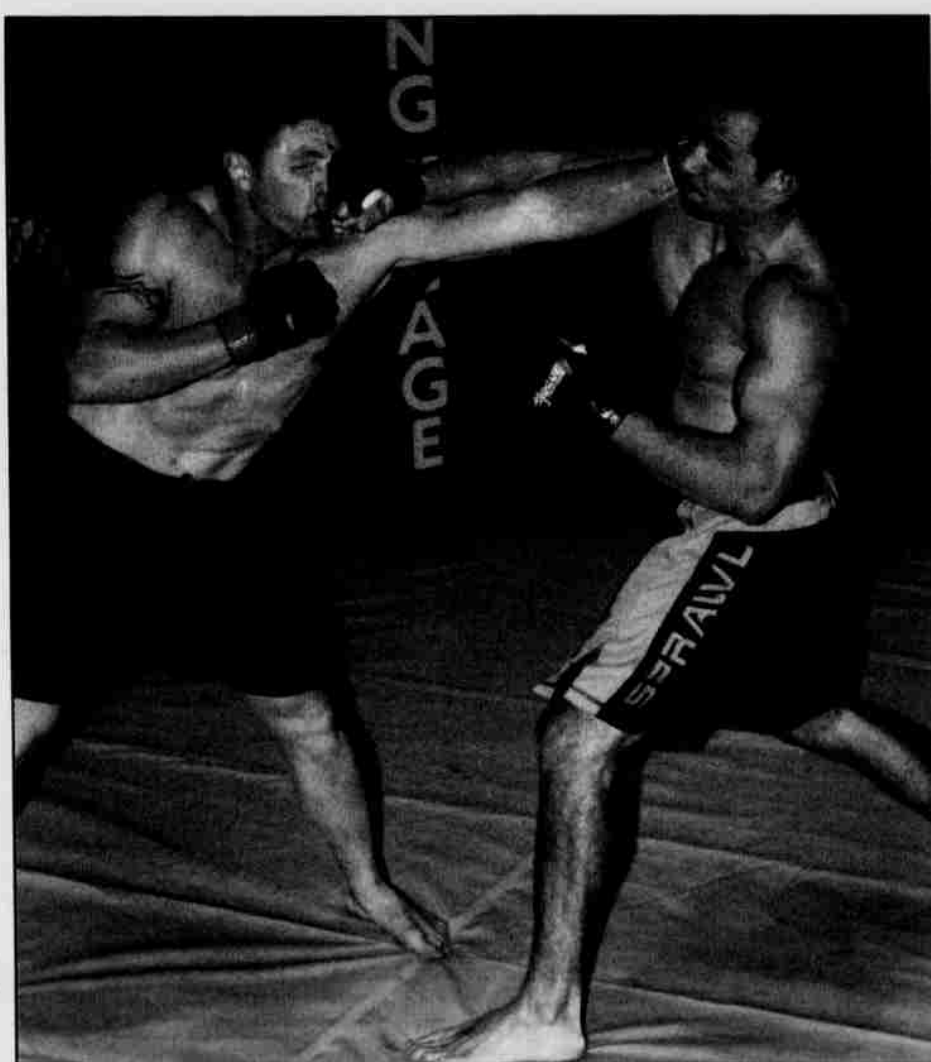


Photo courtesy of MONSTRO PHOTOS & King of the Cage

Tribal member Jonathan Brandon, left, fights Rich Campbell in his first cage fight at the Avi Casino in Laughlin, Nev., on Oct. 4, 2008. Brandon won that fight and will be competing in another cage fight on Saturday, Oct. 3, at the Avi Casino.

ways to make more money.

"I originally wanted to study physical therapy," he says, "but the course work conflicted with sports, and I ended up changing my major to History. I planned to teach and coach."

Without funds to complete schooling, however, he dove into a succession of fitness-related jobs, including going solo as a personal trainer.

He met his wife, Chereese, while working at 24-Hour Fitness, where he worked as a supervisor.

The opportunity came up to purchase the Nutrishop he owns today. "It was a supplement store, similar to GNC," Jonathan says, "but a lot more freedom to do whatever I want."

"With the brands, anyway, we're able to look around and find out which brands are really good, decently priced, work well. GNCs will push their house brand, but we can differentiate between brands."

"And everyone who works here, I make sure they have a really good knowledge base. We sell and write up diets, workout plans for people; and then the actual supplements for sports performance, weight loss, muscle gain. It kind of lines up well with personal training, which I really enjoyed."

"There's really nothing more

rewarding than hearing that somebody has lost all this weight because of what we've done, that they're coming off their blood pressure medication and all this stuff."

The store's location served a second purpose, too, because Chereese's dreams were equestrian and Norco was "a real horse town," Jonathan says.

Jonathan began thinking about cage fighting a few years earlier.

"Back in the Fullerton area, I was working at a gym, and met a couple guys that were into cage fighting," he says. "I trained with them a couple times. I really enjoyed it, but at the time, I was at the gym trying to get clients and train clients from five in the morning to nine at night. My main focus was trying to increase our income."

"Shortly after moving out here, one of my customers was into it as well. He talked me into coming over and training with them. I rearranged my schedule to do it; it was mostly jujitsu. Cage fighting was what I really wanted to do, but at that time my wife wasn't keen on the idea."

"I did a bunch jujitsu tournaments. Also a lot of submission grappling tournaments, wearing only fight shorts, but it was still just grappling, arm bars and chokes, no

punching.

"It took about 1½ years of doing those tournaments until I talked my wife into letting me do the other stuff. Part of it was her seeing the jujitsu, and we kind of got to a point in our relationship and we realized that we had to support each other's goals and dreams."

Chereese's dreams are equestrian.

"Dressage, like an English sport where they make the horse dance around the arena," Jonathan says. "Also jumping as well. She had a horse when I met her; she'd had it for 10 years already. So, when we moved out to Norco, Horsetown USA, it was a good fit."

"I started training and learning the standup, the boxing, Muay Thai, the standup fighting and striking. I did that for about six months, and then I got my first professional fight."

"It was interesting because I had watched cage fighting a lot. I was a fan for a long time, but I never was able to scrape together the money and time to see one live. The first one I got to see live was the one I got to fight in."

With his winnings from that first fight, Jonathan bought Chereese a second horse, a horse with a championship bloodline.

"She can take it as far as she wants," he says.

Another element of Jonathan's story is his dedication to the Cause Community Church in Brea, where he is a high school youth leader.

"Something I definitely I enjoy a lot," he says. "Every Sunday we go to early service. During the service we have a youth service."

With a partner, he leads a small group of teens in discussion. They talk about "life lessons and how the Bible says we should behave and act and different things. Also, I'm there for a lot of the guys you see outside of church as well, for any questions about life and work and anything in between."

His spiritual side plays a concrete role in his fight life, too.

In Palm Springs at the Spotlight 29 Casino on Feb. 6, he took on Eric McDonald, who was part of the Marine Corps fight team out of San Diego.

"A week before the fight, I had a real bad fever," Jonathan says, "and

I had to decide whether to pull out of the fight."

During that week, he was at a church camp, again as a youth leader. At that camp, the speaker gave him "a lot of confirmation about what I was doing. (He made me think that) it was something I could use as a platform as a representative of Christ: you can do a sport like this and still be a Christian."

"That was a big factor on why I decided to press ahead. I had all that confirmation at camp a few days before."

"Our pastor said, 'When you make a decision that you're going to live a Christian life, the devil will try to stop you.' I felt like getting sick was an attack from him."

"I was sick all the way up to the fight. Just before the fight, I sat up against the wall with a few other guys, sat down to pray God to let me go into the fight and do my best; not let the sickness be a hindrance. About five minutes before the fight, the fever feeling went away, my sinuses cleared up, I could breathe good. My cardio was better; I didn't gas out like in the first one."

"We exchanged blows and I got some good takedowns. I got a full mount, sitting on his stomach where you can throw a lot of punches and strikes and elbows. Then, in a minute and 47 seconds in the second round, he turned over. I got a rear naked choke on him and he tapped out."

"I'll take it as far as I can," Jonathan says, with his third fight on Oct. 3, back for another King of the Cage match at the Avi Casino in Laughlin. More than 40 supporters in orange shirts are expected to make the three- to four-hour trip each way to see victory number three.

"I've definitely had my fair share of injuries over the years, but I'll do it as long as my body will hold up," Jonathan says. "We're doing pretty well. A few years ago, we bought the house out here in Norco. It was in pretty bad shape. I had spent time working construction for summer jobs and I used those skills to fix it up. We have enough property that we're able to keep our horses here, too."

"We have two horses, two dogs, a cat that came with the house and a bird that my wife talked me into, and we're working on children." ■

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