Fighting in the Kingdom Ehrgeiz

10th Anniversary Show

November 2009 (revised December 2023)

*(Author’s note: This piece appeared in a different form in Black Belt magazine back in 2009. That version used the story of my fight in the Kingdom Ehrgeiz 10th anniversary show to make a general point about the value of martial artist competition. It was rewritten in 2023 to be more about the Kingdom Ehrgeiz promotion and my experiences fighting on a few of its cards, especially the big 10th anniversary show.)*

Kingdom Ehrgeiz is one of the more interesting holdouts from the kakutougi boom era. It started in 1997 as the short-lived Kingdom pro-wrestling promotion, a shoot-style promotion that served as a way station for a host of Japanese pro wrestlers on their way to MMA fame. The list of fighters who were Kingdom regulars before transitioning to PRIDE and RINGS is long: Yoji Anjo, Hiromitsu Kanehara, Daijiro Matsui, Kazushi Sakuraba, Naoki Sano, Nobuhiko Takada, Yoshihiro Takayama, and Kenichi Yamamoto. In fact, Anjo and Sakuraba were still wrestling for the promotion when they fought in the first UFC Japan event in December 1997. But once Kingdom folded, it was Hidetada Irie, a little-known wrestler who debuted on the promotion’s final card in late 1998, who inherited the name and transformed Kingdom into Kingdom Ehrgeiz, a hybrid puroresu/MMA promotion.

The word “ehrgeiz” isn’t Japanese. It’s a German word that means “ambition” and it was part of Japanese pop culture at the time. In 1997, a sci-fi anime TV series called *ネクスト戦記 EHRGEIZ* (trans. *Nekusuto Senki EHRGEIZ* or *The Next Ehrgeiz War Chronicles*) aired on TV Tokyo. Likewise, there was a popular video game that came out in 1998 called *Ehrgeiz: God Bless the Ring*. Renaming the organization Kingdom Ehrgeiz melded the realistic pro wrestling of Kingdom with the pop culture cool of battle anime and fighting games when Irie relaunched it in 1999.

The early Kingdom Ehrgeiz’s shows have a special place in MMA history because they gave some of Japan’s best fighters their start. Leglock specialist Masakazu Imanari, who the infamous “Imanari Roll” leg attack is named after, was on the very first card (and a few subsequent ones). Likewise, UFC veteran and Sengoku welterweight champ Keita “K-Taro” Nakamura fought his first two matches on Kingdom Ehrgeiz cards in late 2003. Even RINGS/ZST standard bearer and DREAM bantamweight champion Hideo Tokoro fought on one of the promotion’s amateur undercards.

My involvement with Kingdom Ehrgeiz began in October 2008. In late summer that year, I was looking for a place to compete in MMA and a friend suggested Kingdom. My friend was an acquaintance of Irie’s and he kindly asked the Kingdom boss about me fighting on a card sometime. To my surprise, I was offered a fight on an October card, but I couldn’t accept. My day job was teaching English and I couldn’t risk getting all busted up during the semester and frightening my students by showing up for work with black eyes and a lumpy, bruised face (or, worse yet, getting hurt so bad I was unable to work). The only time I could do an MMA match was between semesters.

Fortunately, Kingdom events featured many different kinds of matches. In the space of one show you might see kickboxing matches, a few old-school vale tudo matches, MMA matches fought under Kingdom puroresu rules, and a couple of submission grappling matches. So, my friend helped arrange a pro submission grappling match on the October 2008 card instead of an MMA match.

That event was called “GRAND SLUM ~eggs4~,” which needs a little unpacking. Although I never asked Irie, I assume “slum” was just a misspelling because the Japanese short “a” sound is similar to the English short “u”. So, it was probably meant to be read as “GRAND SLAM” and was used as the title for a series of medium-sized Kingdom Ehrgeiz shows. The “~eggs~” part is less clear, but seemed to imply those shows were a kind of incubator for up-and-coming talent. So, I viewed my grappling match on the card as a stepping stone to an MMA match at a later, bigger Kingdom Ehrgeiz show.

Anyway, my grappling match at the GRAND SLUM ~eggs4~ event went well. I beat my opponent, light-heavyweight MMA fighter Fumiya Hashimoto (橋本郁弥), with a juji-gatame (straight armbar) in just over a minute. That lead to another grappling match a few months later at their next event: サテライトファイトVol.８(Satellite Fight Vol. 8), which mostly featured fights between Kingdom Ehrgeiz fighters from the organization’s various satellite schools. This time I lost via judges’ decision after one 5-minute round and hurt my shoulder in the process. That put me out of commission for the next few months, which turned out to be a blessing in disguise. By the time I’d healed and got back into regular training, it put me on schedule for an MMA match at the Kingdom Ehrgeiz 10th Anniversary show.

That anniversary show was held on August 5th, 2009 at ShinjukuFACE night club. The card featured many veteran Japanese fighters. Each guy had fought multiple matches in Shooto, Pancrase, ZST and/or DEEP. In fact, the penultimate match on the card featured DEEP flyweight champ (and ONE Championship contender) Tatsumitsu “The Sweeper” Wada in a match against Kingdom Ehrgeiz ace and Sengoku vet Ryota Uozumi.

My opponent was heavyweight karate fighter Mitsuyuki Kaneya (金家充幸). His affiliation was listed as 拳正道 (trans. *Kenseido*), which is a modern form of karate, and he had scored 8 wins in 8 kickboxing bouts. The guy had a tattoo going from his left shoulder down to his elbow and big chest and arm muscles. I later discovered Kaneya was also a bench press champion.

Our match was a professional “Kingdom Rules” match, which meant it was fought under puroresu-style MMA rules. Like a usual MMA match, we could punch, kick and knee each other while standing, but we had to wear shin guards (like fighters did in the old UWFi or Pancrase shows) and MMA-style, open-finger gloves. No strikes were allowed on the ground. Also, there were puroresu elements like “rope escapes” and “catch points.” The former is when a fighter grabs the bottom rope (or touches it with his leg) to escape a submission hold. When the rope is touched, the referee calls “break” and the competitors return to standing position. However, each rope escape loses you a point. “Catch points” are called when a fighter catches his opponent in a finishing hold that threatens to submit him but doesn’t. These points reward fighters for multiple submission attempts and makes for more active matches.

Once my match in Kingdom was set, it became a constant, mildly anxiety-inducing part of daily life. I’d be working at my day job, remember I’d be fighting soon, and experience intense doubts. At least once or twice a week I’d feel like calling the promoter and cancelling. The anxiety even came during sleep. I’d have bad dreams about taking a beating during the fight and getting rows of teeth knocked out. Sometimes the dreams would wake me up in the middle of the night. Then I’d look over at my wife and two-year-old son still sleeping peacefully next to me and wonder what would happen to them if I died in the ring.

It sounds bad but, I was nearly 40 at the time. I had a lot of competition behind me and had experienced all of it before. I knew those waves of anxiety would come, rode them out as best I could, and got on with everyday life. In fact, those feelings are a blessing in the gym because they fuel preparation. Before my Kingdom match, that constant, low-level anxiety amped up my MMA training. I pushed harder in the weeks before the match than I had all year, and it wasn't a chore. The thought of getting in the ring and fighting soon made every element of training more lively, purposeful, and satisfying than a normal practice could ever be.

By the time I showed up at ShinjukuFACE on fight day, a simple acceptance had mostly taken over. This was it. No more training. No more stressing. It was time to get in the ring with whatever skill and strength I had and do my best to win. All that was left to do before that moment was attend a cursory rule meeting, rehearse the show opening, and warm up for the fight.

About those show openings: Kingdom Ehrgeiz reveals its pro wrestling roots there the most, heavily emphasizing the build-up before the fights. The 10th anniversary show started with silence, darkness, and spotlights on the ring center. An announcer stepped into the light, declared the show was about to begin, and the ring bell was struck five times in the silence. Next, the lights slowly changed from white to a fiery mix of yellow and red as wind howled over the sound system and the quiet, chiming keyboard start of the “Kingdom Main Theme” by Papala Kawai (パッパラー河合) came in. Menacing chords followed as the song built to a fanfare of synths, drums, and heavy guitar. Only then did the announcer start introducing the fighters one at a time over a chugging guitar and bass line. As our names were called, each of us walked to center stage, posed briefly, walked to the ring, and took our prearranged places in the ring (either lining the sides and facing outwards towards the crowd or standing in lines in the center of the ring, facing the forward). We provided the imposing background for Kingdom boss Hidetaka Irie as he seized the mic for some pre-fight hype as the music died down.

Of course, all of this had to be rehearsed before the show.

After the rule meeting, we spent a fair amount of time getting the ring entrances right. We learned where to line up before our names were called, what our cues were, the path we were supposed to take to the ring, where we were supposed to pause and do a fighting pose for the audience, and where we were supposed to stand in the ring until Irie was finished with his opening, event-hyping speech. Getting all of that right took a decent amount of time, but it was a surprisingly welcome distraction. Focusing on all that made you forget about prefight nerves for a while.

Once the show opening was done, everyone retreated to the locker rooms to get ready. I spent most of that time going over strategy and warming up with my cornerman, Tetsuya Tanaka.

Tetsuya is a good friend and a great corner man. He had wrestled in college and spent years training at Takada Dojo. The guy knows fighting. But Tetsuya’s most important quality as a cornerman is his unflappable calm. No matter how well or badly things were going for me in a fight, I could always count on him to let me know with a level stare and a steady voice. It might not seem like much, but anyone who has every fought knows how important a level-headed cornerman is. When doubts or fears start to creep in during a fight, the guy that you trust to be your third-person eyes and judgement keeps you steady.

Unfortunately, Tetsuya’s calm got tested right before the fight. It happened while I was warming up before the walk out. Tetsuya was going over strategy with me and we started drilling some technique: jab, clinch, opponent tries to push you off, hit him on the break while his arms are busy pushing. Simple stuff. But my pre-fight nerves made that punch on the break a little too energetic and I accidentally hit Tetsuya with a good right hook. I was mortified and immediately apologetic. He looked away from me for a moment and sternly talked over my apologies, saying “Okay, okay. Just leave me alone for a minute.” I could see he was blazing mad, but his natural calm returned quickly and we got the call that it was fight time.

As we were waiting in wings, they played the heavy organ opening to my walkout song, Deep Purple’s “Perfect Strangers.” When I met my opponent in the ring, the nerves were gone. It’s something hard to get across to people who have never fought. All that anxiety evaporates when it’s time to fight. I remember very clearly staring my opponent right in the eye as the referee quickly reviewed the rules and knowing I was exactly where I wanted to be.

The bell rang and we moved towards each other. Kaneya attacked first, immediately landing a right cross in the middle of my face. That was someplace I definitely didn’t want to be as he wound up to throw it again. So, we traded punches as I drove him back against the ropes and secured a body lock. From there, I worked until I got in position and took him to the canvas with a tani-otoshi throw, landing in side position. From there, I pushed my knee across his belly, got mount position, and went for a juji-gatame. Immediately, Kaneya locked his hands together to resist the arm bar and reached his leg towards the edge of the ring, trying for a rope escape. Luckily, I broke his grip and finished the arm bar before he could touch the bottom rope and force the referee to stand us up. After a minute and a half of fighting, it was over. The referee raised my arm, the crowd cheered a little, and I was a pretty happy 39-year old.

Afterward, we met back stage in the locker room. There was no anger or animosity. Kaneya-san congratulated me and talked about his own pre-fight nerves and strategy and I shared mine with him. More than anything, I was grateful that we both came away from the fight without serious injuries. We talked, laughed, reviewed the fight, took pictures together, and exchanged e-mail addresses. Fifteen minutes before, we were trying to smash each other in the face. Now, we were making friends. Hard to believe, but that's usual in the fight game.

Tetsuya and I took in the rest of the event as spectators. We got to see some fun fights between Kingdom Ehrgeiz newcomers and the Uozumi/Wada fight, which was strange. Uozumi was purposely not engaging and doing front rolls around the ring. Eventually, the fighters did start engaging and Wada accidentally kicked Uozumi in the groin. The Kingdom ace couldn’t continue and the fight was ruled a no contest.

Disappointed, I went to the concession area to get a drink and ran into the “Ashikan Judan” himself, Masakazu Imanari, who was there to help celebrate Kingdom’s 10-year anniversary. He was kind enough to hang out for a few moments and take a photo with me. Getting to meet one of the true artists of MMA more than made up for the disappointing fight.

The show climaxed with the main event, Kingdom Ehrgeiz boss Hidetada Irie vs. Sho “Survival” Tobita of Saitama Pro Wrestling. It was a rematch from years ago that was chosen via Kingdom fans voting on Irie’s opponent. The entrances were heavy on puroresu nostalgia, with lots of music, smoke and both Irie and Tobita pumping up the crowd during their walk outs. But once the smoke subsided and the fight started it was a one-sided fight.

Tobita came to the ring in muay thai trunks, but he’s 100% a pro wrestler. He didn’t come to the fight with the same amount of MMA ring experience as Irie. So, the Kingdom boss was all over Tobita right away with kicks, a takedown and a heel hook submission. The whole thing was over in 27 seconds and Tobita was left nursing a torn ligament while Irie celebrated his victory. Then the original Kingdom Pro Wrestling boss, Ken Suzuki, and Kingdom alumnus and UFC veteran Kenichi Yamamoto got in the ring, congratulating Irie on his 10 years keeping the Kingdom flag flying.

With that, the show ended. Tetsuya and I walked to Shinjuku station talking about the event, agreeing that it really felt like a throwback to the early days of the kakutougi boom. In spite of the anxiety, the accidental hook punch, and my advanced age in a young man’s sport, we were already looking forward to the next time we could join in on the mayhem. Then we did the hand shake/one-armed bro hug, said our goodbyes, and headed home on different trains.

As I settled in for the long ride home, I had time alone with my thoughts. On one level, I'm just a middle-aged guy trying his best to stay competitive in the fight sports I love. But on another level, I'm a martial artist looking for the same thing all martial artists are. I’m looking for something more out of all of this than just wins and losses on a fight record. It's the satisfaction that comes from both challenge and change that make a fighting art worthwhile, and the best way to experience them is through competition. The thing that living, training and fighting in Japan gives you is continuity. Fighting in a show like Kingdom Ehrgeiz means being a small part of the larger history of MMA in Japan, a history that includes greats like Sakuraba and Imanari. It’s the kind of experience I hope all martial artists, regardless of where they are or what their lineage is get to have.