

Title:

Sityodtong Muay Thai Legacy

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Summary:

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Article Body:

Kru Yodtong Senanan's place in Muay Thai history is legendary. That's why just two Muay Thai academies in the United States qualify as recognized affiliates of the Thailand camp that bears his name.

The significance of Muay Thai's Kru Yodtong Senanan's recent U.S. visit may have been lost to those unfamiliar with his celebrated contributions to the ancient art. But for students and trainers devoted to the art and sport of Muay Thai, his presence was treated with the kind of reverence usually reserved for dignitaries of international distinction.

So important is Kru Yodtong's role in preserving the history culture that the Kingdom of Thailand recognized him as a "Superior Teacher of Muay Thai." With the proclamation issued directly from the Royal Family, Yodtong's place of honor as a master, teacher and conservator of the sport will be forever documented in the annals of Thai history.

On a recent U.S. trip, Kru Yodtong accompanied Yodsanan 3k Battery, a WBA super featherweight world boxing champion and just one of many titleholders from Yodtong's namesake camp - Sityodtong Muay Thai Training Camp.

Along with producing number of skilled Muay Thai champions, the camp also turns out an equally impressive number of Western-style boxing champs, all of whom are students of the master himself, Kru Yodtong Senanan.

Muay Thai Master

Born 68 years ago as Erawan Sriwaralak, Yodtong's study of Muay Thai began at a

distance, as the sport was then considered too dangerous for boys under the age of 15. Still, from the time he was four, Erawan observed and studied until he was old enough to begin formal training. That training began in earnest at Detprasit Muay Thai camp when Yodtong was 14. His natural proclivity for the art became evident early on. Fighting under the moniker "Erawan Detprasit" to honor his camp, he had his first bout just one year later. At 17, Yodtong moved to the Senanan Muay Thai camp and competed for six years before becoming a trainer to a string of Muay Thai champions. Though there are many camps throughout Thailand that specialize in any number of techniques, the heralded success of the champions hailing from the Sityodtong Payakaroon Camp comes down to teaching refined basics.

"Sityodtong is best known for our comprehensive instruction in all basic Muay Thai techniques," Yodtong said, adding that his camp is especially known for teaching the proper techniques for the use of elbows, kicks and knees. The age restriction placed on young fighters back when Yodtong was a boy have since been removed, allowing training to begin much earlier.

In fact, many of the young fighters at Yodtong's camp are orphans, some even juvenile delinquents. Not only are they trained in the fighting arts, they are also given food and shelter and attend school as well, allowing Yodtong to train the whole person. In addition to his rigorous training regimen, Yodtong offers sage advice to young fighters: "Be a good student, become a good teacher and stay away from a path of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. To be a good person is the most important thing."

Sityodtong Muay Thai Training Camp is located near the resort town of Pattaya Beach, about a 90-minute drive from Bangkok. In operation for over four decades, the camp has turned out a long list of champions that include Daotong Sityodtong, Gongtalanee Payakaroon, Samart Payakaroon, Yoddamrung, Khaosai Galaxy and a host of others.

The Payakaroon brothers are the two most-celebrated champions from Sityodtong. In fact, it was the Payakaroon name and reputation that literally put Sityodtong Muay Thai Training Camp on the map, thus the Camp name, Sityodtong Payakaroon. To be a stadium champion is an incredible feat. When you consider that Muay Thai is the national sport of Thailand, becoming a stadium champion can be likened to winning the Super Bowl, the World Series, being NBA champs or winning the Boston Marathon. As a result, it's easy to see how an icon like Samart Payakaroon, a four-time Lumpinee Stadium champion plus a WBC champion and his older brother Gongtalanee Payakaroon, a five-time Lumpinee Stadium champion, are held in the highest regard.

To appreciate the significance of Muay Thai and Kru Yodtong's place of

prominence in bring the fighting skill to its current level of notoriety, you must first appreciate Thai culture and history. Yodtong sums up the unique entwining of Muay Thai and Thai culture this way: "As anyone familiar in Muay Thai will tell you, one can benefit from improved health, develop a sense a personal safety while also enjoying the pleasures of out culture."

#### Heart of the People, Sport of Kings

There are two schools of thoughts about how Muay Thai became a national sport of Thailand. Some say that during the time of the Burmese invasions of Siam (Thailand), warriors indigenous to the land fought off their would-be invaders using their bodies as weapons, thus the legend of the most-famous and revered Thai boxes, Nai Khanom Tom.

In the 1700s during the fall of the ancient capital, Burmese soldiers captured and imprisoned many Thai citizens. Among the imprisoned populace were Thai boxers. However, the King of Burma granted Nai Khanom Yom his freedom and the freedom of the other Thai boxers after he defeated nine Burmese boxers. Not only did Nai Khanom Tom destroy his capturer's elite warriors in a spectacular fight to the finish, he also defeated a boxing instructor from a neighboring city.

The other school of thought holds that Muay Thai developed as Thai people moved from China. Whether indigenous or introduced by immigrants, all agree that while much of the history of Thailand - and hence the origins of Muay Thai - were destroyed during the Burmese invasions, the emergence of Thailand and the national sport of Muay Thai go hand in hand.

The effectiveness and popularity of Muay Thai as a combat skill was further reinforced during the reign of King Naresuan, who required all Thai soldiers to train in the fighting art. Later, Phra Chao Sua, "The Tiger King," also played a role in the development of Muay Thai as the national sport of Thailand, through his support of prizefights and the creation of early 18th-century training camps. In the 2,000 years that have transpired since the earliest known occurrence of Muay Thai, the popularity of the close-combat art has exploded beyond Thailand's borders, making Muay Thai an internationally recognized sport.

#### Two Schools, One Name

As the art of Muay Thai is interweaved in the Culture of the Thai people, so too are the champions of the Sityodtong camp steeped in traditions of the camp founder's fighting techniques. As the sport continues to gain in popularity among Westerners, Muay Thai gyms in the United States are increasing in numbers. However, of the many gyms that can be found throughout the country, Yodtong has

bestowed only two with the distinct honor of being recognized as affiliates of his legendary camp: Sityodtong USA-Boston and Sityodtong USA-Los Angeles. As Yodtong explains, "The name Sityodtong refers to students of Kru (teacher) Yodtong, my family name. Yod in Thai means above all else and tong means flag (i.e., a flag that flies above all)." Fighters from Sityodtong USA in Boston and Los Angeles represent a long line of champions who collectively are a force with which to be reckoned.

Sityodtong USA-Boston is the East Coast affiliate of Sityodtong Thailand. Owner and operator Mark DellaGrotte lived and trained at Sityodtong Muay Thai Training Camp. A current Muay Thai champion, Yod Mark's fight record includes a second-round KO at the famous Rajadamnern Stadium in Bangkok. He was also ranked tenth at Rajadamnern. Yod Mark's trainer is Kru Toy, Kru Yodtong's son. Kru Toy is also the manager of Sityodtong Thailand, and has traveled to several countries to promote and preserve his father's teachings in the art and sport of Muay Thai.

DellaGrotte's martial arts training includes Jeet Kune Do Concepts, Kali, Silat and Brazilian Jiu-jitsu. "Kru Yod Mark" has been personally appointed by Kru Yodtong to teach and promote Muay Thai around the world. His school, located in the Somerville area of Boston, has been in operation for seven years and has turned out a number of champions.

The other school in the United States that has the honor of being recognized as an affiliate of his Thailand camp is Sityodtong USA-Los Angeles (Sityodtong LA). The school is owned and operated by Walter "Sleeper" Michalowski and his wife, world-renowned martial artist, June Castro-Michalowski. Walter, a former Junior Middleweight Muay Thai champion, also trains and has fought for Kru Gongtalanee Payakaroon representing Sityodtong Thailand.

Michalowski's training began as a young boy in the sport of boxing. He also trained in traditional martial arts and later in the Jeet Kune Do Concepts under Sifu Richard Bustillo. In fact, Michalowski met his first Muay Thai trainer, Nanfa Serchadeco, an Olympic silver medalist in Boxing and Rajadamnern Stadium champion, while training at the well-known IMB Academy (International Martial Arts and Boxing) in Torrance, California.

Michalowski's impressive list of accomplishments includes a kickboxing title and six Muay Thai belts. At his last professional fight he was featured on Thai television as the Main Event at the newly built Pattaya Stadium in Thailand. Michalowski ended the fight with an exciting first-round knockout over a formidable opponent, Phothong Sor Preapan.

Thanks to his mastery of the art and respect for the Thai culture, when he and

his wife opened their Pasadena location (Pro Training, Inc.) in September 2003, Michalowski, a certified senior instructor in Muay Thai, was approached by Kru Yodtong and was asked to be the U.S. West Coast affiliate. The facility was officially anointed the West Coast affiliate of the Sityodtong Muay Thai Training Camp.

Not only have DellaGrotte and Michalowski honed their craft at the namesake bearing Kru Yodtong's name, both men understand that the art of Muay Thai is one with the Thai culture. To separate one from the other is to denigrate the art. Both Michalowski and DellaGrotte speak Thai, which comes in handy for the regular trips they make to Thailand with their students. And, by earning the honor of becoming affiliates and conservators of Muay Thai in their own right, both continue a lasting relationship with master trainer, Kru Yodtong. Most important is the humility and respect that every level of student from both camps have for the Muay Thai master whose traditions and techniques are taught under the banner of Sityodtong USA.