

THAI BOXING

By Steve Rosse

My friend Pat invited me to go to the fights with him tonight. I told him I had to go to the funeral of a close friend instead and, since I hate to lie, now I have to go find a close friend and kill him. Pat is a big enthusiast of Thai Boxing, a sport that to my mind combines the worst attributes of prayer meetings and riots.

If you've never attended a Thai boxing match, let me first congratulate you, then fill you in on what you missed. First you sit down in a crowded arena that's hot enough to grow orchids and smells like old socks. You're jammed in with about a thousand of the worst characters in the province, all of whom have had their personalities modified for the evening by whisky and bloodlust.

It's not unusual, in the provinces, for the crowd to be frisked for weapons at the door. Anyone found to be not carrying a gun or knife is issued one before being allowed entry. There is a dress code: every spectator must wear clothing that he's slept in for at least three nights.

Your ticket will bear the number of a seat in some stadium destroyed in an Allied bombing raid back in '44, so you claim a spot on a hard wooden bench at random, and sit on your programme to keep the larger splinters out of your butt. Even before the boxers appear, the crowd will be shouting and screaming and waving their arms. The yelling is in reference to the projected odds of the first fight; the arm waving is aimed at the mosquitoes that are drawn to the oceans of blood spilled at these events.

Soon the first pair of gladiators are lead out into the ring by their phi liang, which translates as "nanny" or "nursemaid." At this point the band kicks in. The orchestra at a Thai boxing match consists of three ancient men playing even older instruments: drum, cymbals and flute. Their job is to provide a noise like a train wreck, only louder and more prolonged.

The dancers begin a ritualized series of semi-graceful movements designed to pay homage to their dance teachers. They circle the ring, dipping and bowing, posturing and posing, making obeisance to the four cardinal points of the compass, the four primary elements, and the four Marx Brothers. After they've exhausted themselves this way, they're given a rest period during which the crowd commences betting.

This activity is illegal, so everybody does it very surreptitiously, waving handfuls of money in the air and screaming out their bets at the tops of their lungs. A few bet on the outcome of the fight, but most bet on which fighter will be the first to jump the top rope and begin beating the hell out of the orchestra.

Eventually the two combatants are brought to the centre of the ring and the referee explains The Rule. There is only one rule in Thai Boxing: you cannot poke the other guy in the eye. Since people who make their livings this way can't be too bright, they are made to wear thickly padded gloves in case they forget The Rule.

The fighters return to their corners, do some more stylized praying and bowing, get a few last minute good-luck tattoos applied by their coaches, the band wheezes up a squeaky crescendo, the gong sounds and the fight is on. A Thai boxer's uniform consists of a pair of glossy polyester trunks that go from his ribs to his knees, in any of a large assortment of unattractive colours. The trunks are so large because they need to accommodate a lot of advertisements, sold by the promoters to a wide range of products. Most of the products, things like tobacco and alcohol, will be in the healthcare field, as befits an athletic event. The size of the trunks and the weight of the appliquéd corporate logos will dictate a boxer's individual style. Some

fight with one hand and hold up their trunks with the other, while others prefer to throw a flurry of blows with both hands and then back off to pull up the shorts.

In Thai boxing you are allowed to hit your opponent with anything except patio furniture, so there's a lot of kicking, elbowing, kneeing and butting with the head. Between rounds the coaches will rub their Spartans with crushed ice and douse them with cold water, in the belief that by application of this primitive form of cryogenics their life-spans can be extended, at least until the end of the fight. With every blow the crowd screams with one voice: "Uuuuheey!" This is the Thai for "Ouch! Ouch!" Betting continues until the last round, or until one of the fighters, or some farang in the audience, attacks the band.

A win is achieved by a knock-out or by points awarded by a panel of judges. All of the judges are blind but one: this makes bribery much easier. Points are awarded on an arcane system of judgment based on form, technique, blows landed and how long a boxer lets his trunks slip down before pulling them back up. The move that scores the most points is one where a boxer strikes his opponent with an elbow thrown over his shoulder, which explains why they spend a lot of time backing into each other. As soon as a victor is announced, both fighters raise their hands in triumph, strut around the ring bowing to the people who bet on them, and fall into each other's arms like long-lost brothers instead of two guys who just spend 15 minutes beating the crap out of each other. They stumble out of the ring and into an ambulance and everyone throws peanut shells at the band until the next pair of boxers appears.

An evening of Thai boxing goes on as long as there are still pairs of contestants willing to listen to the squeaking and squawking of the orchestra. They are carefully paired by height, weight and tattoos. While Western boxing ranks fighters according to classes such as Bantam-weight, Light-weight, Heavy-weight, etc., a Thai boxer will fight in the "Stubby Little Guys with Salamanders on Their Forearms Class" or "Wiry Little Guys with Monkeys on their Backs," etc. The bands are ranked too, by titles like "Terrible", "Abysmal" and "Simply Awful".

Though the fighters make the same money (about two dollars American at current exchange rates), win or lose, an enormous amount of cash will change hands among the audience on any given night of boxing. It is not unusual for a wealthy businessman to go out with his friends for an evening at the fights, only to return home to inform his wife that everything he owns, including her and the kids, now belongs to a taxi driver from Krabi named Lek. No matter though, because the following Saturday Lek's favourite fighter will let his trunks go for a second too long while backing in for an elbow-thrust, trip over them and fall into a puddle of crushed ice, and everything will revert back to the businessman.

While I don't enjoy Thai boxing myself, I don't begrudge Pat his infatuation with the "sport". I wake up at 4:30 a.m. on February 1st every year to watch the American Super Bowl live by satellite, a game that Aussies like Pat say is for wimps. Imagine players being paid up to US\$10,000 each to play perhaps 10 minutes of a game where they are allowed to wear more protective gear than plutonium miners. I agree with him on that point: you have to respect the Thai boxers. It takes a lot of guts to climb into the ring wearing nothing but a pair of gaudy bloomers and face the music.