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[DREAM JOB]

By MICHAEL KANE

MARIO BARTH

Top tattoo artist leaves his mark

You might say Mario Barth has an impressive bodies of work. That's bodies plural, as the renowned tattoo artist has left his mark on many a thigh, back and arm in his three-decade career.

Growing up in Austria, where tattoo shops were illegal, Barth learned his trade in the underground biker scene. After gaining fame through tattoo conventions in the US, he opened a shop in Miami and began building a clientele that includes celebs such as Tommy Lee, Usher and Sylvester Stallone. Barth, 44, now owns three Starlight Tattoo shops in New Jersey and one in Las Vegas, where in April he also opened King Ink at the Mirage — a shop inside a nightclub where partiers can watch the needle work in progress.

Married with a 5-year-old son, the heavily tattooed Barth splits his time between Vegas and his home in New Jersey. We talked with the in-demand inkster to find out why clients will wait up to two years just to be on the receiving end of his needling.

What was the first tattoo you ever drew?

I was 12, and one of my friend's wanted a tattoo. Practically no one had one in Austria. But my father had gotten one in the military and told me how to do it. I drew a skull on the top of his hand with a big pen of India ink and used a needle to push it in one dot at a time.

At 17, I started to become part of the motorcycle scene. By 18, I was tattooing every day.

How did you learn the skill?

I was self-taught. In the mid-'80s, I began traveling around the world to meet tattoo artists and learn. I spent a few weeks as a guest artist at a shop in Orlando. That was the first legal studio I worked at, and I saw how it could be. So I went back to Austria and set out to convince people in government that it

was a safe and legitimate business. I opened Austria's first legal tattoo studio in 1987.

What's the biggest challenge in giving someone a tattoo?

There are a lot of variables. Every person is different, so every skin is different. It takes years of experience to figure out how skin will react. A conventional artist purchases a canvas that is always the same. But our canvas is always changing.

What led you to move to the US?

I came here in 1990 to compete on the convention circuit. I won 16 trophies, and that was a big turning point. After that, I started to get a following. I'd be featured in tattoo magazines. Then I opened a store in South Beach. I was very fortunate that a few celebrities came in, and I became their tattoo artist of choice.

The first was Vanilla Ice. He wanted a sacred heart tattoo. Next was Lenny Kravitz. He was a regular.

Sly Stallone showed off a lot of your work in "The Expendables."

We've done about 80 hours altogether. I've done a skull, tiger, a por-



ARMS DEALER: Barth has inked everyone from Sylvester Stallone to Tommy Lee.

trait of his wife.

How do people react to the pain?

A lot of times it's the guys with the biggest muscles who complain. Women are stronger. They deal with men all their lives, so they can handle getting a tattoo.

What's the biggest drawback?

That I'm booked for two years straight. I can't call in sick. And the

problem for tattoo artists is the lower back is shot from leaning forward.

What's your advice for someone aspiring to be a top tattoo artist?

It doesn't matter what goes on in your life — when you enter that shop and you sit down, you have to be perfect. Because it's permanent. If you're not prepared to do that, reconsider tattooing as a profession.