

# King of the Jungle, King of the Ring

by Happy Kreter - Photo by Sean Lande



**I**t sounds like a Hollywood cliché, but Bibiano Fernandes' rise to fame is a true rags-to-riches story. He went from the Amazon jungle to the Yokohama Arena in Japan, where he won DREAM 11: Featherweight Grand Prix 2009 to become the organization's first world featherweight champ. But the most remarkable thing about Fernandes' journey is his humility.

In his thick Portuguese accent, he explains: "I enjoy every moment of my life. You have a tough moment, make you go a different step for your life, for you to learn something. Because later you going to need everything."

Tough moments are not only something the 30-year-old has drawn inspiration from; they're also something he's familiar with. For his first eight years, he enjoyed an essentially Western life in northern Brazil's largest city, Manaus. Then his mother died of cancer, and when he was 9, he was sent by

his father to stay with his mother's Indian relatives in the Amazon jungle.

"I was very interested," Fernandes says. "Many animals, birds. It's very peaceful. There, everybody try to help everybody. When my mother die, I realize I'm not alone."

He lived in the jungle for the next four years, eating only what he and his family acquired by hunting, fishing and gathering. There were no schools, no doctors and no toilet paper. "I have malaria four times," he says. "One day I so sick, I almost die. But I keep thinking I have to pass this test."

The boy lay on the jungle floor, clutching a blanket and shivering. "I thinking I gonna die this time because there no doctor, no nothing there," he says. "You die, you die—that's it. People put you in the ground. To get to the city, it take you three or four days. Better to die."

Suddenly, an old man appeared in front of him. The man gave him a mor-

sel to eat and told him to cover himself with his blanket. He followed the instructions and started to feel extremely hot. Then his uncontrollable shaking dissipated, and his health slowly returned.

"I never saw this man again," Fernandes says. "I don't know if this true or only imagination because I was so freezing. I was only a little boy."

The appearance of the apparition was just one incident that shaped his spiritual philosophy, which began to form the day he arrived in the jungle. "When I get there, I think I'm here for a reason. I'm here for evolve. When this time finish, time for me to find that different step."

That step came at age 12, when he journeyed back to the city and reunited with his father. The boy returned to school, but he also worked, selling frozen fruit in city parks. Eventually, conflicts with his stepmother led his father to become violent, so Fernandes