

REFEREE'S CALL:

My Pride Adventure: Day Two

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After a restless night dreaming of geishas and samurai, I awaken at 7:30 am and can't wait to get to breakfast.

Each morning, Pride provides a breakfast buffet for all of the fight camps and officials. Over the years, it has become somewhat of a tradition. There's a friendly and relaxed atmosphere where old friendships are renewed and new ones are made. Table-hopping is accepted and commonplace.

For the next hour and a half I break bread and share war stories with Matt Hume, Quinton Jackson, John Hackelman, Chuck Liddell, Dan Henderson, Randy Couture, Bas Rutten, Mauro Ranallo, and Murillo Bustamante. Over the next few mornings I enjoy the company of MMA's great and near great: Gary Goodrich, Kevin Randelman, Heath Herring and the Nogueira brothers.

After breakfast, I've decided to take a walk and get rid of some kinks that I acquired during my flight to Japan.

As I walk the streets, alleys, and parks for the next two hours, I am struck by the civility of Japanese society. For instance, despite its terrible traffic, drivers' display patience, common sense and a mutual respect that I've rarely encountered. Also, the sidewalks are full of pedestrians and almost as many bicycles. Despite this recipe for disaster, the pedestrians' right of way is respected and it seems that no one even come close to being run-over. This common sense approach to daily living, coupled with the prevailing mood of maintaining societal harmony, may be the reason I never saw a cop, anywhere.

After getting a couple of hours of sleep, I make my way to the hotels main ballroom and the rules meeting, which is mandatory for every fighter and at least one of his seconds. Considering the haphazard approach to the rules meeting taken by most promotional organizations, this one could almost be considered a formal event. Each camp and its interpreter are seated at individual tables, each facing a slightly elevated stage and dais. Given the number of different languages being spoken, the meeting somewhat resembles the United Nations.

Seated at the dais are Dream Stage Entertainment CEO, Nobuyuki Sakakibara; General Manager, Nobuhiko Takada; Yugi Shimada, Executive Rules Director and Chief Referee; Matt Hume, Rules Director and Official Trainer; the English translator, and me.

Mr. Sakakibara opens the meeting with a pep talk, encouraging each fighter to give his all for the fans, and for each camp to act like professionals and to stay out of trouble. Mr. Takada, a former wrestler, famous for his 1997 and 1998 ground breaking matches with Rickson Gracie in Pride-1 and Pride-4 respectively, echoes Mr. Sakakibara's sentiments. Having delivered their messages, they exit the meeting. Mr. Shimada then reads each and every rule and answers all questions. After approximately one hour, the meeting concludes with the photographers and fighters doing their dance.

It's now 4:00 p.m. and I have some time to kill before going to a referees meeting, I opt to go to one of the hotel conference rooms and watch some of the guys roll. Colin Oyama and Quinton Jackson come in with their crew and work on their game plan. Next up are Dan Henderson, Randy Couture and the other Team Quest members.

After fifteen minutes, I leave and check out the room next door. Lo and behold who should I find but Chuck Liddell, his trainer, John Hackelman, and the UFC film crew that has shadowed Chuck's every move since he landed in Japan. The "Ice Mans" win over Alistair Overeem in the opening round of competition, and his subsequent presences in the semi-finals of this Middleweight Gran Prix, has created an unbelievable excitement amongst the Japanese fans.

As much as I would like to continue watching the guy's workout, I can't. I have to attend a referees meeting. Over the next hour and twenty minutes, we discuss the upcoming matches, watch some fight videos and discuss the criteria for scoring.

It is now 7:30 p.m.; jetlag now feels like a 600-pound Gorilla on my back

applying a rear-naked choke. And, I'm so hungry I can eat the south end of a northbound skunk. I'm going to grab something to eat and hit the sack. I'll talk to you tomorrow.

To Be Continued...

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