

h2. *Paul Craig vs. Caio Borralho*

Fight Odds: +450 Craig vs. -550 Borralho

Weight Class: 185lb. (Middleweight)

Paul Craig has split a pair of middleweight bouts since dropping down from the light heavyweight division and he continues to be dealt difficult grappling matchups from the bottom of the deck. Caio Borralho has been flawless to date inside the promotion producing two wins on Contender Series to earn a contract and then rattling off five straight victories in the middleweight division. Borralho is a good risk manager and he strikes as much as necessary (and when appropriate) and looks to secure top position and control rides to tire his opponents and threaten chokes. Brendan Allen showed a clear path for taking Craig to the ground, passing his guard and exploiting him physically. Borralho will have to mind his P's and Q's as Craig is highly motivated, dangerous in all phases, prolific as an underdog, and working particularly hard to improve his striking in the lead up to this contest. That being said, I see Borralho being too youthful, powerful, technical, and meticulous to get caught by Craig. I see Borralho finishing him late in the contest after establishing top position.

Prediction: *Caio Borralho defeats Paul Craig via SUB2/3*

h2. *Michel Pereira vs. Ihor Potieria*

Fight Odds: -600 Pereira vs. +475 Potieria

Weight Class: 185lb. (Middleweight)

Michel Pereira is riding a seven fight win streak into UFC 301, but he still feels like he has a lot to prove inside the octagon. Pereira is known for his flashy moves and his wild style, but he has only produced four finishes in eight UFC victories. Since 2018, he has been knocked out in the first round by Dusko Todorovic, he death gassed in a round against featherweight Tristan Connely and got 10-8'd in Rd. 3, and he got disqualified against Diego Sanchez for an illegal knee. Pereira's two most recent wins were finishes in the middleweight division against short notice Andre Petroski (a win that has aged poorly) via KO1 and an unprepared, unimpressive version of Michal Oleksiejczuk who had no training camp via club and sub in round one. The seven-fight win streak and the two fight finish streak are leading folks to believe Pereira is a super prospect but I think he has poor fight I.Q., he takes unnecessary risks, he is a cardio flake (constantly dropping Rd. 3), and he can be clipped on the chin. Enter Ihor Potieria, a fighter who has come to Rio before and defeated a local hero in veteran "Shogun" Rua. He returns to the scene of the crime to try to continue his winning ways in the middleweight division. Unlike Pereira, Potieria dropped from light heavyweight (205lb.) to middleweight (185lb.) to be bigger

than his opponents. Pereira missed weight at welterweight and was forced to move up to middleweight. I expect Potieria to be the bigger man and Pereira has never fought an opponent taller than him in the UFC. Give me Potieria to make this an honest fight and spring the upset.

Prediction: *Ihor Potieiria defeats Michel Pereira via KO2/3*

h2. *Anthony Smith vs. Vitor Petrino*

Fight Odds: +425 Smith vs. -575 Petrino

Weight Class: 205lb. (Light Heavyweight)

Anthony “Lionheart” Smith has looked like a diminished version of himself in his recent bouts, so it is hard to know what to expect from him these days. Smith is a former middleweight who found his greatest career success in the historically weak light heavyweight division, dispatching old contenders like Alexander Gustaffson and Volkan Oezdemir to claim a title shot against Jon Jones. Now Smith is fighting to retain relevance after a steep decline that has seen him go 2-3 in his last five fights with his only wins in that stretch against Ryan “Superman” Spann. Smith looked dominant against Spann in September of 2021, but by the time they rematched in August of 2023 the gap was much more narrow. Smith eked out a narrow and somewhat controversial split decision and his eye was swollen shut. Skill for skill, Smith is better than Vitor Petrino in every phase of fighting, so I understand why some folks will be tempted to take the underdog shot. Petrino is very talented and he is an athletic freak with above average physicality for a UFC fighter. Despite being less skilled than most of his opponents, Petrino is able to hulk them to the ground, destroy them with one big power punch, or exhaust them with his physicality. Smith just got finished in a brutal three round affair with Khalil Rountree and he has accumulated more than 50 professional bouts worth of damage. Petrino could detonate on his chin with one punch or press him into the fence for a boring if dominant decision. Petrino is due for a fade in the near future because he can be cracked on the chin, his finishing instincts are poor (let Turklaji and Pedro off the hook), and he has virtually no defense while distance striking.

Prediction: *Vitor Petrino defeats Anthony Smith via KO3/UDEC*

h2. *Jonathan Martinez vs. Jose Aldo*

Fight Odds: -165 Martinez vs. +130 Aldo

Weight Class: 135lb. (Bantamweight)

Jonathan Martinez has been silently climbing the ranks at bantamweight using his lanky frame, his potent kicking attacks, and his solid cardio to push other quality fighters in the division like Said Nurmagomedov (close DEC win) and Adrian Yanez (dominant leg kick TKO) to the brink. This is an interesting matchup in part because Jonathan Martinez emulates some of Jose Aldo's most effective weapons including the multi-level kicks (particularly low kicks) and the variety of knees (intercepting, step-in, jump knees, etc.). Jose Aldo is an all-time great fighter who has pivoted many times in his MMA career to continue finding success and increasing his longevity in the sport. Aldo is a soccer player turned fighter who used to throw more kicks, be more wild, and take more risks. Now he is a patient, skilled striker with the veteran savvy to control the pace and distance of fights, punish opponents with counter hooks to the head and body, and mix in his grappling when appropriate (i.e. "Chito" Vera fight). The "King of Rio" is returning home to his stomping grounds and taking on a solid, talented competitor, but not someone who has proven themselves as much as past Aldo opponents. Aldo's UFC losses are all against UFC champions, title challengers, and number one contenders, three distinctions Martinez has yet to earn. If he defeats Aldo, we will have to acknowledge father time and the ascension of Martinez, but I believe this old dog has one more trick up his sleeve. Give me Aldo to light 'em up in Rio.

Prediction: *Jose Aldo defeats Jonathan Martinez via KO2/3*

h2. *Alexandre Pantoja vs. Steve Erceg*

Fight Odds: -190 Pantoja vs. +160 Erceg

Weight Class: 125lb. (Flyweight)

Alexandre Pantoja is a fantastic fighter who is finally getting his due after breaking through as champion in the Flyweight division. Steve Erceg is as unlikely a title challenger as we have seen in the UFC, not because of a lack of fundamental skills, but instead because he has such limited experience professionally and promotionally. Erceg is three fights deep in his UFC career and just 13 fights deep into his professional journey. Meanwhile, Alexandre Pantoja has racked up almost 3 hours of octagon time across 14 UFC fights since he arrived in the promotion in 2016. Pantoja trains with elite fighters at American Top Team and he is returning home to his birthplace of Rio de Janeiro to defend the belt. Pantoja deserves this opportunity and he has shown a willingness to pour out the jug, sacrifice at the altar of athletic glory, and put his chin (and his broader health) on the line to secure victory. Erceg seems balanced in all skill categories and capable of scrambling out of bad positions, creating damage on the feet, and securing close rounds. In order to win, he will need to sprawl and brawl, keep the fight upright, and look to damage Pantoja by exploiting his poor defense all while avoiding the heavy return fire from Pantoja. Erceg will also need to keep a high pace rate because Pantoja prefers to kill his opponent early or control the pace with his grappling. Erceg has given his back to worse opponents and has not yet been made to pay, but Pantoja is capable of securing the back and

riding out rounds or pursuing the finish. The tight betting line on a virtual unknown in Steve Erceg (to the general betting community) suggests early sharp action was on the dog, but I now feel this line is close to accurate. Pantoja can win because he is heavy handed, highly experienced, an elite back taker, and a durable marauder. Erceg could clip Pantoja on the chin because Pantoja invites risk, exchanges in the pocket, and has been wobbled and gassed out before despite never being finished. Pantoja is 34 years of age so despite being technically better, he is less likely than 28 year old Erceg to be in his physical prime at fight time. I think Pantoja will have just enough left to pour out the jug and turn back one more title challenger, but his run as champion will end soon and Erceg has some tools needed for the job. No matter who wins, I expect a violent, conclusive result given the fighter involved. Both can be cracked on the chin, both are lethal submission threats (Erceg club and sub, Pantoja world class grappling), and both guys have some questions still to answer about their cardio over 5 rounds. My gut tells me these two are going to end up trading heavily in the pocket and someone will go down in a heap.

_Prediction: _ *Either Fighter wins via KO1/2 (Gun to my head Pantoja wins it)*