# An excerpt from the upcoming book…

Kakutougi Boom

**Reports from the Glory Years**

**of PRIDE and K-1**

By Keith Vargo

*Kakutougi Boom* is a book for anyone who wishes they were there during the golden era of Japanese MMA. See the fights through the eyes of longtime Black Belt magazine columnist and Japan correspondent Keith Vargo in a series of vintage event reports. Learn more about the fighters and coaches who made that era great through a compilation of profiles, interviews, and news shorts that were done at the height of Japan’s kakutougi boom and in its aftermath.

Below is a free preview of *Kakutougi Boom: Reports from the Glory Years of PRIDE and K-1*. It’s the article inducting Mirko “Cro Cop” Filipovic into the Black Belt Magazine Hall of Fame in 2003. Read about the legendary kickboxers rise to fame in an article written at the height of his dominance in MMA.

For updates on *Kakutougi Boom* or more information about Keith Vargo and his other books, please visit his website at [www.keithvargo.org](http://www.keithvargo.org), his Amazon author page at [www.amazon.com/-/e/B002LUR4EC](http://www.amazon.com/-/e/B002LUR4EC) or his social media (Facebook at [www.facebook.com/keith.vargo.author/](http://www.facebook.com/keith.vargo.author/) and Instagram at <https://www.instagram.com/keithvargoauthor/)>.

Mirko Filipovic: 2003 Fighter of the Year

*November 2003*

*"(Mirko Filipovic is) the best fighter on the planet right now. I'd love to have him in the UFC, but I don't think I have anyone who can beat him."*

—Dana White, UFC President

That’s a startling confession, especially coming from the president of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, but it shows the stature Mirko "Cro-Cop" Filipovic has attained in mixed martial arts. For the past two years, the Croatian kickboxer has handed some of the best fighters in the world their most brutal losses. Not since Maurice Smith has a kickboxer used his style so effectively in MMA. Filipovic has ended fights with knees, kicks, and a wicked cross. He has stuffed the takedowns of great grapplers and forced them to play his game. In a sport dominated by wrestlers and jujutsu fighters, he’s the sole kickboxer threatening to become heavyweight champion.

It didn't start out that way, though. Filipovic had a solid amateur boxing career and won an International Kickboxing Federation championship belt. He also made a strong showing in K-1, scoring a string of knockouts early on. But he came up short against Michael Macdonald, Mike Bernardo and Ernesto Hoost. Between June 2000 and June 2001, the tough Croatian’s record was 4-4-0 in K-1, and his career seemed at a standstill. But everything turned around when Filipovic fought his first MMA match.

The first time mixed-martial arts fans saw Filipovic in action was in August 2001. It was against Japanese pro wrestler Kazuyuki Fujita at the Andy Hug Memorial, and Fujita was a heavy favorite. The Japanese wrestler was 5-1 coming into the match and had tackled and dominated another top kickboxer, Gilbert Yvel. But Filipovic managed to stay on his feet long enough to open up a huge cut over the Fujita's eye with a perfectly timed knee. In less than a minute, he had earned a TKO and gone from kickboxing contender to "wrestler killler".

Some critics thought this was just hype, since Filipovic's next two fights were against pro wrestlers with much less-distinguished MMA records. But Filipovic started to win over the critics with a draw against Vanderlei Silva, which was the only fight in the pprevious three years that the Chute Boxe demon hadn't won. Filipovic followed that with a TKO of "Gracie-killer" Kazushi Sakuraba and the MMA world took notice. Then he rounded out 2002 by beating Kazuyuki Fujita again, finally silencing his detractors. By then, it was clear Filipovic wasn't an over-hyped kickboxer; he was a new force in the sport.

That brings us to 2003, when Filipovic was at his best. This year, he’s done more than anyone else to earn a shot at the heavyweight title. In March 2003, he KO'd K-1 giant Bob Sapp, busting the ex-football players eye socket with a left cross and putting him down and out in less than 2 minutes. In a June 2003 fight, he man-handled top contender Heath Herring, easily shucking off the sambo fighter's many takedown attempts. After busting Herring's rib with a heavy kick, Filipovic followed him to the ground and TKO'd him. Barely two monthes later the Croatian fighter demolished another top contender, Russian kickboxer Igor Vovchanchyn, in just a minute and a half. While agitating for a title shot, he took a fight with Mexican wrestler, Dos Caras Jr., knocking him out cold with a single kick to the head 39 seconds into the first round.

At this point, it seems like White was right: Filipovic does indeed look like the best fighter on the planet. His record is flawless, his power is frightening, and his takedown defense is impeccable. It's difficult to imagine anyone stopping him. As this goes to press, it was announced that Filipovic has finally been slated for a PRIDE title fight against Fedor Emilianenko. It’ll be his biggest challenge yet, but many see it as inevitable that he’ll be the next heavyweight champion. That's why Mirko “Cro-Cop” Filipovic is the *Black Belt*’s Full-Contact Fighter of the Year for 2003.