



(Left) Senior **Zena Nesbitt** practices her punching technique on a punching bag Dec 8. (Below) **Nesbitt** positions herself in the typical Muay Thai fighting stance. *photos//Hana Donnelly*



Queen of the ring

MMA gives Nesbitt chance to follow in the footsteps of her father

SADIE ALLEN

Staff Writer

Zena Nesbitt has been a fighter, in every sense of the word, for as long as she can remember.

The daughter of a professional boxer, it was inevitable that Nesbitt would start fighting someday. But she isn't simply following in her father's footsteps. Nesbitt is a trailblazer in her own right.

Born in Oxford, United Kingdom and living in London until she was 9 years old, Zena has been practicing Mixed Martial Arts, or MMA, since before she could do fractions.

"It's something that I have been born and bred to do," Nesbitt said.

Mixed Martial Arts combines different fighting styles into one. Nesbitt has fought all of them, and knows them inside and out. The one she finds the most difficult is all about groundwork and grappling for position -- Brazilian Jiu Jitsu.

"Brazilian Jiu Jitsu is the hardest," Nesbitt said. "It's all technique. You could find the strongest person in the gym, but if they have no clue what they're doing, they will be submitted by someone else."

Other types of fighting included in MMA are kickboxing and Muay Thai, which are nearly the opposite. Nesbitt started her journey with those, and they remain her favorites.

"Kickboxing is just standing. Punching, kicking. There's no takedowns, no groundwork, none of that," Nesbitt explained. "It's similar to Muay Thai, but they just have different styles."

MMA as a whole, though, is versatile and unpredictable -- which is what Nesbitt loves most about it.

"I love the challenge of MMA," she said. "MMA is the most fun because...it's everything. It's a new challenge, nothing is ever the same."

When her parents moved their business to the United States, they moved the family as well -- to Woodlands, Texas. Back in Texas, Nesbitt instilled her love of fighting in others, as well.

"Teaching people is fun. I taught self defense back in Texas for ROTC, so I ran their self defense department," Nesbitt said. "I trained all the cadets that were going into the military, so they had basic skills going in."

Nesbitt's passion for MMA and self defense stems from her father's experience as well as her own personal motivations. Growing up in a house full of boxers, it was natural for Nesbitt to get involved in the sport.

"My father was a professional MMA fighter, Jason Nesbitt. My dad fought for England, so he represented his country," Nesbitt said. "He did own a gym back in Texas for about two

years... UFC fighter Alex Morono fights out of there, so that's my coach."

But it's not just her father and coach that inspire her. Nesbitt also looks up to Randy Pausch, a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University who passed away in 2008 due to pancreatic cancer. Before his passing, Pausch gave a speech called "The Last Lecture," which was an overarching idea of the lessons he wanted to instill in his children and his students while he still had the chance. This speech has helped inspire Nesbitt when it comes to fighting, and when it comes to her personal life.

"One of his quotes is, 'brick walls are not there to stop us, but there to stop the people who don't want it hard enough,' and that's always been my thing while training," Nesbitt said. "MMA is hard. Life is hard -- we're in high school. Things are hard. So overcoming obstacles is something I've aspired to do."

And Nesbitt has faced her fair share of obstacles. Not only did she move from the UK when she was nine, but she came to Charleston only a few short months ago, one week before the school year began.

"Moving from country to country was something I had to face completely," she said. "I've had to accept that some things are there to stop us, and some things are there to stop the people that don't want it."

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Pausch gave Nesbitt a motivation for continuing to fight MMA, regardless of what country she lives in or what school she attends.

"His message has always inspired me," Nesbitt said. "The idea that your biggest challenge is the person in the mirror -- I find that wholeheartedly true. Fighting is never easy. You can ask anyone who's ever done MMA or anything. They will tell you that fighting is hard."

One of the hardest aspects that she described about fighting is the attitude that is required, the discipline that is necessary to keep a brave face.

"Being punched in the face, and looking at the person like, 'Ow. Okay. Let's go!' That's a hard thing," Nesbitt said. "Some people will weep and cry... at the end of the day, you have to be okay with that."

Even though her training partners tend to leave bruises or put her in chokeholds, Nesbitt still values the connection they make through MMA.

"All of my best friends are all the people that punch me in the face on a daily basis," Nesbitt joked. "It's a connection thing."

But to Nesbitt, it's more than just looking tough. MMA is a lifestyle for her -- an escape, a form of therapy, a way to have fun with nothing but a punching bag.

"It kind of became my release. Some people dance, some people run. I have a punching bag, literally, in my bedroom," she said. "If I'm angry, it's what I do. If I'm sad, it's what I do. It's my focus. If something's wrong, I fight. Yes, I do it to work out, I do it to control my emotions, but I do it because, at the end of the day, I love it. And I will probably do it until the day I die."