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By EARL WATT

- Leader & Times

Accompanied by a dinosaur and a prehistoric club over his shoulder when he enters the cage, David "Caveman" Rickels has turned a scruffy beard and a punishing punch into an indelible image that has him ready to compete for a world championship.

The Kansas native has worked his way through the amateur ranks and onto the national stage in the Bellator division of mixed martial arts fighting, and after winning the \$100,000 Challenge, the Caveman (14-1) will face Michael Chandler (11-0) July 31 for the Lightweight Bellator World Championship.

Rickels started his career much the same way many of the local fighters that will participate in the Summer Heat event Saturday started theirs.

"I started off when I was just getting out of high school," Rickels said. "I wrestled a little bit, and I was a big boxing fan. I took those interests and found a gym."

The Derby native was coached by Andy Zerger. Zerger earned his karate black belt from Liberal's David Rine.

Rickels trained for a year before entering the cage, and it wa a punishing time for the championship contender.

"When I started, I didn't know any better and went 100 percent and would get beat up for awhile," he said of those early days in the gym. "They were better than me when I first started."

But Rickels proved that he could take the punishment — and he could dish it out. With his brute strength, and prehistoric facial hair, his trainers and fellow fighters dubbed Rickels "The Caveman."

Rickels used that year of training to make sure he was prepared for his amateur debut, and he reeled off an undefeated run through a series of fights. He would train, fight, win, train for a couple of months, fight, win, and the pattern continued. Rickels went pro, and he continued to rack up the wins.

When an Oklahoma casino was looking for a local draw for a fight, Rickels stepped in, and won.

That win gained the attention of the Bellator promoters who signed him to a contract.

The Caveman has shot out to a 14-1 professional record, and that one loss was a controversial split decision.

Rickels has five wins by decision, six by submission and three by knockout.

"The way it worked for me, I was lucky enough to make a good reputation as a professional and

amateur in Kansas,” Rickels said. “I made a good reputation in the rankings. It’s all online. You get a win, it goes online, and almost all bouts are sanctioned by the Kansas Commission.”

Rickels will be on hand Saturday at the National Guard Armory to meet fans, sign autographs, and watch the fights.

“I am interested in seeing the competition,” he said. “When I was growing up as an amateur, it was a lot less skill, less developed. What I am starting to see is they know all of it — kickboxing, wrestling jujitsu — it’s interesting to see how much the game has changed. Also, Cody Carillo is fighting. I am interested in watching his fight as well.”

While the sport may have evolved, the road to the top is paved with blood and sweat, and there is no shortcut according to The Caveman.

“What I would tell fighters today is to work hard,” he said. “I feel like that is what I did to get where I am. If you think you are working hard, work harder. Be the best you can be in all facets. One of the biggest things is to be patient. Don’t get in a rush. As a fighter you have to take your time and build yourself. Don’t jump into fights you aren’t ready for. Losing can break your drive. Choose your fights carefully.”

The Revolution Cage Warrior Challenge, Summer Heat will begin with youth fights followed by adult amateurs and pro fights at the Liberal national Guard Armory Saturday. Tickets for the event are available at Rine’s American Freestyle Karate for \$20 each, or admission will be \$25 at the door.

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