

Losing the Battle, but not the War

*Life lessons
through
Muay Thai*

By Sheetal Shetty



I started Muay Thai as an adventure to know and develop myself as an athlete, but little did I know that I would be learning much deeper lessons of life; in how to be an inner warrior.

Muay Thai (Thai boxing) is a martial art and combat sport known as the 'Art of Eight Limbs'. It is characterized by the combined use of both the fists, elbows, knees, and shins. A popular international sport today, its history and origins date back to the ancient myth of the Ramayana.

The Thai Ramayana is called Ramakien (Glory of Rama) and was adapted from the Indian original, with all the names of the characters, places, architecture, wildlife etc. transformed to reflect the language, customs and way of life of ancient Thai culture. The Art of War in the original was also transformed according to the traditional Thai Art of War. Over the centuries, the characteristics and deeds of specific characters like Hanuman (son of Wind God) and the warrior skills of the two brothers Ram (Phra Ram) and Laxman (Phra Lak) inspired and influenced the experts of Muay in their process of creation of martial techniques that are still in use today. (1)

After months of training, I participated in my first Muay Thai competition with World Muay Thai Council India in Kolkata. The preparation of my first fight was an opportunity to construct myself. It was a profound, reflective adventure through sports; constantly testing my limits and slowly expanding them.

The month-long fight camp demanded all of me! I knew I could never be fully prepared for all eventualities, but I dared to push myself to see who I could become. We prepared ourselves with 6km runs, intensive training, drills, sparring, and conditioning to sustain ourselves through the fight. Being disciplined was a way for me to respect myself and my goal of coming closer to achieving my potential. As I look back, what made up for the grueling hard work, was what happened in the process; the team work, the heartfelt laughter after being punched, the sore body that made you appreciate your own effort, and a joyous heart that conquered new boundaries every day. For me, it was not only about developing the techniques for the competition, but to develop tools like physical strength, consistency, emotional stability and mental clarity that would center me.

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By the end, I began to learn to fall with awareness, to get up with strength, and to stand with valor and joy.

The fight day is the real test. You enter the ring alone. Moments before the fight I felt the butterflies in my stomach but I knew I was prepared. Until they announced my name! I was taken by the rush of emotions and felt out of control. I entered the fighting ring for my first fight numb and blank. I could only hear myself breathing, my heart beating and the feeling of fear rushing through my body.

In the first round, my opponent's first punch caught me off-guard. It took a while to make sense of what was happening. But to my surprise, I could endure the hit but had no clue how to respond: my muscle memory was blocked and I was frozen by fear. At the end of round 1 my teammate suggested I initiate action instead of waiting. I gathered myself, decided to go all in and give it my best without thinking about the result. This was the moment of shift. I fought fearlessly till the last round and did not give up: I lost the fight, but not the battle over myself.

There were conflicting emotions of being proud and disappointed at the same time. So many thoughts, learnings, and feelings! After living the whole journey, I am able to turn inward and reflect: what did I really lose? Nothing much, compared to what I gained, and how much I was able to grow. What started as an athletic adventure through Muay Thai turned out to be a beautiful philosophical journey through life: a Journey of Becoming.



Though there were many moments when I wanted to give up, I learnt that the real fight begins at the end of my comfort zone: Muay Thai became an opportunity to construct myself, by practicing discipline, encountering boundaries, learning and unlearning, building confidence, strengthening imagination, and holding fast to a stable center no matter what the circumstances.

Sports has been an integral part of my life since I was 10 years old. Whether athletics, basketball, throwball, or training for martial arts - the forms kept changing but looking back, every sport taught me deep philosophical lessons. I honor these truths with action, by consciously trying to make them a part of my life. I realize now that being a philosopher is to understand that every opportunity that life affords you is a means to know yourself, to polish yourself, to strive to walk the path steadfastly one step at a time.

I recognize now that this is the real battle, the inner war, the most meaningful fight of all, of choosing to be highest I can be, of becoming human, through philosophy, as a way of life. ☺☺

Reference:

1. De Cesaris, Marco, 2023, From myth to Muay: the Thai Art of War of Phra Ram. International Muay Boran Academy, accessed 25 September 2024, < <https://www.muaythai.it/from-myth-to-muay-the-thai-art-of-war-of-phra-ram/>>