

The Muay Kaad Chuak (Bound Fist Boxing)

Written by Scott Mallon
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Every April in Thailand there's a relatively unknown sporting event unlike any other in the world. Known in Thailand as the *Muay Kaad Chuak*, it is also known by some as the *Bare-Knuckle* and uses brutally simple rules abandoned in 1923. Bound Fist Boxing is technically illegal in Thailand however once a year fighters from Thailand and Burma come together to participate in an event which has taken place for hundreds of years.

The *Muay Kaad Chuak* parallels Burma's Leth Wei style of fighting. Elbows, knees, punches, kicks, throws and even head-butts are allowed. There's no hitting an opponent while he's down, poking in the eyes is not allowed nor is biting.

Bare-Knuckle is a slightly misleading term though as the fighters hands are not actually bare. While they don't use gloves, they do have their hands wrapped with a hemp rope or boxing wraps. These wraps are taped as in western boxing to form two cast-like weapons. Fighters may be outweighed by as much as thirty pounds, a weight difference unheard of in the fight game. Each fight lasts for five, three minute rounds and rarely does the participants in the *Muay Kaad Chuak* finish the bouts with movie star looks. Cuts, abrasions and swelling to the point of gross disfiguration are all part of the game. Victory comes by surrender or knockout and if both participants are still standing at the end of the bout, the fight is declared a draw.

The *Muay Kaad Chuak* takes place in the sleepy little town of Mae Sot in Thailand, at the peak of the hot season on the border of Myanmar (formerly Burma). It's held during the Thai Songkran Festival. The Songkran, which is Sanskrit for "the beginning of the new solar year", falls on April 13, 14 and 15 each year and bare-knuckle fights take place daily. The first day or two of the event showcases the more skilled fighters and the last day pits members of the crowd, always Thai vs. Burmese – sometimes those fighting are settling a grudge between them, other times they're simply drunk and feeling patriotic.

The *Muay Kaad Chuak* fights honor Thai soldier Nai Khnom Tom who as legend has it, fought and defeated no less than . nine Burmese fighters in the 18th century to win the independence of Siam (modern-day Thailand). To this day, Nai Khnom Tom is deeply revered in Thailand. These fights are a throwback to ancient times.

Fights begin early in the afternoon. In April the air is thick and heavy and makes it difficult for even the most fit and acclimated of fighters to catch their breath. There is a circus-like atmosphere in the crowd and the underlying loathing Thais and Burmese have for one another compounds the intensity of the occasion. The Burmese invaded Siam in the 16th and 18th centuries capturing Chiang Mai and in 1767 they burned and plundered the former capitol of Thailand, Ayuthaya. The Thais have never forgotten this and neither have the Burmese. The Burmese crowd takes up one side of the ring and the Thai occupy the other.

There are underground bare-knuckle contests elsewhere in the world but the number of truly

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skilled fighters willing to travel to Thailand or Myanmar is limited. Even in Myanmar (Burma), where bare-knuckle fights are a regular occurrence, the pool of professional fighters is relatively small. Couple this with the Myanmar governments' reluctance to let their people out of the country, especially their best fighters and you are not going to end up with their finest representatives.

Most Burmese fighters who make it to the *Muay Kaad Chuak* are simply the best fighters who are able and willing to travel across the border at that particular time. Thailand has a large number of fighters available however fighting in bare-knuckle matches is much different than the gloved battles that take place in Lumpini or Rajdamnern stadiums. Top level fighters from Bangkok decline to take part in the

Muay Kaad Chuak

because the purse is usually much lower than they are used too receiving and the risk of being injured is great. Thai trainers and fighters are of the opinion their Burmese opponents, while tough and well-conditioned, do not fight intelligently.

There is a saying in Thai, "*Nak Muay Khon Parma mai chai samong.*"

"Burmese fighters do not use their brains."

All guts, no brains in other words.

Whether or not this is true, it is clear most Thai's and Burmese do not have a fondness for one another – they simply tolerate each other.

Nothing comes easy for these fighters.

Burmese may come from all parts of their country to participate in the event. They make their way via bus, train or motorcycle. A few years ago a group of Burmese fighters rode their motorcycles for 5 straight days over rugged, unpaved terrain to fight for a purse that nets them \$25. Most of the Thai fighters come from the border towns.

The Burmese normally enter Thailand on a one day border pass out of Myawaddi, Myanmar and are required to depart Thailand late in the afternoon on the same day. If a boxer misses the deadline - even if it was because he was fighting – Thai immigration may choose to detain him until some sort of financial restitution can be made by a manager or promoter.

The Muay Kaad Chuak is a violent affair, at times downright brutal; yet year after year, national pride and tradition keep the event alive.