Benoit Saint Denis: The Battle-Tested God of War

Introduction

This is Benoit Saint Denis, the former French Army Paratrooper who transitioned from a life dedicated to military service to a life dedicated to another kind of combat; one within the confines of the UFC octagon. From the battlefields of Mali to competing at the ultimate echelon of combat sports, the ‘God of War’ has built a reputation of a true warrior, and someone to be highly feared as an opponent.

He’s already produced some impressive victories in the UFC, and only seems to be getting better in terms of his fight acumen and his overall technique. Today, we’re discussing the journey of Benoit Saint Denis; the battle-tested ‘God of War’ who looks to be a real force up and coming force within the lightweight division. Let’s get into it.

Early Life and Upbringing

Saint Denis was born in December of 1995 in Nimes, France. His mother was a teacher, and his father was a French Army Officer as well as a devoted judo fighter with notable skills. Because of this, Benoit found an early love for combat as well as sports in general; and he began practicing judo before he turned 10 years old. By 16, he had earned his black belt, as well as competing in soccer and rugby. It was evident to everyone around him that he had found a love for combat sports; but rather than immediately pursuing a career in MMA, Saint Denis decided to instead enlist in the French Army, serving his country for five years as a member of the 1st Marine Infantry Paratroopers Regiment.

During his military service, Saint Denis saw action in Mali as well as across West Africa during the Mali War defending against various terrorist groups in the region. In 2017, he was awarded

two prestigious French service awards; the Medal of the Nation's Gratitude and the Combatant's Cross. Also in 2017, he began to train in kickboxing and Brazilian jiu-jitsu, resparking his love for combat sports. During breaks from war, Benoit began to compete in BJJ and won the 2019 France National Championships in both the no-gi and gi divisions. A year later, he craved a more thrilling challenge - and he began to train in true MMA and entered himself into a local amateur tournament; which he won.

With is military service coming to an end, it was clear to Saint Denis that his next step in life was to return to his love for combat, and after renowned French MMA coach Daniel Woirin took notice of the Frenchman, and a year later when he ended his contract with the military, Benoit went all in on achieving his ultimate goal - making it to the UFC.

He set a personal goal for himself of achieving that task in no more than two years; as he only had enough savings to support his journey for that amount of time. He got to work nearly immediately and joined the Bulgarian Top Team ready to begin his trek to the UFC.

Early MMA Career

Beginning in various local promotions, Saint Denis saw very little early competition. His MMA debut occurred in February 2019 in the Lions Fighting Championship of Switzerland against Marc Domont, who he was able to submit via a guillotine choke midway through the first round.

Benoit followed that up with three additional submission wins, two of which also occurred in the very first round. It was the ideal start to his MMA career, and after impressing the local promotions throughout Switzerland, Belgium, and his native France, Saint Denis signed with Brave Combat Federation, the largest MMA promotion in Bahrain.

After an accidental clash of heads led to a draw in his Brave CF debut in November of 2019, Benoit went on to cruise through his next four bouts, all 1st or 2nd round victories. He had finally done enough, and shortly after his August 2021 submission of Arkaitz Ramos Gudari, Saint Denis signed to the UFC.

UFC Arrival

Saint Denis made his UFC debut in October of 2021 on the undercard at UFC 267. His opponent was Elizeu Zaleski dos Santos; a 12-year veteran who at the time had some impressive victories on his record; including eventual Middleweight champion Sean Strickland. Those who were familiar with what Saint Denis brought to the table were extremely excited for the matchup, and for a chance to see what the Frenchman could bring to the UFC. Unfortunately for Benoit, his debut in the UFC didn't go quite as he would have hoped. While Saint Denis eventually lost the fight in a unanimous decision, it should have been called in the 2nd round. In a highly viral moment, the referee refused on multiple occasions to stop the fight when Benoit appeared to be completely out on his feet. It was so bad that the UFC leadership actually removed the ref from the other fights he was scheduled to work that night, and he's never again been seen refereeing a UFC bout. He was off to a rough start, but Benoit refused to give up hope.

After debuting in the UFC at welterweight, Saint Denis decided to cut down to compete in the lightweight division. His first opportunity to turn the ship around came in June of 2022 against Niklas Stolze. From the opening moments, it was clear that Benoit had put his previous loss behind him. He sprung ahead right away, securing a takedown within the first 30 seconds of the first round. Throughout the round, he dominated Stolze on the feet, in the clinch, and on the ground - nearly scoring a finish as the round came to a close. The second round was nearly a carbon copy of the first - except for at the 3:30 mark, when Saint Denis secured a victory via rear naked choke. The Frenchman was back in the win column, and fans knew that if this was the fighter that continued to show up on fight night, Benoit's first bout in the UFC would be an anomaly, rather than a normality.

Benoit's Climb

His next two fights all but confirmed that notion. First, in July of 2022, Saint Denis defeated Gabriel Miranda in an impressive and dominating victory in his homeland of France that ended with a TKO in the 2nd round. He was awarded a Performance of the Night bonus, and his overall MMA record was improved to 10-1-(1). Next, in a July 2023 bout against Ismael Bonfim, as another lopsided first round ticked to 0:00, Benoit secured a submission via neck crank to improve his win streak to 3, and was rewarded with a new contract from the UFC.

Up next for Saint Denis was a return to Paris, France for a matchup against Thiago Moises; easily the most skilled competitor he had faced to that point. Moises, a skilled BJJ fighter, came into the fight with a 17-6 record that included wins over Michael Johnson, Bobby Green, and a competitive loss to the eventual champion, Islam Makhachev. It was bound to be an extremely competitive fight, although the outcome wasn't quite so. Outside of a half-hearted armbar attempt toward the end of the first round by Moises, Saint Denis dominated the fight again; culminating in a 2nd round TKO and a Fight of the Night bonus. Benoit was improving in each and every fight; and fans knew what he did - he was closing in on top-15 status.

One final fight stood in his way of being ranked - and it would take place on the main card at UFC 295 in November of 2023. His opponent, Matt Frevola, was another BJJ fighter, ranked #14, who entered the contest sporting an 11-3-1 record with recent wins over Ottman Azaitar and Drew Dober. For Benoit, it was not only his chance to jump into title discussions, it was also his first chance to appear on the main card of a pay-per-view fight - and the God of War was determined to make the most of the opportunity. As the fight started, it was clearly visible that Saint Denis was the larger and more intimidating fighter. After landing a few early body kicks, Benoit took Frevola to the ground after he slipped attempting to block a leg kick. Frevola was able to get back to his feet after a minute, but found himself backed against the cage. As he attempted to shuffle out of the corner, Saint Denis landed one of the cleanest, most brutal head kicks in the history of the UFC, knocking Frevola out cold. Saint Denis hadn't just beaten a ranked fighter for the first time in his career, he had made a statement and created a viral moment that would only skyrocket his brand.

Shortly after the fight, Benoit leapt Frevola to a number 11 ranking. In what is arguably the most competitive division in the UFC, the Frenchman had gone from relatively unknown to close to the top 10 in less than 2 years - a true accomplishment and callback to his roots as a soldier of war; unwilling to succumb to any obstacle.

Conclusion

The eventual outcome of Benoit Saint Denis' UFC career is anyone's guess - but based on his recent form, the future looks extremely bright. Now that he has established himself firmly in the top 15, it only makes sense that his next matchup is against someone also well-established. While no official announcement has been made, pitting him against someone like Rafeal Fiziev

off of back to back losses or Mateusz Gamrot if Rafael Dos Anjos pulls out of their UFC 299 bout makes perfect sense. Regardless of whether he is eventually crowned the UFC's lightweight champion, between dominating victories inside the octagon to battles in true war; there is no denying Benoit Saint Denis has truly lived up to the moniker God of War.