

“Inside the Octagon Is Much Better”: A UFC Champion Says Business Is Harder Than Fighting

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UFC lightweight champion Khabib “The Eagle” Nurmagomedov transitioned to the other side of the fight business in 2020, starting the EagleFC MMA league. We caught up with him recently to talk about how he’s handling retirement, enduring the Dana White silent treatment, and what it’s like running his own MMA league.

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Life after the octagon

Retirement has not come easy to Nurmagomedov, who left the sport undefeated. “Retirement has changed me,” he says. “I trained every day for four to five hours per day. The hardest part is that I feel good when I train.”

As an entrepreneur tasked with building up EagleFC against the imposing UFC, Nurmagomedov has surprised everyone, including himself, with his business acumen. “I didn’t know if I could be good at business. I thought I was just an athlete, just a fighter,” says Nurmagomedov.

The Eagle finds his wings

But Khabib and EagleFC have experienced success. “God gave me this good energy, and with the relationships I have, I found I can secure good deals. I found that I am good at connecting with people since my retirement.”

The Hall of Famer has been described as both terrifying and brilliant inside the octagon. But Khabib isn't concerned about his image. “Honestly, I never think about how I want people to view me as an entrepreneur. I just focus on myself. That's it.”

His schedule as a business owner hasn't let up in the slightest since his training regimen has turned from sweating to crunching marketing and promotional opportunities. “I am scheduled so far in advance. My brain is constantly going, and even in my sleep, I am thinking about business now. Life has changed since I retired two years ago,” says Khabib.

Business is tougher than the octagon

The casual MMA fan might wager that life in the octagon is more difficult than in the boardroom. Khabib doesn't agree. “Inside the octagon is much better. The octagon has rules. The business world isn't fair and people break the rules all the time. If you break the rules in the octagon, you lose.”

While Khabib might have strong opinions forming in the business world, he is quick to underscore that the ‘American Dream’ for immigrants is alive and well. “When I first heard of the [concept] American Dream, I didn't understand what it meant. I arrived in this country in 2000, worked incredibly hard, training every day, and now I am a Hall of Famer. The ‘American Dream’ came true for me and my family.”

Khabib continued, "If they [immigrants] come from Russia, Mexico, or Africa, it really doesn't matter. They come to this country to work and work hard. America is a wonderful platform for those who want to work."

Dana White: A competitor and a mentor

Khabib grew up in the mountainous village of Sildi, in the Republic of Dagestan. YouTube videos showcase the boy-eagle wrestling bears. Those early experiences served him well inside the octagon. Dana White once called him the greatest MMA fighter of all time. But, since Khabib's retirement, White has been less than responsive to his correspondence, leaving Khabib to wonder if the silent treatment is intentional. "I think he is playing games with me, but I must learn from him," says Nurmagomedov. "Dana White is the greatest promoter of all time – nobody is even close."

White might also be a little threatened by EagleFC's success.

EagleFC commands over 1 million viewers per even) through their free app, FLXCast.

But Nurmagomedov is far from delusional when talking about the uphill climb to build a league in the face of the current 'champion.' "I believe we [EagleFC] need five to seven years to build up our brand. Then we can discuss success. We're just beginning, and this is a business. We must create content that matters to the fans of MMA."

His advice to entrepreneurs

Despite his success both inside and outside the octagon, Khabib never assumes victory. "Whenever I prepared for a fight," he says. "I always thought my opponent could beat me, especially if I wasn't training as hard as I knew I could," he says.

Khabib says a rigid mindset is essential. "Hard work is not

about someone's DNA. Hard work is about your mental makeup. There are no 50/50 days. You are either fully on board, or you are not. There is no in between."

No place like home

Khabib owns a significant amount of land in his hometown. As business opportunities continue to expand for Nurmagomedov and EagleFC, he admits to daydreaming about his land, his vegetable business, and when he will return home next. "A lot of people around the world know who I am. But, inside, I am still the same guy, the guy from the village," he says. "It will take time for me to fully understand and appreciate how well-known I am."

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