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COMMENTARY

Retooled St. Pierre keen on overturning loss to Serra

X

By Neil Davidson | Special to ESPN.com

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AP Photo/The Canadian Press, Paul Chiasson

Think Georges St. Pierre is hungry for revenge? "Just look at his eyes," says fellow fighter David Laizeau.

A picture of Matt Serra is taped to the wall of the gym above a Montreal strip mall where Georges St. Pierre works out.

A quick look over and St. Pierre can see why he tortures himself, chaining a 90-pound weight to his waist to make chin-ups more challenging or hoisting a pair of 120-pound dumbbells while strength and conditioning coach Jon Chaimberg urges him on.

"I am much stronger, much faster, much everything," St. Pierre says. "Every face of the game -- especially mentally."

Relinquishing his welterweight title to underdog Serra at UFC 69 one year ago was more than a loss for St. Pierre. It was a humiliation. So much so that on the advice of sports psychologist Brian Cain, he scrawled Serra's name on a brick and symbolically threw it into the icy waters off Montreal's South Shore to rid himself of the burden of that defeat.

The Montreal fighter has spent the last 12 months trying to turn that negative into a positive. Impressive wins over Josh Koscheck and Matt Hughes were just bumps on the road to the Serra rematch Saturday at UFC 83 in Montreal, the UFC's debut on Canadian soil.

"[Since then] I've been right on track," St. Pierre (15-2) said of losing his title. "It taught me



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a big life lesson. I'm doing things differently and it's going to pay off. You're going to see next time ... And if Serra wants to fight me again, again and again, I will fight him again, again and again and the result is going to be the same thing every single time that I fight him."

The 26-year-old retooled, changing management and some of his entourage.

"When I became champion and I lost, I saw the difference," he said. "Now I surround myself with positive people, people who are really there for myself to help me, they're there because they're real, they're not fake."

His friends say he is now ready to reclaim what's his.

"Right now he's hungry," said fellow fighter Jonathan Goulet, who takes on Kuniyoshi Hironaka on Saturday's card at the Bell Centre. "He wants to win that fight. He wants to have that belt. That's his belt. He's doing everything to bring it back home."

"Just look at his eyes," said middleweight David Loiseau.

St. Pierre was a 10-1 favorite to take out Serra the first time around. He was seen as the future of the sport, a physical specimen who was good at everything, while Serra was viewed as an inflated lightweight who had to win a reality TV show to get a title shot.

But someone forgot to tell Serra the script. St. Pierre was woefully subpar that night in Houston. Serra tagged him early with a blow to the head -- St. Pierre said later it landed on the carotid artery -- and then put him away at 3:25 of the first round.

"The confidence of a fighter comes from how he prepares himself," St. Pierre likes to say, and nowhere was it more evident than the first fight with Serra (16-4).

Serious family illnesses, a knee injury and bout of flu, and a lack of focus took their toll on the Canadian.

"I never had a mentor, somebody who was there to tell me 'Hey be careful of this, be careful of that, once you are champion.' I never had that," St. Pierre said in an interview last August. "I was by myself and I got caught in a lot of stuff and was focusing more on doing PR things than training things. I forgot what was my No. 1 priority. My No. 1 priority is to stay champion and being the best in the world.

"I forgot that. I paid for it, I made a mistake. But I'm the type of guy that never makes the same mistake twice."

Not everyone is convinced. The 33-year-old Serra has proved to be a tough nut to crack.

"I think Serra's got a really good chance," said Canadian lightweight Mark Bocek. "I think he's got a better chance than people give him, you know. If I had to bet, I'd probably bet on Georges. But he [Serra] did it before, he could definitely do it again."

Middleweight Joe Doerksen, who like Bocek is also on the UFC 83 card, also has rethought things after watching tape of the first St. Pierre-Serra fight again.

"St. Pierre likes to be on the outside, use his range and stay in his comfort zone. Matt Serra is a bulldog, he just keeps coming at you," Doerksen said. "His punches tend to be a little bit wild and crazy but he throws with bad intentions, he throws with confidence every time. He's fearless and I think that gives him a very strong chance of making it a very competitive fight. I don't think picking a winner is as easy as I thought."

Australian welterweight George Sotiropoulos, who trains with the Serra camp, also warns against counting out the champion.

"He's got great instincts, he's very brutal and yeah, he's really going to get to St. Pierre."

On a recent conference call, St. Pierre hinted at a different strategy for Serra.

"I've been studying him a lot. I know how to fight him and I'm going to fight him in a way that nobody fought him before. People might be surprised. I'm going to do some stuff that people haven't seen before. It's going to be a different story."

St. Pierre and Serra were involved in a brief war of words in the wake of the first fight, a spat triggered by St. Pierre's comments that he blamed the loss on an injury that restricted his training and that he wouldn't have taken the bout if his opponent had been Hughes. "But I told myself it's Matt Serra, I can beat this guy easily," he told a Toronto radio station.

Serra was not impressed. "How do I not get insulted by that?" he told MMA Radio.



Sherdog.com

St. Pierre normally lets his hands and feet do the talking, but he's had some harsh words for Serra.

"Drink your red wine, go to your hockey game and shut up," added Serra, referring to St. Pierre as "Frenchy."

The slagging has not really figured in the prefight buildup, although the UFC asked St. Pierre about it in its prefight interview and has used his response that Serra "crossed the line" in its marketing.

The challenger has other issues on his mind.

"It doesn't matter to me if he's nice or not. I'm going to hit as hard as I can, I'm on a mission right now," he said.

St. Pierre, who held most of his camp in Montreal save for 10 days in Denver and Albuquerque, also has to deal with the challenges of fighting at home. After getting a string of calls from reporters for interviews, he changed his cell phone's answering message to ask that such requests be routed through his manager. When that didn't work, he changed the message to say he was gone until after the fight. But he can't escape the questions.

Relaxing over ribs in a local restaurant one night, St. Pierre was interrupted by a waiter who asked: "Georges, you guarantee victory? No seriously. It's not a joke."

St. Pierre responded: "I guarantee, my friend, I'm going to be the most prepared I can be."

Neil Davidson is general sports editor of The Canadian Press.

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