

# ULTIMATE FATHERING CONFUSION

PAUL MITCHELL CAN'T TURN DOWN A CHANCE TO HANG  
OUT WITH HIS TEENAGE SON, EVEN IF IT IS AT THE UFC.

THE CALL FROM my 17-year-old son comes at the time parents dread: after 11 on a Saturday night. He must be in deep shit that he doesn't want to tell his mum about. He's probably been in an accident. He or one of his unlicensed friends has stacked a car and they need an adult who isn't going to freak.

"How are you, Dad?"

"I'm good son. How are you?"

"I'm good too."

"What's news?"

"You know how I said I'd be going to the UFC tomorrow night?"

Ultimate Fighting Championship: don't tell me he's been in a punch-up?

"Yes, I remember you were going."

"Yeah, well, I've got a spare ticket. Do you have plans?"

No, I don't. And it's a fact I relish.

"No, son. No plans."

"Well, do you want to come? I'm still asking a few people..."

Chances to see him are rare and I'm honoured to be a back-up plan on his social calendar. But a few hours at the UFC? I like boxing, but I have major concerns about UFC. I was worried about him going, but he told me to relax. Apparently several thousand testosterone-, steroid- and alcohol-fuelled hyper-masculine men in a large hall watching hulks tear strips off each other should make me chill.

My tall, thin son's head would be squashed, cartoon-like, into his polo shirt.

"I don't know if I can make it," I tell him. "Can I let you know in the morning? If you find someone tonight, that's fine, no stress."

In the morning I decide if he hasn't found someone, I'll go.

"You still have the ticket?" I text.

"Yes. U want to come?"

Want? No.

AT ROD LAVER Arena the moustached security guard waves his wand over me and laughs.

"At least you'll still see the main event," he says. It's midday. How much could I have missed?

Inside, there's a queue for the men's toilets longer than any I've seen for the women's anywhere. And it's not as if there aren't women here, mainly dressed in tight black jeans and tighter T-shirts. Perhaps the line for the men's – populated by blokes whose average bicep circumference matches my leg's – is the result of beer and steroids.

The auditorium is murmuring as if it's the hour before a big concert. House lights are up, there's a huge crowd. I show my ticket to the smiling and pleasant middle-aged female usher and get my bearings. I'm on the third level. Way below, where a tennis court or U2's mid-gig busking stage should be, sits a purpose-built, see-through cage surrounding a white canvas octagon. Inside, trainers attend the combatants who are sitting on austere chairs at either end. It's mid-fight and there's no advertising blaring.

The cage's perimeter is dotted with people in black, sitting in chairs. I take them to be the judges. Set back another two metres are the first rows of seats, the ringside tickets that cost about a grand. My ticket cost \$80. The cheap seats. I climb the stairs to them and every row has more beefcakes than a McDonald's delivery truck.

A muted roar from the crowd and the large screen says we're ready to go in the final five-minute round of the scheduled three between South Dakota's Ben Nguyen and Geane Herrera from Florida.

They're flyweights. They bounce around and bop each other. They kick and punch and wrestle and scrap and the

crowd offers muted encouragement. The round ends, the result goes to Nguyen, and the fighters embrace.

The screen goes into hyper-promotion mode now. For gaming, upcoming UFC fights on pay-per-view and, finally, the next bout. A decent roar goes up. It's Richard Walsh from Australia up against Canada's Jonathan Meunier in the welterweight division. I watch my son carry his backpack and climb the stairs to our seats. Alone.

"Where are your mates?" I ask.

"I told you Tim couldn't use his ticket."

"I thought you had other mates with you?"

"They're in other seats."

"So it's just you?"

"Yup."

So if I weren't here, he'd be alone? I am a bad parent.

"Who won that last bout?" he asks.

"Nguyen," I tell him, but it seems neither to faze nor interest him. He's focused on the buildup to the Walsh/Meunier fight. Inaudible interviews on the big screen: baldheaded Walsh, a fitter version of the meat-axe you avoid in the aisle at Bunnings, and Meunier, a lump with the narrow eyes and square jaw of a Hollywood villain. Entourages lead the real-life fighters to the side of the ring where they're inspected – for weapons? – and then ushered into the octagon. A hefty roar goes up when the Australian's announced and then it's down to business.

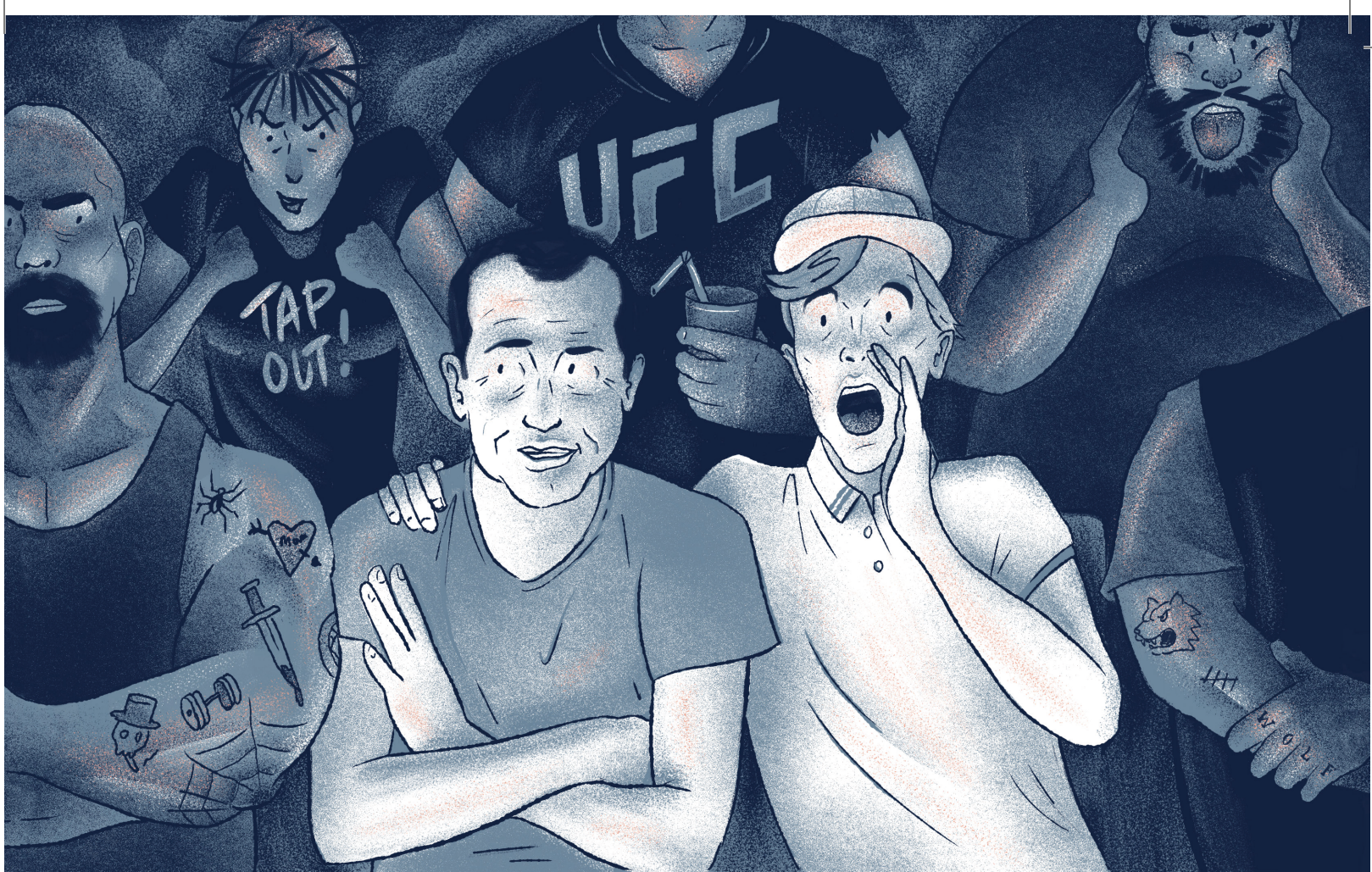
Walsh chases Meunier, the favourite, and I hassle my son for the rules.

"You can kick anywhere but the nuts."

Meunier is getting on top in this first round, heavy kicks to the Australian's front leg.

"You can't poke in the eye, or twist hands or toes. And you can't headbutt."

In the second round, the pair are on



the ground for too long, not smashing each other enough, so the referee gets them back to their feet.

After three rounds, the fight goes to Meunier – his kicking is accurate and hard and Walsh couldn't, apparently, get inside and hit the Canadian with his favoured right hand.

My son eats his packed lunch. There's blood in the ring and cleaners mop up.

"Why do you like this?"

He shrugs.

"You never know what's going to happen until the end. Fighters can be downed heaps and still get up and win."

"Almost knocked out?"

"Yep."

And he likes the skills.

There's one women's fight on the card: Seohee Ham from Busan, South Korea, against Danielle Taylor from the US. My son says he's not looking forward to it.

"I don't like to see women fighting," he says.

"Isn't that sexist?"

He's not sure. He just doesn't like it.

Many hours after the security guard mocked my late entry, the combatants

in the main event take to the octagon: Australia's number-one UFC competitor Robert Whittaker versus Derek Brunson from the United States in the middleweight division.

Brunson's fighting like he wants it over in five seconds. He chases Whittaker across the octagon with a cartoon whirlwind of punches and kicks. Whittaker can only defend, dodge and evade, which he does with some success. The formerly squealing crowd is reduced to *oohs* and *ahhs*.

The fight changes speed and, whoops, Brunson's burning out. His tornado of blows is tiring him and Whittaker's bringing on thunder and lightning of his own. Brunson reels and the patriotic crowd screams and rises to its feet. Fifty-one seconds into round one, the referee declares Whittaker the winner. He hurls himself to the top of the fence, bangs his chest, bellows – and the ecstatic crowd roars with him.

Even with the bout running short, the crowd's well satisfied. It's full of testosterone and alcohol. If shit's going to hit the fan, now's the time.

I break for the exit with my son as close to my side as possible. He's taller than me and his prissy khaki cap is surely a target. I puff out my chest. I have enough boxing training to keep the Orcs of Mordor away from my son long enough for him to run as I'm pummeled.

"Did you have a good day?" I say, deepening my voice.

"Yeah, it was good. You like it?"

All around us there's whooping, discussions and analysis. Beefcakes, Orcs, Trolls and Big Blokes walking around quoting stats and replaying action verbally. And there are some small guys. And women. Smiling and laughing. No-one's punching or kicking anyone. This keeps up all the way to the packed tram. My son's a thin, Bowie-like figure in the crush. He has headphones in, but he takes one out.

"You didn't say if you liked it."

"I liked hanging out, son."

He smiles and puts the earplug back in.

» *Paul Mitchell is a regular contributor to The Big Issue. His debut novel, We. Are. Family., is out now.*