

# THE FLYWEIGHT FORTUNE

After unleashing the flyweight division in March, Dana White will be strapping 10 pounds of gold around the waist of either Joseph Benavidez or Demetrious Johnson at UFC 152 on September 22 in Toronto, Ontario. The heir to the UFC's inaugural flyweight throne is apparent to both fighters, but you'll have to forgive them if they have conflicting accounts.

BY DANNY ACOSTA // PHOTOS BY PAUL THATCHER

Joseph Benavidez looks ready for picture day at school. He sits inside Crepeville, a family-owned restaurant in downtown Sacramento, a few blocks from the Ultimate Fitness gym he calls home, sporting his trademark Birkenstocks and a subdued black v-neck. His thick black hair is naturally brushed to the right. Chocolate milk isn't that bad for a post-workout drink, he insists, completing his youthful presence, which distracts from the pink and red scrapes that decorate his eyebrows and neck—signs of a prizefighter in training.

"I don't work as hard as I do to be on the undercard or the co-main event," he says of his UFC 152 main event title tilt versus Johnson at the Air Canada Centre in Toronto. "I want to be the best. I want to be in the spotlight and showcase my skills to everyone."

The UFC tagging Benavidez vs. Johnson as a headliner assures him the organization is fully behind the weight class that he believes he is meant to reign over. He is pleased to share this opportunity with Johnson, a fighter he considers a friend (albeit, he doesn't really have any enemies). Johnson went three rounds against Ian McCall on two separate occasions to set up the match with Benavidez, who secured his spot in the finals by dispatching of Yasuhiro Urushitani 11 seconds into the second round. More important than being the champion is being a pioneer—an opportunity that goes hand-in-hand on Sept. 22 with the UFC's first 125-pound belt up for grabs.

"How can I not be a pioneer being the first one?" says Benavidez. "Setting a standard for all the other 125-pound fighters to ever come, I'll always be first on that list when I'm the champion."

Benavidez recognizes Johnson is a winner. The adjustments "Mighty Mouse" made after a Fight of the Night draw in March 2012 with Ian McCall, which allowed him to emerge victorious in a rematch three months later, demonstrated marked improvement in strategy and execution. Going through the weight cut twice is also an advantage, and so is having 30 minutes of cage time at flyweight versus Benavidez's five minutes and 11 seconds. Speed kills and Johnson has it. While Benavidez respects the underdog, he doesn't believe he's in any significant danger. In Benavidez's mind, no one can finish him (no one has—his two career defeats were to UFC Bantamweight Champion Dominick Cruz via decision). Johnson is more of a numbers fighter than a threat. He doesn't put much stock in their performances against mutual opponent Cruz, even though he feels he did better. That was a different weight class. At 125 pounds, the playing field is even, and since there is an opportunity to make history, Benavidez relishes the challenges ahead.



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In preparation for his title fight against Joseph Benavidez, Demetrious Johnson is caught up in cleaning his house. Vacuum. Fertilize the lawn. Interview break to discuss the possibility that a former recycling plant worker could become the first champion in the UFC's newest weight class.

"I was a guy just working at a warehouse full time," Johnson says. "I was never a professional fighter. One thing led to another, and I



just kept fighting and winning. As of right now, I'm a full-time fighter. It hasn't even been a full year yet since I've been training full-time under Matt Hume."

The five-year, 17-fight veteran left behind his day job shortly before losing to Cruz in October 2011. After a scoring error declared him the winner versus Ian McCall—only to be reversed as a rightful draw—a rematch came about. Johnson's perseverance and fight-to-fight improvement against McCall mentally prepared him for Benavidez.

"Joe has submitted black belts. He's beaten a lot of big-name guys at 135 pounds. He's known as one of the best guys in the world. I'm looking to test my skills against him and get that belt," says Johnson, revealing that BJJ ace and DREAM two-division champ Bibiano Fernandes has been helping him prepare for Benavidez's ground work. "I'm not going to worry too much about what he's bringing to the table. I'm going to bring it, and I'm the best in the world."

Standing out is not Johnson's specialty. Fighting is. So if being a champion gets him noticed, he'll wear both his husband and mixed martial artist jobs as badges of honor. Days like these—split between working at home and at the gym—put perspective on his quest for gold.

"You get the belt—you're seen as the best in the world," he says. "Regardless, I'm going to go out there and fight my heart out, train my butt off in the gym so I can come back and be the flyweight champion. If I don't succeed that night, I'm going to go back to the gym and keep on training and work my way back up the ladder. That was my plan at 135 pounds as well. I'm never going to stop. I'm going to get that belt."

To be the first champion at 125-pound positions Johnson as a key figure in the UFC's growth process. The little guys having the same stage as the heavyweights is a significant development in the sport, from Zuffa promoting the WEC between 2007–2010 to kick-starting the featherweight and bantamweight divisions, to 2012's flyweight tournament fulfilling WEC's promise of lower-weight stars in the Octagon.

"If God said, 'Demetrious, you go as hard as you want because you get three bodies,' I wouldn't care, but since I only have one body, this body has to run 120 percent on September 22," says Johnson. "One night, I have to be good for 25 minutes. One night, I have to prepare my mind to go hard as hell in the gym, but you have to make sure you don't blow anything out."

Johnson, like Benavidez, remembers the lessons that he learned fighting for the 135-pound title, and Mighty Mouse is confident that his hand will be raised after this title tilt.

"I have so much knowledge that I gained from Matt Hume, and I fought guys I shouldn't even win against," he says. "There's no, 'I'm the number two fighter in the world.' I believe I'm the best flyweight in the world. I'm going to go to Toronto to prove it." 📍