

# Muay thai History

**M**uay Thai started way back in the medieval ages when wars were fought with bows and arrows, swords, and pikes. And in hand-to-hand combat arms, legs, knees, and elbows were also used as weapons. This sport which was included in military training was made famous by King Nareusan 1560 A.D. During one of the many battles between Burma and Siam he was captured. The Burmese knew of his prowess as the best unarmed fighter in the realm and gave him a chance to fight with their best for his freedom. Upon his return to Siam he was hailed as a hero and Siamese-style boxing, as it was called then, was soon recognized as a national sport. Boxing in this style reached its zenith of popularity about two hundred years ago, i.e., in the reign of Prachao Sua (King Tiger), when it was indulged in by all classes of the population.

From those days up until the early part of this century, the fighters, particularly those in provinces, used horsehide strips and later hemp in lieu of gloves. It was also a practice at one time to grind pieces of glass into the hemp if both contestants agreed. Since these practices were obviously dangerous to the fighters' health, regular boxing gloves were introduced about 50 years ago and have been used ever since.

To the Thais, Muay Thai is regarded as a prestigious national sport. Thai boys will in one or another way, intentionally or unintentionally, learn how to box Thai style. Even Thai girls will know enough of the basic principles and to be able to use it for self-defense when necessary.

Muay Thai, called Thai Boxing by foreigners, is our national sport and is now getting more popular in many countries, especially in Japan where a large number of young Japanese are now being trained to fight professionally. But in Japan this fighting is called "Kick Boxing." At present "Kick Boxing" is internationally known as a Japanese martial art. Surely the true name, "Muay Thai" should be retained internationally as the Japanese terms Kendo, Judo, or Karate have been.

There is no [clear] evidence to show the time of origin of Thai-Style boxing. It can only be assumed that Thai boxing existed since the Thai emigrated from the South of China. [Further archaeological work needs to be done in this area, both in the Thai and English languages.]

The [Tai tribe] immigrants had to hide from attackers and met with resistance from local people. In short, they had to fight endlessly for their survival. By the time they managed to settle in the "Gold Promontory", the Thais had gone through to countless battles and many lives had been lost. The ancient weapons consisted only of spears, swords, pikes or bows and arrows. But in hand-to-hand combat weapons become clumsy, and elbows, knees, feet and fists became more practical. This must have been extremely successful, as it was then developed into a form of martial arts used in battle, and this was the origin of Muay Thai.

When the Thais finally settled down and built a city, and extended their territory to become a large country, there was a need for an army to defend the country. Soldiers in those days had to learn Muay Thai along with the use of traditional weapons. Thus there was also the need for Kru Muay, or teacher of Thai boxing. Various tactics for attack and defense were developed, called "boxing tactics". Later, laymen began to take up this form of fighting, as a form of self-defense, and as a handy qualification to become a soldier, which would also lead to further advancement depending on their ability and talent.

During the Ayudhya period, which was a period of consecutive fighting against the neighboring countries of Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam, history records state that King Sri San Petch or Khun Luang Sorasak known as Phra Chao Sua (The Tiger King) often boxed incognito in various up-country temple fairs. He is said to have been a skilled boxer, and enjoyed the sport so much that he often disguised himself thus in order to test his skill against villagers and thus became quite a legend in his own time.

When Ayudhya fell in 1767 A.D. many Thais became prisoners of War. In 1774 the King of Burma held a festival to celebrate the Chedi containing the Buddha's relics in Rangoon, with various forms

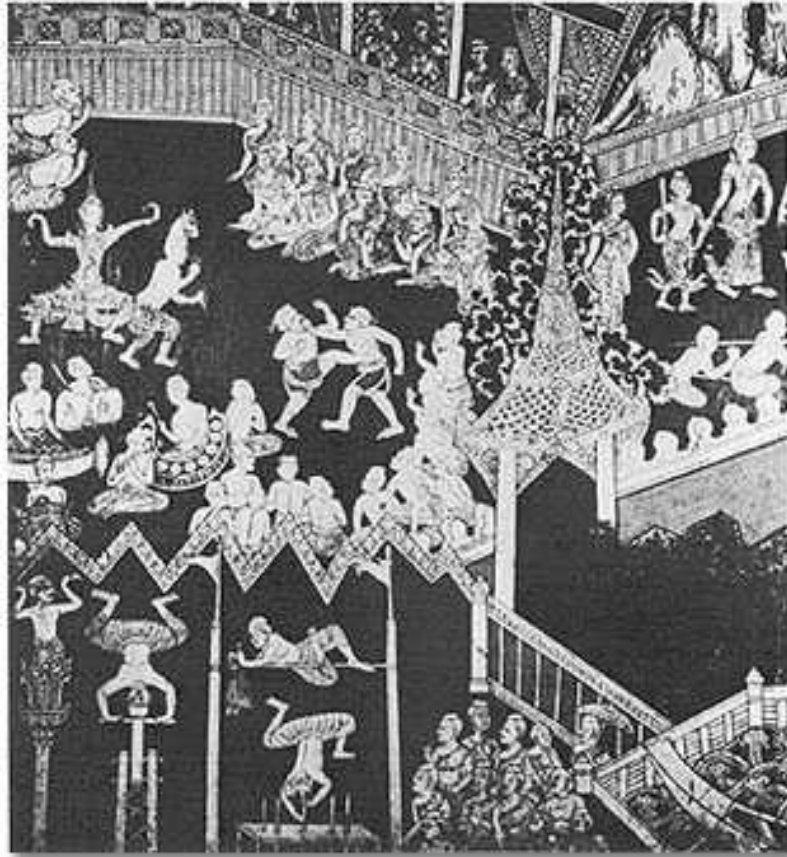
of entertainment and festivities. This included a boxing display for the King by a Boxer named "Nai Khanom Tom" a prisoner of war from Ayudhya. Pit against Burmese boxers, Nai Khanom Tom defeated 10 Burmese opponents in a row, and also became quite a legend.

During the reign of King Tak Sin the Great, the King had a close aid-de-amp named "Phraya Pihai Dab Hak" who had studied the art of Muay Thai with many famous teachers and displayed his talent for the King. As a result, he was chosen to become a soldier, and was later promoted to the position of Chao Muang (governor) with his name recorded in history.

In the Ratanakosin Period, Muay Thai was still a national art form, with competitions in annual national festivities. Time-keeping was done by floating a pierced coconut shell. When the coconut sank, a drum would be beaten to signal the end of a round.

In 1788, during the reign of King Rama I, two french brothers arrived in Thailand by boat, having defeated many boxers across the Indo-China Penninsula. King Rama I consulted the Crown Prince, his brother, who offered to find boxers to fight against the Frenchmen. Phraya Phra Klang would accept the challenge, settling the bet at 50 chang (4,000 bhat). The Crown Prince chose a boxer named Muen Plan of the Royal Guards. The match was held in the grounds of the Grand Palace. Muen Plan wore full battle regalia--bare-chested, seeped in magic charms, cabalistic writing and oils to ensure invulnerability. When the fight began, the large French fighter tried to attack, aiming for the neck and collar-bone. Muen Plan defended himself with Muay Thai. The other Frenchman, seeing his brother making no progress became frustrated, and pushed Muen Plan's back to stop him from backing away. Members of the Royal Guards saw this break of boxing etiquette and proceeded to help Muen Plan tackle the two Frenchmen until they had to be carried back to the boat. They set sail the next day, with no thought of ever challenging a Thai Boxer again.

During the reign of King Rama V, Thai boxing matches were widely popular, boxing matches were held for the King's pleasure, ad skilled boxers received titles from the King, for example Muen Muay Mee Chue from Chaiya, Muen Muay Man Mudh from Lopburi, Muen Cha-ngad Cherng Chok from Korat. Also in this period boxing camps were established. Members of the royal family sent out talent scouts to recruit potential boxers from up-country and arranged matches between camps. Winners would receive money and valuable prizes. This period could be called the Golden Age of Muay Thai.



***Wall picture "Scene from the court life" --Prince Ransit palace (17th century), shows a Muay Thai match, accompanied by the music orchestra (right).***

During the reign of King Rama VI, Thai boxing matches became more widespread. Matches that used to be held in make-shift rings in any available courtyard became a standard raised ring surrounded by ropes. The first ring was built in 1921 at Suan Kularp field. Although standard rings were available, boxers still bound their hands with rope. Foreign boxers came to take on Thai boxers. An important free-style match took place between Young Harntalay and Chin Chang from China which attracted a huge crowd of spectators. The result was that Young Harntalay floored Ching Chang with a beautiful kick. In this period, they also had referees in the ring, and kept time by the clock. These innovations were probably adopted from abroad.

Rope binding was needed until 1929 when boxing gloves took its place. Earlier at the Lumpini Park Ring, a Filipino boxer gave an international style boxing exhibition with boxing gloves. Later, gloves were also used in student boxing matches called "Muay Farang", and in professional international boxing between Thai and foreign boxers. This led the organizers of Thai-Style boxing to see that gloves are less dangerous than rope-binding, and decided that gloves should be adopted in Muay Thai, but fighting with elbows, knees, feet and fists would still be allowed.



***This old Thai Boxing text, written on traditional Khoi paper, may be the oldest extant example of such a book. It illustrates both defensive and offensive techniques and postures used in old style Thai Boxing. It was compiled at least 170 years ago during the reign of King Rama III. Reprint from Muay Thai: The Most Distinguished Art of Fighting by Panya Kraitus and Dr. Pitikus Kraitus.***

Although many improvements or changes were applied from the type of ring, breaking each bout into rounds, using the minute-system of time-keeping, and using gloves, one aspect of Thai-style boxing remained the same--the jock strap. Originally, the jock-strap consisted of a triangular-shaped pillow tied to the waist, with a strap tied behind from between the legs. The pillows were red or blue color according to the boxer's corner. These pillows were used until one boxer went to Malaysia and saw foreign boxers use jock-straps. He brought the idea back to Thailand, and since then jock-straps have replaced the triangular pillows.

During the reign of King Rama VII, in the revolutionary period, permanent boxing stadiums were established both in Bangkok and in the provinces. They gradually disappeared in 1942 during World War II. After the war, boxing stadiums sprang up like mushrooms overnight. Skilled boxers from up-country flocked to Bangkok to take part in tournaments. Finally the first standard boxing stadium was established--the Rajdamnern Stadium, in 1945. Rules were set, and later on regular bouts were set at 5 rounds of 3 minutes each, with a two-minute interval between rounds. The weight was taken down in stones like race-horses, and later converted into kilograms.

In the early days, the match-maker system was used; the stadium officials would organize matches providing cup or talent jackets as prizes. Matches were not classified into weight groups until many years later when the pound system replaced stones and kilograms. International names were given for each weight group, such as flyweight and bantamweight. Matches were arranged to select a champion for each class, following the international style.

Muay Thai is still developing, but what remains unchanged is the use of the pipe and drums as musical accompaniments for the matches, and is considered a unique characteristic of Muay Thai. Muay Thai has been initiated under many names, which have not received prolonged interest because the original has already become known world-wide.

Many additions have been made to the regulations of Muay Thai. It is forbidden now to hit the private parts since this technique has become quite infamous as a form of attack and is considered debasing for the fine art of Thai boxing. Muay Thai remains a national art form. If all parties concerned help to uplift and conserve this form of martial arts, and pass it onto following generations, it will remain a valuable possession of the Thai nation.