

“I ALWAYS HAD THIS DESIRE TO BE BIGGER THAN LIFE BUT DIDN’T KNOW HOW, THEN I FOUND THAT THROUGH FIGHTING.”

FIGHTING

PHENOM

At just 22, rising UFC star Paige VanZant is already showing how she can take on MMA and multimedia. Just don’t underestimate her power.

BY **DIANA KELLY**
PHOTOGRAPH BY **PER BERNAL**

• **IF YOU COME ACROSS** UFC fighter Paige VanZant outside the Octagon, your first instinct might be to give the beaming blonde a hug. But if you’re going to spar with her, you might want to duck. At 5’4” and a fighting weight of 115 pounds, the Sacramento, CA-based strawweight has a vicious kick, strong leg locks, and a 7-2 record, with two knockouts and two submissions among her wins. The 22-year-old former cheerleader, dancer, and model got into mixed martial arts after her dad took her to a local MMA gym. It took only one class for her to fall in love with it. She began competing as an amateur at age 18, winning her first fight in just 50 seconds, and went pro two months later, making her debut in June 2012 and her first UFC fight in November 2014.

After suffering a devastating submission loss to Rose Namajunas last December, “12 Gauge”—as VanZant’s known in the MMA world—was the ultimate comeback kid in 2016. She took second place in ABC’s *Dancing with the Stars*, then defeated Australian Bec “Rowdy” Rawlings in August with a powerful high kick and several hard punches that garnered her the TKO.

But although she’s crossed over from the Octagon to the screen, starting with *Dancing with the Stars*, VanZant insists she’s not following the path of UFC megastar (and Hollywood

darling) Ronda Rousey. “I’m my own person and am going to take every opportunity that I’m passionate about—but at the same time balance it with my fight career.” In fact, VanZant pulled out of the film *Kickboxer Retaliation* because timing interfered with her prep for the Rawlings fight.

FIGHTING SHAPE

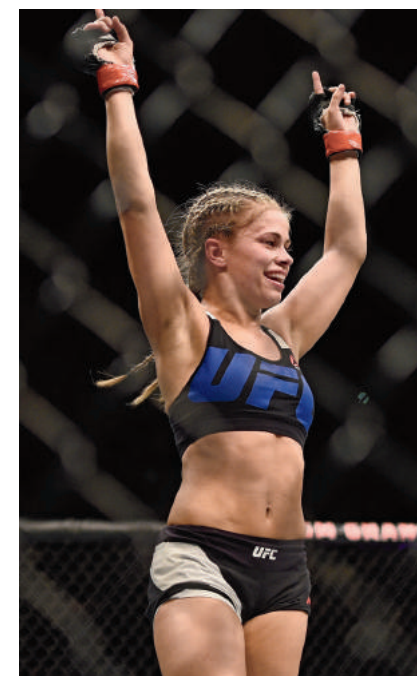
About six weeks before a fight, VanZant trains daily with the prominent Team Alpha Male, focusing primarily on technique and skills. She’s also a frequent CrossFitter and has grown to love power cleans with squats. “I’m an intense person. I like to get in there and work out superhard, get the workout in, and then call it a day,” she says. Two weeks before a fight, she focuses on cardio, like running and fight maneuvers.

MIND GAMES

VanZant also develops a strong mental edge. “It’s not always the best fighter who wins—it’s the fighter who is also the most mentally strong,” she adds. “You need to respect your opponent, but you have to go into the fight knowing you’re going to win. Visualization helps. “I picture myself winning the fight, including getting out of bad positions.” Her deeply religious convictions also play a key role. “Whenever I get a fight, I pray that it’s the right opportunity for me, that I can do everything to train to win, and that my fight camp goes well. And I pray before every fight that God protects me and my opponent—but that I can be victorious,” she says.

And a strong family life has given her a firm foundation. “I have the most supportive parents in the world,” says VanZant. “They’ve given up a lot for me to make this a career and are a big reason I’ve been able to be successful. I’m surrounded by amazing people.”

While her UFC career continues to evolve, she is keeping doors open. “I have awesome opportunities coming up, so I’ll pursue those while I can and still train for the next fight,” she says. “I strongly believe I can be successful at anything I do.”



GO FOR IT IF WATCHING UFC FIGHTS HAS YOU INSPIRED, VANZANT SUGGESTS TAKING A CARDIO KICKBOXING CLASS AT A LOCAL GYM. FOR WOMEN WHO WANT TO TRY A SELF-DEFENSE TYPE OF WORKOUT, VANZANT RECOMMENDS JIU-JITSU.

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