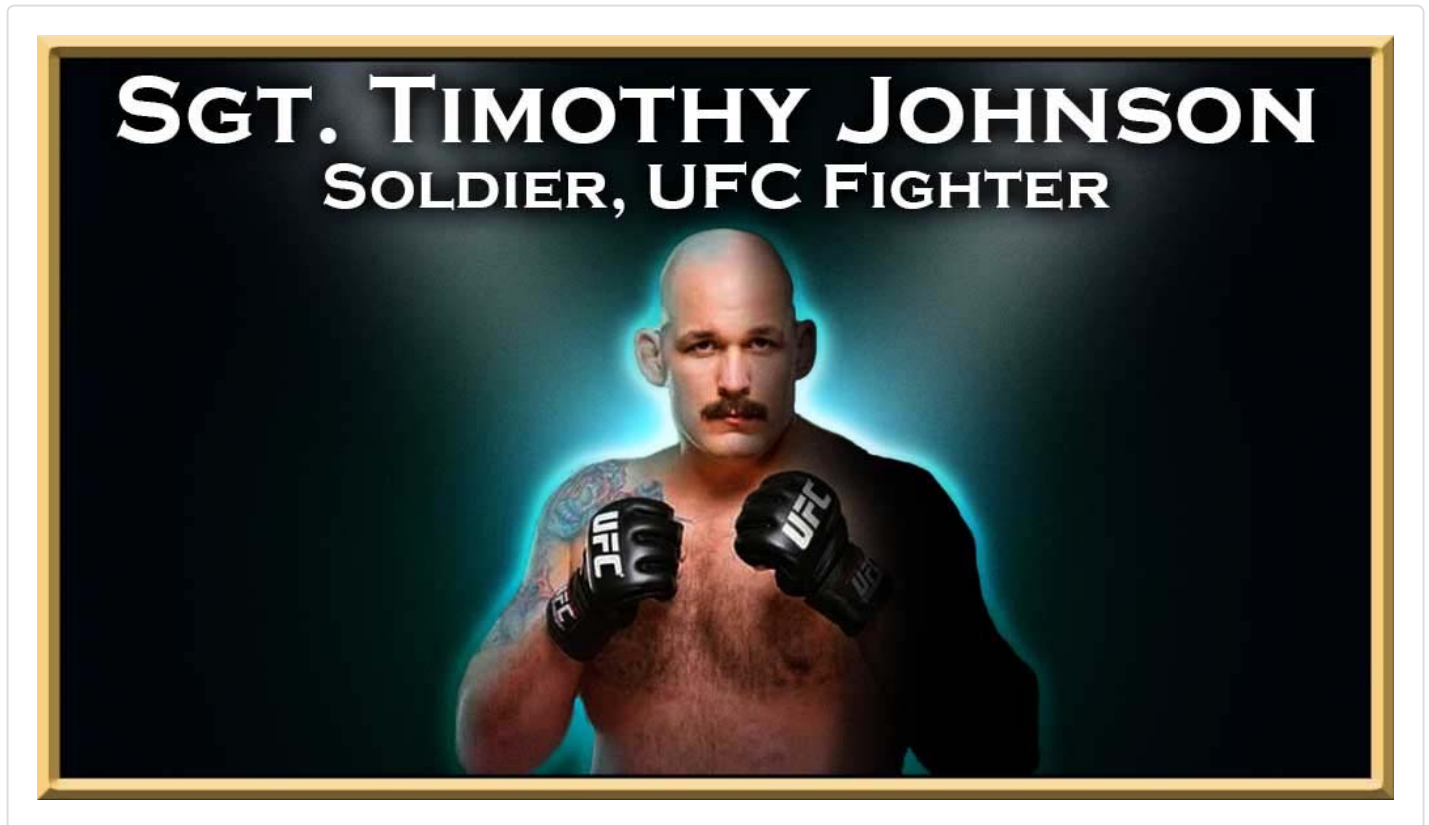


# Minnesota Guardsman Ready for Third UFC Bout

By Pablo Villa - NCO Journal

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For Sgt. Timothy Johnson, being in another country girded for a fight is part of the job. Both of them.

Johnson has been a Soldier with the Minnesota National Guard since 2006. He is currently part of the 134th Brigade Support Battalion. As an NCO, he said, he takes pride in helping his Soldiers craft a “get-it-done” mentality. His time with the Guard has included a deployment to Kuwait in support of Operation New Dawn in 2011.

Johnson is also a UFC fighter. The 6-foot-3, 265-pound heavyweight heads into his third bout in the mixed martial arts world’s top organization Sunday. The fight against Polish fighter Marcin Tybura is part of the six-bout main card of “UFC Fight Night: Rothwell vs. Dos Santos” in Zagreb, Croatia. It will air live on Fox Sports 1. It is Johnson’s third fight as a member of the Ultimate Fighting Championship — and the first time he fights overseas.

But the foreign setting isn’t the least bit daunting. After all, Johnson has already been part of a much bigger battle.

“It’s a total perspective thing,” Johnson said about how deployment compares with fighting. “You get in that cage and you’re going to fight hard. But there are a lot more Soldiers out there doing things that are a lot harder, a lot more dangerous than what I’m doing. It definitely opens your eyes, levels the playing field. You say to yourself, ‘Well, this isn’t so bad. Let’s go in there and fight.’”

## **From grappling to the Guard**

Engaging in a fray has long been a part of Johnson’s life. Growing up in Lamberton, Minnesota, meant being exposed to the rabid wrestling fan base that stretches to the southwestern part of the state from nearby Iowa. When Johnson reached seventh grade he had a choice — basketball or wrestling.

“I decided to go with wrestling,” he said. “As a kid, I was that little butterball. Basketball wasn’t going to be it for me.”

But wrestling was. As a senior at Red Rock Central High School, Johnson finished fourth in the Class AA heavyweight division of the Minnesota State High School Wrestling Championships. But Johnson’s football prowess is what first earned him a chance to attend college. He began playing linebacker/running back at Ridgewater College in Willmar, Minnesota, in 2003. After his first season, the school’s wrestling coach asked Johnson if he’d give wrestling a try. He obliged.

“The following year, I didn’t even go out for football,” Johnson said. “I just stuck with wrestling.”

That decision culminated with a berth on the 2005 National Junior College Athletic Association Wrestling All-America Team. After his time at Ridgewater, Johnson worked in road construction, a job he had done previously. His job ended temporarily in late 2006 as the frigid Minnesota winter took hold and halted the potential for work. A chance meeting with a friend put him in a different kind of uniform.

“I was literally just talking to friends,” Johnson said. “I said, ‘I need a change of pace.’ My friend was in the Guard already. I said, ‘Sign me up. Let’s do it.’”

## **A new kind of fight**

Throughout the following year, Johnson worked several jobs while serving with the Guard. He also continued to pursue his degree, enrolling at Minnesota State University Moorhead in 2008, once again turning to wrestling. As a Dragon, Johnson was a two-time qualifier for the NCAA Division II Wrestling Championships. He did it all while serving his country.

“I guess I just have this mentality of, ‘Go get the work done,’” Johnson said. “There are no easy outs. There are no magic tricks. You have to put in the work and the work will show itself when it’s time.”

As his time as an MSUM wrestler came to a close, a new opportunity arose on the other side of the Red River of the North in Fargo, North Dakota.

“There were a couple area heavyweights out of the (Fargo) Academy of Combat Arts,” Johnson said. “They were just looking for big bodies to train with. Heavyweights are kind of few and far between, especially decent ones you want to actually roll with. These guys were fighters, so they asked me to just come in and be a rolling partner.”

It was Johnson’s first exposure to mixed martial arts. He quickly took to it. Soon enough, he was itching to take a bigger bite out of his newfound sport.

“I had zero intentions of fighting,” Johnson said. “But I was doing it for a couple months and I thought, ‘I’m going to give one fight a try, see what it’s like.’”

A local promoter put Johnson on a Halloween-themed fight card. On Oct. 30, 2010, Johnson displayed his scary potential in his first professional fight, knocking out his opponent, Travis Willey, late in the opening round.

“I was hooked after that,” Johnson said. “I thought, ‘Maybe I want to see how far I can take this.’”

Johnson fought once more in early 2011 before deployment called.

His unit was to work convoy security from a Kuwait-based unit as U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq. The call-up put Johnson’s plans on hold. But it didn’t deter him from taking on the mission with the complete effort that he offered every other facet of his life.

“To me, it was whatever you made it to be,” Johnson said. “You could’ve sat there and sulked or you can just accept it and make the best of it, try to learn something. I think a lot of the guys in our unit did that. So it made deployment a little easier.”

## **Army/fight promotions**

Upon his return, Johnson immediately resumed his fighting career in 2012 while working full-time as a truck driver, moonlighting as a bouncer at a local bar and honoring his National Guard commitments.

He reeled off six consecutive wins before facing longtime fight veteran Travis Wiuff on Oct. 25, 2014. Wiuff had 73 wins to his name heading into the fight and had most recently been a part of the Bellator Fighting Championships stable. Johnson needed less than four minutes to dispatch his opponent with a knockout victory. The win turned heads, including those at the sport’s top company.

“It happened really quickly,” Johnson said. “I signed with SuckerPunch Entertainment, my management company, at the end of October. A week later, I was signed with the UFC.”

The year yielded another distinction for Johnson — he was promoted to sergeant.

“I liked it,” Johnson said of becoming a leader. “You can bring your own take to the Army values in how you interpret them and break them down to the guys underneath you.”

Johnson has done that ever since. He says he continues to hone his leadership skills, focusing mainly on trying to do the best thing for his Soldiers.

“The biggest adjustment for me was sitting back and delegating,” Johnson said. “I was really a hands-on, get-in-there-and-get-the-crap-done kind of guy. I try to get the Soldiers underneath me to see it that way, too. I want them to get a different mentality toward stuff — make it suck a little or make it suck a lot. My favorite part is kind of diverting things that are coming down the line and letting my guys handle what they can handle. I’ll take the brunt of everything else.”

In the octagon, Johnson hasn’t had to take the brunt of much. His strong wrestling base has been augmented with growing striking skills. He has deftly been able to avoid heavy damage in fights by maintaining an over-under grip position to wear down opponents and picking smart positions when he stands and trades blows. He did just that in his UFC debut on April 4, 2015. Johnson was an underdog against Russian fighter Shamil Abdurakhimov. The fight ended with Johnson’s second consecutive first-round knockout win.

“It was big,” Johnson said. “When the ref called stop, it was that adrenaline rush after every fight, like, ‘Ahh, it’s done! Got the W! Let’s go celebrate!’”

The fight also showed Johnson that things are a little tougher at the elite level.

“He was a very good striker,” he said. “There’s no sugar-coating it, he was working me. I didn’t have any answers on my feet with him. What really surprised me was, everyone can punch when they’re going forward. The real tactic is to be able to punch with power when you’re backing up. He was just dinging me every time he was backing up.

“You have to have answers when you get in situations like that.”

Those lessons deepened in Johnson’s second UFC match, a unanimous-decision loss to Jared Rosholt. Rosholt is an accomplished collegiate wrestler in his own right, being named an All-American three times while at Oklahoma State University. As expected, the two heavyweights engaged in a clinch often during the fight. Rosholt did more with the top position and earned the first two rounds. Late in the third, Johnson created space after being pinned to the fence and uncorked several punches, one of which hurt Rosholt. Johnson shot a takedown just before time expired. He won the round but not the fight.

“That was definitely a fight I lost,” Johnson said. “I re-watched it a couple times. I fought pretty stupid. In the third, when I had him on the fences and he was running away and I shot that takedown? I was, like, ‘Why didn’t I just pull up and let one rip?’ He was already stumbling.

“I definitely took away something from it. I like to think as long as you learn something, it’s not a

bad loss. It was an experience. If I get in any of those positions again in the future, I'll know what not to do."

## The next challenge

Johnson's next fight pits him against a fighter making his UFC debut.

Tybura is a 6-foot-3, 249-pound Brazilian jiu-jitsu dynamo. He is a former M-1 Global fight league champion with a 13-1 record. Tybura won his most recent fight against Ante Delija by first-round technical knockout. Many MMA publications dub him the best heavyweight who hasn't fought in the UFC. Thus, he presents a formidable challenge. But it will be the first time Tybura fights in the octagon, which bodes well for Johnson.

"I know this is going to be his first fight in an actual cage," Johnson said. "I think that's going to throw him off. The pressure against the cage is going to be something I don't think he has seen. That can wear out a person real quick.

"I just can't let him get on top. That's basically the only way we feel he can do some damage. Off my takedowns, I've got to be careful of his submission game. He has very good Brazilian jiu-jitsu, so I have to be very cautious from a top position standpoint. Don't give up something stupid, basically."

A win Sunday gives Johnson some career clarity. He'll have one fight remaining on his UFC contract and less than five months before his National Guard contract is up. Meanwhile, he still works as a bouncer at a Fargo bar and drives trucks on occasional weekends.

"As of right now, I'm leaning toward re-upping," Johnson said. "The thing is, I'd probably get out and then three years down the line I'd probably try to get back in so I might as well stick with it."

No matter what he decides to do or what obstacles he might encounter, Johnson is certain that his unbridled work ethic along with the lessons he has learned in the Guard and in the fight game can help him overcome anything. It's a recipe he thinks everyone can benefit from — Soldiers, fighters and everyday citizens.

"Everything goes to plan until you get punched in the face," Johnson said. "The best you can do is adjust yourself, hunker down and be ready to throw punches back."

## Watch it

- **What:** Sgt. Timothy Johnson (9-2) vs. Marcin Tybura (13-1) in a heavyweight match on the main card of "UFC Fight Night: Rothwell vs. Dos Santos."
- **When, where:** Fights begin at noon EDT Sunday at Arena Zagreb in Zagreb, Croatia.
- **On TV:** Broadcast live on Fox Sports 1.
- **Of note:** Johnson is a Soldier in the Minnesota National Guard's 134th Brigade Support

• **Of note.** Johnson is a soldier in the Minnesota National Guard's 154th Brigade Support Battalion. This is his third UFC fight. Sunday's event is headlined by Ben Rothwell and former UFC heavyweight champion Junior Dos Santos.