

Lethwei

Lethwei or Lethawae (Burmese: လက်ဝှေ့; လက်ဝှေ့; also known as Burmese Boxing and Myanma Traditional Boxing) is a form of kickboxing originated from Myanmar (Burma). Lethwei is in many ways similar to its siblings from neighboring South-East Asian countries such as Tomoi from Malaysia, Pradal Serey from Cambodia and most of all Muay Thai from Thailand.

If Thai Boxing is the science of 8 limbs, then Lethwei can be called the science of 9 limbs, due to the allowance of head butts. In comparison, Lethwei can be interpreted as being bolder and more extreme. There are records recording Lethwei style matches dating back to the Pyu empire in Burma. Ancient Myanmar armies successfully used Lethwei, Bando and its armed sibling Banshay in winning many wars against neighboring countries.

Participants fight without gloves or protection, wrapping only their hands in hemp or gauze cloth. Rules are similar to Muay Thai but allow and encourage all manner of take downs along with head butts. Fights are traditionally held outdoors in sandpits instead of rings, but in modern times they are now held in rings. Popular techniques in Lethwei include leg kicks, knees, elbows, head butts, raking knuckle strikes, and take downs. In the past, sometimes biting and gouging were also permitted in the matches.

Matches traditionally and ultimately would go until a fighter could no longer continue. In earlier times, there no draws, only a win or loss by knockout. No point system existed. Extreme bloodshed was very common and death in the ring was no surprise. Nowadays in the match, if a knockout occurs, the boxer is revived and has the option of continuing; as a result, defense, conditioning, and learning to absorb punishment are very important. Burmese boxers spend a great deal of time preparing the body to absorb impact and conditioning their weapons to dish it out. Matches today are carried out in both the traditional manner and a more modern offshoot started in 1996, the Myanma Traditional boxing. The modern style has changed to make the contests more of an organized sport under the government's organization. The goal seems to be to make it a more marketable sport similar to Muay Thai. Some Lethwei boxers tried to participate in kickboxing and Muay Thai matches outside Myanmar but their extreme style and techniques were banned in worldwide kickboxing and Muay Thai matches thus making them unadaptable to professional sport fighting contests, and consequently unable to win any major titles. There are a number of Lethwei boxers who do compete in Thailand professionally with varying degrees of success.

It should be noted that the modern style of Myanma Traditional boxing greatly resembles Muay Thai in its sporting outlook, and not quite the more rough and tumble fighting of its rural roots.

In many traditional and rural fights, members from the audience are welcomed onto the ring to fight with the professional boxers. Sometimes, fighters among the audience successfully knock out the boxers in the ring.

Many of the ethnic groups within Burma have their own variant of the indigenous martial arts giving them sometimes distinctly different styles of Lethwei that make for exciting action packed matches.

The Kachin variant of Lethwei is referred to as soft (relaxed). There is very little wasted motion or effort. Lethwei matches usually start in long range with kicks to the legs and raking punches to the face in an effort to draw blood. As the match continues, the fighters often end up in a clinch and the primary techniques used are standing grappling coupled with various takedowns and sweeps. The preferred finishing techniques are head-butts, elbows, and knees. The Kachin Practitioner generally prefers to fight from the clinch and tends not to fall after missing with a long distance strike, opting instead to follow low line kicks and raking punches into close range.

If the sport is viewed in the context of preparing one for individual combat you can see that it not only teaches timing, distance, and movement but also the ability to absorb and deliver punishment, thereby winning a war of attrition. The goal is not so much the winning and losing but fighting hard and learning lessons about survival.