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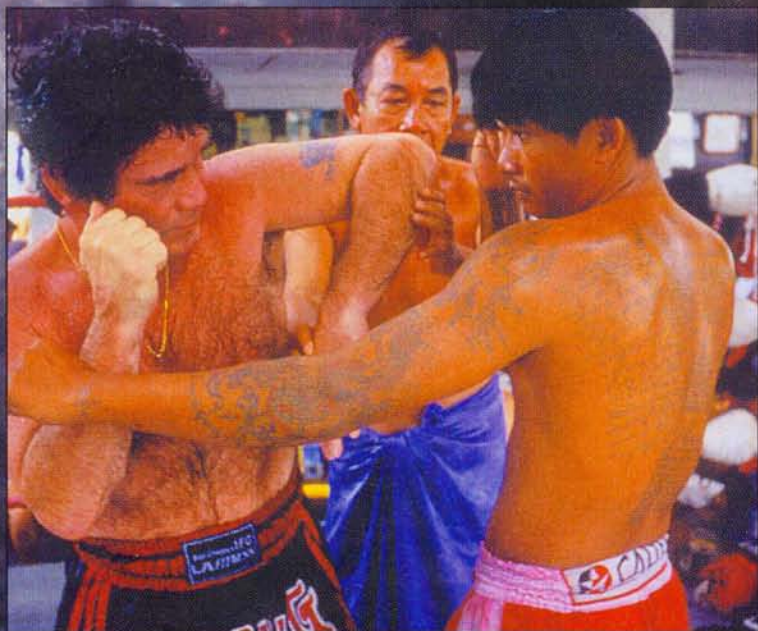
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IN SEARCH

Thai fighter works out in the Sasipara Gym in Bangkok.



Bob Chaney (left) receiving some pointers on how to throw an elbow strike.

of the TRUTH

For the past three weeks, I've been in Thailand learning about the ancient fighting art of *Muay Thai* from some of the best in the game. This little adventure began several months ago with a phone call from Bob Chaney. He asked me if I'd like to take a trip to Thailand with him and one of his senior students, Gary Mattevi, a kickboxer who owns his own school in Duluth, Minnesota.

They were going to spend a week at one of the most famous *Muay Thai* camps in the world and Chaney thought I might like to do a story on what it's like to train in a traditional kickboxing camp. As I am always open to learning about other arts and love international travel, I agreed.

BLOODY PULP, IRON POLES

Training came early the next day. We started with a 5:30 a.m. jog to the *Muay Thai* camp. By the way, Chaney and Mattevi were both in tremendous physical condition. As for me, this was the first real exercise I'd had in almost two years. I had been recovering from a nasty accident, a run-in with a semi-truck. I'd spent 24 months going through operations and rehabilitation for a number of injuries, all of which prevented me from snapping a kick, executing a throw or even doing a sit-up. Now here I am, overweight and short of wind facing what will probably be the toughest training of my life.

For years, I'd heard rumors of how these guys train. I was told they bang their legs against iron poles and cut the nerves in their shins so as not to feel any pain. Another rumor floating around the old *dojo* (training hall) was that *Muay Thai* fighters beat each other into a bloody pulp during their workouts. With all of these images bouncing around in my head, we arrived at Sasiprapa *Muay-Thai* Gym.

This training hall is the home of more champion *Muay Thai* fighters than anywhere else in Thailand. Thakoon Pongsupha, a second-generation trainer of champions, is the man who runs it.

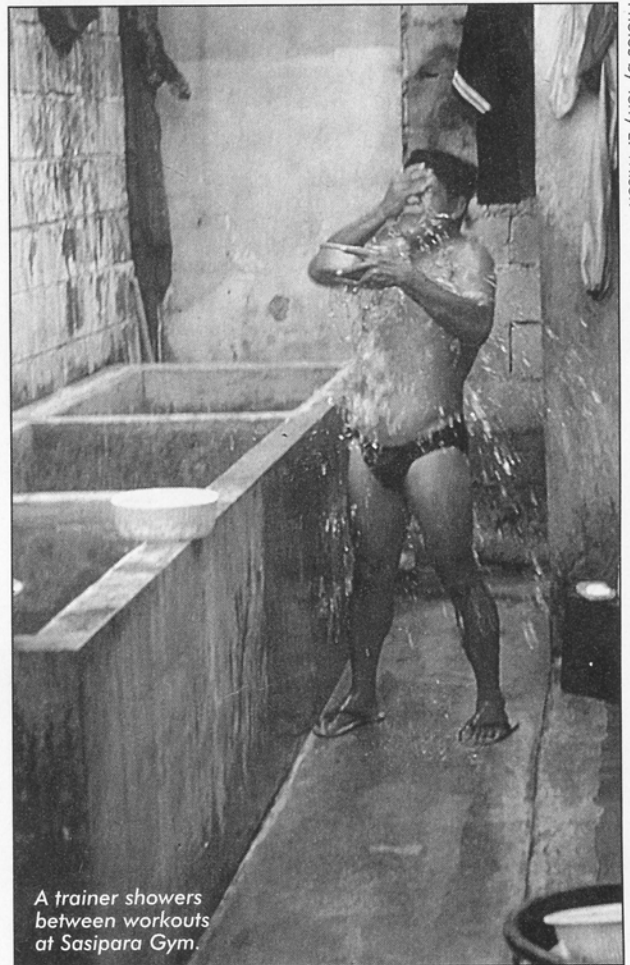
The gym is set up in a large, partially covered outdoor patio-like setting. There are no frills here. They have an old ring, heavy bags, pads and weights. About 20 fighters live there full-time, along with a contingent of foreign fighters who come to train for several weeks or months at a time. Everyone sleeps in a large room on mats or in rolled up blankets. They shower by pouring water over themselves from a cement tub and eat a hearty meal of rice and fish three times a day. Quite the contrast to a state-of-the-art, air-conditioned school like the one Chaney operates.

WORK ETHICS

I was very impressed with the work ethics of the *Muay Thai* fighters and was quick to learn that all of the stories I'd heard about their brutal training methods were a lot of bunk.

There Are Rumors of Bloody, Messy Sparring Sessions and Fighters Cutting the Nerves in Their Shins. What is **Training in Thailand** Really Like?

BY TERRY L. WILSON



A trainer showers between workouts at Sasiprapa Gym.

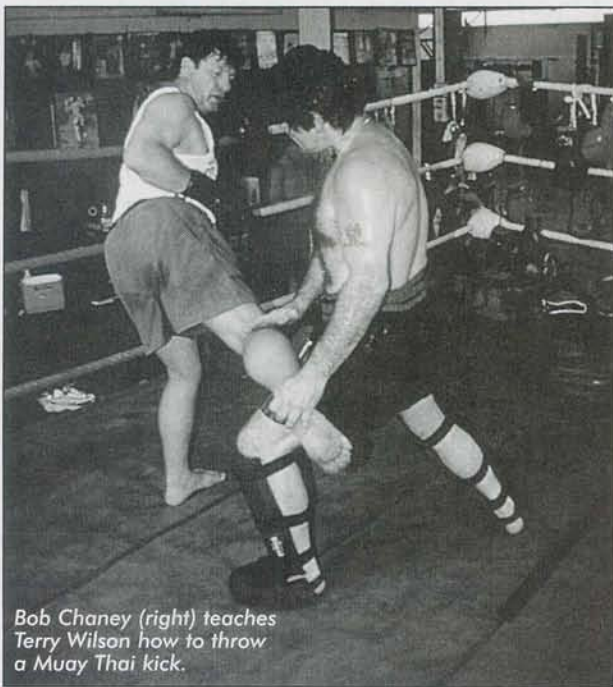
Photos by Terry L. Wilson

"Our fighters train very hard, but they try not to injure themselves in the process of preparing for a fight," said Thakoon Pongsupha, the owner and head trainer of the Sasiprapa Muay Thai Gym. "These fighters earn their living in the ring. To insure a long career, they must remain injury free so they are cautious not to hurt each other while sparing."

Nevertheless, the fighters at Thakoon's gym are the hardest training athletes I've even seen. They train two times a day for about four hours a session. There is very little conversation — it's all work.

A bell on a timer rings and they go about their individual routines. A couple of fighters spar in the ring, others work on their punching and elbow strikes while some bang away on the heavy bags. Each punch and kick is thrown with maximum force, causing sweat to fly from their bodies as if they were taking a shower.

Three minutes later the bell sounds again and they rest for 60 seconds. Then they're at it again for another three minutes. In the process, they develop a lean muscular physique that is void of any body fat. It seems that even their ribs have ribs.

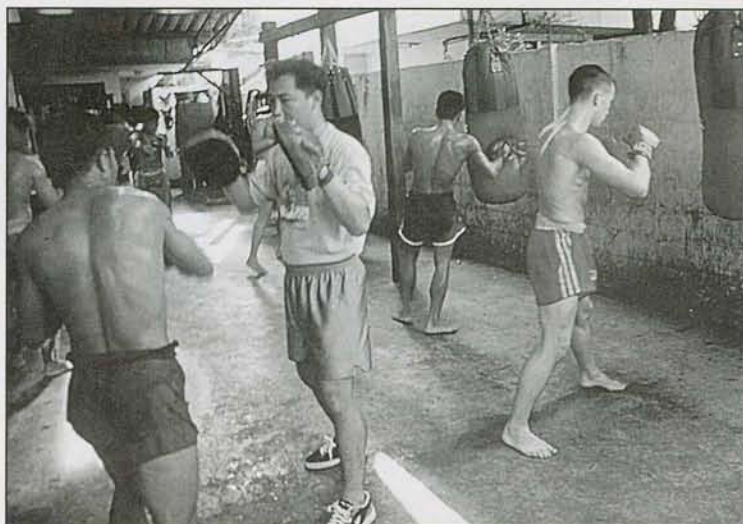


Bob Chaney (right) teaches Terry Wilson how to throw a Muay Thai kick.

An Overview of Thai Boxing

- According to documents, Thai boxing was part of military training between 1590 and 1605.
- Warriors learned to supplement their weapons with Thai techniques.
- In the 1970s, modern boxing gloves were introduced and metal groin protectors were added for safety.
- Bouts consist of five three-minute rounds.
- Muay Thai features 30 basic techniques.
- Hip and shoulder throws are illegal, as well as head butts, choking, biting or attacking when an opponent is down.
- There are no set forms.

Source: The Original Martial Arts Encyclopedia, Pro-Action Publishing, Los Angeles. For more information, check their web site at www.ProActionSports.com or call (888) 567-7789.



Thai fighters work and eat together.

QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE

The Muay Thai fighters at the gym were very gracious and offered me invaluable assistance and advice as I worked on my kicks and footwork. While I was practicing knee strikes on the heavy bag, Chaney and Mattevi squared off in the ring. The Thai fighters were greatly impressed with the "old man's" ability. I say old because when a Muay Thai fighter hits the ripe old age of 20 he is at the end of his career. The fighters at the gym looked up to Chaney as he has been there many times before, while Mattevi won their respect with his superior fighting ability.

As for me, I walked away from the experience with a few more tricks in my martial arts bag. The best part of the trip was the new friends I'd made in Thailand. The brotherhood of martial arts is like a family. We share techniques and information about the arts and in the process get to know each other as individuals. These acquaintances often lead to life-long friendships.

Styles and nationalities take a back seat to the comradeship that we share as fellow martial artists. With each passing year I am very thankful for the wonderful people I've meet during my quest for knowledge. ☯

About the author: Terry Wilson is a freelance writer based in San Diego, California.