

MUAY THAI

The Inner Fight

Max Osipov, Loi Kroh Mini-Stadium

It's a sweltering evening. Even the metal, blue-topped water container is sweating.

Upbeat music is grinding away, coupled with the 'click-clacking' of jump ropes being slapped against the concrete floor of an open-aided room topped with a tin roof. Flags representing numerous countries are dangling above a motley clan of athletes.

In slow-motion, some are punching and kicking into the thick Thai air in front of a life-size mirror comprising a section of the left-side wall. Dampened variations of thudding noises can also be heard while tape-mended punch bags are being jabbed by brick-like fists. "1-2...1-2."

Shiny with sweat, a man is pummeling a red and white-striped bag that is part of a 4-piece contraption made of gray-colored metal with a mounting post set in crudely poured concrete. A strip of perspiration as wide as his shin remains after each round-kick.

To my right are two boxing rings with cloth-covered flooring. As trainees trickle in from their daily jogging regimen, two are in one ring – 'stickin' and movin.' There are now four in the other. Two men – one the size of a refrigerator – are sparring intensely, laughing between the punch and kick sequences.



The beauty of Muay Thai is rooted in the individual. "Your natural abilities are different than mine...what is in your head and heart. When I teach, I'm trying to give the basic movements and let them evolve into being their best," based on inherent character. Andy says two Muay Thai boxers training in the same environment will almost always become different athletes, and "true" training camps are based on a family environment that cultivates this.

"You may get in the ring and fight on your own. You don't get there on your own. You need dad to be your manager, and mom to cook your food, tend to your injuries and give you a cuddle when you lose. You need your brothers and sisters to train with. When you go to a fight, you need these people to work your corner and help you. It has to be family."



For Siok Ong from Singapore, this "exclusive sport" involves one-upping her athletic sister. To Siok, Muay Thai is also about staying fit and standing on her own two feet in life. Furthermore, "Muay Thai is humbling because I know I will never be as good as others, and this is half the fun. You are always playing catch-up."

Andy says a fight – for which Siok is "terrified" when first entering the ring – exists on another realm than training. During a fight, "The person in the opposite corner is trained to do the same as you and will come at you as hard as he can."



Post-fight, stitching surgery (without anesthetic) ensues

"I just want to become more skillful, have good health and empower myself. I am lending my body, so they can become better. It's about training. I don't want someone to disrespect what I am doing for them. They get something from fighting with me. I get something from fighting with them."

Andy said most Western Muay Thai boxers share sentiments related to physical training. However, for some Thais, this sport can be a survival mechanism related to social status, or earning money while serving as an alternative to working in the fields.

For Johan Wallstrom from Sweden, Muay Thai is largely about "taking a break" from work and modern society.

"I get to go back to the basics of humanity; raw nature. Muay Thai is what actual fighting is. There are elements of violence, but it's still very arty and beautiful."

"It's also about getting to know your body better, and how it reacts to hard-training, while having an opponent matching where you are at, in the moment. You learn to push yourself harder and harder. Your body is screaming, 'I can't take this much longer!'"

Johan referred to "the hurricane of feelings" a fight brings him – sometimes resulting in utter exhaustion, while lying on his back and laughing amid crazed elation.

Canada's Joel Hollands says some like Muay Thai because they are "adrenaline junkies," or "need to take something off from their bucket list." However, this discipline has helped Joel stay out of trouble. He's aiming at being a part of the professional realm.

"I have had success in Muay Thai, and I want to see how far I can go. I don't want to be on my deathbed saying, 'Could have; would have; should have.'"

Joel cares less about being defeated than following through with his goals. He says competing on a professional level involves first facing many good fighters – an accomplishment rooted in experience, discipline and working hard.

"Either you have it or you don't. Either you really want to be in the ring, or not. And it only takes one mistake (by the opponent) to win the fight."

Cathay Cheng says the Muay Thai community back in Canada is minuscule, especially for women. This is the third time she's trained in Thailand because, "It's the national sport here... the best place to do it."

She says "The fight is the easy part. It's the training that's hard. To do this every day is no easy feat and something to be proud of. You learn to focus on things and not give up just because it's hard."

Attempting to make sense of this, I recall watching Jean-Claude Van Damme or Rocky movies. However, this is no cinema. It's Chiang Mai, Thailand's Lanna Muay Thai Boxing Camp.

Beyond admiring the boxers' tenacity and skills, I'm interested in why they are doing this and what they're getting beyond the mechanics I see. Although receiving semi-welcoming head nods along with some curious scrutiny from these athletes, I feel very much the outsider looking into a closed world I'd like to understand better.

Andy Thomson, along with partner, Khun Busaba Sukanon, has owned and operated this camp for 18 years. He says people, especially foreigners, from all walks of life come for training. Although each has different motivation, a common denominator is, "They all want to fight, even if they don't admit it."

Muay Thai is the stand-up fighting art of choice he says because it is simple and to the point. "No flashy, fancy stuff. The only belt you're ever going to get from fighting Muay Thai is the belt you get from fighting in the ring. And you will get this after you've spent years training for it."

Andy says the optimal Muay Thai fighter combines high levels of fitness, technical ability and "the vision...to be cool-headed, not loose your cool; no fear."



Wai Khru ritual dance



"If you fight in the gym, you will ruin the gym. You cannot learn when someone is beating on you. Training is all about helping each other develop and grow. One thing I wanted to do when I started this gym is give anyone a chance to try this."

One could knit blankets, climb trees or ride bicycles for cultivating personal improvement. However, Constantine Tohme from Canada has chosen Muay Thai. He came to Chiang Mai for tapping into what Thailand and Andy's gym are offering.

Like solving a puzzle, Constantine says this sport is really about fighting oneself. "It's your struggle. What openings (within the opponent's game) do you see?"

He also acknowledges a "bit of status-ism," especially related to tackling physical extremes. "When I first started doing martial arts, I couldn't even touch my toes."

His relentless training, while continually witnessing positive changes in himself, has percolated into other elements of his life. He now understands that whatever he may be experiencing is not the most prominent issue.

"Some experiences are so strong that we see this as our reality," he said. "It's a moment in time that is going to pass. Muay Thai is like moving from a static to a fluid self. You're never stuck and are always evolving."

Andy says most of Thailand's historical written records were destroyed long-ago by the Burmese. Therefore, in-depth, historical info regarding Muay Thai – a "true martial art" once used in the battlefield, that evolved into a sport – remains illusive.

He says modern Muay Thai in its essence harnesses unspoken rules and complicated game-play that if adhered to "can be a very beautiful thing."

"The best Muay Thai fighter is the one who can beat an opponent without causing harm or getting hurt, keeping him away, knocking him off-balance. When he does hit, he does it perfectly, earning the point." Although this is the ideal, "blood and guts" is often most popular among spectators.

For Constantine, Muay Thai is more about becoming a better person than "murdering the other guy."



Post-fight, stitching surgery (without anesthetic) ensues

"It's like studying. Sometimes you don't want to do it, but when you write your exam and do really well, you look back and know that you had that discipline. If you put in the time with Muay Thai, you're already there when stepping into the ring."

Beyond the chivalry shared between fighters, "The goal is to come up on top, right? Because if you don't, the other person will. So, you can't be nice about it," she added with a laugh. "It's a sport, an event."

Andy says that, "Muay Thai is purely up to you. If you want to do this, you do it for your own life, your own fitness, your own health, your own reasons. You don't do it for anyone else."

Max Osipov – tall; lean; not so mean; conditioned like a well-oiled machine – is with his training compadres in a boxing ring area tucked down a narrow street branching off from Chiang Mai's infamous Loi Kroh Road. Establishments offering everything from orange juice to physical companionship are bordering this playground.

Chant-like drumming music is blaring, as two men wrap white tape around Max's wrists and hands. A third is overseeing this process. What is Max thinking about? "Nothing. And I like to keep it this way."

Point well-taken. I bide my time just perching ringside.

The energy is shifting as Max is being slathered with a menthol-like substance. Its vapors are making my lips tingle and eyes water.

Max and his opponent enter the ring – both meditatively completing the wai khru ritual dance, paying respect to Muay Thai teachers.

The match begins. Without hesitating, Max advances smoothly and round-kick strikes the left-side of his rival's ribcage. I witness this released energy spread throughout his opponent's body as he's flicked against the ropes. A look of surprise flashes through his face. Max retreats slightly, allowing his challenger to recompose himself.

Facing little competition, moments into round two Max serves up another pummeling kick - crumpling his contender into defeat. Now standing above the fallen boxer, checking that he's okay, Max then raises his arms in (a slightly disappointed) victory gesture.

With sweat beading and sliding off like water droplets on a waxed vehicle, he poses for a photograph.

Ahh! So this is what it's all about...