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SIAM Sojourn

Six American Kickboxers Find Themselves in the Land of Muay Thai

Story and photos by Terry L. Wilson


A CAPACITY CROWD jeered a group of stunned American fighters at the Chaweng Beach Stadium in Koh Samui, Thailand, as trainer and fight promoter Bob Chaney cursed everyone in sight at the top of his lungs.

A near riot ensued as the red-faced Chaney came within a heartbeat of climbing into the ring and going after a Thai fighter and the referee. By his side was an equally furious Thomas "The Wildman" Denny, a current USA King of the Cage champion.

What began as an adventure of a life-



Thomas "The Wildman" Denny (right) works out with Bob Chaney near a Buddhist temple in Thailand.



time for a handful of novice American *muay Thai* fighters almost ended in a brawl as two opposing forces faced each other, some armed with coke bottles and ready to swing.

To set the stage, let's turn the calendar back a couple of weeks as the Americans board a China Air jet to Thailand. It's not so much a vacation as it is a serious training trip and an opportunity to experience firsthand how things are done in Siam.

The tour is hosted by Chaney, one of the biggest names in the martial arts business. A karate champ in his day, he now runs one of the most successful martial art schools in the United States teaching *taekwondo* and *muay Thai*. Few, if any, Americans have the contacts and connections in Thailand that Chaney does. From the generals that influence the country to the stadium owners and their underworld counterparts, he's rubbed elbows with them all.

I've been on several trips to Thailand with Chaney, during which I personally experienced what it's like to train in a traditional *muay Thai* gym, but my role on this trip is to observe. So I leave my wraps at home and grab my camera instead. Hollywood couldn't have put together a better cast of characters for this outing. It's like the "Dirty Dozen" minus six. Each fighter has a unique personality that eventually blends into the mix, creating a bond in 14 days that will no doubt last a lifetime.

There's Denny, a mixed-martial arts champion that eats, spits and growls testosterone. His type-A personality is at times overwhelming, but for the most part, he's the guy the other fighters look up to. Not surprisingly, he takes on the role of team captain.

Next is Morris Mushabash—never have I met a funnier guy. Born in Jordan, he spent six years in the U.S. Army before becoming a citizen. His humor and good nature are the glue that bonds the group.

Then there's "The Kid," Mason Reynolds, a 20-year-old who's never been on a plane before, let alone out of the country. Wide-eyed and in awe of everything he saw, he's the guy everyone wants to take

under his wing.

Chad Huggins, a 30-something auto mechanic with a handful of smokers to his credit but only a few months of actual *muay Thai* experience, is thoughtful, intelligent and often the voice of reason when the road gets a little rough.

Val Leedy is the strong, silent one of the group. Standing more than 6 feet tall and sporting a muscular frame, he's a man of few words. He reminds me of the kind of character Clint Eastwood would portray, sort of a *muay Thai* version of Dirty Harry. Like Denny, he's a professional martial artist with his own school.

Chaney's Thai wife, Sarinda, is an invaluable asset to the group, not only because she speaks Thai and English, but also because her ability as a *muay Thai* trainer is second to none. Her assistance to the fighters proves invaluable in polishing their technique.

Chaney himself is among the walking wounded, as he had surgery on his arm and is limited to what he can do. However, he hires Hatyai, a well-known fighter from Bangkok, to act as the group's official trainer. Hatyai instantly becomes everyone's friend, in addition to being the sharpening stone on which each fighter can hone his edge.

After a grueling 13-hour flight and a four-hour layover, everyone arrives, dog-tired, in Bangkok, only to be raised from the rack a few hours later for the first of two five-mile runs and two three-hour kickboxing workouts. The gym in Bangkok is a far cry from the ones the crew left behind in the States. There are no mats, only a concrete floor that turns feet into hamburger, along with a couple of weathered and sweat-laden kicking bags hanging from makeshift meat hooks, a handful of homemade weights and a unique device for doing sit-ups.

Once the Americans get over the cosmetics of the gym, they watch in awe as the Thai fighters start training, showing a determination and focus that amaze their Western counterparts.

"Watching those guys train shows me just how lazy Americans really are,"

Denny says. “The Thais have an incredible work ethic. There are no shortcuts to perfection here. In the States, we’ll take a pill or drink a protein shake to make us better, faster and stronger. The Thais don’t have any shortcuts; they just work their butts off. They train seven hours a day at full tilt. Hard work and focus are what they’re all about.”

The Americans look on as a teenager throws kick after powerful kick, bending the pads with incredible force. “That kid is what I was talking about,” Denny says. “He’s 14 years old, and he has more experience in the ring than I do at 35. Look at his focus and determination—he’s a champion, a born winner. You can see it in his eyes. Every kick, every punch is full power. He never lets up.”



Val Leedy (left) and a Thai training partner practice neck wrestling in the water.

the gym, they’re replaced by a fighter that will—which puts them back on the streets. So muay Thai is more than just a sport or even a job to them. That’s why they train so hard.”

From Bangkok, we travel by van for seven hours to a ferry that will carry us to the island of Koh Samui. There, Mushabash, Leedy, Denny, Huggins and Reynolds will find out just how hardcore muay Thai training can be and in the process test not only their mettle but also their heart.

Chaney arranges for the Americans to train in the Chaweng Beach Stadium, where the local fighters work out. “This is just downright nasty,” Leedy quips when he sees the gym.

“What Americans don’t understand is that Thai fighters live in their gyms. The gym gives them a place to sleep, provides their food and, if they don’t produce, if they don’t win and bring money into the gym, they’re replaced by a fighter that will—which puts them back on the streets.”

It soon becomes evident that the five warriors from the United States have entered a realm of mental and physical training that’s a world apart from what they’re used to. Little do they know that this is just the tip of a very nasty iceberg that awaits them in Koh Samui.

Each day, the runs get longer and the workouts more intense as the Americans train in several locations, each offering a different Thai experience. The common denominator is that regardless of age, the Thai fighters are focused and determined. From the tots that are learning the basics of the sport to the veterans that have a long list of matches on their résumé, they’re fighting not for trophies but for a better way of life.

“These fighters live in abject poverty,” Chaney says. “Muay Thai is one of the few ways they have to earn a living. What Americans don’t understand is that Thai fighters live in their gyms. The gym gives them a place to sleep, provides their food and, if they don’t produce, if they don’t win and bring money into

Chad Huggins (left) and Mason Reynolds were among the group of American fighters who traveled to Thailand to train and compete.



“I’ve never seen anything like this in my life,” Mushabash gasps. “It’s like training in a sewer.”

An open sewer line runs the length of the small concrete training area. The bags are worn through like an old pair of ripped jeans, and the smell is nauseating. The only source of light is a beam of sunshine that makes its way through the open blocks of concrete that encloses the workout floor.

It begins to sink in: The Americans are realizing why the Thais train with such determination. This is their home. The only way out is to become a successful fighter, win lots of bouts and get a ticket to the big time in Bangkok.

Because Chaney is good friends with the vice president of the stadium and has ties with the owner, he’s able to arrange a “friendly” match between several of his fighters and a few locals. “We have a gentleman’s agreement that they will match our fighters up with guys of equal ability and that no elbows are to be used,” Chaney says.

When he tells his people a fight has been arranged, they're excited, exuding a bravado that will soon morph into a sense of "What have we gotten ourselves into?"

The day after the matches are set, I see a different look on the face of each American scheduled to fight. They stand in the gym watching their adversaries work out—and they're really pounding the pads.

Reynolds gawks at the guys he and his pals will soon square off with, the reality of it frozen on their faces. It must have been the same look Custer's men had when they saw all those Indians coming over the hill.

From that moment on, the Americans have a new mind-set. Their focus has



Road work plays an important role in the training of a Thai boxer.

Tough Enough

Everyone knows kickboxers in Thailand train hard. You can see it in their eyes and in the way they do battle in the ring. Most outsiders also think the Thais beat each other up on a regular basis to get to that level, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, when they spar, *muay Thai* practitioners in Thailand take great pains not to injure or even bruise their partners. Unlike most American fighters, they never bang away at full force.

"I came with a bag full of pads, headgear, shinguards, wraps and other protective gear," said Thomas Denny, an American fighter who recently traveled to Thailand to train and compete. "I could have left everything except the wraps and bag gloves at home. I expected us to bang like we do at home, but that wasn't the case at all. There wasn't one injury. The Thais train hard, but they're not rough on each other."

"In the States, we make a sparring session just like the fight. In Thailand, they go full force on the bags and pads, but when they square off, they take care not to injure each other. That's because if they're injured, they can't fight; and if they can't fight, they can't earn any money."

—TLW

The elbow strike would prove to be the undoing of several members of the American team.



changed. They train like they're in for the fight of their lives—and they are. Their faces reflect the attitude of a warrior training for battle.

Reynolds has a bad case of butterflies and wants to back out. His self-confidence wanes, and Chaney attempts to build him up by praising his ability and downplaying his opponent's skills. The Wildman takes a different approach, trying to shame him into fighting by verbally assaulting him in front of everyone. Stopping short of calling him a coward, the champion cage fighter is like a Marine Corps drill instructor trying to motivate a recruit into charging the enemy.

The approaches differ, but the choice is up to the 20-year-old. Following a day of soul-searching, he too crosses the line in the sand and begins to train with a new

self-confidence. At that moment, I see three very different men with one heart. They're all of a single mind and spirit. A team has been born.

Chaney, The Wildman and Mushabash are acting as cornermen for our fighters, while I perch myself in the stands to take pictures. Mushabash is eager to test his skills in the ring, but while training in Bangkok, he injured his leg and was advised by doctors not to fight. Denny also turns down a match because he has a championship fight scheduled as soon as he returns to the States and doesn't want to risk injury.

Minutes before the first American enters the ring, an Englishman I'd met earlier comes rushing over. He too is in Thailand to train.

"Terry," he says anxiously, "you'd best warn your lads that the fix is in and that they should be careful."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

He replies, "The word is out that the Thais aren't going to play fair with your boys."

With that, Reynolds enters the ring, and the Brit vanishes, leaving me to wonder about his warning. Whatever he meant, it's too late for me to do anything but document the event. The bell rings for round one.

Reynolds comes out swinging, and it's apparent that his boxing skills are superior to his opponent's. He rocks the Thai with several good punches and holds his own in neck wrestling. The Thai stings him several times with leg kicks, but the determined American keeps on charging. Then Reynolds makes a rookie mistake: He drops his guard and allows his opponent to land a solid uppercut to his chin. Reynolds



Tempers flare in the boxing arena after a disagreement over the rules.

crumples to the mat, out like a light.

The Wildman is upset, claiming that the Thai set up the KO punch with an elbow. But his protestations don't stop the card from continuing.

Next up is Leedy. He's a formidable-looking foe as he towers over his rail-thin

opponent. At the sound of the bell, it's once again the American side's boxing skills that prevail. Leedy lands punch after punch, backing up his startled adversary. "The power of my jab took him by surprise," Leedy says afterward. "He was backing away from my punches, and I thought, 'Man, I'm going to knock this guy out!'"

The Thai lands a handful of nice kicks to the tall American's legs, but they have little effect. Suddenly, the Thai unleashes a crossing elbow that finds its mark, dropping Leedy to the canvas for the count.

"I thought he was coming in to grab me in a clinch to get away from my punches," Leedy says after the bout. "Then, out of nowhere, he threw an elbow, and everything went black. I didn't even hear the ref count me out. Had I known he was going to use elbows, I'd have protected myself. Next time, I'll know better."

The facilities offered by most muay Thai gyms in Thailand are primitive by Western standards, but the instruction is top-notch.



For many young Thais, earning a name in the kickboxing ring represents a way out of poverty.



Chaney and Denny are furious. They scream, they jump up and down, they call the ref and the fighter every name in the book. That incites the predominantly Thai crowd to unleash a barrage of jeers. Spectators have no way of knowing this was supposed to be a no-elbows fight. They think the Americans are just sore losers. Their boos merely add fuel to Chaney's fury as he and Denny rush their injured man back to the warm-up area. It's there that things almost go to hell in a handbasket.

Seconds after they enter the warm-up area, they're surrounded by Thai fighters and their trainers. A shouting match turns into a scene from *Rumble in the Bronx* as the Americans stand facing angry Thais, some armed with coke bottles and standing nose to nose with the foreigners.

"We were a split second away from having a serious fight when it dawned on us that our last fighter was standing alone in the ring," Chaney says. "So Denny, Mushabash and I ran back to the ring, turning our backs on the Thais. Our first concern was Huggins. I knew we'd have an opportunity to deal with those other guys later."

In the meantime, Huggins is wondering what to do. As he steps between the ropes, tension fills the air. The place is combustible, and I fear that the spark needed to set it all off has just entered the ring.

"I don't know if I was more anxious or nervous," Huggins says. "But this is what I wanted—to come to Thailand and get a real fight."

When the action starts, he follows in the footsteps of his two compatriots and makes a good showing with his hands. But unlike them, he makes it past the first round.

However, in round two, he gets backed into his own corner, and the muay Thai hits the fan. First, his opponent throws an elbow that whizzes past his head. Instead of protecting himself, Huggins looks to Chaney and protests the technique. The instant he takes his eyes off his opponent, the Thai charges, landing a vicious elbow to the head.

Blood begins spurting from a 2-inch-long gash on his forehead. That's the

spark I feared. Huggins is stunned, but he's also ticked off and ready to resume the fight when Chaney jumps up and enters the ring with Denny at his side. They're going after the fighter and the referee.

The frightened young Thai fighter looks as if he's standing on the railroad tracks watching a train heading straight for him. Meanwhile, the ref hastily exits the ring, putting some distance between himself and the crazy Americans.

Fortunately, calmer heads prevail, and a disaster is averted when both sides realize that a fight after the fight would be a lose-lose situation. Instead, they arrange for a rematch in October.

Everyone gets out of the arena safely a little after midnight. Then at 3 a.m., we're up and in the van again, making our way back to Bangkok. During the ride, I tell Chaney what the Englishman told me, about the fix being in. We both know it's possible that our fighters were set up by the powerful gamblers who often orchestrate the rules to make a profit.

Was that the case, or was it just a misunderstanding resulting from the language barrier? Or did the Thai fighters panic when the Americans began pelting them with punches and resort to throwing elbows to defend themselves?

We'll never know what really happened, but it's apparent that the Thais want to make amends with Chaney and his fighters. The stadium owner and VP fire the referee and suspend the elbow-throwing boxers for several weeks for disregarding the rules of the match.

To a man, the American fighters all agree it was an exceptional experience. And they all say they're willing to do it again, but this time they'll enter the ring armed with elbows of their own and a newfound respect for the term "protect yourself at all times."

About the author: Terry L. Wilson is a freelance writer, filmmaker and martial arts practitioner based in San Diego. For more information about muay Thai and training in Thailand, visit <http://www.blackbeltmag.com>.

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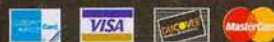
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