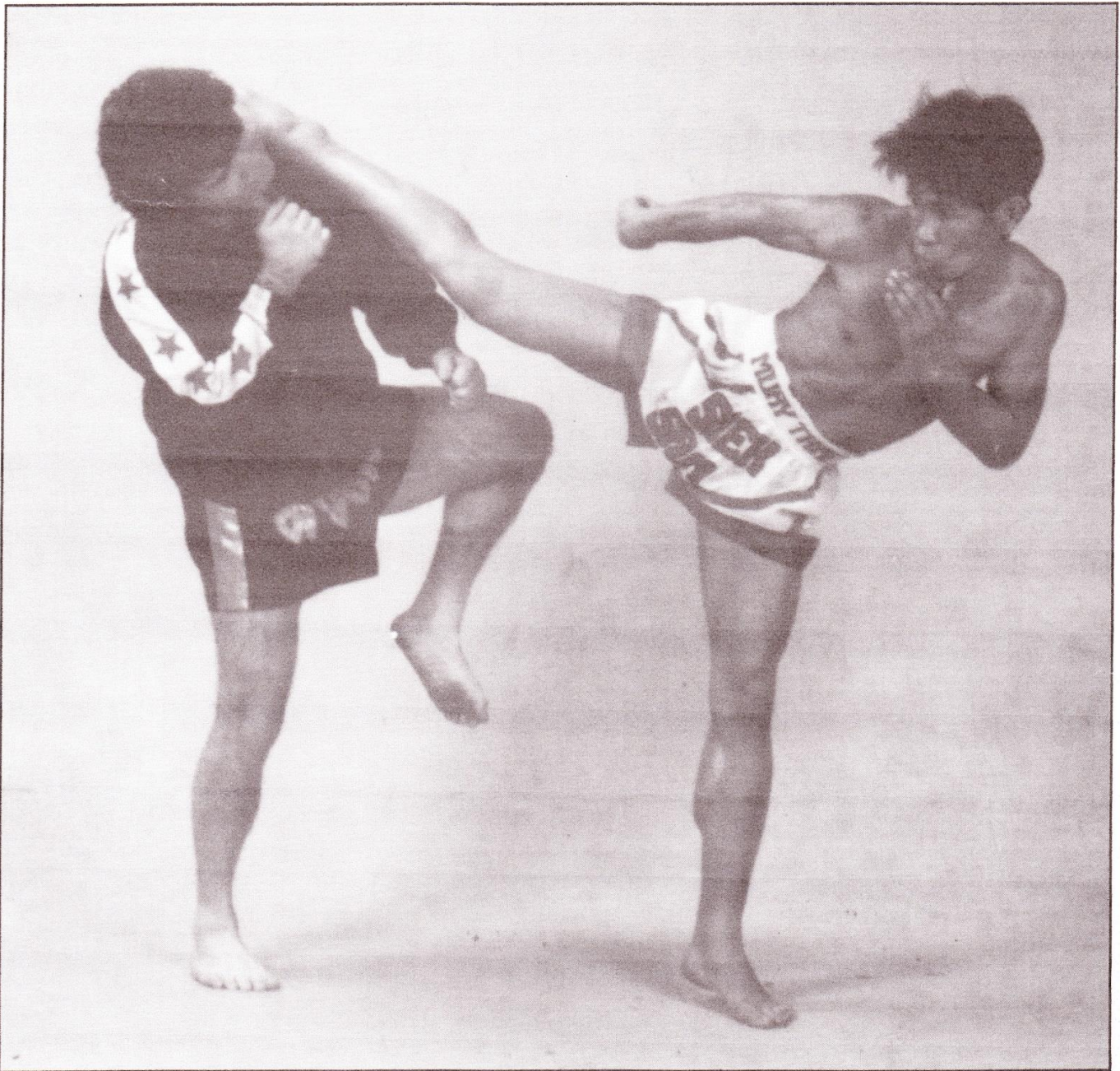


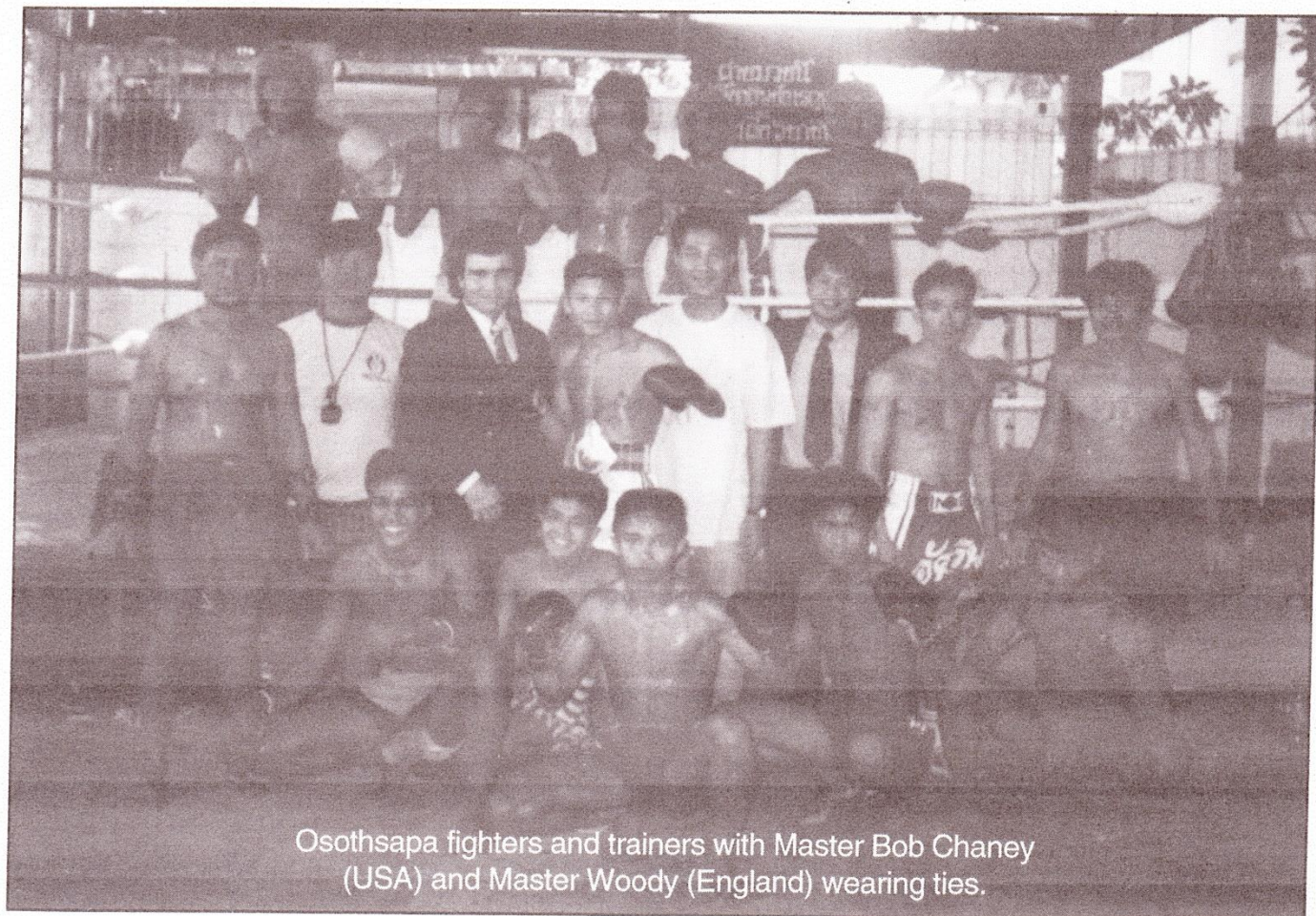
The Truth About Mu

One American martial artist's experiences living and training in Thailand shatters all the myths we have about the brutal sport and practice of Muay Thai. Veteran Bob Chaney's odyssey in Thailand, where he trained in a Muay Thai camp alongside some of that country's top fighters, has been, he insists, a non-stop learning and growing experience. He was in search of a truth that he felt was missing in "the American way" and he found it in one of the world's most misunderstood martial arts: Muay Thai.

Interview by Stephen Quadros



ay Thai in Thailand!



Osothsapa fighters and trainers with Master Bob Chaney (USA) and Master Woody (England) wearing ties.

Muay Thai, until recent years, has raised the ire of the American martial arts community. Since its inception as a sport in Thailand, it has been thought of by most American karate and kickboxing organizations as “dirty” fighting. Where were the jump kicks? Where were the respect and discipline? Where were the rules? To Americans this was a simplistic yet barbaric deviation, one that placed human beings in harm’s way for sport.

This situation was exacerbated in 1989 when popular U.S. kickboxing champion Rick Roufus was TKOed in Las Vegas by a Thai fighter who used only low kicks. America was outraged. But a few Ameri-

“I just gave up everything I had in the world to do this. I’m on the way over there and I felt incredibly lonely. A year and a half ago I had five studios and over 1,000 students and now I’m on my way over to Thailand to start a new life. So I got over there and met this gentleman and went to work re-designing the kickboxing equipment they had.”

cans were starting to take notice. One of those few was Bob Chaney.

This diminutive, yet powerfully built man had run the gamut of American karate. Muay Thai wasn’t Bob Chaney’s original choice for a martial art. Tae kwon do and isshin-ryu karate caught his eye first. They were steeped in philosophy and tradition. These were the styles that would display grace and fluidity, and tae kwon do would eventually become an Olympic sport.

Heading his own karate studio franchise in Las Vegas, which at one point swelled to over 1,000 students, Bob Chaney was in search of a truth that he felt was missing in “the American way.” Ironically, he found that truth by virtue of a drastic move to the

“The training is much more professional than what I expected. They don’t incorporate all the hard sparring that we do here. They believe in drills and the use of equipment. Thai pads, focus mitts, body protectors, shin pads. It’s the most refined and totally professional training I’ve seen.”

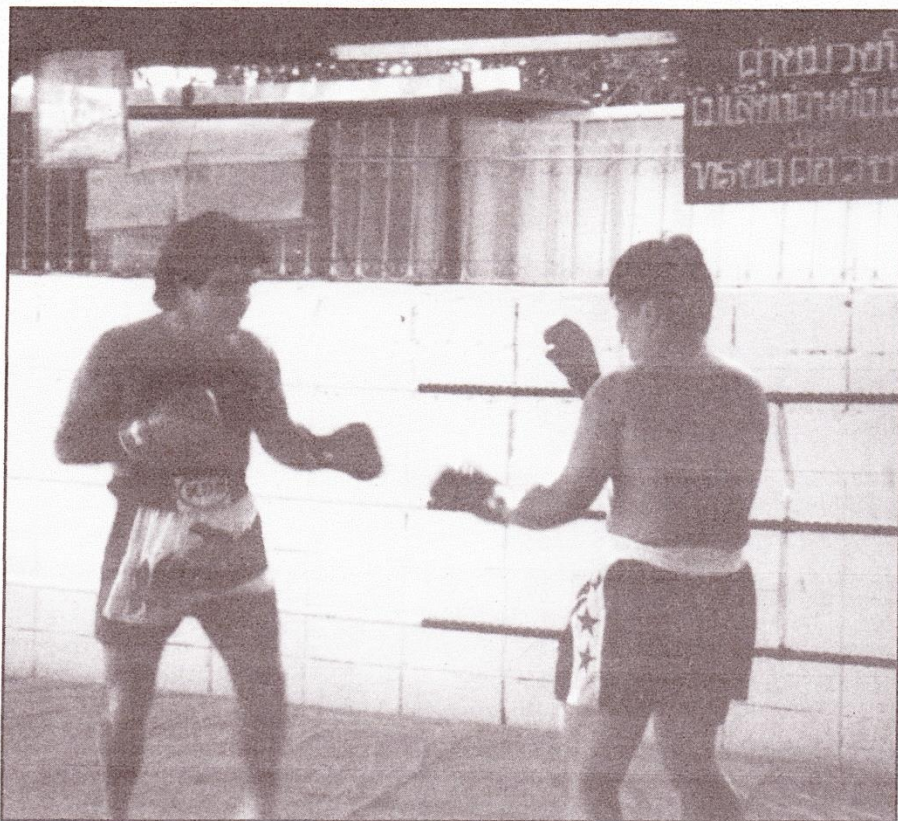
dreaded country that made most American martial artists shake in their boots: Thailand!

Wouldn’t they kill this “farang”? Quite the opposite. He found friends wherever he went, from the training camps to the stadiums. Chaney trained right alongside some of Thailand’s top fighters and they treated him like one of their own. Contrary to the stories he had heard state-side, the fighters didn’t try to kill each other on a daily basis. There were no shards of glass glued to the knuckles. There was no beating the shins with bottles and boards. Myth after myth were shattered before his very eyes. He had found what he was searching for, a sense of brotherhood through the martial arts.

In a world of hype, deception, invulnerable/undefeatable masters and childish challenge games, it is a sobering and refreshing experience to meet a “master” of the martial arts who is human. My interview with Bob Chaney revealed a man who is not afraid to express his strengths and fears, a man not afraid to brave controversy and tell the truth. Bob Chaney’s odyssey to Thailand, where he trains in a Muay Thai camp, tells the story of a man whose life has been a non-stop learning and growing experience.

Inside Kung Fu Presents: How did you wind up in Thailand?

Bob Chaney: In June of 1993, Master Toddy [the well known Muay Thai trainer and promoter] had moved to Las Vegas and



Left to right: Bob Chaney, Sukotha and Manager Thakoon Pongsupa.

“The training [at this camp] is the most serious I’ve ever seen. You don’t need to motivate these kids. This is what they live for, to be the Muay Thai champion of Rajadamnern or Lumpini stadiums. This is the only life they know. This is their big chance. For them, without this camp it’s back to starvation and the worst poverty you can ever imagine.”

lived with me for seven months. I had just opened a new studio on the east side and I actually gave that studio to Master Toddy. He took it over and I’m proud that he is doing so well.

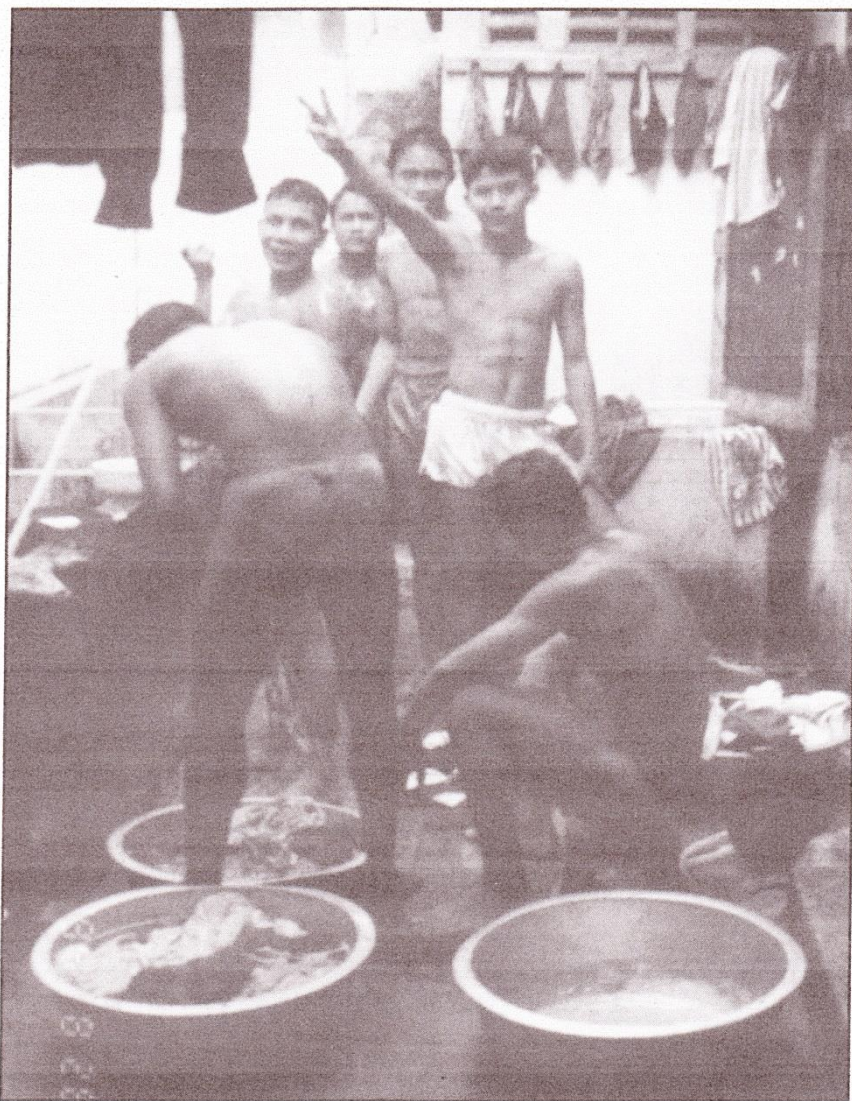
I trained in Muay Thai with Master Toddy privately every morning. We talked about it endlessly at my home and watched all the tapes he has for hours and hours. I learned to really appreciate Muay Thai. Master Toddy was a great teacher and he inspired me.

The opportunity came for Toddy and I to kind of change places. He had the job of selling martial arts training equipment that now I have before me.

He told me one time, “I’m not quite ready for a desk type of job in sales and marketing. My heart is in the teaching of Muay Thai, the promoting of kickboxing events, etc. That’s why I moved to Las Vegas. You’re more suitable for that position.

So we kind of almost changed places. I went to Thailand and assumed his old job and he took over one of my studios and began teaching and promoting events in Las Vegas. The next thing I know I’m on a plane headed for Thailand. I remember thinking, “Man, I don’t know anybody in Thailand!” I just talked to this guy, my new boss, Pimon Niankrajang, on the phone one time. Then I just gave up everything I had in the world to do this.

So I’m on the way over there to start a



"It's very intimidating working out at the camp. I mean, I've been studying over thirty years and some 100-pound fourteen-year-old kid is kicking at least 100 percent harder than me. And forget comparing our speed. The Thai camp will humble you, man. I mean really, really humble you."



The actual brochure from the Thai camp Bob Chaney trains at.

"The kids training in this camp are as young as ten or eleven and up to twenty five. They come from the villages out in the countryside and the streets of Bangkok. They have absolutely nothing in the way of material things; some don't even have their own shoes. The Thai camp provides them with food, shelter and love. It doesn't take long to realize this is a very close, happy family."

“In America, some guy wins a point tournament in a game of tag and you can’t get near him. His head is so puffed up, he thinks he’s God. When a guy wins a title at Rajadamnern Stadium — one of the two meccas of Muay Thai — is on the cover of magazines and newspapers, and is a genuine hero, he is still humble and polite. He hasn’t lost perspective of who he is and where he came from.”

HOME OF THE CHAMPIONS OF THE WORLD



Thakoon Pongsupa (Center)



Master Woody England, Sukotha, Taximeter
Thakoon Bob, Chaney, U.S.A.



Bob Chaney U.S.A.

International Karate Champion
“The best training in the world.”
A once in a life time experience.
Took me into their family shared
everything with me. Lost 19 LBS in
two weeks. I’ll be back

Master Woody. ENGLAND

International amateur Muay Thai federation
Muay Thai Instructor Manchester England.
If your serious about Muay Thai. Then you
must go to train in Osotsapha Camp.

You may contact Mr. Thakoon Pongsupha
by fax or letter for additional information
or contact the representative in your country.
Mr. Pongsupha was educated in the United States
and speaks fluent English.

122/170 Soi Ladprao 130 Bangkok,
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“The Thai camps are not easy to find, and nearly impossible if you don’t know someone to take you. So they go there with a life-time commitment in mind. That’s what I love. For the past 30 years I’ve pampered and coddled students and parents. I’ve built studios that cost nearly one-million dollars. I’ve provided the most modern equipment and conveniences, and ended up spending the largest part of every day listening to complaints.”



“The [Muay Thai students] kick banana bags nowadays. It’s a very long slender leather bag about six feet long and hangs about one foot from the ground. They use it to practice the low kick and to condition their shins by kicking it 500 to 1,000 times a day. In the old days and still sometimes even today, out in the country where there is no bag available, they will use a banana tree as a substitute. The banana tree is soft and pulpy, not like our oak tree, and the juice acts like a healing medicine to their shins.”

new life. When I got there, I met this gentleman and went to work re-designing the kickboxing equipment they had. I designed a whole new line of karate and taekwon do training equipment as well.

IKFP: You trained quite a bit in Muay Thai while you were in Thailand. Describe the atmosphere and training at the camps.

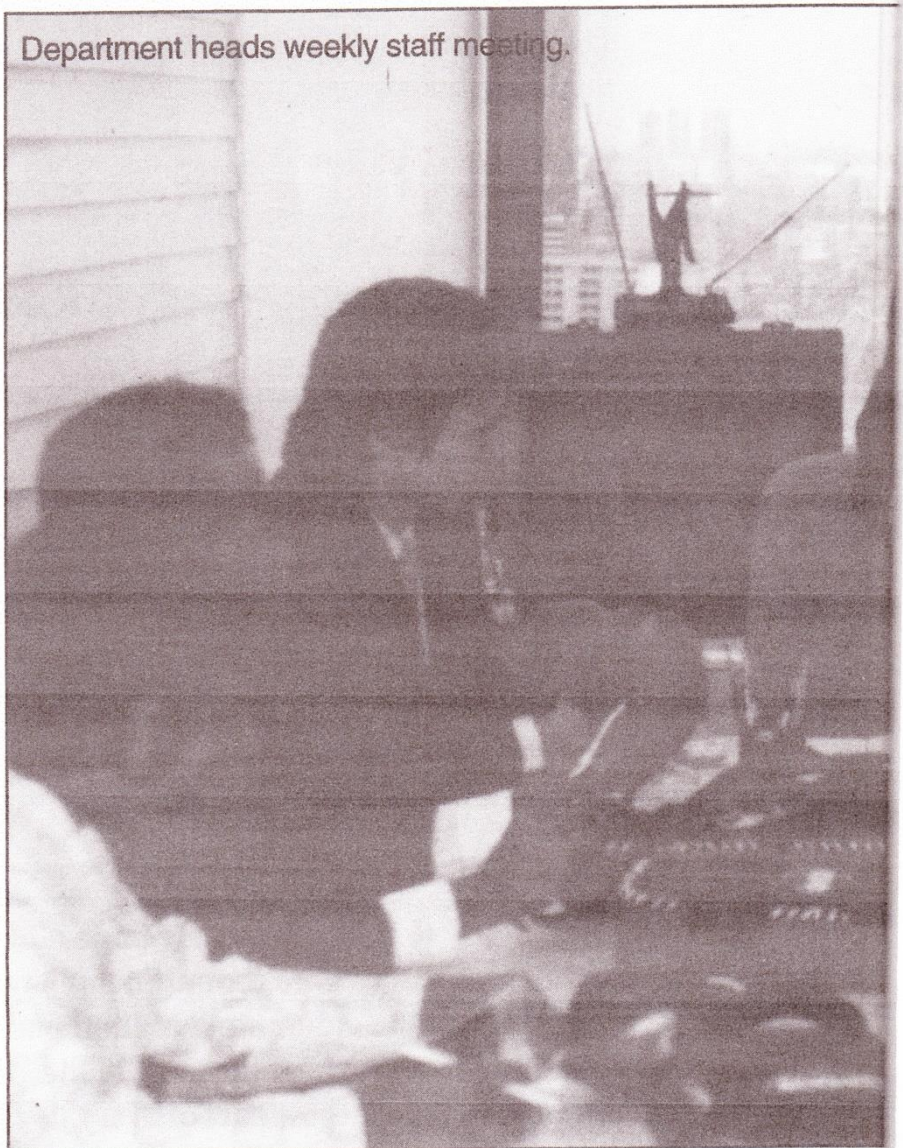
Chaney: The training is much more professional than what I expected. They don’t incorporate all the hard sparring that we do here. They believe in drills and the use of equipment. Thai pads, focus mitts, body protectors, shin pads. It’s the most refined and totally professional training I’ve seen.

My first time at the camp was very intimidating. When my friend Tony said he was taking me to the camp I said, “Why don’t we wait until next week.” Let me get in shape first because I’m not going to be able to hang with these guys. They’re going to kill me.]

Well, he picked me up at 5:30 a.m. and we took a cab to the outskirts of Bangkok. We went down this old road, and the cab had to go about two miles an hour to keep from bottoming out.

We arrived at the famous Osotsapha Camp, also called the Sasriprapa Camp. It was about 6:15 a.m. and the sun was just starting to come up. The fighters were waking up and some of them were already stretching and warming up. And some of

Department heads weekly staff meeting.



I had left to run.

My friend Tony said, "Let's go; we'll join with this group." So we just joined with about ten or twelve fighters and off we went!

Let me tell you something, it doesn't long to get a good sweat going because of the heat and humidity over there. We walked at a slow, steady pace, thank God, three or four miles and got back to the camp, I guess, about 7 a.m. Some of the fighters were back before us and were lowboxing and kicking the bags, which was going on under the canopy out of the sun. Tony started shadowboxing and I joined in. Once all the fighters were back everyone clapped their hands, and the head trainer blew a whistle and everyone went to their training places. Some were working on the bags, others headed for the ring, which was under the canopy and out of the sun. The line lined up with the trainers, holding

Thai kicking pads, focus mitts, and body protectors around their waist. Others paired off for neck wrestling.

The head trainer blew the whistle and everyone began. The training is the most serious I've ever seen. You don't need to motivate these kids. This is what they live for, to be the Muay Thai champion of Rajadamnern or Lumpini stadiums. This is the only life they know. This is their big chance. For them, without this camp it's back to starvation and the worst poverty you can ever imagine.

IKFP: How old are these fighters?

Chaney: As young as ten or eleven and up to twenty five. They come from the villages out in the countryside and the streets of Bangkok.

At the camp, the trainers rotate everybody after three three-minute rounds, with

"I think that the martial arts in America deal with a lot of make believe and fantasy as a result of the movies. People deal with fantasies and lies easier than they deal with truth. With Muay Thai, there is truth. There is a lot less fantasy about martial arts in Thailand. And with that in mind, the style of Muay Thai only deals with things that work, things that were proven in combat, things that a kid who grows up on a diet of Bruce Lee and Van Damme movies finds unexciting, and doesn't understand."

a one minute rest in between. Their enthusiasm and spirit is almost unimaginable. These kids put their heart into every move.

After two hours we broke until three o'clock. Then we repeated it all again, including another three-mile run.

It's very intimidating working out at the camp. I mean, I've been studying over thirty years and some 100-pound fourteen-year-old kid is kicking at least 100 percent harder than me. And forget comparing our speed. The Thai camp will humble you, man. I mean really, really humble you.

Back at that first workout, I followed the fighters to their version of a shower — a trough full of ice-cold water! We stripped to our undershorts, reached in and grabbed one of the plastic bowls and dumped the water over our heads, lathered up with soap and rinsed off the same way. This is the same place they wash their cloths, cook their meals, and wash out their dishes.

There is an open window leading to the bunk area where the fighters sleep. They crawl in and out instead of using the door. For meals, they just gather around the ring and eat family-style.

It doesn't take long to realize this is a very close, happy family. These kids have absolutely nothing in the way of material things; some don't even have their own



shoes. The Thai camp provides them with food, shelter and love.

I had heard they were abusive to the fighters. [in the Muay Thai training camps]. That's what I expected. But no. They all get in the ring together sometimes, 30-40 of them in the ring, all eating together, hanging out together, the trainers with the fighters. It's a big family.

Thakoon, the owner, and I have become the very best of friends. When you hear him talk about his fighters there is not the slightest doubt about the genuine care and concern he has for every one of his boys. He has taught me much about handling students. They're not spoiled like our American students. Man, these guys are incredibly humble.

IKFP:
What about when they become champions?

Chaney:
Well, the first time I realized how humble they really are was when Thakoon asked me to go to watch his boy fight for the title at Rajadamnern Stadium. He won the title and we all went out to a restaurant late at night after the fights. Thakoon, myself, the promoter, the managers, the fighters, everyone.

We were sitting there eating and I asked Thakoon, "Where's the champion?"

He pointed to the kids over at another table where the champion was busily involved in an ice fight.

I asked, "Isn't he going to join us?"

Thakoon explained, "No, he stays over

fighter again.

In America, some guy wins a point tournament in a game of tag and you can't get near him. His head is so puffed up, he thinks he's God. When a guy wins a title at Rajadamnern Stadium — one of the two meccas of Muay Thai — is on the cover of

magazines and newspapers, and is a genuine hero, he is still humble and polite. He hasn't lost perspective of who he is and where he came from.

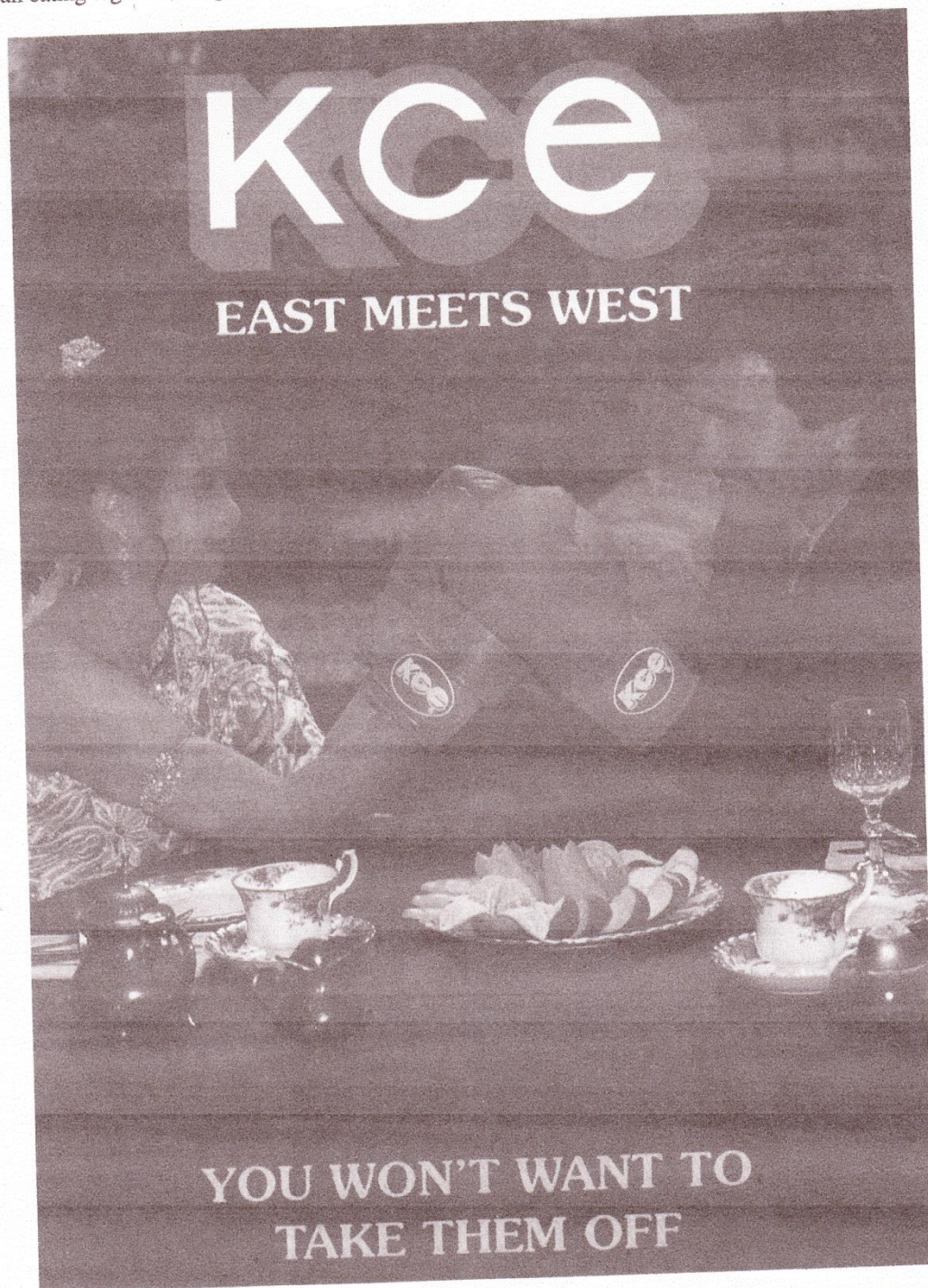
IKFP:
We always hear that they kick banana trees to condition their shins. Any truth to that?

Chaney:
They kick banana bags nowadays. It's a very long slender leather bag about six feet long and hangs about one foot from the ground. They use it to practice the low kick and to condition their shins by kicking it 500 to 1,000 times a day.

In the old days and still sometimes

even today, out in the country where there is no bag available, they will use a banana tree as a substitute. The banana tree is soft and pulpy, not like our oak tree, and the juice acts like a healing medicine to their shins.

IKFP: How much does it cost to train



there with his friends. He's not allowed to eat and drink with us."

The next morning this kid is on the cover of the magazines and all the newspapers in Bangkok. When I got to the camp he was there helping me with my bags! He got no special treatment from the trainers or fighters; he was back to being just another

camp?

Chaney: You don't go to a Thai camp and just sign up like you do over here at the local karate, tae kwon do studio or health club. There are no amateur camps here. In the Bangkok Yellow Pages, a city with a population of over twelve-million, there is only one listing under karate, judo, martial arts, Muay Thai, or kung-fu.

The Thai camps are not easy to find, and early impossible if you don't know someone to take you. So they go there with a lifetime commitment in mind. That's what I love. For the past 30 years I've pampered and coddled students and parents. I've built studios that cost nearly one-million dollars. I've provided the most modern equipment and conveniences, and ended up spending the largest part of every day listening to complaints.

The Thai camp is very primitive. It's dirty, hot, smelly, and totally lacks any of the conveniences my studios had. But the camp provides food, shelter, clothing, and nurturing. The fighters are humble, grateful, and, what is incredibly beautiful to me, they're well-adjusted and happy. They can't comprehend the training conditions or complain about over here in America.

So, no, they don't pay. They sign a contract and if they develop an attitude, complain, or screw up, it's real simple — they are replaced. End of story.

IKFP: Why do you suppose it took so long for Muay Thai to gain any kind of popularity or acceptance in the United States?

Chaney: Well, we thought it was too violent, and we didn't understand the effectiveness of the leg kicks. To us, it was just sparring fighting that didn't require any skill. Anyone can kick the legs, we thought.

In 1985, I allowed a Thai fighter to use my gym after hours. I watched him train, it wasn't too impressed. I thought of all the things that I could do to counter his techniques. So I thought it was highly underrated.

But in 1990, I was working out with world Middleweight Champion Dale "pollo" Cook, and he demonstrated a leg kick on me — and that was it. All the things I thought I could do, I couldn't!

Dale had expressed a tremendous respect for Master Toddy, who was living in England at that time. Toddy and I had heard a lot of good things about each other through

mutual friends. Then a very dear and sweet friend of both Master Toddy and I — writer Jane Hallander — got us together.

Anyway, back to the question. I think that the martial arts in America deal with a lot of make believe and fantasy as a result of the movies. Sometimes people have to accept the truth. For example, if you tell a guy that, when you become a black belt you won't be able to whip seven guys and fly,

“Thailand has been promoting Muay Thai fights for ever and ever. And unlike America they have a vast, almost unlimited pool of great fighters to draw from who have highly recognizable “household” names throughout Thailand. You can turn on the television and watch great Muay Thai matches almost every day. And you can go to Rajadamnern or Lumpini Stadiums six nights a week and turn on channel 9 on television every Sunday afternoon to watch matches or bet on your favorite fighter.”

they're disappointed. They don't want to hear that.

So they'll go down the street to the guy who's going to help them believe in their fantasy. He's going to encourage that fantasy — that his system is going to teach them to punch through concrete and whip those seven guys. They will follow that guy.

People deal with fantasies and lies easier than they deal with truth. With Muay Thai, there is truth. There is a lot less fantasy about martial arts in Thailand. And with that in mind, the style of Muay Thai only deals with things that work, things that were proven in combat, things that a kid who grows up on a diet of Bruce Lee and Van Damme movies finds unexciting, and doesn't understand.

IKFP: I have heard stories that Muay Thai promoters can be a little bit like, let's say, American boxing promoters, if you catch my drift?

Chaney: Hmm! Promoting in Thailand is very much different than promoting in the U.S. or Europe. Thailand has been promoting Muay Thai fights for ever and ever. And unlike America they have a vast, almost unlimited pool of great fighters to draw from who have highly recognizable “household” names throughout Thailand. Names with tremendous drawing power.

You can turn on the television and watch great Muay Thai matches almost every day. And you can go to Rajadamnern or Lumpini Stadiums six nights a week and turn on channel 9 on television every Sunday afternoon to watch matches or bet on your favorite fighter.

A powerful gambling structure and tremendous television exposure draw the only parallels to the American boxing promoters. American boxing is controlled by a handful of very powerful promoters. However, Thailand has a very powerful organization that controls and monitors the promoters and the managers. It's called the Professional Thai Boxing Association.

IKFP: Is there much difference between the matches we see over here versus what you see at the stadiums in Bangkok?

Chaney: Oh yeah! You can't even compare them. When you see Muay Thai matches over here, you see a watered-down version. The most exciting weapons — the elbows and knees to the face — are not allowed. And we don't understand or appreciate the neck wrestling or knee techniques.

Here, the audience participation is minimal and the crowds are small. We're just trying to build it. In Thailand it is already built. Even on a week night at Rajadamnern or Lumpini Stadium, there are ten to twenty thousand fans, and on the weekend or for a title fight they seat thirty thousand. The crowd participation is overwhelming. They love their Muay Thai.

IKFP: I've heard all kinds of stories about how they bet on the fights. Can you describe it?

Chaney: Betting on Muay Thai is the main reason they come to the stadiums. If they just want to watch the fights they can

stay home and watch them on television.

To place a bet you just point at one of the bet-makers. After he sees you, everything else is done by hand signals. It's really strange because there's no money transferred until after the fight. You don't have to put money up first like you do over here. And all through the fight they keep betting with all these hand signals.

I asked Thakoon one time, "How in the world do they keep track of all of this?" He just said they have a system. Well, it blows my mind. After the fight they all settle up. Monies are passed up to the winners, and losers wad it up and throw it down on the floor!

What is really funny is — and I'm sure you've thought of it already — you can go there and bet on the fight even if you don't have any money! You just have to have a fast getaway. And yeah, some people actually do this, but it may be hazardous to your health.

Especially after the last match of the evening, you can see the guys without money who bet and lost, high-tailing it for the door! But they catch most of them. It happens more at Rajadamnern than it does at the biggest stadium, Lumpini, because Lumpini is controlled by the army. And they deal with you swiftly and severely when caught.

IKFP: Muay Thai matches over here have a reputation for breaking out in violence. Does that sort of thing happen over there?

Chaney: Yeah. The audience in Thailand doesn't put up with much. They're pretty educated. The fights are sometimes pretty close and it's hard to tell who wins unless there's a knockout. There isn't much attempt at fixing fights, like everyone thinks. They have heavy screens between ringside seating and the bleachers to protect spectators.

I think it was last February [1994] when they had a major riot at Lumpini Stadium in protest of the judges' decisions. There was significant damage to the stadium and the crowd succeeded in getting the judges to reverse their decision.

That would never happen here. Don King wouldn't get away with as much in Thailand.

I found out the importance of the screens a few weeks later. Thakoon and I went outside Bangkok to Omnoi Stadium in Omnoi City. This one particular fight was

not the normal nonstop action I had become accustomed to, when suddenly a twenty-five-pound block of ice came flying over my head and crashed into the ring just — and I mean just — barely missing the fighters! This was followed by beer cans, food, pop bottles, cups of Coca Cola, and several large stones. It turned out to be a great fight, by the way.

IKFP: Do the Class-A fighters and champions ever fight abroad?

Chaney: Not until after they retire. You hear where this guy or that guy went to Thailand and beat the Thais. Well, that happens, but they don't fight the best fighters or the champions in their prime.

The camps are sponsored. Thakoon's camp is called Osothsapha because that is the name of the sponsor. Osothsapha is a health drink like Gatorade. So it's sort of like saying "Gatorade Camp" or "Coca Cola Camp."

"Even on a week night at Rajadamnern or Lumpini Stadium, there are ten to twenty thousand fans, and on the weekend or for a title fight they seat thirty thousand. The crowd participation is overwhelming. They love their Muay Thai."

The sponsors do not pay to build up a champion that has real commercial value, then send him off to the United States or Europe, where there are no benefits for them. And the best fighters in Thailand are from 105 to about 135 pounds. The big Thais over 145 pounds don't have much of an opportunity to fight in Thailand, so they must depend on fighting abroad. The retired champions must fight abroad if they want to continue their careers.

I'm sorry, but after training there, you're not going to convince me that we have anybody that can go there and compete with the best fighters in Thailand under their rules and beat them.

IKFP: You mentioned that you want to eventually live there permanently. What makes you like it so much?

Chaney: When I met my boss, Pimon we hit it off really well. I admire and respect him immensely. I watched him very carefully. The way he treated his employees the way he conducted himself in business but most of all how the community looked up to him. This guy is respected and loved by everyone, from his employees to the government and military officials. He's a very honest person.

So I like working for his company, KCE and I really enjoy my job. I have complete control to design anything I want. I think the KCE has a very bright future. Since KCE equipment has been introduced here in America, I have never had anything but a positive response. I get calls every day from all over the country inquiring about our equipment just from word of mouth. I hear very often that it is the very "best" equipment in the world. In fact, I hear it from all over the world: England, Australia, Canada.

So the last time I was in Bangkok Pimon took me an hour and a half outside the city to Authaya, where he purchased new land to build a new factory. And he proudly showed me where he had arranged to have a new home built for me not far from the factory. The plans also allow for a Muay Thai camp for Thakoon and I.

IKFP: No wonder you want to live there. Can I go along?

Chaney: Of course. You'd always be welcome. But the most important reason that I want to move there permanently is because the people are gentle. There's very little stress compared to over here.

But most of all Thailand has given me back to me the martial arts that I fell in love with over 30 years ago. The martial arts that made me decide to dedicate my whole life to. The qualities that my master, Il Joo Kwon, believed in and instilled in me, are all over there.

Somewhere those qualities got lost while I was dealing with the martial arts on a commercial level for those thirty years. I was doing it for everyone but me. My marriages, my family, all suffered immensely while I was busy making everyone's dreams come true. Now I guess I'm just being selfish; I'm doing the martial arts for me now. It's time I make my own dreams come true.



Stephen Quadros is an actor, writer, Muay Thai historian based in Los Angeles, California.