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Families join the mixed martial arts world in Irvine

The mixed martial arts studio in Irvine will host a qualifying event on Saturday.

By GREG HARDESTY

The Orange County Register

IRVINE – The 60-year-old man turns to a visitor, grins, and says:

"I can do 500 sit-ups. Right now. Here."

Wearing business casual, he drops to the floor. The visitor stops him.

"It's OK," he says. "I believe you."

Silver-haired Jim Santaniello, co-owner of a fast-growing, little-known fitness empire located in an Irvine office park, gets up and resumes a walking tour of his business.

His enthusiasm is understandable.

A few years ago, Santaniello was watching his sons in a jiu-jitsu class when he decided to give martial arts a try. He was overweight and bored.

What started as a lark for the man who made money in construction has turned into a personal \$5 million bet on the rapidly growing sport known as MMA, for mixed martial arts.

Santaniello, now 60 pounds lighter, and his wife, Karen Vasquez Santaniello, own No Limits, an MMA training facility whose membership has doubled to about 1,500 in the last year and continues to grow at about 10 percent each month, he says.

No Limits, considered the largest MMA facility in North America, offers kickboxing, grappling, wrestling and other sports under one roof.

Members and teachers go by names like Arm Collector and The Body Snatcher.

Oof! Bam!

This Saturday, No Limits will host, for the second time, the Grappling Team Trials, where hundreds of would-be champions will compete to represent the U.S. at the world championships in Switzerland this fall.

Santaniello, of Tustin, crushes out, like so many sit-ups, stereotypes about a sport most popularly associated with cage fighting, in which two people kick and punch each other into submission.

MMA, he says, is about more than blood-thirsty, totally ripped testosterone cases. It's also about strength, speed and coordination – at all levels.

Half of No Limits' members are female, and members range in age from 5 to 70. Local high school and college athletes use the facility to cross train. Members form a United Nations of nationalities: Brazilians, Thais, Japanese, Koreans.

MMA is, increasingly, about families, Santaniello says.

One glance down from his office, which overlooks wrestlers, kick-boxers, grapplers and others working out in the 26,000-square-foot facility, a former Staples store, and it's clear he isn't just putting on a PR smokescreen.

A group of youngsters pound around on some dense-foam mats, practicing jiu jitsu as their parents watch.

Eva Collister, of Anaheim Hills, has enrolled her twin boys, Joaquin and Ronnie, 12, in jiu jitsu at No Limits.

"'The Big Bad World' now starts in the sixth grade," Collister says. One of her sons has been bullied at school, and she says she wants him to gain self-esteem through the martial arts.

Brian McCreadie, of Irvine, watches his son, Kaimana, take down opponents in jiu jitsu.

Instructors at No Limits, many world champions, believe Kaimana is going to be a superstar. The boy excels in jiu jitsu, taekwondo, muay thai, boxing and wrestling.

Kaimana is 7, He routinely beats kids who are older and bigger than he. He already has an equipment sponsor.

No Limits is reaching out to recruit families. For example, this summer it will hold a youth camp, for boys and girls ages 6 to 11, to combat childhood obesity.

Despite its bone-crushing reputation, MMA is not as rife with injuries as pay-for-view bouts would lead one to believe, says Dr. William Kessler, a San Clemente resident who runs No Limits' on-site rehabilitation and wellness center.

Kessler cites a four-year study by the Nevada Athletic Commission in which minor facial lacerations were found to make up about half of all injuries in 171 MMA matches. Between 1998 and 2006, there only was one death worldwide from injuries in an MMA bout, according to statistics compiled by Kessler.

Jennifer Takos says Brazilian jiu jitsu is one of the best ways to tone up. Indeed, Kessler says you can burn 600 to 1,000 calories per hour during a vigorous martial arts workout.

Takos, of Irvine, says she's shed 72 pounds in three years training in various martial arts. She started with cardio kickboxing and now competes in jiu jitsu.

"It's amazing to have all these disciplines under one roof," she says.

MMA is being considered as an Olympic event, and special cage-fighting bouts are planned for television. A just-released movie, in fact, is set in the world of MMA: "Redbelt," by acclaimed screenwriter and director David Mamet

As the popularity of MMA continues to grow, people like Santaniello won't have to rattle the cage so much for attention.

Still, just for fun, he loves to show off what the sport has done for him. He hits the floor and start doing abdomen crunches.

"One, two, three..." Santaniello says, his voice drowned out by the sound of bodies slapping the mats.

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TIGHT SQUEEZE: Aaron "Slam" Wetherspoon gets the upper leg on Brent Cooper during a work out at the No Limits Mixed Martial Arts facility in Irvine. The two are part of Team Oyama, the club's professional fighting squad.

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SATURDAY'S EVENT

What:Qualifying event for 2008 U.S. Grappling World Team

When:11 a.m.-4 p.m., May 10

Site:No Limits

Cost:Free.

Details:About 200 grapplers will vie to compete in the finals, to be held later this Europe. A series of six-minute matches will be held throughout the day.

Information:949-251-8822

"NO LIMITS"

What: Mixed Martial Arts academy and event center

Opened: January 2007 (current location)

Where: 1962 Barranca Parkway, Irvine

Facility: Total of 26,000 square feet, including a boxing/kickboxing ring, regulation fighting cage, 6,000 square feet of mats, 100 heavy and light bags, sports medicine center, cardio machines, weight room with free weights, retail store.

Membership fee: About \$60 to \$200 per month

Number of members: About 1,500

More information: <http://www.nolimitsmma.com/>

What is Mixed Martial Arts?

What it is: One of the fastest-growing sports in the country, this full-contact combative activity involves both striking (kicks, punches, etc.) and grappling (takedowns, holds, submissions, etc.).

Several martial arts fall under MMA's umbrella, including kickboxing, muay thai, boxing, wrestling, jiu jitsu and sombo.

What's hot: MMA's typical signature event is "cage fighting," popularized in 1993 with the first Ultimate Fighting Championship and now a huge ratings-grabber on pay-per-view TV.

What's new: MMA is gaining popularity among families as an interactive sport, with children as young as 5 hitting the mats and bags as an alternative to karate, judo and more traditional martial arts.

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FAST AND FURIOUS: Brent Cooper works out at the No Limits Mixed Martial Arts and Fitness gym in Irvine.

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TO THE TOP: Josh Kim, 22, of Tustin, climbs a rope during warm-ups in his Brazilian Jiu Jitsu class at the No Limits Mixed Martial Arts facility in Irvine.

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CRUNCH TIME: Students participate in the Cardio Kickboxing class at the No Limits Mixed Martial Arts facility in Irvine.

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WIDE OPEN SPACES: Fighters spar in the cage at the 25,000+ square foot facility in Irvine.

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