

ERIC STINTON

The Main Event



Undercard

Front and center was a cage where men would soon punch each other for money. Seats inside Seoul's cavernous Olympic Hall wrapped around it on two levels: cageside VIP tables for the type of people who wear suits to a cage fight, and open-seating above it for everyone else. Behind the cage was a ramp that led up to a theater stage set up with rock band equipment. Above, a jumbo screen showed silent highlight videos of older matches on loop.

A pre-fight promotional video started. Clips of knockouts played as the lights dimmed. Band members crept to their positions through the shadows while the video showed mean-mugging men holding up their fists. The video culminated with re-sounding, ear-splitting English: "Top FC! Fighting! Champion!"

The screen went blank. A row of mortar-like pyrotechnics shot flames upward from the edge of the stage, and the band started screaming over the sounds of their instruments. They sounded like the kinds of bands most kids listen to in high school but are now embarrassed to think about—except Korean.

It was exactly the type of campy, weird high-production values that I wanted, but as the music pierced the on-stage flames and echoed through the auditorium, I didn't quite feel there. I didn't quite feel anywhere.

There were no students in the halls when I left my classroom to make the short walk to go watch the Korean mixed martial arts promotion, Top FC. Teaching on weekends doesn't feel odd to me anymore. That's how education works in Korea; learning never takes a day off. What never ceases to feel strange, though, is the silence after kids leave. Not having something to block out becomes more distracting than any group of screaming, laughing middle-schoolers could be.

Absence itself is a thing, a phantom punch.

Top FC puts on fight cards only a few times a year. A handful of Korean fighters have graduated from Top FC to the UFC, but for the most part it's regional-level talent: think NFL Europe compared to the NFL, or the NBA developmental league compared to the real thing. The appeal of watching Top FC is not the possibility of seeing high-level prospects or to witness exciting fights—though both of those do happen—so much as the guarantee that there will be something charmingly goofy to occupy my attention. It's something different to do, a way to break up the routine.

The walls of my classroom used to be decorated with colorful posters my students made, but for no apparent reason they were torn down and thrown out one night after I went home. They were drawn too well and stuck to the walls too purposefully to think throwing them out could have been an honest mistake, but regardless of who did it or why it feels more like a hospital than a classroom, the walls like visual white noise. It fits the monotony of Korean cram-schools, or *hagwons*, where students come to study for several hours after they finish regular school (or on days when they don't have school). There's something empty about it all. It's nice to teach dedicated students and, contrary to how I taught stateside, I have yet to feel the need to break out my "please don't go to jail" lesson. Still, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I decided to come here.

If I had a dollar for every time I've been asked why I moved to Korea from—"of all places!"—Hawai'i, I would have enough money to pay off my student loans and move back home. Debt is a conversational downer, though, so I usually blame some other millennial pathology, like existential angst or wanderlust or feeling too young to settle into a long-term career. All of which is true, even if those reasons are secondary to debt.

Living and working in Korea was a way to check off all boxes. I make more and spend less than I did in Hawai'i, I travel around Asia easily, and living abroad on a temporary work visa guarantees I won't be doing this forever, endowing the future with a sense of possibility.

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What I didn't expect was the antiseptic walls, the one-day weekends, the repetition of drill-and-kill test prep. For all the excitement living abroad can provide, it can be just as boring and tedious as life was back home when my time was spread across multiple jobs that barely covered the bills.

Main Card Fight #1

"My dream is to become champion and get into the UFC."

"I just think fighting is fun."

The first fight is a matchup of two different personalities: an ambitious and professional fighter vs. one nicknamed "Drunken Hong." Ambitious Professional walks out to a kind of generic gothic dubstep, Drunken Hong comes out to "Zombie" by the Cranberries.

The ring announcer grabs the mic. With gel-haired swagger, his voice booms through the auditorium in English: "We are live at this time! Only the strong survive! Featherweight special match!"

He announces that the fight will be five 3-minute rounds. The people cheer, not noticing he meant to say three 5-minute rounds. The opening bell dings.

Ambitious Professional is clearly a grappler, stocky with a low crouching stance. Drunken Hong is a kickboxer. The crowd goes silent and for a minute the only sounds are the thuds of feet bouncing on the mat and the interruption of skin-on-skin thwacking.

Drunken Hong nearly kicks Ambitious Professional in the groin. They both instinctively back off and bow. I scream "HWAITING, DRUNKEN HONG," which translates into "FIGHTING, DRUNKEN HONG," the generic "go team" cheer for any and all Korean sports, but especially pertinent here. People in the crowd look around and laugh when they see that a foreigner said it.

It isn't exactly an action-packed fight, but it's watchable enough. Drunken Hong stays back and throws strikes at a comfortable range. Ambitious Professional follows a formula: he showboats by shuffling his feet and putting his hands down, eats some punches and kicks for his troubles, resets, and then does it all over again

until the end of the fight.

The scorecards are a strange, nearly random assortment of numbers: 30-28, 29-27, and 28-29. The referee announces Drunken Hong as the winner by split decision while he lifts Ambitious Professional's arm. He realizes his mistake and quickly pulls it down to raise Drunken Hong's arm. As a group of four ring girls approaches him for post-fight pictures, the winner doesn't seem to notice the error.

Living in Korea isn't terribly difficult. It's cheap, it's safe, it's convenient, the food is good, and you don't even really need to speak any Korean; one of the five biggest industries in the country is private English education, so most people in Seoul can meet you halfway. Unless you're living somewhere distinctly non-urban, there aren't many big cultural adjustments to make to feel comfortable.

What is hard is the aggregate of the little everyday things. The walking smartphones with people attached who stride squarely into you; the crowds in front of elevator and subway doors who don't wait for people to exit before they walk in; the *ajeossi's*, the old and usually drunk men who cough on you and touch your face; the *ajumma's*, the old women who push and elbow their way to cut in line; the size Large shirts that are really Mediums. It's stupid and doesn't seem like much, but those minor annoyances—the awkwardness, the obliviousness, the drunkenness—add up, to nothing.

Main Card Fight #2

"From Korea! Playboy!"

Fog machines puff oscillating smoke as a Korean alternative rock song plays. Playboy emerges from behind the curtains. It's his professional debut and the crowd cheers. The next fighter comes out to "Gangnam Style," but the crowd is silent, like they know something I don't.

"From Japan!"

The audience's silence fills the arena as heavily raining boos. The 35-year Japanese occupation of Korea ended in 1945, but some wounds—forced immigration to work in Japanese factories and fight in the Japanese military, abduction of Korean women to serve as sex slaves for soldiers, political and cultural oppression—take longer to heal.

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The stillness lingers as the fight starts. Playboy picks up From Japan and slams him to the mat. The crowd erupts. He then smothers From Japan, hitting him with short elbows until they tangle themselves into a Gordian pretzel. They remain locked together for another minute and a half until the referee cuts in.

There are no chants for the hometown favorite, just stubborn silence consciously funneled toward From Japan. Playboy drags From Japan to the mat and sprawls across his wriggling foe. He delivers more short elbows, carefully advances position, and stifles his opponent's ability to move. The referee stands them up, rinse and repeat.

In the third round I yell "PUNCH!" No one in the crowd reacts, but seconds later Playboy throws a straight right and scores a knockdown. You're welcome, Playboy. This is the moment everyone has been waiting for, something sudden and violent and more immediately gratifying than the slow grinding dominance of top-position wrestling. It isn't a clean knockout, but it's enough to be the definitive highlight of the fight. The crowd applauds.

Playboy ends up winning a decision. For his effort, he is awarded a phallic-looking glass trophy. He takes his time bowing again and again in all directions as he exits the cage, the repetitive motion a polite aftertaste of how he performed inside of it.

When the laundry is drying is when my apartment feels most like a shoebox. If dryers exist in Korea, they have long been extinct in my apartment building. My fiancée and I use a drying rack, which covers roughly one-third of the floor space and takes roughly way fucking longer for clothes to actually dry. Between the two of us and our dog, laundry days feel very much like the trash compactor scene from the first Star Wars, the open space of our room closing in on us until the clothes are all put away.

I've never needed much space indoors, though. I've always found reprieve outside, among trees or in the ocean. Over the mountains from my hometown on O'ahu is Town, capital T, the *other* side of the island defined by loud crowds of tourists. I never went Townside unless I had to be there for work or school. It always made me the worst tour guide to visiting friends who wanted to see Waikīkī and experience nightlife outside of my favorite dumpy dive bars. I'd turn down the wrong one-way streets, drive past parking garages, and generally

not know where I was going. That claustrophobic tropical metropolis of Honolulu is home, I guess, in the same way that distant cousins are technically family. It's familiar enough, but not the same. No matter what, I always knew how to get out of Town; just head to the mountains and sooner or later I'd be back Home.

Seoul is Town magnified by ten condensed into less than half the land mass of O'ahu. Only there is no escape road over the mountains, no away, only snaking subways and bumpy taxis to another identical part of itself.

Rinse. Repeat.

Main Card Fight #3

Either a moth or a slip of paper flutters in the spotlight above the cage. Figuring this out is by far the most interesting part of the fight. The fighters beneath the moth/paper obstruct my ability to solve the mystery—as if I need another reason to begrudge them.

The action, if you can call it that with a straight face, is functionally no different than choreographed shadowboxing. The two men mirror each other like two skittish puppies, prancing ever-so-slightly into range then hurriedly dashing out again. They might as well be exchanging butterfly kisses; their so-called "strikes" are almost exactly as damaging as eyelash tickles. I cross my fingers and hope that they somehow knock each other out at the same time. It's the end all parties deserve.

The Korean fighter who walked out to Bon Jovi's "It's My Life" realizes it is our lives he is wasting and at the end of the third round mercifully smashes his fellow Korean into the mat with ground and pound, preventing me from pounding my head into the ground and sparing us another godawful ninety seconds of twinkle-toed pugilism.

On his way out, the winner bows repeatedly to the audience in all directions.

At least he knows when he needs to apologize.

Birth and death are obverse sides of the same coin: you leave the only world you know, alone, usually to the sounds of someone crying nearby. Life, then, is the grand distinguisher, the invigorating in-between that gives those criers reasons to wail and those lonesome acts of birth and death a sense of meaning.

And yet, we have done an exceptional job at putting what matters in long

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quarantines. Modern life has been whittled down to *birthschoolworkdeath*. Daily monotony knows no culture and obeys no borders.

When I talk to friends back home, they tend to think I'm off on some Big Adventure, looking the future in the eye, facing the horizon with my right knee perched atop a mountain, pointing my finger defiantly outward and piercing the unknowable expanse of destiny.

In reality: Monday through Friday I wake up make coffee walk the dog shower go to work go home eat dinner watch TV drink tea go to bed.

Saturday: Wake up make coffee go to work go home take a nap wake up walk the dog eat dinner watch TV drink tea go to bed.

Sunday, my one day off: I wake up, watch people punch each other in the UFC, walk the dog take a nap go out to dinner with my fiancée, watch a movie or read while I drink my tea then go to bed.

Multiply by 130, my life in Korea.

Main Card Fight #4

"I'll bring a trophy home for Thanksgiving," says the first fighter, boasting a record of 0-1-1. Chuseok, Korea's three-day thanksgiving holiday, is a few days away.

"I'll make him retire from MMA," says the second fighter, nicknamed Lucky Guy. He has a thick tattoo scrawled across his chest that says "EfforTempeR" with an angel-winged cross on his sternum bridging the two words. Incoherent tattoo aside, Lucky Guy has thus far been unlucky more often than not as a professional fighter: his record is 1-2.

The first round is exciting and evenly matched and surprisingly technical for two sub-.500 fighters. In between rounds, Thanksgiving sits on the ground while Lucky Guy is on his stool with his legs propped up by his coaches like he's going into labor. He knocks out Thanksgiving early in the second round, and everyone is off their feet. I check the time. The thought of three more fights makes me preemptively tired. I shift in my seat, waiting for the reason I came to be done with already.

I lied.

My weekly schedule times 130 hasn't exactly been my life in Korea. More

like times 126. Every year earns me two weeks of vacation. Over the course of the past two years, I've thus far spent them with my fiancée in Cambodia, Indonesia, Hawai'i and California. The latter two trips were not my choice destinations; two of my brothers were getting married and I was obliged to go.

Obliged. As if going on vacation to see family and get away from work and all my irrational annoyances is a bad thing, a thing I have to do and don't want to do. It's not like those trips were a bad time, either. I stuffed my face with all the food I've been missing in Korea, I enjoyed all the nature that's absent in Seoul, I saw my niece and nephew become walking talking humans when previously I had only known them as fleshy baby lumps. All of those are good. Still, it's hard to reason out of kneejerk responses. It felt foolish to move to Asia and then spend all my vacation time going back to places I used to live.

Most expats have a common personality trait, a desire to see new places and experience new cultures. That desire becomes an expectation once you've actually planted some roots in foreign soil. The first year in Korea met those expectations. My fiancée and I had momentum, we made plans. We knew life in Korea was temporary and that we'd be back in America sooner than later. We wanted to make the most of our geography while we're out here. But that's not how things worked out.

I really have nothing to complain about, and yet I complain. Feeling frustrated by visiting family is much worse when you know you shouldn't feel that way and you do anyway. Spending time with people you love is what matters—maybe the only thing that matters. The monotony of adulthood has at least taught me that much. Yet I still can't help but feel let down, like I blew opportunities to be with my family even though I *know* being with my family itself was the opportunity.

It's aggravating to feel and exhausting to not feel.

Main Card Fight #5

"This guy is a kickboxer!"

Despite competing in the third-to-last fight, Takenori Sato is the most notable

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name on the card. The Japanese fighter had a pair of bouts in the UFC, but is best known for getting knocked out in both of them before getting cut. But before that he was the six-time defending welterweight champion of Pancrase, a legitimate and respected Japanese MMA promotion. Sato walks out to a Japanese hip-hop club jam, his hair highlighted with bleach-blonde frosted tips. His 36 professional fights make him look older than 31.

His opponent, a buff, baldhead Korean guy runs past the cameras to the cage. He is stopped and reset by the cameraman so they can film his walkout for the folks at home.

Sato gets slammed onto his back almost immediately, but scrambles back up the cage. An advertisement sticker on the fence starts peeling off and sticking to Sato's face. The ref steps in without calling time and peels it off while Buff Baldhead clinches against the fence. He pummels his arms underneath Sato's to gain dominant leverage. They separate, and with seconds left in the round, Buff Baldhead delivers a thunderous kick directly to Sato's crotch. The men in the audience reflexively put their hands between their legs.

Sato writhes in pain while Buff Baldhead sits in his corner. Sato tries to prop himself up with his elbows, but he keeps falling flat to the floor. A team of doctors enters the cage and inspects the affected area on the spot. On the jumbo screen the camera zooms in voyeuristically as the medical crew holds towels up to cover any potential indecency.

As men huddle around his lower torso, Sato's head sticks out. He covers his eyes with the backs of his hands, but it's apparent he's grimacing in pain. Surely most of it is physical pain, but the scene itself is painful in its own way.

Sato winces as he tugs his shorts back on and crab-crawls to the fence. The fight is called. The official decision is a No Contest, but as both men exit the cage—one walking and the other limping, one thinking of where to go out tonight and the other questioning why he came—there is a clear winner. Or at least, a clear loser.

When I'm on stage with the CEO of my company—*hagwons* are private education companies, not proper schools—I try not to think about my immediate situation. I stand on stage doing nothing, a piece of décor for the boss to parade

in front of parents or business partners, while a meeting in Korean unfurls. Usually they are in the three-to-five-hour range. My mind wanders.

Something I've noticed: those who question themselves the most tend to be the ones who don't need to question themselves. This is especially true in teaching. Good teachers often get down on themselves, worry they aren't doing a good job. Lesser teachers don't have that anxiety. Their confidence spawns from not caring enough to worry.

I am a good teacher. I taught Special Ed for four years back home, at every level: kindergarten, elementary, middle school, and a summer of high school. The only subject I'm not "Highly Qualified" to teach—and that's a DOE term, not mine—is math. The only qualifications needed to teach in Korea are a college degree and a willingness to live in Korea.

I'm a good teacher I'm a good teacher I'm a good teacher. I tell myself like I tell my dog he's a good boy. He really is a good boy.

My mind stops wandering somewhere in the second hour. That's when my back starts to hurt from standing. Later it will move down my legs and to my feet, but as the meeting continues and I think about where I am and where I've been, the pain suddenly feels more acutely debilitating.

Main Card Fight #6: Co-Main Event

Heavyweight fight between a Korean guy with a sumo braid and a guy from Guam draped in the flag of his homeland. Guam Flag makes his way to the cage and his walkout song skips to the next track. It restarts as the cage door closes.

The announcer introduces the fight as three 4-minute rounds, ending a four-fight streak of saying the correct numbers.

It's a slow, plodding match, spent mostly in clinch pirouettes with both men taking turns pushing each other against the fence. The first round ends and they're both exhausted. So is the crowd; these minutes aren't normal minutes. It's as if, like a black hole, the sheer mass of the men has distorted time itself. When the second round starts, it feels like it should be the last.

Guam Flag starts to take over, sort of. He presses Sumo Braid against the fence and

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unleashes a barrage of hammer-fists to the thighs. Somehow, a small cut opens on the face of Guam Flag, and the “action” stops. The crowd leaks a collective groan as the medical staff examines the cut to see if Guam Flag is fit to continue. He is, unfortunately, and the fight resumes.

Everything is in slow motion. I no longer know what minute of what round it is. The two men take turns pushing up against one another on the fence, over and over, with only the occasional punch to Sumo Braid’s thighs to let us know that time is still moving forward. It is an awful fight, but for some reason it sucks my undivided attention and I can’t stop watching.

With heavy steps and heavier breaths, the bout limps to the final bell. Sumo Braid can barely hold himself up after the big brother-style Charlie horses his thighs endured. For a fight announced as three 4-minute rounds, it felt like ten 20-minute rounds. At least there was a clear winner. I think.

“Majority draw!” The announcer raises both of their arms at the same time.

The fights took place on September 11th. I tend to think of 9/11 as the moment that thrust me into a consciousness higher than my childhood’s, when I realized that events going on in the world were real. I was 13. This night was the fifteenth anniversary of 9/11, yet I completely forgot about it; it was just the night of the fights.

It’s easy and comforting to forget that the rest of the world continues without you. There is simply too much going on to keep up with, and we’re bombarded by so much information that it is tempting to just forget about it all and focus on ourselves. It’s like that anywhere, but especially out here when you’re isolated from everyone and everything you know. The catch is that the world does keep spinning, regardless of your consent or awareness.

I often forget that I’ve been living in Korea for three years. In that time, friends and family members have married, moved across the country, changed careers, had kids, continued on with their lives—and I’ve been gone for almost all of it. What should have been my memories and my experiences have been stolen from me while I was busy going through the same old rounds I always do. I feel stuck, spinning around in circles on the same plateau, telling myself I’m

actually moving forward. Only when I come up for air and see the world outside of myself do I realize how long I've been here, and how little I have to show for it.

I forget that I—or anything, for that matter—exist outside the walls of my classroom and my apartment. Everything else feels interstitial. The rest of the world happens at a sanitized distance. Time moves slowly, then all of a sudden it's three years later and nothing has changed except everything else.

Main Card Fight #7: Main Event

A face-melting 80s style metal band introduces the challenger for the Top FC featherweight championship, Choi Seung Woo. Gnarly guitar solos fill the room as the singer screams "Korea! OooohYEAH!" The same screamo band from the beginning of the show introduces the defending champ Lee Min Gu.

"Ladies and gentlemen, men of the world, only the strong survive! The final two finals! We shout together! It's rEEal!" The announcer's voice cracks; it's realer than he thought.

The opening bell dings. A woman in front of me screams for what seems like ninety straight seconds as the fighters trade heavy leg kicks. It's annoying, but I don't blame her; the first round is exciting, so much so that I'm no longer keeping score. I'm just watching.

The crowd is fully immersed. Anxious cheers and attentive silence ebb and flow. Lee and Choi are perfectly matched, mirroring each other's movements in violent choreography. When one throws a strike, the other reacts almost flawlessly. One can never expect to go untouched in a fight, but both men avoid eating any flush shots. It really is beautiful.

Midway through the fourth round, Lee slips right into Choi's fist and crumples instantaneously. It's hard to tell if Lee made a mistake or Choi made an adjustment, but the result is undeniable. Choi's team rushes the cage and tackles the new champion. Lee is still out cold, surrounded by trainers and doctors. For a moment, there are two piles of men in the cage, for very different reasons. Choi walks out with a trophy and a championship belt, Lee is carried out on a stretcher.

I lingered outside Olympic Hall after the fights finished. Excited chatter

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buzzed around me, none of it in English but all of it understood. The pure, visceral charge of a good fight knows no language, needs no explanation. It's something to be experienced. It's something you feel.

I took my time walking back to the subway station. Cool, crisp air trickled through the leaves and coalesced into a light breeze, the kind of breeze that whispers hints of winter but is unwilling to forget the summer. The kind of breeze that is caught between two worlds but is exactly what it is.

It was late enough at night, and I was far enough away from the road that the brushing of the wind through the trees was all I heard. Somewhere behind those trees loomed Lotte World Tower, the fifth tallest building in the world – just forty-three feet taller than One World Trade Center. It was nice to not see it, to be in the company of trees.

The trees gave way to a small, circular flower garden. At the center of the garden, thousands of wind chimes were arranged in a large spherical *taeguk*, the red and blue design at the center of the Korean flag that represents balance between negative and positive forces of the universe. The breeze stayed with me and danced between the chimes, allowing a few more moments of peace before I would have to leave it behind and walk across the highway. Those moments are hard to pin down exactly, except to say they felt right. I walked weightlessly, in a place as foreign as it is familiar, and everything was where it was supposed to be.

Korea has been good to me. The hardest part about living here has been seeing myself under new strains and seeing how poorly I react to them. If it has taught me anything, it's that getting hit is inevitable. How you get hit and what you do after—that's everything. I haven't yet figured out how to respond to the punches thrown at me out here. But I did for a night, and at that moment, what was there and what wasn't there was perfect.

I am a good teacher. I really am. 🐼