

warrior's journey with Korey Gibson



FULL CONTACT

Hard Knockout Life

Before a capacity crowd at Warriors Realm 11 on 9 November, undefeated Brisbane-based fighter, Korey Gibson (4-0), defeated the experienced Alex Prates to claim the Warriors Realm Australian Lightweight title. Here, Gibson tells a little of the long story about the hard road to becoming an MMA champion.

On the night he won his title, Gibson, who trains with the highly successful Integrated Martial Arts (IMA) team under coach Danny Higgins and Manager Tony Green, treated roaring fans to an impressive display of combat athleticism. Impressive, considering that just a week earlier he was struggling with a severely damaged ankle. Yet he trained, in any way he could, while his coach Danny Higgins put the rest of the team through its paces.

"It's just a war wound," Tony Green said casually of the injury. This may have raised the eyebrow of an outsider looking in, but not to those who know the Lightweight Champion's background, who, having started life in poverty, rose to the top of his chosen professions while enduring a litany of injuries, including a long battle against cancer. Here, Gibson tells his story in his own words:

"Well, Mum was pregnant with me at 17, and had me at 18. Dad was 21. He was a fisherman in Kaikoura (NZ), and Mum didn't work; she looked after her younger brothers and took care of the house.

My first home was my Grandfather's in Aranui, one of the roughest neighbourhoods in New Zealand — lots of gangs, etc. — but when you don't know any different, you don't know any different, ay? We moved to Kaikoura until I was two — I obviously can't remember

much, but basically we were broke and Dad had no work either.

Dad put Mum and myself on a train to the North Island, because he had work in the fisheries in Taranaki. So we went, and he rode his motorbike, freezing!

We lived with my Nana for a little while before moving into the 'Bronx' at Veronica Place, the poorest street in Bell Block. I loved it there, we had the best time! Got a few hidings from the neighbours and gave a few too, but I was very cheeky so I probably deserved it, ay? Those boys became my best friends, and I'm now the Godfather of one of their daughters and was the best man at the same guy's wedding — makes me very proud.

I always go to this house whenever I go home. Some of my favourite memories from it are Dad bringing home a filthy old car that he brought, and all the kids from the street came around to clean it, getting caught picking my nose on my bike — Dad snuck up behind me and clipped me around the ears and took my bike off me for a week; and taking the handbrake off in the car and rolling it back down the shops hill and into a mini; and my big dog spewing up my rugby sock!

During this time, Dad was in and out of work and Mum was working part-time at fast food stores. Times were tough and they fought about money lots, but it all worked out.

I remember playing rugby and switching to league because you



Gibson plants one on Prates at Warriors Realm 11

weren't allowed to tackle any more, just touch on the hips. I hated it, even though I would get 10 tries a game — I wanted to tackle!

So I jumped into the Bell Block Marist Dragons under-14 league team when I was only 10 — little did we know that in five years I would be playing with the men in the seniors.

Mum and Dad managed to get a loan for our first house, so we moved around the corner to

a nicer street, Lantana Avenue. It was so exciting. I was eight and [brother] Rick was six. We loved it — we had our own rooms! We built running ramps out of wood for our feet and our bikes... It only seems like yesterday.

While we were here, Dad had no job for two years. NZ's unemployment rate was really high and Mum was a cook at the local Cobb and Co, so we didn't have any money. We ate com



Weathering Prates' storm at WR 11



Gibson turns the tables on Prates

toasted sandwiches and pig-feet nearly every night for two years, and loved it! Rick hates pig feet now though – I still love them.

We walked to our local primary school every day, then to the bus when it came high school time.

After a few years, Dad got jobs where he had to go away for weeks at a time on the oil rigs. He'd say, "Boy, you're the man of the house now!" I loved it – I would chop the wood, feed the dogs, etc. Once, there was a massive cyclone that came in from the sea, which was a kilometre down the road. It knocked over all Dad's orchard – I went out there and tried to tie the trees up. Rick was scared, but I made him stay and got into trouble when Mum found us outside. At age 12, cyclone 'Bola' hit, and me and Freeman (my dog) rode the bike to the park and I still ran my 5km around the fields (I did this every day growing up, rain hail or shine). It was bucketing down and the winds were howling so much you could hardly run! Mum was mad; Dad said "Good boy, son" and dried me with a towel.

We had a pretty tough upbringing but I wouldn't change anything about it... maybe the housework. Each day, Mum and Dad left for work at the local steel factory at 5.45am and got home at 6.15pm. Rick and I would wake up, make their bed and ours, do the washing, hang it out, clean the kitchen and house, make our lunch (jam sandwiches), have a wash and get ready for school. Sometimes we had to take our training gear for league practise. After school, we would Hoover the floor, chop and get the wood in, light the fire, walk the dogs and start tea for Mum and Dad. We looked after ourselves as youngsters.

I made every rep' team for league and touch-footy growing up, including a scholarship with the Illawarra Steelers in Sydney in 1995 (my first time out of NZ), and the NZ team at high school. My proudest day was captaining my country in 1996. It's tough going from crying during the national anthem to straight into a haka! I blew the Aussies off the field and ran all over Ben Ikin, who had already played State of Origin and was 30kgs heavier than me! The whole town was proud of me. I was 17 years old and missed a lot of high school because I was playing in the National League competition now – the biggest in NZ.

From here I was signed by the Warriors and moved out of home at age 17. This was the saddest day of my life, leaving my family, my bro's

mostly. I used to take my calculator shopping with me so I knew I had enough money – geek!

My car broke down every day and I had to park it on hills so I could push-start it every time using the 'foot out the door' technique, because the alternator never worked. Looking back, it's very funny. At the time it was embarrassing and frustrating. This went on for about six months before I got my 1977 Corolla for \$900. It looked ugly with its seven different colours, but went really well. I was happy!

I was playing good rugby league, and was the fittest man at the Auckland Warriors from under-17's right through to first grade. They wanted me to repeat all the tests because they thought my results were unbelievable. I thought I was

steel factory. I was okay, but the continual check-ups alone were not nice. I hated drinking the dye!

Anyway, after nine years of check-ups and a couple of scares along the way, I was given the all-clear. Sitting in the hospital (RBH) month after month by myself was scary at times, but it strengthened me beyond belief. I now feel that it helped me to view my life and people in a different way than most: be natural, be honest, laugh and make sure you fill your time up with people you love being around, no matter what anyone else thinks.

During those nine years I was contracted to play league in England. I went and had a great time, trained hard and enjoyed the professional lifestyle, but I missed NZ so much.

After England I had bad back problems, as previously I suffered three spinal fractures and had three epidural nerve blocks. This was annoying. I gained weight and could hardly run. I'd had 16 weeks off with a badly torn quadricep, and things weren't looking good. My body had had enough. I had now broken two ankles (one more to come) and popped my shoulders three times, done rib cartilage and bruised my sternum, yet I continued to get up and fight again.

I almost gave up league at this stage, but instead signed with South Brisbane Magpies. It was the worst two years of league ever! Not only did we continue to lose, but I missed playing with my boys, my real mates, my brothers. You can give me all the money in the world but I'd rather play for nothing and enjoy it with my mates. That's what it's all about, and at the end of the day, it's only a game.

"Cyclone 'Bola' hit, and me and my dog rode the bike to the park and I still ran my 5km around the fields. I did this every day growing up."

and my best mate Freeman.

So I got put into a hostel in Auckland with all these rules. I hated it and got expelled from school, so I went and worked as a labourer for \$8 an hour. I hated it so much but had no choice – up at 5am, slogging your guts out until 4pm, when I had to go to training. Then home, eat, sleep, wake up and do it all again. I also moved into a flat by myself. No money, didn't know many people – my pay just covered my expenses each week. I lived on rice, bread and pig's head

going to be the next best thing. I thought I was unbeatable, until I came home one day after a league game and found a lump. This was scary; 19 years old, living by myself in a massive city with no money and I've just been diagnosed with cancer. I knew then I wasn't unbeatable, but I also knew that I was going to beat it. The saddest thing was telling my Mum over the phone. They got straight in the car and drove five hours to be with me. They stayed until after the surgery, but had to get back to work in the



Gibson checks a kick from Prates



The Integrated team (right of Gibson: Adrian Pang and Tony Green)

But if I'd not come to Australia, I would have missed out on so many opportunities and meeting lots of new, great people. Through all of this, I've come so far. I flew to Brisbane in 1999 with \$50, hoping to become a Rugby League star. The only reason this wasn't meant to be is because I said it wasn't and I no longer enjoyed it. I had no car, no friends, no money, no job, no furniture and had to find a house. I did it all, from washing cars all day and catching trains and buses to

carrying furniture home for miles from garage sales.

All this taught me to be brave, stand up for yourself, be polite, listen to and respect your elders, work smart and use your brains. And stand by your word — without it you have nothing.

After I quit Rugby League in 2001, I decided to give boxing a go. I had two amateur fights and won them both, but my work commitments got too much. Two years later I started training with

Steve Compton just once a week on the pads and a little on the ground — I was terrible on the ground! Slowly my skills got better, so Steve sent me up to Integrated Martial Arts with Danny Higgins. Then talk about having my first MMA fight started. That fight occurred in October 2006.

The IMA team are exactly what I love about a team: we all get on, enjoy each other's company and fight for each other. I love it. Danny Higgins comes up with things every

night at training that leave me thinking, how the hell did he just do that? He's a great leader.

My goal when I entered MMA was to fight for an Australian Title. From here, who knows? We'll just take things as they come... I have plenty of fishing to do back home in NZ and am looking forward to showing my IMA brothers my home.

— Story supplied by Australianmma.com (ed:ed)



JOHN O'NEAL

RICH SKELLS