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Francis Ngannou: From Nothing To Everything

In the world of combat sports, few stories rival the cinematic rise of Francis Ngannou. From the outside looking in, it appears that Francis is a man who has everything. He is a former UFC Heavyweight champion and just faced off against one of the greatest heavyweight boxing champions of all time, after all. However, life wasn't always as glamorous for the behemoth from Cameroon.

Francis' story is one of a man who traversed continents and battled through some of life's harshest adversities to achieve the pinnacle of the fighting world. And, there may not be a more inspirational story in combat sports than the man known as The Predator..

Early Life: Foundations of a Fighter

Francis Ngannou was born into poverty in the village of Batié, Cameroon on September 5, 1986. Life dealt him a tough hand early on. Outside of being born into an extremely poor family, he had to withstand his parents' divorce when he was only 6, having to move in with his aunt in the aftermath. With limited opportunities and a lack of resources, Ngannou's future seemed to be written in the dust of his hometown. However, it was this very struggle that forged the spirit of a fighter within him. From beginning work in the local sand mines at the age of 10, Ngannou's muscular frame was built by hard labor and his character shaped by the hardships that were forced upon him.

As a child, he was approached on numerous occasions by various gangs in his village looking to recruit him. However, Francis refused each time and instead decided to flip the stigma of his father's street fighting reputation into something positive, and found a passion and a dream in boxing.

Training Days: The Pilgrimage of a Warrior

When he was 22 years of age, Ngannou officially began to train in boxing against the wishes of his family. He trained for a year before falling ill, having to give up his newfound passion in order to recover. While in recovery, he had to turn to various odd jobs just to survive, and for a while, it seemed that the journey he had only gotten a taste of would never come to fruition.

However, Francis persevered as always, and at the age of 26, he decided to make the pilgrimage from Cameroon to Paris in order to truly pursue professional boxing. As if that journey wasn't difficult enough as is, he experienced more trouble once he reached Europe; he was arrested and jailed for 2 months for illegally crossing the Spanish border. Finally, though, he reached France with no money, no connections, and nowhere to live. He spent his first months in Paris living on the street, until he stumbled upon a local boxing club, where he introduced himself to a local coach named Didier Carmont. Carmont saw something in Francis, and convinced the owners of the gym to allow him to train for free. It was during his time there that Francis was introduced to Fernand Lopez and the MMA Factory, the premier MMA gym in Paris. Lopez convinced Francis to put his boxing dreams on hold and instead pivot to MMA. He gifted him a set of equipment and allowed him entrance to MMA Factory for free, officially beginning his professional fighting career.

Early Career: The Rise in MMA

Ngannou's transition from boxing into mixed martial arts was marked by a learning curve steepened by his late start in the sport. However, his natural power and athleticism saw him through. Francis' early bouts took place in 100% Fight, a regional French promotion. He made his professional debut on November 30, 2013 at 100% Fight: Contenders 20, against Rachid Benzina. Right out of the gate, it was clear that whatever technical curve Francis was facing due to his late start in MMA, he would be able to make up for it through his raw size and strength. His first MMA fight ended in victory as he secured an armbar in the first round.

Francis returned a month later at 100% Fight: Contenders 21 to face Zoumana Cisse, a bout he lost via decision. It wasn't the result he had desired in his follow-up fight, but he had already overcome a mountain of obstacles; and he wasn't about to give an inch. He rallied to win his

next four fights, including three consecutive first-round victories. In mid-2015, he found himself with a more than respectable 5-1 record, but even he couldn't have imagined what would come next; a call from Dana White and an offer to join the UFC.

UFC Ascension: The Predator Emerges

There is perhaps no more competitive group than the heavyweight division in the UFC. Regardless of if a fight is between two top competitors or two unproven rookies, any heavyweight bout in the UFC is apt to end with a knockout in the blink of an eye. Francis Ngannou, after having relatively no time to get his bearings in the ring, found himself up against the cream of the crop of the fighting world. And he absolutely dominated out of the gate.

His first UFC fight took place in December of 2015 at UFC on Fox: dos Anjos vs. Cowboy 2, where he matched up against Luis Henrique. In the second round, Francis slowly wore the Brazilian down before landing a huge left uppercut to the chin, crumbling Henrique to the ground. Francis came out swinging, and won his UFC debut as a result. Fans were immediately stunned at the newcomer. After every big combination, Francis had a menacing way he would stalk toward Henrique; and UFC fans were anxious to see what would come next for the Cameroonian.

What would come next was nothing short of awe-inspiring. Francis went on a 5-fight win streak, with 4 of them being first-round victories. He beat opponents such as Curtis Blaydes, Anthony Hamilton, and, most impressively, Alistair Overeem, who he defeated in a heavyweight title eliminator match at UFC 218 in December of 2017 with one of the most brutal knockout punches in the history of combat sports. In just over 5 years of having zero fighting experience, Francis had gone from an unknown to competing for the most coveted belt in the world of sport. His opponent would be Stipe Miocic; widely regarded as the greatest UFC heavyweight of all time. He had claimed the belt at UFC 198 after knocking out Fabricio Werdum in the first round, and was on a run of 2 straight successful title defenses. This would be Francis' most difficult task in the octagon to date; and it was a tantalizing matchup.

Unfortunately for Francis, UFC 220 just wasn't his night. Miocic got the better of him in all aspects of the fight, and after 5 rounds he was awarded the decision victory, setting a new record for consecutive UFC heavyweight title defenses. Ngannou was extremely disappointed in

his performance after being so close to his ultimate goal, but just like every other time he faced adversity in his life, he looked to bounce back in a big way.

That bounce back would not come, at least not right away. Francis' next fight was scheduled for UFC 226 in July of 2018, where he would face another behemoth heavyweight in Derrick Lewis as the co-main event for Miocic's next title defense against Daniel Cormier. This bout has been universally called Ngannou's worst performance, as the fight as a whole was extremely slow and hard to focus on. At the end of the third round, the crowd was booing heavily, and Lewis was crowned the victor in a unanimous decision. Francis was visibly dejected, and for the first time since he joined the world's largest MMA promotion, fans wondered if maybe he wasn't who they thought he could have been.

They were wrong.

Up next for Francis was a rematch against Curtis Blaydes in November of 2018 at UFC Fight Night: Blaydes vs. Ngannou 2. Francis had won via a TKO in the second round of their first bout, but this time, he wasn't going to take that long to dispose of Blaydes. Just 45 seconds into the first round, Ngannous landed a massive overhand right to the left temple of Blaydes, shutting the lights off instantaneously. Francis was back in the win column, and his quick and impressive victory earned him a Performance of the Night bonus to boot.

Less than three months later at UFC on ESPN: Ngannou vs. Velasquez, Francis stepped back into the octagon looking to start a new streak on his way to another title fight. This time, he faced off against UFC veteran Cain Velasquez, a former UFC heavyweight champion who was returning to the octagon for the first time in nearly 3 years. It was a great fight to make for the UFC, pitting one of their old guard against the relatively fresh-faced Ngannou. Fans expected dynamite; but no one could have guessed what was to come. Ngannou needed only 45 seconds to dispose of Blaydes. He needed only 26 to knock out Velasquez with a vicious left hook. Velasquez also reinjured a nagging knee issue in the process, quickly wrapping up the bout and launching Francis right back into title fight contention.

Ngannou went on to win his next two fights easily as well, first against another UFC veteran in Junior dos Santos at UFC on ESPN: Ngannou vs. dos Santos and then against Jairzinho Rozenstruik at UFC 249. Both fights ended in first round knockouts for Francis, and both fights combined took just over a minute and a half of fight time. He was on a roll, and the world knew

precisely what Dana White knew - the time had come for Francis to try again to become the UFC heavyweight champion.

Championship Glory

He would get his chance at the ultimate revenge at UFC 260 in March of 2021 against Stipe Miocic. Taking place during the global pandemic, the bout took place at the UFC Apex in a smaller-than-normal octagon; meaning neither man would have anywhere to run. Fans knew what both fighters likely did; unlike their previous meeting, someone's lights would be turned off. Francis landed three notable shots during the fight. First, an overhand right that stunned Miocic just over a minute into the first round. Then, a sneaky head kick that landed flush just a minute later. Miocic was able to withstand both of those, but with just over 4 minutes left in the second round, Ngannou landed a flush left cross that buckled the champion to the floor. Francis saw his opportunity, and he took it; landing some clinch shots before releasing and landing another left cross that knocked Miocic out cold. The dream had been achieved - Francis Ngannou had come from nothing to become the UFC's heavyweight champion.

After nearly a year off, Ngannou's next fight and first title defense was announced to take place at UFC 270 in January 2022 against Frenchman Ciryl Gane. This is notable, as Gane also gained his MMA training at MMA Factory in Paris, linking the two and creating a must-see matchup. A few weeks prior to the highly-anticipated fight, Francis sustained an injury to his knee, leading to speculation that the fight would have to be postponed. This also came at a time when Francis was openly upset with his and other fighters' pay in the UFC, and was in a war of words with UFC brass, leading to a murky future between Ngannou and the UFC. Regardless, Francis did not back out, and although he showed up to the octagon sporting two knee sleeves, he was ready to defend the title he had spent his life working for. And defend it he did. Gane is an extremely unique fighter. As heavyweight, he has extremely crafty movement and striking, and some predicted this would give Francis a lot of trouble. They were wrong, however, as Ngannou overwhelmed Gane over the course of all five rounds, leading to a unanimous decision victory and his first successful UFC title defense.

Fans and pundits foresaw a lengthy run for Ngannou as the UFC's heavyweight champion, but Francis had other ideas. Just a year later, after continuing to dispute with the UFC over fighters' pay and lack of insurance options, he departed, vacating his belt and shocking the sports world.

A New Challenge

Obviously, Francis wasn't done with fighting. Shortly after his very-public break with the UFC, he began to speak openly about his desire to transition to heavyweight boxing, a return to his first true passion and dream. In May of 2023, he signed a contract with the Professional Fighters League as a part of their new 'Super Fight' division, allowing Francis to compete in both PFL MMA bouts as well as other promotions, such as boxing matches.

Soon after, Francis targeted a massive crossover fight, similar to that of Floyd Mayweather and Conor McGregor, and it was announced that he would face off against undefeated WBC heavyweight champion boxer Tyson Fury in what was billed as the 'Battle of the Baddest', and was set to take place in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on October 28, 2023. He began training with boxing legend Mike Tyson in order to prepare for the fight, and while he was openly confident, most boxing fans weren't. Fury is one of the heavyweight GOATs, after all; and he's disposed of some of the most terrifying boxers of his generation. With no professional boxing experience, it seemed that Ngannou would be made quick work of.

That isn't how it played out, however. Although Fury was awarded the victory via split decision, Ngannou was the one who stole the show. He was visibly the more polished man in the ring, and scored the lone knockdown of the fight in the third round. Round by round viewers could visibly see Fury become increasingly frustrated, and Francis increasingly confident; even openly mocking the undefeated boxer numerous times. The final decision has been heavily scrutinized, with pundits overwhelmingly believing Francis could and even should have won. He was outstruck overall by Fury 71 to 59, but he landed more power shots at a count of 37 to 32.

It was a frustrating reality to face for Francis, but at the end of the fight, the world of boxing, including Fury, had no choice but to acknowledge they were wrong about the Cameroonian. He stepped into another unfamiliar territory and very nearly shook the world again.

Conclusion: From Nothing to Everything

What comes next for Francis Ngannou is really not important at this point. He'll either book another massive crossover boxing match, or he'll return to his MMA roots in the PFL. What does matter is his story; the ultimate narrative of hope and determination. From the sand mines of Cameroon to the pinnacle of the UFC and the grand stage of a crossover fight with Tyson Fury,

Ngannou has transcended the role of a fighter to become an embodiment of always striving to achieve your goals.

His story continues to unfold, and whether he returns to defend his MMA title or continues to blur the lines between combat sports, one thing is certain: Francis Ngannou's legacy is not solely defined by titles or victories but by the indomitable spirit of a man who dared to dream beyond the confines of his circumstances. If Francis is in a fight, you better not bet against him.