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How Sabres' Yasuda Turned Defeat into Success
04/26/2007
By Sarah Aswell

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Ken Yasuda doesn't refer to the Tokyo Sabres as *his* team. When talking about the team's members or the assistant coaches, he always says, "my teammates." It's a tiny difference, and it's one of many differences that separate Yasuda from the other IFL coaches, but it's a representative and important one.



The way the team trains, the way they mentally prepare for bouts, and the way they function as a unit – it's all a little different if you're a Sabre. And if the team's undefeated record this season says anything about it, perhaps soon other IFL coaches will take note of Yasuda's strategies and philosophies.

Yasuda's first love was baseball – a sport that brought him to America to play for the University of Southern California. When he realized he wasn't the biggest guy on the field, he turned to weight training and bodybuilding to help him out.

When an injury forced him to leave baseball permanently, he turned his focus to bodybuilding, where he also excelled. Yasuda quickly became Japan's most famous pro bodybuilder, winning several titles around the world.

This unique background is the main thing that sets Yasuda apart from the other coaches. But despite his accomplishments in bodybuilding and the martial arts, he's never had a professional MMA fight. Many might see this as a huge disadvantage to the team, but the forward-thinking Yasuda sees this point as a strength, not a weakness.

"I think that being head coach requires several things," he explained. "The best baseball player is not always the best coach. I see things that other coaches can't see. I have organizational skills."

Yasuda focuses on his distinctive experiences and knowledge – his tenure as a body builder and his time spent on the baseball field – and uses them to his team's advantage.

"My bodybuilding knowledge is a plus – a lot of guys train hard the wrong way or eat whatever without knowing what's going on physiologically or nutritionally, and that's where I come in," he said.

"These fighters are good at fighting in the ring, but they are not experts in conditioning, or on the mental side. That's what the head coach has to take care of. That's where I have more strength."

His baseball background, Yasuda said, pays off when it comes to preparation and team competition.


"I do a lot more scouting and analysis of each of our opponents than the other coaches," he said. "A lot of fighters are coming in and going out of the league, but the good ones always stay. I do the homework for my guys – I observe and analyze how each fighter moves, their habits, their weaknesses and strengths. Then we make up a strategy."

Yasuda also attributes his ability to build team unity to his baseball history.

"I understand how teams work together better than other head coaches, and in terms of analysis, when I played baseball, I had to understand each hitter. And that's how this game is."

His emphasis on team unity seems to be working. Yasuda goes out of his way to spend time with his teammates outside of the gym, hoping to forge a deeper connection.

"In the beginning, we didn't know each other, so I had a lot of team lunches and team meetings, and I tried to stay and talk after practices. We have a preflight lunch one week before each fight, to



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spend more time together outside the gym to get to know each other. That's a plus."

How does this team unity pay off? At the IFL Los Angeles bout in March, Yasuda watched as [Kazuhiro Hamanaka](#) was beaten by the Condors' [Jeremy Williams](#). Fellow Sabre [Vladimir Matyshenko](#) jumped into the ring directly afterward, angry and seeking revenge.

"[Hamanaka and Matushenko] get along very well," Yasuda explained, "Hamanaka is like his little brother. And watching him lose was a bit of a shock."

Matyshenko won his fight quickly, and helped earn a close 3-2 victory for the Sabres.

"You could see it," Yasuda said. "Everybody was pretty much together by L.A."

The team work and the winning record is a big change from last season, when the Sabres did poorly, and only one member made the cut into 2007. Yasuda admitted that newly acquired heavyweight Wayne Cole was afraid he was going to get fired after his KO loss to Antoine Jaoude. But Yasuda explained the difference between the kind of fighter he will cut and the kind he will continue to work with and have faith in.

"I like Cole and his attitude," he said. "He wants to get better and he trains hard. I told him, he learned a lesson about what not to do. I saw some things he needs to improve. As long he works on those things hard, I'm fine with it, and that's what he's done."

It seems to be Yasuda's philosophy: if you have a weakness, you should focus on understanding it and destroying it.

"I wasn't the biggest guy, so to survive at a pro level, I had to gain strength and fitness. I began studying nutrition and conditioning," he said. "If you spend the time, you can obtain the skills. And if you don't have the conditioning to use those skills, the skills are meaningless. It's hard to get in tip-top shape. It's not easy."

But despite his almost obsessive focus on conditioning, training and nutrition, Yasuda isn't as strict as he might at first seem – as long as you're winning.

"It's very important to respect all of my teammates, and that means respecting the way that my teammates prepare for a fight," he said. "But they have to be responsible for their job – they have to come in tip top shape, and they have to win."

Yasuda breaks his team down into two parts – veterans who he considers professional fighters, and younger fighters who are still honing their skills.

"The younger starters are still learning to be in top shape and to perfect their skills and strategy," he said. "I require them to go through a specific system of basic training."

For now, Yasuda is looking ahead to the team's [June 1st bout against the Wolfpack in Everett, Washington](#).

And, not so surprisingly, he's also already talking about the Sabres' role in the semi-finals and championships coming up this summer – analyzing his team's strengths and weaknesses, evaluating and considering the styles and habits of his fighters' opponents, and always, always striving for unity and improvement.

