

The Origins of Muay Thai

Muay Thai (or also known as Thai Boxing) was not founded by a single person, but by generations of the "Thai race", or Thai people, who had migrated southward from China, into the Mae Kong and Chao-praya regions respectively, to join the other Thai race who already co-existed with several other races of people in that region of the world, such as Khom, Lawa, and Morhn.

Conflict between races, or nations gradually brought about the development of fighting system along with the usage of weapons of war. But a written record kept by the Burmese mentioning a prisoner of war who was a Muay Thai master who defeated ten Burmese great fighters in a single tournament. His name was Kanom-tom (many know him as Nai Kanom-tom, the word "Nai" means Mister). The date was March 17, 1770. Now we commemorate Muay Thai on March 17 of every year. There are many archeological findings, such as stone reliefs, found on the walls of old Buddhist temples that support the theory of Muay Thai being practiced long before medieval time. Muay Thai has been called "the art of nine body parts", meaning the use of two hands, two elbows, two knees, two feet. The ninth part of the body is the head, both figuratively (one's intelligence) and practically (head butt). But actually Muay Thai employs every part of one's body, as still seen in the learning of Muay Boran, the traditional Muay Thai.

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Muay Thai of different styles and origins are still being practiced in the tradition way, with all the techniques intact among enthusiasts. The full Muay Thai is not only a stand-up fight as we see in the ring nowadays, but also consists of grappling into submission, throwing, and ground fighting as well. Remnants of such moves are the grappling for inside-knee attack, twisting and throwing in conjunction with inside-knee attacks. One old Muay Thai teacher, or kru, said that in the battle field, a good soldier had to be able to kill an enemy within seven moves exchanged between him and the person with whom he fought with. If he could not do that, then he was not a good soldier, but a dead one. During peacetime, men would learn Muay Thai from their village teachers, who had returned to enter monk hood after their military career. These young men hoped one day they would be able to display their skill before the selecting judges, or even the king himself. If they did well, they would be selected into the military service, thus, would gain prestige and notoriety. Thai custom, still practiced today, states that a man has to be ordained a monk, and serve in the military to be considered a complete man.

There are records of "fist fighting" competitions held in villages and towns more than 800 years back. Gradually, the art of hand wrap was developed. The hemp hand wraps were designed to protect the boxer's hands. The open fingers allowed him to grab, lock and throw his opponent onto the ground. The original Muay Thai competitions were complete and well-rounded fights with rules similar to the mixed martial arts of today. This style of hand wrap was used until 1922, when a boxer from Khmer was killed. After that Western boxing gloves were used in order to safeguard the boxers and show the world that the Thai people were not a barbaric race.

Hand Wrapping

Before the introduction of Western boxing gloves, Thai fighters would prepare their hands with hemp hand wraps. The handwrap was not mandatory, a boxer could choose to wrap his hands for protection, or he could choose to fight bare handed. The hand wrap technique was an art unto itself; the end of the hemp would be knotted into seashell shape knots on top of each knuckle. Moreover, every fighter in those days had to be well-educated in other sciences, such as herbal medicine. They had to know what type, and what part of certain plants were to be boiled in hot water, or to be chewed, or to extract juice from and apply on to the body. These procedures would help toughen the skin, to help stop bleeding quickly, or to cure fight injuries. Another great myth that was repeated until it became fact was that hand wrap of old Muay Thai fighters were soaked in warm starchy water. Then when dry, the hand wrap would be as hard as plaster cast, or even that ground glass would be applied on to the wet hand wrap to give the fists a razor-like effect. According to many well-respected Muay Thai authorities, the ground glass on hand wrap myth is just the repetition of a boast by someone who liked to impress Westerners, and it stuck. The truth is that everybody had his own "hand

wraps; that either he made himself or was given by his teacher. These hand wraps would be worn and taken off at each fight, repeatedly. So logically, there would be no way that hard plaster casts could be used, as hand wraps, over and over again, and ground glass sticking to the hand wraps would make it impossible for the fighter to use them again in the next fight, because he would surely cut himself before inflicting any injury on to his opponent.

Pre-Fight Ceremony

It is an old tradition for a noble warrior to pay homage to his king, his faith of religion, his parents and his teachers. A man is honored by the entities he honors. Before a fight, both combatants would kneel down facing the throne where the king was seated, or in the direction of the royal palace. He would then perform the first part of the ritual, the Ta-Wai-bung-kom, paying homage to the king. Then he would turn and perform the Wai-kru to the other 3 directions, each of which symbolized an entity: religion, parents, and teachers. The reflection of this belief is the Mongkol, on the fighters' head, and Pra-jied around the fighter's arms. Ram-muay is the next set of movements that a fighter would perform. Each clan, or school has its own movements of dance. It was observed that if both fighters performed the same movement of Wai-kru and Ram-muay, they would stop and not fight each other, for they would consider themselves coming from the same teacher, which made them brothers. If one would observe Thai fighters, he would notice that they wore a Mongkol around their head. This headband, same as the Pra-jied, is a sacred object usually hand-made by the teacher and blessed by a holy man. Once placed upon his head, the fighter would not allow anything else to go over his head. That is the reason why we see Thai fighters entering into the ring by climbing over the top rope. Now the Mongkol is removed before the fight, but in the old days, the fighter could pull it down to around his neck, or kept it on his head, but it would be worn through out the fight. The Pra-jied, or Pa-pra-jied, is worn around the upper arms. The music is added to give the fighters rhythm and timing, as well as heighten the atmosphere of the ceremony and excitement of the fight. The music for the pre-fight ceremony is different music from the fight music. There have been four original styles of Muay Thai, named after the regions that have stood out more than others. They are Ta-sao, Koraj, Lob-buree, and Chaiya. Muay Thai Chaiya seems to be the one practiced more in its true form than the other two. The Koraj style is what we see in the ring today in a much more diluted form. There are also smaller groups of enthusiasts who practice their local styles in several parts of Thailand.

The ring sport of Muay Thai we see today is a remnant of the great hand-to-hand combat techniques of the Thai race, developed out of necessity, in the battlefield. Rules and regulations imposed to keep it a safe full-contact competitive sport may have lessened its full range of deadly hand-to-hand combat. However, we can safely say that Muay Thai of today still is one of the most effective fighting systems in the world.

Source: vutmuaythai.com