

# T H E 9 L I V E S O F C A T Z I N G A N O

By Clyde Gentry III

World class wrestlers are no stranger to MMA, and whether you think of Lesnar, Couture, Velasquez or countless others, no doubt they have made a lasting imprint on the sport's evolution. While most MMA fans would associate the chiseled physiques, dominating ground games and raw fighting prowess with male wrestlers, Cat Zingano is an exception to the rule.

Nicknamed Alpha, she is the most decorated female wrestler to have ever competed in MMA, sporting the pedigree of four-time All American and two-time national champion in freestyle. Having started her MMA training with Brazilian jiu-jitsu in 2007, she has rarely had a point scored on her in competition, and also holds a perfect MMA record of 5-0. She's the current 125-pound Ring of Fire champion, and is well on her way to becoming the number one female in that weight class.

This athletic phenom, as beautiful as she is powerful, has conquered every sport in her wake, and sets her sights on MMA. Juggling roles as a wife, mother, gym owner, fighter, and student of combat sports has only strengthened her outlook on life. But she was able to build a foundation very early on from the most unlikely of places. The Minnesota-born Cat Zingano wasn't the typical girly-girl growing up in Colorado, and had difficulties trying to make sense of her place in the world. But at a very young age, there was no doubt that she was going to be a jock, competing in soccer, volleyball, swimming, track, and dancing, but wrestling was something entirely different.

"I was very distracted, somewhat troubled, as a youth and wrestling provided me an outlet where I was able to be creative, active and have the confidence to enjoy and take on life, no matter the inconsistencies and adversities of being a teen girl in an all boys sport," she said. "I found my identity as an individual, as well as the poise and confidence that I needed to have, make, and keep healthy relationships throughout my life, so everyone benefited around me by seeing me happy and motivated."

Many a b-plot in a sitcom or after school special has portrayed the timid teenage girl who decides to make a go at it on the all-boys wrestling team. The parents are un-supportive at first, everyone thinks it's strange, but she proves something in the end with a nice, fat bow on it. In Zingano's case, after trying so many other sports, wrestling just seemed to be a more natural fit - no matter what anyone else thought. Everyone could see the effect it had on her social life and knew it was more than just a passing fancy. At age 14, she became the wrestling team captain for her school. By high school, Zingano was the token female on the Boulder County Fairview High School wrestling team, and a bona fide outsider to boot.

"Starting out as the only female was very difficult, and I met many more disgusted and irritated glances than open arms and praise. I secretly loved the challenge of proving people wrong by doing well and having a dominantly winning record, yet, I honored my place as being the only woman, still acknowledging the need to earn the respect of the wrestlers and the wrestling community humbly. Whispering coaches and fathers telling their sons to either, 'don't go easy on her,' or 'rip her head off' only

meant to me that I was exactly where I was supposed to be, doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing. I understand the stigma that came from my involvement and I actually felt badly sometimes for winning matches, but my sights were too high and I silently demanded respect through my actions, and back then, there was nothing that was going to stop me."

Though Zingano proved herself on the mat, she also had to hit the books. And with school work, her focus and drive academically was a prerequisite to her eligibility. It also opened more doors for her as the fairer sex started to get more mat time. When talk of opening up a women's division for the 2004 Olympics emerged, the teenager had found her goal in life, and had a golden ticket to wrestle at many different colleges.

She first started wrestling at Cumberland College in Williamsburg, Kentucky in 2001, and after competing in several world championships, her body started to wear down. In 2002, she underwent a series of knee operations - five on the right and two on the left - and took some time off. "I returned home to Colorado and healed, then tried my luck again at MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Illinois in 2003 until the program lost its momentum. There has been outstanding growth and evolution in women's wrestling since I have competed, and it's a movement that I am proud to have been a part of. Some of the best friends I have made in my life, I met sharing the same blood, sweat and tears each day on the mat."

During her wrestling career, she trained with the likes of Toccara Montgomery (2004 Olympic gold medalist), Randi Miller (2008 Olympic bronze medalist) and Mary Kelly (multiple-time world champion). She cited both schools as having outstanding wrestling programs, and though she was walking off the mat, she had accomplished so much in the sport so dear to her heart. She even had the opportunity to compete overseas, taking fifth in Poland (1999) and fourth in Sweden (2001).

In 2006, Cat Zingano would go through the most difficult period in her life. Far removed from wrestling, she found herself pregnant at the same time her mother passed away. Zingano's mother was her biggest fan, her support system, and now she was gone. "I miss my mom a lot and not having her in my life is very difficult still, yet, I am forced to move and grow and take on the world without her. It's hard and sometimes I feel like the blind leading the blind, but I am learning a lot about myself. Having a child meant I had to be on my feet and be strong for him, so I tried to deal with her death the best I could while trying to stay positive. Brayden's birth changed my life completely; it was the scariest thing I had ever been through, and at the same time, the best thing to ever happen to me."

She would find renewed strength from her wrestling days through her old high school wrestling coach, Jim Heun. During Zingano's baby shower, Coach Heun and many of her old teammates showed up for support. As with any great coach, Heun knew that she needed more than just a hug. "We started to talk and catch up and he told me



that he would be there for me and my child, and that he would love to help me in any way he could. After my son was born, Coach Heun became pretend grandpa 'Coach.' He loves my son dearly and every week they have a day together where they go do something fun, just them. My son Brayden loves him and they have a very strong bond together." Along with his wife Colette, the Heun family has become a very big part of Zingano's life in more ways than one.

After her son's birth, Zingano was looking for a way to get back in shape, and as luck would have it, Heun's son, Conor, just happened to be in town preparing for an upcoming MMA fight. When Zingano stopped by the Brazilian jiu-jitsu school to say hello, and saw all the fast and furious mat work, she soon found herself in a kimono, rediscovering her love for grappling. Through her BJJ coach Mauricio, she won the Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu World Championship in 2007 and the Rio De Janeiro State Championship in Brazil in 2008.

Cat really enjoyed learning her new craft, and developed a friendship with her coach that turned to romance. "One day, we came clean with one another and admitted we had an attraction. One great day led to another and before we realized it, we were inseparable." On June 14, 2010, Cat Zingano (formerly Albert) came to be, having married Mauricio Zingano, head of Zingano Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. She not only helps run the gym, but she also trains her old coach, Jim, in BJJ. He actually just earned his blue belt. "We get to spend time together on the mat again, and [Jim] continues to be a person that inspires me and gives me support in all areas of my life. I am a lot stronger than I thought, and I have my son, husband, and strength built by the relationships and experiences I have made through wrestling and BJJ to thank."

Just six months into her BJJ training, while driving in the car with then-boyfriend Mauricio, Cat overheard him talking on his cell about needing a fighter. As it turned out, a promoter was looking for a female fighter to compete just six weeks later. Zingano had just started training in stand-up with a local Muay Thai instructor, Oscar Martinez, in Denver. He worked with her in preparation for her first MMA fight which took place on June 13, 2008. Since then, she has finished all but one of her opponents.

With all of her wrestling, BJJ and now MMA accolades, it would be safe to say that Zingano is a great role model for up and coming female fighters and she agrees with that notion. "I hope people can learn from my good and imperfect qualities. Sometimes I forget that while I train or fight, but I'm reminded of that everyday by my son, students and teammates." The Ring of Fire champion has yet to be called up by the likes of Strikeforce or Bellator, but said she's ready no matter what. "There have been fights where I didn't know my opponent's name or what they looked like until we weighed in."

Personally, Zingano wants to take her show on the road and compete in Japan, Brazil, Australia or anywhere that would have her. A career as a pro MMA fighter wasn't something she mapped out, but it's certainly become a way for her to test her skills and get paid for it. She once pondered a career as a pro wrestler, and though MMA is her gig now, she said not to count out doing stunt work down the line if things fall into place.

Currently Zingano is focused on the 125-pound division, though she originally competed at 135. Because of her wrestling background, cutting weight and orchestrating the right diet is old hat. She said that after she accomplishes certain goals at 125, she wants to move up to 135 and possibly 145, wherever

the competition will champion her mettle. When asked specifically about her diet, she said, "I love to eat, so between training camps, I eat a lot different, no fast food or super high calorie, fatty or high sugar food, but I do throw down at an all-you-can-eat Brazilian BBQ restaurant, or eat some scorpions and crickets while visiting Thailand!"

Along with Miesha Tate, Cat Zingano will soon be joined by a new era of female fighters from wrestling backgrounds. Her old training partner and Olympic medalist Randi Miller is set to make her MMA debut in 2011, and so is Sara McMann, the first woman to ever receive an Olympic silver medal for wrestling. McMann has already signed a three-fight deal with Strikeforce to compete in the 135-pound division. When asked about the steady flow of not only competition, but world-class wrestlers, Zingano was elated and had actually been training with Miller already.

"Both of those girls are super talented, hard working, great wrestlers and I cannot wait to see them fight. I'm excited for them and I think they are going to succeed very fast. They are definitely a breed we haven't experienced out there before, and I wish them to their highest good." As with her male counterparts moving into MMA, no doubt we will see a tidal wave of gifted female wrestlers making their way into the cage. Just last month, two women made it to the Iowa State Championships for the first time in history, and with more women getting into the scene due to the Olympics, it could really make an impact on the future of women's MMA.

Fighters, just like anyone else, lead fairly complicated lives, but for Cat Zingano, it's truly an amazing balancing act. "I sometimes don't think I can make it all work, but somehow with the support of my husband, my coaches

and friends, I'm able to get everything done. The people around me really do make a difference. My teammates are more than a family to me, the bond we have together and the desire everyone has to see each other succeed makes work a lot better."

So what does a typical day look like for a wife, mother, gym owner, fighter and student? Zingano trains twice a day, four days a week, and once a day, twice a week with one day off. After getting up in the morning, she gets her now four-year-old son ready for school, makes breakfast and is off to training for one to three hours. Upon returning home, she fixes lunch with her husband Mauricio, does the laundry and runs errands along with other "mom" chores. Then she picks up Brayden from school and transports him back to Zingano BJJ where not only does he take BJJ lessons, but has friends to play with while his mother picks up a second training session for two more hours.

Then the whole family goes home, where Zingano makes dinner for everyone, does the dishes, and then sits down to read some books with Brayden before bedtime. Then husband and wife get a little alone time watching TV or reading before finally calling it a day. On Saturday the load is a little lighter with only one training session so the whole family can spend time together. It's truly astonishing that anyone could follow such a regimented day, but then again, not everyone is Cat Zingano. Aside from spending time with the family, she also enjoys being outdoors, camping, hunting and just traveling in general. No doubt this Cat has nine lives, and she needs that many to keep up with a life most could only dream of.

*Follow Cat Zingano's fighting career or learn more about training at Zingano BJJ by logging onto [www.zinganobjj.com](http://www.zinganobjj.com).*

