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Biting the bullet

MMA's Nick Penner took his drive-by shooting in stride

By **CARY CASTAGNA**

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Nothing can stop MMA fighter Nick Penner from staying in kick-butt shape.

Not even getting shot.

Two bullets struck Penner early one morning in May 2007 outside a nightclub at West Edmonton Mall, where he had been helping a friend work security.

"I just remember hearing a guy yelling," says the Edmonton man known as The Quiet Assassin, who has never before discussed the shooting publicly. "I didn't really pay any attention to him. I just wanted to go home."

That's when the shots rang out and Penner was hit -- twice. "One bullet went through my hip and one went through my elbow," he recalls. "It was closer to my bicep. It never hit any bone."

The gunman had apparently been kicked out of the bar earlier, according to police.

Full of vengeance, he returned with a semi-automatic handgun and wildly fired at least five shots in the direction of Penner and three other bouncers as they left the bar shortly after 3 a.m.

Only Penner was struck.

The shooter fled in a dark SUV, while nightclub employees packed the bleeding victim into a vehicle and drove him to hospital, police said at the time.

"I got pretty lucky on that one. (One of the bullets) went through my hip flexor but didn't hit anything," recalls the former member of the Canadian Armed Forces who is rather nonchalant about the incident.

"I walked out of the hospital the next day and I got back to training probably two weeks after that."

Meanwhile, cops laid several charges against a 24-year-old man with gang ties following a month-long investigation.

Penner made his MMA debut three months after the shooting, which he now admits was a bad idea. "It's hard to train when you've got two bullet holes through you," he says.

No kidding.

While managing to overcome the pain in his hip and arm, Penner won his debut fight in the rough-and-tumble world of mixed martial arts.

He has since amassed a 9-1 win-loss record in the octagon -- including a victory via submission over the 400-pound-plus Eric "Butterbean" Esch.

It's no surprise that Penner's tough-as-nails attitude extends to his training.

These days, the 29-year-old super heavyweight -- who also has a pair of wins in his only two pro boxing bouts -- is a fit 245 pounds at six-foot-four.

The five-time Canadian amateur kickboxing champ trains up to four times a day, six days a week and for about an hour at a time with a handful of trainers and coaches.

That includes three weekly workouts of strength training, cardio and kickboxing and two weekly sessions each of wrestling and running stairs.

His weight training -- under the watchful eye of personal trainer Shara Vigeant -- is MMA-specific, including full-body Olympic lifts, powerlifting and functional-type exercises. To keep his heart rate high, Penner does a circuit of several movements before taking a rest.

His cardio workouts often involve the VersaClimber, which Penner describes as "hell on earth," but effective.

"It pushes you to your max heart rate within no time and then you've got to keep it there for your five minutes," he says.

In addition, he is put through his paces with regular throwdowns of Brazilian jiu-jitsu and boxing, and he routinely goes for a run or light jog.

Much of Penner's motivation comes from the fear that he'll run out of gas in the middle of a gruelling five-minute round.

"I've been there before and it's not a fun place to be," he admits. "I always train right now with the fear that I'm going to be in that place. But I have all the confidence when I go into the ring."

Outside the ring and in the weeks before a fight, Penner entertains an endless stream of what-ifs.

"I'm constantly what-iffing," he says. "But it pushes me to train hard."

As for his diet, Penner eats clean, partially because he's borderline diabetic.

"I could be on insulin but I'm trying to not go that route. I need to work out so many times a day to maintain a proper blood-sugar level," he says, noting his family has a history of diabetes.

And contrary to what many may think, Penner doesn't particularly enjoy getting punched, kicked, elbowed or kneed.

"The trick to it is not to mind it. And you know, once you got adrenaline going, you don't really feel too much."

It's a tough way to make a living. But much like the shooting two years ago, Penner takes it all in stride.

"Life's a bitch," he says.

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