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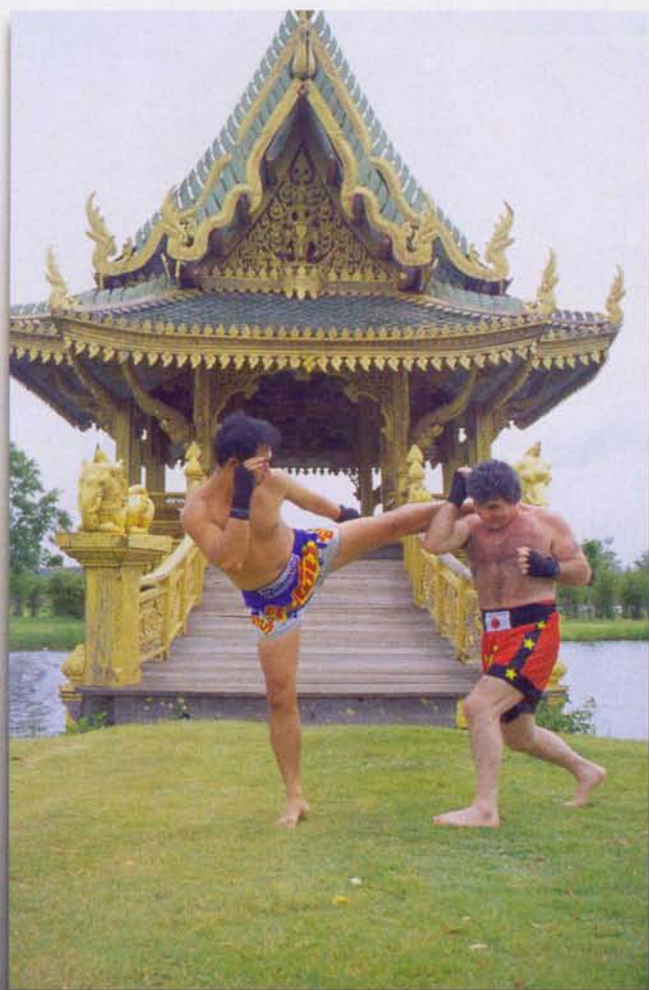
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For a
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Nothing
Beats a
Month in
Bangkok!

TRAINING IN THAILAND

by Terry L. Wilson

There's a good reason why the national sport of Thailand is *muay Thai*: The heart and soul of the nation are embodied in the history and tradition of the art. Experiencing muay Thai is perhaps the best way to experience Thailand.

Unfortunately for jet-setting Western martial artists, you can't just hop a plane to Bangkok, stroll into the nearest gym,

fork over a few *baht* and join the fun. The Thais view their favorite fighting art as a serious business and a way of life. When they accept a person into a gym, they expect him to become part of the family. The owner becomes a father figure who provides food, shelter and training, and the fighter offers 20 percent to 30 percent of his winnings to the owner

Circle of Life

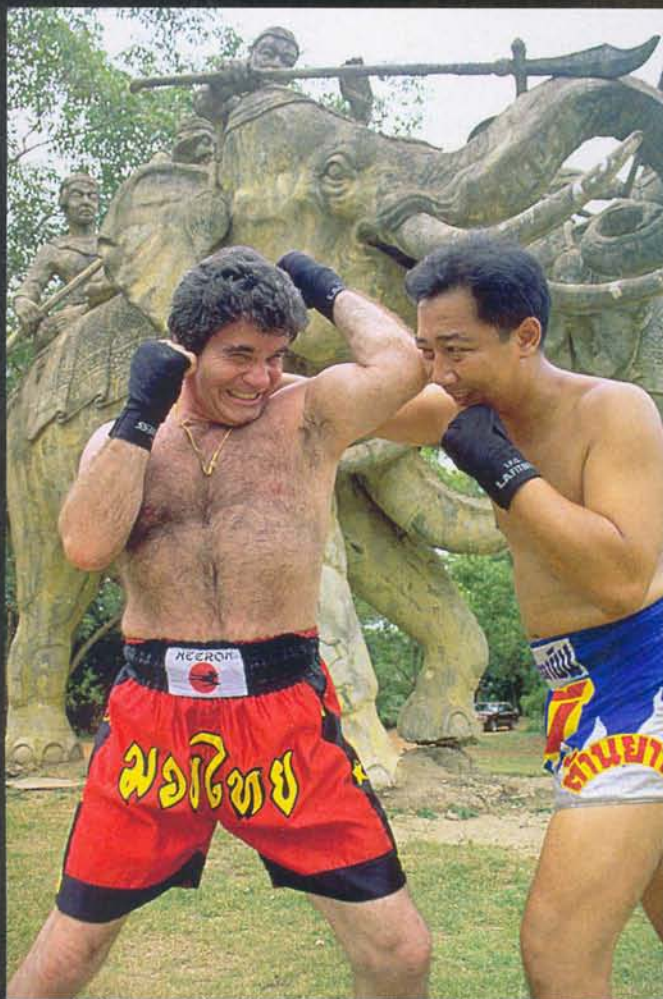
In Thailand, a career in fighting can start as early as age 8. Young boys become apprentices at established gyms, where they serve food and water to fighters and massage their aching muscles after workouts. As the boys develop their skills, they begin competing in amateur bouts. If they are going to turn pro, they usually do so while still in their early teens. Their professional life span normally lasts until they hit their mid-20s. By then, if they have built a decent ring record, they will be able to become trainers or gym owners and pass their knowledge to a new generation.

—Robert W. Young

A young Thai fighter builds his neck muscles with a jerry-built weightlifting helmet.



Thai workouts include plenty of elbow action for close-range combat.



so the facility can continue to operate.

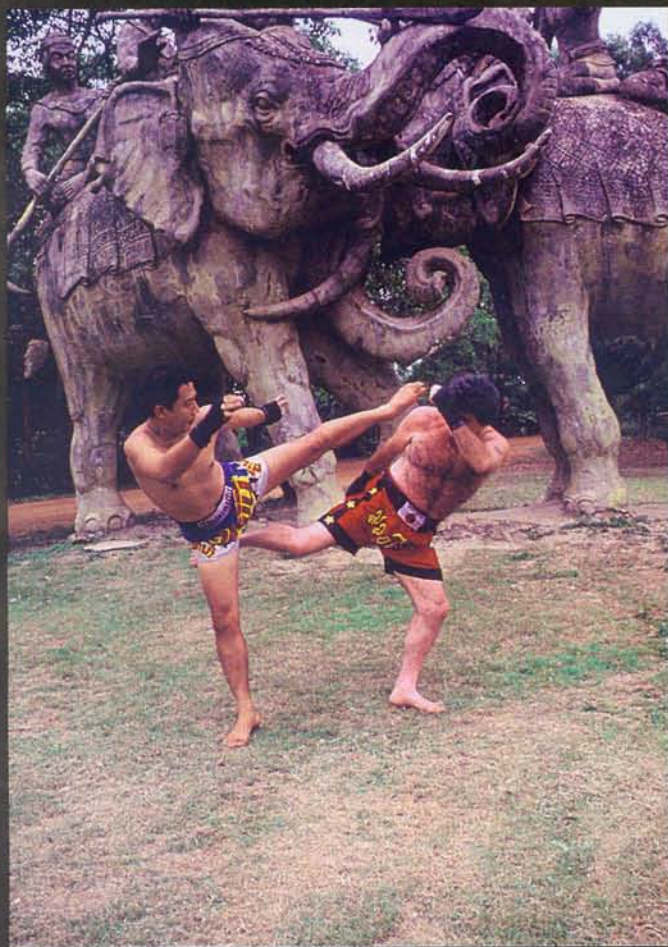
It is rare for a foreigner to be invited into a good gym, but because of my association with Bob Chaney—who for years has enjoyed a relationship with Thakoon Pongsupha, one of Thailand's most respected trainers and owner of Sasiprapa Gym—I was afforded such an honor. I had always heard rumors of how muay Thai fighters train. "Insiders" told stories of how they would bang their legs against iron poles until they were numb, of how they would cut the nerves in their shins so they could no longer feel pain and of how they would beat each other bloody during their workouts. With those lovely images bouncing around in my head, I boarded a plane for the Far East.

SETTING

Located in the suburbs of Bangkok, Sasiprapa Gym looks like any other house on the block from the outside. Once you pass through the iron gate that segregates it from the non-fighting public, however, you enter a whole new world, one designed specifically for teaching muay Thai the "old school" way.

Unlike many American *dojo* that are lined with state-of-the-art mats, kicking dummies and weight machines, Sasiprapa boasts no frills. It is set up in a large, partially covered courtyard with a concrete floor, a couple of heavy bags, a vari-





ety of handmade weights and an old ring for sparring. The fighters sleep on straw mats or blankets that they spread out on the floor of one large room. They shower by scooping water from a cement trough and pouring it over themselves. They eat hearty meals of rice, vegetables and fish three times a day.

Despite its Spartan appearance, the gym has produced more champion muay Thai fighters than any other facility in Thailand. In fact, top-dog Thakoon Pongsupha is a second-generation trainer of champions. If you spend any time there, you'll no doubt get a chance to see some champs or

Turning the hips 180 degrees is the key to generating maximum power with the Thai roundhouse kick. Swinging the arms in opposition also adds power.

future champs in action. And you'll learn firsthand how the Thais really train, how they play and how they will give the shirt off their back to any foreigner who is interested in their fighting treasure—even though he might not know a *teep* kick from a knee check.

UNLEARNING

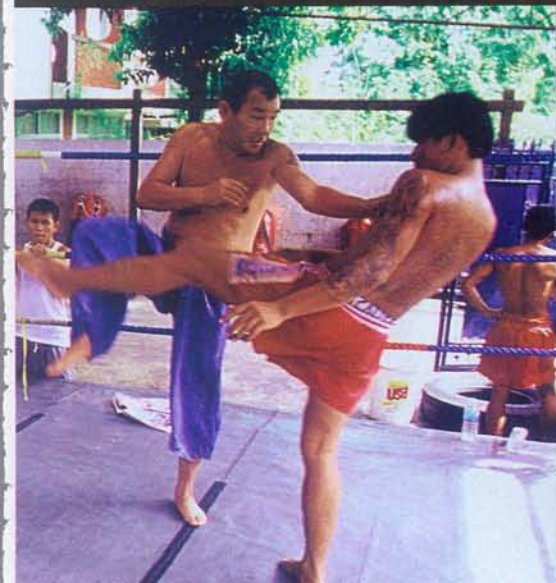
Although my martial arts background spans more than five decades of *jujutsu*, judo and karate training, I soon learned that muay Thai is as different from those skills as night is from day. For me, the most difficult task involved "unlearning" how to execute the roundhouse kick. Unlike karate practitioners who tend to kick with a snap and make contact with their instep or the ball of their foot, Thai fight-

5 Tips From a Champion

- *Muay Thai* is a simple art. There are not a lot of techniques. Once you have mastered the basic kicks and punches, it's time to focus on what's really important: moving, power, timing and defense.
- The roundhouse kick is one of the easiest strikes to land, and you kick with your shin, so it's powerful and effective. You have so much power because you put your whole body into it. Behind your leg, your hip and your shoulder are driving forward into the target. You don't just kick the target; you kick *through* the target.
- You can use your knees to attack without giving up too much vulnerability. When you punch somebody, he can punch you, too; but with knee shots, you can keep your head protected.
- Your hands are useful because you can quickly punch somebody in the head, and if you land one hard shot, you may knock him out or set him up for a knockout blow. Your kicks set up your punches initially, and then your punches can set up your kicks—but that's not to say you should rely on one more than the other.
- In muay Thai, you assume your opponent will block your attacks. In fact, he may block most of your techniques. So when you kick at his body, you're not necessarily looking to land right into the body but to hit the outside shell. I like to teach the "walnut philosophy": You have to crack the shell to get to the nut. You hit him on the outside of the shell to make him react. Assuming he can take the shot, he will adjust and fire back, creating opportunities for you to further break down his outer shell.

—Alex Gong

Chanai Pongsupha (center) teaches a fighter the fine art of unbalancing an opponent at Sasiprapa Gym. For 13 years, Chanai served as coach for the Thai Olympic boxing team; he now hosts a radio show on muay Thai.





The art of muay Thai contains three different knee thrusts, along with four elbow strikes, five punches and five kicks.

ers swing their leg like a club. They turn their hips up to 180 degrees for maximum power, and they drive their leg through the target. The first time I stood on the receiving end of such a blow, it shook me to my foundation and instantly made a believer out of me.

The next transformation at Sasiprapa Gym involved my punching techniques. In lieu of karate's one-punch-one-kill methodology, I learned that it's OK to KO an opponent through attrition. That means frequently bypassing the power shot and using jabbing, weaving and various other boxing moves and combinations in conjunction with leg kicks, high kicks and teep kicks (similar to a foot jab).

TRAINING

Although the Thai boxers of Sasiprapa train according to an impressive work ethic, I discovered that all those rumors about their brutal workouts were a lot of bunk. "Our fighters train very hard, but they try not to injure themselves or each other in the process of preparing for a fight," Thakoon said. "Our fighters earn their living in the ring. To ensure a long career, they must remain injury free. Plus, we are family here, and family should never hurt family."

The average training day begins with a two-mile early morning run, followed by an intense three-hour workout. Whenever the buzzer sounds, each fighter begins his

particular routine—some pound the heavy bag, while others practice neck wrestling, elbow strikes or punching and kicking combinations. They execute each technique with maximum force, causing showers of sweat to fly from their bodies every time they hit or get hit. Two minutes later, another buzzer sounds and each fighter takes a one-minute rehydration break, after which the action resumes.

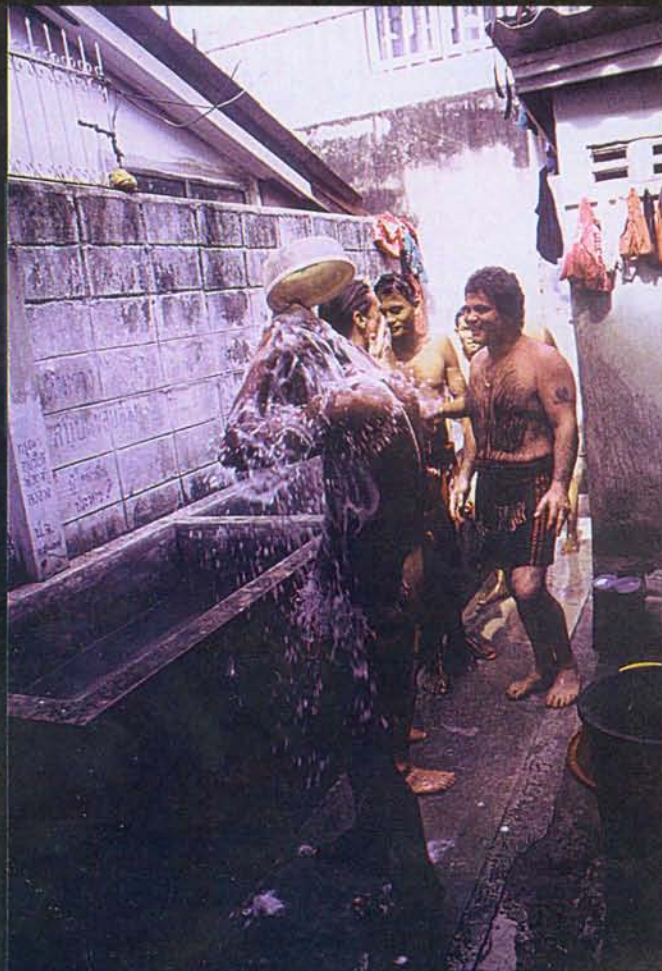
LEARNING

After the Sasiprapa trainers got through with me, Chaney, whom the Thais consider one of the finest instructors in America, stepped in to fine-tune the basics I'd learned. "You've got to quit trying to snap your kick," he said. "Remember, unlike a traditional karate kick that uses a snapping action and delivers the blow with the ball of the foot, our kicks come down like a baseball bat."

I felt like a duck out of water, but toward the end of the day I was landing more shin kicks correctly than incorrectly. However, my aging frame was not used to the contact I'd been receiving from Chaney and the Thais. Although they were going easy on me, it still took its toll. At the end of day one, my feet looked like shredded wheat, my arms ached so much I could hardly eat, and my legs felt as if they'd been tenderized with a mallet.

In the weeks that followed, I was tutored in the art of

Sasiprapa Gym boasts no fancy facilities that might soften its fighters' mettle. Cold-water showers taken outdoors are the norm.

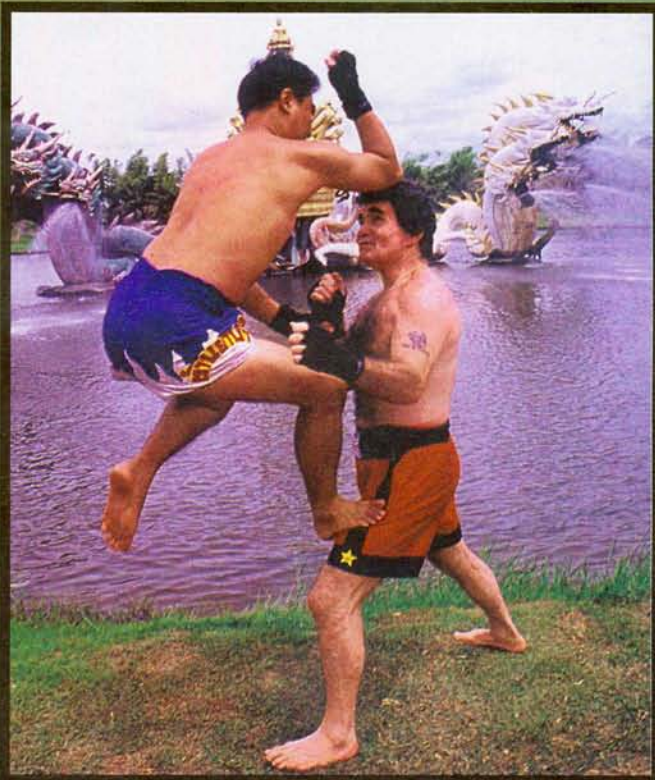


The Winnowing

Muay Thai is said to have 108 basic techniques. This might have been the case in the old days but certainly doesn't hold true today. Some of the older teachers talk of "about 60 major attacking moves," yet even this figure is exaggerated unless one includes every possible variation of every fundamental action. A number of techniques exist in theory only. They are neither seen during training nor ever used in the ring. *Muay Thai* today is 100-percent contest-oriented, with the result that some moves, considered perhaps too difficult, dangerous or not very sportsman-like, have gradually been eliminated. Basically, *muay Thai* employs five different punches, four elbow attacks, three knee kicks and five foot techniques.

—Hardy Stockman

Thakoon Pongsupha demonstrates an ancient muay Thai elbow technique on Bob Chaney. As the art was transformed into a sport, many traditional moves that did not work in the ring were abandoned.



"The Thais view their favorite fighting art as a serious business and a way of life. When they accept a person into a gym, they expect him to become part of the family."

muay Thai elbow strikes and neck wrestling. The elbow strikes are similar to my karate techniques except they are supposed to be delivered in a deceptive manner over the top of a hooking punch. One night while attending a *muay Thai* fight in Bangkok, I was ringside when one of Thakoon's fighters landed an elbow on the forehead of his opponent, opening the guy's head like a melon. It was all the inspiration I needed to return to the gym the next day and work on perfecting my elbow skills.

IMPROVING

By the time my training had come to an end, I was ducking and weaving and I could land a nice *muay Thai* kick to my opponent's leg. However, I will be the first to admit that Chaney and the other Thai fighters were allowing me to execute my fresh techniques without countering me in the process. I was appreciative that they were

giving me a chance to polish my new skills and that they would allow me to leave Thailand with all my vital organs intact.

When my "tour of duty" came to an end, I walked away from Sasiprapa Gym with a few more tricks in my martial arts bag, but the best part of the experience was the new friends I'd made. While exchanging techniques, we got to know each other as individuals. Acquaintances like this often lead to lifelong friendships as styles and nationalities take a back seat to the camaraderie we share as martial artists.

About the author: Terry L. Wilson is a free-lance writer and jujutsu, judo and karate instructor based in San Diego, California. For more information about Sasiprapa Gym, visit <http://www.mightyoak.co.uk/sasiprapa> or <http://www.muaythaitour.com/sasiprapa.html>.